

## “Silk Road” to the Levant

by **Mordechai Chaziza and Efraim Karsh**

The 2013 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s 21st-century grand revival of the ancient Silk Road connecting the Far East and Europe, has transformed the Middle East’s geopolitical role in Beijing’s outlook from exclusively an energy supplier into a vital link in the vast transportation and trade network it is vying to construct. As a result, China has evolved from simply an oil and gas consumer into a major economic (and to a lesser extent political) player in the Middle East. China is now the Middle East’s largest foreign investor, with its \$155 billion worth of investment in 2013-20 accounting for over 40 percent of the total direct foreign investment in the region during this period.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main beneficiaries of this development has been the Levant, which had previously occupied a marginal place in Beijing’s energy-oriented regional involvement. Investment in Israel, to give a prominent example, has nearly doubled from \$6 billion in 2005-13 to \$10 billion in 2013-19.<sup>2</sup> But Syria, Lebanon, and



*Imad Sabouni (left) of the Syrian Planning and International Cooperation Committee signs an agreement with Chinese ambassador Feng Biao, Damascus, March 4, 2020. China is now the Middle East’s largest foreign investor.*

<sup>1</sup> [China Global Investment Tracker](#), American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C.; “[Foreign direct investment](#), net inflows (BoP, current US\$) - Middle East & North Africa, 1970-2019,” [The World Bank](#), Washington, D.C.

<sup>2</sup> [China Global Investment Tracker](#).

Turkey, which lack Israel's economic and technological prowess, have also benefitted from the BRI as their location at a critical segment of the new Eurasian overland and maritime routes enabled them to integrate into China's global economic surge, not unlike their role in the historic Silk Road.

### **The Levant's Renewed Importance**

Unlike its vibrant role in the historic overland Silk Road between the Far East and Europe, the Levant took a backseat in China's post-World War II Middle Eastern relations. This was partly due to Beijing's relatively low level of economic involvement, which focused on satisfying its energy needs, and because of the close association of this region with the two rival great-power blocs: Syria was a Soviet protégé from the mid-1950s to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 while Lebanon (as well as Jordan and Israel) was deeply embedded in the Western fold.

It was only with the intensification of China's political and economic activity in the region in the early 2000s, and all the more so since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, that the Levant has regained much of its historic importance within Beijing's ambitious vision of reestablishing the inter-continental connection between China and Europe through the BRI's two main components:

- The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which replicates the ancient overland Silk Road by crisscrossing Central Asia, the Levant, and Turkey all the way to Europe with an intricate web of railways, highways, air and sea ports, power grids, oil and liquefied natural gas pipelines, and telecommunication networks.

- The "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (MSR), which reproduces the historic maritime Silk Road that traversed the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean en route to the Mediterranean and Europe, with the key difference that it reaches its final destination via the Gulf of Aden and the Suez Canal rather than by surrounding the African continent.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the incorporation of Turkey and the Levant into the SREB gives the BRI an outlet to the Mediterranean that bypasses the Suez Canal as an international trade route with southern Europe and North Africa. This explains Beijing's \$3 billion investment in Israel's primary port of Haifa<sup>4</sup> and its attempt to incorporate Syria's two foremost ports of Latakia and Tartus into the MSR.

This, however, was easier said than done. For one thing, Latakia and Tartus are not deep enough to accommodate China's giant container ships. For another, as part of its reward for saving the Bashar Assad regime, Moscow consolidated its long-standing maritime presence in Syria. It won a 49-year lease for the Tartus naval base, the main hub of the Russian Mediterranean fleet

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3 Xinhua News Agency (Beijing), "Full text: Vision for [Maritime Cooperation](#) under the Belt and Road Initiative," [June 20, 2017](#); Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint, "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative," *Geopolitics*, Apr. 2017, pp. 223-45; Editorial Board, "[Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\): Reshaping the Political Scenario of the Eastern Mediterranean?](#)" *Mediterranean Affairs*, Nov. 7, 2018; Selçuk Colakoğlu, "[China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor: A Question of Compatibility](#)," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., [Jan. 29, 2019](#).

4 *Globes* (Tel Aviv), [Oct. 26, 2020](#).

since Egypt's desertion to the U.S.-fold in the mid-1970s, and built an air base near Latakia. For its part, Tehran, which played a similarly crucial role in ensuring Assad's survival, set its sights on Latakia as an outlet to the land corridor from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean it had been striving to establish.<sup>5</sup>

In these circumstances, while indicating its recognition of these ports' importance for the Maritime Silk Road (e.g., by helping to expand Latakia's capacity to handle large vessels and expressing interest in developing Tartus),<sup>6</sup> Beijing cast its sights on the Lebanese port of Tripoli, some twenty miles south of the Syrian-Lebanese border with a view to using the newly-established Tripoli Special Economic Zone as a central transshipment hub for the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Within this framework, China Harbor Engineering Company expanded the port to accommodate the largest freighters, and in November 2017, the Union of Tripoli Municipalities signed an agreement with China's Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce, effectively incorporating the port into the BRI. Beijing also helped to expand the Mouawad airport (formerly known



*A French container ship unloads cargo at Lebanon's Tripoli port. In November 2017, the Union of Tripoli Municipalities signed an agreement effectively incorporating the port into the BRI.*

as Quleiat), some fifteen miles north of Tripoli, and to complete its transformation from a predominantly military base into a thriving civilian airport.<sup>8</sup> According to the chairman of the Economic Bodies of Lebanese-Chinese relations,

We will not spare any effort in boosting Tripoli's standing and its openness on Chinese markets, and such an alliance will prepare it to become a special hub for co-operation with China within the Belt and Road initiative.<sup>9</sup>

In October 2018, the first giant vessel of the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) docked in Tripoli and unloaded 1,000 of its 10,000 containers before proceeding to other

5 Seth Frantzman, "Iranian IRGC in Syria's Latakia? Report," *The Jerusalem Post*, [May 21, 2019](#).

6 *Asia Times* (Hong Kong), [Oct. 3, 2018](#); CNBC, [Apr. 4, 2019](#).

7 "Tripoli Special Economic Zone," TSEZ Authority, Leb.; *The Diplomat* (Washington, D.C.), [Mar. 11, 2019](#).

8 *Global Times* (Beijing), [Mar. 3, 2019](#).

9 *China Daily* (Beijing), [Nov. 27, 2017](#).

Mediterranean destinations.<sup>10</sup> Beijing's growing interest in Lebanon was also illustrated by its acceptance in June 2018 as a member in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB, established two years earlier as a foremost funding arm for the BRI and other projects, alongside the Gulf monarchies, Iran, Turkey, and Israel.<sup>11</sup>

Tripoli's proximity to Syria also makes it a potential economic and logistic hub for Beijing's involvement in the reconstruction of postwar Syria, as evidenced, among other things, by Chinese plans to revive the Beirut-Tripoli railway as part of a wider network that would incorporate the Lebanese and Syrian railway systems into the BRI. In the words of the president of the China Arab Association for Promoting Cultural and Commercial Change:

We are ready to support Lebanon with our technical knowledge. But we are more interested in connecting Beirut to Tripoli, Tripoli to Aleppo, Aleppo to Damascus, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

### Syria's Postwar Reconstruction

If the Levant's geographic location constitutes the permanent aspect of the region's

**Tripoli's proximity to Syria makes it a potential hub for Beijing's involvement in Syrian postwar reconstruction.**

importance for the BRI, the Syrian civil war provided a powerful opportunistic boost. To be sure, wars and their attendant mayhem and dislocation are, on the face of it, the antithesis to

economic development and prosperity: Indeed, in the six years preceding the outbreak of the civil war (2005-11), Chinese investments in Syria amounted to \$4 billion; in the decade since its outbreak, they dropped to practically nil.<sup>13</sup> Yet, as the war progressed, and the staggering scope of devastation emerged, it became increasingly clear that the postwar reconstruction would require a massive international effort worth hundreds of billions of dollars, and Beijing was determined to have its share in this lucrative pie.

Keenly aware of its highly limited ability to influence the military course of the war, China allowed Russia to take the leading role in securing the survival of the Assad regime while contenting itself with extending political support to Damascus, mainly at the U.N. Security Council where it helped block anti-Syrian measures (e.g., sanctions, International Criminal Court referral). It also sought to mediate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, both individually—being the only great power that maintained good relations with the warring parties and their regional allies—and by participating in the various multilateral efforts to end the war, notably the Geneva I (2012) and Geneva II (2014) peace conferences and the Vienna peace talks (2015). Beijing's only military support for the Assad regime was limited to the sale of reconnaissance drones and the deployment of a special operations force in late 2017 to fight the reported five

10 Xinhua, [Oct. 9, 2018](#); *China Daily*, [Nov. 27, 2017](#); *al-Manar* (Beirut), [Jan. 4, 2019](#).

11 "[AIIB Approves Lebanon Membership](#)," Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Beijing, [June 26, 2018](#).

12 Christina Lin, "The Belt and Road and China's Long-term Visions in the Middle East," Strategy Series, ISPSW, Berlin, Oct. 2017, pp. 8-9; *The Daily Star* (Beirut), [May 24, 2019](#).

13 [China Global Investment Tracker](#).



thousand ethnic Chinese Uyghurs who were fighting in Syria.<sup>14</sup>

As the Syrian regime seemed to be gaining the upper hand, Beijing indicated its interest in postwar reconstruction, however remotely this loomed. As early as 2015, Huawei, the Chinese multinational technology company, undertook rebuilding Syria's telecommunications system by 2020. The following year, the China National Petroleum Corporation acquired major stakes in two of Syria's largest oil companies: the Syrian Petroleum Company and al-Furat Petroleum with estimated assets of 21 billion barrels. Yet, the Chinese corporation was unable to proceed with the projected work as the oilfields where drilling was to take place were largely under the control of the Kurds who would not heed Beijing's compromise offers regarding their use.<sup>15</sup>

In January 2017, Chinese president Xi Jinping pledged \$30 million in aid to Syrian refugees and displaced persons, and six



*The China-Arab Exchange Association, in cooperation with the Syrian Embassy, hosted a trade fair in Beijing, July 2017. Some 1,000 representatives of Chinese companies specializing in investment and reconstruction participated.*

months later, Beijing hosted the First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects where it unveiled plans to invest \$2 billion for the establishment of industrial parks across Syria. Shortly afterward, China delivered eight hundred power generators to the port of Latakia and reiterated its commitment to rebuild Syria's telecommunications system by 2020.<sup>16</sup> This led to an influx of business delegations to Syria to sign contracts and open representative offices and culminated, in September 2018, in the participation of over two hundred Chinese companies in the 60th annual Damascus International Trade Fair—held for the first time in five years due to the civil war—with reported deals on construction of steel and power plants, hospital development, and the manufacturing

14 John Calabrese, "[China and Syria: In War and Reconstruction](#)," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., [July 9, 2019](#); Jacques Neriah "[Chinese Troops Arrive in Syria](#) to Fight Uyghur Rebels," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, [Dec. 20, 2017](#); Mohamad Zreik, "[China's Involvement in the Syria Crisis](#) and the Implications of its Neutral Stance in the War," *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, Dec. 2019, pp. 56-65.

15 *The Diplomat*, [Mar. 11, 2019](#); *Asia Times*, [June 19, 2019](#).

16 *Asia Times*, [June 19, 2019](#).

of Chinese-brand cars in Syria.<sup>17</sup>

For its part, the Syrian regime increasingly viewed Beijing as a foremost cornerstone of the postwar reconstruction as its Russian and Iranian saviors plunged into dire economic straits. As early as June 2017, President Assad proclaimed that “China can be in every sector [of the Syrian economy] with no exception,” and in June 2019, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem arrived in Beijing in an attempt to entice his hosts into greater involvement in the Syrian market. Specifically, he sought to persuade the Chinese leaders to make good on their pledged investments in Syria, as well as to assign the lion’s share of the \$23 billion aid package promised to the Arab world the previous year to Syrian reconstruction. He was particularly keen to jumpstart a 2017 agreement for the creation of a Special Economic Zone in Latakia for Chinese companies, similar to that in Tripoli. Yet despite the warm welcome offered to Muallem—his arrival was accompanied by a gift of two hundred public transportation buses to Syria—the Chinese were reluctant to make concrete promises so long as fighting continued, especially in the Idlib province near Latakia.<sup>18</sup> This, nevertheless, did not dissuade Damascus from continuing to indulge Beijing. Assad told a Chinese television network in December 2019,

**Chinese-Turkish relations gained considerable momentum with the rise to power of the AKP.**

Now, with the liberation of most areas, we have started discussions with a number of Chinese companies experienced in reconstruction ... We have proposed around six projects to the Chinese government in line with the Belt and Road methodology, and we are waiting to hear which project, or projects, is in line with their thinking.<sup>19</sup>

In Assad’s account, the Chinese were open to evading the U.S. sanctions, which had previously acted as a major impediment to Beijing’s greater engagement in Syria, since “it is well known that rebuilding countries destroyed partially or totally by war is very profitable and has high returns on investment.”<sup>20</sup>

### China-Turkey Relations

Chinese-Turkish relations, which progressed sluggishly in the 1980s and 1990s, gained considerable momentum with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) in 2002. This was partly due to the economic boom attending the AKP’s first decade, which made Turkey the 17th largest world economy and dovetailed with the expanding Chinese economy to open new horizons for the two countries. But to a greater extent, it was due to the AKP’s ambitious foreign policy that vowed to make Turkey one of the world’s ten leading powers by 2023. This trend gathered speed during the AKP’s second term (2007-11) when disillusionment with the prospect of Turkey’s

17 The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, [Feb. 6, 2017](#); *China Daily*, [Feb. 10, 2018](#); *The Diplomat*, [Mar. 11, 2019](#); Logan Pauley, “China stakes out a role for itself in postwar Syria,” *Asia Times*, [Oct. 3, 2018](#).

18 Sam Brennan, “China’s Middle Eastern intervention: Sino-Syrian cooperation,” *Foreign Brief*, [June 2, 2017](#); *Asia Times*, [June 19, 2019](#).

19 *The Syrian Observer* (Istanbul), [Dec. 17, 2019](#).

20 *Ibid*; *Middle East Eye* (London), [Dec. 16, 2019](#).

accession to the European Union drove the party to reposition its policy eastward. It reached its peak in the 2010s when AKP strongman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who transformed himself into the country's indisputable dictator, first as prime minister, then as president, embarked on an imperialist policy that sought to project Ankara as the dominant power in the Middle East and Central Asia and which put it in direct confrontation with the West and its regional allies.<sup>21</sup>

These economic and political developments meshed well with Beijing's growing global prowess, especially after the BRI's launch and China's attempt to incorporate the Middle East into this framework. Accordingly, annual Chinese-Turkish trade, which crossed the \$1 billion threshold in 2000, had grown tenfold by 2009, and the following year, Beijing and Ankara launched a "strategic cooperative relationship" that sought to increase bilateral annual trade to \$50 billion by 2015 and to attract Chinese investment in infrastructure and transportation projects.<sup>22</sup> And while this plan failed to meet its ambitious target (in 2014 the volume of Chinese-Turkish trade shot "only" threefold to \$28 billion), it nevertheless made Turkey China's fourth largest Middle



*In 2013, Turkey chose the Chinese HQ-9 air defense missile system (above) over the European or U.S. systems. It was the first time a NATO member awarded a substantial defense contract to a Chinese company under U.S. sanctions although the deal was later scrapped.*

Eastern trading partner and turned Beijing into Ankara's third largest trading partner after Germany and Russia with Chinese investments in 2010-20 totaling some \$11 billion.<sup>23</sup> The two countries also intensified their financial relationships with Turkish banks opening branches in China and vice versa. In 2015, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China even bought a Turkish bank to become a Turkey-registered operational bank, and some Turkish state

21 Svante E. Cornell, "[What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy? Changes in Turkey](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2012, p. 13.

22 *China Daily*, [Oct. 8, 2010](#) (17:53), [Oct. 8, 2010](#) (20:29).

23 Barış Doster, "[The Developing Relations between Turkey and China since 2005](#)," *Sociology of Islam*, May 2016, p. 7; "[China Customs Statistics: Imports and Exports by Country/Region](#)," The Hong Kong Trade Development Council, Dec. 28, 2020; [China Global Investment Tracker](#); Gordon Houlden and Nouredin M. Zaamout, "[China's Middle East Balancing Approach](#)," China Institute and University of Alberta, Jan. 2019; *Deutsche Welle* (Bonn), [July 2, 2019](#).



banks received over half-a-billion USD Chinese loans.<sup>24</sup>

No less important, to the exasperation of its NATO partners, in 2013 Turkey chose the Chinese HQ-9 air defense missile system over the European SAMP/T and the U.S. Patriot missiles for its long range air and missile defense system (T-LORAMIDS)—the first time a NATO member awarded a substantial defense contract to a Chinese company, and one that was under U.S. sanctions.<sup>25</sup> And though Ankara's scrapping of the deal under U.S. and NATO pressure two years later—eventually deciding to buy the Russian S-400 system in its stead—was badly received in Beijing, bilateral relations continued apace despite recurring political disagreements.

For one thing, Turkey's growing alienation from the West and its rapid economic decline enhanced Beijing's importance for the realization of Erdoğan's delusions of neo-Ottoman grandeur both as an immediate source for easing Turkey's short-term economic woes and as a springboard for the country's long-term development through massive investment in upgrading its physical, economic, and technological infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> For another, Turkey's

**Turkey's growing alienation from the West and its economic decline enhanced Beijing's importance for Erdoğan's delusions of grandeur.**

unique geostrategic position as a gateway between Asia and Europe made it “one of the leading countries in Silk Road's geography,” to use Erdoğan's words.<sup>27</sup> Ankara thus became one of

the fifty-seven founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in January 2016 with a 2.66 percent share and a 2.52 percent voting share.<sup>28</sup> Turkey also was incorporated into the Silk Road Economic Belt shortly after its launch: Beijing then engaged both in numerous infrastructure and transportation projects in Turkey (e.g., the Ankara-Istanbul 530-km-long high-speed railway funded by a \$750 million Chinese loan and built by a Chinese company) and in Ankara's own version of the Silk Road, namely the Trans-Caspian East-West-Middle Corridor Initiative or “Middle Corridor” (MC).

Launched in 2013 with a view to creating an extensive railway network across the Caucasus and Central Asia from Turkey to China, the MC was presented as a major economic boost for all involved states.<sup>29</sup> Yet, it was above all an attempt to project Ankara's clout across this vast region in line with Erdoğan's expansionist vision. And since he was keenly aware that this hugely ambitious venture was well beyond Turkey's reach, Erdoğan strove to get the maximum Chinese engagement through the MC's

24 Mehmet Söylemez, “[Turkey and China: An Account of a Bilateral Relations Evolution](#),” *News Note*, China Observatory (Paris), Asia Center (Paris), Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy (Paris), Dec. 2017, p. 6.

25 Burak Bekdil, “[Turkey's Foreign Policy Blunders Deprive It of Critical Arms Systems](#),” BESA Center, Perspectives Paper, no. 1,512, Mar. 31, 2020; Ozan Serdaroglu, “[Turkey and China: An Emerging Partnership?](#)” Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, [Oct. 9, 2014](#).

26 Tao Zan, “‘Turkey Dream’ and the China-Turkish Cooperation under ‘One Belt and One Road’ Initiative,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (Shanghai), no. 3, 2018, pp. 50-72.

27 Altay Atli, “[Making Sense of Turkey's Rapprochement with China](#),” The German Marshall Fund of the United States, Washington, D.C., no. 7, 2018, p. 1; *Washington Examiner*, [June 13, 2018](#).

28 “[Members and Prospective Members of the Bank](#),” Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Beijing, Jan. 13, 2021.

29 “[Turkey's Multilateral Transportation Policy](#),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey.



incorporation into the BRI. As he told a Beijing meeting of the “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” in May 2017,

China’s Silk Road economic corridor initiative integrates with the “Middle Corridor” project, which aims to connect our country to Europe through Anatolia to Central Asia and then to China ... Thanks to various projects carried out in our country and in our region, we are trying to make real the Common Corridor, and we hope that this project is going to be one of the main and complementary elements of the OBOR initiative [i.e., BRI]. I believe that this initiative is a win-win project that will serve peace and stability.<sup>30</sup>

In July 2015, Erdoğan visited Beijing and conferred with President Xi Jinping, and four months later, the two leaders met in the Turkish southwestern coastal city of Antalya, where the G20 summit was being held, and witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding on the “Harmonization of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with the Middle Corridor Initiative.” This was followed by yet another memorandum of understanding on the MC’s incorporation into the BRI, signed in September 2016 in the presence of the two presidents ahead of a G20 summit in



*Turkish officials inspect construction on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway linking Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Beijing invested substantially in the BTK route, which will be a major boon for China’s envisaged railroad from Beijing to London.*

the Chinese city of Hangzhou.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, Beijing invested in some of the MC’s key projects with a view to enabling the annual transportation of 300,000 containers between China and Europe through this route by 2020. Most notable among these was the 840-km-long Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad (BTK) linking Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, completed in October 2017. The BTK is probably the MC’s principal component, which shortened the Asia-Europe transportation route by some 7,000 kilometers, a major boon for the BRI’s envisaged railway line from Beijing to London. Other major projects that attracted substantial Chinese investment were the Marmaray undersea railway line connecting Istanbul’s European and Asian sides and the \$30 billion Edirna-Kars high-speed railway connecting the BTK to Europe. This project, however, has been repeatedly delayed by

30 Nurettin Akçay, “[Turkey-China Relations within the Concept of the New Silk Road Project](#),” Ankara Center for Crisis and Policy Research, Dec. 2017, p. 91.

31 *People’s Daily Online* (Beijing), [Nov. 15, 2015](#); Söylemez, “[Turkey and China](#),” pp. 6-7.

Beijing's insistence on its execution by Chinese companies.<sup>32</sup>

As a country with a long littoral along three seas—the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Aegean—it was only natural for Turkey to seek integration in the Maritime Silk Road. Ankara was particularly keen to prevent Black Sea shipping (e.g., via Georgia's Anaklia port and Romania's Constanta) from bypassing the MC and to provide a counterweight to the Maritime Silk Road's reliance on the Greek port of Piraeus. That port was expanded with Chinese money into the primary container port in the eastern Mediterranean with the China Ocean Shipping Company buying a controlling share in its facilities.<sup>33</sup>

Mirroring this investment, in 2015, a COSCO-led Chinese consortium paid \$920 million for a 65 percent stake in the Istanbul port of Kumport, Turkey's third largest container terminal and first in import container handling. The goal was to use Kumport as both a gateway to the Turkish market and as a new container shipping hub connecting Mediterranean ports with their northern European counterparts.<sup>34</sup>

**To shore up its economy and develop its infrastructure, Ankara ditched the Uighur Muslims.**

By 2016, Turkey's port capacity had more than doubled from 3.9 million to 8.8 million ton/year, and its value to the MSR was to grow significantly with the pro-

jected upgrading of three major ports (at the aggregate cost of \$6 billion): Mersin on the eastern Mediterranean coast, Turkey's closest port to the Middle East with its handy access to the Suez Canal, the North African markets, and the BRI's land routes, which was to have a 11 million ton/year capacity; the Aegean port of Çandarlı, north of Izmir, which is well positioned to serve as a vital transportation link between the MC and Europe and which is projected to have a 12 million ton/year capacity; and the Black Sea port of Filyos, with a projected 700,000 ton/year capacity.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

It is a historical irony that the revival of Chinese imperialism dovetailed with the surge of Turkish and Russian imperial ambitions to advance the BRI. By way of projecting its clout across Central Asia and the Caucasus, shoring its ailing economy, and developing its infrastructure and transportation system, Ankara effectively ditched the Uighur Muslims, apart from recurrent, perfunctory criticism of China's oppression of the community.<sup>36</sup> For its part, Beijing ignored Ankara's support for the anti-Assad rebellion and its tussles with other BRI-involved states (notably Israel and Greece) while focusing on incorporating the

32 Colakoğlu, "[China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor](#)"; Sila Kulaksız, "[Financial Integration via Belt and Road Initiative: China-Turkey Cooperation](#)," *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies*, nos. 1-2, 2019, p. 58; Sait Akman, "[Turkey's Middle Corridor](#) and Belt and Road Initiative: Coherent or Conflicting?" Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, Ankara, [Dec. 2019](#).

33 Colakoğlu, "[China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor](#)"; Altay Atli, "[Turkey seeking its place](#) in the Maritime Silk Road," *Asia Times*, [Feb. 26, 2017](#).

34 Atli, "[Making Sense of Turkey's Rapprochement with China](#)," p. 2; *The Loadstar*, Sept. 21, 2015; *American Shipper*, [Sept. 17, 2015](#).

35 Colakoğlu, "[China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor](#)"; Atli, "[Turkey seeking its place](#)."

36 Söylemez, "[Turkey and China](#)," pp. 4-5.

Turkish railway and port system into the BRI.

At the same time, China benefitted from Moscow's military intervention in Syria. To be sure, the deepening Russian entrenchment in Syria has complicated the incorporation of Latakia and Tartus into the BRI, but, by saving the Assad regime and hastening the war's end, the intervention served the Chinese interest in two important respects: On the one hand, the return of stability will allow the resumption of the Levant's incorporation into the BRI, a process that was largely put on hold for the duration of the war. On the other, China is likely to play the leading role in Syria's postwar reconstruction as the Assad regime's two saviors, Russia and Iran, are no match to Beijing's economic prowess, let alone in view of their current economic predicaments.

Indeed, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, and tensions with Washington and to a lesser extent the Europeans were spiraling to new heights, Beijing sought to exploit the calamity it had sparked for political and economic gains while its global competitors were still reeling from the pandemic's economic woes. This ranged from extending COVID-19 aid and medical supplies to fifteen European states (notably to Italy at a time when it was cold shouldered by the EU at its darkest moment); to offering some 400 million Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine doses to countries in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia; to providing pandemic-related aid to Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, including medications and medical equipment, money, masks, and

protective gear; and carrying out clinical trials in Turkey for the third phase of the experimental COVID-19 vaccine developed by a Beijing-based company.<sup>37</sup>

Most empires and imperial aspirants tend to couch their expansionist designs by altruistic and/or universal pretenses, and today's China is no exception. Thus, President Xi Jinping presents the BRI as an altruistic drive for world peace and prosperity, just as imperial China's intercontinental land and maritime Silk Road had (supposedly) created a "2000-plus-year history of ... friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress."<sup>38</sup> In reality, the BRI is China's grand bid for global economic supremacy and political influence.

**Mordechai Chaziza** is a senior lecturer at the Department of Politics and Governance at Ashkelon Academic College, Israel. He is the author of *China and the Persian Gulf: The New Silk Road Strategy and Emerging Partnerships* (2019), and *China's Middle East Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Strategic Partnership* (2020). **Efraim Karsh**, editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*, is emeritus professor of Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London and director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.



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37 *Al-Monitor*, [May 5, 2020](#); *China Daily*, [Dec. 14, 2020](#), [Dec. 24, 2020](#), [Dec. 29, 2020](#).

38 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, [Sept. 7, 2013](#), [May 15, 2017](#).