

The Kurds and Reshaping the map of the Middle East: Could China address the Kurdish question?

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Abstract

The Kurdish question in the Middle East has been affected by the long-term impacts of colonialism, leading to a protracted and complex question. Over the past century, major powers have approached the Kurdish question primarily through the lens of national security and their own hegemonic and economic interests in the region. Western powers have largely ignored the Kurdish people's aspirations and their right to self-determination. China, traditionally passive and disengaged, has left the Kurdish issue to Western powers. However, with China's recent rise and its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which positions the Middle East as a central hub, China can no longer remain uninvolved.

This paper explores the potential shifts in China's stance toward the Kurdish issue in the Middle East. It investigates whether China will address the Kurdish question and if it can maintain its neutrality given its growing influence and strategic interests in the region. The study will also examine China's evolving approach to global issues, particularly in the Global South and the Middle East, in the context of diminishing Western dominance and the increasing importance of a multipolar global presence.

Key Words: Kurdish Question, Reshaping the map, China, Middle East,

الأكراد وإعادة تشكيل خريطة الشرق الأوسط: هل تستطيع الصين معالجة القضية الكردية؟

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ملخص

تأثرت القضية الكردية في الشرق الأوسط بالآثار طويلة الأمد للاستعمار، مما أدى إلى تفاقمها وتعقيدها. على مدار القرن الماضي، تعاملت القوى الكبرى مع القضية الكردية في المقام الأول من منظور الأمن القومي ومصالحها الهيمنة والاقتصادية في المنطقة. تجاهلت القوى الغربية إلى حد كبير تطلعات الشعب الكردي وحقه في تقرير المصير. أما الصين، التي لطالما كانت سلبية ومنعزلة، فقد تركت القضية الكردية للقوى الغربية. ومع ذلك، مع صعود الصين الأخير ومبادرة الحزام والطريق الطموحة، التي تجعل الشرق الأوسط محوراً مركزياً، لم يعد بإمكان الصين أن تظل مكتوفة الأيدي. تستكشف هذه الورقة التحولات المحتملة في موقف الصين تجاه القضية الكردية في الشرق الأوسط. تبحث الدراسة في مدى قدرة الصين على معالجة القضية الكردية، ومدى قدرتها على الحفاظ على حيادها في ظل نفوذها المتنامي ومصالحها الاستراتيجية في المنطقة. كما ستتناول الدراسة تطور نهج الصين تجاه القضايا العالمية، لا سيما في دول الجنوب والشرق الأوسط، في ظل تراجع الهيمنة الغربية وتزايد أهمية الوجود العالمي متعدد الأقطاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القضية الكردية، إعادة تشكيل الخريطة، الصين، الشرق الأوسط

كورد و دارشتتی نهخشه‌ی رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راست: ئایا چین ده‌توانیت پرساری کورد بکاته‌وه؟

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پوخته

پرسی کورد له رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راست کاریگه‌ری کاریگه‌ریه‌ی درێژخایه‌نه‌کانی کۆلۆنیا‌لیزمی له‌سه‌ر بووه و پرساریکی درێژخایه‌ن و ئالۆزی لیکه‌وتووه‌ته‌وه. له‌ ماوه‌ی سه‌ده‌ی رابردوودا زله‌یزه‌کان به‌ پله‌ی یه‌که‌م له‌ چاویلکه‌ی ئاسایشی نه‌ته‌وه‌یی و به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌ هه‌ژمونه‌گه‌رای و ئابوورییه‌کانی خۆیان له‌ ناوچه‌که‌دا له‌ پرسای کورد نزیک بوونه‌ته‌وه. زله‌یزه‌کانی رۆژئاوا تاراده‌یه‌کی زۆر چاوپۆشیمان له‌ خواسته‌کانی گه‌لی کورد و مافی چاره‌ی خۆنووسین کردووه. چین که‌ به‌ شێوه‌یه‌کی نه‌ریتی پاسیف و بێ په‌یوه‌ندییه‌، پرسای کوردی بۆ زله‌یزه‌کانی رۆژئاوا جیه‌بێشته‌وه. به‌لام به‌هۆی سه‌ره‌له‌دانی ئهم دوا‌یه‌ی چین و ده‌ستپێشخه‌ری پشتنه‌ و رینگا (BRI) که‌ رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راست وه‌ک ناوه‌ندیکی ناوه‌ندی جیگه‌ر ده‌کات، چین ناتوانیت چیتر به‌بێ به‌شداریکردن بمینتیه‌وه.

ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه‌ گۆرانکارییه‌ ئه‌گه‌رییه‌کانی هه‌لوێستی چین به‌رامبه‌ر به‌ پرسای کورد له‌ رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راستدا ده‌کۆلێته‌وه. لیکۆلێنه‌وه‌ له‌وه‌ ده‌کات که‌ ئایا چین چاره‌سه‌ری پرسای کورد ده‌کات و ئایا بتوانیت بیلایه‌نی خۆی بپارێزیت به‌ له‌به‌رچاوه‌گرتنی کاریگه‌رییه‌ په‌ره‌سه‌ندووه‌کانی و به‌رژه‌وه‌ندییه‌ ستراتێژییه‌کانی له‌ ناوچه‌که‌دا. هه‌روه‌ها توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ به‌دواداچوون بۆ رینگا په‌ره‌سه‌ندنی چین ده‌کات بۆ پرسه‌ جیهانییه‌کان، به‌تایبه‌تی له‌ باشووری جیهانی و رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راست، له‌ چوارچۆیه‌ی که‌مبوونه‌وه‌ی بالاده‌ستی رۆژئاوا و زیادبوونی گرنگی بوونی جیهانی فره‌ جه‌مسهری.

وشه‌ سه‌ره‌کییه‌کان: پرساری کورد، دووباره‌ دارشتتی نه‌خشه‌که‌، چین، رۆژه‌لانی ناوه‌راست،

Introduction

The Kurdish question remains one of the most enduring and complex political dilemmas in the Middle East, affecting countries like Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, where Kurdish populations are significant. The term “Kurdish question” refers to the ongoing struggle of the Kurdish people for autonomy, cultural rights, and political representation in states that have historically marginalized or suppressed their identity and aspirations. In recent decades, this issue has evolved into a transnational concern, intertwined with regional conflicts, global politics, and external powers’ interests.

Amidst the complex landscape, China has emerged as a powerful and influential actor in the Middle East. Known primarily for its economic ambitions through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s engagement in the region has predominantly focused on fostering stability to secure its investments and ensure regional cooperation. As a country that generally prioritizes

state sovereignty and non-interference, China's potential role in addressing the Kurdish question is intriguing yet cautious. The "Chinese solution," if there is one, involves a diplomatic, economic, and strategic approach that differs significantly from Western interventionist policies. The roots of the Kurdish question extend back to the post-World War I era and the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. When Western powers redefined borders in the Middle East under agreements like the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920 and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, the Kurds, a distinct ethnic group with a rich cultural heritage, were left without a sovereign state. The modern boundaries of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria divided the Kurdish population across these states, each adopting various policies to manage their Kurdish communities, ranging from forced assimilation to limited autonomy (Gunter 2019, 175).

In Turkey, the Kurdish issue has long been a contentious topic, characterized by policies that enforced cultural homogeneity. The denial of Kurdish identity and language in the early years of the Turkish Republic set the stage for decades of conflict. The emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the 1980s marked the beginning of an armed struggle for Kurdish rights and autonomy, a conflict that continues in various forms to this day. However, in Iraq: Kurdish population has had a different experience due to the autonomy they achieved following the Gulf War and the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Although still facing economic and political challenges, the KRG represents a rare example of Kurdish semi-autonomy in the region, serving as both an inspiration and a point of tension for Kurds in neighboring countries (Saeed 2016, 28).

On the other hand, in Syria the Kurdish question gained new dimensions amid the country's civil war. Kurdish groups, primarily the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the SDF including both YPJ and YPG, established control over territories in northern Syria, known as Rojava or (AANES). Their fight against ISIS with Western support provided them with temporary legitimacy but has led to complex relations with Turkey, the Syrian governments, and various other actors in the region. Nonetheless, in Iran, the Kurdish population has similarly faced restrictions on cultural expression and political organisation. While less publicized than in Turkey or Iraq, Kurdish movements in Iran have been repressed, with limited prospects for autonomy due to the centralised nature of the Iranian state and its internal security priorities (Philips, 2016).

Against this background, this paper tries to examine the multifaceted Kurdish question, parallel to the lens of China's geopolitical motives in the Middle East, and explores whether a non-Western, Chinese-led approach could offer an alternative framework for addressing Kurdish aspirations within the stability that China seeks in the region. The paper is utilizing historical approach to examine both Kurdish question and its multidimensional complexity due to several interventions to the question across the whole 20th century (Dorsey 2017, Pp 1-14). It also examines Chinese methods of solving ethnic and religious disputes approach and whether Chinese approach could present a different result to the Kurdish question compared to the western approach since the collapse of Ottoman empire in the region.

China's Role and Interests in the Middle East

China's interest in the Middle East has significantly intensified over the last two decades, driven by the region's importance to its broader geopolitical and economic objectives. While traditionally cautious in involving itself in the complex political conflicts of the Middle East, China's expanding influence is motivated by two primary factors: securing energy resources and

establishing strategic infrastructure through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). thus, China's rapid economic growth has made it the world's largest importer of crude oil, and the Middle East provides over half of its oil supply. Countries like Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran play crucial roles in China's energy security, making regional stability paramount to Chinese interests. Instability in any Middle Eastern country that contributes significantly to China's energy needs could disrupt its supply lines, compelling China to adopt policies aimed at fostering peace and stability within and between states in the region (Clarke 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was launched in 2013, aims to develop trade and investment routes across Asia, Europe, and Africa, with the Middle East as a central corridor. Through infrastructure investments and economic partnerships, China envisions a network of routes that enhance connectivity and cooperation among partner countries. Middle Eastern countries are strategically positioned along this route, providing both economic opportunities and political risks. Stability is crucial for the BRI's success, as political unrest or prolonged conflicts could jeopardize infrastructure projects and complicate trade. Through this, China's approach to the Middle East has historically been characterized by its principle of maintain balance and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Unlike Western powers, China refrains from direct involvement in the region's internal conflicts, including the Palestinian Israeli issue, the Gulf tensions, and the Kurdish question (Rubin 2016). This policy allows China to build economic ties with multiple, often opposing, states without becoming embroiled in their rivalries. China's strategy is to act as a neutral mediator when necessary, aiming to support stability without taking explicit sides.

On the other hand, despite its emphasis on non-interference, China's growing economic interests in the Middle East have led to a cautious but noticeable increase in its engagement in regional security affairs. For instance, China has participated in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and established a military base in Djibouti to protect its interests in Africa and the Middle East. However, China remains wary of becoming overly entangled in Middle Eastern conflicts, preferring multilateral approaches through organisations like the United Nations or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Thus, while China has not historically taken a public stance on the Kurdish issue, its strategic priorities make it a potential diplomatic player (Aziz 2022).

On the other hand, China views regional autonomy movements, like those of the Kurds, with caution, partly due to concerns over separatist movements in its own territories, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. Nonetheless, China's influence in the Middle East and its focus on stability could lead it to play a balancing role, where it indirectly encourages peaceful solutions without overtly supporting autonomy movements. By prioritizing diplomatic relations with major regional actors - including Turkey, Iran, and Iraq- China could feasibly act as a neutral party in facilitating dialogue around the Kurdish question. Thus, China's approach to the Middle East reveals a careful blend of economic priorities, a commitment to regional stability, and a principled stance on non-interference. These factors make China's involvement in resolving the Kurdish question, complex yet potentially constructive. While China may not take a direct role, its influence could foster a favorable environment for dialogue and conflict resolution (Saeed 2022, Pp 101-112).

The Kurdish Question: Regional Perspectives and China's Position

The Kurdish question is deeply interwoven with the political dynamics of several key Middle Eastern countries, namely, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The aspirations of Kurdish people for

autonomy or independence have consistently clashed with the national security and territorial integrity concerns of these states, often leading to political and military conflicts. China, as a growing power in the region, must navigate these differing perspectives while maintaining its relationships and avoiding direct involvement in regional disputes. This section examines the viewpoints of these four key states on the Kurdish issue and considers how China's interests might align with each. The largest Kurdish population resides in Turkey, where Kurdish nationalist movements have posed a challenge to the central government since the early 20th century. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as a most crucial movement, has engaged in an armed struggle against the Turkish state for over four decades, primarily aiming for Kurdish autonomy. Turkey views the PKK as a terrorist organisation and has implemented stringent policies to suppress Kurdish nationalist sentiment. Ankara perceives any Kurdish autonomy within neighbouring countries—such as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq—as a potential threat, fearing it could inspire similar aspirations among its Kurdish citizens (Gunter 2022, Pp 167-191).

From China's perspective, Turkey's stance on the Kurdish question is critical because of their growing economic and diplomatic ties. China respects Turkey's sovereignty and has been cautious in engaging with the Kurdish issue in ways that might antagonize Ankara. However, China's policy on non-interference and its principles regarding stability might encourage it to support a peaceful resolution to Turkey's Kurdish issue, even if only indirectly. China could serve as a neutral partner, fostering economic cooperation that benefits both Turkey and Kurdish regions, thus subtly encouraging dialogue over conflict.

On the other hand, Iran also has a significant Kurdish population, primarily located in the western provinces near Iraq and Turkey. The Iranian government is cautious of Kurdish nationalism, and it has suppressed Kurdish political organisations within its borders. Iran's approach to the Kurdish question is intertwined with its broader regional security concerns, as Kurdish separatist movements could disrupt the country's territorial unity and fuel other ethnic or sectarian aspirations. However, China's relationship with Iran has been marked by substantial economic cooperation, particularly within the energy sector. China benefits from Iran's oil and natural gas resources, and Tehran has become a valuable partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative. While China is unlikely to support any Kurdish movements within Iran, it could encourage peaceful negotiations or autonomous arrangements in Iraq and Syria as a means of stabilizing the broader region. Maintaining stability in Kurdish-inhabited areas adjacent to Iran would align with China's interest in protecting its investments and preventing regional unrest from spilling over into Iran (Amineh 2022, Pp 28-50).

More visibly, Iraq has granted a significant degree of autonomy to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the north, which has developed into a relatively stable and semi-autonomous Kurdish entity. However, tensions between the KRI and the central government in Baghdad over oil revenues, territorial claims, and political authority periodically strain relations. The KRI has pursued independent policies that sometimes contradict Baghdad's, creating a delicate balance within Iraq's federal system. Yet for China, Iraq's approach to the Kurdish question is a model of autonomous governance that contributes to stability without challenging the central state's authority outright. China has considerable investments in Iraq, particularly in energy, and views the stability of the KRI and its cooperation with Baghdad as essential to safeguarding these

interests. China's engagement with the KRI is pragmatic; it supports economic growth and infrastructure development within the KRI while avoiding actions that might encourage outright independence. This approach allows China to foster regional stability while maintaining positive relations with both Kurdish leaders and the Iraqi government (Aziz 2022).

Nonetheless, the Syrian civil war has drastically altered the country's political landscape, with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlling significant territories in northern Syria. The SDF, which includes the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), has established a semi-autonomous administration that seeks recognition within a federal Syrian state. However, this autonomy is contentious, with the Syrian government and Turkey both opposing the formalization of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria. China has not taken a direct role in Syria's Kurdish issue, primarily focusing on stabilizing the state as part of its regional stability goals. Nevertheless, China's interest in post-war reconstruction could lead to economic engagement with Kurdish areas as well as the Syrian central government. Through investment, China could promote cooperation between Kurdish and non-Kurdish factions within Syria, contributing to a potential framework for cohabitation that respects Syrian sovereignty while acknowledging Kurdish administrative rights. China's involvement in reconstruction could further its non-interference policy by facilitating peacebuilding without advocating for either side in the conflict (Philips 2016).

Chinese Potential Position on the Kurdish Question

In balancing its relationships with these key states, China could act as a stabilizing influence, indirectly supporting measures that offer Kurdish populations some level of autonomy within their respective countries. This would align with China's goals of regional stability and economic development, without directly challenging the sovereignty concerns of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, or Syria. Additionally, China's Belt and Road Initiative could foster economic interdependence between Kurdish and non-Kurdish regions, promoting integration through development projects rather than political negotiations alone. China's approach to the Kurdish question is likely to remain pragmatic and non-interventionist. However, by promoting economic cooperation and regional stability, China could play a constructive role in addressing the underlying tensions in Kurdish-majority areas. Such a position would allow China to expand its influence in the Middle East while respecting the autonomy and sovereignty of its partner states (Fishman 2025).

China's potential role in addressing the Kurdish question is largely guided by its principles of non-interference and economic engagement, which has successfully applied in other regions to foster stability without direct political intervention. In the context of the Kurdish issue, China's strategy could strategically impact on the region. China's (BRI) offers a strategic framework for economic cooperation in regions with complex political dynamics, such as the Middle East. By investing in infrastructure, energy, and trade in both Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas, China can foster economic interdependence that may, in turn, reduce incentives for conflict. For example, investing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and connecting it to broader trade networks can enhance regional integration, strengthening relationships with Iraq, Turkey, and Iran by fostering shared economic interests. China's approach emphasizes mutual benefit and regional connectivity rather than political alignment. By improving transportation networks, energy pipelines, and trade routes in Kurdish regions, China could potentially create economic conditions that support coexistence within larger state structures. This economic focus also aligns with China's objective

to safeguard its investments, as political stability directly correlates with investment security and long-term economic growth (Rubin 2016).

Arguably, China has historically promoted diplomatic resolutions through multilateral institutions and regional forums. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), for instance, provides a platform for dialogue between Central Asian states on issues ranging from security to economic cooperation. Although the SCO currently does not include Middle Eastern countries as full members, China's influence in these platforms demonstrates its potential to promote regional dialogues that address sensitive issues like the Kurdish question. In the Middle East, China could support similar forums or informal discussions that bring together stakeholders from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria to discuss security, economic integration, and governance models that address minority rights within state structures. While China would avoid explicit political advocacy, it could facilitate conversations on inclusive governance and regional cooperation through these channels (Dorsey 2017, Pp 1-14).

Moreover, unlike the United States and Russia, China's relative neutrality in Middle Eastern conflicts allows it to interact with diverse actors without the political baggage that accompanies western involvement. China's position as an economic partner without overt political allegiances can enable it to engage with Kurdish leaders, state governments, and other stakeholders constructively. By positioning itself as an unbiased mediator, China may be able to foster communication and trust between Kurdish entities and central governments. For instance, China's balanced relationships with Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria could help mitigate hostilities that frequently arise over Kurdish autonomy. Through its economic initiatives, China could propose frameworks where Kurdish autonomy is respected within existing national boundaries, avoiding any implications of separatism. This approach could encourage solutions that satisfy both Kurdish aspirations for self-administration and the central governments' concerns for sovereignty (Fishman 2025).

Most importantly, China can be a module in promoting models of Autonomous Governance within National Sovereignty. Arguably, drawing on its experience with autonomous regions, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, China may slightly advocate for a governance model in which Kurdish-majority regions are granted a form of autonomy while remaining within the authority of their respective states. While China's model of autonomy has been controversial domestically, it provides an example of balancing central authority with regional cultural and administrative distinctions. In Iraq, for instance, the KRI's semi-autonomous status demonstrates the feasibility of granting Kurds certain rights and governance privileges within a national framework. China could endorse similar models in Syria, Turkey, and Iran, encouraging Kurdish populations to seek compromise solutions rather than pursuing independence. While China's interest is unlikely to extend to active mediation, it may advocate through its diplomatic channels for Kurdish aspirations to be addressed through non-separatist solutions (Clarke 2018). Notwithstanding, China is deeply concerned with regional terrorism, as instability in the Middle East can fuel extremism that potentially threatens Chinese investments abroad and may spill into Central Asia, a region where China holds substantial economic and security interests. The fight against terrorism provides a pretext for China to support policies that reduce violence and extremism in Kurdish regions, especially as Kurdish forces often have complex relationships with various militia groups. China's collaboration on counterterrorism with Iraq and Syria could extend to

engaging Kurdish forces to prevent extremism while promoting stability. Though sensitive, China's commitment to stability aligns with the interests of countries in the Middle East that are mistrustful of militancy (Shichor, 2020). Thus, by working with all parties, China may help mitigate risks and promote peaceful security arrangements, fostering a more stable environment conducive to addressing the Kurdish question constructively.

Implications for Chinese Foreign Policy and Regional Stability

China's approach to the Kurdish question not only aligns with its principles of non-interference and economic integration but also exemplifies its broader strategy of pursuing stability through development. By encouraging cooperation between Kurdish and central authorities, China can contribute to regional stability while minimizing risks associated with Middle Eastern alliances. The implications of China's engagement with the Kurdish issue are multifaceted. As China deepens its economic engagement in Kurdish areas, its influence in the Middle East will extend beyond traditional partners. By fostering relationships across the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, China's reputation as a stabilizing economic force may increase, potentially positioning it as a key player in regional politics. Moreover, China's balanced approach to the Kurdish issue aligns with its objective of maintaining strong relations with both Turkey and Iran (Yellinek, et al 2020, Pp 531-546). These states are central to China's Belt and Road Initiative and avoiding actions that could provoke nationalist sentiments is crucial to preserving these partnerships.

China's handling of the Kurdish question could provide a model for how it navigates minority and autonomy issues in other regions. By supporting autonomy within national frameworks, China may reinforce its stance against separatism while promoting its economic agenda. This approach has the potential to create frameworks for minority governance that align with its policies in other regions, from Southeast Asia to Africa. Although China traditionally refrains from obvious involvement in international conflicts, its constructive economic engagement with Kurdish regions may align with global efforts aimed at peacebuilding and conflict resolution. China's economic projects, focused on regional development and cooperation, could contribute to broader peace efforts by addressing underlying economic drivers of conflict, such as poverty and underdevelopment (Yellinek, et al 2020, Pp 531-546).

However, China's engagement in Kurdish regions, particularly in Iraq and Syria, provides insights into its approach to balancing economic investment with political neutrality. By exploring specific instances of Chinese involvement in these regions, one can assess how China navigates the complex dynamics of the Kurdish question and whether its strategies yield stability and economic growth without exacerbating tensions. The KRI has been one of the more accessible Kurdish territories for Chinese economic involvement (Dorsey 2017, Pp 1-14). The KRI has established itself as a semi-autonomous region with a relatively stable political structure, allowing China to invest without the complications of directly navigating Iraq's central authority. The KRI's vast oil reserves have attracted considerable Chinese investment. Major Chinese firms, such as China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinopec, have expanded operations in Iraq's oil-rich areas, including the KRI. These investments are crucial not only to Iraq's economic development but also to China's energy security. Having ties with the KRI, China promotes a framework where Kurdish economic strength is coupled with incentives for cooperative relations with Baghdad.

Additionally, China's presence in the KRI oil sector allows it to influence regional energy markets and gain leverage in negotiations with Iraq's central government, which views the KRI as a critical partner in its oil export strategy. By positioning itself as a neutral investor, China strengthens its ties with both the KRI and Baghdad, indirectly supporting stability in Kurdish-Iraqi relations. On the other hand, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to infrastructure projects that connect the KRI with broader Middle Eastern trade networks. For instance, Chinese investments in road construction, telecommunications, and energy pipelines foster KRI's integration into Iraq's economy and strengthen its connections with neighbouring states, including Turkey and Iran. This regional connectivity provides economic benefits for the KRI and fosters dependencies that encourage cooperation (Garver 2006). By linking Kurdish infrastructure to broader Middle Eastern trade routes, China can help create economic interdependence that reduces the likelihood of unilateral Kurdish moves toward full independence, thus promoting a form of stability beneficial to both the KRI and Baghdad.

Notenahles, the situation in Syria presents a more challenging environment for Chinese engagement, given the conflict's complexity and the strained relations between the Syrian government and Kurdish forces. Despite these challenges, China has demonstrated cautious interest in exploring opportunities for post-conflict reconstruction and economic collaboration. Yet, China has provided humanitarian assistance to Syria, including regions with substantial Kurdish populations. Though not specific to the Kurdish issue, China's support in post-conflict reconstruction aligns with its approach of contributing to stability without direct political intervention. This assistance could lay the groundwork for potential economic engagement in Kurdish-administered areas, such as those governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), (Saeed 2020, pp 253-270). China's involvement in reconstruction in Kurdish regions of Syria is indirectly supportive of Kurdish stability, as improved living conditions and economic prospects can reduce tensions and incentives local cooperation with the Syrian government. By contributing to the physical and economic rebuilding of these areas, China can foster conditions that facilitate reintegration and promote economic ties within the framework of Syrian sovereignty. China's restrained approach in Syria demonstrates its strategy of "strategic patience." Rather than taking sides in the Syrian-Kurdish conflict or pressing for a political resolution, China has maintained a stance of non-interference (Saeed 2019, Pp 274-285). This approach allows China to avoid antagonizing either the Syrian government or Kurdish forces, both of whom are essential players in the Syrian conflict's resolution. China's patience reflects its broader Middle Eastern policy, where it engages economically without deep political entanglements. By positioning itself as a neutral party in Syria, China retains the flexibility to engage in post-conflict investment opportunities without compromising its relations with other Middle Eastern states that oppose Kurdish autonomy, such as Turkey ((Murphy 2022).

China's approach in both the KRI and Syrian Kurdish regions highlights implications for regional stability and Kurdish aspirations. China's investments in Kurdish regions create economic interdependencies that may incentivize cooperation with central governments. This strategy aligns with China's preference for addressing separatist sentiments through economic engagement rather than overt political advocacy. By fostering mutual economic interests, China aims to reduce the viability of separatist movements and encourage cooperation within existing state boundaries. Moreover, China's strategy of non-interference enhances its appeal as a potential mediator or

“soft” stakeholder in the Kurdish issue. Though unlikely to directly mediate, China’s balanced relationships allow it to play a background role in promoting dialogues between Kurdish groups and state governments. By maintaining neutrality, China keeps its options open for future engagement in peace building initiatives should regional actors seek a neutral third party for conflict resolution (Huang 2022). However, through engaging in Kurdish regions through economic means, China bolsters its reputation as a stabilizing force. This approach could enhance China’s influence in the Middle East, providing it with leverage not only in Kurdish issues but also in broader regional negotiations with key players such as Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (Yellinek, et al 2020, Pp 531-546). Furthermore, China’s economic ties with Kurdish regions position it as a counterbalance to Western and Russian influences, diversifying the political landscape.

Challenges and Limitations of China’s Approach

While China’s strategies offer several advantages, there are inherent limitations and risks to its approach in addressing the Kurdish question. Turkey and Iran remain sensitive to any engagement that might encourage Kurdish autonomy. China’s economic partnerships with Kurdish regions must be carefully managed to avoid political repercussions from these key partners, both of whom are critical to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Striking this balance without compromising its regional alliances is a delicate task for China’s foreign policy in the Middle East (Pillsbury 2015). While China’s economic approach aims to avoid political entanglements, Kurdish aspirations for autonomy carry deep-rooted political implications. China’s investments in Kurdish regions may be perceived as indirect support for Kurdish autonomy, potentially straining relations with central governments. Additionally, any perceived alignment with Kurdish goals could expose China to backlash from regional states with significant Kurdish populations, such as Iran, Syria and Turkey.

Arguably, China’s success in promoting stability through economic investments is heavily dependent on regional stability. Escalating conflicts or unforeseen political shifts, such as leadership changes in Iraq or Turkey, could disrupt China’s economic projects and undermine its efforts to foster interdependence. Furthermore, internal Kurdish conflicts, such as rivalries between the KDP and PKK, add complexity to China’s engagement, as these divisions may obstruct the effectiveness of economic cooperation. China’s strategic involvement in the Kurdish question, embedded within its wider Middle Eastern policies, reflects an overarching ambition to establish itself as a stable, neutral partner amidst volatile regional dynamics. By combining economic investments with a policy of non-interference, China crafts a unique approach that contrasts with Western and Russian involvement in the Middle East. Thus, the broader implications of China’s engagement for both the Kurdish question and the region’s geopolitical landscape is viewed in a wider context (Kissinger 2011).

China’s approach to the Middle East, often referred to as a strategy of “strategic opportunism,” is driven by some core objectives. The Middle East is central to China’s energy needs, supplying a significant portion of its oil imports. Stability in oil-producing regions is therefore crucial for sustaining China’s economic growth. In addition, the Middle East holds significant potential as a market for Chinese exports, particularly within infrastructure, telecommunications, and defence sectors. China’s investments in Kurdish and neighbouring regions reflect its desire to secure these

energy flows and market access while promoting regional stability through economic development.

Moreover, China's global strategy involves fostering a multipolar world, reducing the dominance of Western influence in key geopolitical regions. In the Middle East, this goal is achieved by developing partnerships with various states, regardless of their ideological alignments. Thus, through engaging with both state and non-state actors, such as the KRI and Kurdish groups in Syria, China positions itself as an alternative partner for states seeking economic and developmental assistance without the political conditions that often accompany western support (Gunter 2019, pp 169-188). The Middle East plays a key role in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to create trade routes and infrastructure networks linking Asia, Africa, and Europe. The BRI is designed not only to enhance China's economic ties but also to build a foundation for strategic influence in the region. Through investments in Kurdish regions, China integrates these areas into its trade network, creating dependencies that facilitate influence without direct political intervention. This integration is part of a broader strategy to solidify China's presence in the Middle East while ensuring the stability necessary for its BRI objectives.

Impact on Kurdish Aspirations for Autonomy and Regional Relations

China's economic engagement with Kurdish regions has potential implications for Kurdish aspirations, as well as for its relationships with neighbouring states that oppose Kurdish autonomy. By focusing on economic growth and development, China promotes stability through interdependence rather than advocating for political autonomy. Chinese investments in infrastructure, oil, and telecommunications bolster the economic self-sufficiency of Kurdish regions while subtly discouraging moves toward full independence. This approach offers a middle ground that acknowledges Kurdish aspirations for economic agency without provoking neighboring states like Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, which remain cautious of a fully autonomous Kurdish state. Chinese investments encourage Kurdish regions, particularly the KRI, to pursue cooperative relations with central governments to ensure continued economic support and security (Aziz 2022). This dynamic reduces the likelihood of separatist actions, as economic interdependence with Baghdad, for example, becomes integral to the KRI's development.

The Chinese model encourages regional integration, which aligns with Beijing's emphasis on maintaining state sovereignty and preventing separatist movements within its own borders. China's engagement provides an alternative to Western-backed initiatives, reducing the influence of western states that often advocate for Kurdish political rights and autonomy. China's neutrality appeals to both Kurdish groups seeking investment and to neighbouring states careful of western interference in their internal affairs (Shareef 2014). As a result, China's presence can offset western influence, creating a multipolar framework where Middle Eastern actors have a broader array of partnerships. China's approach in Kurdish regions is emblematic of its broader Middle Eastern strategy, with implications for regional and international geopolitics. China's reputation as a neutral party bolsters its potential role as a stabilizer in regional conflicts. Although unlikely to engage in formal mediation, China's partnerships with both Kurdish groups and central governments allow it to promote economic cooperation, indirectly fostering stability. This strategy aligns with China's interests in avoiding direct military involvement, focusing instead on economic contributions that promote peaceful development (Pillsbury 2015).

As a matter of fact, China's engagement in Kurdish regions requires careful diplomacy, particularly with states that have vested interests in Kurdish autonomy, such as Turkey and Iran. Both countries have significant Kurdish populations and oppose any moves toward Kurdish independence, viewing such aspirations as a threat to their territorial integrity. China's economic focus minimizes political tensions, allowing it to maintain positive relations with Turkey and Iran while still investing in Kurdish regions. This balance contributes to China's broader goal of fostering regional stability without antagonising key Middle Eastern powers (Huang 2020). China's presence in Kurdish and broader Middle Eastern affairs challenges U.S. influence in the region. The United States has historically supported Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria, primarily for strategic military reasons. However, China's economic partnerships provide Kurdish regions with a non-military pathway to development, presenting an appealing alternative to U.S. support. China's influence encourages Kurdish entities to consider broader partnerships, potentially reducing reliance on U.S. assistance and diminishing the United States' leverage in the region (Kissinger 2011).

Even though China's economic engagement offers a stabilizing influence, there are inherent risks and limitations to its approach. First, China's investments depend on relative stability in Kurdish regions and surrounding states. Heightened conflict or political upheaval, such as renewed hostilities between Turkey and Kurdish groups or shifts in Iraqi or Syrian leadership, could disrupt China's projects. Unstable conditions would limit China's capacity to maintain its economic influence, as sustained security is essential for continued infrastructure and oil investments. However, the Kurdish question itself is fragmented, with diverse political, cultural, and ideological factions. For example, the KDP in Iraq and the PKK in Turkey pursue different approaches to Kurdish autonomy, with varying levels of opposition from neighbouring states. China's engagement with one Kurdish group may lead to tensions with others, complicating its neutrality and limiting the effectiveness of its economic strategy (Saeed 2023, Pp 45-53). China's increased influence in Kurdish regions and the broader Middle East may provoke responses from other powers, such as Russia and the United States, who view the region as strategically critical. The growing Chinese presence could lead to competitive dynamics, potentially undermining China's goal of fostering a stable, multipolar environment.

Comparing Chinese and Western Approaches to the Kurdish Question

China's engagement with the Kurdish question contrasts significantly with that of western nations, particularly the United States and certain European countries. The primary differences lie in China's economic-centered, non-interference model versus the western approach, which often combines economic, military, and political elements, with an emphasis on human rights and democratic governance. As its mentioned above, China's approach to the Kurdish question revolves almost exclusively around economic partnerships, investment, and infrastructure development. The main characteristics of this model include China invests heavily in infrastructure, energy, and trade networks, all intended to drive economic development without directly supporting political autonomy or regional independence (Dorsey 2017, Pp 1-14). This model is especially apparent in China's investments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where it funds oil and infrastructure projects while avoiding involvement in the political dynamics of Kurdish relations with Baghdad or neighbouring states. In addition to that, China maintains a firm non-interference stance, supporting the territorial integrity of states and refraining from

involvement in Kurdish political aspirations. While western nations may support political reforms or Kurdish autonomy movements, China's model keeps political issues at arm's length, ensuring that its economic interests remain unobstructed by political tensions. Therefore, though avoiding political engagement, China aims to promote stability as a means of securing its economic interests. Stable conditions are favorable for infrastructure projects and resource extraction, which are central to China's regional strategy. Thus, China encourages Kurdish regions to cooperate with central governments, particularly in Iraq, to maintain a peaceful environment conducive to economic growth (Yellinek, et al 2020, Pp 531-546).

In contrast to China's limited engagement, western nations adopt a more complex approach that integrates economic aid, military support, and political advocacy for democratic reforms. This strategy of western nations, particularly the United States, have historically supported Kurdish groups pursuing greater autonomy, especially in Iraq and Syria. This support includes military assistance and diplomatic backing, often tied to broader goals of promoting democracy and human rights. For example, the United States has provided military aid to Kurdish forces, such as the Peshmerga in Iraq and the SDF in Syria, as part of counter-terrorism operations, creating a close alliance that reflects western interests in fostering regional allies (Allsopp 2015). Western engagement includes humanitarian and developmental aid, often tied to conditions on governance and political transparency. While these programs contribute to economic development, they are frequently linked to political expectations, such as improved governance or anti-corruption measures, which contrast with China's "no-strings-attached" investments. In addition to economic and humanitarian aid, western nations establish security partnerships with Kurdish groups, particularly in conflict zones. U.S. support for Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria reflects a broader military strategy that prioritizes regional security and counterterrorism (Lister 2015). This partnership, however, introduces a level of dependency that some Kurdish regions view as both beneficial and restrictive, as they must align with western policies to maintain this support.

Conclusion

China's engagement in the Middle East, rooted in its doctrine of non-interference and economic pragmatism, presents a distinctive model for addressing complex regional issues like the Kurdish question. Unlike western powers, particularly the UK and the US, whose involvement with Kurdish forces has been shaped by military alliances and security interests, China's approach prioritizes infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and regional stability through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). From Beijing's perspective, stability in Kurdish-populated regions is a prerequisite for safeguarding its broader economic and energy investments across Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. However, China deliberately avoids taking a political stance on issues of Kurdish autonomy, seeking to maintain neutrality with all regional governments. This calculated distance, while strategic for China's relations with Middle Eastern states, creates ambivalence from the Kurdish perspective. For Kurdish actors -many of whom have historically been let down by the western powers- China's rise offers both opportunity and pessimism. On one hand, Beijing's emphasis on long-term economic development and state-to-state cooperation might provide resources and investment in underdeveloped Kurdish regions. On the other, the Kurds remain cautious of a model that overlooks their political struggle for recognition, participation, and equality within hostile state structures. From the Kurdish viewpoint, any economic engagement that bypasses local governance and avoids addressing structural political grievances

risks reinforcing existing marginalization. The contrast with the U.S.–Kurdish relation further cultivates this point. The U.S, despite its tactical military support -especially during the war against ISIS- has often prioritized its alliances with regional states such as Turkey, Iraq, and at times even the Syrian regime, over long-term commitments to Kurdish political aspirations. The abrupt withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria in 2019 exemplified the precariousness of this relationship, leaving Kurdish forces exposed and deepening distrust in American promises of partnership. While flawed, the U.S. engagement has at least acknowledged the Kurdish role as a security and governance actor. In contrast, China's model risks being seen as economically instrumentalist and politically disengaged. For China to become a credible and constructive force in resolving the Kurdish question, it must go beyond transactional investment. A sustainable strategy would require not only economic inclusivity but also a deeper understanding of the Kurds' historical grievances and political aspirations. This does not necessitate abandoning non-interference but rather adapting it to a more context-sensitive approach, one that recognizes the links between development, governance, and legitimacy. China's capacity to navigate this complex terrain will test the limits of its foreign policy and determine whether it can truly offer an alternative to Western models of intervention. From a Kurdish standpoint, the hope is not that China becomes a new patron or intervening power, but that it uses its growing influence to support frameworks that promote decentralization, rights-based development, and equitable participation. If China engages Kurdish actors meaningfully -without undermining state relations- it could help reshape the regional order through soft power rather than hard coercion. However, if its engagement remains confined to elite agreements and extractive economic interests, it may replicate the very imbalances that have fuelled Kurdish exclusion for decades. Eventually, the Kurdish question represents a critical case for China's evolving role in global governance. It illustrates how economic presence alone cannot substitute for political engagement when legitimacy and justice are at stake. Whether China chooses to remain a neutral investor or evolve into a more responsive diplomatic actor will shape not only its credibility in the Middle East, but also its wider global legacy.

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