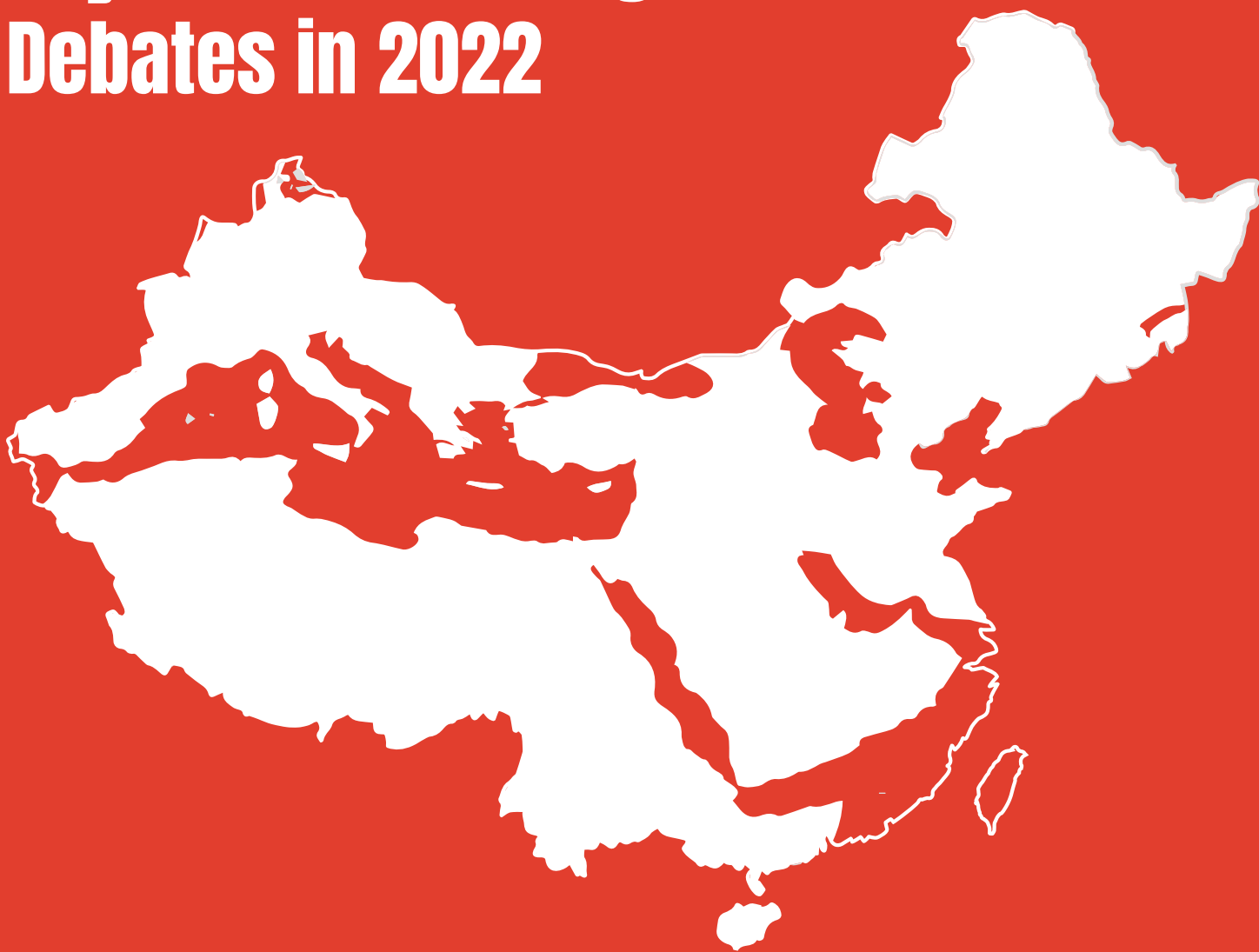


CHINA IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION:

Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2022



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CHINA IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Key Trends and Regional Debates in 2022

Edited by

ENRICO FARDELLA and **ANDREA GHISELLI**

Published by Torino World Affairs Institute
Corso Valdocco 2 | 10122 Torino, Italy

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ISBN: 9788894080353

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report discusses the main trends in the media debates in China and in seven key countries of the wider Mediterranean – France, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye – on China's role in the region. Supplemented by descriptive statistics, the analysis of each chapter is based on original sources in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Greek, Italian, Hebrew, and Turkish.

Regarding the Chinese media debate, the main international events discussed this 2022 were the ongoing war in Ukraine, the future of the Iranian nuclear deal, Türkiye's role in the region, France's withdrawal from Mali, and the United States' attempts to pressure the region's states to contain China and oppose Russia. In general, while celebrating the opportunities for cooperation, especially in the context of improving Sino-Arab relations and waning Western influence in the wider Mediterranean, Chinese analysts were not necessarily optimistic on the region's future as political instability and external interventions remain frequent.

Meanwhile, opinions on China in the Israeli media have been mainly shaped by Beijing's relations with other countries, rather than the dynamics of the Sino-Israeli relationship itself. Indeed, the debate on China has become incredibly polarized due to Beijing's rivalry with the US, its friendly ties with Iran, and the importance that Israelis place on national security. The complexity of this discussion is undoubtedly indicative of the magnitude of the challenge that awaits Israeli policymakers in balancing competing international forces.

The Iranian media debate on China in 2022 fully reflected Iran's difficult position. It is evident that how Tehran should approach China is a highly politicized and consequential issue over which different positions uneasily coexist. While some see Beijing as a formidable partner, others are increasingly concerned by Iran's overreliance on China, especially following Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia which has only added more fuel to the fire. These contrasting stances also gained more or less space with the evolution of Iran's external environment.

On the other hand, the articles written by Saudi journalists and commentators clearly reflect the will of the country's policymakers to expand and strengthen relations with China by fully leveraging the strong economic complementarity between the two countries. Nonetheless, the fact that concerns were expressed about the geopolitical sustainability of this course of action can be seen as symptomatic of the challenges Saudi Arabia will likely face in the coming years.

The debate on China in Iraq seems to confirm that Baghdad's fragmented political situation is one the main obstacles to

the development of Sino-Iraqi relations beyond the scope of oil exchanges. Moreover, concerns about corruption and Iran's possible influence on those that favor stronger ties with China cloud the Iraqi discussion. This is despite the government's continued efforts to provide evidence of beneficial and growing cooperation between the two countries in sensitive sectors.

As to Türkiye, its media debate reflects how Ankara mainly perceives China as a country with which it has a fruitful, but somewhat unequal trade and investment partnership. However, the debate also showcases the unsympathetic perceptions of Beijing common in Turkish politics and society due to both the Uyghur issue and the perception of China as a threat to Türkiye's economic and, to a minor extent, political ambitions in the region.

In France, the media discussion on China reflects Paris' clear awareness of the Mediterranean dimension of Beijing's foreign policy. While not surprising given France's long-standing ties with Africa and the continent's centrality in its foreign and defense policy, the strong words used suggest that French policymakers and commentators consider China to be an important test for Paris' influence in the wider Mediterranean, especially in North Africa.

The Italian media debate on China has only barely considered Beijing's role in the wider Mediterranean region. Interestingly, analyses on this aspect of Chinese foreign policy mostly came from policymakers, as journalists and other commentators seemed more interested in following the debate on China at the European Union-level. This reflects how in Italy, unlike in the other two European countries included in this report, there is an apparent lack of awareness of how Beijing is now a significant actor in Rome's own neighborhood.

Finally, the cautious but nuanced positions in the Greek media debate on China reflect both Greece's geopolitical priorities and a keen awareness that Beijing, through COSCO's massive presence in the Port of Piraeus, is not a faraway country. China's permanent seat at the Security Council of the United Nations is also a noteworthy element in light of Greek's maritime dispute with Türkiye. These elements contribute to explaining Athens' relatively diplomatic approach vis-à-vis China.

To conclude, what clearly emerges is how the policymakers of all the countries considered, including China, are facing enormous challenges in adapting to both the changing situation in many parts of the wider Mediterranean region as well as the evolution of the international order.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINA MED PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa, and Asia. [Our research team](#) at [ChinaMed Project](#) analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at [ChinaMed Data](#).

Moreover, we publish a newsletter, the [ChinaMed Observer](#), that every month collects the most interesting and noteworthy articles on Sino-Mediterranean relations. The Observer comes out in two sections: "China Looks at the Mediterranean" and "The Mediterranean Looks at China." The former covers

analyses on the wider Mediterranean region from Chinese media sources, while the latter collects analyses on China's increasing regional presence from countries across the wider Mediterranean such as Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Greece, Italy, and more.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the [ChinaMed Business Program](#), [scientific publications](#), and [academic events](#). The ChinaMed Project, a part of the [TOChina Hub](#) developed by the [University of Turin](#) and promoted by the [Torino World Affairs Institute](#), carries out these initiatives and its research through its partnerships such as those with the [China-Global South Project](#), the [Department of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University](#), the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies](#), and the [Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies](#). ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation as well as of the International Affairs Program of the Compagnia di San Paolo, a leading Italian banking foundation.

Acknowledgments

This report is the product of the ChinaMed research community, the collective effort of a group of dedicated and passionate researchers devoted to free learning and independent analysis. I would therefore like to begin by thanking these young and free spirits - Amanda, Andrea, Faruk, Leonardo and Valeria - because their genuine energy is the strong pillar upon which the ChinaMed Project stands.

The TOChina Hub, ChinaMed's resilient sponsor, and its leadership - Prof. Anna Caffarena and Prof. Giovanni Andornino - deserve our most sincere gratitude for their loyal and considerate support. John Cabot University (JCU), its visionary President Prof. Franco Pavoncello, renowned JCU colleagues Prof. Seth Jaffe and Prof. Michael Driessen and JCU's remarkable team - including the talented designer Gioia Fiaccadori and the indefatigable project manager Azelya Terzi - have quickly recognized the potential of our project and have generously invested in and promoted its latest activities and this report. I would like to sincerely thank them as their deep trust and warm encouragement is providing our team with new and refreshing stamina.

It is a pleasure to express our gratitude for the support provided to our project - in accordance with Article 23 bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967 - to the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, its brilliant head Counsellor Giuliana Del Papa, and her inexhaustible colleagues Rodolfo Colaci and Lorenzo Vai. It goes without saying that the views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

Last but not least, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the University of Naples "L'Orientale" for giving me the opportunity to work once again in my country. I am fully confident that the ChinaMed Project will soon become a fertile and productive ground for L'Orientale's rich intellectual community of scholars and students.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

The emotional symbology that supports the “China Dream” – the renaissance of the Chinese nation – projects the “return” of China to the center of the international system as the realization of a natural path towards the reestablishment of a harmonious and fair order. However, along this apparent historical trajectory towards the completion of China’s “revolution,” the country has deeply transformed itself to adapt to the changing global environment. During this epoch-making shift, China has moved from relative isolation to being profoundly integrated into the core of the globalized world. China’s current search for contemporary centrality in a newly integrated global system represents a completely new challenge for Beijing, one that for the very first time profoundly exposes China’s interests and ambitions to the volatile dynamics of the “others.”

Among them, the Mediterranean region has progressively acquired a privileged role. The growing surge of Chinese goods bought by European consumers has also led to China’s increased dependency on the Middle East’s energy supplies and thus the region’s stability. China’s emerging competition with the United States has also turned key regional actors into essential partners as it attempts to hedge vis-à-vis American pressures. Therefore, in the last two decades, the wider Mediterranean region has risen to the top of Beijing’s strategic horizons, becoming its most important area beyond Asia. At the same time, China’s political and economic investments in the region have boosted the global relevance of the Mediterranean, bringing some to describe its “new centrality.”

However, the recent deepening of the Sino-American rivalry is revising the above-mentioned dynamic. Vocal American warnings have ignited a lively debate within regional actors over the risks and opportunities generated by close economic and political relations with China. The reaction by Mediterranean actors has not been uniform. While the China policy of some, especially those who are NATO members, has shifted to complete alignment with the United States; others, instead, have opted for a more independent posture in an attempt to maximize the benefits that can be reaped from being at the center of great power courtship.

Therefore, the regional debate on China is a useful proxy that can be studied to identify the potential evolution of the

dynamics within the Mediterranean region that shape China’s global stance and, thus, influence its path and pace toward the successful completion of its dream of national rejuvenation.

To capture at least one aspect of this phenomenon, this report discusses the main trends in the media debates in China and in seven key countries of the wider Mediterranean – France, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye – on China’s role in the region. We build on the work done throughout 2022 for our monthly newsletter, the [ChinaMed Observer](#), which draws from original sources in Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, French, Greek, Italian, Hebrew, and Turkish. The analysis in each chapter is supported by descriptive statistics based on the data that the ChinaMed Project team has gathered over the years from a variety of sources, that range from the Chinese government to international organizations.

It goes without saying that the countries taken into consideration here greatly differ from one another on many key indicators and issues like media freedom or foreign policy interests, and these differences naturally shape the nature and drivers of their debates on China’s role in the wider Mediterranean region as well as the nature of the insights that can be gained from analyzing said debates.

Nonetheless, what clearly emerges is how the policymakers of all countries considered, including China, are facing enormous challenges in dealing with the reverberations of the worsening relations between Beijing and Washington, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the breakdown in the negotiations to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the failed search for a new model of political stability and economic development in much of the southern and eastern parts of the wider Mediterranean region. Indeed, defying the widespread narratives that describe well-defined international fault lines, such as between autocracies and democracies, or between being pro-Beijing and pro-Washington, this report instead highlights how regional actors are in reality trying to hedge their bets vis-à-vis growing uncertainty. For example, Chinese commentators were cautious in levying criticism against Paris for its attempts to assert its influence in its former colonies, conscious of how without any French involvement the situation in much of the Sahel is likely to worsen. In Iran, some disputed the soundness of closer relations with Beijing. Meanwhile, in Greece, Saudi Arabia, and Israel there is no

desire to antagonize or quickly scale down economic and technological cooperation with China, despite their close security ties with the United States. In other countries, such as Türkiye, China is many things at once, from a source of capital to a competitor in foreign markets. Another crucial element that emerges from this report is a sometimes-deep lack of knowledge of the Chinese or Mediterranean other. Of course, policymakers are very likely better informed than what shines through their countries' media debates. Moreover, there is no doubt that some commentators willfully mischaracterize other states' intentions to promote certain policy positions, or discredit others. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that certain explanations for why China, the United States, or the region's countries act are based more on mirror-imaging than anything else.

To conclude, we hope that the reader will appreciate our efforts to provide an overview of evolving Sino-Mediterranean relations as the actors involved describe them. Despite the chapters' brevity, we believe that the pages that compose this report contain important information and insights that will provide nourishing food for thought for experts and policymakers alike.

CHINA

As China's economic, trade and diplomatic presence in the wider Mediterranean region grows both in extent and relevance, Chinese media have in turn become increasingly interested in the region. Analyses mostly revolved around the opportunities and challenges that global, regional and national developments pose to Beijing's relations with regional actors. The main international events discussed this year were the ongoing war in Ukraine, France's withdrawal from Mali, and the United States' attempts to pressure the region's countries to contain China and oppose Russia. In comparison, the global impact of events in China, such as the implementation of Beijing's strict zero-COVID policy and the resulting economic slowdown, was barely discussed.

This is not surprising: the Chinese media debate aims to both inform the public and promote a narrative that emphasizes the virtues of Beijing's foreign policy and political system. The ideas of a "rising East against a declining West,"¹ of a successful "Chinese model" and of a "Chinese solution" to international problems are key components of this narrative. This logic informs China's media discourse around events in the wider Mediterranean and explains Chinese experts and commentators' heightened focus on the region's stability. As such, to comprehensively understand the Chinese perspective on the region, noting what is absent from the debate is equally important as analyzing what is included.

The Middle East: Regional Détente and Strategic Autonomy After American Disengagement

Chinese commentators have been optimistic regarding the "unprecedented opportunities" of China-Middle East cooperation. This optimism is largely due to the "changes unseen in centuries" reshaping the region.² One of these changes was the de-escalation of tensions between Israel and many Arab countries following the 2020 Abraham

Accords, which normalized Tel Aviv's diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. Another is the regional power vacuum being created by Washington's "strategic retreat" that the region's most prominent countries (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Türkiye, Iran and Israel) are gradually filling through increased cooperation between themselves. Chinese scholars thus happily predicted that the region is slowly but steadily moving toward a new, less US-dependent order characterized by increased regional autonomy.

This prediction was very popular and was repeatedly echoed in Chinese media throughout the year, especially after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's Middle East trip in March.³ According to Chinese commentators, Blinken's failure to rally diplomatic support for Ukraine and against Russia, to convince Israel to welcome the restoration of the Iran nuclear deal negotiations, and to reduce the gap between the Israeli and the Palestinian positions, showed that in the context of regional détente, Middle Eastern countries' strategic autonomy will likely grow at the expense of Washington's influence.⁴

US President Joe Biden's Middle East tour in July was also depicted in similar terms. The Chinese news outlet *The Paper* reported that the trip "ended in disgrace amidst the ridicule and derision of international public opinion" due to it being made for blatant utilitarian purposes.⁵ Moreover, regional actors no longer share Washington's concerns regarding China, Russia and, increasingly, Iran.⁶ According to Chinese commentators, this disconnect is the main reason behind the slow but irreversible decline of US influence in the Middle East.⁷ A consequence of the US' growing disengagement is that Middle Eastern states have begun to implement "Look East" policies to diversify their diplomacy and to, above all, benefit from the economic possibilities of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

¹ Niu Xinchun, 全球能源转型加速 “东升西降” [The global energy transition speeds up the “rise of the East and decline of the West], Global Times, January 18, 2022, [link](#).

² Ibid.

³ Qiu Wenhan, 布林肯开启中东行, 有哪些“重头戏” [Blinken goes to the Middle East, what are the highlights?], Liberation Daily, March 28, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Zhang Hong, 中东国家自主意识日渐增强 [The strategic autonomy of Middle Eastern countries is growing], *People's Daily*, April 6, 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Liu Zhongmin, 中东睿评 | 拜登中东行黯然收场, 折射美国权力和声望双重衰落 [Middle East Foresight | Biden's trip to the Middle East ends sadly, reflecting the decline of American power and prestige], *The Paper*, July 19, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Zhang Quan, 今起先后访问以色列、约旦河西岸和沙特阿拉伯 – 拜登任内首访中东着眼多重目标 [Biden will visit Saudi Arabia, Israel and the West Bank and Saudi Arabia – His first visit to the Middle East has many goals], *Jiefang Daily*, July 13, 2022, [link](#).

⁷ Qiu Wenhan, 宣称将开启双方关系“新篇章”, 结果却遭遇多重尴尬拜登任内首次中东行成果寥寥 [Many embarrassing moments during Biden's first trip to the Middle East despite the promise of beginning a “new chapter” in the relations between the two sides], *Jiefang Daily*, July 18, 2022, [link](#).

Indeed, the trend of the region's countries prioritizing economic development was interpreted by many Chinese scholars as a sign of the "decline of the West against the rise of the East" and as a clear indicator of the Chinese model's success with respect to the American model based on hegemony and security competition. However, more cautious voices also warned that despite its relative decline, the US remains for the moment the most influential extra-regional great power. Furthermore, competition with Washington remains an important factor shaping China's relations in the region. Therefore, to have a successful Middle East policy that takes full advantage of these "unprecedented opportunities," China should not fall into the trap of wanting to become the next hegemon by attempting to fill the power vacuum left by the US. Instead, Beijing should strive to understand and satisfy Middle Eastern countries' desire for development, autonomy and multipolarity.⁸

Nonetheless, Chinese commentators were aware that Sino-

discussed growing regional instability, including in countries like Iraq where Beijing has significant economic and energy interests (See Figure 1), they avoided mentioning the possible implications for China. Space was instead given to criticizing how the actions of the US have contributed to destabilizing the region.¹⁰ Moreover, Chinese commentators, regardless of Washington's partial disengagement, still consider the US and its foreign policy to be the biggest source of uncertainty and risk for the Middle East.

The Arab World: Opportunities and Uncertainties

In 2022, Chinese media paid special attention to the Arab world, as the Ukraine-related energy crisis caused major fluctuations in oil prices and expanded the influence of oil-producing countries. Gulf states, in

Value of the contracts won by Chinese construction companies in Iraq

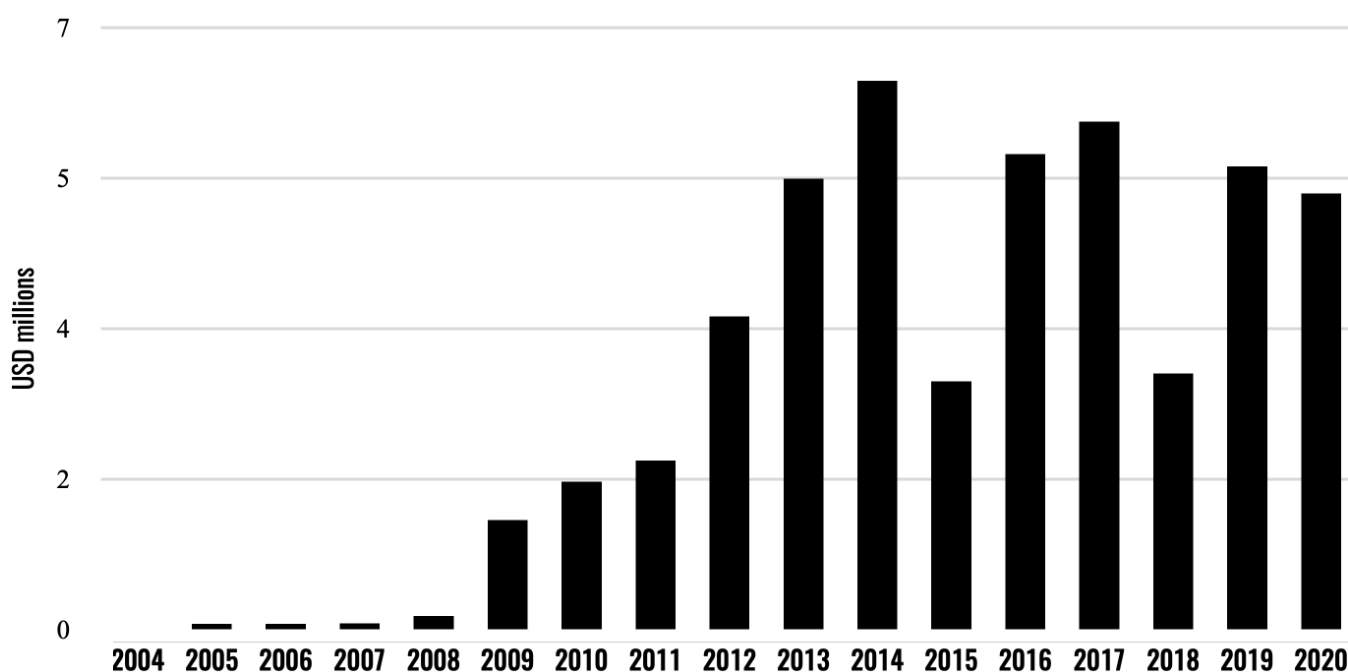


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iraq>.

Middle Eastern cooperation still faces many challenges complicated by the war in Ukraine and the ensuing global energy, economic and food crises. Countries that were already dealing with political instability and security challenges such as Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Iraq have seen their situations worsen. This has only heightened the fear among Chinese scholars that another "Arab Spring" might break out and undermine overall regional stability.⁹ It is interesting to note that when Chinese media outlets

particular, could leverage their renewed influence to act more independently in the region, in the world and towards both China and the US. Considering the weight of energy in China-Arab trade (See Figure 2), Chinese commentators have called on Beijing to be careful and keep strengthening its relations with oil-exporting countries, especially Saudi Arabia.¹¹ It is not surprising that these appeals appeared concomitantly to Biden's

⁸Tang Zhichao, 中东国家迈向战略自主 [Middle East countries move toward strategic autonomy], *Globe*, July 26, 2022, [link](#).

⁹Xie Lian, 大选一年后, 伊拉克新总统为何仍然“难产”? [One year after the election, why is the formation of a new Iraqi government so difficult?], *Beijing News*, October 13, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁰Fan Shuaishuai, Wang Jian, and Pan Xiaojing, 美在中东种下祸根不断结出恶果 [America's seeds of evil in the Middle East continue to bear fruit], *Cankao Xiaoxi*, September 8, 2022, [link](#).

¹¹Li Shijun, 俄乌冲突, 中东产油国成“新变量” [The countries in the Middle East become "new variables" against the background of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine], *Global Times*, June 14, 2022, [link](#).

trip to Riyadh in June, when he called on the Saudi government to support the West buckling under the energy crisis. Considering Biden's campaign promise to ostracize Riyadh for its part in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018, Chinese media also reported the visit as a demonstration of the hypocrisy of the American discourse on democracy and human rights. However, the negative impact that China's zero-COVID policy has had on its economy and thus on global oil demand and on Gulf economies was completely absent from the debate.

Meanwhile, Iraq's precarious political and security situation raised concerns over the future of China's investments and infrastructure projects in the country, carried out under the banner of the BRI and the 2019 'oil for reconstruction deal.' Already in August, the Chinese embassy in Iraq issued a warning to all Chinese companies and organizations to be extremely cautious and to strengthen security measures due to the growing instability.¹⁴ Besides being an opportunity to condemn the US for the long-lasting destabilizing effects of its 2003 invasion, Chinese articles on Iraq

Value of Chinese energy imports from the Middle East

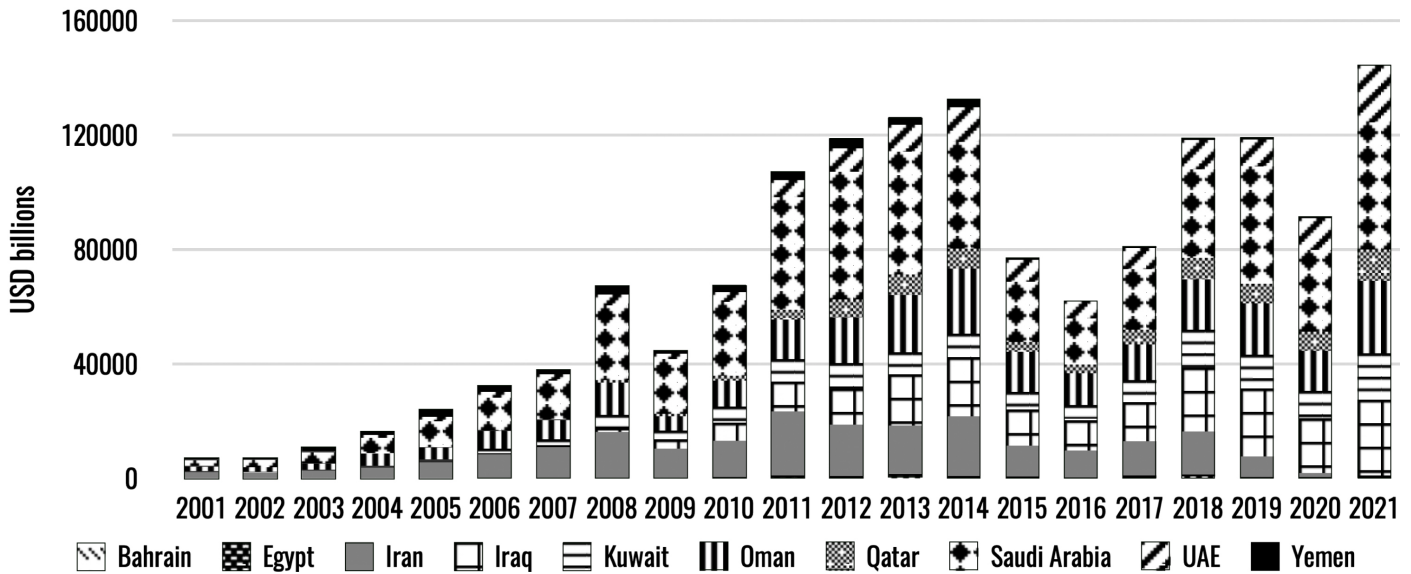


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east>.

Overall, Chinese commentators seemed content with the US' failure to engage Arab countries and appreciated Gulf countries' attempts to boost their autonomy and international influence in the context of the Ukrainian crisis. They complimented the Saudi decision in October to push OPEC+ countries to cut oil production and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan's visit to Russia that very same month.¹² Alongside the UAE, Qatar was another frequent recipient of Chinese praise due to its skillful diplomacy. It hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup was interpreted as a further example of its global ambitions, as the event gave it the opportunity to enhance its diplomatic clout and create new business opportunities with other regional and extra-regional powers.¹³

suggest that Beijing is becoming increasingly aware of the security risks of economic initiatives in fragile Middle Eastern countries and the need to protect its companies and citizens abroad.¹⁵ However, it is not yet clear from the media debate what concrete steps China is willing to pursue to guarantee the security of its interests in the region.

Arab-Israeli Cooperation to Contain Iran and the Marginalization of the Palestinian Issue

Despite the Abraham Accords being a product of the Trump administration, most Chinese commentators

¹² Li Zhiwei, Huang Peizhao, and Chen Zishuai, 不满“欧佩克+”减产决定，美资深议员放狠话要报复沙特！ [Dissatisfied with the OPEC+' decision to cut production, senior U.S. lawmakers speak harsh words against Saudi Arabia!], *Global Times*, October 12, 2022, [link](#).

¹³ Qian Xiaoyan, 世界杯最小主办国卡塔尔：人口200多万接待百万球迷，安保靠外援 [Qatar, the smallest host country of the World Cup, has a population of more than 2 million and receives millions of fans, the security is provided by other countries], *China Business Network*, October 19, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁴ Qian Xiaoyan, 油市再添变数！伊拉克首都陷暴力冲突，会否波及石油供应 [More uncertainty in the oil market! Violent clashes in Iraqi capital could affect oil supplies], *China Business Network*, August 30, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁵ Du Ke, 伊拉克之乱，祸根在谁？ [What is the root cause of the chaos in Iraq?], *People's Daily*, September 6, 2022, [link](#).

welcomed warming relations between Israel and Arab states as it catalyzed regional détente and strengthened Middle Eastern states' strategic autonomy through new forms of diplomatic and economic cooperation.¹⁶ However, they also expressed concerns over the fragility of Arab-Israeli collaboration due to it being based on the joint need to contain Iran rather than the resolution of the root causes of Arab-Israeli confrontation. Furthermore, Chinese commentators also complained about the Palestinian issue's increasing marginalization and, during the clashes between Israel and Hamas in April, expressed fears over a possible escalation of the conflict.¹⁷ Despite critiquing Arab countries' inaction in the face of Israel's violent actions against Palestinians, Chinese analysts limited themselves to calling on international organizations, such as the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to make efforts to promote peace.

Despite their differences on the Iranian and Palestinian issues, which remain the region's main contradictions, the Chinese media debate has been optimistic on the future of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors. The

US-mediated maritime demarcation deal between Israel and Lebanon brokered in October was praised and hailed as a positive sign for the development of regional stability. Moreover, the deal was depicted as an opportunity to mitigate the economic and energy crises, as it would allow the exploitation of gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁸ Finally, regarding the future of Sino-Israeli relations against the background of increasing US pressure on Tel Aviv, the Chinese do not expect Israel to give up its special relationship with Washington. However, they are also confident in Israel's willingness to preserve and expand cooperation with China, considering the encouraging data on bilateral trade (See Figure 3).¹⁹

The Restart of the Nuclear Accords and Iran Joining the SCO

Discussions on Iran in Chinese media were centered on the consequences of the possible revival of the nuclear deal and the prospect of Tehran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Chinese commentators have long considered the rise of Iranian

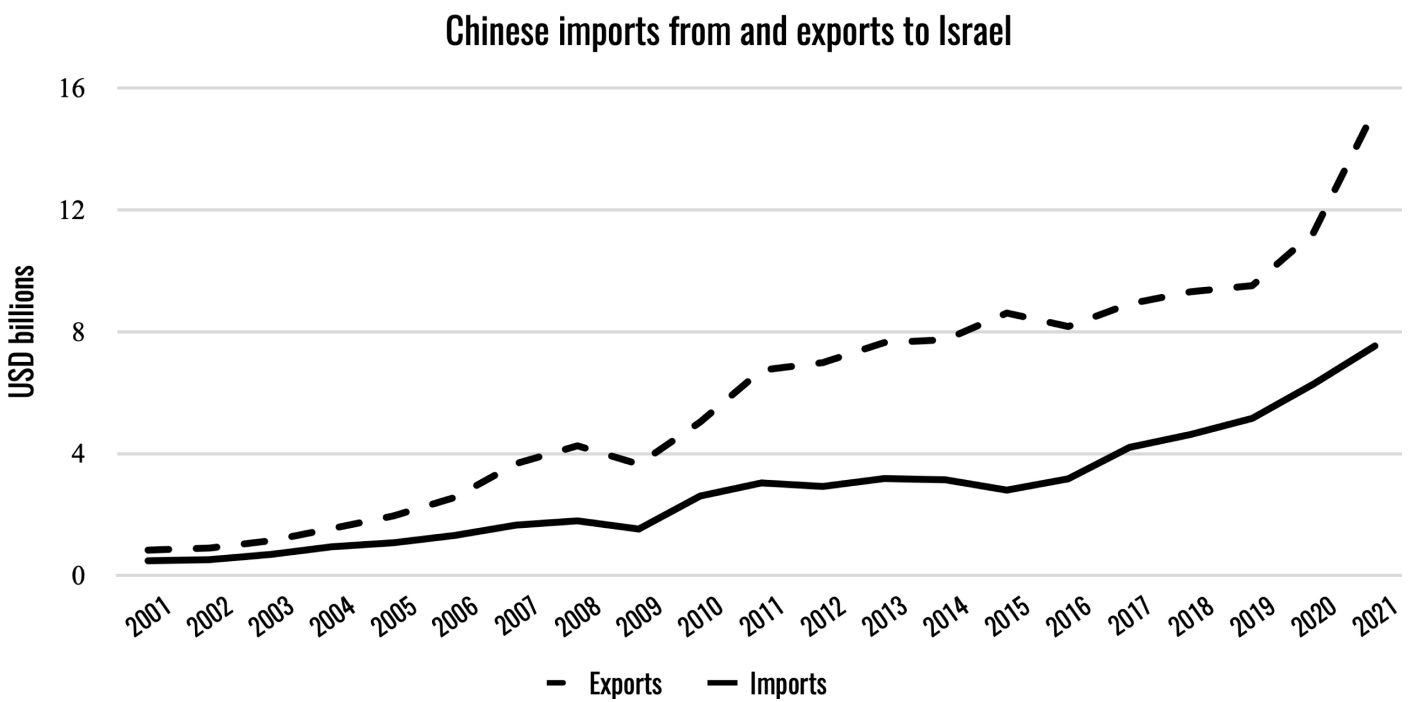


Figure 3 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/israel>.

¹⁶ Liu Zhongmin, 中东睿评 | 中东地区大国关系缓和的虚实表里 [Middle East Insights | The many aspects of the détente among Middle Eastern great powers], *The Paper*, March 21, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁷ Lin Zizhan, 冲突不断令巴以局势再度紧张 [The continuous escalation makes the situation between Israel and the Palestinians worse], *People's Daily*, April 21, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁸ Wen Shaobiao, 以色列与黎巴嫩达成海上划界协议 [Israel and Lebanon reach maritime demarcation agreement], *People's Liberation Army Daily*, October 11, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁹ 左右为难? 以媒: 以色列同意向美通报对华贸易最新情况 [A dilemma? Israel agrees to inform the United States about the status of economic relations with China], *Global Times*, January 4, 2022, [link](#).

power as “the most important variable triggering geopolitical changes in the Middle East” because it largely determines the actions of the other regional players.²⁰ In this context, some argued that the more or less overt attempts by countries like Israel and the UAE to undermine the Iran nuclear deal talks were evidence that an agreement had almost been reached.²¹ Others criticized the US for deliberately undermining the negotiations by keeping the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on a terrorist blacklist, despite Iran clarifying that their removal was a key precondition.²² Furthermore, Chinese commentators blamed Washington for creating a humanitarian crisis in Iran through sanctions, for its reluctance to make the first move in the nuclear deal negotiations, and for allowing the talks to get hijacked by its confrontation with Russia.

Sino-Iranian relations experienced new momentum when the Chinese defense minister visited Tehran in April to emphasize the role of security cooperation between the two countries and to reiterate Beijing’s support for the nuclear deal negotiations under its new foreign policy scheme, the Global Security Initiative. Chinese commentators also expected bilateral collaboration to strengthen once Tehran officially joins the SCO in 2023 as a full member. Iran’s addition will also supposedly showcase the China-led SCO’s “spirit of independence” as the organization will expand while still not including any Western country.²³ In general, Chinese discourse was quick to celebrate Iran as an anti-American partner with whom Beijing shares the struggle of building a multipolar world order against US hegemony. On the other hand, there was media silence in China on the protests that broke out in Iran in reaction to the murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September. This is not unexpected, given Iran’s importance to Beijing and the fact that late 2022 was also a period of growing social dissatisfaction in China because of its stringent zero-COVID policies.

Türkiye’s Foreign Policy and its Peculiar Role in the Region

Throughout the year, Chinese commentators (similarly to their Western counterparts) continuously criticized Türkiye for pursuing an assertive foreign policy despite not possessing the necessary resources to sustain it. They stated that Ankara’s diplomatic approach has only led to tensions with its Western allies and to its own isolation, such as when it threatened to veto Sweden and Finland’s accession to NATO in May.²⁴ At the same time, Türkiye was also singled out as an example of how Washington has failed to rally support in the region against Moscow. In fact, Russo-Turkish trade grew significantly as Türkiye started to sell to Russia many of the goods that it once used to purchase from European countries.²⁵ According to Chinese analysts, this development also highlights how US foreign policy’s contradictory nature and Washington’s neglect of its allies’ national interests has resulted in the growing tendency of regional actors to maneuver in autonomy and resist American influence.

Overall, despite Türkiye’s advantage of holding multiple identities and memberships in various groups and international organizations, Chinese commentators argued that Ankara’s tense relations with its European neighbors, especially Greece, its unresolved issues with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, and its overstretched economic and military power prevent it from fulfilling its foreign policy ambitions in the region.²⁶

Great Power Competition Might Be a Blessing for Africa

Generally, 2022 was a disastrous year for many African countries due to the food and economic crises provoked by the war in Ukraine. Chinese commentators throughout the year have expressed their concerns over the worsening food shortage in Sudan,²⁷ the unresolved Tigray War in Ethiopia, and the security vacuum left by the withdrawal of French and other European troops from Mali, which is likely to brew terrorist and refugee crises in the Sahel.²⁸ In particular, some Chinese scholars expressed worries that France’s withdrawal

²⁰ Ding Long, 丁隆: 中东地缘政治正在发生哪些变化 [Changes in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East], *Global Times*, August 24, 2022, [link](#).

²¹ Fan Hongda, 复活伊朗核协议谈判再起 [The dialogue on the Iranian nuclear deals restarts], *Dazhong Daily*, August 5, 2022, [link](#).

²² Zhong Sheng, 打破伊核谈判僵局, 美国应纠正错误政策 [The United States should correct its wrong policy to break the deadlock in Iran nuclear negotiations], *People’s Daily*, May 9, 2022, [link](#).

²³ Qin Tian, 伊朗正式“入群”是上合组织发展史上的又一里程碑 [Iran officially “joining the group” is another milestone in the history of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization], *China.com*, September 18, 2022, [link](#).

²⁴ Liu Zhongmin, 中东睿评 | 反对芬兰、瑞典加入北约, 埃尔多安的狠话认真的吗 [Middle East Review | Opposing Finland and Sweden to join NATO, are Erdogan’s harsh words serious?], *The Paper*, June 1, 2022, [link](#).

²⁵ Qian Xiaoyan, 堵住对俄制裁漏洞? 美国施压“特立独行”的土耳其和印度 [Closing the loopholes in the sanctions against Russia? US pressures ‘maverick’ Turkey and India], *China Business Network*, August 23, 2022, [link](#).

²⁶ Liu Zhongmin, 刘中民: 土耳其“多元身份”的得与失 [Liu Zhongmin: The gains and losses of Turkey’s “multiple identities”], *Global Times*, September 27, 2022, [link](#).

²⁷ Wang Bingfei, 苏丹粮食危机难觅出路 [There is no way out from Sudan’s food crisis], *Globe*, June 3, 2022, [link](#).

²⁸ Li Zhuoman, 萨赫勒安全危机外溢风险加大 [The risk of spillovers from the Sahel security crisis increases], *People’s Daily*, October 1, 2022, [link](#).

could create significant challenges for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali that has long benefitted from French logistical and air support.²⁹ These concerns are not only connected to regional stability, but also to the safety of the Chinese soldiers serving in the mission (See Figure 4). It is important to emphasize that the implicit recognition of France's contribution to Malian and Western African stability is noticeable in the context of a Chinese media debate that, otherwise, depicts Western countries and Western military interventions as critical sources of instability for the continent.

Although the Chinese did not seem happy with the withdrawal of European troops from Mali, they have used the event to highlight the role of China's security initiatives in the continent, in particular the China-Horn of Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development Conference held on June 20-21 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. On this occasion, ministers and senior government officials from Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Djibouti were joined by Xue Bing, Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to discuss issues related to regional security, a continuation of the discussions that began in 2015, when peace and security were listed among the ten macro areas of cooperation between China and African countries at that year's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. Chinese commentators praised the summit as a positive development both for the continent and for the future of China-Africa cooperation, and as a clear indicator of the maturity and effectiveness of Chinese diplomacy in the region. Many scholars pointed to the summit as the perfect example of the Chinese model of pursuing security goals through economic development and cooperation through the training and assisting of African personnel in the fields of implementation of the BRI, public security, peacekeeping, antipiracy, and counterterrorism.

Although some Chinese scholars expressed uncertainty on whether or how much Beijing could contribute to mediating regional issues,³⁰ most of them agreed that the emphasis on the link between development and security is one of the elements

that made the conference one of great importance, especially in comparison to Western initiatives that "rarely do so."³¹ Indeed, despite the Europeans shifting their focus in Africa from aid to investment, Chinese commentators nevertheless argued that they have been failing to deliver and that they have not committed new resources (likely due to the energy and economic crises). As for the US, for Chinese scholars the American strategy in Africa has the same goals as in the Middle East, which is to contain China and Russia rather than addressing the needs and interests of the countries of the continent.³² Nonetheless, some Chinese scholars consider that great power competition might actually be a blessing for Africa, as it brings with it attention and resources that could benefit the continent if invested in the right places.³³

Southern Europe and the Repercussions of the War in Ukraine

In comparison to other parts of the Mediterranean region, Chinese commentators did not pay particular attention to Southern Europe, only considering its countries when they engaged with African states or when they reflected EU-wide trends. Italy was the country that attracted the most analysis, as the political and economic issues affecting this major EU member state were seen as confirming Chinese analysts' pessimistic outlook on Europe's current trajectory. However, despite this interest in Italy, no Chinese article mentioned Rome's growing awareness and apprehension of Beijing's influence in the region, in particular the concerns expressed in the Italian Defense Ministry's 2022 Security and Defense Strategy for the Mediterranean.³⁴ The Italian political crisis in July was interpreted by Chinese analysts as being caused not by squabbles between the various parties supporting Mario Draghi's government, but rather by general European trends. More nationalistic commentators expressed (with some *schadenfreude*) that Draghi's pro-US position and strong support for Kyiv were determining factors behind his government's

²⁹ Gao Qiao, 法国撤军，西非反恐形势更严峻 [The French military leaves, the problem of terrorism in West Africa worsens], *People's Daily*, August 20, 2022, [link](#).

³⁰ Li Huanyu, 首届非洲之角和平会议顺利闭幕，中非共同推动地区和平的第一步 [The first China-Horn of Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development Conference ends smoothly, the first step jointly made by China and Africa to promote regional peace], *Guancha Syndicate*, June 23, 2022, [link](#).

³¹ Wang Chuanjun, 首届中国-非洲之角和平会议：创新域外大国与非洲国家合作模式 [The First China-Horn of Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development Conference: Creating a new model of cooperation between Africa and extra-regional great powers], *Guangming Daily*, June 27, 2022, [link](#).

³² Zhou Ying, 美国为何急着和非洲“套近乎”？ [Why is the United States trying to chum up with Africa?], *People's Daily*, August 18, 2022, [link](#); Zhong Sheng, Fēizhōu bùshì dàguó bóyì de jìngjì chǎng 非洲不是大国博弈的竞技场 [Africa is not an arena for great power competition], *People's Daily*, August 18, 2022, [link](#).

³³ Ma Hanzhi, 角逐非洲——欧盟能给非洲带来什么？ [A race to Africa -- What can Europe bring to Africa?], *Guangming Daily*, March 4, 2022, [link](#).

³⁴ Ministero della Difesa, Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo [Security and Defense Strategy for the Mediterranean], June 2022, [link](#).

collapse.³⁵ However, in general, it was considered a consequence of the energy and economic crises provoked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing political instability, which was interestingly defined by one Chinese scholar as "political turmoil," a term usually reserved for countries experiencing severe political strife or civil war.³⁶

On the energy crisis, Chinese commentators have been blaming Washington (rather than Moscow) for the dramatic situation that has left European leaders scrambling to reduce their dependence on Russian oil and gas. In particular, the US' desire to keep Iran out of the energy market and its refusal to reach an agreement with Tehran have been preventing much-needed oil from reaching European consumers.³⁷ Moreover, Washington's withdrawal from the construction of the new EastMed pipeline to carry Israeli natural gas to Europe in January was stated to have contributed to the EU's current crisis. For Chinese analysts, another consequence of the energy crisis will be an accelerated withering of Europe's industrial capabilities and a reduction of European investments in the Middle East and in Africa.³⁸ The latter fact will

also prevent the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean from developing the gas fields off their shores, which could improve Europe's energy situation.

Regardless of responsibilities, Chinese media and experts are extremely concerned that the rising energy and food prices caused by the war in Ukraine may provoke not only a repeat of the Arab Spring, but also foment the rise of right-wing politicians in Europe.³⁹ The victory of Giorgia Meloni in Italy's snap elections in September corroborated this prediction. According to Chinese experts, Meloni and other right-wing European politicians will continue to use provocative rhetoric vis-à-vis the EU and grow in influence over the coming years. However, their lack of government experience and technical knowledge and the strain of having to deal with Europe's current crises will make it highly unlikely that any of them will adopt radical foreign or domestic policies or attempt something like Brexit.⁴⁰ Therefore, most Chinese analysts did not believe that Meloni would follow through with the anti-China rhetoric of her campaign. This forecast also seemingly came to pass, as during the 2022 G20 Bali summit in November, Meloni and Xi Jinping had a

Chinese contribution of troops and other personnel to UN peacekeeping operations in Mali

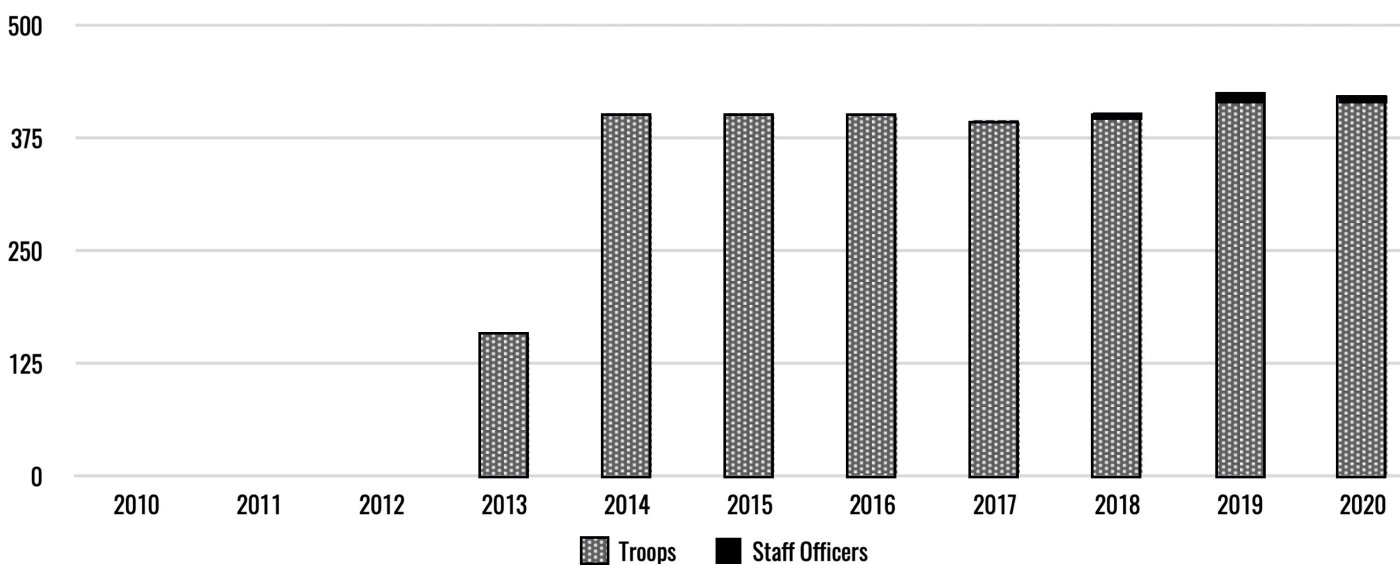


Figure 4 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/mali>

³⁵ Will political storm extend to more EU countries as inflation pressure pinches?, *Global Times*, July 17, 2022, [link](#).

³⁶ Dong Yifan, 欧洲政治右倾化映射“治理赤字”日趋严峻 [The rightward shift of European politics casts light upon its increasingly serious “governance deficit”], *China.org*, October 5, 2022, [link](#).

³⁷ Liu Zhongmin, 刘中民: 欧洲能源困境根源在美国 [Liu Zhongmin: The root of Europe's energy problems is in the United States], *Global Times*, May 20, 2022, [link](#).

³⁸ Sun Yanhong, 孙彦红: 欧洲“去工业化”势头影响深远 [Sun Yanhong: The trend of “de-industrialization” in Europe has a far-reaching impact], *Global Times*, October 27, 2022, [link](#).

³⁹ Zhao Junjie, 赵俊杰: 欧洲右翼政党为何日渐得势 [Zhao Junjie: Why European right-wing parties are gaining ground], *Global Times*, September 15, 2022, [link](#).

⁴⁰ Jian Junbo, Peng Chongzhou, Yan Shaohua, Zhang Xiaotong, and Li Anfeng, 中欧观察 | 意大利极右翼政党将上台执政, 欧洲右转之势难止? [Europe Observer | Italy's far-right party will come to power, will the right turn in Europe be hard to stop?], *The Paper*, September 30, 2022, [link](#).

mostly cordial bilateral meeting. However, rather than proving Chinese scholars' assumptions that right-wing European politicians are unable to affect foreign policy, the diplomatic approach of EU politicians as of late is likely due to them not wanting to burn diplomatic bridges with China while under pressure to address their countries' socio-economic issues.

Conclusion

Despite criticizing the US for considering the states of the wider Mediterranean region solely through the lens of its own foreign policy interests, Chinese commentators engaged in similar behavior as well. This year's regional developments, like the Arab-Israeli rapprochement and Iran joining the SCO, were analyzed in so far as they could assist Chinese media in spinning its narrative of a region eager to abandon a declining US and collaborate with a rising China. Moreover, while the wider Mediterranean's interconnectedness was recognized, Chinese media often ignored national nuances to depict the region as moving away from Washington as a bloc. Even countries that are clearly not following this supposed trend like Israel and Italy (because of alleged US pressure) were predicted to maintain positive relations with Beijing due to the importance of bilateral trade ties.

However, Chinese commentators' focus on Sino-US competition led to a certain degree of disregard for local agency, for the strong desire for non-alignment, and for the greater importance of local issues with respect to international dynamics in shaping regional actors' foreign policies. One clear exception was Türkiye, whose autonomous foreign policy and distinct regional ambitions were noted and criticized. Additionally, all problems in the wider Mediterranean, from instability in Iraq and Iran, to the economic shockwaves of the war in Ukraine, were blamed on the West and specifically the US. Contrarily, there was no discussion of the negative repercussions of events in China, such as regarding the fall in global energy demand provoked by Beijing's zero-COVID-induced economic slowdown, and of severe disturbances in "China-aligned" countries, such as with the protests in Iran.

Despite celebrating the opportunities for China-Arab cooperation and waning Western influence in the wider Mediterranean, Chinese media was not necessarily optimistic on the region's future. Indeed, the food and economic crises are fueling fears of a new Arab Spring and of a populist surge in Europe. In the case of the Sahel, Chinese commentators did not even welcome France's retreat, as it could leave behind a security vacuum. While proud of Beijing's approach to international security exemplified by the Horn of Africa Peace Conference, many analysts warn that China should not fall into the same trap of attempting to play a hegemonic role in the region like the US.

ISRAEL

During 2022, which was marked by the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Israel, Israeli media paid great attention to the current status of Sino-Israeli relations. Israeli commentators noted how this relationship is being shaped by two opposing forces: American pressure on Israel to reduce cooperation with China, and Tel Aviv's desire to maintain good terms with Beijing so as not to harm its own economy. This contraposition has mostly affected science and technology cooperation, infrastructure projects, and bilateral trade relations.

The renewed US-China strategic rivalry has led Washington to attempt to contain Beijing's ambitions in the high-tech sector. One way the US has been trying to constrain China's capacity for innovation is by pressuring its ally Israel, a technological powerhouse, to scale down its collaboration with Beijing. Although Israeli commentators recognize US pressure as being motivated by the desire to contain China, they also agree that Beijing becoming a technological competitor represents a national security threat for Israel. Therefore, they have recommended their government be careful of Chinese infiltration in sensitive sectors.¹ Tel Aviv has seemingly taken this advice to heart, as on September 28, it held the 1st Joint Israeli-US High-Level Strategic Dialogue on Technology Cooperation. This initiative can be considered an American version of the Israel-China Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation (established in 2014) and a reflection of Israel's commitment to maintaining a special relationship with Washington. At the same time, it also revealed Tel Aviv's growing mistrust of Beijing, likely due to China engaging in technological cooperation with countries hostile to Israel, in particular Iran.² Indeed, despite not mentioning China, the Israeli-US Dialogue's mission statement is clearly oriented towards Beijing as it mentions the need to strengthen coordination to protect Israeli tech from leaking to and being used by "malicious parties."³

The US-Israel partnership also affected Chinese infrastructure projects in Israel. According to Israel's Institute for National

Security Studies, Chinese firms have been winning fewer construction tenders and completely "ceased winning bids for operations tenders" since 2020.⁴ That year Israel established the Advisory Committee for Evaluating National Security Aspects of Foreign Investments, a government body for the regulation and screening of incoming foreign capital. In June, *Walla!* reported on one of the committee's cases, that of Urbanix Group (a corporation that includes both Israeli and Chinese firms), which submitted a petition to the state after being disqualified from a tender, a disqualification it blamed on alleged interference from NATO officials.⁵ Regardless of the veracity of these claims, *Globes* confirmed the discouraging effect that the committee has had on possible Chinese investors, reporting that there have been only 12 total Chinese investments in Israel during the first semester of 2022. Moreover, none of these investments were in Israel's high-tech sector, which is now increasingly decoupled from Chinese capital. This likely has only further exacerbated the trend of steadily declining Chinese investment in Israel that began in recent years, but undoubtedly accelerated following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Indeed, data shows that investments have continuously declined after peaking in 2018 at USD 4,620 million (See Figure 1).

However, not all Israeli commentators wished for their country to buckle under US pressure and decouple from China. Some experts and scholars have instead called on Tel Aviv to "be careful to protect [its] relations" with Beijing so as not to miss out on the economic opportunities that cooperation could offer.⁷ In fact, despite the sharp decline in Chinese investment, Beijing remains an important trade partner, as shown by record Chinese electric car sales in the country and the ongoing talks for an Israel-China free trade agreement. Although Chinese exports to Israel are greater than its imports, bilateral trade has been expanding steadily over the years (See Figure 2).

¹ Ofer Shelah, ונחנאו יניסה וְחַבְמָה [The Chinese test and us], *Ynet*, July 1, 2022, [link](#).

² Eyal Pinko, תּוֹנָשָׁרֵף | רוֹזָאָה לַע עֵיפֶשֶׁם אַרְיָאֵל וְיֵס יוֹב יִנְעִידוֹם הַלוּעֵף פּוֹתִישׁ כֶּךְ : חֲרוֹמָהּ מוֹיָא , [The Menace from the East: How Intelligence Cooperation Between China and Iran Affects the Region | Commentary], *Maariv*, June 4, 2022, [link](#).

³ Barak Ravid, בְּאֵהָרָא מֵעַ פֶּתֶשָׁה גּוֹרְדֶשֶׁל הַרוֹמְתָב , [In exchange for upgrading cooperation with the USA: Israel's dramatic step towards China], *Maariv*, September 28, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Galia Lavi, 2022: China and National Infrastructure in Israel: Past the Peak. *In Strategic Assessment - Policy Analysis*, 25 (2), July 2022, [link](#).

⁵ What the state's response in the light train tender issue demonstrates: the Chinese are not welcome in Israel, *Walla!*, June 1, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Assaf Gilead, יָנִיס וְהֵמ יֵאֲרָשִׁיה הַיְגוֹלוֹנְכָטָה פִּנַּע וְקוֹרְתָה דְצִיִּכ : וּמֵלַענַע זָאוּ , יֵאֲרָשִׁיה קִטְיִיָּה תָא שׁוֹבְכֵל וְפִיצ , [They expected to conquer Israeli high-tech, then they disappeared: How the Israeli technology industry was emptied of Chinese capital], *Globes*, July 13, 2022, [link](#).

⁷ Khinraj Jangid, How not to think about Israel-China relations: a conversation with Dr. Shalom Wald, Insights From the *SIGNAL* Board Series, May 19, 2022, [link](#).

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Israel

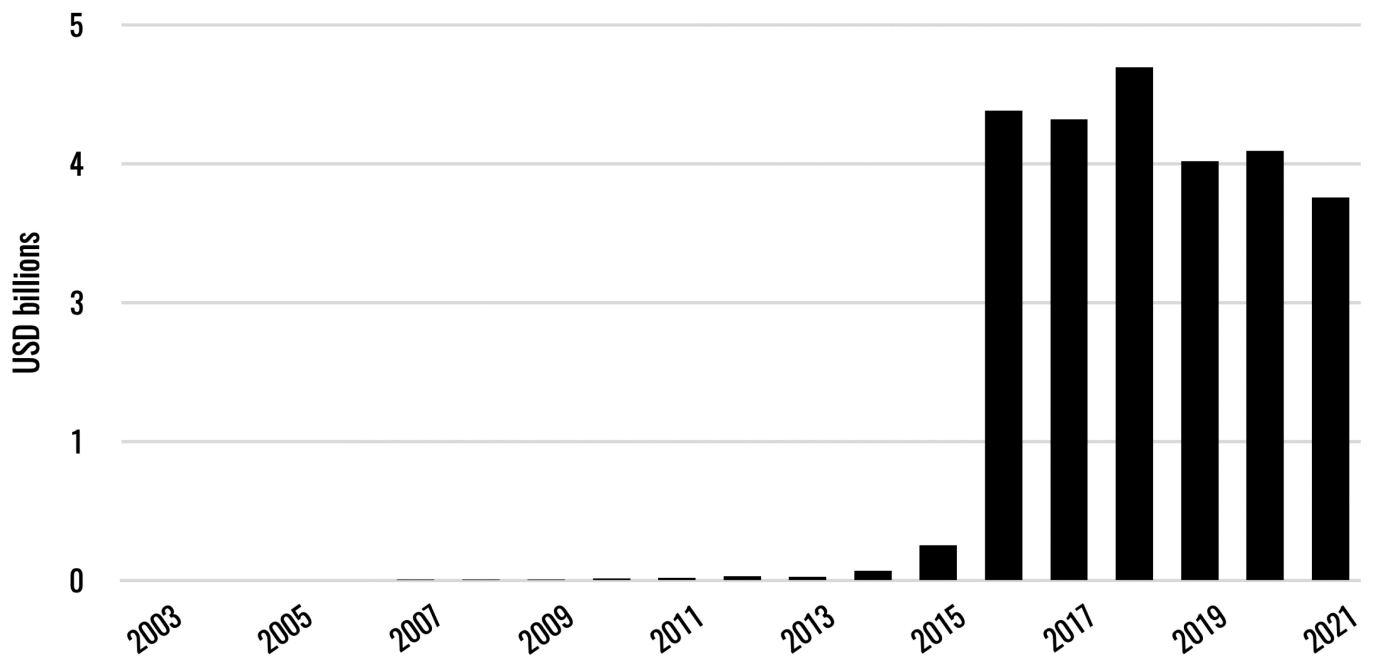


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/israel>.

Chinese imports from and exports to Israel

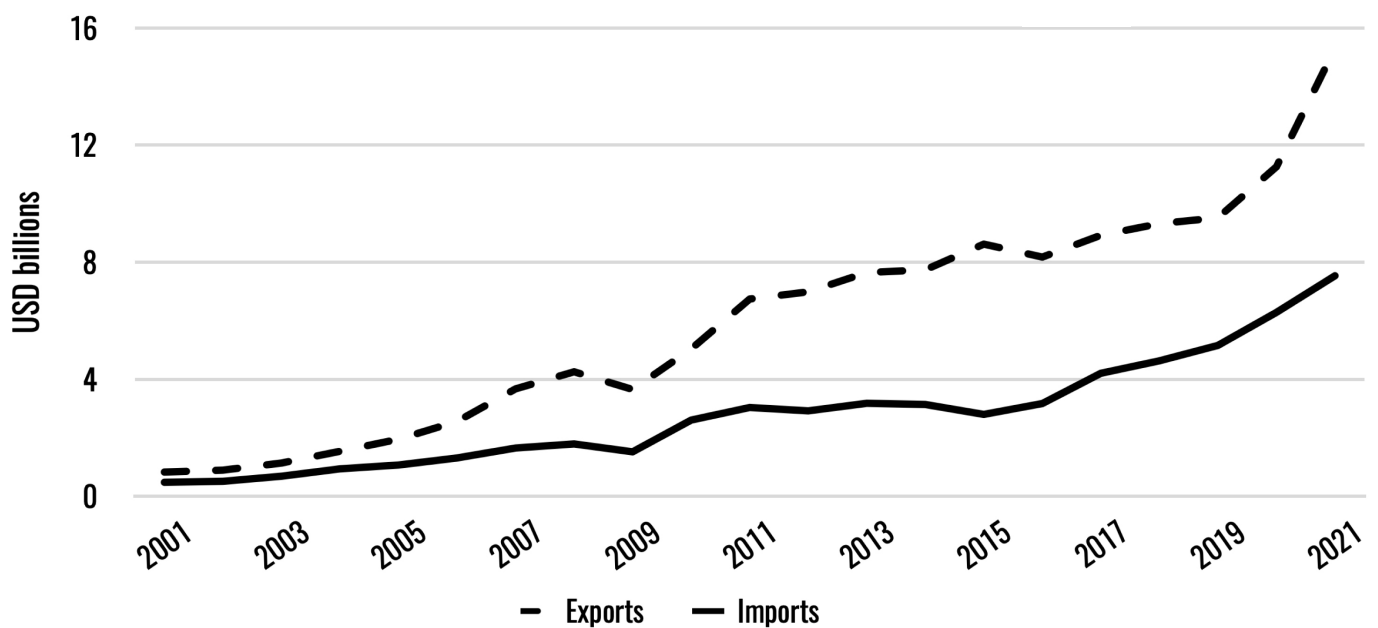


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/israel>

To summarize, opinions on China in Israeli media have been mainly shaped by Beijing's relations with other countries, rather than the dynamics of the Sino-Israeli relationship itself. Indeed, the debate on China has become incredibly polarized due to Beijing's rivalry with the US, its friendly ties with Iran, and the

importance that Israelis give to national security. The complexity of this discussion is undoubtedly indicative of the magnitude of the challenge that awaits Israeli policymakers in balancing competing international forces.

IRAN

In 2022, similarly to previous years, Iran's need to bypass Western sanctions and breathe life into its economy brought Iranian commentators to focus on China. This year's media debate was particularly lively due to the Look East strategy's centrality in the foreign policy of Iran's thirteenth government led by hardliner Ebrahim Raisi, as well as the ups and downs in the negotiations on the Joint Cooperation Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Conservative media outlets close to the government have written articles praising the partnership with Beijing and the much-discussed Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program signed in 2021. While the program is supposedly a roadmap to attract Chinese investments in different sectors along with promoting trade, innovation, infrastructure development, and knowledge- and technology-transfers; no details of the agreement have yet been disclosed, nor any projects implemented. Nevertheless, some Iranian sources stated that potential cooperation with China within the program's framework grants Iran leverage in the nuclear talks in Vienna, or even that the agreement itself can be a direct alternative to the JCPOA.¹ Tehran's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was also often described as a way to boost cooperation with China and lessen the consequences of the tensions with the West, though some expressed doubts on how much Iran can actually benefit from the organization.²

These comments ought to be read in the context of a narrative based on the idea of an unspoken "tripartite alliance" between Iran, China and Russia, "the few countries in the world that stand clearly against American hegemony," according to Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader.³ For supporters of this view, Iran should align with China, the world's future premier superpower, and support its foreign policy and international economic engagement. Beijing would accept Tehran's support due to a shared

opposition to Western unilateralism and because Iran is a major energy supplier. Moreover, the growing confrontation between China and the US in East Asia and in the Persian Gulf is "laying the groundwork for the strengthening of cooperation between Tehran and Beijing in the military and security fields."⁴ In exchange, Iran would gain the investments and trade it needs to revive its economy. Tehran would also enjoy China's substantial support in international fora and organizations, while maintaining its sovereignty and independence.

These just-outlined claims are to be taken with a grain of salt, however. Although China cautiously supported some of Iran's stances in international fora, Beijing still mostly follows and operates within the boundaries established by international institutions. Other obstacles that the two countries' military and economic cooperation face include differences in foreign policy objectives, asymmetric relations, and, of course, the sanctions on Tehran. The effects of these limits can be seen in the stagnant value of Chinese investments in Iran in comparison with the value of those in other regional actors like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (See Figure 1).

Iranian commentators are not only very well aware of this fact, but some also stated that Tehran should actually decrease its reliance on Beijing.⁵ For example, the reformist newspaper *Sharq* sharply attacked China's BRI in July, claiming that it is "not compatible with the national interests of the countries involved, including Iran" and is a threat to global security, as it only serves Beijing's "hegemonic, unilateralist interests."⁶ Other analysts, in a less polemic manner, have also expressed doubts on whether China truly wants to help Iran or, instead, prefers Tehran to remain isolated so as to preserve its diplomatic

¹ Mohammad Reza Manafi, «Iran-China relations are rooted in history/A timetable for the implementation of the 25-year agreement is needed», IRNA, December 14, 2022, [link](#).
25 دینس یارجا زاغایا دربهار یادامیپ [Strategic consequences of the implementation of the Iran-China 25-year document], Keyhan, January 20, 2022, [link](#).

² یادگنانش نتاجن دار [Shanghai's salvation path], *Sharq*, October 2, 2022, [link](#).

³ «Velayati: Iran, Russia and China are three important and independent powers against the expansionism of America and the West», *Keyhan*, July 23, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ «Politization of a half-century of relations», *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, October 17, 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Mas'ud Rezayi, «Constant obstacles to Iran-China military cooperation», *Etemad*, May 7, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Mahmud Ashrafi, «Diplomacy of hesitation and China's dreams», *Sharq*, July 21, 2022, [link](#).

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

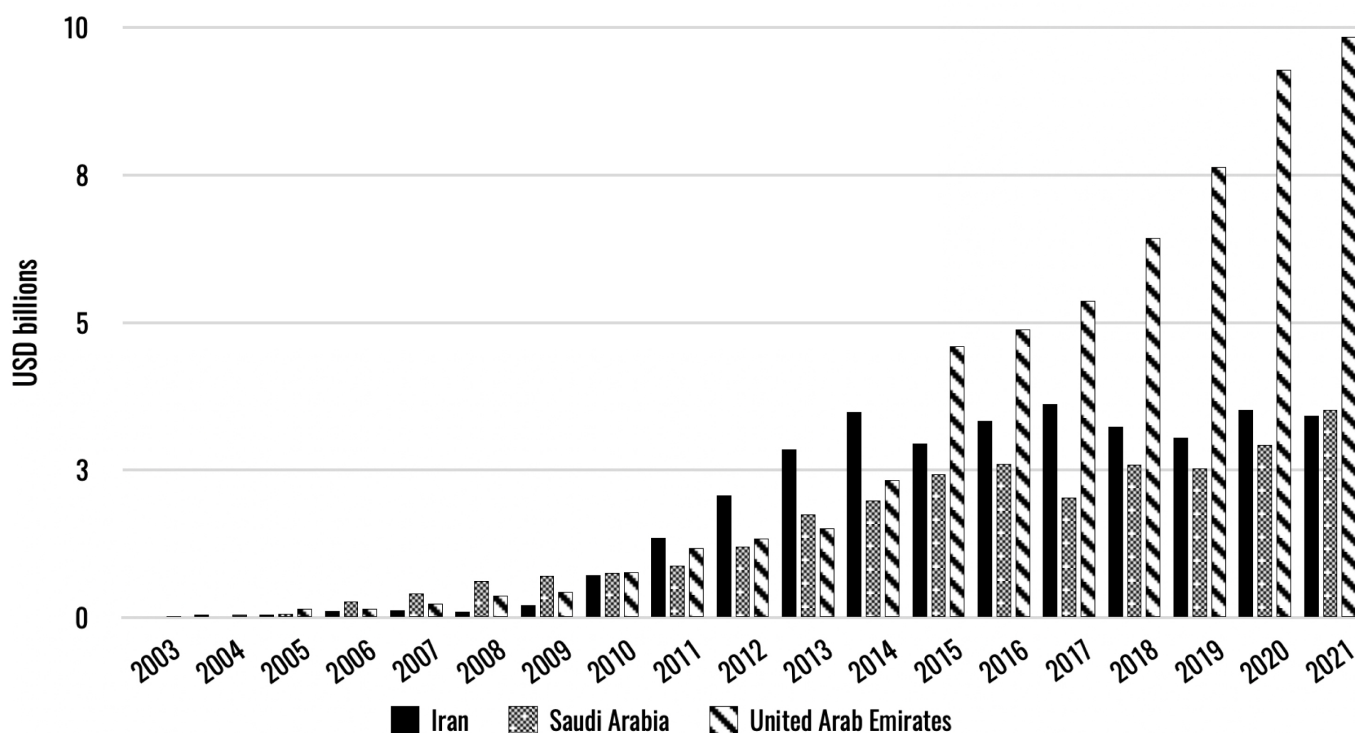


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east>

influence and privileged access to the Iranian market.⁷ It is important to note that these China-skeptical voices, which often instead propose re-establishing ties with the West, have been weakened by the many disruptions in the negotiations to revive the JCPOA. However, Chinese President Xi Jinping's December trip to Saudi Arabia and the joint statement released after the conclusion of the first China-Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, which referenced the territorial dispute between Iran and the UAE over the Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa islands, have given new ammunition to those concerned over overreliance on China.⁸

To summarize, the Iranian media debate on China in 2022 fully reflects Iran's difficult position. Despite the tightly controlled media environment, it is evident that how Tehran should approach China is a highly politicized and consequential issue over which different positions uneasily coexist. These contrasting stances also gain more or less space based on the evolution of Iran's external environment.

⁷ Reyhane Khosrojerdi, «چرا ما شاهد مشارکت فعال چین در مذاکرات JCPOA نیستیم؟ [Why are we not witnessing China's active participation in the JCPOA negotiations?], ISNA, August 30, 2022, [link](#). وردوخ تاندر او عزم دیدج ضر او ع [The new complications of the ban on car imports], *Donya-ye Eqtesad*, February 8, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ «چینی چ زاس» [Chinese instrument, Saudi music], *Sharq*, December 10, 2022, [link](#).

SAUDI ARABIA

2022 began and ended with events that displayed how thoroughly diplomatic ties between China and Saudi Arabia have developed. In January, Saudi foreign minister Faysal bin Farhan visited Beijing along with his counterparts from three other Gulf states and the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Then in December, Chinese President Xi Jinping went on a state visit to Riyadh during which he attended three summits: the China-Saudi Summit, the China-Arab Summit for Cooperation and Development, and the China-Gulf Summit for Cooperation and Development. During their bilateral meeting, President Xi and King Salman bin Abdulaziz signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in which they commit to holding semi-annual meetings. Chinese and Saudi companies also signed 34 agreements worth USD 30 billion, covering green energy, information technology and infrastructure.

Against this background, it is unsurprising that Saudi officials and observers unanimously expressed great enthusiasm. The meetings showed how the scope of Sino-Saudi ties have grown beyond just the economic realm and that “the Kingdom is keen to play a strategic role in the regional and international arenas.”¹ According to the newspaper *al-Riyadh*, the summits’ results reflect Saudi Arabia’s central role in the development of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. They are also proof of the country’s successful efforts to secure an important position in global energy supply chains, which are of great importance for Beijing’s economic development.²

All these developments were far from unexpected. Following the directives of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi companies and official institutions have strived throughout the year to strengthen ties with and expand their presence in China to diversify their revenue baskets and networks of partnerships. Saudi media frequently reported on the evolution of Sino-

Saudi trade and investment relations. In particular, they paid great attention to Aramco’s push to launch several development and refining projects in various Chinese cities. These efforts included the memorandum of understanding signed in August 2022 by Aramco and the Chinese state-run oil giant Sinopec, covering areas of potential cooperation such as integration in refining and petrochemicals, engineering and construction, upstream and downstream technologies, and cooperation in carbon capture and hydrogen operations in existing joint ventures.³ In December, that memorandum was expanded to include the second phase of the integrate refining project in Fujian province, and a crude oil purchase agreement with Shandong Energy, already China’s largest recipient of Saudi crude oil.⁴

Other efforts by Riyadh to further ties with Beijing included strengthening collaboration in the military and nuclear industries, where Chinese requirements are more flexible than Western ones.⁵ Another area of interest is finance, where some Saudi media analysts predicted that “the petroyuan is coming.”⁶ Meanwhile, the value of Chinese assets in Saudi Arabia remains the second highest among GCC countries, though the gap with the United Arab Emirates has expanded significantly since 2015 (See Figure 1).

At the same time, however, observers have been concerned about the Sino-Saudi rapprochement’s possible repercussions on Riyadh’s relations with Washington. On this topic it is important to note that regardless of how the United States’ disengagement from the Middle East and the Biden administration’s disposition toward the Kingdom on the war in Yemen and human rights have pushed Saudi Arabia to pursue a foreign policy more focused on regional and domestic dimensions, the US continues to be

¹ ن. فيصل او عيدو عميل [Saudi and China... limits of partnership in a turbulent world], *al-Jazeera and Asbab*, December 23, 2022, [link](#).

² Fahim al-Hamed, محقق [The Riyadh Summits established an era of independence], *al-Riyadh*, December 15, 2022, [link](#).

³ أهدافت، ترافيدم نا عقوق (كفبون ياس) و عيدو عميل و كفا را [Aramco and Sinopec sign a MoU], *al-Riyadh*, August 3, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ ظلم الكفتملا ءجل اعمل او ريركتملا تا عورشم يوقاب ززعتمت ن فيصل او كفل ممل ا كفا رش [The Sino-Saudi partnership is reinforced by the strongest integrated refining and processing projects], *al-Riyadh*, December 20, 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Isa Nahari, ن فيصل ا يلع احافن ال اب بر نلا عم امتقال ع فيرعت دي عت عيدو عميل، *Independent Arabic*, February 5, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Abdallah ibn Abd al-Muhsin al-Faraj، ورتبيل، مفاق مفاق ناوي - ورتبيل، [The Petro-yuan is coming], *al-Riyadh*, March 19, 2022, [link](#).

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in GCC Countries

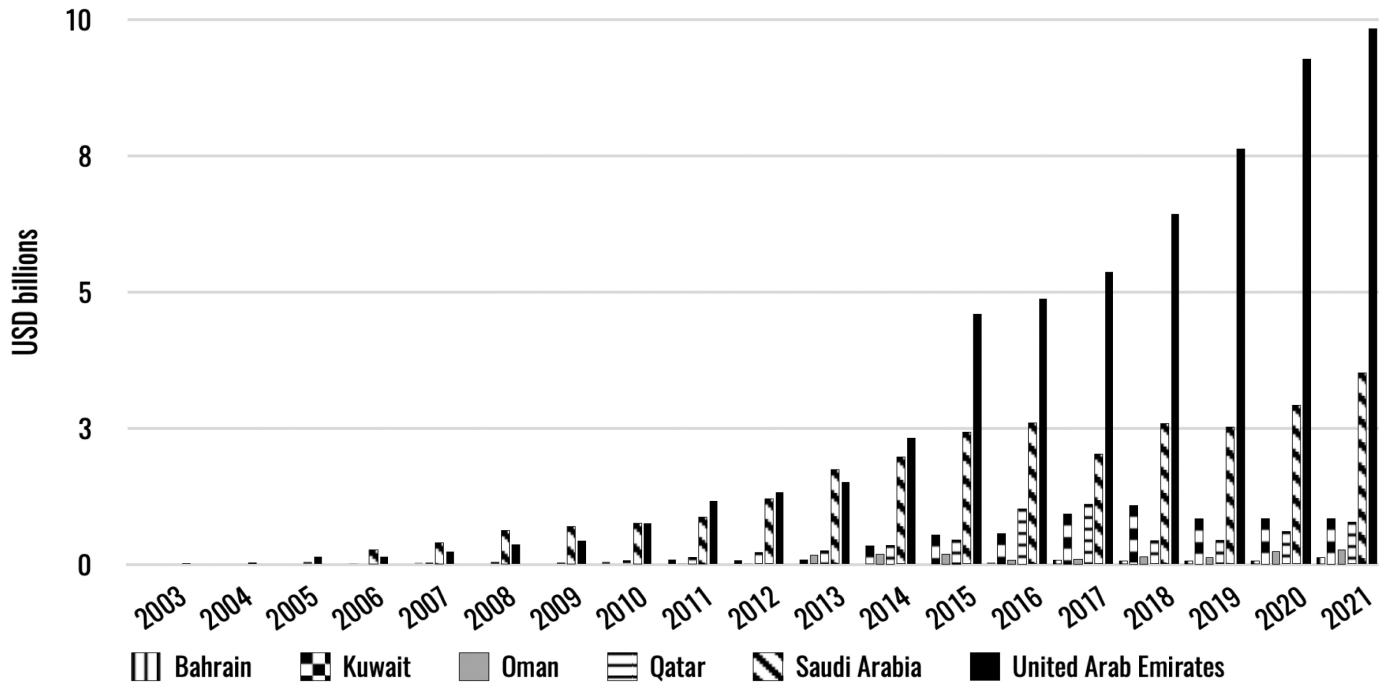


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east>.

Riyadh's, and the region's, main security partner.

Saudi commentators seemed to have held different assessments of the situation and how it could evolve. Some, like Amal Abdulaziz al-Hazani writing for *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, highlighted that the current policy of diversification serves to secure Riyadh's national interests and security in a world in which the US will be less relevant in light of China's economic growth and network of alliances.⁷ It is in this context that the Kingdom's possible request of admission into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should be considered.⁸ Other, usually more senior observers such as Saddaqa Yahya Fadel, predicted that, although Saudi Arabia may succeed in striking a balance in its relations with both Washington and Beijing, the increased interests of both superpowers in the region are likely to fuel tensions, thereby placing the Kingdom's current position at risk.⁹

Overall, the articles written by Saudi journalists and commentators clearly reflect the will of the country's policymakers to expand and strengthen relations with China by fully leveraging the strong economic complementarity between the two countries. Nonetheless, the fact that, even in a highly controlled media

environment, concerns were expressed about the geopolitical sustainability of this course of action can be seen as symptomatic of the challenges that Saudi Arabia will likely face in the coming years.

⁷ Amal 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Hazani, *السياسة الصينية: الجانب السياسي لزيارة الرئيس الصيني* [The political side of the Chinese president's visit], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 2022, [link](#).

⁸ Ali al-Khashaibani, *المنتدى الصيني-الاسيوي: هل يدخل العالم في نقطة مختلفة؟* [The SCO conference... is the world entering a different junction?], *al-Riyadh*, September 19, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ Saddaqa Yahya Fadel, *اللقاءات العربية-الصينية الثلاثة..! [The three Arab-Chinese summits]*, *Okaz*, December 17, 2022, [link](#).

IRAQ

In 2022, the Iraqi debate on China focused on the domestic implications of the Iraq-China Cooperation Framework Agreement, better known in Iraqi media as the “oil-for-reconstruction deal” or the “Chinese agreement.” The agreement delineates a financial mechanism through which Iraq is to export crude oil to China at international prices; the revenues, deposited in a special joint account, then constitute the basis of Chinese investments in infrastructure projects throughout the country. Given China’s growing purchases of Iraqi oil (See Figure 1), the

governorates, with the Chinese companies Power China Group and Sinotech as the main contractors.¹ The desirability and even the legal validity of the agreement have long been disputed. Some insist that it could successfully lead to the recovery of the Iraqi economy and the completion of the reconstruction of the country’s infrastructure.² On the other hand, other observers believe that China cannot be trusted, and that the agreement will lead to higher levels of corruption or become another example of Beijing’s

Value of Chinese energy imports from Iraq

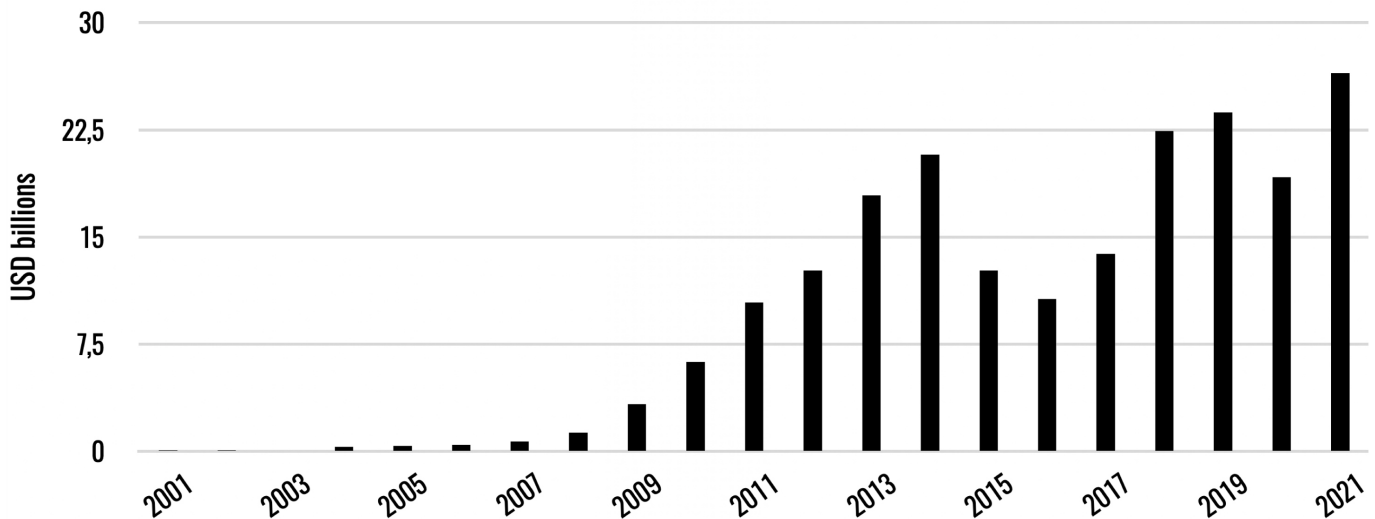


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iraq>

value of this deal cannot be understated. Further details of the agreement have yet to be published despite it being signed in late 2019 during the presidency of Adel Abdul Mahdi. Nonetheless, at the beginning of 2022, Iraq’s Secretariat of the Council of Ministers announced the implementation of the framework’s first project which aims to build a thousand schools in different

so-called “debt-trap diplomacy,” subjugating Iraq to China’s will.³ Adding fuel to the fire, the independent news media outlet *al-Hall* has published articles claiming that the influence exerted by Iran-backed militias on the government might be behind Baghdad’s keenness to strengthen the Chinese agreement.⁴

¹ During his meeting with the president of Power China Group... al-Ghazi : the schools’ project is the starting point for projects in different sectors], *NINA*, March 13, 2022, [link](#).

² Cabinet Secretariat : there is a governmental orientation to refer new projects within the Chinese agreement], *NINA*, June 7, 2022, [link](#).

³ Harith Hassan, About the Chinese agreement], *al-Mada*, December 18, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Ali al-Hayani, The Chinese schools in Iraq: reconstruction of the education sector or dependent on Tehran’s instructions?], *al-Hall*, July 5, 2022, [link](#).

These allegations have also contributed to the country's ongoing political crisis. The failure to create a cohesive government after October 2021 parliamentary elections (called after the motion of no confidence against the then-Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi) led to a political crisis that continued until Muhammad Shayaa al-Sudani was named prime minister in October 2022. During the year-long crisis, the opposition, mostly consisting of Shia-oriented political parties, begun loudly calling for expanding the Chinese agreement's scope and made cooperation with Beijing the main

the country's economy through the partnership with China.⁷ However, no significant steps have been taken over the last year. Moreover, the implementation of the al-Faw Port project has been assigned to the Korean company Daewoo, which, according to Iraqi observers is likely due to both internal and external reasons. For example, Hadeel Harbi Dhari, writing for the al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies, believes that, given the country's location and its role in oil market, the construction of the al-Faw Port with Chinese investment would bring Iraq into direct competition

Number of Chinese workers in Iraq employed through construction and labor services contracts

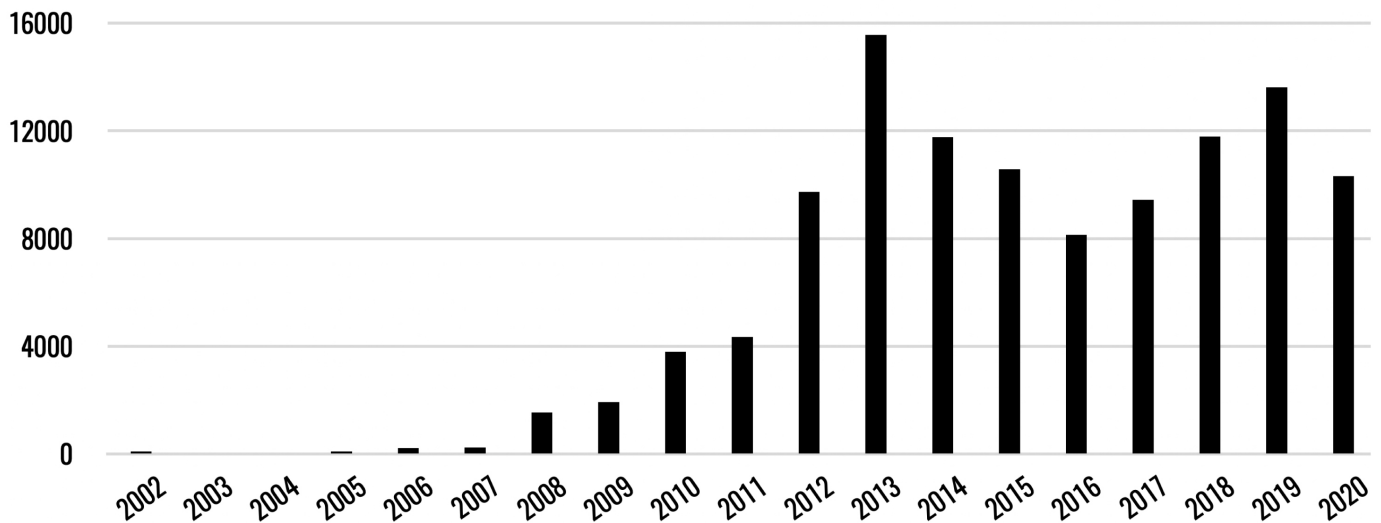


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/iraq>.

condition for their support to a future prime minister.⁵ Similarly, calls for speeding up the implementation of that agreement and, in general, for Iraq's deeper integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged in governorates where Chinese oil companies are concentrated – mainly in south-eastern Iraq, such as Maysan, Basra and Diyala – and where there have been frequent protests to pressure those companies to hire more locals.⁶ As shown in Figure 2, the number of Chinese workers has indeed grown significantly over the years. In this context, the development of the al-Faw Port project has been described as fundamental for accelerating Iraq's entrance into the BRI and restoring

with the Kuwait's Mubarak Al Kabeer Port, that also belongs to the BRI framework. Ultimately, he argued that Chinese involvement in al-Faw would have run the risk of raising tensions between Baghdad and its neighbors.⁸ Journalist Adel al-Jabbouri, for his part, suggested that the main obstacle was created by Washington, which does not want Baghdad to get too close to Beijing. However, he emphasized that the Iraqi economic and business environment and the country's political instability still do not provide “the appropriate grounds and favorable climate” required for such kind of projects, regardless of external pressure.⁹

⁵ Muhammad al-Amir, *هل أصبحت الشركات الصينية لاعباً أساسياً في الأزمة العراقية؟ [Chinese companies in Iraq : have they become a fundamental player in the political crisis ?]*, *al-Hall*, August 17, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ *الاهل في واسط يضغطون لفتح حقول نفط في المنطقة المحيطة بالقرية [People of the al-Ahrrar district close the al-Ahdab oil field in Wasit]*, *NINA*, March 22, 2022, [link](#).

⁷ *موقف وقف في ميسان يدعو لتنفيذ الاتفاق الصيني العراقي [A standstill in Maysan calls for the activation of the Sino-Iraqi agreement]*, *NINA*, November 25, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ *الخط الحديدي يحيي اقتصاد العراق ويطهر آمال "طريق الحرير" [The railway link revitalizes Iraq's economy and revives hopes for the "Silk Road"]*, *Shafaq*, February 15, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ *تأثير مبادرة الحزام والطريق الصينية على العراق: فرص وتحديات [The effect of the Chinese Belt and road Initiative over Iraq: opportunities and challenges]*, *al-Bayan Centre for Planning and Studies*, January 25, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ *العراق على المسار المتدهور نحو طريق الحرير... تصادم الاقتصاد مع السياسة [Iraq on the faltering path to the Silk Road... The collision of economy with politics]*, *al-Mayadeen*, February 17, 2022, [link](#).

Likewise, the outcome of December 2022's Saudi-China Summit, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-China Summit, and Arab-China Summit caused concerns among Iraqi observers over the stark difference in the depth between Baghdad's relations with Beijing and that of the relations between its neighbors, mainly the GCC countries, and China. Once again, as expressed by Fateh Abd al-Salam, Editor-in-Chief of *al-Zaman*, this may stem from Baghdad's inability to address its domestic issues, above all wide-spread corruption.¹⁰

Thus, the debate in Iraq, although taking place in a highly controlled media environment, seems to confirm that Baghdad's fragmented political situation is one the main obstacles to the development of Sino-Iraqi relations beyond the scope of oil exports. This is despite the government's continued efforts to provide evidence of fruitful and growing cooperation between the two countries in sensitive sectors.

¹⁰ Fateh 'Abd al-Salam, نبي صلا،

TÜRKİYE

In 2022, the 51st anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic ties between Türkiye and China, Turkish commentators attentively followed the trends and developments in Sino-Turkish relations. The Turkish media debate this year was dominated by concerns over trade issues and the treatment of China's Uyghur minority.

On the topic of trade, while the value of Sino-Turkish bilateral trade reached a record USD 43 billion in 2022, the value of Turkish exports to China was only USD 3 billion, less than a tenth of Chinese exports to Türkiye (See Figure 1). As mentioned in a report by the Foreign Economic Relations Board of Türkiye, reducing this trade deficit is a priority for Turkish policymakers.¹ Indeed, in July, trade minister Mehmet Muş stated that Ankara's Far Countries Strategy includes plans

to support the presence of Turkish products in China by setting up online stores.² The Turkish ambassador to Beijing, Abdulkadir Emin Önen, also emphasized the importance of e-commerce for increasing Turkish exports to China.³

Chinese investment in Türkiye has also been steadily growing over the past few years (See Figure 2). Turkish media has been optimistic that this trend will continue, as many Chinese companies have expressed interest in establishing or increasing their production capabilities in Türkiye.⁴ Reasons behind this interest include: Türkiye's geographic position, its customs union with the European Union, its balanced approach towards the war in Ukraine and the intensifying China-US rivalry, and the complementarity between Türkiye's Middle Corridor Initiative and the Belt and Road

Value of Chinese imports from and exports to Türkiye

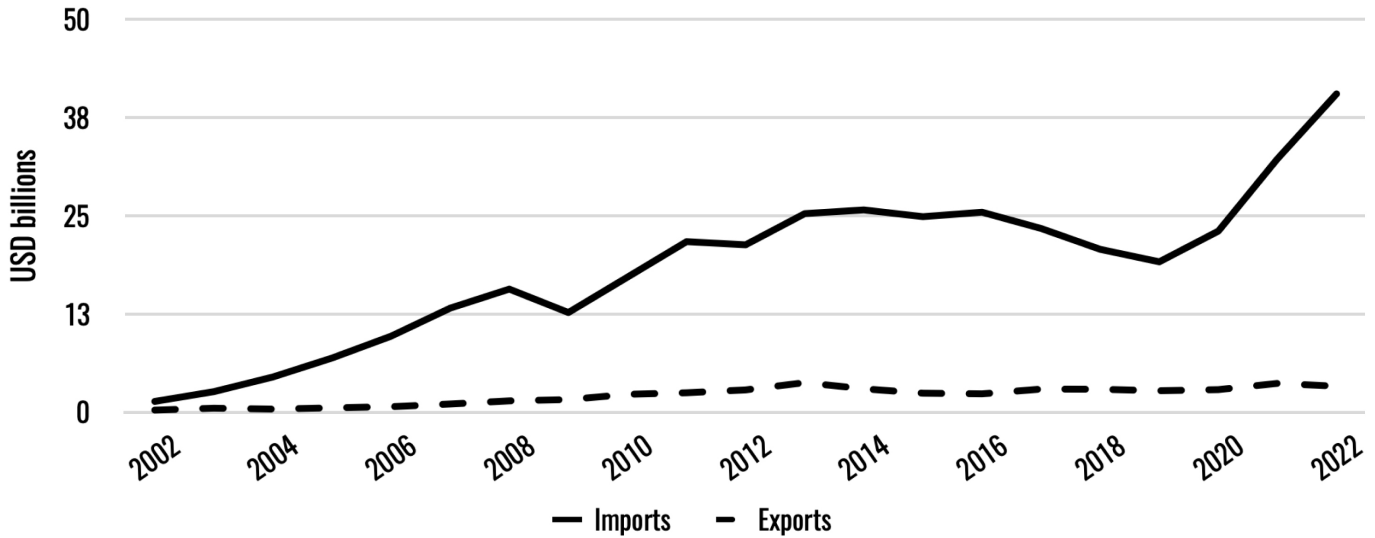


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/turkey>

¹Türkiye Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu - Ekonomik Araştırmalar Raporu 2022 [Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board - Economic Research Report 2022], *Türkiye Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu* (DEİK), November 2022.

²Ticaret Bakanı Muş: Çin'e e-ihracatımızı artırmak için çevrim içi mağazalar kuracağız [Trade Minister Muş: We will set up online stores to increase our e-exports to China], *Anadolu Agency*, July 6, 2022, [link](#)

³Türkiye'nin Pekin Büyükelçisi Önen: Çin'e ihracatta e-ticaret dönemini başlattık [Türkiye's Ambassador to Beijing Önen: We have started the e-commerce era in exports to China], *Anadolu Agency*, May 2, 2022, [link](#).

⁴Çinli promosyon üreticileri Türkiye'de yatırım arayışında [Chinese promotional producers seek investment in Türkiye], *Anadolu Ajansı*, January 1, 2022, [link](#).

Initiative.⁵ Regarding the BRI, Ambassador Önen stated that the Organization of Turkic States could play a role in the Initiative, a statement which could be interpreted as an attempt to both strengthen economic relations with China and minimize the possibility that Beijing perceives the Organization and the pan-Turkic ideas behind it as a possible risk.⁶

However, some Turkish commentators suggested that there is also a competitive element in Sino-Turkish economic relations. While many Chinese companies reportedly want to move to Türkiye, others have already moved to other countries in North Africa and the Middle East. This, *Dünya Gazetesi* wrote, puts them in direct competition with Turkish manufacturers, for example, in the textile sector, as they all target the same European and Middle Eastern markets.⁷ Additionally, geopolitical concerns over shipping giant China Ocean Shipping Company's consolidation in Greece has led some Turkish analysts to argue that "Türkiye has been excluded from China's Middle Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean plans," as Beijing's investments in the Port of Piraeus have contributed to the Western part of the Aegean Sea becoming more important and dynamic than the Eastern part in terms of maritime trade flows.⁸ This development probably influenced Ankara's plans to expand its logistic

capacity through the construction of new ports with the goal of becoming the gateway to the Middle East and Central Asia.⁹

Finally, the Uyghur issue continued to be an important element of the Turkish media debate as many Turks, both in government and in civil society, consider China's policies in Xinjiang as a human rights issue that Türkiye has an "ethnic-religious responsibility" to address. Despite Beijing regarding it as a domestic issue connected to its national security, a variety of actors in Türkiye, from the Uyghur diaspora and liberal groups, to conservatives and nationalists, have continuously written articles and issued official statements calling on Ankara to take a stronger stance on China's treatment of its Turkic minorities.¹⁰

In summary, the Turkish media debate reflects how Ankara mainly perceives China as a country with which it has a fruitful, but somewhat unequal trade and investment partnership. However, the debate also showcases the unsympathetic perceptions of Beijing common in Turkish politics and society due to both the Uyghur issue and the perception of China as a threat to Türkiye's economic and political ambitions in the region.

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Türkiye

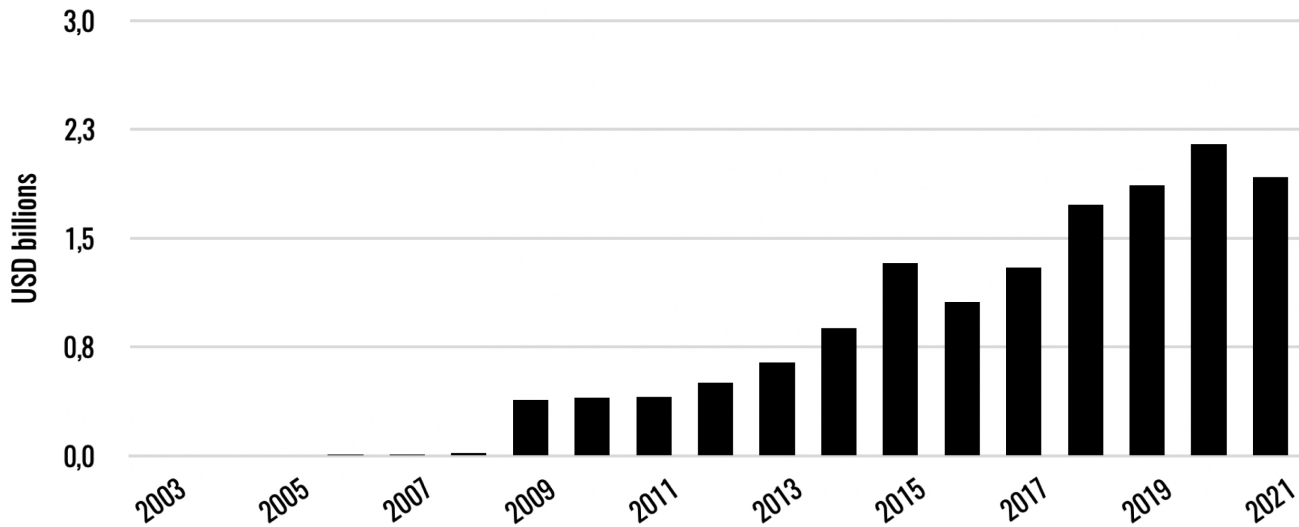


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/middle-east/turkey>

⁵ Türkiye için tarihi fırsat: Çin'in Avrupa'ya açılan kapısı olabiliriz [Historical opportunity for Türkiye: We can be China's gateway to Europe], *Yenisafak Gazetesi*, March 17, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Pekin Büyükelçisi Önen: Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı Kuşak ve Yol'u geliştirebilir [Turkish Ambassador Önen: Organization of Turkish States can develop Belt and Road], *Aydınlık Gazetesi*, February 10, 2022, [link](#).

⁷ Hazır giyimde yeni tehdit Kuzey Afrika" [New threat in apparel in North Africa], *Dünya Gazetesi*, October 5, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ Türkiye Çin'in Ortadoğu ve Doğu Akdeniz planlarından dışlandı [Türkiye excluded from China's Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean plans], *Medyascope*, January 20, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ İki yeni liman yolda! Lojistikte de üs hedefi [Two new ports are on the way! Base target in logistics], *Türkiye Gazetesi*, December 8, 2022, [link](#).

¹⁰ Uyghur Türkleri, Pekin Kış Olimpiyatları'nı protesto etti [Uyghur Turks protest Beijing Winter Olympics], *Yeni Akit Gazetesi*, February 5, 2022, [link](#). Türkiye'nin Çin açmazı [Türkiye's Chinese dilemma], *Gazete Oksijen*, February 2, 2022, [link](#). TBMM'de milletvekilleri, Çin'in Uyghur soykırımını gündeme getirdi [Turkish Parliamentarians brought China's Uyghur genocide to the agenda], *QHA*, May 27, 2022, [link](#).

FRANCE

Sino-French relations have been put to the test across many theaters this 2022. While French media focused more on concerns over economic dependence on China and on Paris' opposition to Beijing in both the EU and the Indo-Pacific, there was some coverage on the frictions between the two in the wider Mediterranean, especially in the Maghreb and the Sahel.¹

This coverage was mostly negative, as reporting on the end of the French-led anti-terrorist military intervention "Operation Barkhane" in November showed. Although French troops withdrew from Mali in response to the demands of the country's new military regime, the French press was quick to blame Russia and China, interpreted as collaborating against Western influence in the continent, to be among the causes of the operation's failure and, more broadly, the decline of France's influence in Africa. In particular, French commentators for *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* decried Chinese infrastructure financing, scholarships, and trade as part of a neocolonialist grand strategy to turn the Global South against the West.² They also frequently called for a united European effort to block China's influence and to not "lose" Africa.³ On the other hand, little space was given to the agency of African countries, the possibility that Beijing is simply a more important partner than Paris, or the French approach's defects as it neither provides the necessary economic investments, nor fully comes to terms with France's colonial past.

The positions of French commentators and those of the French government mirror each other to some extent. In August, President Emmanuel Macron visited Algeria for a trip that was widely interpreted by the press as an

attempt to secure energy supplies from Africa's biggest gas producer. During the trip, the French President expressed regrets for having accused Algiers of rewriting history and fomenting "hatred against France." Yet, he also blamed China (along with Türkiye and Russia) for being behind anti-French sentiment in the country.⁴ While Macron's visit relaunched Franco-Algerian relations, it did not weaken Algeria's strong ties with China. In November, Algiers applied to join the BRICS and signed its second Five-Year Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Plan with Beijing. On the BRICS, both French and Algerian analysts pointed to economic opportunities and regional political issues, rather than international dynamics, as the main factors behind Algiers' application.⁵ These very same analysts considered Algeria's bilateral relationship with China, which has well-surpassed France as its primary source of imports and foreign investment (See Figure 1), mostly from an economic perspective as well. As part of its charm offensive in Algeria, France did not follow the US and Spain in recognizing Moroccan claims over Western Sahara. *Le Monde* suggested that this, along with French visa restrictions (which are also an issue in Algeria and Tunisia), is the cause of worsening ties between Rabat and Paris.⁶

While France remains Morocco's biggest foreign investor and an important security partner, Moroccan analysts have begun to look to China as an alternative, in the context of the rapidly growing trade ties with Beijing (See Figure 2). While Moroccan analysts and officials have welcomed the signing of a Belt and Road Initiative implementation plan (the first in North

¹Grégoire Normand, La France a importé deux fois plus de produits vulnérables de Chine en 20 ans [France has imported twice as many sensitive products from China in the last 20 years], *La Tribune*, November 25, 2022, [link](#).

²Frédéric Bobin, «L'Afrique entre dans une stratégie chinoise d'encercllement du Nord par le Sud» [Africa is joining a Chinese strategy to encircle the North through the South], *Le Monde*, January 12, 2022, [link](#).
Frédéric Lemaître, La Chine tente de fédérer le Sud pour «dépasser la petite clique» du G7, [China is trying to federate the South to "overtake the small clique" of the G7], *Le Monde*, June 21, 2022, [link](#).

³Nicolas Baverez, Ne perdons pas l'Afrique!, [Let's not lose Africa!], *Le Figaro*, October 9, 2022, [link](#).

⁴Adlène Meddi, Ankara juge « inacceptables » les propos de Macron à Alger [Ankara considers Macron's comments in Algeria as "unacceptable"], *Le Point Afrique*, August 28, 2022, [link](#).

⁵Nadjib Touaibia, L'Algérie brigue une adhésion au groupe des Brics [Algeria seeks to join the BRICS], *L'Humanité*, November 9, 2022, [link](#).
Mohamed Ouanezar, «L'Algérie a tout à gagner dans les Brics» [Algeira has everything to win in the BRICS], *L'Expression*, August 6, 2022, [link](#).

⁶Frédéric Bobin, Entre le Maroc et la France, le grand désamour [Between Morocco and France, the great falling out], *Le Monde*, November 18, 2022, [link](#).

Value of Chinese and French exports to Algeria

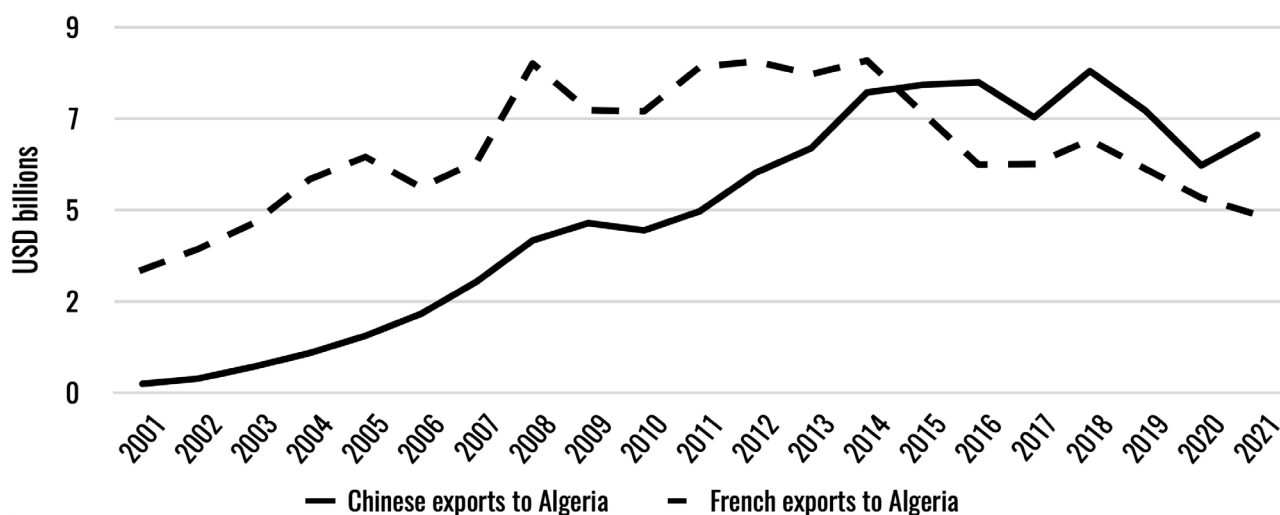


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/algeria>.

Africa), they also recommended Rabat not to pick sides. Instead, Morocco should take advantage of Chinese investments and international polarization to stimulate Western financing, which has been rather lacking in recent years (similar considerations have been made by Tunisian commentators as well⁷). Against this background, Beijing's success in maintaining good relations with both Algiers and Rabat is noteworthy, as Paris, on the contrary, has failed to balance the two rivals. However, this could change if China gets entangled in the Western Sahara dispute, as both Algerian and Moroccan officials hope to

get Beijing on their side.⁸

In summary, the French debate on China reflects Paris' awareness of the Mediterranean dimension of Beijing's foreign policy. While not surprising given France's long-standing ties with Africa and the continent's centrality in its foreign and defense policy, the strong words used suggest that French policymakers and commentators consider China to be an important test for Paris' influence in the wider Mediterranean.

Value of Chinese and French exports to Morocco

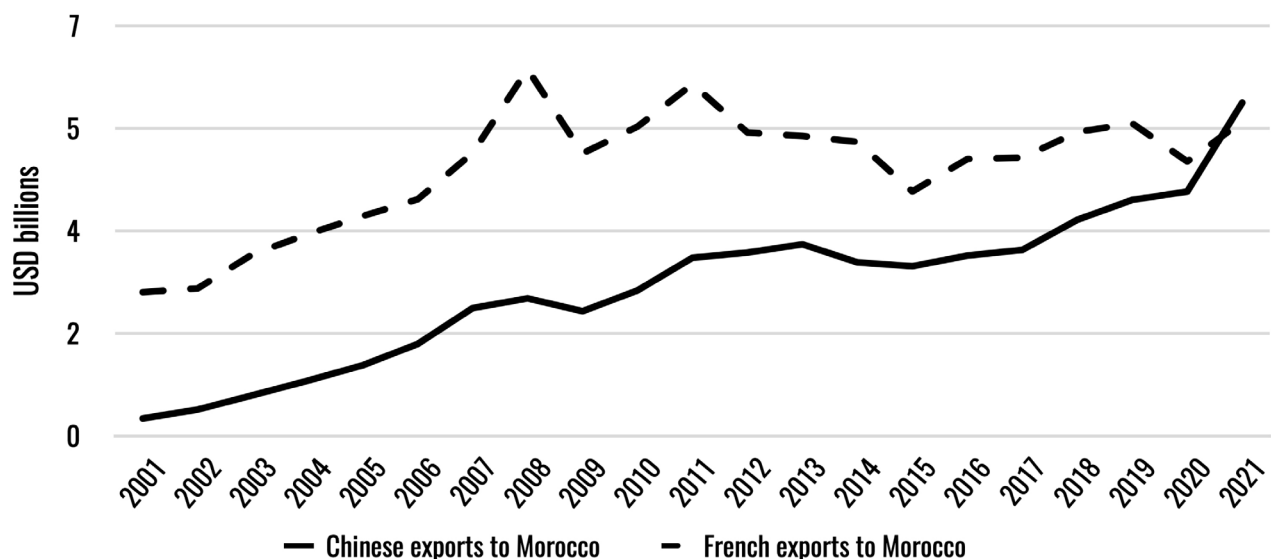


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/morocco>.

⁷ Kamal Bilhadi, *قروشلا روحو سنوت* [Tunisia and the Eastern Axis], *al-Khaleej*, May 12, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ Anass Machloukh, *Maroc-China: ce que gagnera le Maroc de la «Nouvelle Route de la Soie»* [Morocco-China: what Morocco will gain from the "New Silk Road"], *L'Opinion*, August 23, 2022, [link](#).
 Algérie-Chine. Convergence de vues concernant les questions d'intérêt commun [Algeria-China: Convergence of view on matters of common interest], *Le Soir d'Algérie*, March 20, 2022, [link](#).

ITALY

This 2022, while China's international role was actively analyzed by Italian commentators, little attention was paid to Beijing's growing presence in the wider Mediterranean. Italian media mostly discussed possible changes in Rome's China policy, especially after the victory of the far-right Brothers of Italy party in September's snap elections. Following the inauguration of Giorgia Meloni as Prime Minister, commentators predicted a deterioration in ties with Beijing.¹ While the preceding "technocratic" government of Mario Draghi was also firmly "Atlanticist" and wary of China, Draghi practiced an approach focused on obstructing Chinese influence rather than on rhetoric, limiting criticism of Beijing to joint statements with the G7 and the EU. Meloni, on the contrary, has been much more outspoken. On the campaign trail, she openly denounced Beijing's policies regarding Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Taiwan; defined the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding

on the Belt and Road Initiative a "big mistake;" and stated that she would not renew the Memorandum in 2024.

However, when Meloni encountered Chinese President Xi Jinping at the G20 Bali summit in November, she did not focus on political differences. Instead, Meloni mostly brought up economic issues, in particular Italian exports to China (See Figure 1), which despite having grown significantly from USD 3.8 billion in 2001 to 30.3 billion in 2021, are valued significantly less than Italy's imports from China (USD 43.6 billion in 2021). This led many Italian analysts to reconsider how "anti-China" her government would be, with commentators at *Il Foglio* even accusing her of going "soft."²

Value of Chinese imports from and exports to Italy

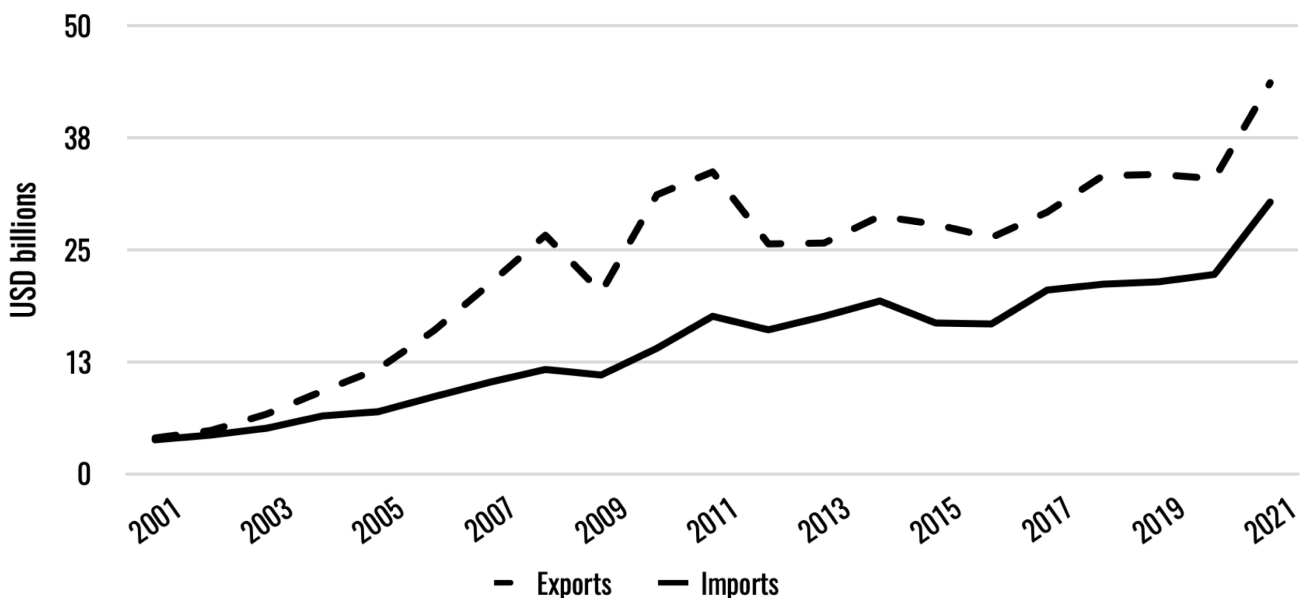


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/south-europe/italy>.

¹ Michelangelo Cocco, Il governo Meloni promette scintille con il "nemico" cinese [The Meloni government promises sparks with the Chinese "enemy"], *Domani*, 28 Settembre, 2022, [link](#)

² Carlo Tecce, Gli affari sono affari: e così Giorgia Meloni non è più anti-cinese [Business is business: and that's how Giorgia Meloni is no longer anti-Chinese], *L'Espresso*, 30 November, 2022, [link](#).

Simone Canettieri & Giulia Pompili, Meloni è turboatlantista sull'Ucraina, ma morbida con la Cina. E ha la spina Macron [Meloni is a turbo-Atlanticist on Ukraine, but soft on China. And has Macron as a thorn in her side], *Il Foglio*, November 17, 2022, [link](#).

Notwithstanding the rather cordial meeting in Bali, back in Italy, Minister of Economic Development Adolfo Urso emphasized avoiding technological and economic dependence on China, and Defense Minister Guido Crosetto accused Beijing of “neocolonialism” in Africa and the Mediterranean.³ Concern over Chinese influence in the Mediterranean was also present in the Italian Defense Ministry’s 2022 Security and Defense Strategy for the Mediterranean and in the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic’s annual report.⁴ Both documents noted how Beijing is now an established actor in the southern and eastern parts of the Mediterranean region and how it is taking advantage of the vacuum left by the US’ partial disengagement. The latter document also expressed apprehension for Chinese influence in Italy.

Italian media, on the other hand, did not regularly discuss Beijing’s role in the wider Mediterranean.⁵ The few analyses on this topic, such as those after December’s China-Arab summit, considered Beijing through the lens of China-US competition rather than from a regional perspective.⁶ Analysts instead focused on Beijing’s influence in Italy with articles on the dangers of agreements between Chinese media and Italian news outlets, of Confucius Institutes, and of China’s much-discussed police overseas service stations.⁷ Chinese investments and their possible risks to Italy’s high-tech sector and strategic infrastructure were also a frequent topic. In particular, Chinese state-owned enterprise China Ocean Shipping Company’s attempt to acquire a significant stake in the Port of Hamburg revived the narrative that Beijing has ambitions to control Italian ports, despite, as noted by some scholars, China’s limited influence and interest in them.⁸

Against this background, experts also predicted that the current Italian government would follow its predecessor in readily blocking Chinese investments in strategic sectors through the so-called “golden power,” i.e., the power to

interfere with the management of both public and private entities operating in certain strategic sectors.⁹ This measure, despite its regular use by the Draghi government, has apparently not impacted Chinese foreign direct investment to Italy with it reaching USD 3.4 billion in 2021 in terms of stock (See Figure 2).

To summarize, the Italian debate on China has only partially considered Beijing’s role in the wider Mediterranean region. Interestingly, analyses mostly came from policymakers, as journalists and other commentators seemed more interested in following the debate on China at the EU-level. This likely reflects how in Italy, unlike in the other two European countries considered in this report, there is an apparent lack of awareness of how Beijing is now a significant actor in Rome’s own neighborhood.

³ Carlotta Scozzari, Tempismo imperfetto. Urso presenta il manifesto di sovranità produttiva anti-Cina a poche ore dall’incontro Meloni-Xi [Imperfect timing. Urso presents the anti-China manifesto for production sovereignty a few hours before the Meloni-Xi meeting], *HuffingtonPost.it*, November 15, 2022, [link](#).

Francesco Specchia, Guido Crosetto, il piano: “All’Italia servono più soldati, ecco cosa faremo” [Guido Crosetto, the plan: “Italy needs more soldiers, here’s what we’ll do”], *Liberato*, October 30, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Ministero della Difesa, Strategia di Sicurezza e Difesa per il Mediterraneo [Security and Defense Strategy for the Mediterranean], June 2022, [link](#). COPASIR, Relazione sull’attività svolta dal 1° gennaio 2021 al 9 febbraio 2022 [Report on activities carried out from 1 January 2021 to 9 February 2022], February 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Formiche.net has been the only media outlet to have published articles on China’s Mediterranean presence on a somewhat regular basis.

⁶ Xi in Arabia Saudita: la Cina sbarca in Medio oriente [Xi in Saudi Arabia: China lands in the Middle East], ISPI, December 7, 2022, [link](#).

⁷ Chinese propaganda on leading Italian paper: journalists react, Decode39, December 6, 2022, [link](#).

Lucio Palmisano, Come la Cina vuole influenzare l’istruzione in Europa [How China wants to influence education in Europe], *Linkiesta*, February 2, 2022, [link](#).

Giulia Pompili, A Prato ci sono dei poliziotti cinesi che fanno il loro lavoro, ma in Italia [In Prato there are Chinese cops doing their job, but in Italy], *Il Foglio*, September 3, 2022, [link](#).

⁸ Porti italiani, penetrazione cinese limitata. Ma le mosse tedesche riaccendono i timori [Italian ports, Chinese penetration limited. But Germany’s moves renew fears], *Teleborsa*, November 10, 2022, [link](#).

⁹ Mariarosaria Marchesano, Cosa può combinare Meloni con il golden power? Parla Giulio Napolitano [What can Meloni achieve with the Golden Power? Giulio Napolitano speaks], *Il Foglio*, September 29, 2022, [link](#).

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Italy

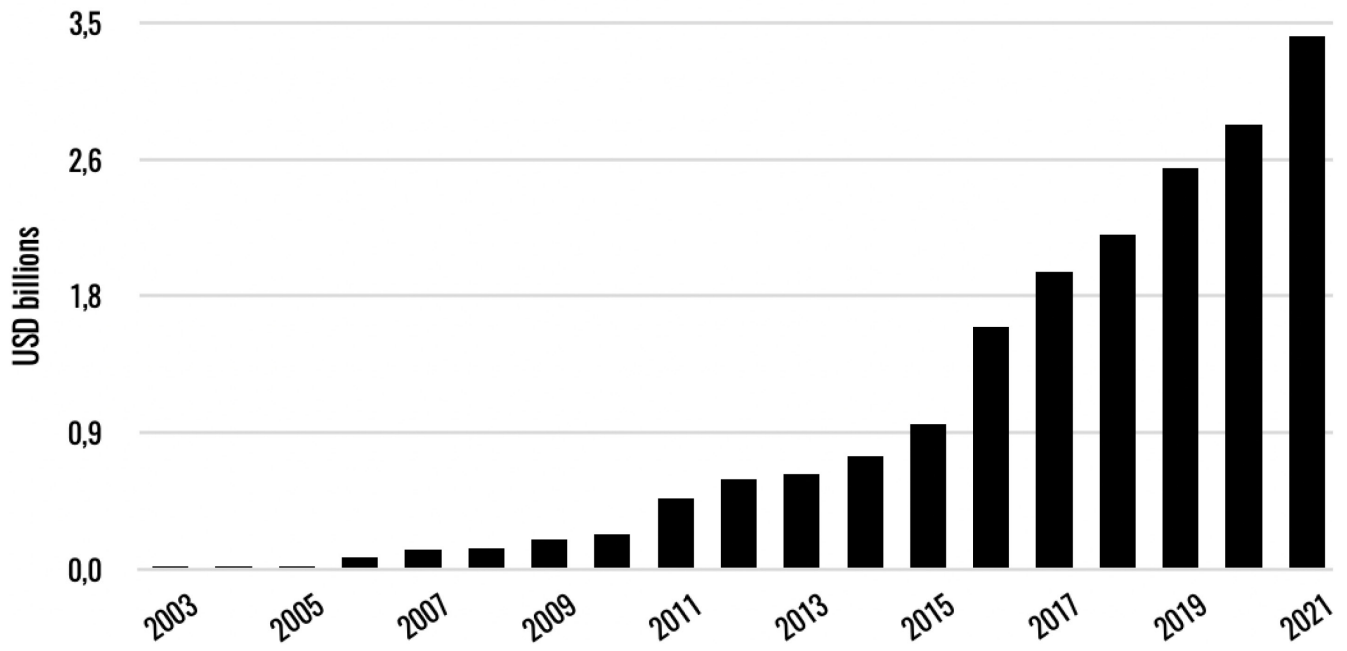


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/south-europe/italy>.

GREECE

In 2022, despite the tensions between China and the West, Greece under Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis maintained a more “open” China policy compared to other EU states. The rather cordial relationship between Athens and Beijing, exemplified by the many celebratory messages exchanged on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-Greek diplomatic ties, caught the attention of the Greek media.

In the context of wars of conquest returning to Europe, some Greek analysts interpreted Athens’ moderate approach toward Beijing as an attempt to gain the backing of a permanent member of the UN Security Council against Türkiye’s claims in the Aegean Sea. Statements made by Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias after his meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on the margins of the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Summit in August were reported as proof that China supports Greece in its

dispute with Ankara.¹ Dendias claimed that after he had affirmed Athens’ commitment to the One China policy, Wang had assured him that Beijing supports Greece’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, in the Chinese readout of the meeting no such commitment is mentioned.² In it, Wang only relayed Beijing’s hope that Greece plays a “constructive role” in China-EU relations.

Nonetheless, the real basis of Sino-Greek relations is not security, but rather investment and trade. Indeed, bilateral trade has grown significantly over the last two decades, with both Chinese exports to and imports from Greece reaching record values in 2021 of USD 11.1 billion and USD 973 million, respectively (See Figure 1). Moreover, in 2021, the total stock of Chinese foreign direct investment in Greece climbed to USD 133 million (See Figure 2).

Value of Chinese imports from and exports to Greece

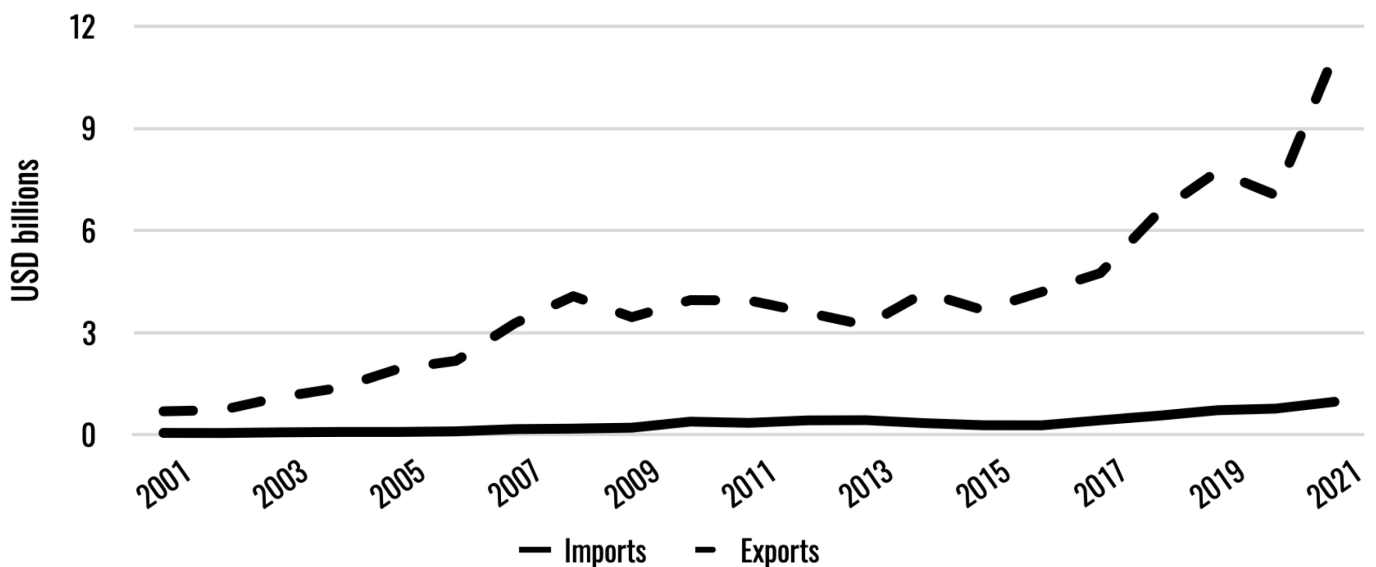


Figure 1 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/south-europe/greece>.

¹ Πεκίνο στηρίζει Αθήνα σε ΟΗΕ για την κυριαρχία των νησιών του Αιγαίου [Beijing supports Athens at UN over sovereignty of Aegean islands], *Estia*, August 5, 2022, [link](#).

² Wang Yi Meets with Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, *Ministry of Foreign Relations of the PRC*, August 3, 2022, [link](#).

Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Greece

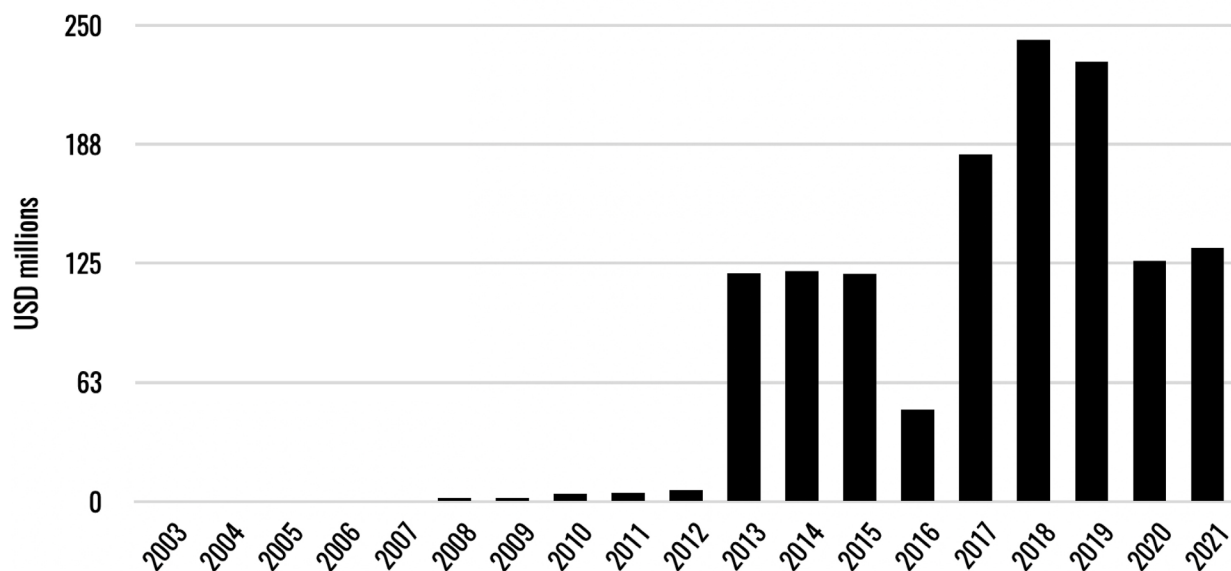


Figure 2 Prepared by the ChinaMed team. Data from: <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/south-europe/greece>.

Against this background, the main issue that unsurprisingly continues to dominate the Greek debate on China-Greece relations remained the China Ocean Shipping Company's (COSCO) investment in the Port of Piraeus. While COSCO's acquisition of a 51% stake in the Piraeus Port Authority in 2016 has been associated with a massive increase in the port's traffic (from 700,000 containers in 2008 to 5.5 million in 2021), the Greek press have reported on accusations that the statistics are unreliable and that the economic benefits go predominantly to COSCO.³ Furthermore, Greek analysts have claimed that there has been a decline in port traffic, allegedly because of either labor strikes or COSCO's monopolistic pricing policy.⁴ While issues between COSCO and local authorities, trade unions and civil society groups have been ongoing for years, in 2022, significant tension was caused by plans to expand the port and the "master plan" proposed by the Greek Council of State. The plan faced criticism from civil society groups and Greek commentators due to the rapidity with which it was passed, the lack of environment, social, and traffic impact assessments, and the perception that it would give COSCO more land and "unlimited power" over port activities.⁵ Regardless of the criticisms over these plans, it would be

incorrect to state that Athens is wholly supportive of China's influence in the Greek economy, as lately it has been excluding Chinese state-owned enterprises from its public tenders.⁶ Greece has also refused to host the 2022 summit of the format formerly known as the "17+1" and reaffirmed its ties to NATO.⁷ Nevertheless, China has maintained an amicable diplomatic approach, possibly because it sees Greece as one of its sole remaining friends within the EU. Indeed, the Chinese Ambassador to Greece, rather than engage in the "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy commonplace in the rest of Europe the EU, has recently expressed support for Greece's positions by upholding the principle of "territorial integrity" and preemptively condemned any escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸

To conclude, the cautious but nuanced positions in the Greek media debate on China reflect both Greece's geopolitical priorities and a keen awareness that Beijing, through COSCO, is not a faraway country. They also contribute to explaining Athens' relatively diplomatic approach vis-à-vis China.

³ Η Κίνα δεν κατέστη «σωτήρας» της ελληνικής οικονομίας, η σημασία της επένδυσης της Cosco [China has not become the "saviour" of the Greek economy – The importance of Cosco's investment], *metaforespress.gr*, February 8, 2022, [link](#).

⁴ Γιατί έχει μπει σε πτωτική πορεία η κίνηση στο λιμάνι του Πειραιά [Why has the traffic in the Port of Piraeus started to decline?], *Business Daily*, February 22, 2022, [link](#).

⁵ Christina Papastathopoulou, Πειραιάς για Όλους: Συνεχίζει την επέκταση η Cosco κόντρα στην απόφαση ΣτΕ [Piraeus for All: Cosco continues to expand against the CoS decision], *efsyn.gr*, March 17, 2022, [link](#).
Μπελαβίλιας κατά ΟΛΠ - Cosco - Κυβέρνησης: Πως ξεφύτρωσε μια κινεζική πόλη 770.000 τ.μ. μέσα από το νέο μαστερ πλαν [Belavilas v. PPA - Cosco - Government: How a Chinese city of 770,000 m2 was born through the new master plan], *Business News*, July 25, 2022, [link](#).

⁶ Plamen Tonchev, Chinese Influence in Greece, *CEPA*, August 24, 2022, [link](#)

⁷ Tarkas Alexandros, Αποστάσεις παίρνει η Αθήνα από την Κίνα - Δεν θα φιλοξενήσει τη Σύνοδο Κορυφής των "17+1" [Athens distances itself from China, it will not host "17+1" Summit], *slpress.gr*, March 12, 2021, [link](#).

⁸ Remarks on East Mediterranean Situation by Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Greece in Response to Media Inquire, Embassy of the PRC in the Hellenic Republic, March 2, 2022, [link](#).

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