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The position and role of Qatar in China's Middle East policy

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Abstract. The evolving dynamics of global foreign policy have highlighted economic cooperation as a critical factor in international relations post-Cold War. China's increasing involvement in the Middle East, particularly in the Persian Gulf, has emerged as a significant development. In fact, China's international prominence was largely attributed to its need for petroleum imports. However, as the 21st century unfolded, China's global influence has grown substantially, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, where it has expanded its economic, diplomatic, strategic, and military engagements. Considering that China-Qatar relations have intensified across political, economic, commercial, and energy sectors, the primary aim of this study is to elucidate the strategic significance of Qatar within China's foreign policy framework. It seeks to demonstrate how Qatar's role extends beyond merely providing natural gas, exploring the multifaceted nature of their bilateral relations. The research uses a descriptive-analytical methodology and analyzes diplomatic, economic, and security aspects of the bilateral relationship by focusing on recent developments and shifts in the geopolitical landscape. The findings reveal that Qatar's strategic value to China extends beyond its role as an energy supplier. The relationship between the two nations is characterized by a deepening network of mutual dependency, encompassing cooperation in energy, investment, and security. This deepening of connection will make the future of China-Qatar relations, as evidenced by this growing cooperation, closer together. And the increasing importance of bilateral relations between China and Qatar for the future will be highlighted by this strengthening cooperation. Additionally, Information and research data are collected through library studies, the Internet, and quarterly journals.

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Позиция и роль Катара в политике Китая на Ближнем Востоке

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Аннотация. В условиях трансформации глобальной внешней политики и усиления роли экономического сотрудничества в международных отношениях возрастающее присутствие Китайской Народной Республики (КНР) на Ближнем Востоке, в частности в регионе Персидского залива, представляет собой значительный феномен. С XXI в. наблюдается существенное расширение экономического, дипломатического, стратегического и военного влияния КНР, особенно в контексте стран Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки, что в значительной степени обусловлено потребностью Китая в импорте углеводородов. Настоящее исследование посвящено изучению стратегической значимости государства Катар в рамках внешней политики КНР, в частности, установлению многоаспектного характера двусторонних отношений, выходящего за рамки роли Катара как поставщика природного газа. Проанализированы дипломатические, экономические аспекты сотрудничества в области безопасности в контексте двусторонних отношений с акцентом на актуальные события и изменения в геополитическом ландшафте. Результаты свидетельствуют о том, что стратегическая ценность Катара для КНР состоит не только в его роли экспортера энергоресурсов, демонстрируя углубление взаимозависимости, охватывающей энергетическое сотрудничество, инвестиционные потоки и взаимодействие в сфере безопасности. Растущее сотрудничество сблизит Китай и Катар, а также подчеркнет важность этих отношений для будущего. Источниковая база исследования включает материалы библиотечных фондов, онлайн-ресурсы и данные периодических изданий.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика, энергоресурсы, энергетическое сотрудничество, инвестиции, безопасность

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Introduction

The Middle East continues to be a significant component of the foreign policy agenda of major global powers. The evolution of international politics pursued by these nations has exerted a substantial influence on the developmental trajectories of the region [1. P. 9]. China is something of a “newcomer” in the Middle East region. For a long time, its importance to Beijing was low due to geography, but this began to change in the early 2000s. Thanks to rapid economic development, marked by its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the growth rate of China's energy consumption has increased sharply, and the importance of this region for China's energy security has also grown [2. P. 29].

In recent years, China has significantly ramped up its involvement in the Middle East, by enhancing stronger ties with a diverse array of nations across the region. By strengthening trade relations, it has developed into a vital import-export partner and a rising investor in countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. China's growing participation in the region is centered on Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to promote China's economic growth and the regime's domestic legitimacy by increasing connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe [3. P. 1]. This is partially explained by the necessity of being more assertive in a geographically important area where it has numerous interests. It is also an indication of status — a rising power with global interests needs to be seen as playing an important role in the Middle East. China has been increasing its political influence in order to achieve this [4. P. 2].

In fact, the countries of the Persian Gulf are actively pursuing bold growth plans meant to achieve economic reform and reduce their excessive reliance on oil. These initiatives include Vision 2035 in Kuwait, Vision 2030 in Qatar, Vision 2030 in Bahrain, Vision 2020 in Oman (which was replaced by the Oman Vision 2040 “Implementation Follow-up Unit” via Royal Decree 100/2020 on August 18, 2020), Vision 2021 in the United Arab Emirates (now succeeded by “We The UAE 2031”), and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia. These countries are trying to achieve sustainable development by privatizing and developing non-oil industries. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and these large regional development plans have agreed

upon a shared route for economic growth. These strategic synergies seem to bring new opportunities to both sides [5. P. 2].

On the other hand, Qatar is about to become an influential player at the regional level in the field of foreign policy. In this regard, in less than 20 years, Qatar has emerged as one of the major regional players in Middle Eastern international relations by being the world's largest LNG exporter [6. P. 185]. Additionally, between 2017 and 2021, its neighbors (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) imposed a land, sea and air blockade that lasted nearly three and a half years. This was due to Qatar's independent and controversial foreign policy. The small gas superpower is not only much more visible, prominent and influential; it is also the subject of heated debates about its foreign policy [7. P. 5].

For this reason, Qatar's political leaders think that this country's geopolitical importance in the Middle East has been increasing. Moreover, it seems that China's increasing need for hydrocarbon energy has been taking China and Qatar relations to new dimensions. It is almost certain that relations will become even stronger and more diversified as energy trade between the two countries develops.

To examine the strategic role of Qatar in China's foreign policy context, and to focus on both countries bilateral relations that have advanced beyond the conventional energy collaboration into wider economic, political, and security cooperation; **the main goal of this study** is to analyze how economic collaboration, investment initiatives, and geopolitical placement have reinforced China and Qatar bilateral relations within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, it indicates that what driving forces led China to get increasingly engaged with Qatar. As a result, the study emphasizes how small but resource rich states like Qatar can perform as a critical actor and subsidize to China's Middle East policy. By highlighting the fact of Qatar leverages its energy resources and mutual benefits for both national development and regional stability in the Persian Gulf, the study intends to contribute to a profound understanding of how Qatar contributes to foreign policy strategies of emerging global powers such as China.

China's foreign policy in the Middle East

During the Cold War (1945–1991), China a smaller power was squeezed by two superpowers and it found itself largely isolated from the Middle East during this period. In fact, it didn't have a largely visible presence in the region, and it was under the little risk from the side of superpowers. There were two waves of diplomatic normalization that came after the People's Republic of China (PRC) achieved early diplomatic breakthroughs in the Middle East. Egypt and Syria were the first nations in the area to have diplomatic ties with China in 1956. But Beijing took up Taipei's position on the UN Security Council following the major breakthrough in the 1970s brought about by China's admission to the organization [8. P. 4].

A fundamentally new approach to foreign policy began to take shape in the PRC after 1978. Beijing's policy towards the Arab world was de-ideologized. To strengthen cooperation, prerequisites began to be created within the PRC (study of Arab countries and culture, granting greater freedoms to Chinese Muslims) [9. P. 35]. On the other hand, since the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping came to power, the rapid structural reform movement in various aspects of the country happened. It was the beginning of a return to the international community and reconciliation with national interests. Stepping into the valley of facts paves the way for the country to join the World Trade Organization [10. P. 99].

After Deng Xiaoping came to power, a radical change occurs in the country's foreign policy, in which economic interests and motives are replaced by ideological and geopolitical conflict of the world. This trend is known as the "*developmental discourse*" in Chinese foreign policy [11. P. 159].

Following Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies in the early 1980s, partners were chosen primarily based on their ability to provide China's energy needs, particularly in the Middle East. This has made the pertinent nations that are most accessible — particularly those in the Persian Gulf — even more important. China's foreign and security policy agenda now places a high premium on ensuring a steady and uninterrupted supply [12. P. 3].

However, in the 1990s, China's interest in and economic dependence on the Middle East expanded significantly. An international security analyst at the elite Central Party School in Beijing claims that China's geopolitical, economic, energy, and security interests in the Middle East are continually growing [8. P. 4].

The Middle Eastern countries' relationship with the People's Republic of China started to drastically shift in the early 2000s. China's relations with the Persian Gulf countries have become increasingly unique, especially in the socioeconomic arena, in light of the "*multipolar world order*" and the geopolitical "*chess game*" concept. The significant increase in trade and the resulting strategic Chinese investment in selected infrastructure projects in the Arabian Peninsula have met the changing economic needs of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. They are increasingly faced with the need to diversify their economies, which are heavily dependent on petrochemicals. Highlighting the fact that, it was driven forwards by the growing environmental concerns and eco-friendly policies adopted by Western nations. This has accelerated efforts to decouple economic growth from crude oil consumption [13. P. 205].

The (Persian) Gulf is seen as a crucial part of the BRI since the election of a new Chinese administration in 2012. In addition to Yemen, Iran, and Iraq, the GCC nations were crucial to bolstering China's energy security, opening up foreign markets, and advancing its soft power in the new era [14. P. 32]. During the Fourth World Peace Forum in Beijing in June 2015, Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the following remarks under the title "*China's Role in the Global and Regional Order*": First; opposing "*the deliberate use*

of force”, “China consistently favors the peaceful resolution of international disputes and is committed to developing a new model of inter-state relations with win-win cooperation as a basis”. Latter; China has taken a broad role in solving global hotspot problems: “From Ukraine to the Middle East and South Sudan, we are deeply involved in international cooperation in the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking, climate change, and the Iranian nuclear issue”. Third; “We have fulfilled our obligations by participating in more than 23,000 bilateral agreements, more than 400 multilateral agreements and almost all intergovernmental organizations”. Fourth, China has actively advocated exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations [15. P. 180]. At the beginning of 2016, China adopted a new strategic concept regarding Arab countries. This was the first document that clearly outlined the contours of China’s foreign policy in the Middle East for a long-term historical perspective. It also revealed the PRC’s desire to play a significant role in this region, while strengthening relations in the political and economic spheres [16. P. 23].

On the other hand, the country’s rapidly rising energy consumption, mandatory supply from external sources and serious concerns about the country’s “energy security” prompted the energy diversification strategy which resulted in being highlighted in the agenda. Based on this strategy, it searches for energy sources almost all over the world. Persian Gulf, Africa, Russia and Central Asia are the main implementation centers of this strategy [17. P. 15]. China’s interest in the Middle East was based on the growing demand for energy resources, which the region is rich in. The significance of this factor remains today: in 2019–2020, over 15 % of Chinese demand for crude oil was satisfied by Saudi Arabia alone, and another 25 % was provided by other Gulf countries [18. P. 2382].

Chinese diplomats and specialists in strategic affairs have imparted knowledge regarding the basis of China’s proactive involvement in the region. Beijing espouses the concept of peace through development, emphasizing “shared security perceptions” divergent from the Western-led “traditional security perception,” which prioritizes security through defeating adversaries and maintaining exclusive military alliances¹. To meet its energy needs and ensure the security of its energy supply, China has adopted a twofold policy, which can be summed up as follows [19. P. 3]:

1. With the start of the New Silk Road infrastructure projects, the historic Silk Road routes have been transformed into an extensive system of pipelines, modern roads, and railways designed for trade and energy resource transportation. With this strategic endeavor, the hazards associated with naval blockades and embargoes will be reduced and vulnerabilities at sea will be minimized.

¹ Moonakal NA. The Impact and Implications of China’s Growing Influence in the Middle East. *The Diplomat*. July 09, 2022. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-impact-and-implications-of-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

2. Parallel to efforts to fortify military capabilities aimed at protecting foreign interests have been initiatives for military modernization, particularly in naval capabilities. Furthermore, the PLA Navy's (PLAN) strategic focus has shifted from "*coastal defense*" to "*far sea defense*".

As emphasized by a Chinese expert, China's energy strategy has emerged as a significant factor influencing not only the Asian but also the global geopolitical equilibrium. This assertion highlights the pivotal role energy security plays in shaping regional dynamics. The expert draws parallels with historical events, citing how energy insecurities propelled Japan's expansion into Southeast Asia half a century ago, ultimately contributing to the outbreak of the Pacific War. This underscores the multifaceted nature of energy security, which extends beyond mere economic concerns to encompass national security, strategic economic interests, and diplomacy [20. P. 55].

Leaders from the Middle East, particularly the (Persian) Gulf States, have been visiting China on a regular basis in the last few years. Since the two nations' diplomatic relations were established in 1987, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa made his first official visit to China in September 2013. The visits to Beijing in March 2014 by a Saudi prince and May 2014 by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani followed this. Kuwait's prime minister visited China in May 2014 after 10 years. Such events can be considered as Middle Eastern capitals seeking to further involve Beijing in the diplomatic and strategic realities of the region [21. P. 9].

China is now the Middle East's largest trade partner, encompassing North Africa, and the region's largest investor. China is the top trading partner of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates; Iraq and the former are ranked second. It has managed to become an important import point for countries whose trade is dominated by the EU (e.g., Algeria and Egypt). Its investments range from infrastructure (especially ports) to telecommunications [22. P. 5]. In 2013, the "*Belt and Road Initiative*" (BRI) developed by President Xi used the logic of geo-economic development as a priority. President Xi stressed the "*1+2+3*" cooperation model between China and 22 Arab governments in June 2014 during the China-Arab Cooperation Forum's sixth ministerial session. China suggested splitting infrastructure development and trade investments into two wings and making energy cooperation the major axis of this plan. Nuclear power, aviation, satellites and new energy rapid breakthrough areas; All of this is based on geo-economic strategy [23. P. 8].

During the 6th Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in June 2014, President Xi Jinping stated that the countries in the region are "*natural cooperation partners in jointly building the BRI*". Since then, various actors from China, especially companies, banks and financial institutions, have engaged in active efforts to implement the BRI in the (Persian) Gulf [24. P. 6].

The BRI is at the center of China's diplomatic confrontation with Middle Eastern countries, a point repeatedly emphasized by Beijing officials. Therefore, the Silk Road strategy gives new impetus to the economic transformation of the Middle East. Despite the challenges, risks can be turned into opportunities as long as China faces them head on and responds positively. China's rise has coincided with significant shifts in the global economy and geopolitical tendencies during the last 20 years. These developments create new opportunities for Middle Eastern countries looking to diversify or rebuild their economies, increase trade and seek investment opportunities in emerging markets [25. P. 3].

Chinese cumulative contracts and investments in Middle Eastern states (2005–2017) are concentrated in Saudi Arabia (30.2 billion), Iran (24.3 billion), Egypt (22.2 billion), the United Arab Emirates (20.4 billion), and Iraq (18.7 billion), according to the American Enterprise Institute (2017), a Washington-based think tank (26. P. 285). According to China Global Investment Tracker, Beijing's investments in Middle Eastern states from 2013 to 2019 reached \$93.3 billion. Most are in the energy sector (\$52.8 billion), real estate (\$18.4 billion), transportation (\$18.6 billion) and utilities (\$5.9 billion). This is important for Middle Eastern countries because they are all under pressure from more diverse economies. Therefore, this will help them to undertake major infrastructure and construction projects. Chinese companies are uniquely well positioned to benefit from this approach to developing the infrastructure of the BRI [24. P. 2].

The connection between China and the Middle East extends to substantial levels of commodities commerce and business development in addition to energy exchange. It has promised to invest \$40 billion to fund the building of infrastructure, especially at significant crossing sites along the historic Silk Road trade routes, which pass across the Arabian Peninsula. As of the end of 2014, China had inked 118 bilateral or tripartite free trade agreements with states along the "One Road, One Belt" path [27. P. 2].

Thus, the Chinese government has an interest in keeping a careful eye on the Middle East in order to fulfill its Belt and Road agenda. China has strategically positioned its BRI at the geographic core of the Middle East. An important point of convergence occurs where the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe meet the Mediterranean, Red, Arabian, Caspian, and Black oceans. The Bosphorus, Bab al-Mandeb, Dardanelles, and Strait of Hormuz are the four main sea channels that are included in it as well [5. P. 2]. Owing to their advantageous position, plentiful energy resources, consistent economic expansion, and growing consumer and products markets, the Persian Gulf countries stand out as essential stakeholders with the potential to make major contributions to the effective implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. One significant supplier to these markets may be China [28. P. 71].

Qatar in China's Middle East policy

Qatar's foreign policy, energy export regulations, and national security measures are textbook examples of how a little state has expanded its global reach well beyond its borders. Qatar's global ambitions are often portrayed as a manifestation of the policy-making goals of regime-aligned elites, particularly its ruling family. Nonetheless, it's critical to acknowledge that Qatar's objectives are made feasible by its prosperous and quick economic development [29. P. 13]. Qatar has achieved geopolitical success at the crossroads of energy, foreign policy, and national security, setting it apart from its neighbors in the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council in terms of security frameworks. Qatar is traveling in a different direction. Using a variety of bilateral ties established through long-term export contracts, Qatar defies the dominance of the global market and innovates the international system's security framework [29. P. 17].

On the other hand, with the help of revenues from gas resources, Doha has sought a greater role in foreign policy and adopted creative methods, thus being portrayed as playing a mediating role in local, regional and international issues [30. P. 139]. In line with these policies, Qatar has increased its relations with China in recent years. On the other hand, due to the increasing energy need, China follows the strategy of investing in Qatar energy resources and making long-term contracts to secure its country's energy resources.

Their relationship has been affected over time by the Cold War context, regional changes in the Persian Gulf, and internal advancements in both China and Qatar. Only on July 9, 1988, did China and Qatar establish diplomatic relations. Because Qatar, a Western-oriented nation, had only sporadic commercial ties with Communist China dating back to the 1950s, it had little substantive engagement with the latter. Tensions between Qatar and China increased in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of China's terrible repression of Muslim minorities during the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, bilateral ties between Qatar and China remained virtually non-existent during this period [31. P. 12].

Qatar-China relations can be discussed in three phases. The first phase can be described as the period from July 1988, when diplomatic relations between the two countries began, to 1999, when Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani visited China. During this phase, both countries made an attempt to increase chances for cooperation and potential in a number of industries, with a focus on difficulties linked to petrochemicals and energy. Professional delegations from the trade and energy industries paid each other reciprocal visits to look into possible areas of collaboration. The second phase commenced with the Emir of Qatar's visit to China, marking a significant milestone in bilateral relations. Following this visit, which established a strong framework for cooperation, the two nations signed a number of agreements covering economic, political, cultural, and other fields of cooperation. The visit to China by King Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

in November 2014 marked the start of the third stage, which can be considered the pinnacle of bilateral relations².

When Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Project during his visit to China in 2014, Qatar became one of the first countries to join the initiative. Additionally, in the same year, Qatar's sovereign wealth fund set aside a \$10 billion fund to invest in China's healthcare, infrastructure and real estate sectors. These initiatives of Qatar towards China have been further strengthened by the country's decision to exempt visa requirements and grant permanent residence permits to Chinese citizens. At the same time, Qatar has become a country with foreign exchange authority with the agreement it made with the Central Bank of China³.

"Qatar is an important country playing a unique role in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, and is considered an important economic and security partner of China in this region," Chinese President Xi Jinping stated during this visit [32. P. 3].

Beijing's resounding endorsement of Doha helped to make Qatar's involvement in the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative — which seeks to position China at the forefront of world trade in the twenty-first century — well-known. Qatar is a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and was among the first countries to fund the Belt and Road Initiative. Although Qatar is not directly on either the "Belt" or the "Road", Doha has played a diplomatic role in Middle Eastern and African conflicts over the years. Given that geopolitical instability throughout the Belt-Road corridor threatens the success of this initiative, Beijing has strong reasons to assist Qatar.⁴

The Belt and Road Initiative will have a major positive impact on Qatar since it will allow China and Qatar to work together more closely to realize the full potential of QNV2030. An agreement to maximize the benefits of the private sectors in China and Qatar and to foster greater cooperation between the two countries in order to establish new partnerships was signed in April 2017 by the China International Trade Promotion Council and the Qatar Chamber. They also signed a memorandum of understanding that made it possible for the Qatar Chamber of Commerce to become a member of the Silk Road International Chamber of Commerce. A second memorandum of agreement was later signed by China and Qatar in November 2018 with the aim of promoting QNV2030 and China's Belt

² Qatar China relations between 2014 and 2017. Embassy of the State of Qatar. Available from: <https://beijing.embassy.qa/en/china/qatar--china-relations> (accessed: 18.03.2025).

³ Zhou Jian HE. Qatar and China natural partners in Belt and Road cooperation. *The Peninsula*. Jun 30, 2020. Available from: <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/opinion/30/06/2020/Qatar-and-China-natural-partners-in-Belt-and-Road-cooperation> (accessed: 20.03.2025).

⁴ Ulrichsen KC, Theodore K. How Asian and European countries helped Qatar maintain sovereignty. *Gulf State Analytics*. Apr 22, 2018. Available from: <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/how-asian-and-european-countries-helped-qatar-maintain-sovereignty/> (accessed: 21.03.2025).

and Road Initiative through international marine investment opportunities⁵. On 04 Nov 2019 Lim Meng Hui, Chief Executive Officer of the Belt-Road Project, stated that 3.64 billion QR (\$1 billion) of funds were provided to promote investment and economic growth in Qatar. According to the latest reports of the Qatar Free Zones Authority, it has approved investment applications from major international and local companies worth over QR 1 billion by the end of August this year. Qatar Free Zones Authority also acts as a “*regulatory zone developer*” with a \$1 billion fund to encourage investment and economic growth. A free zone of approximately 40 square kilometers is mentioned. Meng Hui stated, “*Our direct role is to attract investments and long-term partners to Qatar, especially in the three main sectors: logistics, chemicals and emerging technologies*”⁶. “*Qatar’s position in the region helps it play an important role in the Belt and Road Initiative, especially with its economic and geographical components,*” said Gui Hanfeng, chairman of the Global Economic Development Forum (GEDF)⁷.

Because Qatar has consistently supported and promoted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) throughout the (Persian) Gulf area from its beginning, China views Qatar as an essential partner in the BRI. Qatar, on the other hand, is conscious of China’s status as a rising political and economic force in the world and believes that China’s impact on these matters will only increase going forward. For Qatari businesses, China is a significant economic market and source of investments. Qatar supports China’s dedication to equality and non-hegemonic conduct and respects its method of fostering mutual relations. Regarding the “*Qatar blockade*”, Qatar also values China’s non-interventionist stance and practical foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region [31. P. 12].

Al Mansouri, former Chinese ambassador to Qatar, described the Belt and Road Initiative as “*noble*” because its fruits will benefit not only China but also all Asian and other countries along the route, so Qatar was one of the first countries to support the initiative. “*We believe that all efforts that will contribute to the rejuvenation of all countries in Asia should be supported*”⁸.

Qatar’s cooperation with China also has a relatively separate military dimension. A cooperation agreement in the field of combating terrorism was signed in 2017. This agreement was announced shortly after Qatar’s Saudi, Emirati

⁵ Silk Road Briefing. China’s Belt & Road initiative and Qatar. Nov 22, 2022. Available from: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/11/22/chinas-belt-road-initiative-and-qatar/> (accessed: 21.03.2025)

⁶ Shoeb M. QFZA holding \$1bn to promote investment & economic growth: CEO. *The Peninsula*. Nov 04, 2019. Available from: <https://s.thepeninsula.qa/nbeltq> (accessed: 21.03.2025)

⁷ Perumal Santhosh V. Qatar seen playing a key role in China’s Belt and road plan. *Gulf Times*, November 26, 2018. Available from: <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/614255/qatar-seen-playing-a-key-role-in-chinas-belt-and-road-plan> (accessed: 21.03.2025).

⁸ Qatar and China: developing a comprehensive strategic partnership. *China today*. August 11, 2018. Available from: http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/2018/ii/201808/t20180811_800138032.html (accessed: 21.03.2025).

and Bahraini neighbors blockaded the agreement, alleging Qatar's support for international terrorism. The main point of the document was to state that Doha could count on the support of major powers such as China. In December 2017, during Qatar National Day celebrations held for the first time during the blockade, the Qatari military displayed its short-range Chinese-made SY-400 ballistic missile [33. P. 3]. Beijing's decision to turn its bilateral relations with Doha into a strategic partnership can be explained within four strategic factors⁹:

1. China considers exporting military technology to Qatar to be a profitable venture.

2. Given that Qatar is the Arab country most receptive to unconditional talks with Islamist non-state actors, China and Qatar have normative solidarity in the field of security.

3. The Chinese Government is of the opinion that strengthening cooperation with Qatar on the fight against terrorism will limit Doha's influence on the Uyghur Turks.

4. By strengthening security cooperation with Qatar, China is strengthening its role as a mediator in the event of a security crisis between the GCC countries.

China's Ambassador to Qatar evaluates cooperation in bilateral relations as follows¹⁰:

"Our cooperation has created a mature model with energy as the foundation, infrastructure as the key, and finance and investment as the new starting point. In the next phase, we want to work more closely with our Qatari friends and jointly support the high-quality development of our Belt and Road cooperation".

However, in 2020, the value of bilateral commerce between China and Qatar was estimated to be 39.8 billion Qatari Riyals, or 10.9 billion US dollars. Therefore, it can be said that the expansion and growth potential of economic relations between the parties is at very high levels. Both countries signed a double taxation agreement at the beginning of this year. In addition, Qatar Petroleum signed a ten-year contract to supply two million tons per year of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Sinopec in China in May 2021¹¹. In the meantime, China formed two \$20 billion joint investment funds with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates and constructed two foreign exchange clearinghouses in those nations [34. P. 191].

⁹ Ramani S. China's growing security relationship with Qatar. *The Diplomat*. November 16, 2017. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/chinas-growing-security-relationship-with-qatar/> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

¹⁰ Zhou Jian HE. Qatar and China natural partners in belt and road cooperation. *The Peninsula*. Jun 30, 2020. Available from: <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/opinion/30/06/2020/Qatar-and-China-natural-partners-in-Belt-and-Road-cooperation> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

¹¹ Potential to expand Qatar and China relations with trade and investment. *Business Start Up Qatar*. July 01, 2021. Available from: <https://www.businessstartupqatar.com/news/qatar-china-relations-trade-investment/> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

Sinopec signed a 10-year contract with Qatar Energy, formerly known as Qatar Petroleum, in May 2021, stipulating that the latter provide two million tons of LNG yearly. Following that, a 10-year contract for the yearly supply of two million tons of LNG was signed in May 2021 between Sinopec of China and Qatar Energy, formerly known as Qatar Petroleum. In November 2022, Sinopec of China and Qatar Energy signed the longest LNG supply agreement in Sinopec's history, spanning 27 years. Due to market instability, purchasers were looking for long-term contracts, therefore this action was taken in response¹². China benefits greatly from such large-scale, long-term LNG arrangements with Qatar in three important ways. They are essential in the first place for gaining access to the world's fluctuating gas reserves. Second, Europe's access to these resources is limited since the global gas and oil market is a "zero-sum game", with the greatest LNG exporter in the world having direct access to China. Thirdly, it entails consolidating China's dominance over the greatest gas resource in the world¹³.

With 24.8 billion cubic meters (bcm), or 18 million tons, supplied in 2022, Qatar surpassed all other LNG suppliers in China to become the country's second-largest provider. This accounted for 16.6 % of China's total natural gas imports, including pipeline and LNG. China was Qatar's largest buyer of LNG, accounting for 21.7 percent of Qatar's exports¹⁴.

China National Petroleum Corporation also took a stake in the eastern development of the North Field LNG project as part of another agreement signed on June 20; The LNG train, with an annual capacity of 8 million tons, has a share of 5 percent. Qatar Minister of State for Energy Affairs Sherida Al-Kaabi said: *"Qatar has firmly supported the role of natural gas as a central component of any energy mix on the path to a realistic energy transition. We provide the world with the cleanest source of hydrocarbon energy, with both economic and environmental qualities, to support sustainable growth and a better future"*¹⁵.

Dr. Steven Wright from Hamad Bin Khalifa University stated that amidst of great instability in parts of West Asia are because of agreements between Qatar Energy and CNPC. Dr. Steven Wright explained that *"China has signaled its intention to expand its presence primarily through trade rather*

¹² China and Hong Kong's Bilateral Trade and Investment Outlook with Qatar. *China Briefing*. November 22, 2022. Available from: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-hong-kong-qatar-trade-and-investment-outlook/> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

¹³ Watkins S. What Qatar's Latest Megadeal with China Means For Global LNG Markets. *oilprice.com* Jun 28, 2023. Available from: <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Natural-Gas/What-Qatars-Latest-Megadeal-With-China-Means-For-Global-LNG-Markets.html> (accessed: 25.03.2025).

¹⁴ Downs E., & Mills R. Unpacking the Recent China-Qatar LNG Deals// *Center on Global Energy Policy at Columbia University*. July 10, 2023. Available from: <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/unpacking-the-recent-china-qatar-lng-deals/> (accessed: 11.03.2025).

¹⁵ Qatar signs 27-year gas supply deal with China's Sinopec. *ARAB NEWS*., November 05, 2023. Available from: <https://arab.news/5xvyg> (accessed: 11.03.2025).

than military force.” Steven Wright continues: “For both Qatar and China, this new partnership promises to deliver both economic gains and geopolitical gains for upcoming years”¹⁶.

On October 26, 2021, Wang Yi, the foreign minister and state councilor of China, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, the deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Qatar, met in Doha. The announcement of China and Qatar as key partners was made during this summit. Wang Yi also appreciated Qatar’s commitment to developing friendship with China and deepening bilateral cooperation. The two leaders of state agreed upon the strategic relationship between China and Qatar during their meeting. In this setting, emphasis was focused on working together to create the Belt and Road Project to a high standard, signing an implementation plan early, increasing collaboration across the board, and striving for new developments¹⁷.

Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on December 9, 2022, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Apart from reiterating China’s commitment to assist Qatar in achieving its National Vision 2030, Xi stated that his nation is keen to increase its investments in Qatar and is prepared to aggressively encourage personnel exchanges between the two countries. Xi recognized China’s great support for Qatar’s sovereignty, security, and stability while reiterating China’s steadfast support for these aspects of Qatar’s economy. Xi acknowledged the importance of the Arab world as a crucial independent force in the current multipolar world and expressed gratitude for Qatar’s persistent support and facilitation of cooperative efforts between China and Arab countries, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). He also pledged to continue working with Qatar on these initiatives¹⁸.

Qatar has many markets, regional access and air and sea connectivity that are very difficult to access for most countries. Qatar is in an important position to serve these markets, having very good relations with most of them. Qatar’s potential has increased thanks to its world-class infrastructure and excellent air and sea transportation connections¹⁹.

¹⁶ Cafiero G. The rising Sino-Qatari gas collaboration. *Amwaj.media*. July 1, 2023. Available from: <https://amwaj.media/article/the-rising-sino-qatari-gas-collaboration> (accessed: 10.03.2025).

¹⁷ Wang Yi Holds Talks with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China*. October 27, 2021, Available from: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1917137.shtml (accessed: 25.03.2025).

¹⁸ Xi says China ready to improve cooperation with Qatar in energy, finance, investment. *Xinhua*. December 9, 2022. Available from: <https://english.news.cn/20221209/b347b552740741ce96563c4350969552/c.html> (accessed: 26.03.2025).

¹⁹ Shoeb M. Belt & Road Initiative to bring Qatar and Mideast closer to the world: QFZA chief. *The Peninsula*. November 02, 2021. Available from: <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/04/11/2019/Belt-Road-Initiative-to-bring-Qatar-and-Mideast-closer-to-the-world-QFZA-chief> (accessed: 26.03.2025).

5 July 2023 Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs State Minister Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, during his meeting with China's special representative for Middle East affairs Zhai Jun in Qatar's capital Doha, said that Qatar will cooperate with China on regional hot spot issues in order to ease further tensions in the region. Al-Khulaifi said Qatar and China have deep relations and both sides to maintain a high level of coordination and cooperation in various fields²⁰.

Conclusion

Qatar's close partnership with Western countries, constant investment and deepening energy relations with China are one of the features of "infusion" in Doha's foreign policy strategy. Despite growing friction in relations between Beijing and Washington, Qatar's alliance with the United States has not prevented Doha from expanding its energy ties with China. On the other hand, Qatar is trying to take advantage of the US-China rivalry in the current global setting for its own gain. Thus, Qatar thinks that this country's relations with China won't be harmful to the US.

It is projected that relations between China and Qatar would become more complex and robust, with a network of "*mutual dependence*" based on cooperation in areas such as energy, investment, and security. Especially after the conflicts of interest in the Arab World, Qatar focused on its relations with China and the relations gained a strategic dimension. On the other hand, the fact that Qatar is a rich country and a strong actor in the Islamic world is an important driving force in China's rapprochement with Qatar.

China's credit to Qatar is underscored by its pivotal role in the Belt and Road Project's logistics. As the project advances, Qatar is expected to deepen its engagement, especially in economic, logistical, and energy sectors.

Our assessment is that China is currently trying to negotiate a free trade agreement with the (Persian) Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes Qatar. Due to the embargo, Qatar was compelled to change the way it conducted business, diversify the sources of its products and services, form new port relationships, and modify its approach. Qatar's economy will consequently accelerate its diversification and grow more autonomous. We believe that this might provide Qatar with opportunity to strengthen ties and forge alliances with Asian countries, especially in the building, tourism, mining, informatics, electronics, and textile industries.

²⁰ Qatar hails China's positive role in improving relations among regional countries. *Xinhua*, July 6, 2023. Available from: <https://english.news.cn/20230706/c4f7ddab1a3d402595a5c0ec29f96ff3/c.html> (accessed: 26.03.2025).

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