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# Rivals or Partners?

Interdependencies  
between the EU and China  
in the Middle East

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*If we think about the Middle East and the influence of extra-regional powers, it is mainly the USA, the EU and Russia, which come to our minds. However, China has quietly started reaching out to its Western neighbourhoods (Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe) in recent years and its presence in many Middle Eastern countries is growing. This paper argues that geopolitical occurrences and the changing role of the United States in the Middle East have led to an increased interdependence between the EU and China in the Middle East, a region where the economic and security interests of each meet, compete and converge. While the main drivers of EU-China relations remain economic, the security dimension of their relationship is steadily increasing. It is therefore timely to undertake a preliminary mapping of EU-China security relations in the Middle East, in order to assess the potential drivers towards cooperation and explore possibilities to turn the increased interdependence into increased cooperation rather than expanding competition. This paper seeks to shed light on the status quo of EU-China security relations in the Middle East and suggests that there is common ground for security cooperation. Furthermore, it highlights possible opportunities and constraints for such cooperation and concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for further research on EU-China relations in the Middle East.*

## 1 Introduction

As the US under President Donald Trump withdraws from the Iran Nuclear Deal and continues to alienate its Western allies in multiple avenues, China has started reaching out to its Western neighborhoods, including the Middle East. Since the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>1</sup> in 2013, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has steadily increased its presence in the region and fostered diplomatic and economic ties with many Middle Eastern countries. As diplomats from Russia, China and the EU gathered in May 2018 to discuss possible new accords to offer Iran financial aid in order to salvage the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), at least two consequences of the withdrawal of the United States were highlighted. First, it has created a window of opportunity for stronger Chinese engagement in the region;

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<sup>1</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative, also called Silk Road Economic Belt, is a Chinese Eurasian infrastructural, development, connectivity and economic cooperation project. It was established in 2013 under Xi Jinping (Ghiasi and Zhou 2017a) and is supposed to interlink the countries and economies of the Eurasian continent. According to the official white paper, 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', the main objectives of the BRI were introduced, also called the 'five connectivities': to coordinate policies in the countries along the road, to facilitate connectivity and trade, to foster financial integration and to establish people-to-people bonds (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2015) .

and second, it has increased the interdependence between the major extra-regional actors in the Middle East, not least between the EU and China.

Most research focuses on the US and Russia as the main external actors in the Middle East, while the growing influence of the PRC and its impact on the EU's role have hitherto received scarce attention. It is therefore timely to undertake a preliminary mapping to explore the growing interdependence between the EU and China in the region, in order to point to possible opportunities and current constraints for cooperation. Especially in the changing geopolitical setting following the USA's withdrawal from the JCPOA, scholarly interest on the question of how the EU and China can and should collaborate in the Middle East is on the rise. Although consensus is growing within the EU to take a toughened stance on China in its outreach to Europe, it is of mutual interest for both for the EU and for China to readjust their foreign and security policies towards each other and to search for common ground on Middle Eastern issues.

This study proposes that there is indeed common ground for cooperation within EU-China security relations. Although different approaches towards key principles of foreign and security policy have long hindered security cooperation between China and the EU, as both actors are divided over key political values, geopolitics and conceptions of world order (Maher 2016), relations have steadily improved. Under the BRI framework both actors agreed to take their policies to a level where they create a "secure and stable environment from China to Europe, including Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria" (Schweisgut, 2015). This exceeds mere economic collaboration and alludes to cooperation in other policy areas, especially the security realm. Although the main drivers of EU-China relations remain of an economic kind, meaning primarily concerns with trade, investment and intellectual property issues (Kirchner et al., 2015; Huotari et al., 2017), the security dimension of the relationship has steadily increased over time and so has the will to cooperate.

The various strategy papers from the European Commission (EC) reflect those changing perceptions from "constructive engagement" (European Commission 1995) to "comprehensive partnership" (European Commission 1998, 2001) and the will to "engage China further", to "support China's transition towards an open society", to "encourage the integration [...] into the world economy" and to "work together in support of peace and stability" (European Commission 2006). As for China, it published its first policy paper on the EU in 2003, which states that there are disagreements and differences between the EU and China, but no fundamental conflict of interests (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2003). In contrast, China's second EU policy paper in 2014 speaks of "tremendous changes" in their relations, highlights "important strategic

consensus” over disagreements and states that “China and the EU have far more agreement than differences” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014).

In promoting the argument that security cooperation between the EU and China is possible despite remaining constraints, this study seeks to contribute to the emerging discussion on China’s role in the Middle East and the changing European-Chinese relationship situated between old legacies and new opportunities. This paper maps existing theory-driven academic and impact-oriented policy literature, and highlights aspects in the assessment of EU-China security relations in the Middle East that deserve closer academic examination. In order to detect preliminary policy implications of the changing geopolitical setting in the region, this study sheds light on the official European and Chinese policy discourse. It does so on a region-to-state level and assesses the relevance of EU-China security relations in the Middle East in their own right, rather than derivative from a US or Russian centered perspective. Finally, the study concludes with incentives for future research.

## **2 Mapping existing research on EU-China relations**

The following section outlines existing research on EU-China relations and has three objectives. First, to sketch the theoretical framework and situate the argument of this study into different strands of literature that have touched upon similar topics. Second, to shed light on aspects that require more attention in research, in order to reach the third objective, which is to provide ideas for future studies on EU-China security relations in the Middle East. The literature review will distinguish between academic theory-driven research and impact-oriented policy research.

### **2.1 Academic, theory-driven literature**

The relationship between the EU and China has been subject to a plethora of academic works. In general, scholarly interest was always closely connected with diplomatic and economic developments between the two actors. Although the establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and China dates back to 1975, research on their relationship emerged significantly later. Despite the conclusion of a Cooperation Agreement in 1985, the EU and China devoted little attention towards each other in their foreign policy strategies in the first phase of diplomatic relations. The upsurge of new cooperation projects since

the 2000s (e.g. the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, CSP) and the revitalization of relations led to increased scholarly interest in the topic.

EU-China relations are neither of an interregional nor of a bilateral state-to-state character. This is reflected in two different conceptual approaches that characterize academic theory-driven literature. The majority of scholars focus on what is referred to as “Sino-European” relations, namely the bilateral relations of individual member states and China. They stress that the EU is not a genuine, unified security actor and that the development of security policies remains a prerogative of the member states (Maher, 2016; Smith and Xie, 2010). With the rising discussion on the EU’s evolving role as a major security actor, a new strand of research has started to develop that emphasizes the scholarly interest and political relevance of the EU’s emerging common foreign, defence and security policy and its impact on EU-China security relations. This strand accentuates the necessity to analyze EU on a region-to-state-level (Kirchner 2015).

In addition to these rather conceptual differences, the mutual perceptions of the EU and China have changed over time. The present discussion circles around the question of whether China is rising with peaceful motives (Chen 2016) or whether it is seeking hegemony and aspiring to a monopoly of power. To date, two strands of literature have emerged. Some scholars stress the theory of a ‘Chinese threat’ and interpret the rising role of China in its Western neighborhoods as a threat to national and international interest of the EU in ideological, economic, strategic and geopolitical terms (Johnston 2003; Broomfield 2003). These scholars still base their research heavily on the EU’s strategies towards a rising China (Huotari et al. 2017; Griesse 2006) and seek to explain the behavior of the PRC predominantly from a neoclassical or offensive realist perspective. They name the aspiration for power, economic wealth and the search for new energy sources as key drivers behind China’s offensive foreign policy, and their research mainly focuses on power politics (Zweig and Bi 2005; Dannreuther 2003; Broomfield 2003). The other strand of scholars provide a more diverse observation of Chinese foreign policy and focuses not only on possible threats, which constraint cooperation between the EU and China, but also on opportunities (Kirchner, Christiansen, and Dorussen 2016; Maher 2016; Shambaugh 2007; Pradt 2016; Möller 2002; Hongjian 2018). These scholars concentrate on the fact that China positions itself as a constructive actor within the international system and makes an effort to improve relations with its neighboring countries (Stanzel 2007; Shambaugh 2005). Examples of these efforts are China’s active participation in the six party talks with North Korea,<sup>2</sup> as well as its contribution of troops for UN deployment in conflict

<sup>2</sup> South Korea, Japan, the United States, Russia, China and North Korea.

areas. The current general sense of this train of thought is that cooperation between the EU and China beyond the economic and in the security realm is possible. Although deeper alignment is still hindered by contradicting foreign and security policy principles, there is a rising interdependence between the EU and China, which makes security cooperation favorable (Stanzel 2007). As possible areas for cooperation, scholars mention non-traditional security issues (e.g. conflict resolution and prevention in third countries, or climate and energy security) that pose a threat to international society, and enlarge the scope of security to encompass also political, economic, financial, technological or cultural security (Liping 2008).

In short, the majority of researchers conceptually sees EU-China security relations as being characterized by competition rather than cooperation. However, the possibilities of cooperation are the subject of a small but emerging strand of research, which considers the increasing interdependence between the EU and China and analytically assesses the opportunities and constraints for security cooperation. Still, literature on EU-China security cooperation in general, and in the Middle East in particular, remains scarce.

## 2.2 Policy-oriented literature

In policy-oriented literature, which focuses both on the present relationship between the EU and China and sketches possible future developments, EU-China security relations are depicted differently from academic literature in this area. The most prominent difference is that academic literature mainly focuses on analyzing activities of cooperation that have already been implemented, while policy-oriented literature can and does focus on drawing possible scenarios for future development of EU-China security relations, linked with concrete policy recommendations and suggested courses of action. Therefore, the scope and degree of what is implied by the term 'cooperation', differs between academic and policy-oriented literature. Academic scholars assess cooperation in three different ways: either they measure cooperation by the amount of agreements of actions two actors sign on bilateral or multilateral level; or they focus on the extent to which two actors engage in joint actions and actually implement an agreement (Keohane and Martin, 1995; Mitchell and Hensel, 2006). Only few include the level of intentions or rhetoric into their operationalization of cooperation. Currently, many prospects for cooperation in EU-China relations are still at the level of discourse and are not yet ready to be implemented. Policy-oriented research embraces a broader understanding of the term 'cooperation' and learns from already implemented cooperative or non-cooperative actions. It sheds light on articulated intentions on a rather discursive level, as political discourse

can create a political momentum, which facilitates and paves the way for future cooperation. Therefore, policy-oriented literature takes up the emerging strand of academic research that focuses on the evaluation of opportunities and constraints for cooperation and naturally builds upon the argument that increased interdependence should lead to a pivot of the EU towards China – although with certain restraints.

Prominent studies on the future of EU-China relations from within the European policy circles can be found with the Mercator Institute for China Studies, Rasmussen Global, the European Council on Foreign Relations, the Stockholm International for Peace Research Institute (which has a whole research branch dealing with Chinese–European cooperation in traditional and non-traditional security) and the Global Public Policy Institute, among others. In contrast to academic literature, the majority of policy-oriented work includes the Chinese perspective or even focuses explicitly on analyses of China-relevant issues: it recognizes the growing European–Chinese interdependence and attempts to find acceptable European answers. Policy-scholars, in general, agree on the currency that China is an emerging power and has a rising impact on different aspects of the EU’s foreign and security policy interests. Accordingly, many policy scholars recognize that EU-China relations are at a critical juncture and that the next steps will decide whether increased competition or expanded cooperation becomes the focus. (Summers et al. 2017).

Two main trends can be detected in policy-oriented literature. Scholars of the first trend conclude that competition and rivalry are more likely than cooperation in EU-China security relations: they look to find strategies for European reactions to China’s increased presence, namely to counter China’s engagement in world regions where the EU has previously been a dominant security actor. For instance, Duchâtel and Duplaix conclude their analysis of China’s Maritime Silk Road<sup>3</sup> with the political notion that the Silk Road creates more competition than cooperation for the European Union (Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018), and stress the importance of finding new and innovative strategies to respond to Chinese power aspirations. Huotari et al. (2015, 2017) assess China’s “emerging global security profile” (2017, 10) and develop strategies for an adequate European behavior. With a similar notion, Benner et al. (2018; Benner and Wright 2018) present their work on China’s rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and consider it a “challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe’s values and interests” (2018, 2).

Scholars of the second trend, focus on how the “stalemate” (Godement and Vasselier 2017, 16) in EU-China relations can be overcome by being both more

<sup>3</sup> The Maritime Silk Road is the maritime section of the Belt and Road Initiative and is intended to connect China to economic hubs around the world via three ‘blue economic passages’ (Funairole and Hillman 2018).



competitive and cooperative simultaneously. These scholars assess the potential for cooperation with China despite current constraints, and include the Chinese discourse and perspective on issues of European interest. For example, Ghiasy and Zhou shed light on the implications of the BRI on the EU as foreign policy actor in Central and South Asia, as well as for EU-China security cooperation (Ghiasy and Zhou 2017a; 2017b), and propose policy recommendations which address both the opportunities which this new infrastructure brings about, as well as the constraints resulting from China's expansive behavior. Similar to many academics, these scholars consider non-traditional security issues the most fruitful realm for cooperation, as traditional security issues remain prone to competition and conflict. They also stress that cooperation is most likely to occur in policy fields where economic interests are at stake, with resulting spillover to the security realm. This reasoning follows the neofunctionalist assumption that cooperation in one policy field can indeed trigger cooperation in another. Similarly, Huotari et al. (2017) assess China's emergence as a global security actor and make a first step towards an encompassing evaluation of this emergence and its impact on core European interests in Central Asia and Africa, and endorse the political currency that China has indeed the potential to become a closer partner for the EU, even though it will also continue to act as a competitor and adversary.

### **2.3 Incentives for further research**

The above literature review suggests three aspects which would benefit from additional scholarly attention. First, it can be concluded, that while the constraints for cooperation in the security realm and the possible threat which China poses to Western actors feature most prominently in literature, there is a growing amount of research that deals with the possibilities for cooperation despite these constraints. This latter body of literature certainly requires more attention, and further analyses on potential common ground for security cooperation between the EU and China are needed. Second, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the specific security relations between the EU and China in the Middle East. It is possible that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA will increase scholarly interest in whether the changing role of the US in the region creates new opportunities and occasions for the EU and China to deal with each other as security partners, or whether it rather deepens rivalries. Third, it is necessary to conduct further thorough research which includes the Chinese perspective and contributes to building "high-caliber, independent China expertise" (Benner et al. 2018, 7) within the EU. This last focus would potentially provide helpful insights into possible future developments in the region and might help to turn the increasing EU-China interdependence into cooperation intentions rather than increased threat perceptions. It is necessary

to recognize that China relates also to individual EU-member states and that these relations, especially with Germany, France and the United Kingdom, are certainly more established than with the EU as a whole. Focusing specifically on the EU and China as two entities would add additional value to the analyses of EU-China security relations. These region-to-state relations have their own dynamics and are meaningful and consequential in the context of global governance (Christiansen 2016, 31). In-depth analyses with an actual EU-China focus would therefore complement the picture of what EU-China relations in the security realm entail in scope or degree.

### 3 Official European and Chinese security policy discourses

The following section examines how the EU's role in the Middle East may interact with the increasing Chinese presence in the region by providing insights into the official European and Chinese policy discourses on security cooperation. The section adds empirical observations on the status quo of EU-China security relations to the literature review and underpins the need for further research through empirical evidence. In order to detect trends and patterns of behavior of the EU and China in the security realm, the official policy papers of the EU and China respectively, as well as all joint declarations of annual EU-China summits, are analyzed. Further information stems from European and Chinese media outlets, in English and in Mandarin. The section first explores security as a policy field in EU-China relations, and outlines different security issues, which are important in the EU-China discourse, in order to shed light on the stance of the EU and of China towards security cooperation in the Middle East. By tallying specific research fields of interest, it becomes clearer that the interdependence between both actors in the security realm, especially in the Middle East, is increasing.

Although the current main drivers for EU-China cooperation are economic – foremost concerning trade, investment, or monetary and intellectual property issues – security has become a rising topic (Giessmann 2008) and is frequently addressed by both entities in their official policy documents. Figure 1 displays the number of mentions of a range of selected policy fields in EU and China official policy papers and the joint declarations of the annual EU-China summits from 1998 to 2018.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In total, this creates a text corpus of 31 official documents, covering a time span from 1985 to 2018. The documents were coded inductively. A detailed coding scheme is available upon request.

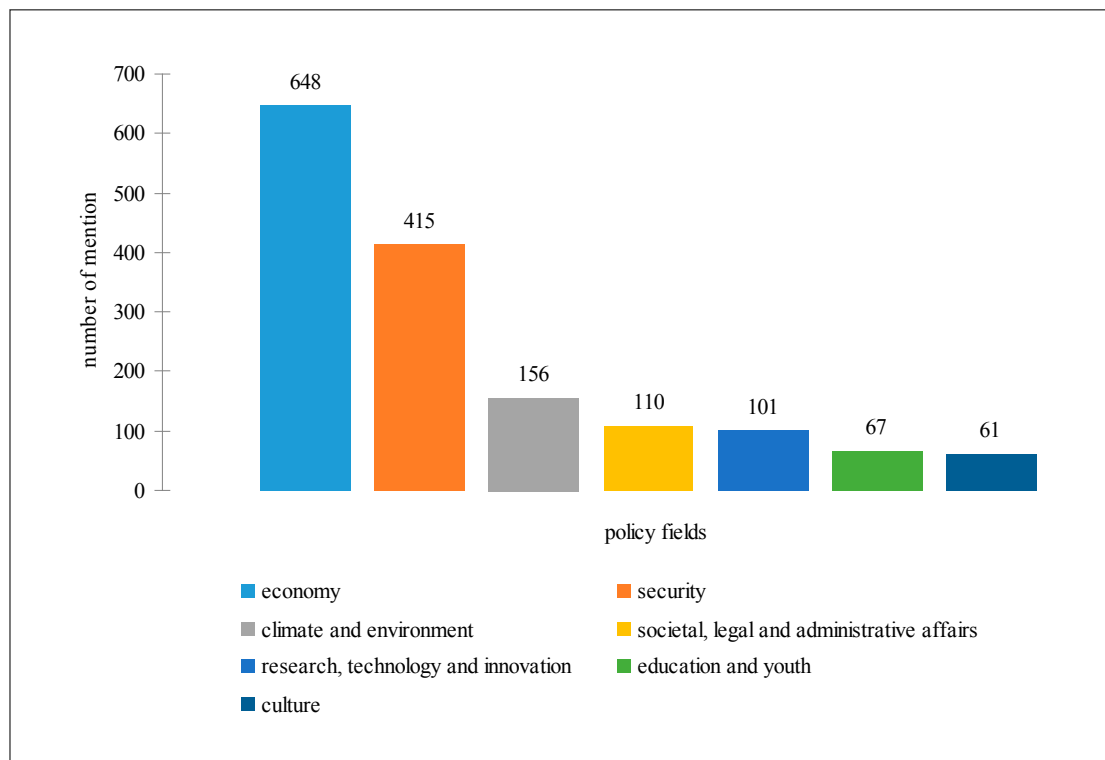


Figure 1: Policy Fields in EU-China Relations. Author's depiction

Security is now the second most frequently mentioned policy area in EU-China relations after economy and before legal, administrative and political affairs. This corresponds to the wording within the policy papers analyzed. For instance, since 2010, the CSP encompasses also foreign affairs, security issues and global challenges, including climate change, global economy governance, combatting terrorism and organized crime, deals with illegal migration and fosters maritime security. This finding correlates with the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, which names peace and security as one of the most important policy fields of cooperation (European Union and People's Republic of China 2013).

A tallying of eight different security issues (regional security, conflict resolution and prevention, food security, military security, nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, cybersecurity, terrorism and organized crime, climate and energy security, maritime security / anti-piracy, human security / development aid, and migration / immigration) shows that China and the EU put more emphasis on some security issues than on others (see figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 is based on the same text corpus as Figure 1. The different security issues were coded inductively. A detailed coding scheme is available upon request.

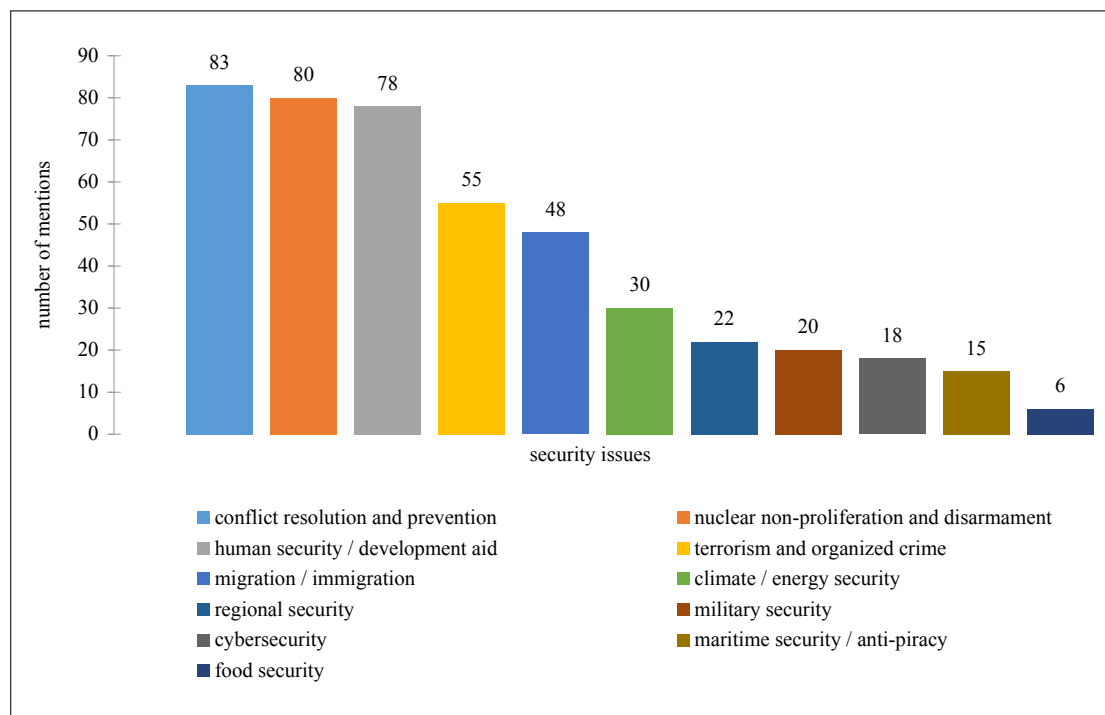


Figure 2: Security Issues in EU-China Relations (mentions in total). Author's depiction

For instance, non-traditional security issues (e.g. conflict resolution and prevention in third countries, human security, climate and energy security, and food security) are mentioned more frequently in combination with cooperation efforts, while traditional security issues (e.g. military security or regional security) only marginally appear. In particular, conflict resolution and prevention, and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament stand out, and also the fight against terrorism and organized crime features high on the list of security priorities in EU-China relations. This results is counterintuitive, as one could expect lower levels of convergence and cooperation for security issues in which difference over sovereignty issues, non-interference and territorial integrity remain, such as conflict resolution and prevention. So it is striking that the discourse circles mainly around the issues of conflict resolution and prevention and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, because China and the EU adhere to very different if not contradicting principles of foreign and security policy. (Section 4 will explore this in more detail.) Possible reasons for increased intent to cooperate in the security might stem from the perception of common threats in the non-traditional security realm, such as the possibility of nuclear proliferation and the rising terrorist threat. Furthermore, neo-functional spillover effects from the economic to the security realm might occur, with the aim to secure economic investments and to pursue national economic interests. However, further research is necessary to analytically expound possible motives for security cooperation between the EU and China.

The paper now moves from security issues in EU-China relations in general to the Middle Eastern context in particular. Four nations from the Middle East are considered. These countries are either part of the land route of the Belt and Road Initiative or pivotal lands alongside: Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The EU and China make explicit reference to these countries when they want to coordinate foreign and security policies. Most EU-China policy papers post-2011 emphasize that bringing peace to the above mentioned countries is an important precondition for stability and long-term security of both the EU and China (European Union and People's Republic of China 2013). Conflict resolution and prevention is mentioned in context of all four countries, while nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament is mainly mentioned with reference to Iran. Figure 3 displays the security issues which are addressed regarding the four countries mentioned in the text corpus.

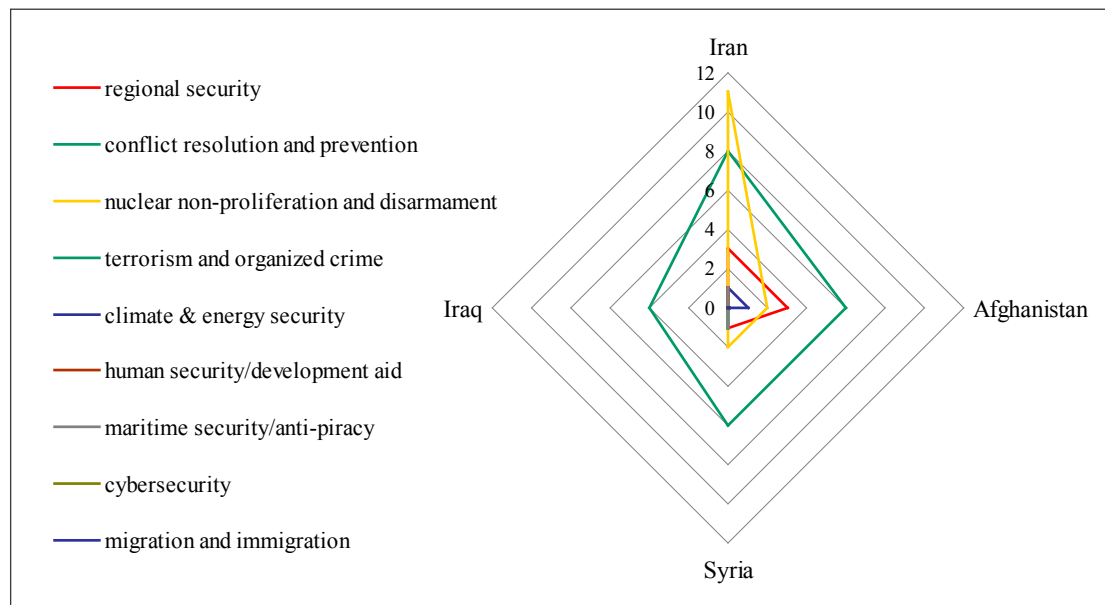


Figure 3: Jointly Addressed Security Issues in the Middle East. Author's depiction

## 4 EU-China security relations in the Middle East

The following section briefly outlines the differing foreign and security policy approaches of the EU and China that account for the main constraints to deeper alignment in the Middle East. This is followed by an introduction of the opportunities to cooperate, with a special emphasis on Chinese interests.

## 4.1 Constraints for cooperation

### *Non-interference, sovereignty and territorial integrity*

China promotes three main principles in its foreign policy (外交政策): sovereignty (主权), territorial integrity (领土完整), and non-interference (不干涉) in the internal affairs of other countries. These principles are deeply rooted in the country's tradition and primarily serve the domestic concerns of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such as preservation of stability and regime survival (Huotari u. a. 2017). They originated from the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, formulated in 1954, and became the basic norms shaping China's relations to other states (Government of China 1954). The Five Principles are: 1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; 2) mutual non-aggression; 3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; 4) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and 5) peaceful coexistence. Even amidst the opening-up of foreign policy under Xi Jinping, with the aim of China becoming a more active, innovative player in the international arena, these principles have remained (Kejing 2013). And despite certain shifts towards a more liberal interpretation of non-interference, they still prominently feature in official Chinese rhetoric. The country's adherence to national sovereignty translates into a general disapproval of foreign intervention and the use of force (Finamore 2017). Consequently, China protects its own national territorial integrity and sovereignty aggressively against any form of foreign interference and oppression. Yet, the opening-up, China's ambition to be perceived as a great power and the corresponding responsibilities have altered the principle of sovereignty, or at least changed China's perception of it. While for decades the principle of non-interference into other countries' domestic affairs has been interpreted as a strict opposition to any form of external intervention, China has now become one of the biggest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations (concerning the provision of peacekeeping personnel). The People's Republic even voted in favor of the A/RES/60/1 Resolution at the UN World Summit in 2005, which endorsed the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) (Finamore 2017). China, however, interprets this doctrine differently than most other UN member states and urges a constrained, multilateral approach to the application of R2P. It supports pillar one and two of the doctrine,<sup>6</sup> but is reluctant to permit the actual use of force unless the principle is applied strictly within the boundaries of the 2005 World Summit Outcome language (Chen 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> The first two pillars of the R2P doctrine state that every state has the responsibility to protect its populations and that the international community has the responsibility to encourage each state in meeting this objective.

The European Union takes a different stance towards territorial integrity and sovereignty. Its 28 members decided to pool their sovereignty in policy fields and transfer it to a European governance system (Sjursen 2006). The principle of sovereignty, if understood in the Chinese way, would contradict the actual constitution of the EU with its supranational institutions, common laws and wide-ranging regulations. Concerning interventions or interferences in other countries, the EU considers itself a humanitarian actor and in this role does intervene worldwide in reaction to crises. With the conclusion of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2018, the EU expanded its competences to take a leading role in peacekeeping operations, humanitarian interventions and crisis management, using both civilian and military instruments (European External Action Service 2018b).

### ***Multilateralism and multipolarity***

Two foreign policy concepts of the EU and China, which repeatedly clash in the Middle East, are multilateralism and multipolarity. Multilateralism means the joint action of several states working together to increase efficiency and practicability of their foreign policies (Scott 2013). Multipolarity focuses on balancing against prevailing power and hegemons by distribution of power among multiple important actors in the international system (Stanzel 2007). The EU is one of the main advocates of multilateralism and considers it a fundamental European value: The goal to contribute to building a multilateral world is even included into the Treaty on the European Union. In contrast, multipolarity features prominently in official Chinese foreign policy doctrines.

However, there is a discernable shift towards multilateralism in Chinese foreign policy. Wu and Lansdowne term this a “turn to multilateralism” (Wu and Lansdowne 2011, 3). In the late 1990s / early 2000s, China started to expand the number of its memberships in multilateral arrangements in the security realm, whereas previously it has supported multilateralism only in the economic realm, as a member of the WTO or ASEAN+3. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether this turn towards multilateralism is a true shift in Chinese foreign policy thinking or whether it rather represents a change of instruments to protect national interests more strategically in a changing world order (Wang, 2012).

### ***Good governance and the promotion of norms***

China’s core understanding of governance, which is referred to as *zhìli* (治理) in Chinese (Scholte 2008), is a sovereign and strong state (Stahl, 2011). The Chinese foreign policy aims to serve economic and political national interests and is considered an extension of and support for domestic policy ends (Giessmann 2008). Notably, the concept of ‘good governance’ (*shànzhì* – 善治) is not

often used in Chinese policy discourse. The EU, in contrast, constantly stresses the importance of good governance as transparent, efficient and democratic. Especially in the last few years, the European understanding of 'governance' has developed from a concept to describe the EU's internal structure (Jachtenfuchs 2001) towards a concept that encompasses the EU's main constitutional norms: human rights, democracy and rule of law (Stahl 2011). Governance, when it now appears in official EU policy discourse, is an expression of the EU's normative claim (Manners 2008). As enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, the EU is based on the respect for freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. This not only shapes EU foreign policy influences situations that pose a threat either to the EU itself or to one of its partners. In those situations, following its good governance approach, the EU adheres to the human security approach towards international conflict resolutions and calls for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (Putten and Chu 2012).

The EU's approach to good governance is very evident in its dealings in the Middle East, while China focuses on a 'no strings attached' approach which grants economic investments without requiring reforms towards more transparent, democratic or efficient governance. Although China is not averse to shaping the political environment in countries where it has economic or security interests, it does not focus on promoting human rights or engaging civil society in state building. This resulted in the attempt of several Middle and Central Eastern autocrats, who have tried to embrace the Chinese version of "economic liberalist coupled with tight political control" (Dorsey 2018, n.p.) to stabilize their own authoritarian rule. Such an approach also undermines European efforts to create stable, transparent and efficient states and promote human rights and international law.

## 4.2 Opportunities for cooperation

Despite these contradicting foreign and security policy approaches between the EU and China, which play out in the Middle East and are hindrances to deeper cooperation between the two actors, there remains common ground for cooperation, with various possibilities for further cooperation still to be explored.

### *Syria*

Even as the EU aims to "seek active co-operation with China on issues such as stabilizing Afghanistan and Syria, tackling the migration challenge, and contributing to the overall settlement in the Middle East" (European Commission 2016), China has also stressed on various occasions that both China and the



EU needed to step up security cooperation in Syria in order to maintain the momentum of Syrian political dialogue. Beijing notably called the Syrian case a “common concern” (共同关心) with the EU (Xinhua News Agency 2017). Syria could thus provide common ground for cooperation via their shared interest in pacifying the country. However, the underlying reasons which lead to this convergence of interests differ. For China, the ongoing crisis primarily implies a threat to national security, as the enduring conflict has grave implications for Chinese Islamist non-state groups operating in China. Consequently, the Chinese stance towards Syria has changed from one of caution to one of reaction over time. Although official discourse barely touches upon this topic, Beijing’s commitment to finding a peaceful solution for Syria is mainly driven by fears of approximately 5000 Chinese Uighur fighters who have joined the battle in Syria later returning East (Chaziza 2016; Clarke 2016; Duchâtel and Duplaix 2018). The Uighurs are one of China’s 55 recognized ethnic minorities and mainly live in the northwestern province of Xinjian. In recent years, Uighurs have had ties with global militant movements, including al-Qaeda. The Xinjian province is also believed to be a source of insurgency against the Chinese political leadership (Hyer 2006). With national security and territorial integrity, rather than its financial investments, at risk in Syria, China has encouraged conflict resolution in a third country for the first time in its history. China’s special envoy to Syria has repeatedly supported mediation talks between all parties in Syria in search for a lasting resolution of conflict.

Besides its own individual state efforts, China actively engaged in the UN-led Syrian peace process (Murphy 2017). This active engagement meets similar European interests in the country, which focus on creating a stable and secure Syria. In contrast to the Chinese approach, the EU intends to promote democracy and human rights in its foreign and security policy, and thus the EU’s interests are foremost ending the war through a genuine political transition, addressing the humanitarian needs of the Syrian population, supporting its resilience and promoting an inclusive transition in the long-term (Council of the European Union 2017). Despite the differences with regard to underlying motivations, a closer cooperation between the EU and China, especially under the multilateral UN framework, can serve as common ground for jointly working to improve the humanitarian situation and to end the conflict.

Further cooperation measures could happen under the framework of the Agreement on Strategic Cooperation between the European Police Office and the Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic (2016), which focuses on information exchange in order to combat terrorism more effectively.

## *Afghanistan*

Located adjacent to Afghanistan, the People's Republic is interested in a secure neighboring country to avoid spillover of instability. As Afghanistan shares racial and religious ties with the northwest area of China, the political stability of the country exerts a major impact on the stability and security of the whole region. China also has strategic geopolitical interests in Afghanistan, as the country is located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. Improving security and stability also facilitates the launch of new Chinese investment projects, with special interest in the Afghanistan's natural resources (gemstone lapis lazuli, iron, copper, gold, cobalt, rare earth metals, and lithium). The mining of those resources has to date been either hindered by the fragile security situation or has led to disputes between local security forces and the Taliban (Stanzel 2016); accordingly, China's import and export rates to and from Afghanistan remain low (Worldbank 2018b; 2018a). Nevertheless, China has demonstrated increased interest in Afghanistan and, especially since the establishment of the BRI in 2013, has been "slowly and gradually increasing its security relations" (Khalil 2016); and with the withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan in 2014, China has started to adopt a more proactive stance. Concerned about the effects of Afghan instability on the PRC due to terrorist attacks, a possible influx of militants or cross-border organized crime, China has established an anti-terrorism alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. With tensions rising between the government and the Muslim Uyghur minority in the western Chinese province Xinjiang, the PRC wants to avoid possible collaboration between its own Muslim minorities and the Taliban or other Islamist groups in Afghanistan (Chaziza 2016). Its main concern is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), formerly called East Turkestan Islamist Movement (ETIM), a party that was founded by Uighurs in Western China and is believed to train fighters to promote insurgency in Xinjiang (Clarke and Kan 2017). The PRC thus supports the Afghan National Unity Government in the ongoing peace and reconciliation process (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016a). China has also positioned itself as a moderator between Kabul and Islamabad to improve the overall regional security situation and promote a stable environment for its investments along the Silk Road. During the first China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in December 2017, all three parties agreed on extending the China-Pakistan-Economic-Corridor to Afghanistan (CPEC) to enable further investments (Xinhua News 2017).

The EU is also concerned with Afghanistan's stability and acts to promote long-term stability and development in the country. Under the framework of the an EU-Afghanistan cooperation agreement on partnership and development, signed in February 2017, security problems in the country, e.g. money

laundering, terrorist financing, organized crime and corruption, will be cooperatively combatted. (Council of the European Union 2016). Similar to China, one of the most pressing concerns of the EU is that Afghanistan might become once again a base for fundamentalist Islamic terrorism. Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stressed the importance and influence of China's role in the Afghanistan peace process and identifies "many issues of common interest" (European External Action Service 2017) between the EU and the PRC, one being the fight against terrorism.

### *Iraq*

The EU and China share the interest of creating a stable and secure state in Iraq. China's engagement in the country is mainly driven by its seemingly insatiable hunger for oil (Arango and Clifford 2013) and is the main reason for their support of the Iraqi reconstruction process. Over the past decade, China has invested increasingly in the Iraq's oil sector. Two examples, among others: in January 2018, Iraq revealed the construction of an oil refinery at the port of Fao on the Persian Gulf together with two Chinese companies; and in June 2018, the Iraqi Ministry of Oil signed new contracts with two Chinese firms to explore and develop oil and gas blocks in Iraq (Xinhua News 2018). Almost all major Chinese companies engage in oil extraction in Iraq and its neighboring countries, and over the past decade China has developed into the main importer of Iraqi crude (Downs 2013). To secure future investments and infrastructure projects, China is interested in stabilizing the country and supports state building and conflict resolution efforts. Iraq is located along the BRI, which offers both Iraq and China great potential benefits. Consequently, China currently engages in conflict resolution efforts, assists Baghdad in restoring the country's infrastructure and "will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016b, n.p.).

The EU also has well-established trade relations with Iraq. In 2017, the EU imports from Iraq were worth 13.1 billion Euros, with 99.6 percent for oil (Directorate-General for Trade 2018). Conversely to China however, the EU's efforts in Iraq are a blueprint of European foreign policy as the crisis in Iraq affects Europe in several security aspects: the refugee issues, human trafficking and the fight against the Islamist terror group Islamic State. Even as China, the EU stresses the need to preserve the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq to build a stable political system (General Secretariat of the Council 2018). As both the EU and China are threatened by the mounting terror in the region, both contribute to the Counter-terrorism Implementation Taskforce (Junbo and Zhimin 2016) and both signed that UN resolution 2379, which deals

with “war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by (ISIL/ Da’esh) in Iraq” (United Nations Security Council 2017). Despite these platforms for cooperation, China’s engagement in Iraq’s security has not yet reached the extent of the EU: its efforts to implement anti-terrorism measures remain low, as do their attempts to actively seek deeper alignment with the EU.

### *Iran*

Iran is a prominent subject in EU-China security relations with regard to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. This may in part be due to China’s role as a UN veto power, having called the UNSC in 2007 to address the Iranian issue. Chinese own engagement with Iran has a longer history than the other Middle Eastern countries. China and Iran concluded a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016, followed by a formal visit of President Xi Jinping to Iran (Yang 2018). It can be expected, due to the events of 2018, that Iran and its nuclear program will be mentioned more frequently in EU-China policy papers and joint declarations due to current developments in the region and the changing Chinese stance towards Iran. As the world’s main oil importing country, China’s demand for oil drives its interest in a stable and China-friendly situation in Iran. With its constantly growing economy China’s demand for external oil will certainly increase, even as its main oil fields in Daqing, Shengli and Liaohe are drying up (Zhang 1999). Iranian oil is considered a major resource to meet China’s demands. Especially following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran again features more prominently in Chinese policy discourse and provision of financial aid to save the deal appears to be one of China’s current priorities. In June 2018, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of the JCPOA during a meeting with the Iranian president Rouhani, as he granted Iran ongoing Chinese support. For China, the JCPOA is “conducive to maintaining the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and peace and stability in the Middle East” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b). The turnabout in US policy implies a major boost for Beijing, as China considers itself the “natural next choice to lead future negotiations” (Perper 2018), together with the EU and Russia (Faris and Lee 2017). China will put a lot of effort into saving the JCPOA, as its failure would damage its economic relations with Iran, which had flourished since the lifting of sanctions (Azodi 2018). During the first half of 2017, bilateral trade grew 31 percent and reached 18 billion USD (Financial Tribune 2017). This fuels into China’s energy security interests and its intention to gain access to Iran’s large consumer market. Accordingly, Chinese companies are investing significantly in energy infrastructure globally, including the developing countries along the BRI, as well as in Iran (Summers et al. 2017).

Similar to China, the EU has also demonstrated commitment to the JCPOA after the US withdrawal. The European Commission acts to protect the interests of EU companies investing in Iran (European Commission 2018), and has promised to ensure that the lifting of sanctions would be continued (Council of the European Union 2018). In 2016, the first fiscal year after the JCPOA implementation, EU exports to Iran increased 27.8 percent to 8.2 billion Euro (10.8 billion in 2017), and the EU's imports from Iran grew 34.8 percent to 5.5 billion Euro (10.1 billion in 2017) (European External Action Service 2018a). Thus, the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal may have opened another window of opportunity for EU-China security cooperation in Iran, where their economic and security interests converge. The securing of non-proliferation and supporting disarmament is perceived as national interest for the EU and for China alike, as expressed in their Joint Declaration on Non-Proliferation and Arms Control (2014), in which they adhere to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime (NNP) and explicitly stress the importance of the international verification agencies, namely the International Atomic Energy Agency or the Organization on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The Iranian case showcases that working with or within international institutions can foster cooperation between countries: all negotiations concerning the JCPOA took place under the UN framework and China actively participated in them as part of the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, UK and the US) (Almond 2016; Finamore 2017).

## 5 Conclusion and recommendations

This study puts forward the argument that there is a growing interdependence between the EU and China in the Middle East. Both face security challenges in the four Middle Eastern countries that were analyzed and both share interests in the security or in the economic realm, albeit to different degrees. Via a mapping of EU-China relations in the Middle East, this study highlights the need for deeper alignment in the security realm and stresses the necessity for both China and the EU to readjust their policies towards each other. It outlines that, despite contradicting approaches towards foreign and security principles, there is common ground for security cooperation between the EU and China in the Middle East and suggests that such cooperation is necessary. Finally, the study advocates that rather than hard security issues, it is the softer aspects of the EU foreign and security policy goals that may offer common ground for cooperation with the PRC.

Accordingly, the EU's and China's policy discourses should consider to shift the focus towards issues such as development aid, conflict prevention, state and institution building, cybersecurity, non-proliferation and disarmament or anti-terrorism. By establishing innovative cooperation formats, the EU and China could potentially fill the current US void in the Middle East, assist the region in becoming more stable and secure, and improve EU-China relations in the long-term. EU-China relations are at a critical juncture and now is the time to decide the scope and degree of future EU-China security cooperation in the Middle East. In order to make full use of the opportunities for potential cooperation and to find strategies to reduce the current constraints, it is necessary for academic and policy scholars to foster academic research on China's role in the Middle East and to analytically assess possible drivers towards increased EU-China security cooperation. As outlined in the literature review, it is strongly recommended to also take into consideration the Chinese perspective on security cooperation with the EU in the region, in order to build high-caliber, independent expertise.

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