

The Importance and Challenges of the Persian Gulf for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

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Abstract

In the second decade of the 21st century, and especially with the rule of its fifth generation of elites, China has taken steps to consolidate its power in the trans-regional arena. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013, expanded in 2017 to include more than 65 countries. By 2021, more than 140 countries signed memorandum of understanding with China to become a member of the BRI. Although the initiative was initially limited, over time and its acceptance, China's approach changed and declared it unrestricted (open and public to join). The main question is, what is the position of the Persian Gulf in the China BRI? The present article argues that the Persian Gulf, as an important and strategic region after Southeast Asia, is the most important region for China, using a descriptive-analytical method. Findings show that the Persian Gulf is a strategic region with an important position for China, which imports more than 40 percent of its crude oil from this region. The Persian Gulf, with a population of more than 170 million (market) and an investment destination rich in hydrocarbon resources, is located between Asia, Africa, and Europe and is one of the poles of BRI. In this article, the method of collecting materials is documentary, and the concepts of Mega-regionalism and Quasi-inter-regionalism are considered.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China, Mega-regionalism, Persian Gulf, Quasi-inter-regionalism.

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Introduction

As a great power in international arena, China has taken steps to maintain, acquire and maximize its power and interests. After more than four decades and growing influence, it is thinking beyond the East Asian region or even the Asian continent. China became the world's second-largest economy in 2010 and has moved towards some types of inter-regionalism to consolidate and increase its interests. The rise of China's fifth-generation leaders since 2012 at the 18th Congress of the Communist Party of China promises an active foreign policy that has improved China's international standing in the years to come. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China since 2013, has taken an active approach to foreign policy and outlined China's roadmap or master plan this year in two speeches (Central Asia and Southeast Asia) titled One Belt, One Road (Belt and Road Initiative). The plan, often referred to as China's Marshall Plan and considered equivalent to the US plan to rebuild Western Europe, consists of two parts: the belt (land corridor) and the road (sea lane). It focuses more on developing countries. The BRI aims to connect continents of Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond and pays special attention to trade, connectivity, and investment sector, especially infrastructure, financial, and policy coordination.

The BRI, including the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), connects China by land with Southeast and South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is a sea lane that connects China's coastal areas to Southeast and South Asia, the South Pacific, West Asia, and East Africa to Europe. As of March 31, 2021, 143 countries have signed an MoU with China as part of the BRI. So far, 17 member countries of this initiative are located in West Asia and North Africa. Eight Persian Gulf countries are also participating in the BRI. Although the official map of the BRI published by China does not highlight the Persian Gulf, the Persian Gulf sub-region is one of the most important in the initiative. Xi Jinping is also in the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. In 2014, he referred to it as a natural partner in the joint creation of the BRI. The question of the current study is what is the position of the Persian Gulf

in China's BRI. The present article argues that the Persian Gulf strategic region has an important posture for China using a descriptive-analytical method. The Persian Gulf has a population of more than 170 million, a total trading volume of more than \$238 billion in 2019 with China, and a rich supply of hydrocarbon resources. Its members also have membership in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and are located between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The region is considered one of the main poles of the BRI.

The Persian Gulf consists of 8 countries, playing a vital role in the energy supply and transit of the world, especially to China. Examining China's BRI and its impact on the Persian Gulf region is crucial for Iran's national interests. In the same way, this study aims to explore the role, importance, and position of the Persian Gulf in China's BRI. The main question of the present article is what is the position of the Persian Gulf in China's BRI? The secondary questions are as follows:

1. Which countries in the Persian Gulf region are more important for the BRI and why?
2. What projects has China designed or implemented in the Persian Gulf region?
3. Has the Persian Gulf region been able to play its role in this initiative since its introduction?
4. What are the challenges of the Persian Gulf for playing an effective role in the BRI?

In the first part of the article, the conceptual framework, inter-regionalism, is described. Then, the formation and content of the BRI will be mentioned. Finally, the role, importance, and position of the Persian Gulf as a strategic region in the BRI and its limitations or challenges will be analyzed.

Conceptual Framework

Since the late 1990s, the rise of bilateral and multilateral forums and dialogues has attracted the attention of scholars, leading to the emergence of a term called Inter-regionalism. The most concise as well as the clearest definition of inter-regionalism is provided by Hänggi et al., who believe that it is "institutional relations between regions of the world." Many concepts have emerged in this area, and

there is still no consensus on what they refer to in the real world. Some concepts included “trans-regionalism”, “mega-regionalism”, “trans-continentalism”, “inter-continentalism”, “pan-regionalism”, “bi-regional” relations, or “bilateral inter-regionalism”, or quasi-inter-regionalism. Hänggi distinguishes between 5 types of Inter-regionalism, 3 of which are used in the narrow sense and 2 in the broad or wider sense. Quasi-inter-regionalism is the most limited form, mega-regionalism is the widest form, and the other 3 cases are placed between these two cases (Hänggi, 2006: 41) see Table 1.

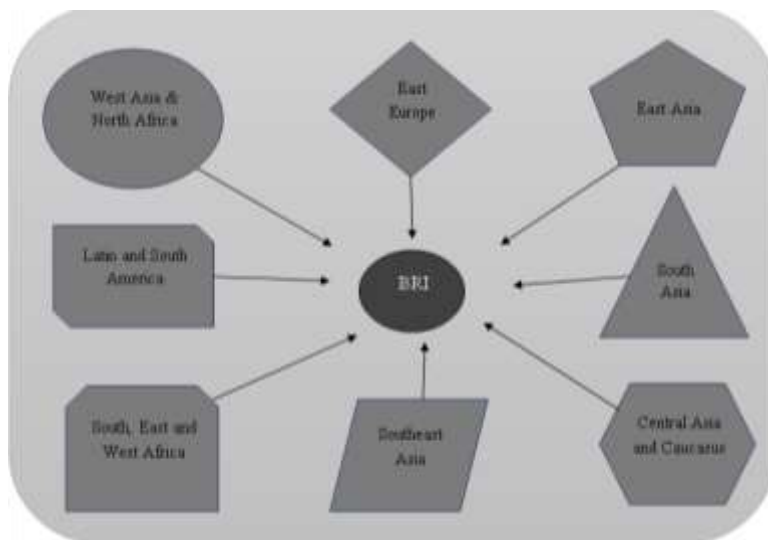
Table 1. Types of inter-regional relations

Type	Region A	Region B	Form of inter-regionalism	Spectrum
1	Regional organization/ regional group	Third country/ great power	Quasi-inter-regional relations	Wide sense
2	Regional organization	Regional organization	Inter-regional relations	Narrow sense
3	Regional organization	Regional group	Inter-regional relations	Narrow sense
4	Regional group	Regional group	Inter-regional relations	Narrow sense
5	Group of states from more than two regions		Mega-regional relations	Wide sense

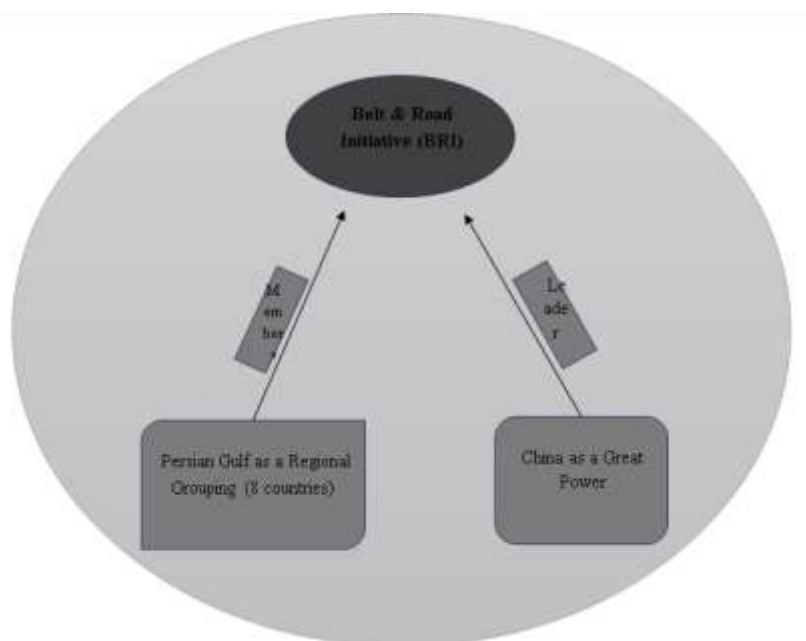
Source:(Hänggi, 2006: 41).

Mega-regionalism is a term for mechanisms with groups of states from more than two regions. Quasi-inter-regionalism means the relationship of an organization or regional grouping with a third country or a great power.

In this study, among many concepts of inter-regionalism, due to the participation of many countries from different regions (Mega-regionalism, see Picture 1) and the dominance of China as a great power and its cooperation with the Persian Gulf as a regional grouping (Quasi-inter-regionalism, see Picture 2), we chose these two concepts as the conceptual framework.



Picture 1. BRI as Mega-regionalism
(By the Authors)



Picture 2. The Persian Gulf and China in a Quasi-inter-regionalism
(By the Authors)

Methodology

The type of research is qualitative and its approach is deductive. The research method will combine description and analysis according to the subject and questions. The method of collecting materials is also documentary (books, articles, reports, and sites).

1. What Is BRI as a Mega-regionalism?

Since early 2000s, China has proposed new projects, strategies, or programs to determine its goals. Some cases are 'Peaceful Rise,' a 'Harmonious World,' and 'New Great Power Relations' (Yu, 2018: 223). Other Chinese policies include "Going Out," "March West," "Grand Western Development," "Chinese Dream," and "Community of Common Destiny."

The latter two can be considered as components of the BRI (Steer Davies Gleave, 2018: 25). The BRI, which is very large and reflects China's grand strategy approach, was initially called One Belt One Road (OBOR), and was later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The reason for changing its name is the openness of this initiative, increasing its members from nearly 70 members in 2017 to more than 143 members (with about 30 regional organizations) in 2021 (they have signed an MoU with China).

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally proposed the Silk Road Economic Belt (to connect China and Europe by land) in Kazakhstan, as well as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe by sea) in Indonesia (Verlare & Van Der Putten, 2015:1).

In March 2015 (Boao Forum), China released the "Vision and Action on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" as one of its national strategies (Hong, 2016: 1). So far, China has held 2 Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019 (Xi & Men, 2021: 77). The sixth Belt and Road Summit was jointly organized by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council (HKTDC) with more than 17,000 viewers from about 80 countries and regions attending the summit (Bloomberg, 2021).



Picture 3. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Source: (AlamIqbal;Nayyer Rahman& Sami, 2019: 2).

As the leader of the BRI, China outlined five dimensions of the initiative in the 2015 Vision and Action document:

Table 2. BRI Vision and Action Document

Key features	Four principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Openness *harmony and inclusiveness *respect for market forces *mutual benefits
	Five priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * policy coordination amongst governments * connectivity in regional infrastructural facilities * more trade and investment flows * deeper financial cooperation and integration * increased cultural bondage amongst people across places.
	Mechanism of cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * strengthening bilateral tiesat all levels * enhanced cooperation in existing multilateral platforms such as APEC, ASEM, ASEAN Plus China (10+1), and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF).
	Infrastructural projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * transport (e.g. roads, railways, ports, airports) * power supply and transmission * oil/gas pipelines * fiber-optic networks and other telecommunications * green and low-carbon projects
	Action plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Memoranda of Understanding * regional cooperation * long-term development plans * policy support, including the establishment of AIIB and Silk Road Fund

* hosting international summits, forums, seminars, and expos

Source: (Chu, 2015).

Many see China's introduction of the BRI as a fundamental change in its foreign policy and approach to the international system. The initiative is a grand strategy in terms of the various dimensions that China envisions. With the inclusion of more than 143 countries from different regions of the world that have signed an MoU with China, it fits into the Mega-regionalism concept. The countries participating in this initiative are from more than 8 regions of the world, and according to the theorists in this field, especially Hänggi (2006: 41), when states of more than 2 regions attend regionalism, it can be called Mega-regionalism.

2. Why Has China Proposed BRI?

There are various approaches to the BRI, which we divide into three categories: optimistic, pessimistic, and specialist¹. In general, optimists believe that the BRI is in the interests of both countries (China and Others), especially developing countries. This approach speaks of words such as win-win cooperation, mutual benefits, and equal participation (Lintao, 2019: 12; Lin & Wang, 2016: 99; Huang, 2016).

Pessimists liken the initiative to the US Marshall Plan (Starr, 2019: 1; Jia, 2017; Boriçi, 2018) and talk about debt and loan traps (Chellaney, 2017; Jones & Jinghan, 2019: 1416) through which China seeks to make developing countries dependent. In this way, she will receive maximum privileges in line with her national interests.

Specialists also have examined the role of this initiative in regional connection (Cheung & Hong, 2018), infrastructure (Van Noort, 2021), Airport Infrastructures (Lin & Ai, 2020), Culture (Farwa, 2018), identity (Lanteigne, 2021), Human Security (Dellios & Ferguson, 2017), soft power (Jakimów, 2019), economic, physical/military and soft powers (Duarte, 2018), Actors and Agency (Schneider, 2021), Neoliberal Globalization (Bayari, 2020) and other fields. According to

1. specialists here mean all those who have studied the Belt and Road initiative with specific examples such as economic interests, national security, influence and credibility and etc. In general, they lacked a biased approach to mere pessimism and optimism.

these, China, like any other country, considering the various components of its power, is towards strengthening and deepening them. Because BRI is a grand strategy, their approach covers part of the reality. Although there can be an argument about the optimistic and pessimistic approaches that they also cite part of the truth, due to the many differences in this area (between optimistic and pessimistic), it is better to present their approach separately.

In general, China's goals for BRI areas follows:

- Sustaining economic growth, especially in China's western provinces
- Exporting industry surplus, especially infrastructure projects
- Consolidation and popularization of RMB in the field of international interactions
- Earning more profit from the accumulated foreign reserves
- Expanding the Chinese model of globalization (Karlis&Polemis, 2019: 8-9) or globalization of Chinese capital (Weidong, 2017)
- Connecting continents, regions, and countries of the world through land transportation, routes, ports, and sea lanes, as well as reducing the cost of transporting goods
- Diversifying energy sources/routes and reducing China's Malacca Dilemma (Mobley, 2019: 59-60) or even the Hormuz dilemma (Ghosh, 2018: 7).
- Reducing the level of extremism with economic growth and development, especially in Xinjiang province
- Stabilizing China's position and balancing some strategies, such as the United States' Pivot to Asia
- Gradually reforming the current state of the international system and gaining a position commensurate with China's capacity and power
- Encouraging cultural relations to support wider projects (Zimmerman, 2015: 6-7).
- Economic growth of participants and increasing demand for Chinese products
- Transfer of the Chinese growth model
- Increasing China's strategic influence in participating countries

- Increasing military-security presence in some strategic locations (Cleveland et al., 2018: 259-263; Dollar, 2015: 11).

3. The BRI in the Persian Gulf (Quasi-inter-regionalism)

China as the leader and the Persian Gulf states (in the form of a regional grouping) as members of BRI have created a form of Quasi-inter-regionalism. Based on the importance and position of the Persian Gulf countries, China is proposing, designing, and implementing some projects in the region.

In the developing world, West Asia, especially the Persian Gulf, is ranked third out of seven regions. Outside of the Asia-Pacific region, it is the second most important region for China. Statistically, Africa is more important than Southeast Asia, but if we consider some factors, namely the role of West Asia as an essential source of Chinese imports, key connections with China's internal security, and its geopolitical importance for China, the region then competes with the importance of Africa to Beijing. At the same time, considering the political indicators, the importance of the region is evaluated beyond what it is (Scobell et al., 2018: 297). Of course, we have to keep in mind that the importance of the West Asian region for China has been gradually increasing since the 1990s.

3-1. The Position of the Persian Gulf in BRI

China's presence in the Persian Gulf can be considered as a strategy named BRI, in which China has spent billions of dollars in loans, aid, and financing to advance its projects. The Persian Gulf states are an important part of the BRI as a land and sea bridge connecting China to Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. Most Chinese projects (large and non-oil investments) in the region integrate and expand the BRI structure, including railways, industrial parks/ zones, commercial ports, and roads (Rolland, 2015). China has set up some financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS New Development Bank, Silk Road Fund, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Bank, to fund and oversee BRI projects (Fulton, 2016: 43).

The Persian Gulf plays central role in BRI due to its strategic location, energy richness, consumer market, investment destination, labor market, source of trade, expansion of naval power, monetary, financial, and the fight against terrorism (Scobell, 2018: 11-20). According to the document “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” published by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Persian Gulf will play a role in both the land route and the sea lane (NDRC, 2015).

The Silk Road Economic Belt is not a single route but encompasses six main corridors that run from eastern China to Europe. The Persian Gulf is a part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, which starts in China's eastern Provinces and crosses Central Asia and Iran. The maritime part of this project, called the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, goes to the Persian Gulf, and this area is part of it (Fig 2). It should be noted that China has stated that the BRI is an open and public initiative and that it can be developed both by China and through the proposals of the participating states. In this regard, we can mention some words of Chinese officials as examples:

Chinese President Xi Jinping at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference:

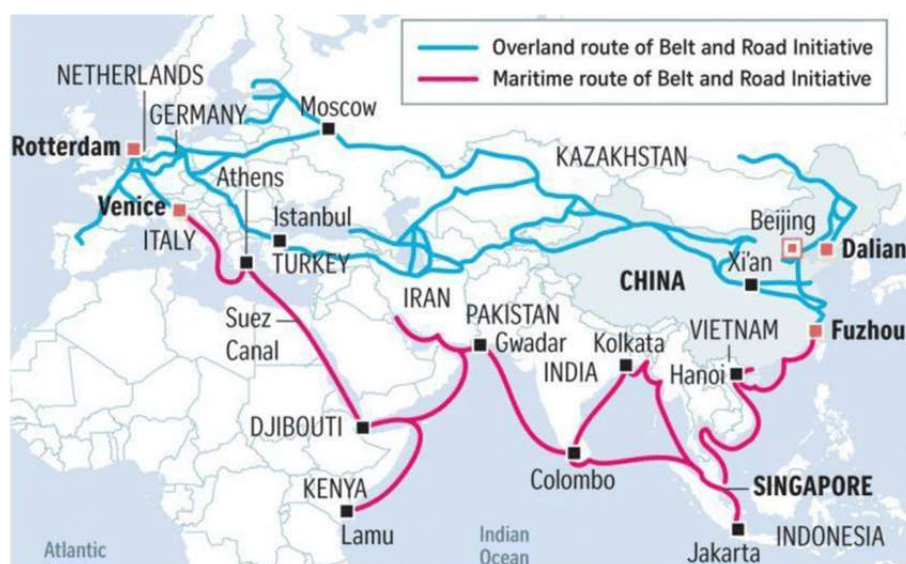
The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a public road open to all, not a private path owned by one single party ... All interested countries are welcome aboard to take part in the cooperation and share in its benefits (Xinhuanet, 2021).

State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Asia and Pacific High-level Conference on Belt and Road Cooperation:

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a public road open to all and has no backyard or high walls. It is open to all kinds of systems and civilizations and is not ideologically biased. We are open to all cooperation initiatives in the world that are conducive to closer connectivity and common development, and we are ready to work with them and help each other succeed (MOFA PRC, 2021).

The published maps show the general area of the initiative, and China's projects in countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and

even Iraq, which are part of the Persian Gulf or even cases in other regions and countries, have not been inserted in these maps. BRI branches gradually develop, so this initiative and its projects become part of China's value chain. BRI seeks to converge and integrate a wide range of countries in various thematic areas such as infrastructure, free trade, finance, energy cooperation, tourism, technology, etc. The China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor is an important case, and one of the six main corridors of BRI, which includes one of the Persian Gulf countries, Iran, but part of it has been completed (Lin, 2017: 2-6).



Picture 4. General view of the BRI
Source: (Jiangbo&Zezhuang, 2020: 150).

However, China's attention to some infrastructures and even the completion of those, such as the Jeddah-Mecca-Medina or Dammam-Riyadh and Abu Dhabi ports of the UAE, indicate the importance of these countries (MERICS, 2018). Much of the importance of the Persian Gulf countries can be seen in the volume of Chinese investment, contracts, and construction projects in these countries. Between 2013 and 2019, China invested heavily in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, mainly in the energy sector, but little in Iran and Iraq

(Mashino, 2020: 5). More than 80 percent of China's investments are in the energy sector, and Chinese state-owned companies are involved in upstream projects in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran (Scobell, 2018: 13; StlhaneHiim&Stenslie, 2019: 153). the investment trend is developing and expanding to other areas like construction, infrastructure, and connectivity.

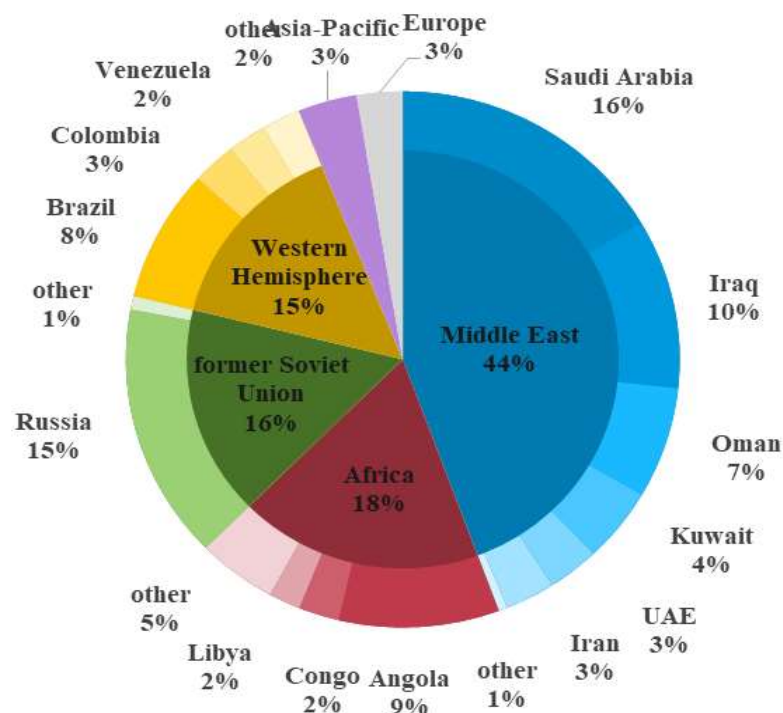


Fig. 1. China's crude oil imports by source, 2019
Source:(US Energy Information Administration, 2020).

China was the world's largest oil importer in 2020 (Pipeline & Gas Journal, 2021), and its energy consumption is the primary motivation for its presence in the region. According to the above diagram, China, the world's largest consumer of oil, imports about 43% of its energy from the six Persian Gulf countries. Its growing need for oil and even gas has led to stronger cooperation with countries in the region.

In 2017, China became the world's second-largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG), 40 percent of which was supplied from

abroad (US Energy Information Administration, 2018). China's LNG consumption is projected to increase by 60% between 2017 and 2023, making Qatar a significant trading partner (Reuters, 2018A). In 2018, Petro China and Qatar Gas signed a 22-year deal in which China expects to import 3.4 million tons of LNG from Qatar annually (Reuters, 2018B).

Table 3. China's total trade with Persian Gulf partners (Billion Dollars)

	2000	2013	2019
Saudi Arabia	2.8	66.6	84.3
UAE	2.38	39.5	50.2
Iraq	0.89	22.9	30.57
Iran	2.37	37.4	21.7
Oman	6	20.28	20.32
Qatar	0.48	11.66	13.2
Kuwait	0.45	12.12	16.86
Bahrain	0.17	2	1.65
Total	15.5	212.5	238.8

Source: (Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 2021).

Trade is another important factor that makes the Persian Gulf market vital for China. From 2000 to 2019, China's trade with the region increased more than 15 times (from \$15.5 billion to \$238.8 billion). This volume increased by more than 13 times in the period 2000-2013, and the main reasons for its inadequate growth can be mentioned in the sanctions against Iran and terrorism in Iraq (ISIS). However, the Persian Gulf region's trade market is one factor that highlights its position in BRI.

Table 4. China's investment and Construction in the Persian Gulf

	2005-2012	2013-2021
UAE	7.63	29.26
Saudi	20.33	27.04
Iran	14.68	12.59
Iraq	15.34	11.92
Kuwait	2.69	8.42
Oman	1.03	5.59
Qatar	3.97	4.43
Bahrain	0	1.42
Total	65.67	100.67

Source: (American Enterprise Institute, 2021).

China's investment and construction in the framework of contracts in the Persian Gulf region have grown by more than 35% from 2013 to 2021 compared to 2005 to 2012. China invested \$65.67 billion between 2005 and 2012 and \$100.67 billion between 2013 and 2021.

\$166 billion out of a total of \$795 billion that China has invested since 2013 is spent in the Persian Gulf countries (nearly 24% of the total).

The Persian Gulf region is also important to China for the strategic extension of China's homeland and periphery, through which the stability of the Persian Gulf countries, especially the kingdoms of the region, is considered important. Things like the Islamic Awakening movement or even the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) worry China, as Beijing worries that these grassroots and extremist movements may encourage ethnic Han dissidents to push for more democracy and Uyghur activists for greater autonomy or religious freedom in Xinjiang (Scobell, 2018: 9-10). The internationalization of the Chinese Renminbi is another factor that China is pursuing to institutionalize using its currency in the region (with the removal of the dollar from interactions) (Calabrese, 2018: 180-181; Rolland, 2017: 130). These cases have created a situation of interdependence between a major power as the leader of BRI and the Persian Gulf regional grouping of eight countries as members of BRI, in which they will expand and deepen cooperation.

3-2. China's BRI Projects, Contracts, and Constructions in the Persian Gulf

China from the East Asian region and the Persian Gulf countries as a regional group of West Asia cooperate in the form of Quasi-inter-regionalism. China's tools for gaining, maintaining and maximizing interests in the Persian Gulf have become more sophisticated over time; for example, until the early 21st century, trade was the key to the country's relationship with the region, and gradually energy imports and investment were added to it. Since the early 2010s, cooperation in various fields such as technology, nuclear and renewable energy has been at the center of China's attention which was followed in the form of some plans (like Industrial park-port interconnection, two-wheel,

and two-wing approach, and “1+2+3” framework: energy as core, infrastructure, and trade as “two wings” and, new technologies such as nuclear energy, aerospace and new energies as “three turns.”) (Fulton, 2020A: 516). Such cooperation is seriously pursued in the form of medium-term vision documents for the Persian Gulf countries.

China will use these projects and plans to link countries and markets to BRI. Under BRI, industrial parks in Saudi Arabia (Jazan), Oman (Duqm and Salalah), the UAE (Khalifa Port complex), and other countries will be connected to regional ports in the UAE, Oman, Egypt (Port Said), and Djibouti. This connection will secure the supply chains of West Asia, and so far, it has progressed in a way that the Arabian Peninsula will be its center. China has been involved in the construction of the port of Duqm and Oman railway projects. Such investments can be considered in line with China’s strategy to build a sea lane in line with BRI for China to trade and invest in the region. Its importance can be seen in the official project document published by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Transportation projects, especially the Chinese Railway in Oman, aim to accelerate and facilitate the flow of energy from other countries in the Persian Gulf and West Asia. Meanwhile, the port of Duqm is expected to be a vital hub for energy transportation between China and the Persian Gulf. Duqm projects include a refinery with a capacity of 235,000 barrels per day and a petrochemical complex, and a \$2.3 billion methanol complex /plant. The methanol complex is expected to have a capacity of 10 million tons per year, which will be one of the largest petrochemical projects (Zulfikar Rakhmat, 2019). Indeed, Omani ports could reduce the severity of dependence on Arab Sheikdom oil exports through the Strait of Hormuz.

One Chinese consortium plans to spend \$10.7 billion in 2017 to turn the Oman fishing village into the Special Economic Zone Authority of Duqm (SEZAD). In Abu Dhabi and Qatar, China is also implementing some projects, such as spending \$300 million on one of the new terminals in the port of Khalifa and a similar agreement on the port of Hamad in Qatar. The small Persian Gulf states follow a similar approach to their counterparts, working to strengthen ties with Chinese investors (Bodetti, 2019).

In this regard, for example, we can mention the wider participation of China in the \$100 billion projects of Kuwait Silk City. The two countries also signed a memorandum of understanding for cooperation in the development of the islands of Kuwait. (Failaka, Warba, Bubiyan, Miskan, and Awha) in November 2018. The construction of a 36-kilometer bridge between Kuwait City and the five islands and the establishment of Mubarak Port as the country's largest commercial hub are other goals of Kuwait to join the Chinese initiative. (Aguinaldo, 2018). Kuwaiti authorities hope that the Silk City, which includes a major seaport, airport and free economic zone, can become one of the hubs of the BRI. (Gulf Monitor, 2019). Bahrain also sent a delegation to China in 2018 to cooperate in various fields and signed a memorandum of understanding with China to play a more important role in the BRI and its joint development (Chaziza, 2020: 73).

Considering the domestic-regional and global conditions, the countries of the Persian Gulf are moving towards expanding and deepening their relations with China and making BRI the basis for this. The countries of the Persian Gulf have considered economic diversification programs in different forms and at different levels, and some examples can be seen, for example, Saudi Arabia Vision 2030, Abu Dhabi Vision 2030, Kuwait's New Kuwait Vision 2035, Qatar National Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, Bahrain Economic Vision 2030, Iraq Vision 2030 and Iran Vision 2035. With such plans, Persian Gulf countries are trying to strengthen the private sector and diversify the domestic economy. Therefore, China's experience in developing the infrastructure of the Persian Gulf countries can be considered as a basis for coordinating plans to achieve the BRI "vision".

Finance has also been in the spotlight on both sides in recent years. Cooperation between China and the UAE continued with 36 agreements until early 2016. China and the United Arab Emirates signed their first bilateral currency exchange agreement in 2012 with a maximum of 35 billion Renminbi. In late December 2015, China renewed its Renminbi exchange agreement with the United Arab Emirates in an effort to internationalize the Renminbi (Herlevi, 2016: 14-15). In 2018, under this agreement, transactions worth \$6.5 billion were made (Reuters, 2018C).

Dubai, with more than 4,200 Chinese companies (up from 18 in 2005) and about 300 thousand Chinese, is the regional financial center of the Persian Gulf and even West Asia (Abdul Kader, 2016). China's four largest banks, China Construction Bank, China Agricultural Bank, China Bank, and China Chamber of Commerce and Industry, have established branches in Dubai. The Jabal Ali Free Zone has attracted China with various incentives such as 100 percent ownership, subsidized energy, and significant transportation facilities and logistics infrastructure. More than 230 Chinese companies are present in the region (Scott, 2015). The Bank of China Industry and Commerce has also opened branches in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, and the Bank of China has a branch in Bahrain (Chen & Shu, 2018).

The UAE (Martin, 2015) and Qatar (Wall Street Journal, 2014) joint venture funds with China have also been established with a joint venture of \$10 billion. Kuwait (Martin et al., 2019) and Saudi Arabia (Bloomberg, 2019) have also announced plans to create a \$10 billion joint fund and a \$20 billion joint fund, respectively. Such joint measures are considered in order to develop and expand support for projects in the Persian Gulf countries, as well as to improve the infrastructure required for BRI.

In 2019, China and Iraq signed a 20-year agreement to restore oil extraction resources. China agreed to receive oil from that country, and in return, Iraq could become a member of the BRI and have access to the projects of this initiative (oil for construction). China has pledged specific resources (100,000 barrels of crude oil per day revenue) to finance infrastructure projects (focused on roads, railways, airports, and ports) for Chinese companies operating in Iraq. Iraq's priority is transportation projects. However, other BRI projects, such as the South Baghdad Combined Cycle Power Plant, are underway (Moore & Kordvani, 2021: 11). In 2019, the investment committee of the Najaf governorate also signed an initial agreement with a Chinese company to build a monorail for the city. The project will provide an accessible and fast transportation way for the city's people and all tourists (Xinhua, 2019). In 2019, China and Iraq signed a contract to build a liquefied natural gas (NGL) plant in the Iraqi province of Basra (Liangyu, 2019). In 2021, China's Zhongman Petroleum and Natural Gas Group Corporation (ZPEC) signed a partnership

agreement with the Iraqi Drilling Company. The agreement covers support, drilling, and rehabilitation operations in Iraq's oil fields and the transfer of expertise and technology (Lee, 2021).

The importance of the Persian Gulf countries to China can also be understood from the Strategic Partnership and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreements. China has only signed comprehensive strategic partnership agreements with Iran, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and strategic partnership agreements with other Persian Gulf countries except Bahrain. (Fulton, 2019: 4). It seems that Iran weighs more heavily on China than any other country, but some restrictions such as Western sanctions and some factors such as the openness of the UAE's economic and financial sphere have turned it into China's economic hub. China signed a MoU (memorandum of understanding) with Saudi Arabia in 2012 (Fulton, 2020B: 13) and in 2017, a nuclear energy cooperation agreement (Reuters, 2017). China signed a similar agreement with the UAE in 2018 (World Nuclear Association, 2021). China and UAE announced renewable energy as one of their strategic partnership points in July 2018. China has announced that it has invested \$3.86 billion in the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Park, the world's largest and most concentrated solar project (Jing, 2018). In 2017, China also signed agreements with Saudi Arabia in the field of aerospace, specifically in the field of drone production (Chuanren & Pocock, 2017).

Before introducing BRI, China participated in some Iranian projects, such as the world's tallest dam in Lorestan province and parts of the Tehran metro system. In 2016, a train carrying 32 containers arrived in Tehran after 14 days and more than 10,000 kilometers from eastern China. This shortened the 44-day transportation by 30 days, which usually sails from China to Iran. In this way, China is trying to reduce longer distances to Europe and reduce costs (Goh, 2016). In 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year agreement. The agreement covers cooperation in the fields of energy, infrastructure, banking, military security, and telecommunications. The projects of this agreement can also be evaluated in order to strengthen BRI, which includes railways, airports, as well as free trade zones in Mako, Qeshm Island, Abadan, and Arvand. China also provides Global Positioning Technology to Iran. China is committed

to investing \$400 billion in Iran over 25 years, which is a large portion of China's planned spending on BRI (Figueroa, 2021). Chinese firms have been involved in several Iranian transportation and energy projects, including oil and gas fields, the Tehran-Mashhad railway, and the electrification project high-speed railway connecting Tehran-Qom-Isfahan (Fulton, 2016: 47). Projects such as the Kermanshah-Khosravi railway in western Iran (a 3.53 billion yuan (\$513 million) contract to build a 263-km) are being built by China (Tianyang, 2019). In 2018, the Sinomach, also known as China National Machinery Industry Corp, signed a new \$845mn contract to build 410km of railway in western Iran, Tehran-Hamedan-Sanandaj (Dyble, 2020). Iran's railway network, especially (Mashhad-Tehran and Tehran-Isfahan) is part of the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, and the two aforementioned railways cover part of it. This corridor enters Iran from Turkmenistan and reaches Turkey from east-west and the Persian Gulf from the north-south (Ferguson, 2021: 132). In addition, Iran can connect its railway network to the regional railway project established in 2017, namely Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) (Abdullayev, 2017). In 2018, China opened a new railway connecting Mongolia with Iran. The train loaded with sunflower seeds arrived in Tehran after 15 days after passing more than 8,000 kilometers. The train reduced transportation time by more than 20 days compared to the ship (Yan, 2018).

For Iran, the Tehran-Mashhad electrification project is part of its wider rail development plan to electrify all railroads by 2025. The government has placed the expansion of the country's rail network on top of its agenda. In its sixth five-year development plan (2017-22), Iran vowed to increase the share of rail in cargo and passenger transportation to at least 30 percent and 20 percent, respectively, by the end of the period (Tianyang, 2019).

An LNG import terminal in Gwadar, Pakistan, is also planned, along with a gas pipeline linking Iran to central Pakistan, which Chinese companies will construct. Some projects, such as the Iran-Pakistan pipeline, failed due to Western sanctions. China-Pakistan agreed on a liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal project from Gwadar to the main natural gas distribution hub in Nawabshah. However, we cannot talk about replacing Iran, and it can be said that

this project complements the project of Iran-Pakistan and if built, their connection will be possible (Bhutta, 2015). After several years of delay (due to pressure from countries such as the United States and Saudi Arabia), it seems Pakistan intends to revive it (Zameen, 2018). Today, the Caspian Sea Agreement has intensified the passage of trade corridors around Iran, which is in the interest of our competitors. In the field of energy, we also see that pipelines such as TAPI, Trans-Caspian gas pipeline, and Habshan–Fujairah oil pipeline are bypassing Iran, and even each has somehow diminished Iran's geopolitical and transit importance; while the Iranian Peace Pipeline has been stalled for nearly two decades (Mousavi et al., 2021: 119). The BRI can be a good opportunity in this area and be connected to the energy pipeline between China and Pakistan. In 2018, Saudi Arabia announced that it would join the China-Pakistan economic corridor and invest in the port of Gwadar and its energy infrastructure to boost Riyadh-Islamabad trade (Worldview, 2018).

Trade and connectivity are the two central principles for China and Iran under BRI. These two principles are the basis for improving Iran's connectivity by establishing and expanding railways, ports, and roads. Osiewicz (2018: 229) believes the BRI's ultimate success, especially in geopolitical and logistical issues, largely depends on Iran's participation and support. Iran's critical infrastructure is a high priority for BRI Southern Corridor (China Central-West Asia Economic Corridor), which starts in China, and passes through Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans.

Although Iran has a good strategic position in the region and the world, such opportunities are quickly lost by the initiative of others. The previous opportunities will either not be reversible, or, at best, will not include the interests of that time.

China also has a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which it signed with Saudi Arabia a few days before Iran and with the UAE in 2018. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE, like Iran, has faced sanctions, withdrawal from the JCPOA, and maximum pressure from the US. Similarly, while Iran is in the early stages of the agreement, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are implementing the agreement with China. The comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Saudi Arabia led to establishing a

High-Level Joint Committee in 2016, which meets annually (one of whose six sub-committees was put in charge of BRI). At the annual meetings, numerous MoUs and agreements have been signed. The UAE has not lagged behind Saudi Arabia in this model and has taken a similar approach. In 2019, Dubai, on behalf of the UAE, signed \$3.4 billion worth of contracts at the BRI Summit in Beijing. In the same year, Abu Dhabi signed 16 agreements with China in the fields of environment, energy, and economy and included the Chinese language in the national curriculum (Fulton, 2021: 10-11).

Although China's relations with the Persian Gulf region cannot be assessed in the form of a specific organization such as the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, the Persian Gulf countries are a regional grouping whose relations and cooperation with China have a similar pattern (On the one hand, there is the strategy of China which deals with different countries in the same way but at different levels, and on the other hand, all countries in the region are rentier states). Similarly, the regional grouping relations of the Persian Gulf and China can be examined in the form of a Quasi-interregional.

4. Challenges of China's BRI in the Persian Gulf

The Authors and researchers cite various challenges to implementing the China Initiative. The rivalry of the great powers in the Persian Gulf region is considered one of the obstacles to the Chinas' BRI. For example, some argue that the United States guards the Pax Americana carefully in the region and is wary of China's growing presence, especially in the security domain (Scobell & Nader 2016 quoted in: Yang, 2018: 293) and some believe the United States is intensifying competition with China in the Persian Gulf region by putting pressure on its Persian Gulf allies to reduce their cooperation with China, particularly in the areas of artificial intelligence, 5G technology, and COVID-19 technology and equipment (Bingbing, 2019: 14). China, on the other hand, is trying to avoid a major confrontation with the United States while limiting US dominance in the Persian Gulf and promoting principles such as multilateralism and the creation of different regional poles (Cheng, 2018: 439).

India is another major power that opposes BRI and instead pursues its Mausamplan to create an "Indian Ocean world" that is set to extend east Africa, south of Iran, and Sri Lanka to include Southeast Asia (Amirahmadiyan & Salehi Dolatabad, 2017: 34). As in the case of Malacca, China is facing the Hormuz dilemma. Closing or disrupting the flow of energy in this place can severely affect China's energy supply. Likewise, there is a potential threat to China and India's cooperation with Iran in the port of Chabahar. India is part of the North-South International Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, part of which connects the port of Mumbai and Bandar Abbas (Ghosh, 2018: 7).

The Karakoram Corridor runs through Gilgit-Baltistan Province and the Kashmir region controlled by Pakistan, have created fears of siege among Indians. Delhi considers the basis of this fear to be the "String of Pearls" of China. Pearl refers to existing or potential Chinese naval bases and commercial ports. The chain also includes a network of such pearls over a vast expanse from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa that could connect China's navy. Specifically, the chain includes Chinese bases and ports in Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Djibouti, Tanzania, Pakistan, and even Sudan. Combining the chain with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which allows Beijing access to the Arabian Sea at the port of Gwadar, encircles Indian territory. India, on the other hand, seeks to establish a corridor connecting Chabahar and Sarakhs through the Cotton Route project and connecting it to the ancient Silk Road in Central Asia.

The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran in sensitive areas such as Yemen, Iraq, and even Syria is a factor that leads to instability for various reasons such as sectarianism, zero-sum game, and non-acceptance of mutual interests. The instability of the Persian Gulf region and even its surroundings as a connecting hub is a major obstacle to China's strategic initiative, as it weakens connectivity, threatens infrastructure projects and makes an unsustainable Persian Gulf or West Asia corridor to European markets (Lidarev, 2017).

In the Persian Gulf region, due to the existence of different ethnic groups and different religious sects, there are conflicts and differences between these countries. Most of the Persian Gulf region is inhabited by Arabs, and in some other areas by Kurds and Persians, including the two Shiite and Sunni religious groups and their historical-

geopolitical rivalries. The existence of some ethnic and linguistic groups in the Persian Gulf that are not specific to one country (such as the Kurds in Iraq), causes a lack of national unity in this country and intensifies internal and external government gaps. The countries of the Persian Gulf region are multi-ethnic and multi-identity; they are always facing conflicts and challenges from internal groups, a clear example of which is the situation in Iraq. Iraq has different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups and has always struggled to achieve national unity. Iraq, which includes Sunnis, Kurds, and Shiites, has been embroiled in intense internal strife over the past century. The existence of minorities has been fueled by leaving negative effects on the relations of neighboring countries and competition and caused relations to be strained (Torabi & Saneie, 2016: 19).

Countries involved in the issue of minorities always accuse their neighbors of supporting opposition minorities, for example, in Iran, the Sunni Arab minority and in the Persian Gulf states except for Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, which has a Shiite majority, have a Shiite minority. This situation causes countries to accuse each other of interfering in their internal affairs (Like terrorist groups in the east and west of Iran and the Shiites in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia or the majority of Shiites in Bahrain that suppress by Al Khalifa), which is an obstacle to building trust and cooperation between these blocks in the form of BRI. Social unrest, extremism, ethnic strife, and civil war in the region are also obstacles to BRI, which include the unrest and ISIS in Iraq. Of course, it should be noted that there is relative stability in other Persian Gulf countries (except for Saudi Arabia, which is invading Yemen, and its facilities are being attacked). Another obstacle is different political systems. The Persian Gulf countries see Iran as an enemy and rival whose Islamic republican system poses a serious threat to them, and any success achieved by this country will confront them with problems such as democratization and the demand for political participation. This puts the countries of the region in competition and enmity, which will certainly not result in maximum closeness and cooperation in the form of BRI. Of the eight countries in the region, six are monarchies that gain legitimacy by offering public goods and rents and somehow lack modern Western legitimacy. The repression of minorities, such as the Shiite minority in Saudi

Arabia and the majority in Bahrain, means that at least part of the society is not associated with the government, and even they have the potential to sabotage the infrastructure and BRI (Torabi & Saneie, 2016: 19-20).

Some other challenges can be added to these challenges, such as parallel and incomplete economies that make these countries rivals at best, current patterns of friendship and enmity in the region that have historical roots and are produced, reproduced, and intensified by some trans-regional actors, differences in economic, customs and financial rules and regulations that slow down the Quasi-inter-regionalism process, differences in the level of infrastructure that some countries like the UAE are good and Iraq is at an unfavorable level.

Conclusion

BRI, which was launched in 2013, has now attracted many (developing) countries. More than 140 countries from around the world are involved in China's Initiative as a major power (Mega-regionalism). The Persian Gulf, which consists of eight countries, also plays a role in BRI (Quasi-inter-regionalism). China seeks to establish balanced relations with all countries in the region and is not a challenge to the United States which provides security in the region. Due to its geostrategic location, substantial amount of oil and gas reserves, investment destination, economic, military, technical cooperation, consumer market, and a region to internationalization of Renminbi, the Persian Gulf is playing an important role in the implementation of BRI. Chinese investment in energy, infrastructure, and technical projects under the framework of BRI is becoming an important factor in bilateral relations. This will create new energy and economic partnerships that China is seeking in the framework of strategic partnerships.

Although neighboring regions are a priority for China in terms of design, policy and attention, the Persian Gulf has been called a neighboring region by China since the second decade of the 21st century and its importance to this country is increasing. Since 2013, due to the importance of the West Asian region in general and the Persian Gulf in particular in BRI, in November 2013, at the Third

Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the Middle East region (the Persian Gulf as a sub-region of it) emerged as China's "neighbor".

It seems that Iran, due to the consumer market of 85 million people, rich mineral resources (energy and copper, steel, etc.), geographical position by land (the ability of land transit to the region of West Asia and Europe, East-West and Northeast-Northwest), and sea (having more than 1000 km of the coastal border in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, North-South) is of particular importance for BRI. However, Western sanctions have so far hampered Iran's high capacity to play its desired role in BRI.

Saudi Arabia also for reasons such as high oil reserves, consumer market, and importance to the Islamic world (because of Mecca and Medina), and the UAE because of its energy reserves and its trade-oriented approach (becoming the commercial hub of the Persian Gulf) is of great importance to BRI. Due to the significant presence of the United States in Iraq, and the threat of terrorism, China has taken precautions against this country. However, Iraq's energy reserves, consumer markets, and extremist devastation, which have required more investment, are driving China to pay attention to this country.

Finally, sanctions, sectarianism, terrorism, and the patterns of friendship and enmity that lead to ethnic-political conflict in the region seem to be the most important constraints on China's initiative. The vacuum created in the security order of the region (due to American policies) is also considered one of China's challenges for the maximum and optimal implementation of this initiative. . China must find a solution for it. Although China, according to Garlick & Havlová, (2020), has been able to pursue its economic interests in the form of a strategic containment approach under the security umbrella of the United States with a low security presence, but increasing economic interests and challenges facing these interests will lead China to pay more attention to military security.

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