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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Digital Silk Road: "Tech-Diplomacy" as a Paradigm for Understanding Technological Adoption and Emerging Digital Regulations in MENA

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a Chinese infrastructure and investment project launched in 2013 that seeks to link China with over 70 countries through transport, communication, and trading networks. The BRI consists of building and construction projects including railways, ports, roads, and other vital trade infrastructure. Importantly, the BRI also includes the establishment of a new "Digital Silk Road" (DSR) enhancing digital connectivity using the latest 5G high bandwidth, low latency mobile and satellite technology. In 2019, several Western states (notably USA, Australia, Canada, and the UK) banned Chinese telecommunications technology companies, such as Huawei, from rolling out 5G networks in their respective jurisdictions. The purported basis for the bans were security concerns over the ability of the Chinese government to control and potentially intercept communications over the Huawei systems. In the MENA region, no such bans have been adopted and the DSR is proceeding to connect MENA economies to China at a rapid pace. This places MENA countries in a precarious position between strategic links with the US as the global hegemon with a strategic interest in the region, and the emerging Chinese global political and economic order. The regulation of digital communication technologies is one dimension where legal frameworks must be designed with care and discernment to balance competing geopolitical forces. This article seeks to answer the question of how best to understand the legal regulation of new technologies in the MENA region and argues that the conceptual lens of "Tech-diplomacy" helps to provide such an understanding. In addition to privacy-centric, security-centric, and growth-centric philosophical and jurisprudential approaches to understanding data regulation, the predicament of the MENA region is a case study in how geopolitics can also inform our understanding of tech regulation.

Keywords: China; MENA; Belt and Road; Digital Silk Road; data governance; tech-diplomacy

1. Introduction

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are important partners of China, and play an integral part in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Beijing advances its concept of global governance, amidst an increasingly multipolar

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world, a number of countries from the MENA region have become key allies of Beijing. Energy exporting countries are seeking economic diversification as part of their development strategies, and China has emerged as an integral partner in these ambitions. Non-energy exporting countries across the region are also seeking to modernise and develop their economies as they face socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment rates and demographic pressures. China's economic footprint in the region has thus significantly expanded, contributing to its development, from bolstering the region's infrastructure to contributing to various sectors, including manufacturing, chemical industries, and technology (Middle East Council on Global Affairs, 2024).

One of the key strategic planks of Chinese efforts to enhance its global influence is the ambitious BRI. The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is the connectivity dimension of the BRI. Through the development and deployment of internet, satellite, fibre optic, undersea cable, and 5G technology, China is seeking to expand its digital footprint and invite partner states within this digital ecosystem. This plan comes with economic benefits for participants but also geopolitical concerns—particularly from Western countries. It is within the bounds of this tension, and at this crucial time when high-speed communication and data storage technology is proliferating, that many states within the MENA region are introducing data regulation regimes.

There are several ways in framing policy motivations informing data regulation regimes around the world. Protecting privacy, promoting competition and innovation, or avoiding the exploitation of the public are all lenses through which data protection and cybersecurity laws can be conceived. In the MENA region, however, there is another angle with which one may perceive the scope and nature of these new regulations. In this context, the "tech-diplomacy" conceptual framework is instructive, specifically as it is related to the global confrontation between China (and the Global South) and the US and its allies.

In recent years, China's relations with the MENA region has also grown to encompass political cooperation and coordination on strategic issues. During the 2022 state visit to Saudi Arabia, President Xi Jinping attended the first China-Arab States Summit and the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit. The visit was also marked by various bilateral meetings between President Xi and leaders of countries in the Middle East, underscoring the robustness of China–Middle East relations and reflecting both sides' commitments to capitalising on the shared benefits of strengthening ties. Moreover, China's mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran further highlighted Beijing's considerable diplomatic and political role in the region, within the context of its Global Security Initiative (GSI).

American dominance in the MENA region was established following the Second World War. Its continued military presence in the Middle East is based on its economic interests in the vast energy reserves, and its importance for the global economy. Although oil was discovered before the Second World War it only became apparent after the war exactly how much oil was buried in Arabian sands and how strategically important access to that oil would be. During the Cold War, the US also had an interest in preventing the Soviet Union from expanding its influence in the region. Following the September 11 attacks, the US increased its military presence in the region first to launch an attack on Iraq and since then to contain Iran. All these factors have combined to cement the US as a permanent player in the MENA region. That domination is now being challenged, primarily on the economic front by China.

"Tech-diplomacy" (sometimes called "Techplomacy") is an emerging field of global strategic studies focused on how states engage the technology sector (Buckup and Canazza, 2023). In recent years, several states have appointed tech-ambassadors to important technological hubs such as Silicon Valley and Shanghai (Desmarais, 2024). Governments are engaging with the technology sector for a variety of reasons ranging from national defence issues to improving the provision of government services to citizens. The technology sector is so large and influences all aspects of global relations (finance, communication, trade, politics, etc.) that it can no longer be ignored by sovereign states.

Tech-diplomacy can help explain the engagement of some MENA states with certain tech companies and, by extension, the countries of origin of those companies. In this sense, the narrow definition of tech-diplomacy is: states engaging with tech companies, must be expanded to include states engaging with other states *through* tech companies.

Just as during the Cold War, the world was divided between two competing ideologies, presently, the fragmentation that is increasingly defining spheres of influence is based on technology standards and digital ecosystems (Malcomson, 2016; Khan et al., 2022, pp. 442–464; Seaman, 2020, pp. 20–21). Going even further back in history, to the seventeenth century, global commercial empires like the British and the Dutch, were the birth places of globally dominant trading corporation such as the East India Company and the Dutch East India Company. These companies were essentially the extensions and instruments of their home countries' colonial policies. In many respects, global technology companies are operating in much the same guise although without "boots on the ground". In this wave of corporate global domination, it is not physical resource extraction that the companies are undertaking (at least not directly), but digital integration and economic influence. Many states, including in the MENA region are cognizant of this reality and are thus approaching their technology adoption and regulation decisions with the same seriousness with which they engage other facets of international relations.

This article is divided into three main parts. The first part examines China's growing role in the MENA region through the BRI, particularly as it relates to technological engagement. The second part introduces the concept of "tech-diplomacy" as a paradigm of modern international relations and especially its relation to the DSR. Finally, the third part applies the "tech-diplomacy" conceptual framework as an explanatory tool to understanding how MENA laws in the context of technology and data protection are emerging.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and development of SINO-MENA relations

China's growing economic and political involvement in the MENA region highlights how Beijing has sought to increase its role in the Middle East, especially since the presence and influence of the US in the region is arguably declining. Indeed, the US pivot towards East Asia to contain China has led to the perception of a US strategic retreat from the MENA region (Yellinek, 2022). As this dynamic unfolds, China will likely be part of the security architecture of the region (Lons et al., 2019). Indeed, while China's presence in and discourse about the Middle East has, in the last decade at least, focused on economics and trade, contemporary events[1] show that this two-dimensional perspective is changing. Beijing is playing an increasing role in the geopolitics of MENA and maintains a soft military presence in the Middle East without establishing military bases. In this way, the country's engagement in the region differs from the entrenched Western patterns of influence characterised by a strong military presence and occasional military intervention.

China does, however, see the importance of having a military capability in the region. For example, the Chinese military base in Djibouti is important for protecting one of the most significant maritime passages for China (*Bab-el-Mandeb*), which is critical in the export of natural resources to China. The base's strategic location covers the Persian Gulf and the African continent. The Middle East is strategically important for China to secure the energy needed to maintain its economic growth. Strategically, the Middle East is the crossroad of trade routes and sea-lanes that link Asia to Europe and Africa. The Levant links China to Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean while reducing trade routes'

[1] The most noticeable is the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in Beijing.

dependency on the Suez Canal (Sharma, 2022). In this way, the Middle East is an important link of the whole BRI project. The importance of the MENA region for China is underlined through the 2015 "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," and the Chinese 2016 "Arab Policy Paper" (Xinhua, 2016). The latter focuses on closer cooperation in the energy sector, infrastructure building, trade and investment, and technology related to nuclear and renewable energy, and space satellites (Calabrese, 2021). China is also reliant on oil imports from the Middle East, with imports from the region rising by 4.8% during the first quarter of 2022, to account for 53.8% of China's crude oil supplies (CME Group, 2022).

As a massive pan-Eurasian infrastructure project, BRI has been criticised in some Western circles for its potential to lead developing countries to "debt traps" (Vaisi, 2022). Chinese partnerships, however, are more established with the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Iran, as well as with North African countries, especially Egypt and Algeria (Burton, Lyall and Pauley, 2021). These countries are eager to diversify and technically improve their economy and economic infrastructure (including communication infrastructure) and are thus interested in Chinese investments and technology. Indeed, negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between China and the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) have recently been boosted and continue to develop (Middle East Briefing, 2023; Zhang, 2023). In January 2022, foreign ministers from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the secretary-general of the GCC met with Chinese then-foreign Minister Wang Yi, in Wuxi, in China, for a 5-days visit (Lons et al., 2019). Interestingly, the Middle East receive 57% of BRI investments (Syed, 2022).

The Chinese approach to partnership-diplomacy falls into three broad categories in line with their importance (Chaziza, 2020b, pp. 69–83).

1. Comprehensive strategic partnerships;
2. Strategic partnerships; and
3. *Friendly cooperative partnerships.*

Among Chinese exports to the Gulf and the wider region are weapons and different military equipment. China also increasingly carries military drills with countries such as Iran (Moonakal, 2022) and some sources have even indicated China's interest in the construction of a military base in the UAE (Al-Mashareq, 2022). Furthermore, this enhanced military cooperation aspect of BRI has been highlighted by some analysts including the export of Chinese surveillance and censorship technologies (Dunne, 2021). Indeed, some GCC countries prefer to buy Chinese military equipment as China does not selectively impose duplicitous "human rights" conditions, like the US. These sales increase the weight of China in the region but also renders its position as a neutral party in danger (Dunne, 2021). Moreover, the attacks supported by Iran on Saudi and Emirati oil facilities and tankers are a danger for Chinese energy supply chains. In this way, China's Saudi-Iran deal of March 2023 is a step towards a more stable Arabian Gulf, a region critical for its natural resources. China is building long-term political and military relations (Dorsey, 2021). For a full and detailed overview of China–MENA relations, see Appendix A.

From the perspective of MENA countries, the BRI is a way of diversification of their partnerships in all domains. It is not, however, without danger as the US are increasingly warning strategic partners such as Israel or MENA states against developing too strong a partnership with China. It is no secret that China invests heavily in ports along the Mediterranean, the Arabian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean to gain control over strategic points such as the Suez Canal, Gibraltar Strait, Hormuz Strait, and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. In this way, the BRI is not only about economic development (connecting global economy to China) but also about grand strategy and geopolitics (Dana, 2022). The US, by contrast, projects its power directly with an explicit military presence in regions of strategic importance (i.e. South China Sea, Middle East, etc.). China has successfully aligned its interests with its partners (see the "National Visions" of Gulf countries), addressing the critical social and economic challenges of the regions and states with which it engages (Moonakal, 2022). Indeed, China believes and projects the idea of peace through development as a primary plank of its foreign policy.

Many states in the MENA region maintain relations with both the US and China. Navigating the growing tensions between the two super powers is one of the greatest challenges to incorporating the BRI into the MENA region (Yellinek, 2022). US pressure for MENA states to limit Chinese influence in the region is strong. For example, rather than using Huawei technology, Tunisia carried out an important 5G development test in Djerba in November 2022 with the Swedish company Ericsson (Dugit-Gros and Henneberg, 2023)—a key Western corporate counter weight in this important field. For now, China does not seem willing to act as the "cop on the beat" and replace the US security architecture in the MENA region. MENA states may, however, have to pick a side and take a clear stance, which could make impossible the realisation of some of the BRI's projects.

The BRI needs a stable environment to be successful, and in the MENA region, there is no strong collective and inclusive security arrangement such as NATO (Moonakal, 2022). Moreover, apart from strategic friction with the US, BRI expansion into the MENA region may also stoke tensions with regard to Chinese–Russian relations, particularly towards states traditionally close to Russia (i.e. Syria or Iran). Nevertheless, similar Sino-Russian interest can also create opportunities for cooperation. For example, Chinese investments in Iran could be connected to the Russian International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Boltuc, 2022).

Finally, cultural and religious differences can also be an obstacle to deeper cooperation and integration between China and MENA countries (Chaziza, 2020d). Alternative approaches, for example, to workplace relations, attitudes towards religious adherence, and social expectations may all hinder person-to-person relations. Admittedly, such frictions are quite common in many cross-cultural settings and do not necessarily mean that relations are doomed. Within this context, MENA states are developing and introducing policies and laws, including in the field of data regulation, that embody the tightrope inherent in a geopolitical landscape characterised by increasing multipolarity.

How MENA states are interacting with and utilising new technologies for social, economic, or national security purposes are painted, in one way or another, by the shadow of this geostrategic tussle. From a legal and jurisprudential perspective, therefore, a new way of examining and understanding tech-related laws in the MENA region that incorporates sufficient deference to the diplomatic and geopolitical reality is needed. It is here submitted that that conceptual lens can be found in the emerging idea of "tech-diplomacy."

3. Tech-diplomacy and the Digital Silk Road

Just as technology is playing a growing role in the lives of ordinary citizens in the performance of their everyday tasks (shopping, education, social communication, etc.), it is also playing an increasing role in international relations. Tech-diplomacy can be defined as "a nation strategically engaging with technological stakeholders for diplomatic objectives" (Mashiah, 2023). "Technological stakeholders" is an interesting term to dissect. Private technology companies like Microsoft (US) or ByteDance (China—owner of TikTok) are obviously technology stakeholders directly relevant to this conversation. States that host these companies, however, are also important stakeholders. Users and international governance organisations are also tech-stakeholders as their interests and objectives are similarly influenced by the proliferation of technological practices and standards. In this study, the focus is on government-to-tech-company engagement as a proxy for government-to-government relations.

Tech-diplomacy is distinct from digital diplomacy which refers to the use of digital channels such as X (formerly "Twitter") to communicate diplomatic messages.

Technology, as an industrial and social force, is political in many respects. Communication technology in particular, can be used to influence public opinion through the dissemination of information contrary to the preferred regime narrative (i.e. US lawmakers' concerns over TikTok showing images from Gaza). Technology is also vital to the social, economic, and commercial arteries of any modern state. Cyber-attacks, for example, have in recent years crippled markets, halted transport services, and even interfered with electricity grids causing billions of dollars in losses and even jeopardising the lives of citizens (Sharif and Mohammed, 2022). From a practical and national security perspective, therefore, the technological infrastructure adopted and invested in by a state is critical in terms of its efficacy in providing stable, secure, and safe services. Besides technical appropriateness, another factor in recent years, namely diplomatic considerations, have also influenced government decisions to adopt and deploy certain types of technologies. It is unclear, however, the weight given to diplomatic vs technical considerations within the calculus of government decision making; but it would be safe to assume that considerations of international relations feature (and are growing) as part of internal government deliberations. Finally, tech-diplomacy is not only for developed nations but also for lower-income countries seeking to leverage technology to rapidly facilitate economic growth and opportunities for their citizens (Cheney, 2022).

Even in so-called "free market" system, governments have acted to restrict technology companies from participating in the market process for non-commercial and political reasons. The idea of "data sovereignty", for example, captures the national security aspects of this issue by describing how sovereign entities (or collectives as in the case of the EU) seek to retain possession and control of both government data and the personal data of citizens collected by tech firms (Gu, 2023, pp. 1–22). On the hardware side, this is done by mandating that data centres that host specific sensitive types of data be onshore. This allows those states to leverage the benefits of cloud computing while minimising the externalisation and physical possession of that data outside of its control (Han, 2024, pp. 263–288).

Although still developing, tech-diplomacy is becoming an evermore relevant perspective on understanding the proliferation of technology and data standards around the world. As Ashbrook notes, "[t]echnology is now the pre-eminent battleground of economic leadership—and attendant to that political leadership—in an era of exacerbated great power competition." (Ashbrook, 2023).

3.1 Tech-diplomacy

When engaging with a tech company, government interlocutors and official, are in effect dealing with cyber emissaries of those states where those powerful tech companies are domiciled. Understanding the nature of the relationship between ostensibly private companies and the states in which they are established requires an examination of the data governance framework of that state. The primary concern is whether data collected and controlled by that company, and pertaining to a foreign government or citizen, will be securely held and used only for intended purposes. On the one hand, a robust data regulation regime that is overseen and enforced by a government or government authority will enhance the appearance of data security from illegitimate access. There is the other aspect of data access and control, however, that is also important for governments to consider. Questions as to the ability and extent of foreign government to legally and legitimately access data held by companies within their jurisdiction is the second fundamental issue colouring tech-diplomatic relations. That access need not only be discreet "back door" technical access (i.e. NSA spying) but also access facilitated by the law and the rights granted to governments for criminal investigations for other regulatory reasons (anti-monopoly actions, counter-terrorism, etc.).

What the China–MENA case study illustrates is that tech-diplomacy is most poignant in relation to companies that are strongly related to state power—Huawei being a case in point.

Increasingly, technological fragmentation is dividing the world as different states and aligned political partners are increasingly operating within alternative digital ecosystems leading to what some have termed "the splinternet" (Malcomson, 2016). The technological fault lines are significant for trade and supply chains as well as gaining technological superiority in strategic sectors such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). On the personal device and social platform level, there is the ever-present hardware distinction between Apple's iPhone (iOS) and Samsung (Android), as well as social networks such as TikTok and YouTube. The latter video platforms have, in recent years, evoked reciprocal banning efforts between China and the US. As these platforms capture the attention (and data) of billions of people, their connection to particular countries has become a prominent political question. Technology that can collect, control, and share data, especially personal data, is already a significant issue in the relations between states (Beraldo and Milan, 2019). In the US, for example, the proposed ban on TikTok as a Chinese platform and a dangerous national security threat that is contrary to US data governance interests is a prime example (Clausius, 2022, p. 273).

There are several ways to understand the philosophical and jurisprudential motivations for data regulations around the world. Two prominent approaches are the "privacy-centric" and the "growth-centric" perspectives upon data governance. The "privacy-centric" approach examines data governance through the prism of data security, accessibility, and data controllability within a legal framework (Miyashita, 2021). The "growth-centric" approach, by contrast, is more economic in outlook and measures the extent to which data regulations allow for innovation and commercialisation of data through avenues including data sharing and open data frameworks (Smart, 2017). Importantly, these two perspectives need not be mutually exclusive as, it has been argued at least, privacy and growth can co-exist and indeed may even be complementary in a properly calibrated regulatory environment (Frey and Presidente, 2024).

Atop this privacy vs growth approach is a fundamental political divide between respecting individual rights and striving for collective goals—in layman's terms democracy vs autocracy. Ashbrook again explains that: (Ashbrook, 2023)

> [d]emocracies and autocracies are in a moment of active competition for members of emerging technological coalitions on either side of a splintering internet and exacerbating competition over control of tech inputs, next generation networks and their stability, hardware sovereignty and software spread.

Beyond the domestic perspective on data governance, there is the international dimension of data sharing. It is here that the idea of "tech-diplomacy" arises both in the context of sharing of hardware technology such as 5G antennas but also in the sharing of data. There are many legitimate reasons why countries might share data including transborder criminal law enforcement (money laundering, terrorism, human trafficking, etc.). The legal instruments used to oversee these data-sharing arrangements are either sector specific agreements, or Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) (Kendall and

Funk, 2013, p. 59).[2] There may also be more high level and opaque data-sharing in the context of military cooperation and national security intelligence.

Tech-diplomacy includes engaging with globally significant companies such as Huawei or Google. This engagement has become more important to international relations as there is a discernable "re-nationalization" of global tech sectors on the basis of national security and national interests (Ashbrook, 2023). Denmark was the first country to take tech-diplomacy seriously by appointing a "Tech Ambassador" with offices in Copenhagen, Silicon Valley, and Beijing (Klynge, Ekman and Waedegaard, 2020, pp. 185–195). Understanding the importance of technological innovations and engagement with the tech industry as a tool for managing international relations, Denmark has sought to proactively engage the two main global superpowers directly in the field of technology. Subsequently, many other countries have followed suit and established diplomatic presences in strategic technology hubs such as the San Francisco Bay Area (Ittelson and Rauchbauer, 2023). Apart from the Bay Area, other emerging Tech-Diplomacy Hubs include Bengaluru (India), Barcelona (Spain), Beijing (China), and Geneva (Switzerland) (Ittelson and Rauchbauer, 2023).

In the MENA region, data governance regulations are still emerging. From a business and investment perspective, this creates uncertainty as nearly all businesses now rely on large volumes of data that is to be stored and managed. Issues such as cloud computing standards and cross-border data transfers require clarity in order to instil confidence in users. The more significant data governance issue in the MENA region, however, apart from safeguarding personal data, is cybersecurity. Cybersecurity is a very important issue particularly with government and military institutions. The prevalence of cyber threats emanating from bad state and non-state actors is a prominent national security issue in nearly all MENA jurisdictions arguably taking precedence over personal data security and privacy (Kshetri, 2013, pp. 119–134).

There are many strategic technological fields where diplomacy is necessary in order to avoid geopolitical tension spiralling into all-out conflict. With the growth of AI technology in many facets of industry, finance, and governance, the race for (computer) "chip supremacy" is intensifying (Miller, 2022; Choung and Koo, 2023, pp. 117–132). "Chip supremacy" refers to being able to control the manufacture of semi-conductors being the primary component in computer chips—and computer chips being needed for the manufacture of all products with digital or connectivity attributes. From cars to fridges to mobile phones, controlling the manufacture of computer chips is critical to any manufacturing sector in any economy in the digital age. Importantly, TSMC in Taiwan and Samsung in South Korea are two of the world's largest manufacturers of computer chips and are both on China's doorstep but within the American political orbit.

Rare minerals, such as cobalt, being important components in the manufacture of batteries and mobile phones and prevalent in parts of Africa and Indonesia, are part of the tech-diplomacy matrix. As the growth in renewables continues to increase and electric cars such as Tesla (US) and BYD (China) take up more market share in the automotive sector, these rare minerals and their control will again form a new tech-diplomacy fault-line.

Tech-diplomacy, therefore, does not only involve states engaging with tech companies or setting up in international tech hubs, but also inter-state diplomacy around matters of technological significance and strategic national importance mediated through large powerful technology firms and state-proxies.

[2] Some of the MLATs between the US and MENA countries include: US–Egypt (1998), US–Morocco (1993), US–Jordan (1995).

3.2 The Digital Silk Road and the MENA region

The growing economic and military ties between China and the MENA region, discussed above, have very important strategic consequences on the balance of power and influence between the US and Europe on one side, and China on the other (Gordon and Nouwens, 2022). One important front in this twenty-first century version of the "Great Game" is the cyber-front. Attaining dominance in the digital realm both in terms of technical standards and in terms of online platforms is important for economic, political, and cultural supremacy in an increasingly tech-fragmented world (Shen, 2018, pp. 2683–2701).

The DSR is an initiative bringing states within the Chinese digital ecosystem. DSR will enhance the quality and availability of digital resources of participating countries by improving and upgrading existing digital infrastructure. This includes the laying of fibre optic cable networks, establishing data centres for data storage and cloud computing, and even the launching of interconnected satellite systems as part of the digital tapestry. The aim of DSR is to promote e-commerce, facilitate digital financial arrangements, and support other digital services (Majcherczyk and Bai, 2019, p. 106). The DSR is an initiative that falls within the ambit of the broader BRI.

The DSR is designed to promote China's economic and strategic influence by creating a physical and economic network. With the establishment of connected and interoperable digital infrastructure across the network, the harmonisation of digital platforms and standards will reduce digital barriers to trade and bring participating countries deeper into the Chinese economic orbit. With the launch of the Digital Yuan as a Chinese central bank digital currency capable of cross-border payments, the opportunities for strengthening such links are significant (Erie and Streinz, 2021, pp. 1–92). For many countries participating in the DSR, the gaining of sophisticated technologies (such as 5G) is an added incentive to be part of the initiative for the purpose of technological development.

The DSR promotes technological innovation and supports the growth of new technology-focused industries. This has broader economic benefits for participating jurisdictions that will encourage local professionals to develop skills capable of leveraging the technological opportunities presented. This demand, in turn, also presents an opportunity for Chinese higher education institutions to supply educational services in the fields of technology and business to students in DSR countries (Baark, 2024, p. 26). Overall, the DSR project will strengthen digital cooperation and ties between China and participating countries, broadening e-commerce channels and investment. Cultural and social ties can also be developed upon the back of the DSR initiative (Chang, 2023, pp. 283–321).

The MENA region is one of the important links in the DSR project (Aboul-Dahab, 2021, pp. 51–65). In particular, the Chinese-led and built "Digital Silk Road Information Highway" aims to connect Europe, Asia, and Africa to Chinese digital infrastructure. Beyond the MENA regions, this infrastructure includes fibre optic cables, satellites, and data hubs that will connect Western China to Pakistan (International Crisis Group, 2018). The expansion of Chinese digital infrastructure into the MENA region is complimented by economic and political collaboration such as the China-Arab States Digital Cooperation Forum (Mogielnicki, 2021, pp. 281–296). Combined, the physical and political links between China and the MENA region are intended to drive cooperation in areas of digital finance, e-commerce, and cybersecurity while enhancing the strategic influence of China amongst participating states (Triolo et al., 2020).

Chinese activity in the MENA region in the context of the DSR has been unequally spread. Gulf States, such as the UAE, have embraced Chinese technological offerings, including satellite communication management, through the construction of a satellite ground station in the UAE, further improving communication bandwidth and quality between the two countries. China is also non-partisan when it comes to sharing its technology. Unlike the US where sanctions against Iran prevent any business dealings, China has open dealings with Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia (Gulf Business, 2019), Egypt, and other MENA states.

The expansion of the DSR into MENA, however, has created geopolitical uneasiness on the part of the US and its Western allies that have long dominated the region. This digital expansion directly affronts Western states fearful of Chinese cyber espionage threats. The basis for these fears arises from the fact that the DSR is being rolled out by two of China's largest technology companies both purportedly with strong links to the Chinese government. Although these two companies, Huawei and ZTE, are owned by private investors and their shares are publicly traded, both companies reportedly have links to the Chinese state and military.[3]

In 2019, several states, including the US and Canada, issued bans on these companies operating in their countries for fears that their devices and networks pose espionage threats (Johnson, 2019). Such bans have not been imposed in the MENA region even though states such as the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain are strong allies of the US. The US has an important strategic interest in those countries as they host significant US military assets. The challenge for MENA states, therefore, is to reap the benefits of greater cooperation with China while not upsetting the US and stoking Western ire. It is this balancing act and unique form of tech-diplomacy that is influencing the scope and scale of MENA digital regulations.

Looking at the State of Qatar as a case study, its laws and regulations as well as its chosen technological standards in relation to cloud computing and 5G demonstrate a diverse geopolitical engagement. Although a small country in geographical and even population standards, Qatar punches well above its weight diplomatically. Pursuing a strategy of "friends with all, enemies with none," Qatar has been able to carve out an important niche for itself in world affairs (Kamrava, 2013). Its role as a mediator in conflicts such as the recent Gaza conflict in Sudan and even between Russia and Ukraine reflects Qatar's strategy of political balance for the sake of collective benefit. In the technological space, Qatar has pursued a similar path as its broader diplomatic posture. In the cloud computing space, for example, Qatar has signed long-term deals with the US company Microsoft to develop and maintain data centres in Qatar (Doha News, 2022). With respect to the roll out of 5G technology, by contrast, Qatar has opted to engage Chinese company Huawei (Telecom TV, 2024).

4. Tech-diplomacy as a lens to view tech regulation in MENA

When examining law and regulations in a comparative sense both internally amongst MENA countries, or between the West and China, one must look at both the form and substance of legal instruments. The legal systems that exist in the West straddle both Civil Law and Common Law traditions. In the Anglosphere countries (US, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand), the English Common Law system prevails. In continental Europe, by contrast, the legacy of Roman Law and the Civil Law system operates. The Civil Law system also operates in nearly all East Asian states. West Asia, including the Arab regions of North Africa, also have Civil Law legal system. This is primarily due to the influence of the French colonial legacy. In some areas of law, like family law, for example, the influence of Islamic Shar'ia dominates more than the European Civil Law.

[3] According to reports, Huawei's founder and CEO, Ren Zhengfei, was a former engineer in the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) and has strong ties to the Chinese Communist Party. Similarly, ZTE's controlling shareholder, Zhongxingxin Telecommunications Equipment Corporation, is owned by a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises.

In this sense, legal systems in the MENA region share a common heritage with China as both have inherited aspects of their respective legal cultures from the European Civil Law tradition. Nearly all jurisdictions in the MENA region have a legal system that is based on the French Civil Code (by way of Egypt). In China, there is also the influence of the European Civil Law system (by way of the Soviet Union) (Li, 1995, p. 327). Developments in cybersecurity, data governance, and other digital regulations, will, in form at least, be familiar to Chinese legal frameworks. The top-down legal approach (contrasted to the case-law of common law systems) and the "rule by law" reality rather than Western "rule of law" mythology is similarly common to both Chinese and MENA jurisdictions. The practice of direct control through an abundance of sub-legislative regulations is also common to both China and MENA countries. This type of managerialism is now also very common within Anglosphere legal systems.

The US and other countries with common law legal frameworks differ from China, Europe, and MENA states in terms of legal heritage. Some Arab Civil Law jurisdictions, notably Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar have introduced common law courts within broader jurisdictionally specific financial centres (Dahdal, Arner and Walker, 2017, pp. 529–549). As a mechanism that can address concerns around data protection and cybersecurity, legal frameworks are an important dimension of facilitating cordial relations in the face of increasingly intense tech-diplomacy around the DSR and global cyber governance (Erie and Streinz, 2021, pp. 1–92). Competition, however, runs deep. Even in the context of law, where relations can be imagined in a more constructive manner, the influence of competing global powers will filter through into the nature and form of legal frameworks around digital developments.

It is proposed, therefore, that a useful lens for understanding the drivers of tech regulation in the MENA region is the paradigm of "tech-diplomacy." Rather than attempting to understand data protection, privacy, and cybersecurity laws in terms as being informed by political concerns for personal privacy, national security, or economic growth, for the MENA region, geostrategic factors loom large. As such, many MENA states such as the UAE, Qatar, and Morocco have modelled their data protection laws on the GDPR standard. This is interesting given that GDPR is strongly influenced by notions of individual sovereignty over personal data and this is not always consistent with the approach evident in some MENA countries where social cohesion and stability are greatly valued.

4.1 Data protection and cybercrime laws

In recent years, many states across the MENA region have enacted new laws or updated existing laws around data protection (Government of UAE, 2021; Government of Saudi Arabia, 2021; Government of Bahrain, 2018; Government of Qatar, 2016; Government of Egypt, 2020; Government of Tunisia, 2019; Government of Algeria, 2018; Government of Lebanon, 2017) and cybersecurity (Governmnet of Saudi Arabia, 2021; Government of UAE, 2021; Government of Qatar, 2014; Government of Bahrain, 2014; Government of Egypt, 2018; Government of Tunisia, 2015; Government of Algeria, 2015; Government of Lebanon, 2018). Among the issues that these new laws address are data access, collection, control, and sharing, as well as national security and combating online criminal activity and cybersecurity threats. There are several motivations influencing the enactments of such laws. Undoubtedly, the nature of these new technologies presents new threats to personal and public safety. There is also the threat to national security and domestic political stability that is part of the equation. The economic opportunities created within the digital sphere is also an important driver of legislative intervention. Law makers are always eager to control and tax new economic domains.

The existence of such laws, and in particular central government oversight bodies, such as, for example in Qatar, the National Cyber Security Agency (QNCSA), reassures strategic partners such as the US and Europe that even if Chinese technology is deployed, Qatar has the capabilities to monitor and address cybersecurity issues. Given that sensitive data sharing pertaining to regional issues may well occur between allies, the existence of such frameworks and technical capacities is imperative for MENA states seeking to walk the tech-diplomacy tightrope. As MENA states move closer to the US and NATO (The White House, 2022), the security of shared data and overall the cybersecurity capabilities of such allied states will become increasingly important. A prime, although not unique example, of the international focus of the legal audience for such laws is the *Qatar Cybercrime Prevention Law* (Law 14 of 2014). In that instrument, more than half the promulgated 54 articles are focused on international cooperation (data sharing, extradition, etc.) (Arts. 23–54). Such laws can be interpreted as counterbalancing the growing influence of China and Chinese tech in the region, and the proliferation of Chinese hardware as the backbone of the digital infrastructure of US-allied states (Zhao, 2020, p. 84).

It is not, therefore, entirely about hardware standards, but also the signalling nature of legal and regulatory frameworks.

The enactment of certain laws mirroring the European or US approach to data protection also conveys a political message as to the underlying philosophy that MENA states are turning towards. In the simplistic dichotomy of: global liberalism against national authoritarianism—the introduction of privacy or even economically inspired data protection laws is tangible evidence of a commitment to one ideological path as opposed to another. So even though on the surface, MENA laws might embody privacy-centric or economically inspired data protection laws, there is a broader global context in which those laws are being enacted—it is a form of digital-*real-politik*.

In practical terms, however, MENA data protection and cybersecurity laws do not go as far as the EU with a so-called "right to be forgotten," although in other respects, there are some important aspects of MENA legal frameworks that are significantly privacy affirming beyond what a free speech approach might entail. For example, the *Qatar Cybercrime Prevention Law* makes it an offence to share anyone's private details online without their consent (doxing) or make any negative comment ("insults or slanders others") about anyone or any business online. It does not matter if the comment is truthful, a legitimate review, or an honest opinion of a restaurant. If it is posted online and carries negative connotations, it is not permitted. There is nothing stopping a dissatisfied patron from talking directly to business, or even reporting any matter to the relevant authorities. There is, however, a limit on publicly humiliating someone (online or otherwise)—no matter how sincere or well meaning. This can be seen as placing a higher social value on maintaining the dignity of the other and social harmony compared to liberal free speech.

Another interesting example of data and technology laws in the MENA region being influenced by "tech-diplomacy" are the Bahraini cloud computing regulations (Government of Bahrain, 2018). In this context, cloud computing providers located within the Kingdom of Bahrain will be subject to the legal and jurisdiction of the countries where customers whose data is held in Bahrain are domiciled: (Government of Bahrain, 2018)

> Section 3 (1)
>
> Subject to paragraph (4), the Customer Content shall be subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of the competent courts and competent public authorities, and the application of the laws, of the Foreign State in which the Customer is domiciled, constituted or established.

Section 3 (2)

> The jurisdiction under paragraph (1) of the competent courts and competent public authorities shall mean the power to issue valid and binding orders to the Service Provider or the relevant Customer, in accordance with the laws of the relevant Foreign State, concerning the Customer Content, including orders for providing access, disclosure, preserving or maintaining the integrity of the Customer Content.

By contrast, in the EU or the US, no specific cloud computing laws apply directly to this technical arrangement. Rather, there are umbrella frameworks that apply to data management service provision contracts more generally. Nothing akin to this Bahraini "carveout" exists in Western jurisdictions and definitely not in China. Although the two examples of Qatar and Bahrain suffice to make the point, beyond these two jurisdictions, there are numerous other examples of specific technology-related laws being crafted in ways that pay deference to foreign influence and are geared to international cooperation. There is, therefore, a clear level of consideration amongst MENA policy makers both on the technical hardware and standards that might be adopted, but also among law makers as to how best to control technological proliferation and deployment. Hardware standards may integrate a state within a transnational digital ecosystem, the legal standards, however, integrate that state into a broader political reality.

4.2 Digital economic integration

It has become an accepted part of global data law developments (or at least considered "best practice") that laws and regulations are "technology-agnostic," in the MENA region that approach also embodies geopolitical neutrality between fragmented blocks of alternative technology ecosystems. As those ecosystems are increasingly financialised with money and payments, and are borrowing-bound within a given set of technology frameworks—the position of MENA states crafting, as they are, a legal domain outside any single tech-ecosystem may well have both political and economic advantages. One of the documented risks associated with states participating in the BRI is the "Patron-Client" capture that can occurr when significant investment originates from a single source (Young, 2020, pp. 414–434). By remaining outside the scope of any single digital ecosystem, and maintaining inward and outward investment diversity, the risk of patron-client capture is reduced.

The DSR is an integral component of a growing propensity towards a broader Sino-MENA e-commerce entanglement between participating countries and China's massive manufacturing capacity (i.e. Alibaba, TEMU, etc.). Connected to this integration, and in an important geostrategic move, China has also long sought to spread the use of its own currency in international trade to loosen the grip of US dollar on the global economy (Frankel, 2012, pp. 329–365). As a rising global super power, it is seen as vital for China to internationalise its currency and dislodge the tight grip of the US dollar on global commerce. Given the convergence between technology and money in the form of proposed central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) or other digital money frameworks, discussion about technological standards and ecosystems will have real economic consequences as new monetary arrangements come online (Peruffo, Cunha and Haines, 2023, pp. 881–896). The Chinese leadership clearly understands this trend and that is why China is at the forefront of developing and deploying its own CBDC (Xu, 2022, pp. 235–250).

Several MENA countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have also recently introduced currency swap agreements with China opening up to more Yuan denominated trade and investment (Alshareef, 2023, pp. 380–401). Greater use of the Yuan is also being realised through the denomination of infrastructure construction projects around the BRI in the Chinese currency—and importantly, also in petroleum sales (Al Badawi, 2023). Some analysists, however, have seen this switch as largely symbolic rather than a practical threat to the domination of the US dollar (Cadman and Sergie, 2022). There are several advantages for any country having an "international currency" that is widely used in international commerce. Primarily, being able to print/create an unlimited amount of money in order to pay debts denominated *in that currency* makes foreign defaults nearly impossible and only really subject to domestic politics (Byrne, 2024, pp. 72–90).

Technological and digital tools already form the payment rails of significant portions of economic transactions in the developed world. As the use of cash continues to decline, the control over technology platforms is becoming an economically and systemically significant consideration for governments. With the integration of technological standards for things such as instantaneous cross-border payments, economic pressures to participate in trading blocks (be it BRICS+ or otherwise) will influence decisions on technological adoption. Geopolitics and economics have long been connected. Presently, however, technological considerations must also be factored into the delicate calculus of international relations.

Legal frameworks relating to technology are important indicators of a country's economic, political, and strategic direction. "Law" can be a mechanism for rule, but it is also an important form of social and political expression both domestically and to global players. What is expressed in legal terms can sometimes be aspirational, and at other times less so—perhaps being merely practical. Nevertheless, how a state shapes its laws reveals something about that particular political community and where it stands or hopes to stand in relation to issues and major centres of political power.

In the MENA region, data protection and cybersecurity laws are influenced by many competing considerations. Alongside privacy, economics, and national security perspectives, tech-diplomacy represents a new lens through which to understand legal developments.

5. Conclusion

The liberal paradigm of personal freedoms and perpetual economic growth are insufficient to explain how technology-associated laws are developing in the MENA region. For MENA states, the DSR is an opportunity to benefit from Chinese technological innovations, improve ties with a rising superpower, and broaden the basis for inward and outward trade and investment. Legal reforms are an important ancillary development to this bourgeoning relationship. The risk is that the law itself will become a geostrategic battle ground for influence rather than a neutral regulatory framework (even though it may be naïve to ever think of law as such). In this context, "technological agnosticism," long heralded as necessary to allow for fair competition and future innovation in the tech sector, might be said to represent political neutrality for MENA states caught between Sino-US relations. For an outside observer, the tech-diplomacy perspective provides a new lens through which one may understand how and why data governance laws are developing the way that they are. As a consequence of having various pressures applying on legal reform in this important sphere (economic, social, security, diplomatic), domestic jurisdictions within which those laws apply may well suffer in the long term. Not only will those laws be ill-suited to domestic needs and requirements for economic or social progress, they may become strategically misaligned and redundant as global political constellations change. Legal scholars examining technology law and regional political analysists seeking to understand Sino-MENA relations would both be well served using the tech-diplomacy lens to better understand each other's respective domains.

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Appendix A
A country-by-country overview of BRI projects in the MENA region

Algeria: Algeria is an interesting partner for China because of its oil and gas resources. Moreover, Algeria is near Europe, the Sahel, and the Sub-Saharan region. Algeria joined the BRI in July 2018 (Foster, 2022). China is an important partner in infrastructure projects like the Grand Mosque inaugurated in 2020, the East-West Highway, or the new Algiers airport completed in 2019 (Hamaizia, 2020). Chinese companies also constructed El Hamdania Port, the first deep-water port in Algeria[4]. It is reported that in exchange for providing finance for the project, Beijing will control the port for the next 25 years (Foster, 2022). In 2022, a second five-year strategic partnership between the two countries was signed (Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs and National Community Abroad, 2022). In May 2022, a deal between Chinese and Algerian firms was signed to build a petrochemical plant in the Arzew Oil Port in Oran for $542 million (Middle East Monitor, 2022). In December 2022, Algiers and Beijing signed an executive plan for the joint development of the BRI. China is investing in the domain of natural resources, energy, and mining: in 2022, a $7bn deal for phosphate mining was signed between Algerian and Chinese companies (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022a). For example, regarding Sinopec, in 2022, a deal was signed to build LNG tanks for $178 million (Moilwe, 2022) and later the same year a $500 million production-sharing contract in oil (Calik, 2022). In this way, Chinese companies in the construction and energy sectors are very well present in Algeria (Calabrese, 2021).

Bahrain: Bahrain is strategically located near major oil fields, and its business and banking environment is attractive for Chinese investments in the Gulf and the MENA region (Calabrese, 2021). In 2018, China and Bahrain signed an MoU to develop BRI projects, aligning with Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. The first project concerned a US$ 690 million contract with China Machinery Engineering Corporation in 2019 for the construction of East Sitra housing project (Saudi Gulf Projects, 2019). The bilateral trade between Bahrain and China is important, as the latter is Manama's first trade partner with an amount of US$2.2 billion in trade between the two countries in 2021, a 15% increase compared to the year before (Zawya, 2022).

Egypt: Chinese investments through the BRI align with Egypt's Vision 2030. Egypt is a strategic component for the BRI because of its location (Suez Canal) and its large population, representing a potential huge market (Al-Anani, 2023). In 2014, a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Egypt was signed. Chinese companies are building the CBD of the new Egyptian capital city (Seetao, 2021), and are constructing Chinese textile hub in Sadat City (Xinhua, 2020). During summer 2022, the electric train linking Cairo to the new capital, built and partly financed by Chinese companies, opened (Rogers, 2022a). The China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade

[4] The project was stopped following the Hirak Movement (also known as the Revolution of Smiles) in 2019 and resumed in July 2020.

Cooperation Zone, launched in 2008, has become one of the major projects in enhancing the BRI objectives in Egypt (Seetao, 2022). China is the biggest user of the Suez Canal and the major investor in the Suez Canal economic zone (Calabrese, 2023). Egypt's membership in the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, which began on 1 January 2021, is also interesting from the Chinese perspective. Egypt has joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as a dialogue partner and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China is Cairo's fourth largest creditor with 5% of Egypt's external debt. Egypt continuously borrows from China: in Egypt's recent IMF deal (January 2023), the China Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank contributed a combined $1.4 billion (Al-Anani, 2023). The debate around Egypt falling into a Chinese debt trap divide analysts (Helmy, 2022; Bangkok Post, 2023). Finally, joint military exercises and arms industry are also a component of the exchanges between Cairo and Beijing (Al-Anani, 2023).

Iran: China and Iran signed a comprehensive strategic partnership. BRI has the potential to help the Iranian economy, especially with the context of economic sanctions against Tehran. The relations between Iran and China revolve around the 25-year China–Iran cooperation deal signed in 2021 (Motamedi, 2021), entering its implementation stage in 2022 (Motamedi, 2022). The agreement covers economic, security, and military cooperation, as well as a $400 billion trade and security pact (Dunne, 2021). Under the BRI project, transportation is evolving in Iran and linking it to the outside world. BRI helped connect Iran to Inner Mongolia in 2018 and, in December 2020, it was announced that a line will connect Istanbul to Islamabad via Tehran (Goulard, 2021). China is also interested in Iranian ports such as Jask and Chabaha ports. The relations between China and Iran are also the result of pragmatic considerations and economic imperative: both countries consider the US presence as a threat to their national security (Osiewicz, 2018, pp. 221–232); Iran desperately seeks to export its oil to avoid economic disaster and China needs oil to support its economic growth. Tehran is China's third largest provider of oil, after Saudi Arabia and Russia (Dawi, 2023), although Iran sells its oil at heavily discounted prices (Vaisi, 2022).

Iraq: Iraq has been China's third-biggest partner in BRI for energy engagement in 2021 (Reuters, 2022) and a strategic partner. More than 10% of China's oil comes from Iraq (Çalışkan, 2023; Siddiqi, 2022).[5] The same year, a Chinese firm won a contract to develop Al-Khairat oil power plant (Energy & Utilities, 2021). In January 2022, China's Sinopec signed a deal to develop Mansuriyah, the second largest gas field of Iraq (Lee, 2022). In the beginning of 2023, however, this specific deal was collapsing (Iraq Oil Report, 2023) and it was unclear what would happen to Sinopec regarding the Mansuriyah project (Al-Maleki, 2023). In April 2023, Shanghai Electric secured a deal to build Mansuriyah gas station (Lee, 2023). Following the end of the US invasion and the era of the Islamic State, China has invested massively in Iraqi reconstruction (England and White, 2022). Indeed, in January 2023, a Chinese conglomerate offered to invest $10bn in Iraqi Kurdistan (Rogers, 2023). Like other BRI-linked countries, analysts also fear that Iraq could fall into the Chinese "debt trap" (France 24, 2022).

Israel: In 2017, Israel and China signed a Comprehensive Innovative Partnership (Harkov, 2022). China and Israel tried to reach a free trade agreement, but US pressure has prevented, at least for now, the finalisation of such a deal (Figueroa, 2022). China is Tel Aviv's second largest trading partner after the US even if Chinese investments in Israel are relatively modest. China operates one of Haifa's port terminals (Ben-David, 2021) and is part of the construction of the new ports at Ashdod (Hrvacevic, 2022). China invests mainly in technology, start-ups, cybersecurity, chips, and research and development projects, including weapons (Figueroa, 2022). However, agriculture, real estate and minerals sector, and academic institutions are also fields of cooperation between the two countries (Interesse, 2022). US pressure to limit Chinese investments in Israel contributed to Chinese firms losing the lucrative Tel Aviv light rail project (Harkov, 2022).

Jordan: In 2022, China was Jordan's second largest trading partner and its largest source of imports: the trade volume between the two countries reached $6.45 billion, a 46% increase compared with 2021, while Jordan's export to China grew by 75% (Mustafa, 2023). China has also invested in natural resources in Jordan as with the Attarat oil shale power plant that will satisfy more than 10% of Jordan's power demand. Moreover, China's SDIC Mining Investment Company is the main shareholder of Arab Potash Company, helping increasing exports of Jordanian potash fertiliser to China. The Aqaba International Industrial Estate, a special economic zone that will welcome industrial parks in different domains and initiated by China (Chinese Embassy in the Kingdom of Jordan, 2022). The two countries also have cultural and educational partnerships (Chau, 2022).

Kuwait: Kuwait was one of the first countries to join the BRI and signed a strategic partnership with China seeing compatibility between the BRI and Kuwait Vision 2035 (Chaziza, 2020a). In January 2019, the first phase of a $130 billion project, part of the BRI, opened in Kuwait, a 36 kilometres route connecting the capital to the northern part of the country. The overall building project is to last for 25 years with routes and the development of five islands

[5] In 2022, Iraq exported 55 tonnes of crude oil to China, a 47% increase.

into free trade zones. The project comprises the construction of Silk City—Madinat Al Hareer—a logistic, transport and financial hub worth more than $80 billion (Gorvett, 2019; Khedr, 2021). Chinese investment is also supporting the construction of Mubarak Al Kabeer port, as part of the Silk City project and Kuwait Vision 2035, with the first phase completed in 2021 (Mwenda, 2022). China is an important economic partner for Kuwait. Kuwait is also a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The two countries are strengthening their strategic partnership through more cooperation in food and agriculture, security, 5G, smart cities, high tech, new energy but also health and education (CGTN, 2022).

Libya: Since the uprising in Libya, China has adopted a non-aligned position, hedging its bets. Before the revolution, Chinese industries were highly involved in the Libyan oil industry (Wehrey and Alkoutami, 2020). China is interested in Libyan oil and strategic location between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean (Chaziza, 2022). However, China is also looking for ways to capitalise on the Libyan oil sector and the use of Libyan ports (Atalayar, 2021; Foster, 2022).

Lebanon: Lebanon joined the BRI in 2017 (Zreik, n.d.). China actively supports the Tripoli Special Economic Zone around the port (Serlet, 2021) as it could be a hub for trade routes connecting the Mediterranean to East Asia and, more locally, to facilitate reconstruction of Syria seeing its proximity to the Syrian border (De Stone, 2019). On 9 December 2022, Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Riyadh to discuss further developments (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2022).

Morocco: Morocco and China signed an MoU to implement the BRI, the first African country to do so in 2017, and both countries have established a strategic partnership. Moreover, geographically, Morocco stands in a strategic area: access to the Mediterranean and African markets, near Western Europe, and provides access to the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic sphere is important for China, as currently it is a maritime space under US domination. American intelligence has recently discovered that China intends to establish military base in the region[6] (Phillips, 2021) as the west coast of Africa and the Atlantic is an area that is crucial in the US–China confrontation (Yellinek, 2022). On 5 January 2022, an MoU was signed between China and Morocco to facilitate the joint implementation of the BRI; Morocco was the first North African country to do so (HKTDC, 2022). This should lead to Chinese financing of infrastructure projects and facilitate cooperation in industry, energy, and technological development. Chinese companies invest in infrastructures, finance centres, and industries: the Kenitra Atlantic Free Zone, Casablanca Finance City, Tangier Med Port Complex (in the strategic Gibraltar Strait), as well as a finalised deal with China Communications Construction Company in July 2022 to build $1bn Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City, expected to host around 200 Chinese companies and to be finished by 2027 (Rogers, 2022b; Zawya, 2023a). China is also supporting the "Morocco Digital 2025" plan: Huawei, China's main technology-related company is developing DSR projects in Morocco. The company has already opened a logistics centre at Tangier Med Port, is providing communication technology for the national railway system (ONCF), and is generally well involved in telecommunication systems across the country (Neary, 2023).

Oman: Oman is located in a strategic area along the economic and trade shipping between Europe and Asia through the Strait of Hormuz. Oman and China signed an MoU on the BRI in May 2018 and have a strategic partnership. Oman is framing Chinese investments as useful in enhancing Oman Vision 2040 promoting economic diversification. Still, China is Muscat's largest oil importer, accounting for more than 80% of the crude oil and oil condensate Omani exports in 2021 (Oman Observer, 2022). In February 2023, Oman signed a liquefied natural gas (LNG) deal with a Chinese firm Unipec to deliver 1 million metric tonnes of LNG per year for four years from 2025 (Reuters, 2023). Moreover, Oman and China signed a land lease agreement to build a huge industrial zone in Duqm. The cooperation goes beyond the construction of the immense refinery and port terminal, which opened in February 2022, as China finances an 11.72 square kilometres industrial park in Duqm for more than $10bn (Markets Insider, 2022; Middle East Eye, 2022). The Chinese group Oman Wanfang acquired a 50-year usufruct agreement with the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (Gnana, 2017). However, Oman seems concerned over growing Chinese influence in the Gulf. Indeed, in April 2022, the Chinese Minister of National Defence visited the Sultanate, and a military MoU was drafted. However, shortly after, Omani concerns over Chinese influence put a hold on the MoU (ANI News, 2022). In May 2022, China and Oman signed an MoU to enhance tourism between the two countries (Times News Service, 2022).

Palestine: Chinese aid to Palestine is meagre: $2 million in 2021. Chinese companies invest little in Palestinian territories, only financing small facilities for solar power and desalination in Gaza (Lavi and Eran, 2023).

[6] US intelligence found out that Beijing was seeking to establish a military base in Equatorial Guinea.

Qatar: Qatar has been part of the BRI since 2014 as it aligns with its National Vision 2030. Qatar also has a strategic partnership with China. In 2017, an MoU allowed Qatar Chamber to join the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce and, in November 2018, the two countries signed an MoU to identify global maritime investment opportunities (Chaziza, 2020c, pp. 78–102). A Chinese contractor built the iconic Lusail Stadium that welcomed the FIFA World Cup final in 2022. China Harbor Engineering Company also participated in the construction of new deep sea Hamad Port. In March 2023, China accounted for a little bit more than 20% of Qatar's exports, a 20% rise compared to March 2022 (Zawya, 2023b). China is the largest trading partner of Qatar and the largest importer of Qatari LNG (Adly, 2023). In April 2023, Sinopec acquired a 5% stake in the Qatari North Field LNG expansion project (El Dahan and Mills, 2023). In November 2022, Sinopec signed a $60 billion deal for 27-year supply with Qatar Energy for 4 million tonnes of LNG per year, the longest such agreement to date (Dargin, 2022). It will ensure security in Chinese energy imports to support its manufacturing sector in a context of disruption of the energy sector following the Ukraine–Russia war. It is also a way for China to meet its carbon emission goals, getting away from the carbon-intensive coal energy (Dargin, 2022). Moreover, Qatari companies also invest in China under the sovereign wealth fund the Qatar Investment Authority (Chaziza, 2020c, p. 92). Concerning military cooperation, China sells defence and military technology to Qatar, such as SY-400 ballistic missile system. In this way, China ensures that it has a secured access to gas, and Qatar can diversify its military alliances (Chaziza, 2020c, p. 92).

Saudi Arabia: China and the KSA relations has, since 2016, evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Xi Xinping visited Saudi Arabia in December 2022, and 34 investment agreements were signed worth around $50 billion (Abuljadayel and Omar, 2022) in automobile manufacturing, green hydrogen, medical industry, intelligent equipment, and the food and beverage industry (Zheng, 2022). China is Saudi Arabia's top trading partner (Nagraj and Khan, 2023), and the energy sector is the one receiving the most investments in Saudi, in the oil and gas sectors (Syed, 2022, p. 10). However, cooperation also concerns other sectors such as decarbonisation technologies, electricity and renewables, hydrogen or digital infrastructure (computing, surveillance technology, virtual currency). During the first half of 2022, Saudi Arabia was the largest recipient of Chinese investments within the BRI, with an amount of $5.5billion (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022b; Syed, 2022). Indeed, the BRI and the Saudi Vision 2030 are well aligned (The Global Times, 2022b): China is massively investing in Saudi mega-projects such as NEOM (Xinhua, 2022; Porter, 2023). The exchanges, however, are bilateral as Saudi Aramco invested billions in China through two refinery deals in March 2023 (Tan and Aizhu, 2023). The growing cooperation in the military sector between the Kingdom and Beijing was exemplified by the publicly known, since 2021, production of ballistic missiles between the two countries (Salami, 2022). Also, Saudi Arabia is buying Chinese air defence missile HQ-17AE and drones (Yellinek, 2022).

Syria: In January 2022, Syria signed an MoU to join the BRI. China seeks to invest in the reconstruction of Syria given the country remains under Western sanctions. Syria is trying to attract Chinese investments in the country through several projects (Burton, Lyall and Pauley, 2021)[7]. Also, Syria is the main oil producer in the Eastern Mediterranean and has gas reserves that could be used to support BRI infrastructure costs. Moreover, Syria is linked to the "Five Seas strategy" of the BRI, a plan to link the Caspian, Black, Mediterranean, and Red Seas with the Persian Gulf. The Syrian access to the Mediterranean and the possible Chinese investments in harbour infrastructures in the country aligns with Chinese stake in such equipment in the Mediterranean (Israel, Piraeus Port in Greece, etc.). The inclusion of Syria in the BRI would allow linking Iran to Damas through Iraq (Iraq Business News, 2023)[8] and, more broadly, to the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Tunisia: Tunisia joined the BRI in 2018 and signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement with China in 2021. Chinese investments in Tunisia are limited: in 2021, China was 35th on the list of countries actively investing in Tunisia and was the third supplier of consumer goods in the North African country (Dugit-Gros and Henneberg, 2023). Some remarkable Chinese projects were carried in Tunisia such as a new $23 million diplomatic academy inaugurated in 2022, while China is reported to be interested in Tunisian ports (Dugit-Gros and Henneberg, 2023). Moreover, China is investing in infrastructures such as the University Hospital in Sfax, inaugurated in 2020 (Foreman, 2020). China has assisted in the construction of sports, cultural, academic, and medical facilities, as well as a canal, in Tunisia (Foster, 2022).

[7] Among them: "the construction of a north-south-east highway, the re-development of the ports of Latakia and Tartus, and the construction of railroads, one in the Damascus region and another that would connect with the Lebanese port of Tripoli."

[8] Despite tensions between Iran and Iraq, the two countries agreed to open a cross-border rail through the Basra/Shalamcheh corridor.

UAE: UAE and China are part of a comprehensive strategic partnership. China is UAE's largest non-oil trading partner (Nagraj and Khan, 2023). Also, the UAE are China's second-largest trading partner and the largest export market in the Arab region (Nagraj and Khan, 2023). The UAE-China Business Committee facilitates the cooperation between Beijing and Abu Dhabi in multiple fields (Interesse, 2024). UAE and China have been investigating joint ventures (Interesse, 2024). In 2016, China's Cosco Shipping Ports obtained a 35-year concession to operate Khalifa Port Container Terminal 2 in Abu Dhabi. In December 2018, Cosco announced an investment of $200m to expand the terminal, having already invested some $300m in the facility and $130m in a nearby container freight station (Oxford Business Group, 2022). Moreover, Chinese investments in Dubai are also significant including Motor City, Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, and Dubai Water Canal (Bhatia, 2023). Since 2018, an industrial zone in Abu Dhabi is under construction, the Khalifa Industrial Zone, a project announced in 2015 between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (Han, 2022). Regarding the digital field, Dubai International Financial Center (DIFC) and Jiaozi FinTech Dreamworks of China signed an MoU in July 2020 (Interesse, 2022). In September 2022, China National Space Administration signed an MoU with UAE's Mohammed bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC), for their first joint space project (The Global Times, 2022a). Financially, Abu Dhabi Global Market built its first foreign representative office in Beijing (Abu Dhabi Global Market, 2018). On the military side, China is selling military equipment such as fighter jets and drones to the UAE (Xie, 2022).

Yemen: Because of current instability in Yemen, Chinese investments in the country are very limited. However, Beijing expressed its interest in Yemeni ports (Al-Batati, 2022) and post-war reconstruction (Charouz, 2023; Tekingunduz, 2020).

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