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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Different in Economics, Coordinated in Politics. Russia and China in the MENA region in the XXI century

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews Russia and China's engagement with the Middle East and North Africa since the 1990s and assesses the scale and depth of their cooperation and competition in the region. The article argues for the development of a de facto convergence between the two states, with Russia at the forefront of diplomatic and military initiatives, and China supporting the latter's actions in bilateral and multilateral relations with MENA partners. The regional crisis unleashed by Arab Uprisings have boosted such a cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, both in respect to their regional partners and Western rivals. And yet, they have also highlighted the different relevance that the region deserves in their respective international relations. On the background of the existing literature, the analysis of official statistics as well as of historical precedents, the two countries are analysed and compared along the topics of economy and politics-diplomacy.

KEYWORDS: China; Russia; Middle East; North Africa; International Relations

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1. A Historical Outline

As soon as both Russia and China re-engaged massively in the Middle East and North Africa in the late 1990s, they increasingly found common ground to coordinate in order to secure and expand their economic and political investments. The immediate reason for such convergence lays in their perception of Western, and particularly US, policies as counterproductive for the political stability of the region, if not clearly opposed to Russian and Chinese presence. However, by analysing both differences and commonalities in their respective patterns of engagement, the article argues for other factors being relevant for such convergence, and likely to sustain further coordination: namely, the promotion of state-centred politics and economics as a viable framework for the development prospects of MENA countries and, of course, their relations with Russia and China.

The historical relevance of the Middle East and North Africa in modern economy lays in their strategic location at the crossroads of major trading routes, their artisanship before industrial revolutions and, since early XX century, the presence of energy commodities for global industrial growth, namely oil and natural gas and, last but not least, for its major share in the world consumption of military technology¹ (Owen & Pamuk 1998; Findlay & O'Rourke 2007). However, it represents also a difficult area to engage with: the political and institutional fragmentation of the region into small-to-middle states, often competing one against the other has long disrupted the opportunities provided by those commonalities in languages, religions, political cultures, migration flows and natural resources that would make them cohesive and effective as for inner governance and foreign relations. Balance of power, anti-hegemonic alliances and bandwagoning with external powers are some of the most salient features of regional and international politics in MENA (Hinnebusch 2003). On the one hand, the Middle East and North Africa host some of the longest armed conflicts since WWII, like the Arab-Israeli one or the ever-

¹ The Middle and North Africa accounts for some of the highest military spending both as percentage of government spending (between 10 and 20%, except for lower figures in Egypt and Turkey) and share of GDP (between 4 and 6 per cent); Saudi Arabia and Israel rank among the first countries spending on military items. Values are expressed at constant 1990 US\$ prices (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI 2018).

ending crisis in Iraq and Lebanon, whose complexity has both enhanced and exhausted the diplomacy or hegemonic ambitions of world powers. On the other hand, the economy of the Middle East and North Africa ranks among the less integrated within a regional framework, and one of the most outward-oriented of the world (Mustapha 2010; WB 2010). The globalization waves of late XX and early XXI centuries have underlined existing cleavages, fostering a differential integration of highly-selected centres, like the Arab Gulf and Mediterranean coasts, against the marginalisation of peripheries, notably the rural, inland territories (Romagnoli & Mengoni 2014, p. 73, 122). Most leaders in MENA opt for negotiated trade-deals rather than to all-out liberalization policies, which grant them the control over the flows of goods as well as the domestic beneficiaries of such deals, and would fit well into the framework of a “statist globalization” (Hartwell 2019, pp. 103-104).

Differences in the presence of China and Russia were minimal during the 1990s, because they all suffered from a virtual absence. In fact, the end of the Cold War roughly coincided with the minor presence of Russia and China from the economy and politics of the MENA region: Moscow had already scaled down its presence in the late 1980s and since then focused primarily on the consequences of socialist collapse and relations with Western countries and former Soviet republics. The only, notable exception was establishing fresh, new relations with Israel in parallel with mass migration to the Middle East country (Vasiliev 2018, p. 276; Cherif 2019, pp. 14-16). Only since 1996, with the advent of former Soviet officer and MENA expert, Evgeniy Primakov, Moscow re-engaged with the long-run Arab partners in Egypt, Syria and Iraq in order to re-cover its status in international politics along the principles of “Great Powers Balancing” (Vasiliev 2018, p. 303; Milosevich 2019, p. 33). China was still fully engaged in adjusting to an export-led pattern of growth, and focused on integration within Asian and Western markets, whereas the Middle East, and more precisely the Gulf, was valued for energy imports for the oil-thirsty industrial development (Degang & Zoubir 2014). If the 1990s were the heydays of Western-led neoliberal principles and institutions, ruling and opposition forces in the region were left with no major alternative partner

abroad, or at least any partner that could counter-balance Western pressure. Indeed, after the mighty show of strength of the Gulf War in 1990–1991 against Iraq, the United States of America were hold as the regional power-broker: the “dual containment” strategy against Iraq and Iran, as well as the brokering of the Arab-Israeli conflict in mid-1990s were the pillars of the US “moment” (Fawaz 2012). Europe still acted as the main economic partner of the region, and the European Communities’ initiatives (later European Union), like the grand Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 1995 or the more stringent European Neighbourhood Policy in 2003 were cautiously accepted by MENA states in their neoliberal economic provisions but were rejected in their advocacy for political liberalization (Teti & Abbott 2017; Trentin 2018; Görgülü & Kahyaoglu 2019).

During the 2000s, both China and Russia expanded their presence along their specific and very different paths of domestic development: Russia as a partner for energy and military technology, China as a major industrial power. However, it was their common contempt for US policies in the region that fostered their convergence, and later cooperation: accordingly, since 2003 Washington proved to be both unable and unwilling to provide strategic stability to the region, and because neither Moscow nor Beijing could replace the US as the economic and strategic power-broker they would coordinate their strategies to secure their investments and interests, notably the containment of transnational, political Islamic movements (Milosevich 2019). In this perspective, crucial events were the US refusal of cooperation against transnational jihadi groups after 9/11 in Central Asia and Caucasus as well as the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, with the consequent political failure to enforce any semblance of institutional stability. Coupled with NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe and crisis in Ukraine, such events fed suspicion against or just outright rejection of Western-based liberalism. Thus, Russia and China converged to support “stability” under the banners of “state legitimacy and sovereignty”, which translated into supporting the embattled existing regimes, whatever their foundations and features, against mass mobilization and liberalism (Akl 2019). Such development accelerated since the Arab Uprising of 2011 and was welcomed by

MENA elites in their struggle to survive social upheavals and political crisis across the region, as well as to counter the uncertainties of Western policies as outlined in Egypt, Libya and Syria.

2. Factors for Convergence: Networks, Investments, Strategy and Common Rivals

Both Moscow and Beijing conceive the Middle East as an integral part of Asia, thus accepting the United Nations notion of the area as “Western Asia”. Nevertheless, the main differences between their approaches to the Middle East and North Africa originate from their geographical and historical proximity, which heavily condition interests and perceptions of security. For Russia, the Middle East is a “proxy” area: the immediate neighbourhood is still represented by former Soviet republics of the Caucasus, so that Turkey and Iran represent their “second tier” and the Arab countries the “third tier” of their near abroad. The region is linked to its own citizens by transnational ties, like Orthodox Christianity, Islam and remnants of socialist and nationalist networks. For China, instead, the Middle East is a distant space, located in the “third” circle of Beijing’s foreign policy (PRC 2016; Vasiliev 2018). However, such distance is differentiated according to the economic investments made by China: if the Gulf has been providing oil and natural gas to the East Asian country, Iran and Turkey are now pivotal in the “New Silk Road” project that would connect Eastern China with Central and Western Asia. Hence, for different reasons and trajectories, both Russia and China have been upgrading their relations with Turkey and Iran (RIAC 2016a; RIAC 2016b; Milosevich 2019, pp. 44-45).

As for economics, Russia and China entered the MENA markets as long as these have been trying to diversify their international economic relations beyond their traditional partnerships with European countries and the United States of America (Trentin 2014).² Energy is the commodity that has provided the basis for

² The recent oil shock during the “long 2000s” (2001–2014) sustained the diversification and increase of trade relations between MENA and Asia regions, as well as within the MENA region, in

economic interaction with the MENA region. Since mid-2000s most of the energy flows from the Gulf moved to the consumption markets of Eastern and South Asia: since 2013, China has become the largest importer of oil from the Gulf area. Though being at the opposite sides of production and consumption, both Russia and China have agreed so far to the principle of stability in energy markets, and not of maximisation of short-term gains through prices hikes and downs. In order to balance imports, Asian manufacturing, industrial and financial products poured into the area massively, now framed in the Beijing's "One Belt, One Road (OBOR)" project, while Russia has expanded the supply of energy-production technology. This process has developed into a wide and deep web of economic relations that was duly described as "structural interdependencies" (Davidson 2010). Differently from Central Asia, Russia and China have never really entered in direct competition for the time being. Investment in energy infrastructures might be the only sector where both countries would compete for contracts, but the primacy of bilateral coordination on political issues has so far prevented major frictions (Carlsson et al. 2015, pp. 59, 65).

Since the late 1990s, Moscow and Beijing have converged on some basic principles and patterns of political action in world politics, which then translated into the specifics of the MENA region: the development of multipolar world led by great powers, that preside over an economic globalization built on the integration of state-owned enterprises (SOE) and private companies (Onnis 2011; Hartwell 2019, pp. 93-101; Milosevich 2019, pp. 42-44); the primacy of state institutions as the pillar of domestic and international legitimacy, and therein the prominence of armed forces as their guarantors; the primacy of bilateral negotiations and deals on defence and conflict-resolution as prerequisite for successive multilateral agreements, and opposed to unilateralism; the rejection of any kind of regime-change strategy and, after NATO attacks in Kosovo (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), heavy caution towards humanitarian interventions; the aversion against militant Political Islam,

contrast to the previous shocks of the "long 1970s" (1969–1986), which favoured mostly Western partners (WB 2018).

which might boost dissent within their own territories (PRC 2016; Presidency of the Russian Federation 2016).

Such a convergence was first tested in Central Asia during the 1990s and institutionalized in the Shanghai Cooperation Council. Later on, as long as both Moscow and Beijing deepened their involvement in the region and conceived US and Western policies as increasingly inimical, they began to act along a *de facto* division of labour: on the one hand, Russia is at the forefront of diplomatic and security initiatives, with the deployment of “hard power” and intelligence in Syria, Libya and Iraq since 2011, and diplomatic pragmatism throughout the rest of the region. On the other hand, China has largely supported Russian initiatives in MENA countries and thus contributed to build a minimal consensus upon which to develop political and institutional stability.

Last but not least, another factor for Russian and Chinese convergence in the Middle East and North Africa has been provided by policies of the United States. If Russia was the first to conceive the MENA as a possible battleground for the development of a multipolar world in the late 1990s, against to US-led “liberal order” (Primakov 2009; Vasiliev 2018), China still banked on the US acting as the regional power-broker to develop its investments throughout the 2000s. Transnational jihadi movements provided the chance for both Moscow and Beijing to offer their cooperation to Washington and NATO after 9/11. However, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Western support for “coloured revolutions” in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, led Russia and China to develop a more confrontational postures against the US (RIAC & Fudan 2018). In particular since the Arab Uprisings of 2011, both Moscow and Beijing shared the idea that the United States would not provide anymore political stability to the Middle East and North Africa, like it has been the case during the US “moment” in the 1990s. Quite the contrary, they suggested that social upheavals were ignited by Western liberal doctrines, and regional rivalries have been left escalating into the so called “New Middle East Cold War” in order to prevent the emergence of inimical forces to the US, like Iran or the AKP-led Turkey, as well as to disrupt the expansion of Russian and Chinese in-

vestments overseas (Santini 2017; Milosevich 2019, p. 35). As a response, Moscow and Beijing presented themselves as agents of stability, legitimacy and pragmatism, which actually ran counter the tide of political change during the Uprisings, but was praised by the conservative counter-attacks in 2013 (Hokayem & Wesser 2014; Akl 2019).

MENA elites played at full length in the Russian and Chinese engagement in order to contain those Western policies that might ran against their own interests. However, MENA leaders found difficult to drag Moscow and Beijing into regional rivalries, like the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Saudi-Iranian struggle, because Russia and China resisted against endorsing their local partners' interests as their own (Charap 2014, p. 193). Compared to Western countries, and the US in particular, both Russia and China have shown so far a higher degree of autonomy towards their local partners. Upgrading cooperation with Teheran in Syria went in parallel with Russian and Chinese engagement with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Turkey (Milosevich 2019, p. 44).

3. The Economics of Russia and China in the MENA region

3.1 Russia's Specialization on Strategic Sectors

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia withdrew from MENA markets and resorted to minimal trade relations with long-standing allies, like Syria and Algeria, or neighbours, like Turkey and Iran: for instance, Arab countries in early 1990s amounted to less than 1% of total Russian foreign trade, against the 20-25% during the 1970s and early 1980s (Poti 2018). However, in concomitance with the oil price hikes of 2001, Russia returned the MENA region as a relevant economic actor in four specific fields: energy (oil, coal and LNG), raw materials, weaponry, tourism and food industry (Hartwell 2019). Though exporting grain to the region, Russia is as a net importer of food products, particularly from Turkey and Iran, whereas it is a major exporter of commodities in all three other sectors. Its exports to MENA countries increased from 1.19 billions US\$ in 1992 to 3.31 billions in 2002 and 13.7 billions US\$ in 2015, with constant surpluses in its balance of

trade, from 147 millions US\$ in 1992 to 3 billions in 2002 and 12 billions in 2015. Trade value with the Middle East is six times higher than with North Africa (IMF 2018).

Among the most important trade partners of Russia one might figure out a first ring of countries, including Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the United Arab Emirates, followed by a second ring composed by Syria, Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. As the major trade partner in the region, Turkish imports from Russia in 2015 reached over 20 US\$ billions compared to the 13 US\$ billions for the rest of MENA countries, while Turkish exports to Russia accounted for nearly 4 US\$ billions compared to only 2 US\$ billions for Arab countries, Israel and Iran. Nevertheless, their trade is still a fraction of their overall trade balance: Russian exports to MENA countries (excluding Turkey) amounted to 6% while imports to just 1.4% of overall Russia trade volume (RIAC 2016a, p. 7; RIAC 2017; Simsek et al. 2017; IMF 2018).

Russia-MENA trade relationships remain pretty marginal for most partners involved, as for volume and monetary value. According to economic analysis, one of the main causes lay in the extreme concentration on few commodities and products (energy, arms and food), highly dependent on the instability of international markets and regional politics. (Hartwell 2019). This reflects the limits of Russian economy, however such commodities and products are of utmost strategic importance for both Moscow and MENA elites, which explains the reason why both sides attach such relevance and caution to their bilateral relations. Not surprisingly, Moscow integrated its engagements in the region within the framework of “national interests” in 2014 (Kozhanov 2018).

As a major world producer and exporter of hydrocarbons, Russia has returned the MENA markets with its own technology for exploration, refining and transport facilities. Again, previous relations during the USSR represent the bulk of Russian market position, like in Syria and Algeria, as well as in Libya until Qadhafy’s death. In late 1990s, Moscow was back to Iraq, arguing for the removal of the UN sanctions. A fresh, new start occurred instead with the Arab Gulf Monarchies: here,

Russian export of energy technology was balanced by the GCC investments in the booming Russian real estate sector.

Between 2005 and 2007, a whole range of permanent institutions have been set up in order to facilitate trade with the Arab Gulf states: the Russian-UAE Business Council in 2005, which presides over trade and the Emirates' investments in transport facilities in Russia; the Russian-Kuwaiti Business Council and the Russian-Bahraini Business Council in 2007. In 2008 Russia, Kuwait and Qatar signed a memorandum on the peaceful use of nuclear energy in order to defuse tensions concerning its cooperation with Iran. Between 2008 and 2012, dozens of agreements were signed between Gulf and Russian energy companies in Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman. In November 2011, Moscow inaugurated the GCC-Russian Strategic Dialogue, which would enhance political dialogue on strategic issues like trade, investment, technology and culture. In fact, Gulf investments in Russia increased since 2015 whereas Russian ones slow-downed since the global financial crisis hit the country in 2008 (Hartwell 2019). In line with the pattern of bilateral, state-led relations, the Sovereign Wealth Funds of the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia participated to the Russian Direct Investment Fund, established in 2011, with the aim of gaining political influence in Moscow. By the way, this warranted high returns as well because of the risks connected to Western sanctions against Russia (Nakhle 2018; Hartwell 2019, pp. 99-100).

Relations with Teheran have improved steadily since 1991, with cooperation on nuclear energy being the hallmark of such partnership. However, Moscow has proven cautious on Iranian projects to deliver its natural gas straight to Europe through Iraq, Syria and the Mediterranean, because this might compete with its own supplies to the European Union.³ Similar dynamics apply to relations with Algeria and Qatar, some of the largest producers of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG): these have increased exports to European countries, which in turn work to diversify their imports out of Russia's prominence. Moscow's response has been the proposal to

³ Moscow stood firm in its political and military presence in Syria just at the end-point of the planned Iranian pipeline, exerting several times its leverage on the Iranian partner (author's anonymous interviews in Moscow, 19-27 April 2017).

coordinate policies and investments, stabilize prices and market shares. However, Russian efforts, like the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, have reached mixed results: though they agree on stabilizing prices, Qatar and Iran are reluctant to let Moscow oversee any coordination policy that would hamper their market shares (Cherif 2019, p. 23). Similar difficulties have featured Russian engagement with Gulf oil producers. The price collapse unleashed by Saudi Arabia in spring 2014, hugely reduced Russian revenues, and Moscow's efforts to strike a deal with OPEC failed because of rivalry between Ryad and Teheran. However, as soon as Saudi Arabia faced recession in 2016, they all resorted to minimal cooperation to stabilize oil prices back at profitable levels. Here again, Moscow tried to engage MENA producers on a common framework that would balance competition with the stability of the markets that cooperation might provide; the state would act as a legitimate player in shaping the "market" in accordance to its development goals (Mammadov 2018).

The primacy of politics in Russian foreign economics, however, proved vulnerable to the political changes both in the region and in Moscow: the Arab uprisings in 2011, regional rivalry concerning Syria and the Gulf, and the fall of oil prices in 2014 were all factors that led to a significant decline in trade exchange, and in all cases business relations resumed only once state guarantees were provided in 2017 (IMF 2018). Moreover, following the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the US and UE sanctions against Russia deterred MENA companies to engage with Moscow out of fear of retaliation on their assets in North America and Europe. As a counteroffensive, the Kremlin has tried to foster bilateral trade-deals with major state guarantees, both to support domestic companies and to demonstrate its capacity to withstand Western attempts at isolation (Hartwell 2019).

On the whole, Russia still represents a minor economic partner for the Middle East and North African countries. Mainly focused on energy, military technology and food products, as well as because of their preference for bilateral trade-deals and state-owned companies (SOE), Russia and MENA countries do not contribute much to the diversification of their production and consumption patterns.

However, in an energy-rich and conflict-ridden region, where political elites often base their survival on rent-distribution and the widespread use of armed forces to deter and contain social mobilization, Russia has two major assets to play with.

3.2 China's Investments and Provision of Diversification

The core of Chinese engagement with the MENA region revolves around economic business: in particular energy and logistical infrastructures. The 2004 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the 2010 “strategic dialogue” between Beijing and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) would provide the suitable avenues to stabilize energy flows and increase Beijing’s investments in the region (Brown 2014, p. 2; Ezzat 2016; Scobell 2016, p. 5). Oil is the major factor impacting on trade exchange: since 1993 China has become a net importer of oil, and in 2014 half of its oil imports came from the Middle East and North Africa, while since 2013 Beijing ranks as the largest importer of oil from the Gulf area (Kazemi & Chen 2014, p. 40). When oil prices declined in the 1990s, Beijing scored trade surplus between 1 and 2 US\$ billions with MENA countries whereas, as oil prices increased between 2000 and 2014, China registered trade deficits between 3.4 US\$ billions and 2.6 US\$ trillions respectively. When oil prices halved in 2015, Beijing returned to a stunning surplus of 29.9 US\$ billions which shows the depth of Chinese penetration in MENA markets over the decade (IMF 2018).⁴

Among the main economic partners of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran rank first and second because of the energy trade with Beijing. However, Iran is a major asset because it is an obliged passage for the “New Silk Road” initiative. Saudi Arabia is the main energy and political stakeholder within the GCC, while the United Arab Emirates represents the latter’s logistical hub. Egypt is worth for its large consumption market and the logistical gateway of the Suez Canal towards Europe, which had been included within the maritime side of the OBOR project. Similarly, Turkey is valued for the large and expanding consumption market and location to-

⁴ Since almost all its energy imports originate from the Gulf area, China has always registered large surpluses with North African partners: from the tiny 183 millions US\$ in 1992 to the 14.5 billions in 2015 (IMF 2018).

wards Europe, still along the “New Silk Road”. Iraq and Libya are worth mentioning because they proved Chinese capacities in the energy market: in Iraq, Beijing profited from the presence of both US forces and Iranian proxies in the south in order to secure sub-contracts in the energy sector, which led finally Iraq to be included into the OBOR initiative in 2019. Beijing scored mix results in Libya: despite importing more the 10% of its oil and ranking second among foreign suppliers of infrastructural and industrial goods in 2010, China failed to make a massive entry into the core of Libyan production: Chinese oil companies failed to exploit offshore fields, and in 2009 former ruler Mu’ammar Qadhafy denied them to purchase the assets of Canadian company to the benefit of the state-owned Libyan National Oil Company (Sotloff 2012; Feng 2015, p. 3).

Since 2001, when China entered the World Trade Organisation, its exports and investments helped stabilizing the balance of payments between the Asian country and the region. Beijing invested heavily in the energy sector through the state-owned Sinopec, Petrochina, Chinese Offshore Overseas Oil Corporation. In 2010, Saudi Arabia was the main recipient of Chinese FDI with 9.19 US\$ billions, compared to the 774 millions in the UAE, 715 in Iran, 483 in Iraq, 337 millions in Egypt, 185 in Yemen and 189 millions US\$ in Israel (OECD 2010, p. 4).⁵ Though most of the FDI to the region still originate from the European Union, the Gulf states and the US, up to 2016 China has invested 29.5 US\$ billions in the MENA region, while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), namely a multilateral bank established in 2015 and largely funded and led by Beijing, has pledged 20 US\$ billions in loans, and 106 US\$ millions in financial aid to ten MENA countries, namely Egypt, Bahrein, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel (Dusek & Kairouz 2017).

Beijing supplied capital investments in infrastructural projects connected to energy and logistics: in particular, the renewal of maritime ports in the Gulf and the Mediterranean, and railroads connecting the main productive and consumption

⁵ Chinese investments in Israel concern high-technology programmes connected to military and civilian security.

centres of the region (Neill 2014). China contributed to increase by one-third ports' activities in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Turkey between 2008 and 2014, which would combine with Chinese shares in the ports in Greece and Italy (UnctadStats 2017). In Egypt, China focused on the construction of the Chinese-led Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (SEZ) in 2009, and the high-speed railway connecting the urban centres of Cairo and Alexandria in 2012. The OBOR project, announced in 2013 would consolidate further the penetration of Chinese products and services in the region, whose stability and development are not just instrumental to trade with Europe but worth for themselves (Scobell 2016, pp. 8-11). In fact, Beijing developed an area-fit approach, which would supposedly combine local resources with their strategic location for global trade: by sub-contracting final productive segments to the area, it hopes exploiting cheap but professional local labour as well as preferential access to regional markets and the EU. MENA governments highly welcomed Chinese investments because they think these would create the much-needed job opportunities (Alessandrini 2012, pp. 3-4). As for economics, the China's Arab Policy Paper of January 2016 adopted the "1+2+3" formula: 'to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as the three breakthroughs' (PRC 2016).

Last but not least, both ruling elites and public opinions in MENA countries view China as an effective partner for development. During the last two decades ruling elites grew wary of Western pressure to link economic liberalizations to political reforms, which could disrupt existing state-business networks. In parallel, social movements criticized Western powers for supporting those neoliberal and austerity reforms that impacted heavily on popular and middle classes. On the search for new points of reference, China has been depicted as a different model, conjugating a market-based economy with a strong developmentalist state: by retaining the ultimate control over the "commanding heights" of the economy, such system would benefit popular and middle classes, too (Abdel-Malek 2004; Zambelis & Gentry 2008; Degang & Zoubir 2015; Adly 2018). Such views often neglect the

complexity and hardship of Chinese development, but they actually legitimize Beijing as a sovereign, independent power in world economy as well as those MENA elites struggling to retain command over state power and profit-making sources (Onnis 2011; Samarani 2017).

4. Russia and China in MENA Politics: Supporting Stability for Legitimacy

4.1 Russia's Display of Hard Power and Diplomatic Brokerage

Despite all confrontational rhetoric between the US, the EU and Russia, which is reminiscent of imperial and Cold War rivalries, and still proves useful to mobilize domestic constituencies, today's Russian leadership thinks and acts as a great power within an "unstable" world, whose "legitimate" return at the top of hierarchy is first instrumental to domestic development, and second profitable to other rising powers in terms of diversification and defence of sovereignty. As outlined by Evgeniy Primakov in mid-1990s and later on by Foreign Minister Lavrov in 2016 (Lavrov 2016; Milosevich 2019, pp. 31-33), the strategic location and endowments of the Middle East, and the concomitant political fragmentation, provide a major arena where great powers can assert their role: Russia's initiatives in the region are a function of its international prestige and legitimacy which, coupled with the acknowledgment of its own limits, have translated into the exploitation of all opportunities set by political crisis to assert itself as mediator and provider of institutional stability for contested elites (Akl 2019, p. 59; Talbot & Lovotti 2019, pp. 13-17). In the MENA region, such an approach has translated into the defence of existing political orders against transnational, radical or liberal forces; the conquest of profitable market shares in energy and military sectors; the assertion of Russia as a reliable partner against Western interventions (Dannreuther 2012). This was tested in the direct, massive intervention in Syria since 2015, by supporting with military force the official state, its ruling regime and armed forces against any unconstitutional reversal; by engaging with and balancing regional powers through a minimal, common framework for negotiations, like the Astana process in 2017 (RIAC 2017; Alami 2018). With due differences, it moved along similar lines in Egypt as well as

in Libya since 2011 (Akl 2019, pp. 59-63). Despite liberal and Western criticism, the Kremlin substantially achieved its goal of being treated as a major, international power operating in the region (Cherif 2019, p. 26).

Russian elites and society conceive the region as the “Near Abroad” whose development has direct impacts on their own territories: over a quarter of Tsarist Russia, then the Soviet Union and today’s Russia is composed of Muslim people, largely Sunni; with the formal exception of the USSR, Moscow has claimed for the “protection” of Orthodox Christianity in the region; after 1991, it has forged strong ties with Jewish citizens of Russian origins in Israel, paving the way to dense bilateral partnerships (Kreutz 2007, pp. 52-53; Vasiliev 2018, p. 11). Such transnational networks provided Russia with multiple channels for influence, but processes like Islamic radicalization quickly spilled over to Russia, as witnessed by the Islamic insurgencies in the Caucasus in the 2000s (Hegghammer 2006; Charap 2014, pp. 187-191). In order to offset criticism against military campaigns, Moscow appealed to Muslim citizens by embedding Islamic authorities within the nationalist discourse, where Islamic principles have their own historical and legitimate role to play in the development of Russia (Dannreuther & March 2010). A major breakthrough in Islamic legitimacy came with the admission of Russia to the Organization of the Islamic Conference with an observer status in 2005, which marked the apex of relations with Saudi Arabia.

The scale and depth of Russian engagement in the region developed along territorial proximity to its borders. The relations between Russia and its two direct neighbours, Turkey and Iran, follow the long history of cooperation and confrontation: geographical and social proximity forged wary partnerships between states that all share imperial legacies, top-down modernizations, and revolutionary experiences. After the end of the Cold War, relations improved on the basis of respect for political sovereignty and of mutual interests on market interdependency (Freedman 2000, p. 2, 4; Akturk 2006; Dannreuther 2014; Frappi 2018), according to the Treaty on Principles of Relations and Principles of Cooperation’ signed by Russia and Iran on March 2001. The new pattern of relations endured different, serious crisis. In par-

ticular, the war in Syria (2011–2019) showed how a major conflict prompted cooperation with Iran and confrontation with Turkey, and yet it has neither developed into a full-fledged Russian-Iranian alliance, nor a full-fledged armed conflict between Russia and Turkey. In all cases, bilateral cooperation deepened as long as their relations with the US and the EU worsened: this reminds to how the Kremlin has moved in and gained results with those regimes at odds with Western partners as well as, from a MENA perspective, how Russia has often being held valuable as a counter-force to balance Western powers (RIAC 2017; Akl 2019).

Moving south to the Arab world, Russia's current posture is rooted in the Soviet pragmatic realism which was born out of the disillusionment towards the Arab nationalist regimes since the early 1970s: this meant supporting Non-alignment; diplomatic resolution of conflicts led by international powers and then framed within multilateral fora; securing ties with military leaderships through the export of military technology and training. The withdrawal of the 1990s maintained a minimal presence in those countries with long-standing ties, like Syria, Algeria or, partially, Libya. Since early 2000s, partnership was renewed with Iraq and Egypt, whereas fresh new starts began with the Gulf States. Moscow's regional standing was valued as a viable supplier of advanced military and energy technology, and as a consistent supporter of state legitimacy which, in patrimonial regimes, meant securing the rule of existing elites whatever their political features (Primakov 2009; Vasiliev 2018, p. 363; Akl 2019).

In a relative departure from the Soviet era, when barter or clearing agreements were widely used, today the export of military technology has been conducted on commercial basis and along financial transactions. Especially after Western sanctions and the collapse of oil prices in 2014, the need for hard currency was a major factor for Moscow to increase the export of expensive weaponry abroad, like air-defence systems, aircrafts, tanks and transport vehicles (Borshchevskaya 2017; Hartwell 2019, p. 97). From 1992 to 2015, Algeria ranked first as for purchase of military technology with 8.27 US\$ billions, followed at distance by Iran with 3.4 US\$ billions, the United Arab Emirates with 1.7 billions, Egypt with 1.65 billions,

Syria with 1.5 billions, Iraq with 1.13 billions and Yemen with 1.18 US\$ billions (SIPRI 2017b). However, no deal was struck without a kind of political agreement, as proven by the synchronization between diplomacy and business. For example, all major deals were accompanied by debt-relief negotiations accumulated by MENA with the USSR, as it was the case for the 13.4 US\$ billions debt of Syria in 2005, 4.7 US\$ billions debt of Algeria in 2006, 12.9 US\$ billions debt of Iraq between 2004 and 2008, and eventually 4.5 US\$ billions of Libya in 2008 (Cherif 2019, pp. 21-23). Russian exports to Iran increased after signing the cooperation treaty in 2001, and later on, after the Israeli war against Hizballah in Lebanon in 2006; export to Baghdad increased following the US-led invasion of Iraq, where Iraqi military still opted for some Russian equipment. Since 2008, then, new deals were struck with MENA governments out of fear for the US “Pivot to Asia” or, after 2011, frustration against Western responses to the Arab Uprisings and the war in Syria (Dodge & Hokayem 2014). In this sense, military export represents the nexus between the economics and the international relations of Russia (Borshchevskaya 2017; Connolly & Sendstad, 2017; Hartwell 2019, p. 94).

If continuities between late USSR and current Russia’s posture in the Middle East are easy to detect, there are also major differences. For example, once the Cold War was over, the massive flow of Russian Jews to Israel allowed Russia to re-establish relations with Israel, whose rupture was a major obstacle for the Soviet Middle East policy. Either out of conviction or effective capacities Russia has abstained so far from promoting any universal patterns for development, which let Moscow overcome previous suspicion by conservative elites against the official socialist internationalism of the USSR (Dannreuther 2012, p. 557; Teti 2015; Lovotti & Tafuro Ambrosetti 2019). In an effort to complement its “hard power” in the region, Moscow has also appealed to a broader, conservative public by conveying an image of muscular masculinity, benevolent patriarchy and strong connection between national and religious identities: this would distance Russia from the “moral decay of the West” caused by liberalism, and set Moscow in tune with nationalist, conservative forces in the region, both secular and religious-oriented (Zvjagel’skaja

2016, p. 75). However, once engaged directly in Syria, Libya and Iraq after the Arab Uprisings of 2011, Moscow began to clarify its preference for certain institutional settings: namely, a strong central government that would concentrate the decision-making process into one single, legitimate authority; such leadership, either a presidential republic or monarchy, would preside over fragmented societies through the provision of state services and patronage, and would represent the unique, legitimate interlocutor for foreign partners. In the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, such institutional preference was valued also for containing “open institutional democracy, collective action and civil society” (Akl 2019, p. 58). That means opposing Islamist as well as pro-Western, liberal forces, which is a major common ground between the Kremlin and ruling elites in MENA. Such a preference would not depart much from those held by the Soviet Union since the late 1970s (Kreutz 2007, p. 149; Kalinovsky & Radchenko 2011). However, given the complexity of social fabrics in the area as well as the disruption of state institutions by fiscal crisis and armed conflicts, Moscow has also been arguing for robust local autonomy: by preventing secession or exhausting guerrillas, decentralization would give a stake to those sub-state forces that retain effective control over territories and would co-opt them into the new state-building process (Harb & Atallah 2015, pp. 229-234; Sputnik International 2016). The recognition of sub-national forces as legitimate actors represents quite of a novelty for Russian policy in the region and if the primacy of the central state and territorial integrity are fundamental principles for the Kremlin, the domestic articulation of the state can be negotiated case by case.⁶

4.2 China's Diplomacy through Investments

Despite being a major economic actor in the Middle East and North Africa, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is still a minor in its capacity to intervene in the international politics of the region. While forging partnerships with all MENA countries, Beijing still continues to rely on external forces to guarantee its investments: once the US, more recently Russia.

⁶ Interviews with Russian academics and analysts, Moscow, April 2017, February 2019.

Chinese engagement in the region starts with the domestic priorities set by the Chinese Communist Party: namely, economic development and political stability. The respect of sovereignty, non-alignment and developmentalism, namely the basics of postcolonial politics, are the pillars of Chinese relations with the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, far from the militant revolutionary zeal of early, Chinese communists, its growing presence is now framed within the restoration of ancient, profitable interconnections among Chinese, Persian, Islamic and Arab “civilizations” (Shichor 1979; PRC 2016).

Since the 1980s, Chinese politics and diplomacy were to develop trade relations and secure energy flows from the Gulf area; non-interference in domestic politics, neutrality on regional disputes, and support for the political status quo were the guiding principles of Chinese engagement. In exchange, Beijing required support for the “One China Policy”, that is the non-recognition of Taiwan’s sovereignty (Brown 2014, p. 5-6). Since the 1990s, a new factor connected China to the region: the fight against political Islamic movements, whose transnational connections, according to Beijing, would spark unrest among restive communities in Western China, and hamper the inland trade routes connecting Chinese coasts to Central and Western Asia. Such concern prompted Beijing to converge first with the US on the War on Terror in 2001, then in 2006 with Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization policy against ‘terrorism, separatism, extremism’, and last in 2014 with both the US and Russia against the Organisation of the Islamic State. The massive hard security measures enforced by Beijing against Muslim Uighur communities since 2018 has attracted considerable concern and criticism among MENA countries, and yet without major consequences.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, China accepted and worked within the security framework brokered by the US in the Middle East, which guaranteed Chinese economic presence without bearing the costs of political or military engagement. Within the uncertainty unleashed by US partial disengagement under the Obama administration, the Arab Uprisings and the struggle for leadership among Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Beijing tried to stay neutral as long as possible, and

backed Moscow's efforts to broker region-based, negotiated solutions (Feng 2015, pp. 6-8). The new assertive leadership of President Xi Jinping began advocating for political engagement in the Middle East and North Africa. In December 2015, Beijing established the Middle East Foundation for Peace and Development (MEFPD); in January 2016 it released the "China's Arab policy Paper", which provides the official framework for Chinese partnership under the keywords of "peace" and "development"; in May 2006, Beijing and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum founded the Middle East Peace Forum (PRC 2016). Yet, the MENA region lays in the "third circle" of Chinese foreign policy, where Beijing abstains from binding treaty alliances, opts for bilateral agreements in economics whereas multi-lateral fora are used to debate economic development issues (Onnis 2011).

As for arms trade, China is a minor partner for Middle East and North Africa embattled countries. The total amount of Chinese exports to MENA countries from 1950 to 2015 amounts to only 13 billions US\$, which is just a percentage of the 121 billions US\$ of Russian exports (SIPRI 2017a). Since the 1990s, Iran and Algeria have become steady importers of Chinese military technology. Conversely, China imported military technology, in particular for unmanned-vehicles, from Israel between 1990 and 2001, for a total amount of 350 millions US\$ (Zambelis & Gentry 2008, pp. 68-69; SIPRI 2017b). While this angered Washington, Arab states and Iran downplayed the dossier as long as Beijing continued to support Arab stances on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Pang 1997, pp. 35-40).⁷

5. Conclusions

The convergence on general principles between Moscow and Beijing, like the promotion of a hierarchical multipolar world, has being in the making since early 2000s. However, the growing distrust against the United States, whose policies have been conceived both as damaging and aggressive in their neighbourhood of Europe and East Asia, has urged Moscow and Beijing to develop a working part-

⁷ The visit by Taiwanese President to Arab countries in 1994 was a largely symbolic, occasional retaliation for Sino-Israeli military partnership.

nership in the area of the Middle East and North Africa, where major world powers have been trying to assert their leadership by way of direct interventions since the late XIX century. As a matter of fact, Moscow and Beijing have converged on some basic principles, such as the primacy of the state institutions as the pillar of political legitimacy and markets, and the containment of political Islamic movements. What they think have been US attempts to disrupt such principles in the MENA region since the 2000s has led Russia and China to upgrade their political convergence into a viable coordination of their strategies: Russia being at the forefront of diplomatic and military interventions on defence of embattled ruling elites, while China promoting state-led, bilateral deals with the same partners.

Differences in the patterns of economic engagement of Russia and China in the region are enormous and stem from their own processes of development. Russia has been specializing in the Middle East and North Africa on the two sectors that drive its international relations since the 2000s, if not actually the 1970s, that is, technology and capabilities for the development of energy and military sectors. The relevance of Russia for the region lays on the fact that such specialization concerns the very core sectors of MENA economics and politics. China has focused in the energy sector but, in order to balance large imports from the MENA region, it has been investing massively on the supply of industrial and infrastructural facilities, too: Beijing has delivered MENA states with transport and port facilities, like railroad and railways networks as well as container ship terminals, to such an extent and speed that any other foreign investors, namely members of the European Union, the US or Russia, ever did so far. Moreover, Beijing is now becoming the first provider of Information Technology in the region, effectively challenging European and US presence in such strategic as well as mass consumption markets. Hence, the extension and diversification of China's economic engagement in the Middle East and North Africa has moved well beyond Russia. Recently, concerns have raised in Moscow about Chinese supplies of advanced military equipment, like drones and surveillance systems, to Egypt and Iraq. Together with Chinese investments in the energy sector, such presence does effectively challenge Russia's core business.

However, any of these issues have led so far to public, official confrontation between the two states. At worst, they have been downplayed by public officials and analysts to matters of normal, business competition.

Last but not least is the impact of Russia and China in the international relations of the MENA region. If their public support for “stability” after the Arab Uprisings in 2011 has meant opting for a conservative status quo, it also contributes to the revision of the international relations of the Middle East and North Africa: that is, the provision of new, additional partnerships beyond the two century-old prominence of Western powers. Though the Russian and the Chinese engagements are yet to provide any major change in international alliances or economic and political development, their stress on the state as the ultimate institution presiding over politics and markets has already had a double impact. First, to dispute the Western-led narratives about the superiority of “free markets” and liberal-democratic orders to provide safety, freedom and justice for all. Second, to re-ignite foreign competition in the Middle East and North Africa along patterns that are reminiscent of the mercantilist and imperial, great power politics of XIX century, whose plurality and fluidity in ideational references was not yet constrained in the more rigid ideologies and geopolitics of the Cold War, or the US “moment” in the 1990s.

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