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Everyone's Friend, No-One's Foe: China's Persian Gulf Hedging Strategy Since 1979

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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PhD Government and International Affairs

School of Government and International Affairs

Durham University

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2024

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Declaration

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Abstract

Since Deng Xiaoping's opening-up and modernisation reforms in the late 1970s, China's approach towards the Persian Gulf has been characterised by prioritising cultivating positive and strong relations with all regional states irrespective of their governance traits and of rivalries or conflicts between them. Given that the Persian Gulf is a region in which mutual securitisation, conflicts, and hostilities between neighbours have been ubiquitous, this approach, defined in this dissertation as strategic hedging, could see China be viewed by regional states as unfavourable, according to conventional wisdom about the region.

Defining the Persian Gulf as a regional security subcomplex (which includes the US, the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq), this dissertation seeks to examine: The contours of China's hedging strategy amid regional conflicts and rivalries since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979; the efficacy of this strategy, which is taken as being whether China has succeeded in realising its interests in the region and whether its strategy has impacted upon this; and regional perceptions of its strategy. To achieve this, the dissertation explores Beijing's Persian Gulf hedging strategy across four chronological time periods from the Iranian revolution to the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iran deal. The first is from 1979-1988, incorporating the US hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war. The second is from 1989-1991, focusing on the Kuwait crisis from the Iraqi invasion to the US-led operation to liberate Kuwait. The third is from 1992-2003, examining China's navigation of the US' dual-containment strategy towards Iran and Iraq and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The fourth, and final, period is from 2004-2023, which analyses China's navigation of the protracted Iran-GCC/US rivalry (amid the nuclear issue but also in terms of broader hostilities) and the GCC split.

The dissertation draws on constructivist and neoclassical realist insights to outline the regional security complex paradigm and to understand Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf so as to assess whether or not China has been successful in realising its interests in the region amid the deployment of its hedging strategy. The use of constructivist insights allows the exploration of normative and ideational interests, in addition to purely materialist interests. Drawing on secondary literature, extensive English, Arabic, and Persian primary sources, in addition to quantitative data from various sources, the dissertation ultimately attempts to unearth whether strategic hedging is conducive for an external power to achieve its interests in a regional security subcomplex characterised by deep divisions, tensions, and hostilities between its states.

Table of Contents

Part 1 – Building Blocks

Introduction - China's Persian Gulf Hedging Strategy since 1979……………………………..1

Theoretical Concepts……………………………………………………………..5

Structure of the Dissertation…………………………………………………...7

Chapter 1 – Strategic Hedging: Towards an Assessment Framework………………………….9

Introduction……………………………………………………………………9

Strategic Hedging……………………………………………………………...9

Strategic Hedging……………………………………………..…...10

The Research Puzzle: China's Hedging Strategy amid Persian Gulf Rivalries.13

Assessing the Efficacy of Strategic Hedging………………………………….15

China's Interests in the Persian Gulf: Neoclassical Realism with Constructivism……17

The Benefits and Shortcomings of Realism…………………………………...17

Constructivist Insights………………………………………………………..21

Identity, Ideas, and Foreign Policy in China…………………………………………….24

Conclusions and Perspectives……………………………………………………...29

Chapter 2 – A Penetrated Region: The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex………..30

Introduction………………………………………………………………………..30

The Regional Security Complex Paradigm………………………………………..30

Globalisation: A Challenge to the Paradigm?..32

Regional Security Subcomplexes……………………………………………..33

Constructivism, Realism, and the Regional Security Complex Paradigm……33

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex…………………………………….35

Persian Gulf Threat Perceptions……………………………………………..36

The Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Origins of the GCC…….38

A Penetrated System: External Powers in the Persian Gulf…………………………...44

The United States and the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex……..46

The US Security Architecture………………………………………………47

The Emergence and Re-Emergence of External Powers in Regional Affairs………..49

Russia……………………………………………………………...………49

India……………………………………………………………………….50

Japan………………………………………………………………………51

European States and the European Union…………………………………52

Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea………..…...52

Conclusions and Perspectives…………………………………………………...…53

Chapter 3 – Methodology……………………………………………………...…..55

Case Selection…………………………………………………………………...57

Data Collection: Methods………………………………………………………….61

Secondary Data: Literature, Articles, Statistical Data……………………….62

Primary Data: Content Analysis……………………………………………..63

Part 2 – China's Hedging Strategy in the Persian Gulf

Chapter 4 – 1979-1988: China's Hedging Strategy from Iran's Revolution to the Iran-Iraq War……………………………………………………………………………………...67

Introduction………………………………………………………………………..67

Theoretical Insights…………………………………………………………..68

China's Interests: Redefined Approaches in a New Era……………………………..69

China's Persian Gulf Interests………………………………………………73

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex: Stark Transformations…………..78

Iran's Islamic Revolution, the US, and its Persian Gulf Neighbours…………78

The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War……………………………………………79

The Iran-Iraq War…………………..……………………………………..81

GCC States' Responses to the Conflict……………………………………..84

US Responses to the Conflict and the Growth of the US Security Umbrella….85

The Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex…….87

China's Policies Towards the Persian Gulf: The Emergence of its Hedging Strategy..88

China's Role in International Diplomacy: The Iran Hostage Crisis…………89

China's Role in International Diplomacy: The War and Persian Gulf Hostilities…………………………………………………………………………90

The Persian Gulf at War: Chinese Arms Sales and Military Involvement……93

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions……………………96

Iran's Responses and Perceptions……………………………………………96

Iraq and the GCC States' Responses and Perceptions………………………98

US Responses and Perceptions………………………………………………99

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?...100

Diplomacy, Trade, and Arms Sales…………………………………………100

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible but Independent Power…………………103

Preventing Superpower Interference and the Question of Regional Stability.105

Conclusions and Perspectives……………………………………………………106

Chapter 5 – 1989-1991: China and the Kuwait Crisis………………………………108

Introduction………………………………………………………………………108

Theoretical Insights……………………………………………………………108

China's Interests: Recovering from Tiananmen Square………………………..……109

The Persian Gulf in this Equation………………………………….…………113

The Persian Gulf: Iraqi Aggression and US Entrenchment…………………………114

Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait: A Brief Overview……………………………..114

The International Response to Iraq's Aggression…………………………...116

Regional Responses and the Entrenchment of the US Security Umbrella..…117

China's Policies towards the Kuwait Crisis: A Reformulated Hedging Strategy…....118

China's Role in the United Nations…………………………………………118

China's Relations with Iraq Throughout the Crisis…………………………122

China's Reformulated Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions……124

The GCC States' and US' Responses and Perceptions……………………..124

Iraq's Responses and Perceptions…………………………………………..126

China's Reformulated Hedging Strategy: Job Done?..127

Diplomacy and the International Community: Successful Reintegration?.....127

Regional Relations and Trade………………………………………………129

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible Power and Champion of Anti-Unilateralism…………………………………………………………………..131

Regional Stability: Chinese Citizens Abroad………………………………..132

Conclusions and Perspectives………………………………………………………133

Chapter 6 – 1992-2003: China and the 'Pariah' States……………………………....134

Introduction………………………………………………………...…………134

Theoretical Insights……………………………………………………………134

China's Interests after the Kuwait Crisis……………………………………………135

The Persian Gulf in Chinese Interests……………………………………….138

The Persian Gulf: American Predominance and the 'Pariah' States…………………140

Iraq: From Containment to the US-led Invasion……………………………141

Iran: Troubled Relations with the US………………………………………..144

China's Hedging Strategy: The US First, Iraq and Iran Second……………………146

Between Iraq and the US……………………………………………………….147

Between Iran and the US……………………………………………………….152

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Perceptions and Responses…………………..155

Iraq's Responses and Perceptions……………………………………………..155

Iran's Responses and Perceptions……………………………………………..157

The United States' Responses and Perceptions……………………………..158

China's Hedging Strategy: A Successful Approach?..159

Trade and Energy…………………………………………………………...159

Post-War Iraq: A Lost Partner?...162

The Xinjiang Issue…………………………………………………………..163

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible Great Power……………………………165

Conclusions and Perspectives……………………………………………………….167

Chapter 7 – 2004-2023: China's Persian Gulf Hedging Strategy in the 21st Century……….169

Introduction……………………………………………………………………169

Theoretical Insights…………………………………………………………169

China's Interests after the Fall of Saddam…………………………………………171

"Coopetition" with the United States and China's Great Power Identity….171

Energy, Trade, Diplomatic Relations, and the Belt and Road Initiative……175

The Xinjiang Issue…………………………………………………………..178

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex…………………………………..179

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry…………………………………………………..180

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry: The Nuclear Issue……………………………..181

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry: Other Key Issues and Developments…………...183

The GCC Split………………………………………………………………186

Further Context: Shifting Eastward Focus of Persian Gulf States…………187

China's Hedging Strategy: Approaches and Dynamics……………………………..188

The Iran Nuclear and Sanctions Issues………………………………………...189

Between Iran and its Rivals: Arms Sales and Military Cooperation………..193

Navigating Tense Episodes between Iran and its Rivals……………………195

Further Developments and the 2023 Saudi-Iran Deal………………………197

China and the GCC Split……………………………………………………198

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions…………………...200

The United States and GCC States…………………………………………..200

Iran…………………………………………………………………………203

Qatar………………………………………………………………………..204

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?..204

Energy, Trade, and the Belt and Road Initiative……………………………205

Regional Relations and China's Great Power Identity……………………..210

Normative Solidarity: Xinjiang……………………………………………..212

Conclusions and Perspectives………………………………………………………214

Conclusions and Perspectives: Everyone's Friend, No-One's Foe?......................................216

China's Hedging Strategy: Dynamics………………………………………………216

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?..218

Theoretical Contributions…………………………………………………..…222

Originality and Scope for Future Research…………………………………………224

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………...226

List of Tables

Table 4.1 - China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1979 and 1988 (in USD)……………………………………………………101

Table 5.1 - China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1989 and 1992 (in USD)……………………………………………………130

Table 6.1 - China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1992 and 2002 (in USD)……………………………………………………160

Table 6.2 - Value of China's Oil Imports from Persian Gulf States in 2001 (in USD)………162

Table 6.3 - Value of China's Oil Imports from Persian Gulf States in 2003 (in USD)………162

Table 6.4 - Value of China's Oil Imports from Iraq after the US-led Invasion (in USD)……163

Table 7.1 - China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf……………………….……188

Table 7.2 - China's Oil Imports from Iran (2012-2022) (Barrels per day)…………………191

Table 7.3 - Chinese Arms Exports to Iran and its Rivals (2004-2022) (Trend Indicator Values, Figures in Millions of USD)………………………………………………………………194

Table 7.4 - China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 2004, 2016, and 2022 (in USD)……………………………………….….206

Table 7.5 - China's Oil Imports from Key Persian Gulf Exporters in 2022 (Approximate Quantity of Barrels per Day)……………………………………..…………………207

Table 7.6 - China's Exports to and Imports from States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 2022 (in USD)…………………………………………………………209

Table 7.7 - Belt and Road Initiative Projects (Digital and Physical) in the Persian Gulf States……………………………………………………………………………………..209

Part 1

Building Blocks

Introduction

China's Persian Gulf Hedging Strategy since 1979

Having been a fairly peripheral player in the Middle East up until the late 1970s, China's rise in the region, much like its rise in the world more widely, has been staggering. As the foremost extra-regional economic actor in large swathes of the region today, not to mention an ever-increasingly pivotal political actor, Beijing's emergence in the Middle East as a prominent power has been solidified. Of the Middle Eastern sub-regions, the Persian Gulf is the most salient in Chinese strategic calculations. Over half of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) comprehensive strategic partnerships and strategic partnerships in the Middle East are with Persian Gulf states. Further, in 2019 more than three quarters of China's $299.6 billion goods trade with Middle Eastern states was conducted with Iran, Iraq, and the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Ehteshami et al., 2023). Home to around half of the world's oil and gas reserves, at a geostrategic vantage point, and with several globally-significant powers with enormous financial capacity but significant scope for development, it is no wonder why the Persian Gulf is so attractive to the PRC, the world's largest energy importer and the founder of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a mega-project seeking to enhance global, and especially intra-Asian, trade and connectivity. Amid this convergence, significant interdependence has emerged between Beijing and several Persian Gulf states built on, among other areas, ever-growing economic exchange, normative convergence in terms of non-interference in each other's domestic affairs, and the core pillar of energy cooperation.

Engaging with the Persian Gulf has not proven to be without challenges, though. Ever since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in China in the late 1970s, which sought to modernise the PRC's economy and open it up to engagement with the outside, the world has witnessed the region go through multiple conflicts and periods of heightened tensions. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 upended the regional order and threw into the mix a wildcard that the US, the GCC monarchies, and Saddam Hussein's Iraq were deeply concerned about. The US hostage crisis in Iran cemented apprehension in US policymakers' minds and laid the foundation for protracted enmity between them. Iran and the US have been fierce rivals for over four decades, with only some brief respite following the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Indeed, for China to engage with the region, it has had to navigate the following events and issues, among others, since 1979: The US hostage crisis; the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988); the

Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (1990-1991); the US' dual containment strategy towards Iran and Iraq and its subsequent invasion of Iraq (1990s-2003); the protracted rivalry between Iran and several GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia, since the Islamic Revolution; and the GCC split between three GCC states and Qatar in 2017. To say that the region has experienced volatility would be an understatement. This dissertation argues, in keeping with claims made by Gause III (2010), that the Persian Gulf is a regional security subcomplex - comprising the GCC states, Iran, Iraq, and the United States - that has long been defined by intense mutual securitisation, rivalries, and conflict between neighbours. It is also a subcomplex in which an extra-regional power plays a prominent role in regional security dynamics. The United States underwrites regional security on behalf of the international community and its regional partners, maintaining extensive security architecture in the region. Its involvement has been far from neutral, though. Indeed, Hinnebusch (2007: 213) terms Washington "a partisan player", not least of all due to its pivotal role in securitising Iran.

Rather interestingly, though, China has not approached this region in the way that many other external powers have. Unlike the United States and several other extra-regional powers, Beijing has sought to be "the friend of all and the enemy of none" (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4). Indeed, since the revolution in Iran, China has painstakingly choreographed a balancing act between all regional states amid their conflicts and rivalries, attempting to maximise the breadth and depth of its engagement in the region while avoiding becoming deeply embroiled in these rivalries. Aligned with Garlick and Havlová (2020) and Fulton (2021), this dissertation terms this approach "strategic hedging". Fulton (2021: 208) asserts that strategic hedging "is an option for a second-tier extra-regional power that wants to pursue its interests without disrupting an advantageous status quo. Successful hedging allows a state to cultivate ties with everyone while carefully avoiding alienating anyone, usually by developing stronger economic and diplomatic relations without introducing an aggressive security presence". At first glance, this strategy sounds simple. Indeed, in a region with few tensions and hostilities between neighbours, this would be a logical and easy approach. The Persian Gulf is not one such region, though. Fulton (2021: 203) forwards the commonly-held presupposition that many have about the region and, indeed, the notion that guides this research: "In an intensely competitive regional order like the Gulf, the prevailing assumption is that extra-regional powers with deep interests cannot sit on the fence indefinitely. Eventually they will have to pick a side". Indeed, Salman and Geeraerts (2015), among many others, underline the need for future research to determine whether

such a strategy could entail negative implications for the external power in its relations with regional states.

It is to this issue that this dissertation speaks, namely, whether strategic hedging is a viable strategy in a region with such profound hostility and tension between its states. The foremost question guiding the research is: Given the intense hostilities and rivalries between Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states, has China's hedging strategy been a successful approach towards the region? To provide as deep and broad an analysis of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf, its strategy is examined across four time periods. The first is from the US hostage crisis to the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The second is the Kuwait crisis, from Iraq's invasion to the US-led campaign to restore Kuwaiti sovereignty. The third is from the end of the Kuwait crisis to the US-led invasion of Iraq, including in-depth analysis of the PRC's hedging strategy between the US and the so-called "pariah" states of Iran and Iraq. The fourth and final period is from after the fall of Saddam Hussein until the signing of the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iran deal in 2023, which includes analysis of China's hedging strategy between Iran and its GCC/US rivals and the GCC split between Qatar and three of its GCC neighbours. In examining the period from 1979 to 2023, the dissertation seeks to sketch as comprehensive as possible a picture of China's hedging strategy since the emergence of the foremost faultline in Persian Gulf security, namely the arrival of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the subsequent solidification of the US security presence.

Of course, in attempting to unearth the success of this strategy, it is imperative to consider carefully several sub-questions and, most importantly, how success is defined. Given that the PRC's engagement with the region is in pursuit of realising its interests, this dissertation asserts that a logical means to assess the success of its strategy is the *realisation of its interests*. Accordingly, each empirical chapter outlines Beijing's evolving interests in the region drawing on the analytical framework forwarded in chapter one. In short, the framework used to assess Chinese interests is one that leans on both neoclassical realism and constructivist insights in order to ensure appropriate attention is given to normative and ideational interests while still acknowledging that neoclassical realism and its emphasis on material interests can explain the bulk of Chinese interests. The dissertation also asserts that, in order to grasp fully whether the strategy is conducive for the realisation of Chinese interests, regional perceptions of China's hedging strategy must be examined. These perceptions can support ascertaining whether achievements or obstacles in China's ties with certain Persian Gulf states are due to the hedging strategy or other issues, in addition to

generating a clear picture of whether China is succeeding in cultivating "goodwill" in the region, something that Ehteshami (2018) argues is important for the success of its BRI and other interests. As such, taking into account these building blocks, the research questions are:

(1) How has China approached engaging in a hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf?
(2) Has China succeeded in realising its interests in the Persian Gulf amid deploying a strategy of hedging between regional rivals?
(3) How and to what extent has China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf impacted regional perceptions of Beijing?

To achieve this, beyond the analytical and methodological background chapters, each empirical chapter first examines Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf during the time period under study. Then, security dynamics in the region are examined. Following this, China's hedging strategy is outlined in detail, exploring the contours of the strategy. Thereafter, regional perceptions of China's strategy are analysed before the question of the realisation of Chinese interests is examined in detail. In so doing, each chapter thoroughly assesses how China went about its hedging strategy amid conflicts and rivalries, how its strategy is perceived by regional states, and whether or not China was capable of realising its interests amid this strategy and whether it directly impacted positively or negatively on the realisation of its interests.

Methodologically, the dissertation primarily takes a qualitative view of these issues, drawing on issue-specific details in depth from a variety of primary and secondary sources in English, Arabic, and Persian. In addition to drawing upon the academic literature on associated topics, the dissertation makes use of news articles, political memoirs, United Nations documents, government statements and research papers, and other sources written or spoken by elites in relevant states. Quantitative data is used frequently, too, in order to assess the quantitative dimensions of China's strategy (such as arms transfers) and the realisation of interests that are best assessed through the use of data, such as exports to the region and energy imports.

The literature on China-Persian Gulf relations in broad terms has burgeoned in recent years. Several studies focusing on China's bilateral ties with regional states have been conducted (for example: Al-Tamimi, 2014; Fulton, 2019; Garver, 2006), as have edited volumes, journal articles, and monographs examining a variety of issues related to China's

engagement in the region and the Middle East more widely, from its economic footprint to the question of Sino-US competition in the region (for example: Alterman and Garver, 2008; Burton, 2020; Dorsey, 2019; Ehteshami and Horesh, 2018; Reardon-Anderson, 2018; Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Recently, a special issue of the journal *Middle East Policy* was published with an emphasis on great power competition and Middle Eastern states amid a shifting international balance of power, highlighting the strong inroads that have been made in China-MENA studies (see, for example, Ghiselli and Ehteshami, 2024; Fardella and She, 2024). While China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf has been given some attention in the literature, especially in relation to China's hedging between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent years (Fulton, 2021; Garlick and Havlová, 2020; Greer, 2022; MacGillivray, 2019), this dissertation is the first research output to attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of China's hedging strategy across multiple decades, an assessment of the efficacy of the strategy, and analysis of regional perceptions of China's approach to maintaining relations with all states in the region amid their rivalries. In so doing, it sets itself apart from the extant research but is nestled firmly within the broader corpus of literature on China-Persian Gulf relations. While some of the issues analysed in this dissertation have been examined in relation to other research questions, such as the PRC's approach in general towards the Iran-Iraq war (Craig Harris, 1993), the specific focus on the contours of its hedging strategy, regional perceptions of this strategy, and the impact of the strategy on the realisation of its interests is distinct from the existing literature. Furthermore, the deployment of constructivist insights alongside neoclassical realism in a field dominated by realist accounts facilitates a broad analysis of material, ideational, and normative interests. This allows for in-depth analysis of the success of this strategy in multiple domains.

Theoretical Concepts

This dissertation innovates in several ways theoretically. First, in order to provide a framework for assessing the PRC's interests, the dissertation draws on Barkin's (2010) claim that realism and constructivism can be deployed together and need not be seen as diametrically opposed. As such, the dissertation represents the first work on Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf that enhances realist claims with constructivist insights. In so doing, it showcases the depth and breadth that realism and constructivism collectively offer when examining Chinese interests in the region. To achieve this, the dissertation argues that, first, neoclassical realism is superior to the other sub-schools of realism in understanding Chinese interests in the region given its emphasis on both systemic and domestic drivers

and, second, that neoclassical realism is the gateway through which a synthesis of realism and constructivism can be achieved. A good example to illustrate the bridge that neoclassical realism provides is that of strategic culture. Given that neoclassical realist theorists themselves have argued that “inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions” drive strategic culture, notions that are considered constructivist in other settings, the extension of this thinking to include the constructivist emphasis on intersubjectivity, ideational proclivities, ideas, identity, and norms is logical and theoretically coherent (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016: 67). As such, this dissertation draws on both neoclassical realism and constructivism to approach understanding Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf.

Second, further in keeping with synthesising constructivist and realist thinking, the Persian Gulf is understood as a regional security sub-complex, drawing on the paradigm forwarded by Buzan (1983) and, later, Buzan and Wæver (2003). A regional security complex is a region defined as “a set of units whose major processes of securiti[s]ation, desecuriti[s]ation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analy[s]ed or resolved apart from one another”. While Buzan and Wæver (2003) claim that the regional security complex paradigm is entirely constructivist, not least of all given the assertion that complexes are ever-changing according to the security behaviour of states within them, the remnants of realist thinking permeate the paradigm in the literature. First, Buzan and Wæver (2003) emphasise the notion of anarchy in regional security complexes. Second, there is a focus in the literature on enmity rather than amity, which suggests that realist thinking has not been entirely discarded (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006b). These two points demonstrate that acknowledging the broadly constructivist contours of the theory while paying tribute to the realist thinking that still permeates the paradigm is important.

Third, the dissertation deploys the theory of strategic hedging. Strategic hedging is a two-level strategy that China deploys in relation to the Persian Gulf. The first dimension of the strategy is on a systemic level. It is a strategy that second-tier states deploy to manage the supremacy of another power in the global system in a way that makes direct conflict or hostilities less likely while also allowing the second-tier state to gain power and influence. The second dimension of the strategy is on a regional level. China seeks to manage diversified relations with all regional states while avoiding becoming embroiled in their disputes or upending the status quo. The dissertation provides the first attempt in the literature to offer a framework to assess the efficacy of strategic hedging. The dissertation forwards the notion that the realisation of Chinese interests must be viewed as the primary

dependent variable of any such framework. Given that the PRC first and foremost engages in the Persian Gulf to realise its interests, the realisation of its interests as a benchmark of success is logical. As such, the dissertation is the first research piece to examine the PRC's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf over the course of its focused engagement in the region since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, offering an analytical framework that can ascertain the efficacy of the strategy.

Structure of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, chapter one introduces strategic hedging as a concept. Thereafter, it provides an assessment framework for the efficacy or success of strategic hedging that is used throughout the dissertation. This framework is the *realisation of Chinese interests*. To provide the theoretical background for assessing China's interests, a framework that incorporates neoclassical realist and constructivist insights is forwarded. Thereafter, the chapter discusses some of the core literature relating to constructivism and Chinese foreign policy, as this is frequently left out of the literature on China-Middle East relations.

Chapter two then argues that the Persian Gulf is a regional security subcomplex. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Buzan and Wæver (2003), the chapter outlines the regional security complex paradigm before arguing why the Persian Gulf can be considered a regional security subcomplex. Within this discussion, attention is given to the idea that the United States is a core part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex, in keeping with the claim made by Gause III (2010). Chapter two thereby provides the conditions that China's hedging strategy takes place in. Thereafter, the issue of the region being "penetrated" by external powers is discussed, with a brief examination of several important extra-regional powers following (Brown, 1984).

Chapter three outlines the methodology used in the dissertation, arguing that the research follows a qualitative agenda but also makes use of quantitative data where necessary. It also outlines the case selection undergirding the premise of each chapter before highlighting the secondary and primary data used in the dissertation to answer the core questions.

Chapters four, five, six, and seven all examine China's hedging strategy in separate, chronologically-ordered periods. As was mentioned above, each empirical chapter first explores Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf during the relevant period. It then examines security dynamics in the region. Thereafter, China's hedging strategy is outlined in detail, exploring the contours of the strategy. Following this, regional perceptions of China's

strategy are analysed before the question of the realisation of Chinese interests is examined in detail. Chapter four explores China's hedging strategy between Iran and its rivals between 1979 and 1988, mainly focusing on the Iran-Iraq war and Iran-United States hostilities. Chapter five examines the PRC's hedging strategy amid the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent international campaign to liberate Kuwait. Chapter six analyses Beijing's hedging strategy amid the US' dual-containment strategy towards Iran and Iraq and the subsequent US-led invasion of Iraq. Chapter seven delves into China's hedging strategy between Iran and its rivals (mainly Saudi Arabia and the US) and between the rivalling GCC states during the GCC split.

The dissertation ends with a conclusions and perspectives chapter that seeks to bring together the four time periods to draw out an overarching response to the core questions of the contours of China's hedging strategy in the region, the nature of Persian Gulf states' perceptions of this strategy, and whether or not it has been a successful approach towards the region from the perspective of the realisation of Chinese interests.

Chapter 1

Strategic Hedging: Towards an Assessment Framework

Introduction

For over four decades, China has engaged in a policy of strategic hedging in the Persian Gulf, seeking to be "the friend of all and the enemy of none" (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4). Given that this dissertation seeks to understand the contours of China's hedging strategy in the region and, most importantly, the efficacy of this strategy, this chapter forwards a framework to assess its success. In so doing, the chapter argues that the best way to analyse the efficacy of the strategy is to examine whether it has impacted positively or negatively on the realisation of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf. To achieve this, though, requires an analytical framework to understand China's interests. This dissertation argues that, in order to grasp the rich tapestry of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, a framework is required that pays attention to material, normative, and ideational interests. As such, in addition to drawing on the neoclassical realist framework used by Fulton (2019a), this chapter outlines the ways in which constructivist insights can enhance the framework before discussing some of the key works on constructivism and Chinese foreign policy to display the significance of this school of thought in appreciating China as a foreign policy actor. Overall, the chapter forwards the notion that neoclassical realism and constructivism can complement each other well when seeking to examine Beijing's interests in the Persian Gulf.

Strategic Hedging

Throughout the several decades in which the United States has been the foremost external power in the Persian Gulf, Washington has largely pursued policies wherein it securitises one actor in a rivalry or conflict and supports the other. In the Iran-Iraq War, Washington provided support to Iraq and its Arab partners, even engaging in naval skirmishes with Iranian forces (Axworthy, 2013). During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the US was uncompromising in its belief that Iraq was in the wrong and acted accordingly (Freedman and Karsh, 1991). Thereafter, Iraq and Iran were both treated as pariah states, with President George W. Bush launching an invasion of the former in 2003 based on dubious intelligence (Hinnebusch, 2007). Regarding the protracted rivalry between some of the Arab Gulf states and Iran, the United States has persistently securitised Iran. While some observers in the Persian Gulf were fearful that the Iran nuclear agreement in 2015 represented a rapprochement between the US and Iran, it can also be analysed as an act of perceived

necessity by Washington to keep its regional allies safe from a nuclear weapons-possessing Islamic Republic. Regardless, the lifeline of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) was short-lived, with Washington returning to its intense securitisation of the Islamic Republic and an intensified rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE under former US President Donald Trump. Finally, at the beginning of the Saudi, Emirati, Bahraini, and Egyptian blockade of Qatar, Trump supported the move. While he later switched his position to one that supported a resolution, undoubtedly as other government departments had finally convinced him of Qatar's centrality to US security architecture in the region, his initial reaction displays again the US penchant for picking sides and securitising particular states in the region (Ulrichsen, 2020). As the most deeply involved external power in the Persian Gulf, the United States rarely seeks to balance its relations with rival or conflicting parties. Largely speaking, Washington picks a side, supports it, and securitises the other, viewing security affairs in a fairly binary manner. However, China does not take the same approach, consistently opting to seek amicable relations with all actors in the region despite regional rivalries and conflicts. This approach has been termed one of "strategic hedging" by several observers of China-Persian Gulf relations (Fulton, 2021; Garlick and Havlová, 2020; Salman and Geeraerts, 2015).

Strategic Hedging

Much of the research on strategic hedging has framed it as a strategy used by weaker powers towards stronger ones that approximates balancing or bandwagoning. For Medeiros (2005/2006: 145), the emphasis of strategic hedging is on deploying "realist-style balancing" in terms of security cooperation while also facilitating cooperation and integration in other domains. For Tessman and Wolfe (2011), hedging is a strategy used by a weaker state towards a stronger state, primarily with the use of soft balancing strategies, to prepare for the downfall of the stronger power before the use of more traditional balancing strategies. In disagreement with these conceptualisations of strategic hedging, Garlick and Havlová (2020: 84) state:

> The concept has therefore been given a very specific spin: A form of soft balancing by a relatively weaker state to counter the influence of a hegemonic power such as the United States (Pape, 2005) or China (Goh, 2005). In this definition, strategic hedging is undertaken through non-military means (specifically economic, diplomatic, and institutional competitive behaviours) 'so as to weaken the

> operational capability of the superior state' (Kizeková, 2017: 146). However… we argue that strategic hedging of the type used by China… needs to be understood as a *sui generis* strategy of multilateral engagement rather than a form of balancing or bandwagoning intended either to weaken a hegemon such as the United States or to strengthen or weaken regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Aligned with this stance, Fulton (2021: 208) argues that hedging "is an option for a second-tier extra-regional power that wants to pursue its interests without disrupting an advantageous status quo. Successful hedging allows a state to cultivate ties with everyone while carefully avoiding alienating anyone, usually by developing stronger economic and diplomatic relations without introducing an aggressive security presence". The understanding of strategic hedging used in this dissertation aligns with Garlick and Havlová's (2020) and Fulton's (2021) conceptualisations, while also paying tribute to the systemic emphasis forwarded by Medeiros (2005/2006), Tessman (2012), and Tessman and Wolfe (2011). Strategic hedging, in the way the PRC deploys it in the Persian Gulf is a two-level issue. First, on the systemic level, it is about a second-tier state managing the (albeit dwindling) supremacy of another power in the global system in a way that makes direct conflict or hostilities less likely while also allowing the hedging state to gain power and influence. Tessman (2012: 193) highlights this succinctly:

> I argue that hedging will be most prevalent in systems that are unipolar and in the process of power deconcentration. These systems are defined by a leading state that enjoys power preponderance, but is clearly in relative decline. For second-tier states, strategic hedging behavior is effective because it avoids outright confrontation with the system leader in the short term, while still increasing the hedging state's ability to survive a direct military confrontation should it occur in the long run. Strategic hedging behaviour can also insure the hedging state against security threats that might result from the loss of public goods or subsidies that are provided by the system leader at that time.

This systemic level is central in understanding how the PRC has navigated rivalries and conflicts in the Persian Gulf in which the US' role is central. Second, there is also an important regional dimension to hedging. In the Persian Gulf, the PRC is intent on maintaining relations with all key regional states and avoiding becoming embroiled in their disputes by taking one side or by appearing to attempt to change the status quo in any

profound way. Thus, Beijing has carefully sought to balance its ties with regional states amid their conflicts and rivalries, such as Iran and Iraq in the 1980s and Iran and the GCC states in the 21st century. Importantly, further in agreement with Fulton (2021) and the above claim made by Garlick and Havlová (2020), strategic hedging does not necessarily mean that the hedging state is seeking to displace the foremost power. Indeed, as is discussed in chapter seven, in particular, this dissertation asserts that Beijing is not looking to upend the US-led status quo in the Persian Gulf, as Washington underwrites regional security, which greatly supports the realisation of core Chinese interests.

It serves to consider some key caveats and qualifications to provide a fuller account of what is meant by strategic hedging in this dissertation and how it is understood. First, while the finance literature understands strategic hedging as hedging one's bets by avoiding putting all of one's eggs in the same basket in case of volatility (Garlick and Havlová, 2020), this dissertation only views this as one facet of a broader conceptualisation of the term. China also pursues diversified relations in order to maximise its influence across the world and to enjoy the absolute benefits that each relationship brings. To suggest that China maintains diversified relations *solely* to avoid potential future disruption or volatility reduces its relations with other states to risk management, thereby ignoring the absolute benefits reaped by pursuing each relationship. It is true that several Persian Gulf states offer very similar benefits to China, including wide-ranging investment opportunities and abundant energy resources. However, a rising power seeking to expand its economic capabilities must enjoy relations with a multiplicity of states to maximise its influence and the benefits it reaps from international engagement. In the Belt and Road age, this point cannot be overstated. The initiative, to which President Xi has attached unparalleled significance, is dependent on success across Asia and would suffer if key powers across the continent reject it. Regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, Saudi Arabia cannot simply replace Iran, which boasts a geostrategic vantage point for the purposes of the project unparalleled by many other states. Furthermore, while the benefits of each Persian Gulf state to the PRC are similar, some countries in the region are endowed with relatively unique assets. Iran's geostrategic location is testament to this. The potential use of oil pipelines between Iran and China in the future is something that Arab Gulf states are unlikely to be able to achieve, not to mention that train deliveries from Iran are over two-thirds faster than shipping from the Gulf, representing a significant benefit in the event of future potential disruption (Li, 2019). Conversely, Saudi Arabia is the only Persian Gulf state positioned on the Red Sea,

facilitating increased connectivity with Africa and to the much-coveted Suez Canal. Thus, to suggest that China's hedging strategy is reducible to a risk management strategy is misleading, even if it provides one strong impetus of many to pursue such an approach.

Second, China's hedging strategy across the decades has not been monolithic. China's exact approach to each conflict and rivalry has differed slightly. For example, during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, China leaned heavily towards the Kuwaiti side, while trying to maintain cordial relations with Iraq. In terms of Iraq's violation of Kuwaiti sovereignty, though, Beijing's position was simple: Iraq should leave Kuwait (Craig Harris, 1993). Throughout the Saudi-Iran rivalry, however, for example, its position has been much more neutral. Even though there is some validity to the claim that the PRC has leaned slightly towards Saudi Arabia, its approach has been far more fluid than during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (Wu, 2011). Accordingly, strategic hedging is a term used in this dissertation to cover a spectrum of behaviour wherein the PRC tries to maintain positive and progressive relations with conflicting parties while avoiding becoming embroiled in their disputes as a rivalling party. The extent to which it has balanced relations equally has varied from case to case, but in each instance China has done what it can to maintain an acceptable level of proximity to all conflicting parties.

Third, in a departure from some of the literature on strategic hedging that views it as all about a second-tier power's navigation of its rivalry with the hegemon (Medeiros, 2005/2006; Tessman and Wolfe, 2011), this dissertation looks at how China has deployed strategic hedging amid rivalries between weaker powers (such as Saudi Arabia and Iran) in addition to a mixture of stronger and weaker powers (such as the United States and Iran). The idea that strategic hedging must refer to the behaviour of a weaker state towards a stronger one is unnecessary. Indeed, this dissertation asserts that it can refer to any behaviour by a state that seeks to manage diversified relations with conflicting parties. In all cases, China has sought to avoid becoming entangled in their disputes and has aimed to achieve wide-ranging interests in relation to each party. As such, the emphasis should be more on the strategy and how it is deployed than on the power position of the parties with which the hedging state is seeking diversified ties.

The Research Puzzle: China's Hedging Strategy amid Persian Gulf Rivalries

It is no secret in China-Persian Gulf studies that the PRC tries to be everyone's friend. As early as the 1990s, Shichor (1992: 100) writes that Beijing was "trying to eat its cake and

have it… that is, to maintain good relations with all parties" throughout the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and in its aftermath. Shichor's seeming amazement at this fact underlines the extent to which it was anomalous when compared to the actions of other great powers. Only a year later, Craig Harris (1993: 192) acknowledges that China had matured as an actor after its opening-up in the late 1970s, now pursuing "cordial ties with nations across a spectrum of political positions and ideologies". Importantly, she notes, the PRC had not only diversified its portfolio of foreign relations, but also sought to manage relations with conflicting actors, citing Beijing's ties with Iran and Iraq throughout their war. Critically, fifteen years later, such a policy had become expected of the PRC, with Alterman and Garver (2008: 19) outlining what they termed "Beijing's omni-directional friendship policy". Specifically, they argue that, following the opening-up policy and associated reforms undertaken by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China had launched a policy wherein it pursued amicable and progressive relations with each state in the Middle East, regardless of its internal political system or the quality of its relationship with the United States or other regional actors. To solidify their claim, Alterman and Garver (2008) cite China's diversified relations with Iran and Iraq during their war, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation from the early 1990s, and Saudi Arabia and Iran, especially following Iraq's demise as a potential hegemonic power in the region in 2003. The assertion that China is engaging in strategic hedging in the Persian Gulf throughout regional rivalries and conflicts is now a seemingly accepted part of the China-Persian Gulf literature, representing a commonly-cited feature (Burton, 2020; Calabrese, 2018; Dillon, 2004; Dorsey, 2019; Fulton, 2021; Salman and Geeraerts, 2015; Shichor, 2018). Chen (2021: 11) aptly summarises the overall issue, stating "when it comes to conflict of interests between two or more countries in the Middle East, China… does not want to please one country while taking a risk of alienating another". Critically, Chen (2021) argues that part of the reason for this strategy is the desire to maintain a good reputation among all parties, thereby ensuring that amicable relations continue to facilitate Chinese access to its interests in the region. As is outlined further in chapter two, given that the Persian Gulf is a regional security subcomplex wherein intense manifestations of rivalry and conflict erupt based on protracted and deeply-embedded threat perceptions, though, it is crucial to question whether the PRC's hedging strategy has been, and will be, efficacious. When the United States was perceived to be getting closer to Iran upon the ratification of the JCPoA, Saudi-American relations cooled, suggesting that external powers' relations with regional states may be partly contingent on their approaches to regional affairs. It serves to note that numerous authors are starting to

wonder whether China's strategy is durable and sustainable. Yetiv and Oskarsson (2018), for example, question whether Beijing will be able to gain influence in the region whilst balancing relations with conflicting parties. As Fulton (2021: 203) asserts: "In an intensely competitive regional order like the Gulf, the prevailing assumption is that extra-regional powers with deep interests cannot sit on the fence indefinitely. Eventually they will have to pick a side". Of particular note, Salman and Geeraerts (2015) underline the need for future research to determine whether such a strategy could entail negative implications for the external power in its relations with the other countries.

Crucially, while the literature has come a long way in outlining this dynamic across the decades, there are three core elements that the literature is lacking in examining China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf: (1) A thorough account of the contours of this strategy since China's emergence onto the Persian Gulf scene following Deng Xiaoping's reforms; (2) analysis of regional perceptions of this strategy and how it is impacting China's image in the Persian Gulf; and (3) a study into whether the strategy has been efficacious and into its impact on the realisation of China's interests and relations in the region. The parameters used to assess what is meant by efficacious are outlined later in this chapter. Accordingly, this is the gap that this dissertation seeks to fill. By this point, it is indisputable that China is seeking to maintain positive relations with all states in the region, regardless of whether it leans slightly in one direction at particular moments. What is less clear, however, is the impact that this strategy has had, and is having, on Beijing's ability to secure its interests in the region. Thus, this dissertation examines the PRC's hedging strategy across four and a half decades, examining dynamics amid: The Iran hostage crisis, the Iran-Iraq war, and the tanker wars in the 1980s; the Kuwait crisis at the turn of the 1990s; Washington's dual-containment strategy in the 1990s and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003; and the Iran-GCC/US rivalry and GCC split in the 21st century. In examining this strategy across the entire period that China has been actively attempting to court all regional states, this dissertation aims to provide as comprehensive as possible an account of this strategy. The ability to survey the entire period can generate a holistic view of Beijing's hedging strategy in the region with the ability to see how decades-old dynamics impact or inform contemporary manifestations of this strategy and regional responses to it.

Assessing the Efficacy of Strategic Hedging

In order to assess the efficacy of any strategy, parameters of success must be established. As an external power to the Persian Gulf, China is not forced, per se, to engage with the region, it chooses to. What drives Chinese engagement with the region are its interests – both those that are found *in* the region, such as the abundant energy resources, and those that come *from* engaging in the region, such as the opportunity to be viewed as a responsible great power when conflicts emerge and are deemed to require the involvement of the international community. As such, this dissertation employs *the realisation of Chinese interests* as the primary means to analyse whether its hedging strategy has been successful. To support this analysis, the dissertation also examines the perceptions of states in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex of China's hedging strategy to attempt to understand the extent to which the strategy is impacting regional perceptions of China and whether any direct or indirect references are made to the impact of this strategy on the realisation of Chinese interests.

While some observers of the region are dubious as to whether China's hedging strategy could impact upon the realisation of its interests, arguing for example that regional states would never cease exporting oil to the PRC as they themselves rely on energy exports, it is crucial to note that this dissertation questions in as broad a way as possible whether China's hedging strategy is impacting upon the realisation of its interests. First, regional states have already showcased a willingness to use their resources as leverage in relation to sensitive political/security affairs, as was evidenced by the 1973 oil embargo, but energy is just one part of the equation. Second, in addition to the quantitative dimensions of Chinese interests, such as the volume of trade and energy imports, certain qualitative dimensions can indicate the nuances of how its strategy is impacting the realisation of its interests. Some examples can elucidate this further. Is China being portrayed positively or negatively by regional states? Is it winning favourable contracts against other competitors or being snubbed? Are regional states aligning with it on normative issues, such as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and, if so, is this alignment extending into leaving China to its own internal affairs in sensitive areas that relate on an identity-level to the region, such as its treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang? There are many ways, both quantitatively and qualitatively measured, in which its hedging strategy could lead regional states to undermine Chinese interests in small or profound ways.

An important caveat must now be addressed. Put simply, China's hedging strategy is not the be all and end all of its approaches to the region. There are many issues discussed in this

dissertation wherein the impact of China's hedging strategy on the realisation of its interests is minimal because, for example, its economic engagement is so impactful that regional states are not too concerned by individual policies that are viewed as unfavourable. This dissertation does not assume that China's hedging strategy will have impacted negatively upon China's achievements in the region. Indeed, the research simply questions whether strategic hedging is a viable, sustainable, durable, and conducive approach for an external power in a regional security subcomplex with such stark divisions. Further, it can be challenging at times to trace the source of issues, or even improvements, in relations. This is where engagement with regional perceptions and careful tracing of events can help in ascertaining the role of China's hedging strategy on dynamics.

In using *the realisation of Chinese interests* as the dependent variable of this research, it is imperative to forward an analytical framework that undergirds discussions about these interests. Thus, rather than attempting to provide a full account of core Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf across over four decades here – indeed, each period is examined in its respective empirical chapter in part two – this chapter simply outlines the analytical framework used to understand Chinese interests.

China's Interests in the Persian Gulf: Neoclassical Realism with Constructivism

This dissertation asserts that, whilst generating crucial insights about China's core interests in the Persian Gulf, the extant literature does not offer a conceptual framework that holistically engages with the PRC's evolving interests in the region. In large part, conceptual frameworks forwarded in the extant literature overlook crucial features due to their deployment of a purely materialist ontology driven by realism. While realism offers foundational insights into Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, indeed accounting neatly for the bulk of these interests, this dissertation argues that an analytical framework is required that has the scope for material, ideational, and normative interests. Indeed, where scholars have discussed Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf without explicitly forwarding a framework, there has been wider acceptance that certain interests are ideational, or at the very least, straddle the material-ideational border (Scobell, 2018). Thus, the claim here is that a framework is required that facilitates an appreciation of material and ideational factors. Accordingly, this dissertation argues that the only way to achieve this is through the deployment of neoclassical realism with further insights from constructivism.

The Benefits and Shortcomings of Realism

Among the key literature on Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, one of the first scholars to forward a framework built on international relations theory was Bin Huwaidin (2002). In his study, which examines fifty years of relations, from 1949-1999, Bin Huwaidin (2002) leans on a Waltzian logic of international relations, arguing that China's interests in the region can be understood by observing its power position in an anarchic international arena relative to key global powers, most crucially of all the Soviet Union and the United States. This neorealist stance, with its emphasis on the distribution of material power and states' relative power compared to others in the system, has many perks, not least of all in its appreciation for the primary driver behind China's evolving relations in the region as a result of fluctuating Chinese power in relation to the United States and the Soviet Union. Whilst this neorealist stance may sound all-encompassing, particularly when considering the salience of these concerns during the PRC's early forays into the region, it overlooks domestic drivers, including the aforementioned anxiety in Beijing that Persian Gulf states could incite anti-regime sentiment in Xinjiang, in addition to ideational drivers, such as China's will to propagate communism internationally, as indeed it attempted in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, despite forwarding a neorealist framework, Bin Huwaidin (2002) himself indicates the importance of ideational factors, acknowledging that exporting ideas, such as those associated with Chinese communism, was a goal of the PRC's foreign policy in the region until the late 1970s. Thus, it is evident that a structurally-deterministic framework, such as neorealism, whilst apt in underscoring *some* key drivers of foreign policy, is unable to explicate Chinese interests in the region in a holistic manner. Even Waltz (1979; 1996: 54), who advanced neorealism as a theory, argues that, if expected to be both a structural theory of international politics *and* a predictor of individual states' foreign policy choices, his "old horse cannot run the course and will lose if it tries".

In his study of Sino-Saudi relations, al-Tamimi (2014) asserts that material needs guide their interaction, placing an emphasis on economic and energy exchange. Naturally, given that oil trade has long been the centrepiece of Sino-Saudi relations, this captures a crucial element of their relationship. Importantly, though, al-Tamimi (2014: 27) actively rejects the importance of ideational drivers in his theoretical framework. Again, whilst such an analysis captures some of the key drivers of Chinese interest in the region, it ignores other important factors in pursuit of what are perceived to be China's central interests. Indeed, in the body of al-Tamimi's work (2014: 70, 74, 90, 111), he regularly references ideational and normative factors, including Sino-Saudi normative convergence on human rights and the

role of the state. This underscores the theoretical-empirical mismatch inherent to the pursuit of a purely materialist framework, further highlighting the need for a framework that offers enough flexibility to respect the centrality of material concerns, such as energy acquisition, in addition to normative and ideational interests.

Aptly acknowledging the shortcomings of a purely systemic analysis of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, Fulton (2019a) asserts that neoclassical realism generates the strongest insights. Neoclassical realism, put simply, retains the notion that the structure is the independent variable. Thus, the power position of a state within an anarchic international system is still central. Pivotally, though, it expands upon neorealism, by arguing that domestic factors can act as intervening variables. These can include, for example, the perceptions of key figures in a state and the state's relationship with society, which, in extension, constrains or facilitates its ability or desire to deploy state resources for foreign policy goals (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, 2009). Fulton's (2019a) utilisation of neoclassical realism, which pays tribute to both domestic and systemic factors, far outpaces its structurally-deterministic neorealist cousin, not least of all due to its acknowledgment of domestic concerns, such as the need for energy acquisition in service of both economic development and the regime's domestic legitimacy. Indeed, this appreciation of the intermediary role of domestic variables is essential to any serious understanding of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf. To grasp fully the centrality of energy needs to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) domestic legitimacy or the salience of the Belt and Road Initiative for Xi Jinping's leadership requires a peek into China's domestic context. Furthermore, to understand the salience of the Xinjiang issue as a driver of engagement with Persian Gulf states similarly necessitates engagement with state-society relations in the PRC. Vitally, while considering these elements, the theory still acknowledges that the primary driver of state behaviour is its relative power position within the international system. This is undoubtedly pivotal in determining the contours of Chinese interests and behaviour in the Persian Gulf. As such, the first node of this dissertation's framework to understand Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf is neoclassical realism. For clarity, once again, the theory's starting point is the neorealist notion that the state's power position in the anarchic structure is the primary determinant of its foreign policy interests and behaviour. Where it builds on neorealism, though, is the assertion that several domestic elements act as "intervening unit-level variables" on the structurally-deterministic independent variable. According to Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016: 59), these

intervening variables can be categorised broadly as: “The images and perceptions of state leaders; strategic culture; state-society relations; and domestic institutional arrangements”. These elements greatly mitigate most of the shortcomings of structural realism.

However, in seeking to outline what are perceived to be the core interests pursued by the PRC in the Persian Gulf, such an analytical framework overlooks China’s ideationally and normatively-driven interests, such as its desire to propagate an image of itself as a responsible power by engaging in regional diplomacy (Scobell, 2018), to foment notions of mutual respect and non-interference in international relations, or indeed the ideational significance attached to gaining support in the Islamic world for the CCP’s controversial policies in Xinjiang. Broadly speaking, this oversight is the product of realism’s purely materialist focus. Indeed, without considering the salience of social construction and historical contingency, the evolution of China’s interests in the region cannot be fully captured, especially in those circumstances where its interests have been altered and shaped by its own past behaviour, such as Chen (2021) outlines with the notion of path dependence and its impact upon the PRC’s normative ideals. This is where the focus of constructivism on identity, norms, and the ideational significance attached to particular material issues can support analysis.

In many ways, neoclassical realism is ripe for a framework that bridges it with constructivism. The notion of strategic culture as an intervening domestic variable, in particular, paves the way for such considerations. Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016: 67) argue:

> Ideational models of strategic culture include a set of inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions. Strategic culture or collective expectations shape the strategic understanding of political leaders, societal elites, and even the general public. Through sociali[s]ation and institutionali[s]ation (in rules and norms), these collective assumptions and expectations become deeply entrenched and constrain a state’s behavio[u]r and freedom of action by defining what are acceptable and unacceptable strategic choices, even in an anarchic self-help environment.

This discussion, while limited here to the notion of strategic culture and not a constructivist *carte blanche* to examine the role of identity, ideas, and norms on all aspects of foreign policy, clearly indicates an appreciation of the role of these elements on the process behind foreign policy decision-making. They even go on to say that “national strategic culture can,

in exceptional circumstances, be constructed and reconstructed over time, due either to the conscious agency of national governments, the impact of major historical events, or the imposition by foreign occupiers" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016: 68). Aligning with the constructivist idea that structure and agency mutually reproduce each other, were it not for the limited focus of this point on strategic culture it would fall almost squarely into the constructivist school of thought. Barkin (2010: 2) reminds us in relation to the dichotomisation of realism and constructivism that "in building paradigmatic castles, it encourages insular thinking and a focus on emphasising differences." Indeed, in his seminal work on bridging realism and constructivism, Barkin (2010: 3) states the following: "An examination of constructivist epistemology and… realist theory suggests that they are, in fact, compatible. Not, of course, that good constructivism is necessarily realist, or that good realism is necessarily constructivist". As is clear from the above discussion, siloing realist insights from constructivist thinking is unnecessary intellectually-speaking and, as later chapters will display, unhelpful when trying to understand China's wide-ranging interests in the Persian Gulf. This gets to the heart of the framework used to ascertain Chinese interests in the region, namely that constructivist and realist approaches need not be seen as diametrically imposed. On the contrary, they can complement each other by adding significant depth to claims made, particularly when realist assumptions are buttressed by constructivist insights.

Constructivist Insights

While many of the core drivers of Chinese interest in the Persian Gulf are material and thereby understood neatly within the realist tradition, several Chinese interests in the region are not fully captured by a purely materialist framework. Good examples of this are the CCP's ideational desire to be seen as a "legitimate great power" by regional and extra-regional states (Calabrese, 2018: 8), the desire to project an image of the PRC to its population as a strong global player (Rubin, 1999), and the normative drivers for convergence between authoritarian and non-liberal regimes (Alterman and Garver, 2008; Wang, 2013). Constructivism supports an understanding of the role of norms, historical experience, ideas, identity, and the ideational or normative significance of material factors, thereby facilitating an appreciation of these facets.

To incorporate constructivist insights means to leave behind rationalist assumptions of international relations and their emphasis on pre-given interests. More widely, three core

notions drive this approach. First, it carries the worldview that the world of politics, international relations, and indeed all human interaction, is socially constructed. Second, it rejects the unidirectional causality of either structure or agency on the other, claiming instead that structure and agency are co-constitutive. That is to say, the two constantly reproduce and alter each other (Giddens, 1984; Wendt, 1992). Third, and crucial to this project, a constructivist approach maintains that ideas hold importance in international relations. Agents (often in international relations, though not always, states) understand the world around them by contextualising events “in an institutional context” (Onuf, 2015: 62). Agents continuously filter what happens through their own constantly evolving understanding of the world and their position within it. Then, in keeping with the notion of structural-agential co-constitution, their responses re-shape the structure, and the loop continues. Thus, the notion that scholars can pre-emptively ascertain a particular state’s interests, by simple virtue of it being a state, is anathema to this ontology. It serves to emphasise this point further. Interests are not assumed as *a priori*, or pre-given, features inherent to each and every state according only to their relative power position in the global system and regardless of their historical and social context. However, it is also important to debunk a common myth surrounding this constructivist ontological approach; such an ontological agenda does not, *ipso facto*, subordinate material factors, but rather avoids granting ontological primacy to either material or ideational interests (Hopf, 1998). What matters, on the large part, are the ideas attached to an interest. The social, historical, political, and cultural experiences of actors undergird their interpretation of the world, shaping their interests and how they go about realising them.

Further, the notion of intersubjectivity carries great significance. Wendt’s (1995) oft-cited example of nuclear missiles suffices to advance this point. If adopting an ontology which assumes the indisputable nature of materials and which places no emphasis on the myriad meanings attached to them, an observer of the United States, witnessing its deep resistance against a handful of nuclear weapons in Pyongyang, would assume that Washington views foreign-owned nuclear weapons as a threat. However, the response from the United States towards hundreds of British or French nuclear weapons is muted, even though they are more likely contenders than the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) for global hegemony, if one subscribes to the idea that relative power is subject solely to the possession of particular materials and capabilities. Attributing the centrality of friendships and rivalry,

and, accordingly, the importance of intersubjective meanings, to this example, Wendt (1995: 73) summarises succinctly:

> Amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings. As students of world politics, neorealists would probably not disagree [that friendship is key in this example], but as theorists the example poses a big problem, since it completely eludes their materialist definition of structure. Material capabilities as such explain nothing; their effects presuppose structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities.

The question arises, therefore, of how scholars can identify states' interests, given that their universal applicability is in question. To meet this end, a thorough examination of an individual state's preferences must be undertaken. This involves a deep-dive into the individual circumstances of a state, in addition to its practices in the international arena. Furthermore, politicising and securitising acts, in addition to rhetoric from key leaders and policy choices, indicate the evolving interests of a state, especially when cross-referenced with behaviour and observable policy choices. This endeavour reflects the salience of area studies to international relations. An approach that incorporates constructivism can act as a critical bridge between international relations, more widely, and area studies, something called for by numerous prominent scholars, especially those concerned with the implicit, and at times explicit, imposition of the Western experience on international relations theories (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003).

While some constructivist scholars - usually those considered to be critical constructivists - claim that the social world in its entirety is socially constructed and that this fact extends to all areas of life, this dissertation aligns with, and indeed goes beyond, Wendt (1999) on the issue of rump materialism. Wendt (1999: 109-110, original emphasis) notes that it is reasonable to accept a "rump materialism", which "opposes the more radical constructivist view that brute material forces have *no* independent effects on international politics". Put simply, this claim allows an appreciation that certain material factors impact upon politics and decision-making. This dissertation most certainly aligns with this position and indeed even argues, in keeping with neoclassical realism, that a large proportion of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf can be understood through a materialist lens and the perspective of China's relative power position within an anarchic international system mediated by certain domestic variables. With that said, constructivist insights can enhance even these core claims

by providing greater clarity to the ideational significance attached to these interests, thereby elucidating their salience during any given period.

To conclude, therefore, the framework used in this dissertation to ascertain and understand Chinese interests is one that leans heavily on neoclassical realism, with its emphasis on both the impact of the international environment and certain domestic variables, with constructivism, with its focus on the role of ideas, norms, and identity. In so doing, the framework adequately captures all of China's core interests in the region, from its energy and economic interests to normative issues associated with, for example, the nature of its domestic governance and how this relates to the region. Given that the primacy of realism is accepted in much of the literature on China-Middle East relations, the rest of this chapter explores some of the core ways in which constructivist ideas of identity and historical experience permeate Chinese foreign policy and international relations.

Identity, Ideas, and Foreign Policy in China

Constructivism eschews purely rationalist conceptions of state interests, which grant primacy to concerns about the distribution of capabilities within an anarchic global system. Naturally, however, constructivism is a far from united school of thought. Indeed, it is widely accepted to be characterised by two, often viewed as competing, camps – conventional constructivism, which often adopts a positivist research perspective, and critical constructivism, which often falls within the more interpretivist, post-positivist camp. Aligned with Cho (2012) and Hopf (2002), this dissertation posits that, in order to understand the evolving identity of a state, researchers must lean on the logic of both conventional constructivism, with its emphasis on the impact of the external environment on state identity formation, and critical constructivism, which focuses on understanding the formation of state identity according to ever-changing domestic factors. Far from ignoring the meta-theoretical challenge involved in embracing constructivist eclecticism, Cho (2012: 311) argues that to grasp fully how a state's identity impacts upon its foreign policy, "scholars in security studies can use conventional constructivism in looking at the external construction of state identity, while using critical constructivism in examining the internal one". Indeed, given the extent to which both external factors, such as the PRC's century of humiliation, and internal elements, such as the pillars upon which the CCP has based its domestic legitimacy, have shaped the contours of China's interests abroad, such an approach is necessary. Accordingly, throughout the coming discussion and case study analysis in the

substantive chapters, both external and internal factors that have shaped China's state identity will be considered. Whilst this section by no means provides an exhaustive account of the literature on the nexus between identity and foreign policy in China, it seeks to provide a clear picture of some of the key claims forwarded and an appreciation of how constructivist thinking can supplement realist research.

The role of identity, ideas, and culture have grown in ubiquity in scholarship about China and its rise in recent years. Indeed, this scholarship has in many cases emerged as a direct response and outright rejection of claims by, among others, Mearsheimer (2014) and Allison (2017) that, without significant intervention, China is destined to clash with the United States. In particular, these scholars do not claim that Beijing will seek confrontation with the United States due to it being a belligerent or untrustworthy actor, but rather that it will succumb to structural forces that render conflict with Washington inevitable. In short, according to these predictions, China cannot grow in terms of material capabilities without a clash ensuing between it and the United States. However, in seeking to counterbalance these structurally-deterministic predictions, numerous constructivist and identity-driven scholars have scoured Chinese history, going back thousands of years, to surmise that China's historical experience and culture render it able to grow as a global power and offer an alternative to the current international order in a peaceful manner, something that is often attributed to its Confucian roots (Kang, 2006). These accounts often, rather romantically, invoke traditional Chinese concepts, such as *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven), to claim that Chinese leaders have acted with great benevolence throughout history due to their cultural uniqueness (Zhao, 2006; 2011). Whilst this dissertation does not outright discard the essence of such concepts, as it is perfectly possible that some traditional Chinese notions do enter the decision-making process of certain Chinese leaders, even if only on a legitimation level, Callahan (2016: 227) aptly notes that claims about so-called Chinese pacifism are historically inaccurate and that these scholars' "fascination with the 'exotic' ideas of Chinese tradition means that the identity dynamic of China's 20th century experience of war, revolution, and socialism is largely ignored". However, as Callahan (2010: 4) also argues, it should be noted that the PRC often seeks to employ these ancient concepts in its rhetoric abroad as part of a drive for soft power that presents China as a great nation that has stood the test of time and whose values and ideas can be adapted for a global audience. Indeed, in his landmark study of Sino-Iranian relations, Garver (2006) supports this point, noting the

PRC's ubiquitous usage of ancient concepts and references to China's and Iran's ancient civilisational roots as a means of building solidarity with Iran.

More widely, though, scholarship on Chinese foreign relations concerned with ideas, identity, and culture has emerged that addresses contemporary debates within China and the impact of both domestic and external factors on the PRC's identity. Among these is Callahan's (2010) signal volume on the nexus between identity and foreign policy in the PRC, *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*. In this work, Callahan (2010) outlines a framework stating that China's national identity, which plays a significant role, in his opinion, in moulding Chinese foreign policy, is based around a curious combination of optimism and pessimism – what he terms "pessoptimism". The optimistic side of Chinese identity, Callahan argues, has its roots in China's long history as a strong nation, its current economic fortunes, and its prominent role in the modern era as a global power. Its pessimism, conversely, stems from several episodes of challenges and plight, some of which came about due to foreign treatment of China, such as the century of humiliation, and some of which were due to domestic political decisions, such as the famines caused by the Great Leap Forward. The so-called emerging "structure of feeling" that incorporates the dynamic interplay between both optimism and pessimism is what undergirds China's national identity, according to Callahan (2010: 10-11), leading the PRC to strive not only for material strength, but also "international respect and status", something that is discussed in several chapters of this dissertation in relation to the PRC's pursuit to be viewed as a responsible great power. Justifying the continued role that historic episodes, such as the century of humiliation, play in modern Chinese state-led identity formation, Callahan (2010: 12) affirms that "national humiliation education" is on the rise in schools in the PRC. From this perspective, it is evident that China's quest for international respect is, firstly, both a response to domestic and foreign factors and, secondly, is a state-led attempt to bolster its domestic and international legitimacy. Accordingly, much as Callahan encourages scholars to reject simple binaries, identity cannot be understood as merely a product of *either* external *or* internal drivers. Narratives that seek to understand the linkage between identity, ideas, culture, and foreign policy must consider both.

In a landmark study on the link between identity and Chinese foreign policy and international relations discourse, Boon (2018) traces the evolution of the notion of great power responsibility in the People's Republic of China, uncovering several crucial findings. First, the notion of great power responsibility became a keenly-pursued ideational interest

of the PRC in the early 1990s, particularly following the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989 and China's subsequent isolation from key global markets. Second, countering presumptuous claims that China has eschewed global responsibility since 2013 given that its foreign policy has become more assertive under President Xi, Boon (2018: 152) finds that responsible great power identity "has not only continued in the Xi era; it has discernibly intensified". Third, whilst this identity has been pursued more intensively by President Xi, reflecting a willingness on Beijing's part to work within the international order in its current manifestation, Boon (2018) also notes that in certain areas China has sought to revise the extant order, carrying both normative implications and material consequences for international relations. Finally, Boon (2018) identifies six drivers behind the PRC's growing commitment to the identity of responsible great power. First, Chinese leaders are aware that acting responsibly in global affairs is good for its image among other states. Second, US pressure across several decades has led to this identity affiliation. The US has made clear that it will only consider China to be a great power if Beijing carries its weight and takes on international responsibilities. Recognition from the US leads to recognition from other key states around the world; Chinese leaders are fully cognizant of this fact. Third, and highly linked to the first two drivers from a social perspective, Chinese leaders wish to be seen as legitimate by the international community. Exerting responsibility as a great power is part of this, according to Chinese leaders. Fourth, several external events have catalysed this identity affiliation and spurred debates within China that have highlighted the benefits of exerting great power responsibility in foreign affairs, including the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s and the Global War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks in New York. Fifth, increasing its discursive and practical adherence to great power responsibility is viewed by some decision-makers in the PRC as an instrument to assuage concerns in the international community about China's rise. Sixth, there is a natural connection between some of the PRC's other ideational pursuits, such as to "strive for achievement", and the notion of great power responsibility. All of these points display that, whilst China pursues this particular ideational interest in order to improve its image in the international community in service of wider objectives, China's pursuit of a responsible great power identity is driven by a multitude of material, ideational, and normative features, which themselves stem from both domestic and foreign factors.

In a more recent study examining Chinese global power, in addition to problematising how scholars approach the study of China's rise, Breslin (2021) identifies several vital areas in

which ideas and foreign policy intersect. On the issue of normative power, Breslin (2021: 22-23) asserts that there is both a negative, defensive aspect to China's interests in re-shaping the normative framework underpinning international relations and global governance and a positive aspect to these goals that seeks to "offer Chinese alternatives to the status quo". From a defensive perspective, Breslin (2021: 22) notes that the PRC's "overarching goal is to prevent pre-existing dominant powers using their understanding of universalist norms to serve their interests at the expense of China's", further linking this point to CCP concerns about external encroachment of its domestic sovereignty and the impact this could have on internal unrest. From a positive perspective, China is interested, according to Breslin (2021: 23), in the democratisation of the global governance structure and the formation of institutions that re-shuffle global trade and finance procedures. Similarly, on the issue of human rights, China has been keen to cultivate relations with a lengthy list of states opposed to the extant Western-led liberal agenda. According to Breslin (2021), these ideas play a key role in China's foreign policy.

An additional crucial point emerging from Breslin's (2021) study is the emphasis on who defines Chinese interests. Much like in many states, the definition of state interests is a highly complex issue, with multiple actors and interest groups all seeking to guide the contours of state policy. Breslin (2021: 64) nicely encapsulates the challenge facing researchers. "So it's all about balance. About trying to work out what exactly the overarching strategy is (what the leadership wants and how it thinks it can achieve its objectives), how different voices either feed into or reflect these central choices, and what room exists within the overarching strategic framework for others to try and get what they want as well". Thus, once again, the clear takeaway from this is that the state must not be viewed as a black box or as a simple pre-social monolithic entity; rather, as an entity that is constantly socially produced and re-produced due to both internal and external factors, it is crucial to consider the ways that these domestic debates and relations impact identity and interest formation. The role of Chinese corporations in the face of sanctions on Iran is an important example of this in the context of this research.

The above works fit into a wider spectrum of literature on Chinese identity and the influence of ideas and culture on the PRC's foreign policy. In addition to extensive body of literature addressing China's ideational proclivities (Callahan, 2016), the linkage between domestic legitimacy and foreign policy in China (Fewsmith and Rosen, 2001; Garrison, 2011; Shambaugh, 2013a), and its pursuit of normative power, smart power, and soft power

(Breslin, 2011; Kavalski, 2013; Lai and Lu, 2012), many of which are utilised throughout the case study chapters, this scholarship works to identify the crucial role that ideas and identity play in the formulation and functioning of the PRC's foreign policy and relations.

Conclusions and Perspectives

This chapter argues that, in order to assess the efficacy of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf, the most apposite indicator is the realisation of its interests in the region. Naturally, this necessitates a framework that can explain the nature of these interests. Accordingly, this chapter forwards a framework that combines neoclassical realism and constructivism, allowing an appreciation of the impact of the anarchic system and China's power position within it, the role of certain domestic variables, and the role of norms, identity, culture, and the ideas attached to material interests. In so doing, the framework offers a holistic framework to understand the drivers of Beijing's interests in the region. Beyond this, the chapter has outlined some of the core literature on constructivism and Chinese foreign policy to highlight the benefits of constructivist insights to research on Beijing's international relations.

Chapter 2

A Penetrated Region: The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex

Introduction

With a clearer conception of China's interests in the Persian Gulf outlined, it serves to gain an appreciation of the challenges that external powers face when engaging with Persian Gulf states so that the scope conditions of the region in which China engages in strategic hedging can be understood. Accordingly, this chapter provides a discussion of the Persian Gulf as a regional security subcomplex, an arena in which states' threat perceptions are predominantly driven by intra-regional concerns and in which their security policies and practices of securitisation and desecuritisation are deployed to counter these perceived threats (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Naturally, such a claim requires a consideration of multiple issues. As such, after a brief discussion surrounding the regional security complex paradigm and how the Persian Gulf constitutes a regional security subcomplex, Persian Gulf threat perceptions are outlined, detailing the drivers of security concerns in the region. Following this, the chapter scrutinises whether attempts at regional integration have implications for the assertion that the Persian Gulf is a regional security subcomplex. Thereafter, the "penetrated" nature of the Persian Gulf is discussed with a focus on the United States' role in the region and the growing involvement of other powers (Brown, 1984; Hinnebusch, 2014). Specifically, the question of whether the United States can be considered a part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex is scrutinised. The chapter outlines the scope conditions of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex that make it such a fascinating and important, but challenging, case study when examining China's hedging strategy.

The Regional Security Complex Paradigm

Placing an emphasis first and foremost on regional, rather than global, interpretations of international relations, Buzan (1983) and, later, Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that states across the world exist within clusters wherein their security practices are predominantly internally-focused, the regional security complex. Laying the foundations of their paradigm, they first assert that national security is too parochial a vision of international security due to its lack of wider context and its overlooking of the interconnectedness of states' security. "Security dynamics are inherently relational", they assert, "no nation's security is self-contained" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 43). Global level analyses, conversely, are far from apposite due to the rarity of perfect global security integration. That is to say, it is unusual

for any global interpretation to reflect accurately myriad states' on-the-ground concerns, risking the reification of Western-centric notions of international relations. Accordingly, drawing on what Buzan (1983) first termed "security complexes", Buzan and Wæver (2003: 43) forward their vision of regional security, positing the following:

> The region, in contrast, refers to the level where states or other units link together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other. The regional level is where the extremes of national and global security interplay, and where most of the action occurs. The general picture is about the conjunction of two levels: the interplay of the global powers at the system level, and clusters of close security interdependence at the regional level. Each [regional security complex] is made up of the fears and aspirations of the separate units (which in turn partly derive from domestic features and fractures). Both the security of the separate units and the process of global power intervention can be grasped only through understanding the regional security dynamics.

The above outlines the centrality of regions to security analysis. Neither the role of global powers nor domestic considerations are overlooked. However, regional security complexes are not regions in the purely geographical sense. A regional security complex is, put simply, dependent on the security practices of states. Indeed, in their earlier work, Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998: 201, emphasis removed) define a security complex as "a set of units whose major processes of security[s]ation, desecuriti[s]ation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analy[s]ed or resolved apart from one another". They also emphasise the fact that the majority of their security concerns originate from within the complex, though "collective security[s]ations of outside pressures" can arise from grand concerns, such as those posed by global economic crises or climate change. Thus, at the crux of the regional security complex are intensified security arrangements towards and between states to counter threats, both perceived and real, largely emanating from within the complex itself (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Gause III, 2010).

A final point is vital to consider. A grouping of units can be considered a regional security complex if the bulk of their security engagement is directed towards each other. However, there is no prescription as to whether the engagement must be driven by amity or enmity, both matter. Therefore, in a region where the large focus of each state's security policies is towards other regional states, then it can be considered a regional security complex; this is

the case even if security integration and cooperation are common. Accordingly, when examining a regional security complex, it is critical to consider both security alignment and hostility (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). With that said, the theory has been criticised by many for its focus on enmity, rather than amity.

Globalisation: A Challenge to the Paradigm?

The process of globalisation has led to an impactful shift in the ways that certain security threats spread across borders, regions, and continents. The flow of technology, knowledge, money, investment, medicine, products, and people between states across the world is staggering. Never has the globe been so connected in human history. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that certain aspects permeate the security environments of multiple regions at the same time. The best example of this, and one acknowledged by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) is the global economic system. This widespread economic interconnectivity has created an environment in which security threats can emerge from across the globe as quickly as they can from nearby. As such, this process of growing interconnectivity raises important questions about the appropriate level of analysis in security studies. Indeed, it challenges the assumption inherent in regional security complex theory about adjacency, the idea that security interactions and interdependence are more consistently observed at the regional level than any other level (Buzan and Wæver, 2003; Jarząbek, 2020). Whilst acknowledging this important issue, this dissertation asserts that the regional level is indeed the most apt lens through which Persian Gulf security affairs can be understood. Whilst there is a high degree of external penetration in the region, something that is addressed later in this chapter, and whilst the region's economic security is heavily linked to that of the global economy, it is still the case that the *majority* of the regional states' threat perceptions, acts of securitisation and desecuritisation, security integration, and security policies are a product of, and response to, the regional environment. As such, understanding regional security affairs through the regional security complex paradigm, whilst also acknowledging the salience of global interconnectedness in the modern age and regional penetration by external powers, is the best approach to understanding the Persian Gulf. This is justified further in the coming discussion. Importantly, though, understanding the greater proximity between previously distant states due to the effects of globalisation showcases the salience of appreciating the role of increasingly important external powers in regional security complexes, much as this dissertation attempts to do in the case of the People's Republic of China and the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex.

Regional Security Subcomplexes

For the purpose of this dissertation, it is crucial to consider the notion of regional security subcomplexes. Briefly, subcomplexes are smaller areas that are part of a wider regional security complex but can also be considered small complexes of their own due to their "distinctive patterns of security interdependence that are nonetheless caught up in a wider pattern that defines the [regional security complex] as a whole" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 51). Where the number of states in a regional security complex is large, the existence of multiple subcomplexes is not unusual. Furthermore, individual states can be part of more than one subcomplex within their wider security complex.

The case of the Middle East, an example cited by Buzan and Wæver (2003: 51-52), is particularly noteworthy when considering subcomplexes. The Middle East can be considered a regional security complex. However, it also comprises several subcomplexes, one of which is the Persian Gulf. Indeed, as will be asserted below, the Persian Gulf is a subcomplex due to the intense inwardly-focused security practices and threat perceptions that exist within the region. That does not mean, however, that the Persian Gulf states are not part of the wider Middle East regional security complex, a fact that will become evident throughout this dissertation, with concerns prevalent in the Persian Gulf about other states' involvement in, for example, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Libya, Lebanon, and others.

Constructivism, Realism, and the Regional Security Complex Paradigm

According to the theory's founders, the regional security complex paradigm is embedded within the notion of social construction in international relations. For a cluster of actors – or, in the case of this dissertation, states – to be considered a regional security complex, there must be "patterns of amity and enmity among the units in the system" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003: 40). The regional security complex, thus, is reliant on the policies and perceptions of states within it, not solely the balance of power or capabilities between states. The security complex is produced, reified, altered, and reproduced according to the actions of those actors within it. Any particular complex is not a static, unchanging entity. When actors recalibrate their security practices to incorporate other issues or actors, the security complex can change. However, it is important to emphasise that any changes would be the product of consistent alterations to states' policies and threat perceptions within the security complex, not singular events. Importantly, the emphasis is on security practices. More general notions of regionalism or regional identity are not of concern when identifying regional security

complexes, though there is little doubt that features inherent to certain regions can be the source of enmity and amity between actors within a security complex.

From these perspectives, it is evident that social construction is at the heart of the regional security complex paradigm. Firstly, given that the complex is reliant on the actions of actors within it, it cannot be considered pre-ordained. To clarify, the Persian Gulf, as an example, is not a regional security subcomplex because the states are located next to each other, though this undoubtedly plays a part in the equation. Rather, it is a regional security complex due to the security practices and threat perceptions of the actors within it. Furthermore, as Buzan and Wæver (2003: 50) emphasise, regional security complexes do “not exist independently of the states and their vulnerabilities”. It is entirely a product of their interaction. Secondly, social construction is central to this discussion due to the lack of prescription attributed to the causes of threat perceptions and security practices. That is to say, due to the centrality of states’ individual threat perceptions, any number of drivers could be behind their concerns. Thus, threat perceptions are not solely regarded as dependent on the balance of power and material capabilities among states, though this could absolutely be a concern. Rather, the scope is widened to acknowledge that the ideas behind threat perceptions ultimately matter. Threat perceptions and relations between states can be driven by a multiplicity of elements, including cultural and historical concerns (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Jarząbek (2020: 49) sums this up nicely, “in accordance with the assumptions of constructivism, it is actually the subjective perception of threat(s) that drive the [regional security complex’s] dynamics”.

In a critique of the regional security complex paradigm, Adib-Moghaddam (2006b) argues that it suffers from a theoretical drawback that suggests Buzan and Wæver (2003) did not entirely discard realist thinking in their conceptualisation of security complexes. For example, in agreement with McSweeney (1999), Adib-Moghaddam (2006b: 29) claims that regional security complex theory “remains committed to a negative understanding of the meaning of security”. Whilst Buzan and Wæver suggest a relational approach, in which actors produce security through interaction with each other, the authors infer a negative meaning to security as threats to survival that require… radical counterstrategies, a semantic misrepresentation that suggests affinity to the realist… credo about perpetual security dilemmas”. Furthering this point, Adib-Moghaddam (2006b) asserts that, from a theoretical perspective, regional security complexes are not given the latitude to evolve into security regions typified by amity, something that contradicts the claim that the paradigm is driven

by social constructivist thinking. While Buzan and Wæver (2003: 40) express their committed belief in the social construction of regional security complexes, stating that it is both "patterns of amity and enmity" that matter, this dissertation argues that Adib-Moghaddam's point is accurate to a certain degree. As such, acknowledging the impact of realist thinking on the regional security complex paradigm is important. Similarly, and in keeping with this seemingly Hobbesian interpretation of security, the regional security complex is built on the idea of anarchy and the distribution of power among states within the regional system, once again suggesting a leaning towards neorealism. Far from echoing the constructivist sentiment that "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992), several scholars have acknowledged this as a pitfall of Buzan and Wæver's (2003) conceptualisation of security complexes (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006b; Jarząbek, 2020; McSweeney, 1999). As such, it is crucial to acknowledge that, while the notion of regional security subcomplexes being socially constructed is apt in many ways, the theory is tinged with realist thinking in terms of the centrality of enmity over amity and its emphasis on anarchy among states. The regional security complex *is* a socially-constructed entity that exists according to the practices of its constitutive parts. It is built upon threat perceptions that are contingent on the social experience of the actors within it. Therefore, static or pre-given notions of security cannot delineate one security complex from another; the security policies of states within a particular area indicate the complex to which they belong above all else. However, the emphasis on anarchy between states within complexes, enmity between them, and the Hobbesian interpretation of security all indicate that the regional security complex theory is one that bridges realist thinking with constructivism. Much as in the case of the framework outlined in chapter one, this dissertation asserts that acknowledging how constructivist and realist insights complement each other holds great utility. It must also be acknowledged that this dissertation does somewhat align with realist thinking given the focus on rivalries and conflicts between Persian Gulf states. In this regard, the realist proclivities – not least of all the emphasis on enmity over amity - that underpin the constructivist-leaning regional security complex paradigm are evident in this research, too.

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex

Drawing the boundaries of a particular regional security subcomplex is crucial. Aligned with Gause III (2010), this dissertation asserts that the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex comprises the following states: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Additionally, as will be covered extensively later, the United

States can be considered part of the regional security subcomplex. All of these states are part of the regional security subcomplex as the bulk of their security policies are devoted to intra-regional concerns. Furthermore, their threat perceptions largely emanate from within the region. While certain other states, including Türkiye and Israel, have increased their security engagement with and towards the region in recent decades, they cannot be considered part of the regional security subcomplex as the sub-region is not the focal point of their security practices (Gause III, 2010). As has been alluded to, some states within the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex also belong to other subcomplexes. Iraq is a prominent example, straddling both the Levant subcomplex and the Gulf one (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). However, given that it has been the focal point of two Persian Gulf wars, the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of its security practices are devoted to the Persian Gulf subcomplex.

The temporal focus of this dissertation is also key to consider when examining the Persian Gulf security complex. Gause III (2010) and Han and Hakimian (2019) claim that the subcomplex emerged in 1971, upon the independence of Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates following the end of overt British imperialism in the region. With intense British oversight now withdrawn, they contend that three core states surfaced, now freer to pursue independent policies amidst a region of otherwise fairly small states: Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Whilst the subcomplex may have appeared in 1971, by the late 1970s and early 1980s it had fully crystallised. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, which upended the increasingly-involved United States' regional security policy by removing one of its core allies, the Shah, cast a shadow of fear over its Persian Gulf neighbours. Whilst the exact nature of these fears will be explored in depth below, the predominant concern was that Iran would incite uprisings led by Shi'a Persian Gulf citizens. Following Iraq's invasion of Iran and the protracted conflict that ensued, Persian Gulf states' threat perceptions were heightened, leading Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait to form the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 (Abdulla, 1999). Whilst this will be covered more extensively below, these brief details display that the Persian Gulf security complex was firmly in existence subsequent to the revolution in Iran. As such, examining China's role from 1979, as indeed this dissertation does, facilitates a rich appreciation of Beijing's engagement with the Persian Gulf as a regional security complex across the majority of its lifetime.

Persian Gulf Threat Perceptions

To reduce the multiplicity of factors that drive Persian Gulf threat perceptions to one core proposition would be to ignore the relatively diverse political environments of each state. However, certain core themes emerge across the rich tapestry of security concerns in the region, including: fears of territorial expansionism and military attacks; concerns that neighbours may attempt to incite domestic unrest; the use of economic coercion; and the spread of transnational ideologies. What unites these concerns, though, is the precarious domestic legitimacy and rule of each regime. Whilst this varies from one state to another, it is a commonality across the region.

Gause III (2003; 2010: 9) emphasises the centrality of regime security to threat perceptions in the Persian Gulf. Whilst he acknowledges that energy resources and border challenges may be the source of some tension in the region, thereby precipitating an intensified regional focus of each state's security policies, he argues that Persian Gulf states mainly deploy security policies and securitise other actors when there are "perceived threats to their own domestic stability". An overwhelming majority of states in the Persian Gulf have an awkward relationship with their citizenry. With perhaps the most extreme exception of Qatar, which enjoys relative domestic stability in comparison to its neighbours, Persian Gulf regimes walk a tightrope to safeguard themselves against the various risks emanating from social, religious, tribal, economic, and cultural cleavages in their respective polities. For example, Saudi Arabia, with a fairly significant Shi'a population in the strategically critical energy-rich Eastern regions, fears that the Shi'a theocracy, the Islamic Republic of Iran, may incite unrest in Saudi Arabia, thereby risking the staying-power of the Al Saud royal family. Such anxiety in the regime was fomented by an uprising of Shi'a Saudis in the aftermath of the revolution in Iran (Entessar, 2017). This particular example highlights, too, the salience of identity and ideological issues in the region. Many of the states are afraid of ideological challenges to their rule, this can be on the basis of religion, as the above example underlines, or on the basis of governance style. As largely authoritarian regimes with few democratic traditions or institutions, calls for democratic reform or social liberalisation can be perceived as threats, especially when they precipitate domestic unrest. The extent to which Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia went to counter Qatar's foreign policy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, which diverged from its GCC partners by encouraging reform and regime change, rather than supporting regimes, displays this. By blockading a close regional partner in 2017, the three states firmly exhibited their apprehension surrounding the potential spread of a more democratic and politically-pluralistic ideology. Their opposition to the Qatar-

owned Al-Jazeera news network, which played a significant role in raising regional and global awareness of the protests, serves as a strong example of this (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Whilst anxiety surrounding transnational ideologies and the potential of these ideas leading to the demise of regimes in the region is central to Persian Gulf threat perceptions, it would be foolish to ignore the threat of territorial expansionism and coercion, two features that risk the legitimacy of the ruling elite by undermining their sovereignty and perceived strength. In addition to the deep alarm surrounding Iraqi expansionism, underscored most pertinently by its invasion of Iran in 1980 and of Kuwait in 1990, for decades, the smaller Gulf states were concerned about their territorial and governance integrity in the face of Saudi Arabia's expansionist and interventionist actions. Ulrichsen (2020) documents numerous occasions in which Riyadh generated such angst among its neighbours. In 1976, Saudi Arabia put pressure on the Kuwaiti royalty to restrict the capabilities of elected officials. Furthermore, Saudi adventurism into Qatari territory in the early 1990s led to the death of a small number of Qatari armed forces. Similarly, as recently as 2010, armed naval forces from the UAE and Saudi Arabia shot at each other, though the skirmish ended swiftly. There are several instances across the region of territorial disputes. The Hawar Islands were a point of contention between Qatar and Bahrain that resulted in military tension in 1986 (Wiegand, 2012). Similarly, the UAE contests Iran's ownership of the islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb, and the Lesser Tunb (Foley, 1999). These serve as brief examples of some of the territorial issues that fuel the regional security complex.

The above examples of regional threat perceptions stress the intense linkage between regional and domestic security. Whether it be via overt military incursions or transnational ideological affinities, regimes in the region fear the potential ability of their neighbours to damage their domestic legitimacy. Accordingly, the bulk of their security practices and securitisation processes are directed towards their neighbours, as they are the states that are perceived to pose the greatest threats. Naturally, it is not solely states that pose a threat on these levels to the regimes. Islamist movements and parties, including Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, have continually represented a security risk to several states in the Persian Gulf. However, this dissertation focuses on state-to-state relations and, therefore, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss this at length.

The Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Origins of the GCC

The above discussion of Persian Gulf threat perceptions paints an untrusting picture of states in the region. It is, therefore, apt to discuss an example of protracted cooperation between six of the states. In so doing, it facilitates a deeper comprehension of some of the most salient issues in the region. First, it serves to consider the origins of the GCC, in order to clarify the significance and extent of threat perceptions and (in)security among states in the region. This is best achieved by considering two critical regional events, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War. Second, it is worth briefly considering what the implications of the GCC's existence are for the claim that the Persian Gulf is a regional security complex. With such levels of cooperation between some of the states, can it reasonably be considered a security complex? Finally, the 2017 GCC split is discussed in brief to underscore some of the ubiquitous concerns in the region, in addition to the challenges that Persian Gulf states face in cooperating with each other.

As was mentioned above, in order to appreciate fully the origins of the GCC, it is imperative to understand two key events in Persian Gulf history, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Iran-Iraq War. Following a period of extensive public disenchantment surrounding, among many other issues, the Shah's suppression of the Iranian population and poor economic governance, widespread protests erupted across Iran in 1978. The Shah's secret police, the Savak, cracked down hard on protestors, further emboldening them to depose the monarchy. With no other viable opposition groups endowed with sufficient resources and communication networks to spearhead the revolutionary protests, Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates swiftly became figureheads of the opposition. With extensive financial and logistical capabilities, thanks to the pervasive influence of mosques across the country, the Shi'a cleric-led revolution had firmly transformed into a religious revolution. By January 1979, the Shah had fled, heralding, after a brief period of factional and ideological contestation, the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Shi'a theocracy built around the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, a system wherein clerics govern the state's affairs. Of particular note for foreign states, especially those in the region, was the Islamic Republic's aim to spread the revolution, stoking fear among Gulf monarchies that they could be next (Ehteshami, 2017). From a regional perspective, the Islamic Revolution profoundly altered the status quo. The Shah had represented one of the twin pillars upon which the United States had based its regional security architecture, the other pillar being the Saudi regime. His ousting, thus, represented a significant blow to Washington. It is unclear what track US-Iranian relations were on in the immediate

aftermath of the revolution. However, whatever their destiny, fate was sealed by the student-led takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979, which resulted in the detainment of around fifty American hostages for over a year. The storming of the embassy was a reaction to the Shah's arrival to the US, something which Khomeini exploited to claim that the US was working on a clandestine basis with Iranians opposed to clerical governance. While Khomeini is not believed to have instigated the hostage taking, he soon expressed his support for the students, thereby hammering the final nail into the coffin of Iran's credibility in the West and condemning US-Iranian relations to decades of hostility (Axworthy, 2013).

Whilst the exact nature of the unfolding rivalry between certain GCC states and Iran will be covered in more detail in chapter seven and Iran's rivalry with Iraq will be covered in chapter four, understanding the roots of discord and threat perceptions is crucial to framing certain features that drive and sustain the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Indeed, few events have been as significant to Persian Gulf regional security calculations as the Iranian revolution. Having witnessed the ousting of one of Washington's closest allies in the region and a keen defender of the monarchical regional status quo, threat perceptions among the Persian Gulf monarchies were at an all-time high. To add insult to injury, the new Iranian regime was not only a republic, but one that sought to propagate its revolutionary ideals across the region and beyond. Thus, even to the Republic of Iraq, fears of the spread of Iran's ideology were palpable. To Saudi Arabia, in particular, as a state with legitimacy claims structured around its custodianship of Mecca and Medina, the two most crucial Islamic pilgrimage destinations, the ensuing challenge was felt distinctly (Mabon, 2016). Accordingly, it is evident that the looming threat of Iran meets at the crossroads of ideational and material threats. Certain Arab Gulf states feared the possibility that their populations, especially Shi'a Muslims, would feel an affinity with Iran's ideology, thereby fuelling domestic dissent. This concern, centred on the notion of regime security, has persisted since the Iranian revolution, and was felt starkly during the Arab Uprisings in the early 2010s (Ehteshami, 2013). It is crucial to note, though, that Iran is perceived as more of a threat by certain states and less so by others. Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE (less so Dubai, though) are most fearful of Iran, not least of all due to their Shi'a populations and fears that they may feel an affinity with the Islamic Republic. Oman and Qatar are less concerned and have fostered varyingly cooperative relationships with Tehran over the decades following Iran's Islamic Revolution, as has Kuwait once the dust of the revolution settled (Bianco, 2020).

If the Iranian revolution did not already sufficiently confirm the extent of regional insecurity in Persian Gulf decisionmakers' minds, Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 certainly did. Given that chapter four outlines the Iran-Iraq war in detail, it aids the discussion here surrounding Gulf threat perceptions and the origins of the GCC to consider merely some of the key features of the war. Axworthy (2013) notes that Saddam Hussein, acting opportunistically and thinking wishfully, invaded Iran under the impression that the new regime would not have consolidated power enough to repel Iraqi forces, thereby allowing him to seize the Shatt al-Arab river and energy resources in the region of Khuzestan. By late September 1980, tens of thousands of Iraqi troops had crossed over into Iranian territory, representing an unexpected offensive on Hussein's part. This invasion led to an eight-year long war between the two sides, with each side making occasional gains that ultimately resulted in deadlock. Khomeini finally accepted a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1988, but not before hundreds of thousands of lives had been lost, both military personnel and civilians (Sick, 1989).

Crucially, the Iraqi invasion of Iran and the subsequent protracted conflict highlighted the ever-increasing insecurity in the region to Persian Gulf leaders. Saddam Hussein's expansionism, building on already rife concerns about Iran's revolutionary fervour, expedited a hitherto drawn-out process of regional cooperation among six Persian Gulf neighbours (Abdulla, 1999; Legrenzi, 2015). Having met in Saudi Arabia in 1979 to discuss the potential domestic repercussions of Iran's revolution in each of their states, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar had made clear the increased insecurity felt across the region. While the GCC did not emerge from the meeting in Saudi Arabia, Legrenzi (2015) asserts that it was an important step. First and foremost, it facilitated the acknowledgment of a mutual threat, that of Iran. Second, in meeting without Iraq, much to the chagrin of Saddam Hussein given his aspirations to be the *de facto* leader of the Persian Gulf, the future GCC states paved the way for cooperative arrangements that would exclude Iraq. Legrenzi (2015) even acknowledges that Iraq's invasion of Iran cemented and facilitated the exclusion of Iraq from the GCC initiative. Baghdad's overt expansionism confirmed apprehension that it could undermine other Persian Gulf states' internal security. With these two substantial perceived threats gaining prominence into the 1980s, it is unsurprising that the GCC was born in May 1981.

The main focus of the GCC has been economic integration and cooperation. The success of this endeavour has been muted. Even though a customs union finally came into full existence

in 2015, it was soon undermined by a number of bilateral free trade agreements between member states, underscoring the challenges the organisation faces due to the lack of power wielded by the GCC as an entity (Hertog, 2007; Legrenzi, 2015). Indeed, the subordination of the GCC to the whims of its constitutive members has been a consistent issue. While security cooperation was not explicitly codified in the GCC charter, it "was in many ways the organi[s]ation's animating spirit, infusing most of… its activities without ever being explicitly mentioned" (Legrenzi, 2015: 34). Furthermore, by 1987, a multilateral security agreement was signed by all six states facilitating security cooperation, the exchange of intelligence, and opposing any attempts to destabilise other member states' internal security through the use of propaganda. Additionally, bilateral security agreements are common between the GCC states. Thus, even though the GCC's focus has largely been on economic integration, security has been a key mutual focal point. This was evidenced most poignantly by the role played by forces from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar in quashing Arab Spring protesters in Bahrain, a particularly interesting point given that Qatar had been consistently pro-reform in states further afield (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Based on the information outlined above, it is reasonable to question whether the Persian Gulf can be considered a regional security subcomplex given the extent of security cooperation between GCC states. This dissertation asserts that security cooperation between GCC states reinforces the claim that the Persian Gulf is a security complex. Buzan and Wæver (2003) note that security practices, whether hostile or friendly, are what define regional security complexes. Accordingly, the extent of security cooperation between GCC member states reaffirms the claim that they operate within a regional security complex. Gause III (2010: 4) expresses this point aptly:

> Regional systems should include states whose primary security focus is one another, manifested over time in the wars they fight and the time and resources they devote to dealing with one another. Note that this conception of regional system does not privilege positive interactions such as efforts at regional integration. Systems are defined by the intensity and durability of their security interactions, whether positive or negative.

As such, it is evident that security interaction is what matters, not just threat perceptions. Thus, it is apposite to consider the Persian Gulf a regional security complex. This is not despite, but partly *because of*, extensive GCC security cooperation. It is crucial to remember,

though, that the organisation emerged primarily due to security challenges in the region, thus underlining that intra-regional threat perceptions play a pervasive role in the Persian Gulf.

As has already been alluded to above, the GCC states do not exist in perfect harmony with each other. There are also trends of enmity between its members, ultimately reinforcing the assertion that they exist within a security complex rife with mutual threat perceptions. The most prominent example of insecurity between them is typified by the 2017 blockade of Qatar by Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (in addition to Egypt). Whilst the origins and trajectory of the blockade will be covered extensively in chapter seven, once again it serves to consider some basic details in order to gain an appreciation of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex and its manifestations. In June 2017, the GCC troika, in addition to Egypt, withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar, expelled Qataris from their states, and launched a land, sea, and air blockade of Qatar. Far from an historical aberration, the 2017 blockade represented another, albeit more serious, iteration of hostility towards Qatar on the part of all three Gulf states. Subsequent to the 1995 coup, when Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani ousted Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani to become the Emir of Qatar, the troika were reported to have planned a later-aborted coup to reinstate Khalifa bin Hamad. Furthermore, in 2014, all three states summoned their ambassadors back home in an ambassadorial boycott lasting several months. In both 2014 and 2017, the three states claimed that they were behaving this way towards Qatar to protect their national security. Indeed, they demanded numerous actions be taken by Doha to facilitate the resumption of ordinary activity, including: to close Al-Jazeera; to cease support for the Muslim Brotherhood; to sever relations with Iran, a big ask given that Qatar and Iran share the world's largest gas field (Boussois, 2019); and to align its foreign policy with its GCC partners (Ulrichsen, 2020). These concerns highlight the extent to which Qatar's policies were perceived as a threat to the other states' domestic legitimacy. The troika feared that Qatar's pro-reform position on the Arab Spring, a position it could afford due to its comparatively stable political environment, could incite protests across the Gulf, thereby undermining their domestic stability. The case was similar vis-à-vis Doha's relationship with Tehran; the troika perceived the relationship as a legitimator of Iran's regional policies, potentially blunting their attempts to securitise Iran among their citizens. Overall, the blockade depicts a prominent example of securitisation between GCC states. The troika invested a substantial amount of time into presenting Qatar as a threat to regional security, especially through the use of bots online and smear campaigns (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Krieg (2019) imparts salient wisdom observing the GCC split. He reminds regional observers to avoid falling into the trap of seeing regional security matters solely through the binary prism of the Iran-GCC rivalry. The blockade of Qatar in 2017 underscores the deeper complexities at play in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Despite fairly extensive attempts at economic integration and the symbolism of being GCC partners, Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia persisted with the blockade against Qatar for nearly four years. Naturally, this begs the question as to why the GCC did not manage hostility between member states. Legrenzi (2015: 150) emphasises that “the GCC is a sub-regional forum devoid of any supranational powers”. Accordingly, the organisation’s achievements and failures are subject to the whims and desires of national elites. Whether or not this indicates a “moribund” institution, a point of scholarly contention, is up for debate (Abdalla, 1999; Teitelbaum, 2014). What it does underscore, however, is that regional insecurity dominates in the Persian Gulf. As Adib-Moghaddam (2006a: 129) eloquently asserts in concluding his signal social constructivist study of Persian Gulf international relations, “regional states have acted on the premise of a ‘culture of rivalry’”. Put simply, the Persian Gulf is undoubtedly a regional security subcomplex.

A Penetrated System: External Powers in the Persian Gulf

If the Persian Gulf security subcomplex were not already intricate and multifaceted enough, the existence of myriad external powers in the region underlines the complex variables shaping regional security. Brown (1984: 4) and Hinnebusch (2014) define the wider Middle East, thus including the Persian Gulf, as a “penetrated” system. Put simply, this means that the region is, and has long been, an arena in which foreign powers have played a dominant and often intrusive role. Specifically, Brown (1984: 5) asserts that “the politics of a thoroughly penetrated society is not adequately explained… without reference to the influence of the intrusive outside system”. The generations of colonialism that the region experienced at the hands of numerous actors but most pertinently France and Britain are no exception when compared to other regions of the Global South. Indeed, swathes of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and beyond have been the victims of Western colonialism. However, the Persian Gulf, and indeed the wider Middle East, can be considered “penetrated” due to the continued role that some external powers have played in shaping regional events. In many cases, the roots of this penetration are to be found in the dependence of some regional elites on external powers. With shaky domestic legitimacy, it was, and remains, common for regimes to rely on external patronage, especially in the realm of security. Furthermore, as

Hinnebusch (2014) argues, the reliance of Persian Gulf powers on income from energy resources, rather than domestic taxation, has rendered them less independent when confronted by the demands of external powers. Prior to the end of overt imperialism in the region, Britain often played the role of security guarantor. After its withdrawal in 1971, however, the United States stepped up to this role in the Persian Gulf, beckoning a protracted period of American predominance in regional affairs, bolstered by ever-increasing US regional security architecture.

In addition to the United States, the Persian Gulf is an arena in which most large global economies have a stake, as will be discussed below. First and foremost, external powers are interested in the region's abundant energy resources. As of 2010, the Persian Gulf was home to approximately 54 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of proven gas reserves (Niblock, 2013). Securing access to these resources has been a key goal of states across the world. Oil and gas are critical to most states in order to fuel industries, the production of goods, vehicle ownership, construction, personal and commercial amenities, and much more. Despite the drive among numerous states to diversify their use of energy resources away from fossil fuels, spurred on by climate-related concerns and the associated externalities of fossil fuel consumption, global yearly oil and gas sales increase most years. Regarding oil, as of 2016, around 90 million barrels a day were being consumed, a substantial increase on 60 million barrels a day in 1980 and just over 75 million barrels a day in 2000 (Index Mundi, 2021; Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Furthermore, even though numerous energy exporters exist across the world, oil prices are decided by global markets. Thus, even though the United States, as an example, is increasing its domestic production of oil, it is still reliant on stability in Persian Gulf oil markets, thereby tying its own economic prosperity to Persian Gulf security (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Accordingly, it is fair to claim that the geostrategic significance of the Persian Gulf to states across the world is unlikely to decline in the near future.

Naturally, as a region with occasional instability stemming from the bubbling up of intense rivalries and conflicts, certain challenges face external powers when dealing with the Persian Gulf. The Strait of Hormuz, a waterway between Iran on the one side and the UAE and Oman on the other, sees around 40 percent of global oil exports pass through it each day. While alternatives exist for some exporters, such as Saudi Arabia, which could theoretically transport its oil from the energy-rich Eastern provinces across the width of the country to the Red Sea, these alternatives are often too costly to be considered (Yetiv and Oskarsson,

2018). On numerous occasions, Iran has threatened to close the Strait, thereby potentially grinding to a halt a substantial proportion of global oil sales. Any such closure would undoubtedly entail a hefty increase in global oil prices, contrary to the interests of most key economies. While Pham's (2010) realist assessment of this leads him to argue that Iran does not have the capabilities to follow through with such a threat, the instability that could result from any attempt would be damaging for most external actors in the region, not to mention regional states. As is clear, the region's potential political and security volatility, when considered in conjunction with its geostrategic significance, is a recipe for potential chaos. External powers must navigate these obstacles when engaging with the region. Rather significantly, this means that they all have a stake in regional security, something which is almost entirely underwritten by the United States and its extensive regional security architecture.

The United States and the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex

Before outlining the exact nature of the United States' Persian Gulf security architecture, it serves to consider the question of whether the US is part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Buzan and Wæver (2003) claim that great powers cannot be part of more than one regional security complex and, thus, that the United States cannot be part of the Persian Gulf subcomplex in addition to complexes across the world, including Pacific Asia. However, in agreement with Gause III (2010), this dissertation posits that the United States is indeed part of the Persian Gulf security subcomplex. Having been an important regional player throughout the majority of the 20th century, evidenced for example by its purported involvement in the Mossadegh coup in Iran in the early 1950s, Washington's role in the Persian Gulf took off in the 1970s following Britain's withdrawal from the region (Kamrava, 2011). Its newly-found prominent role in regional security in the 1970s coincided, rather uncoincidentally given the new independence of multiple Gulf states following Britain's withdrawal, with the emergence of the modern Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Thus, it has been deeply involved in regional security since the emergence of the subcomplex itself. Throughout the decades, the United States has been central to security dynamics in the region. As Gause III (2010) acknowledges, Washington was key in bringing about the eventual outcome of the First Gulf War, leading to the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait. Similarly, in deciding to invade Iraq in 2003, Washington upended the distribution of power among Persian Gulf states, constraining one of the key contenders for regional hegemony. Furthermore, its approach towards Iran, especially in instigating international

sanctions against Tehran, has greatly altered the nature of Persian Gulf security. Thus, whilst the US has not always been the central pivot around which every single rivalry and conflict has revolved, it has played a crucial role in shaping regional security dynamics and rarely finds itself irrelevant to regional events. Referring to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Hinnebusch (2007: 213) elegantly asserts, "the US role in the world has taken a turn away from benign hegemony as predictability, self-restraint, and multilateralism no longer hold and, in the Middle East at least, the US has become a partisan player, not a balancer". While this may not be the case in all regions of the world, in the Persian Gulf, the United States is firmly a member of the regional security subcomplex.

Taking into consideration the evolving nature of regional security complexes, asserting that the US is part of the Persian Gulf security subcomplex does not mean that the United States is *inherently* a part of the Persian Gulf subcomplex, nor does it signify that it is not part of other subcomplexes. What it underscores, rather, is that the security dynamics of the region would not be as they are without Washington's involvement. US policies play a substantial role in guiding and shaping the direction and contours of Persian Gulf security. For the last several decades, its involvement has been etched into the DNA of Persian Gulf threat perceptions, security policies, securitisation, desecuritisation, and alliances. US regional security architecture provides the framework within which regional states engage with each other. It is, therefore, an indelible part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex.

The US Security Architecture

Much of the literature pertaining to China's role in the Persian Gulf takes US security architecture in the region for granted. Within this dissertation, though, it is useful to consider exactly what this means. In so doing, a clearer picture of Persian Gulf security can be generated, facilitating a comprehension of the rich security tapestry that other external powers face when engaging with the region. Within the context of a study about China's role in the region, a state that was described by former US President Barack Obama (2014) as a security "free rider" in the Middle East, it is imperative to understand this.

Spurred on by the dual concerns of ensuring access to energy supplies and countering Soviet expansionism in a significant geostrategic location, the United States took Persian Gulf security very seriously in the 1970s. With the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, one of Washington's key pillars of regional security had been swept from under its feet, leaving US policymakers feeling like they had no choice but to increase their direct security

engagement in the region. The Shah's ousting represented not only the demise of Washington's regional "policeman", but also entailed the cancellation of US energy contracts in Iran worth billions of dollars (Ehteshami, 2013; Gause III, 2010: 13). Such a swift course of events proved to the United States the instability and volatility of Persian Gulf regional security and the adverse effects this could have on US interests in the region. Thus, in keeping with the Carter Doctrine, which aimed to prevent any external powers from dominating the Gulf, former US President Jimmy Carter formed the "Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force", (RDF) which sought to make US responses to security challenges nimbler and faster (Gause III, 2010: 57). Fearful that overly close ties with the US could result in similar events to those witnessed in Iran in 1979, most Gulf states were unwilling to support the US in this endeavour as directly as offering bases. Indeed, Oman was the only state to accept Washington's proposal. A decade later, though, with the looming threat of Iraqi expansionism embodied in its invasion of Kuwait, other Arab Gulf states soon changed their minds.

In addition to the first clear version of US RDF in the region in Oman, the Iran-Iraq war propelled Washington's security role in the region. By 1987, Kuwait had been subject to Iranian attacks on its oil tankers, leading it to seek assistance from either the US or the USSR. The US obliged, re-flagging Kuwaiti tankers and providing assistance, both requested and unrequested, to tankers belonging to other Arab states, including Saudi Arabia (Axworthy, 2013; Gause III, 2010). Whilst the Iran-Iraq War threw the United States into the spotlight, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 represented a remarkable turning point in the United States' wider regional security architecture development. The hitherto cautious Saudi Arabian leadership opted to invite US troops to be stationed in the Kingdom, hoping that they could act as a sufficient deterrent against any further Iraqi foreign incursions. Indeed, the majority of Washington's half-a-million strong military personnel deployment was based in Saudi Arabia. While very few remained in Saudi Arabia by the end of the Gulf War, the US had set up the US Combat Air Operations Centre in the Kingdom, which acted as the central coordination base against threats across the Persian Gulf and beyond. The centre remained there until 2003, moving thereafter to Qatar (Niblock, 2006). Further, building on the Reagan Doctrine, which set out to protect regimes in the region from internal security threats, Washington invested significantly in training the Saudi Arabian National Guard. US regional security architecture during the 1990s and beyond was not solely based in Saudi Arabia, though. Defence agreements were ratified between Washington and all

other GCC states between 1991 and 1994. Additionally, in 1995 Bahrain began hosting the revived US Fifth Fleet (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Further to the above, following the construction of al-Udeid base in Qatar, the US expanded its military presence in the country, where it now has the army components of US Central Command. Over 10,000 US troops are stationed in Qatar, displaying the significantly diversified security portfolio that Washington has procured in the Persian Gulf (Kamrava, 2013b). Finally, the US has numerous bases scattered across the other Arab Gulf states, including its Integrated Air Missile Defence Centre in the UAE. Building on all of this, Washington has upped the ante across the decades on its ability to deploy forces rapidly. All in all, in addition to the billions of dollars' worth of weapons and military equipment that the US has sold to Arab Gulf states across the last few decades, the United States has firmly positioned itself as the key security guarantor in the Persian Gulf. As Yetiv and Oskarsson (2018) aptly acknowledge in their signal volume on US, Chinese, and Russian capabilities in the region, Washington's capabilities in the Gulf far outstrip any other potential competitors. With such a claim acknowledged, it is no surprise that other external states, including China, all rely on US security architecture to guarantee the safe flow of oil.

The Emergence and Re-Emergence of External Powers in Regional Affairs

The United States is not the only external actor in the region, though. Thus, before addressing China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf in chapters four to seven, it serves finally to acknowledge the emerging and re-emerging role of other external powers in the region in order to contextualise fully the myriad actors engaged in Persian Gulf security affairs. Accordingly, this section provides a very brief overview of some of these actors' positions in the region, though it is by no means exhaustive. The key aim of this section is to display the extent of external penetration in the region and the multiplicity of actors involved.

Russia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia's development of comprehensive ties with Persian Gulf states has been slower than China's. However, releasing the burdensome shackles of intense communist ideological convictions and the often overly-simplified bifurcation of alliance-building that existed during the Cold War has facilitated a closer rapprochement between Persian Gulf states and Moscow. Above all other actors, Russia retained relatively strong economic ties with Iran throughout the 1990s and enjoyed more

trade with Iran than with all GCC states throughout the 1990s and early 21st century. Though, relations with the GCC states blossomed upon the turn of the millennium. Indeed, in 2003, Russia-GCC trade amounted to only around $750 million, skyrocketing to nearly $3.5 billion in 2011 (Oskarsson and Yetiv, 2013). With ever-increasing sanctions placed on Iran due to its nuclear enrichment, the GCC overtook Iran as Russia's biggest trade partner in the region in 2012 (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018).

On the political and security side, the GCC states are unhappy with Russia's decision to support the Assad regime in Syria, thereby fuelling the perception that it is more closely aligned with Iran's Middle East policy (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). The extent to which this has dampened the mood in Russia-GCC relations is yet to be seen, though. Indeed, whatever the perceptions of regional states, Russia has seemingly tried to avoid entering into the political quagmire of regional rivalries. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, though, its actions have consequences for Persian Gulf security. Accordingly, considering its role is continually important. Within the remit of its role as a permanent UNSC member, it has been involved in decisions on Persian Gulf issues spanning from the Iran-Iraq War to the Iran nuclear programme. Furthermore, tensions spiked between Saudi Arabia and Russia in 2020, as Russia refused to decrease its oil production in order to maintain oil prices at a reasonable level (Ward, 2020). This underlines an important aspect of Russia's relations with energy-producing Persian Gulf states. Cooperation facilitates increased economic engagement, but as another energy producer, competition can arise that renders engagement more challenging. The Persian Gulf states have showcased a variety of responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022. Several US partners in the region have adopted positions that hedge between the US and Russia. Iran has fallen on the Russian side of the equation, even providing Moscow with drones (Sauerland, 2024).

The Soviet Union's positionality in the Persian Gulf, and indeed wider Middle East, was a salient concern of the Chinese leadership in the Cold War, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, following the Sino-Soviet split. The PRC feared that the Soviets would make significant gains in the region, thereby strategically encircling China from all sides, near and far. Accordingly, especially in the first two case studies (the Iran-Iraq War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait), the Soviet Union's role must be considered.

India

In addition to India's intense need for oil, for which it receives around two-thirds of its imports from the Persian Gulf, trade and investment between India and the Persian Gulf states has grown steadily for a number of years. The UAE is India's third-largest trade partner and the GCC overall represents the biggest foreign investor in India (Janardhan, 2011). Indeed, in 2011, India-GCC trade reached $135 billion (Pant, 2013). Furthermore, of note to India-Gulf relations is the substantial Indian diaspora living throughout the region. Indeed, around five million Indians live and work in the Gulf. Similar to China, India has not picked sides between Iran and the GCC states, however it has expressed its opposition towards Iran's nuclear proliferation. Indeed, on the large part, India's security role has remained minimal, but its increasing economic engagement with states in the region makes it an important state to keep an eye on (Janardhan, 2011).

Japan

Having been included among the states targeted during the 1973 oil embargo and having been reliant on oil imports for its intense economic growth and output, Japan has long been cognizant of the geostrategic importance of the Persian Gulf. Despite having sought to diversify its energy sources and suppliers, the Persian Gulf continued to play a critical role in Japan's energy acquisition, with Qatar providing Tokyo with around half of its LNG needs in 2011 and Persian Gulf states accounting for around 70 percent of its oil imports in 2015 (Japan's Ministry for Economy, Trade, and Industry, 2016; Kobayashi and Miyagi, 2015).

Regarding security issues, Japan awkwardly tried to balance between the Iranian and American positions on Iran's nuclear issue, hoping to retain a foot in Iran's energy industry. Ultimately, though, Japanese companies withdrew from Iran as the US made clear that it would not acquiesce (Kobayashi and Miyagi, 2015).

Having decided following World War Two to limit its foreign military incursions, Japan is behind most other strong economies in terms of military capabilities. However, following criticism surrounding its lack of military support, other than via financial means, towards the banishing of Iraq from Kuwait in the early 1990s, Tokyo felt ready to initiate a return to foreign military activity, eventually sending troops to Iraq in 2003. While Japan's security involvement in the region has been otherwise limited, the fact that its re-emergence as a foreign military power happened in the Persian Gulf underlines the extent to which the region is an arena in which external powers seek to exert their influence and display their strength (Evron, 2017). When viewing the region as a "penetrated" system, it comes as no

surprise that Japan's re-emergence as a foreign military power would take place in the Persian Gulf of all regions. Given the occasional tension and underlying challenges in Sino-Japanese relations, understanding the potential implications of their Persian Gulf policies vis-à-vis the other will be particularly important in the future. Though, Evron (2017) asserts that there is little reason for Chinese concern at present.

European States and the European Union

Numerous European states have been involved in the Persian Gulf for far longer than the United States. Britain acted as a colonial power in the region for a protracted period and the impact of other European colonial states was felt across the Persian Gulf. In the modern day, relations between European states, including the European Union, and Persian Gulf states cover a wide breadth of issues. According to figures from the European Union, goods trade between Iran and the European Union amounted to over €5 billion in 2019 (European Commission, 2020b). Furthermore, its goods trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council was worth over €120 billion in the same year, making the GCC the EU's fourth-biggest export destination (European Commission, 2020a). Thus, it is evident that on a trading basis, the region is critically important to European states.

On a security level, some European states have a more involved role than others. Britain and France are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, alongside the US, Russia, and the PRC. Accordingly, they have been involved in each security issue that has been raised at the security council level, including regarding the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the US-led invasion of Iraq, Iran's nuclear programme, and much more. Additionally, Germany has played an increasingly important role in Persian Gulf regional security, acting as one of the negotiating countries in the Iran nuclear agreements. Therefore, the role of these states needs to be considered during each case study explored in this dissertation.

Republic of Korea and Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Both of the Koreas have shown significant interest in the Persian Gulf over the last few decades. However, each has engaged with the region for very different reasons, largely driven by the Republic of Korea's extensive economic aspirations and close ties with the US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's desire to resist Washington and improve ties with other so-called pariah states.

The Republic of Korea has largely engaged with the region for economic reasons, seeking to engage in construction and infrastructure projects since the 1970s and import energy from the region. The Republic of Korea is one of the world's biggest oil importers and receives the majority of its oil imports (well over 50%) from the Persian Gulf. As such, it has become an important customer to regional states, and it has a vested interest in the region (EIA, 2020). Among its important projects was the highly coveted contract to construct a nuclear power plant in the UAE in 2009, offering Seoul a foot in the door of the Middle East nuclear power industry. The contract was worth around $40 billion and nicely complemented the Republic of Korea's increasing trade with regional states, which totalled over $639 billion between 2000 and 2010. Given Seoul's close relationship with Washington, it is unsurprising that the Republic of Korea's leadership has often been pressured to support the US in its security and military endeavours in the region. Whilst the Republic of Korea was able to get away with sending secondary support staff to the region during the Kuwait crisis in the 1990s, Washington exerted enough pressure during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 for Seoul to deploy over 3,000 soldiers (Levkowitz, 2012).

Conversely, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has played a more prominent role in the region as a military exporter, though its exports have been concentrated on other states resistant to US hegemony, including Syria and Iran. Thus, in the Persian Gulf, Pyongyang's focus has been on Tehran. Relations between the two sides developed in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, with Tehran in dire need of weaponry, especially missiles, and Pyongyang eager to amass the financial capabilities to fund its own missile development projects. Throughout the war, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was one of Iran's few friends. The regime in Pyongyang played a pivotal role in facilitating weapons transfers from China to Iran and exporting its own Scud-B missiles to Tehran. The Iran-DPRK relationship has continued long after the Iran-Iraq war, with the two states cooperating in scientific and technological affairs and displaying a rhetorical willingness to resist US hegemony and unilateralism (Levkowitz, 2017). Unlike the Republic of Korea, Pyongyang's relations in the region are far less wide-ranging and are not economically extensive. However, from a security perspective, the DPRK's role in shaping the contours of regional events has not been insignificant.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Identifying the Persian Gulf as a regional security subcomplex, wherein the focus of regional states' security practices and threat perceptions are on each other, this chapter has aimed to outline the complexities facing external powers that try to engage with the region. Rivalries and conflicts are rife in the Persian Gulf and mutual threat perceptions guide states' regional security policies. With regime security topping most regional states' agendas, fears of territorial encroachment or transnational ideational affinities inciting domestic uprisings are widespread. This leads to an increased ubiquity of securitising behaviour in the region and an escalated probability of conflict and bubbling tension.

In addition to the six GCC states, Iran, and Iraq, this dissertation aligns with Gause III (2010) in claiming that the United States is part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. The US not only provides the security architecture upon which most external and Persian Gulf states rely to secure their regional interests, but also plays an unparalleled role in shaping the contours of regional security. This was most clearly manifested by its ability to end Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and to launch a war against Iraq in 2003, an event that dramatically altered the power dynamics across the region. In addition to this, the region is penetrated by a multiplicity of global powers, from the former colonial European powers to East Asian states.

In outlining these dynamics, the chapter paves the way for the dissertation to question whether China's hedging strategy, in the context of a regional security subcomplex with intense mutual securitisation and frequent conflicts and tension, is conducive, damaging, or effective when it comes to realising the interests that China pursues from its engagement in the region. This is a question in dire need of answering given the PRC's increasingly-embedded role within the Persian Gulf's political and economic landscape.

Chapter 3

Methodology

All of the research questions examined in this dissertation pertain to the time period 1979-2023. In order to gain a rich appreciation of the breadth and depth of Chinese interests – an important foundation for answering the three central research questions outlined in the introduction - in the Persian Gulf, the efficacy of its strategy, and Persian Gulf perceptions of China, this dissertation follows a qualitative research agenda. Specifically, qualitative research sets itself apart from quantitative research in its pursuit of a "thick description" of social interaction (Geertz, 1973). Seeking to obtain as deep an analysis as possible of the various features of social life and the constructed meaning behind them is typical of a qualitative research approach (Bryman, 1984). Indeed, as has been elucidated in both chapter one and chapter two, this research is guided by a framework that includes elements of constructivist thinking, an approach dependent on qualitative research (Silverman, 2013). Primarily, though, this research is positivist.

The single most dominant research tradition is positivism, a philosophical stance derived from the natural sciences. Researchers that subscribe to positivism assert that there is an objective reality external to them that can be discovered by scholars. An emphasis is placed in positivism on the relationship between facts, which are believed to be objective, and causation. Specifically, theories and hypotheses are employed in positivism to test deductively whether expected phenomena are observed within particular case studies. Importantly, researchers do their utmost to separate themselves from the objects of their research, keen to avoid imbuing the results of their hypothesis and theory testing with their own feelings, emotions, and proclivities (Carson et al, 2001). The focus of positivism is to generate research that holds validity and reliability. Validity refers to the generalisability of the research based on the sample. For example, a researcher chooses a sample of the British population to answer whether or not they enjoy eating cheese in the hope of identifying what percentage of British people like it. To ascertain if the research is valid, a researcher would need to be confident that the sampling techniques used fairly represent the varying demographics present in Britain in order to be confident that the sample actually reflects the wider population. Thus, the ability to reproduce the research results with other participants is what defines validity. Reliability, rather, is the yardstick used to assess whether the same results emerge if a study is conducted following the same methodology. If we ask 100 British

people if they like cheese, and 90 say yes, reliability assesses whether the participants will respond with the same answer if a different researcher is placed in front of them or if they are asked a week later. To summarise, then, positivist researchers seek to uncover an objective reality external to them using methods of measurement that try to separate the researcher from the research subjects as much as possible (Bryman, 2016). A criticism of positivist research, though, is that it does not always account for the historical and social context that research subjects exist in. This is addressed in this dissertation with frequent emphasis on the context of the states examined.

Depending on the particular aspect of the research, this dissertations adopts an eclectic ontological and epistemological framework that combines insights from materialism and constructivism on the ontological front and interpretivism and positivism on the epistemological level. First and foremost, constructivism claims that there is no reality separate to the meanings attributed to it. Reality is not external to social agents, but rather constructed by them on a continuous basis and subject to their perceptions (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008). As was explained with the example of the DPRK and Britain in chapter one, whether or not Britain's accumulation of nuclear weapons represents a threat to the United States is dependent on the meanings that US officials attach to Britain. If viewed as antagonistic or an enemy, Britain's accumulation of nuclear weapons would likely be perceived a threat. If viewed as a friend or ally, it would unlikely be viewed as threatening (Wendt, 1995). Thus, the subjectivity of experience is what separates constructivism from other ontological positions. Of note to the discussions about regional perceptions of Beijing, usually concomitant with such an ontological position, an interpretivist epistemology carries the belief that researchers ought to explore the myriad meanings that research subjects attach to the world around them. Central to such a stance is the importance of context. Without gaining a grasp of the social and historical context within which social agents exist, interpretivist data collection cannot be fruitful. From this perspective, the researcher is not seeking to discover a reality that is exogenous to research subjects, but rather *their* realities. Naturally, depending on the exact aspect of the research under consideration, either a positivist or interpretivist epistemology dominates. When assessing whether China has realised tangible, material interests in the Persian Gulf, such as the acquisition of energy supplies, a positivist approach is apt. When considering the subjective perceptions of Persian Gulf elites, an interpretivist lens is most appropriate as it facilitates an appreciation of the

research subjects' "interpretation of meaning through [the researcher's] empathetic understanding and pattern recognition" (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993: 27).

Thus, this research is partially guided by a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, especially in its examination of regional perceptions of Beijing. However, certain aspects of world politics are observable and independent, at least in their basic existence, of the meanings attached to them, a notion aligned with Wendt's (1999: 109) "rump materialism" and perfectly aligned with a positivist research agenda. It serves at this point to consider an example salient to this dissertation. Oil plays a central role in China-Persian Gulf relations, as is evidenced by the extensive and protracted energy relationship between Beijing and its Persian Gulf partners. For the purpose of this research, the subjective meanings and importance attached to oil by Chinese leaders is critical in order to ascertain the extent to which it guides Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf at any given time. For example, in the 1980s, oil imports were not particularly important to the PRC. After 1993, however, this situation changed dramatically as China was no longer able to satisfy its oil needs with domestic production. Accordingly, the salience of the Persian Gulf to China escalated. In scenarios where electricity outages have threatened potential domestic unrest in China, the significance of oil imports has been palpable (Garrison, 2011), thereby displaying that interests are not static, but rather subject to the current social and historical context within which social actors exist. Thus, from the viewpoint of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, the subjective attribution of meaning to particular interests is crucial to understand, thereby necessitating an interpretivist research agenda. However, in order to examine whether, for example, China's hedging strategy has impacted its ability to procure oil supplies from the region, data must be observed through a positivist lens. Thus, as will be furthered below, this dissertation actively uses quantitative data to ascertain whether China's strategy has affected its procurement of material resources. These particular types of outcomes can be observed, calling for a positivist approach. As is evident, thus, a directly positivist approach imbued with interpretivist elements is adopted in this dissertation, depending on whether a particular element requires greater study behind the observable meaning. For example, barrels per day (bpd) of oil exports do not require any interpretivism, whereas the nature of regional perceptions requires a certain degree of interpretivism.

Case Selection

The issue of case selection is one that most researchers must grapple with, whether dealing with small-*N* or large-*N* studies. In small-*N* studies, it can be challenging to produce generalisable data from the small number of cases selected. However, as Seawright and Gerring (2008) aptly acknowledge, purposive sampling of cases enables researchers to engage with cases that are deemed most apposite for their particular research questions. Taking this further, they note that when researchers are more interested in delving deep into "features specific to a particular case… the problem of case selection does not exist" (Seawright and Gerring, 2008: 296). This is because the case, or group of cases, is determined as apt prior to any such case selection decision, and the emphasis on generalisability does not concern the researcher to the same extent as in other studies. This can be considered "*a priori*" sampling (Seawright and Gerring, 2008: 296, original emphasis). In this vein, the varying definition of the term "case study" emerges. It can be used to describe one example of a particular phenomenon that highlights features common across all or most other examples similar to it or it can be utilised to suggest the detailed study of one (or one small group) of examples to identify their particularities (Gerring, 2006). This observation is key to this dissertation, as the research questions specifically problematise Chinese behaviour within the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex, questioning whether its attempts to be the "friend of all and enemy of none" have been conducive to realising its interests in such a politically-volatile region amid protracted conflicts and rivalries and whether this approach has impacted upon Persian Gulf perceptions of Beijing (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4).

Accordingly, the case selection technique used in this dissertation falls somewhere between purposive sampling, the notion that the researcher uses their own pragmatic discretion to choose cases that match the research questions, and *a priori* case selection, the notion outlined by Gerring (2006) and Seawright and Gerring (2008). First, the case study selection process used in this research can be considered *a priori* because similar phenomena have been witnessed by scholars in China-Persian Gulf studies across each of the cases. That is to say, China has sought to maintain positive relations with rivals during the Iran-Iraq War (Craig Harris, 1993), the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (Shichor, 1992), the US-led dual containment of Iran and Iraq, the US-led invasion of Iraq (Alterman and Garver, 2008), the Saudi-Iranian rivalry (Alterman and Garver, 2008; Garlick and Havlová 2020), and the GCC split (Burton, 2020; Fulton, 2019a). However, it can also be reasonably argued that the case selection technique aligns more with purposive sampling, given the attempts that are made

in this dissertation to compare commonalities and differences across the four time periods, whilst also placing them within their unique contexts. Indeed, the conclusion of this dissertation does not shy away from making cross-case comparisons to ascertain the efficacy and implications of China's hedging strategy across the four and a half decades under study. From this perspective, whilst historical contingency is emphasised in each case study, cross-case analysis is deployed in the conclusion to identify any commonalities that may exist across the time period. Whilst it may appear contradictory to academic convention to be unclear whether the case selection process was *a priori* or based on purposive sampling, in the spirit of researcher reflexivity, it would be reasonable to suggest that the reality of this dissertation's case study selection sits within the grey area between the two, given the prior, albeit limited, awareness brought to the research about each case and China's role in them.

Despite the above discussion, it is crucial to explore briefly what unites each of the case studies and the parameters that render them all acceptable. First and foremost, given that the framework used to assess the efficacy of China's strategy is the realisation of its interests, it is vital that China has interests in each case. Otherwise, it would not be possible to measure the main dependent variable, the realisation of its interests. While China's interests have grown in depth and breadth in the region since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, the literature is quite clear that Beijing has had significant interests in the Persian Gulf since then. Accordingly, all case studies in the four periods fulfil this first, basic criterion.

Second, there must be sufficient evidence that China seeks to maintain relations with each side of a rivalry or conflict. Given the qualitative nature of this research, evidence for this could be: Extensive economic engagement, elite-level connectivity and diplomatic relations, the existence of some form of strategic partnership, military ties and arms sales, or security cooperation. This will be addressed in each chapter.

Third, as has been discussed in chapter two, the particular issue that gives rise to the research problem is the existence of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex and the extent to which rivalries and conflicts take place in the region. The research puzzle would not be particularly pressing if all states in the Persian Gulf existed in a state of mutual amity. In such a scenario, it is unlikely that Beijing would face any opposition or challenges in maintaining relations with all states. Thus, for the purposes of this research, it is critical that each case study provides an example of conflict or rivalry between at least two Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states (including the US).

Regarding this, first, the Iran-Iraq war was an evident example of conflict and rivalry that resulted in the deaths of at least half a million people. Furthermore, other regional states were deeply affected by the ongoing war, as was evidenced by the threats posed to other states' oil tankers and their procurement of weaponry to prepare for any potential attacks against them. Further, the outbreak of hostilities and tension between Iran and the US following the hostage crisis and the subsequent tanker war has had profound security implications on the Persian Gulf ever since. Second, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait represented a similarly hostile period, with at least several tens of thousands of deaths and the involvement and heightened threat perceptions of other regional states. The US' dual containment strategy towards Iran and Iraq also represented an intense and protracted period of securitisation and tension. The US-led invasion of Iraq completely upended the regional security order and the balance of power. Fourth, the protracted Saudi-Iranian rivalry has involved intense manifestations of security tensions, tit-for-tat executions, diplomatic severances, and proxy conflicts throughout the Middle East. Its rivalry has been pervasive across the region, rendering rapprochements between other Persian Gulf states and Iran challenging and creating an atmosphere in the region of binary choices. Similarly, the Iran-US rivalry persisted in the 21st century, with the US playing a central role in further securitising Iran, imposing unilateral and multilateral (with the UNSC) sanctions, and engaging in occasional assassinations of Iranian officials. Finally, the GCC split witnessed Saudi, Emirati, and Bahraini attempts to undermine Qatar's economic and food security, intense manifestations of securitisation, and moments that appeared dangerously close to outright invasion. Whilst the GCC split is perhaps the least regionally pervasive example among the four cases, it rendered challenging the position of neutral states, such as Kuwait, and placed added strain on the Qatar-Iran relationship.

Thus, as is clear, all of the case studies are consistent in the core criteria that link them to the research questions. China has, and has had, interests in each example, ranging from arms supplies in the Iran-Iraq war to extensive economic and political engagement in the 21st century amid the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the GCC split. China has sought to maintain and develop relations with conflicting and opposing parties in each example of rivalry or war. Each case study is an example of enmity between Persian Gulf states, though to varying degrees, and each case has in some way impacted upon the security environments of other regional states. In addition to these criteria, it also bears considering that the United States, which this dissertation argues is part of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex, has

been involved in each case study, thereby complicating the political and security environment that China has sought to navigate. Thus, Sino-US relations must be analysed in each case study.

Finally, though, it serves to identify briefly the differences between each case study. Each case offers a slightly different perspective on the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex whilst also retaining the core characteristics that render them comparable to a certain degree. The Iran-Iraq war is an apt example of intra-regional war, thus facilitating a comprehension of how China sought to manage relations amid outright conflict. The Kuwait crisis is a strong case of an international community-led resolution of a security issue in the region, in addition to being an example of a stronger regional actor taking advantage of a weaker regional actor. The US' dual containment and US-led invasion of Iraq underscore a period of almost unfettered US predominance in the region. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a protracted rivalry at the heart of regional events between the two most long-standing potential regional hegemons. The GCC split is unique insofar as it represents a rupture between states participating in an organisation designed to reduce regional insecurity and increase policy alignment. Accordingly, whilst each case study aligns with the criteria laid out above and can be cross-examined to draw wider inferences about the nature and efficacy of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf, each case provides a different angle from which to view China's navigation of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. In so doing, a rich picture of China's strategy in the regional security subcomplex is generated, taking into consideration the various manifestations of rivalry and conflict in the region. It should be noted that the timeline studied ends in 2023, partly due to the signing of the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iran deal, which allows significant perspective to be generated on the research topic, but mainly as it allows a year of perspective to emerge for the research to understand the impact of China's hedging strategy on the realisation of its interests. In so doing, issues can be seen with greater perspective in their historical setting without very short-term, passing elements interrupting a clear conceptualisation of broader patterns.

Data Collection: Methods

In order to address the questions guiding this dissertation, the research employs a mixture of secondary data and primary data collection. Put briefly, the secondary data utilised for this dissertation come in the form of an extensive review of the academic literature, the use of data available online, and news articles. Primary data are extracted from political memoirs

of key officials, government-led research papers, government statements, news articles, audio-visual sources, and sources written by elites in English, Arabic, and Persian. It should also be noted that, while the author of this dissertation does not speak Mandarin Chinese, wherever possible, direct translations of Chinese sources have been used. Additionally, the works of authors, commentators, and experts with command of Mandarin Chinese are employed throughout the dissertation to ensure that a nuanced understanding of Chinese interests, strategies, and behaviour can be fully appreciated. Further to this, debates and resolutions from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are also useful in providing data on China's role in these institutions in relation to its hedging strategy.

Secondary Data: Literature, Articles, Statistical Data

In order to engage with the theoretical, empirical, and methodological debates undergirding a study about China's relations with the Persian Gulf, this research uses academic literature as a springboard from which to answer the core research questions. Specifically, literature on the following topics is covered: China's relations with Persian Gulf states; China's Global South engagement; international relations theory; security studies theory; Sino-US relations; great power politics; power, including its normative and soft varieties; Middle Eastern history; Chinese history; identity and norms; methodological, ontological, and epistemological issues; wars and rivalries in the Persian Gulf; energy, including oil, gas, and renewable sources; and international political economy. Not only does the academic literature provide an abundant source of debates and background information, but also a wide array of data that help answer the specific research questions. In particular, literature that outlines facts and data on China-Persian Gulf trade, weapons transfers, security engagement, and energy exchange is useful for the purposes of this research.

Further to this, op-eds and newspaper articles that use data analytically to engage with debates pertaining to this dissertation are used. Whilst these types of articles do not form a central part of the research, they help provide context and data surrounding China-Persian Gulf relations and ongoing debates among policymakers, journalists, government departments, and academics.

Finally, secondary data gleaned from websites are utilised. These are commonly found on trade and energy data production websites and reports published by intergovernmental organisations, national governments, and corporations. Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) are frequently used. These data are used to provide the quantitative evidence needed to display whether China has continually enjoyed access to the financial, trade, energy, and weapons markets and supplies in the Persian Gulf whilst maintaining relations with conflicting and opposing parties in the region.

Primary Data: Content Analysis

In addition to the secondary data, this research is guided by a need to access information pertaining to the nature of China's hedging strategy in individual case studies, data relating to the realisation of Chinese interests, and the subjective perceptions and opinions of elites in the Persian Gulf.

Defining the term "elite" is something that has challenged scholars. Harvey (2011) aptly notes that the precise use of the term in any given project is often relationally denoted according to the scholar's position vis-à-vis the research subject or the subject's position in society based on their job, education status, or wealth. Fully recognising that there can be a mismatch between power and job title, as indeed Harvey (2011) claims, the term "elite" is used in this dissertation to refer to those who work at relatively high levels of government. These can be anything from ambassadors, high-level diplomats, or deputy ministers. Crucially, though, this dissertation calls for the differentiation between elites and "ultra-elites", with the latter being those "who exhibit especially great influence, authority, or power, and who generally have the highest prestige within what is a prestigious collectivity to begin with" (Zuckerman, 1972: 159-160). Within political systems such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, a significant amount of power is held in the hands of a select few individuals, usually Emirs, Kings, Crown Princes, and Royal family members close to the core (Niblock, 2006). Accordingly, both ultra-elites and, where not possible, elites are important subjects for this research. Ultra-elites can offer a direct view of regional perceptions of Beijing and its policies. That is, of course, when their utterances can be considered genuine and not an attempt to reel off the official government line. Lower-level elites can provide insights into the wider government's impressions of Beijing and its policies, and potentially a glimpse into the ultra-elites' perceptions, too, depending on their proximity to the highest echelons of decision-makers. Importantly, in the case of the Persian Gulf research, it is these categories of individuals that are viewed as key research subjects. The utterances of both of these groups in the Persian Gulf is carefully examined in news articles, videos, statements, op-eds, and in other domains. While interviews would have been useful in gaining further

data, the resources available provide compelling answers to the core research questions. It should be noted that interviews were not possible for several reasons. First, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic rendered travel challenging for the first year and a half of this project. Second, the researcher's health has rendered travel impossible during the time period. Third, while interviews could take place online, the inability to access elite groups from afar is a profound obstacle, with many suspicious of researchers' motives.

Content analysis of government documents, elite remarks, elite news interviews, UNSC resolutions, political memoirs, and news and opinion articles is conducted. In many cases, gaining access to elites, especially ultra-elites can be especially challenging (Harvey, 2011). Accordingly, content analysis provides a vehicle to enrich the research findings. The case of Iran provides a strong example into the quality data that can be gleaned from content analysis. Indeed, the debate about China and its impact upon the Iranian economic and political environment is extensive in Iran, with a plethora of data available via articles, social media, elite news interviews, and government documents (Ehteshami, Horesh, and Xu, 2018). Thus, in this particular case, subjective perceptions of China and its policies in the Persian Gulf can be gleaned from the extensive availability of documents, comments, and videos available on the internet. Furthermore, given the extensive array of content available online, content analysis can be useful when seeking to find inconsistencies in elites' opinions and utterances, thereby aiding the researcher to identify when statements are made to support government initiatives and when they reflect personal perceptions (Krippendorff, 1989). Finally, one core benefit comes from content analysis that cannot easily be achieved in an interview, and something that is of particular note when engaging with historical case studies. Content, via whatever medium, be it a video, statement, or news article, is produced at a particular moment in time. Whereas interviews rely on the memory of interviewees, something that can be affected by all sorts of issues, including recency bias, wherein people are more likely to remember what happened most recently, content analysis facilitates the view of someone's perceptions at a particular snapshot of time. Via content analysis, then, data can be understood in the social and historical context of the time. This renders it an insightful method that can both enrich the data gleaned from interviews, whilst also generating insights that cannot be recalled easily in an interview setting. The use of tri-lingual research (namely in English, Arabic, and Persian) is also very useful for the purposes of this dissertation as it facilitates access to a wide array of resources that generate salient insights into China's role in the Persian Gulf, regional perceptions of Beijing, and regional

politics more generally. It should be noted that, when it comes to online content analysis, where elites have used public fora to express their opinions, data are not anonymised as they could be accessed by anyone capable of using the internet. Finally, the research has been subjected to an ethics review to ensure that the conventions and methods used are aligned with the most up-to-date ethics procedures.

Part 2

China's Hedging Strategy in the Persian Gulf

Chapter 4

1979-1988: China's Hedging Strategy from Iran's Revolution to the Iran-Iraq War

Introduction

In the late 1970s, both China and the Persian Gulf underwent seismic transformations. Following the death of Mao Zedong, the PRC pursued extensive economic reforms and opened its economy to the outside world, heralding the over four decades of miraculous Chinese growth that the world has since witnessed. In the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Revolution in Iran knocked aside the staunch US-supporting Shah and placed in his stead Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic Republic. In the aftermath of this cataclysmic event, regional insecurity in the Persian Gulf spiked, leading to the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran and detainment of American diplomats for over a year and the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war, which left over 600,000 people dead (Razoux, 2015). Throughout the period, tensions were high between Iran on one side and Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the US on the other. Now intent on developing relations with this cash-rich region and maintaining positive relations with the United States, the PRC pursued a policy of balancing relations between rivals throughout the 1980s.

This chapter examines China's strategy towards the Persian Gulf from 1979 to 1988, emphasising Beijing's hedging strategy between Iran and its rivals. To achieve this, the chapter first discusses China's global and Persian Gulf interests during the period and provides an overview of key regional events. Following this, the PRC's hedging strategy is outlined in detail and then subsequently assessed according to how it impacted upon regional perceptions of Beijing and whether or not it hindered or facilitated the realisation of Chinese interests.

The chapter argues that, on the whole, China's hedging strategy did not hinder the realisation of its interests in the region. While Chinese support for Iran, particularly its provision of Silkworm missiles to Tehran, certainly attracted heavy criticism from Arab states and the US, Beijing was able to cultivate relations with most regional states by the end of the conflict and managed to pave the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia by 1990, marking the successful establishment of ties with all regional states. Using hitherto-uncited material, this chapter redresses errors in the literature which state that China's hedging strategy was not criticised by the key belligerents (Calabrese, 1991; Craig Harris, 1993), by displaying that both Iran and Iraq, in addition to other regional states, did express

concerns surrounding Chinese attempts to maintain relations with all conflicting parties. Overall, though, Beijing managed to realise the majority of its core interests in the region, showcasing a remarkable ability to balance ties with rivalling and warring parties.

Theoretical Insights

This brief section will provide a flavour of the theoretical insights facilitated by the frameworks forwarded in this dissertation. Drawing on neoclassical realist and constructivist insights, the chapter first displays the impact of isolation in the international system and ongoing great power competition amid the Cold War on China, leading into the Deng Xiaoping reforms of the late 1970s. By utilising neoclassical realism, a solid grounding in the domestic challenges facing the CCP is understood, not to mention the CCP's concerns on a systemic level of Soviet and, to a lesser degree, US expansionism. Adding to this, the materialist emphasis of realism supports an appreciation, for example, of the need for economic gains. With that said, without constructivist insights, the extent of this need and the particular ideational attachment to the need for economic gains cannot be fully understood. Further to this, constructivist insights allow for an understanding of Chinese officials' desire to be viewed as a responsible power in the international system, in addition to being seen as a reliable partner by regional states.

Further to this, the regional security complex paradigm offers a clear view of the region-wide interconnected challenges facing regional states during the 1980s. The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent Iraqi invasion of Iran were issues that impacted upon the entire region to a significant degree.

Finally, the emphasis on the two-level nature of strategic hedging is fully outlined in relation to Chinese behaviour in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s. First, on the systemic level, the PRC works hard to avoid upending the US-led status quo or attracting significant American disdain, as is evidenced by it ceasing Silkworm trade with Iran following US requests. With that said, in keeping with the theory, China attempts to make significant inroads in the region economically and even in relation to arms sales, thereby displaying a desire to gain influence in the region amid US preponderance. On the regional level, China works hard to balance its desire to sustain relations with both Iran and Iraq amid their protracted war while also cultivating ties with the GCC monarchies, several of which were wary of China following the Mao period. The assessment framework outlined to ascertain the success of China's hedging strategy, which seeks to underscore whether the PRC realised its interests in the

region amid its hedging strategy, is deployed according to the interests surveyed at the beginning of the chapter. The framework offers the first attempt at assessing the efficacy of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s, displaying that it was broadly a success from the perspective of China's material, normative, and ideational interests in the region, albeit not without causing some frustration in Arab capitals, Tehran, and Washington.

China's Interests: Redefined Approaches in a New Era

In the late 1970s, the People's Republic of China underwent its most significant transformation and recalibration since the socialist revolution three decades prior. For years, Chinese citizens were subjected to a command economy that had stripped the country of innovation, created immense inefficiency and waste, and deprived its people of basic human necessities. The combination of all-encompassing (and often misled) economic central planning, self-imposed isolation from global markets, and the CCP's drastic attempts to retain power and reinvent Chinese society and the economy through the extreme initiatives known as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution had devastated any possibility of comfort and economic security for Chinese citizens. GDP per capita growth rates were one seventh of most of China's neighbours and as much as one tenth of Japan's during the 1960s (Perkins, 2013). Furthermore, and tragically, under the strain of this ideologically-fuelled economic mismanagement, tens of millions died of poverty.

By the 1970s, it was clear something had to change. Depravity was widespread across China, and it was evident that pursuing the same economic system could only fail and, most importantly in the eyes of the leadership, entail the demise of the one-party system dominated by the CCP. With the deaths of Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai in 1976, two of the most authoritative figures in communist China since the socialist revolution, the new leadership, under the stewardship of Deng Xiaoping, had a unique opportunity for introspection. Due mainly to fears of Soviet encirclement and aggression, but perhaps also due to an increasing acceptance that a new approach must soon be considered, particularly now that Beijing had won its place on the United Nations Security Council a year prior, Mao had set the stage for a possible opening-up of China to the outside world in 1972, when US President Richard Nixon made a clandestine visit to the People's Republic. Little progress was actually made in terms of a Sino-US rapprochement in the intervening years, not least of all due to developments in US politics, such as Watergate,

that stalled developments. However, Mao opened the door to such an idea just enough to provide Deng Xiaoping with justification to explore an approach to global politics that was less insular. With key elements of the old guard gone, though careful to respect their memory given their perceived sacrosanctity, in the late 1970s Deng Xiaoping oversaw an extensive programme of economic and foreign affairs reforms. These reforms almost entirely overhauled Mao's economic strategy and led to an outright rejection of the autarkic aspect of China's strategy. Deng was unequivocal in his belief that the PRC had become a backward Third World country that needed urgently to open itself up to the global economy and reform key industries. And this, he did. By January 1, 1979, Sino-US relations had been normalised, setting in motion the policy of opening-up that heralded the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations with states all over the world. Opening-up would not transform China's economy alone, however. The Chinese leadership, acting on the hopes of the late Premier Zhou Enlai, swiftly sought to emphasise four priority areas for modernisation: Science and technology, industry, national defence, and agriculture.

With these policies of reform and opening-up, Deng aimed to create a new legitimacy base for the CCP. Rather than a strict observance of ideological tenets, the successful development of the economy would act as the basis to justify the CCP's continued rule. Deng was cognizant throughout the 1970s that Chinese citizens had, on the large part, grown tired of communist governance and were uninterested in having their destitution justified by the philosophies of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong. Accordingly, he was aware that the CCP was walking a tightrope vis-à-vis the Chinese public and that living conditions would need to be improved dramatically to restore the party's legitimacy. Garver (2016) exemplifies the centrality of domestic legitimacy as a driver behind China's opening-up and reforms in the late 1970s using the example of clothes production. With a whole host of industries in dire need of reform, Deng first chose to prioritise the import of machines necessary to produce clothing. Despite being a necessary commodity, access to cloth was limited across China. As such, Deng hoped to show the Chinese public the benefits of opening-up by emphasising an industry that would benefit all strata of society. Swiftly, this policy paid off. The more that the Chinese public was exposed to the wealth enjoyed by citizens in foreign countries, the more they craved the same levels of comfort and luxury. It increasingly became evident to the CCP that economic development was now the central pillar of its domestic legitimacy.

Naturally, this drive for economic development required a whole host of policies, which in turn broadened Chinese interests during the late 1970s and 1980s. With the establishment of

special economic zones in several Chinese port cities and the liberalisation of regulations pertaining to foreign trade, not to mention the liberalisation of the Chinese economy itself, it was imperative that Beijing establish diplomatic relations with states across the globe. To meet the economic needs and desires of its enormous population, the PRC would need to build up a strong export base and establish itself as a reliable economic partner. This was especially the case with advanced capitalist economies. During his trips abroad, Deng had witnessed the importance of advanced technology and soon coveted such tools and capabilities. Forging and maintaining relations with these states, particularly the United States, became an imperative for the Chinese leadership if it were to obtain and retain access to the technology needed to kickstart China's economic growth. Thus, losing the diplomatic recognition of the United States and its capitalist partners was not an option, an important theme when considering China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf. Given that China's ties with the US had only been normalised in the late 1970s, it would be imperative that the PRC play a careful balancing act to ensure that it kept Washington broadly happy with its policies abroad. Ensuring that Sino-US relations did not become overly strained by peripheral issues was critical.

With an enhanced role in the global economy and global politics and the need to be viewed as trustworthy by potential and new diplomatic and trade partners, though, it was also important that China forge a fresh identity for itself on the global stage, and one that did not adopt ideologically-fuelled foreign policies that risked alienating other states. What this identity needed to look like depended, of course, on the audience. To key capitalist economies, particularly the United States, China wished to be seen, first and foremost, as a great power. This was not to say that the PRC wanted to be seen as a threat, indeed far from it. Deng worked hard while visiting the United States, Japan, and other capitalist countries to frame the PRC as a backward state that needed to learn the superior ways of these states – this was also a strategy to justify reducing its foreign aid budget and inviting aid, something that succeeded given that China became the foremost recipient of global aid by the late 1980s. Rather, it needed to be afforded the respect of a great power, commensurate with its large population and permanent seat in the UNSC. Increasingly, this notion became tied with the idea of being perceived by the likes of the US as a responsible great power, a concept forwarded by Premier Zhao Ziyang in 1985 and reinforced with Deng's use of the Chinese term *fuzeren* (responsible) in 1988 (Boon, 2018). For states in the Global South, particularly those whom China wished to convince it would cease foreign policies driven by

communist ideological zeal, it was vital that China assert an identity of reliable collegiality, built on mutual non-interference, and support in the fight against superpower hegemony and great power imperialism. This relied on both a rhetorical and practical application of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, as well as meaningful opposition to great power overstretch in the Global South. The extent to which the PRC actually remained consistent on these issues became up for debate, but the identity aspirations swiftly became staples of Chinese foreign policy. The combined Chinese desire to be seen as a responsible great power capable of opposing the great powers when necessary (such as to air its frustration at US arms sales to Taiwan in the early 1980s) but also a power that did not interfere in other states' affairs led to the introduction in 1982 of China's independent foreign policy. Beijing was unwilling to be viewed as too closely aligned to either of the Cold War superpowers and was keen to forge its own path as an emerging power. Forging this identity for itself was also, in some respects, a matter of domestic legitimacy and security. With the case of Taiwan, Beijing was eager to push back against American support for Taipei, both to avoid the decreasing material possibility of the island's reunification with mainland China and also to prove to the Chinese public that the government could shield from foreign interference what it deemed to be its sovereign territory. With the century of humiliation still in the minds of some citizens, but especially the ruling elites, this ideational aspect must not be understated, even within the context of China's opening-up.

It serves to add to this list of concerns two further issues, one of which is closely linked to the above point. The Soviet Union had become a substantial threat to China, exemplified by the build-up of troops at their shared borders, Moscow's support for the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. As such, Beijing did not wish to see further Soviet aggression or expansionism and was unwilling to restore diplomatic relations until these three issues could be resolved. As will be explored below, China's desire to avoid Soviet expansionism played an important role in the formulation of Beijing's Persian Gulf policy during the Iran-Iraq war. Furthermore, and in some respects a corollary to these concerns about Soviet military expansionism, China's military was keen to modernise and develop. The Four Modernisations and reforms meant that the majority of Chinese revenue was being pooled towards other industries, leaving the military dependent on finding alternative ways to finance itself. Now that foreign exports revenue was no longer being directed towards central government, with the exception of income tax, the military used international arms sales as a means to generate capital for research and development.

As such, and to ensure that it did not get left behind during the economic boom, the Chinese military placed an emphasis on boosting arms sales in the subsequent decade (Shichor, 1988). Naturally, as will be explored below, this is particularly salient in the case of the Persian Gulf during the 1980s given the protracted and multi-faceted conflicts that surfaced there.

To summarise briefly, the main driver of Chinese interests in the period after the death of Mao Zedong was the relegitimisation of the CCP based on extensive economic development. The economy became the central focus of the Chinese government, with former ideologically-driven foreign policies such as support for communist movements across the world shelved. Within this context, and in service of the Four Modernisations, China needed to maintain positive relations with advanced capitalist economies in order to import the necessary technology to fuel the economy, whilst also developing relations with states across the world as markets for Chinese exports. To achieve this, China needed to rectify its image among foreign states to appear to be a responsible great power that eschews interference in other states' affairs. With that said, the PRC was eager to avoid expansionist designs of either superpower, but especially the Soviet Union, and its military was intent on modernising as swiftly as possible by raising funds from foreign arms sales.

China's Persian Gulf Interests

Before considering how these issues fed into Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, it serves briefly to consider the state of China's relations with Persian Gulf states by the late 1970s. By the end of the 1970s, China had made few inroads in the region. For decades, it was viewed with suspicion by several regional states due to claims that the CCP was mistreating its Muslim population, which accentuated the regional belief that China was a godless state, and due to its support for communist revolutionary groups across the region. Indeed, having heard exiled Chinese Muslims' reports of mistreatment at the hands of the Chinese government, some Persian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, were concerned that ties with China could suggest an acceptance of these standards. This suspicion even led Saudi Arabia to forbid Chinese Muslims from going on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina between 1963 and 1976 (Craig Harris, 1993). Furthermore, the issue of support for communist groups was particularly salient in the Persian Gulf as the Chinese had been providing rhetorical, and at times material, support for the Dhofari rebels in Oman and the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. Given that these groups had made explicit their

wish to overthrow the region's monarchies, which at the time included all six of the (soon-to-become) GCC states and Iran, it is no wonder that these regimes felt uninclined to seek a rapprochement with Beijing (Calabrese, 1991; Shichor, 1979). Indeed, these sentiments were so strong that Saudi Arabia, still a partner of the Republic of China in Taiwan, was opposed to the PRC's accession to the UN in 1971. Whilst Beijing struggled to develop ties with all regional states, that is not to say that its diplomacy had been a total failure. By the late 1970s, Beijing had received diplomatic recognition from four Persian Gulf states: Iraq (1958), Iran (1971), Kuwait (1971), and Oman (1978). With that said, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which threw the Shah into exile and installed in his place an Islamic republic, led to a brief strain in Sino-Iranian relations, temporarily generating the concern that China would lose one of these important relationships. This will be explored more later in this chapter, however. Thus, Beijing's ideological fervour during the Mao period did little to support its position in the Persian Gulf. Once these proclivities were laid aside, though, particularly following the death in 1971 of prominent General Lin Biao, the brain behind China's aid to communist revolutionary groups, some inroads were made, as is evident in the case of Sino-Omani and Sino-Iranian relations, two states that had cooperated in fighting Chinese-backed rebels.

As was asserted previously, China pursues interests directly in the Persian Gulf, such as trade relations with regional states, but also seeks to work towards wider interests through its engagement in the region. Accordingly, it is worth keeping this in mind when exploring how China's wider interests fed into its interests in the Persian Gulf during the late 1970s and 1980s. Given that the PRC's primary incentive after Mao's death was to modernise and grow its economy, Beijing needed to establish relations with states all over the world. The Persian Gulf, in particular, was an attractive destination as regional states had become incredibly cash-rich over the preceding decade, thanks in large part to a substantial increase in oil revenue following the 1973 oil embargo. The Gulf states were investing large sums of money in domestic infrastructure, and many citizens of these states had access to more capital than ever before. This made the region a lucrative market for exports, both in terms of human labour and goods. Given China's sizeable population, the exportation of human labour, usually to undertake construction contracts, was an area that the PRC was looking to expand significantly into. Furthermore, Kuwait had proven itself to be a reliable source of aid and loans to China, signalling a strong likelihood that other Persian Gulf states would follow suit if only Beijing could establish good-quality relations with them (Calabrese,

1991). From this perspective, the primary driver behind Chinese interest in the region during this period was to expand trade relations in support of its economic modernisation and development, something that would progress China's material strength and, most importantly, solidify the CCP's domestic legitimacy and staying power.

As a necessary pre-requisite of strong economic relations, in most cases China would need to attract diplomatic recognition from regional states with whom it did not yet share relations and retain recognition from those that it already dealt with. This was a multi-faceted and complex issue given regional perceptions of China at the time, though it was a necessary step if Beijing wanted to exploit the region's abundant markets and access to capital. Saudi Arabia and Iraq were increasingly becoming strong regional powers with extensive financial capabilities, and their regional neighbours similarly enjoyed the boost in oil revenues that had emerged during the 1970s. Furthermore, Kuwait was a critical partner for China to retain positive relations with due to its close relations with the other Arab monarchies. Kuwait had been willing to act as a conduit between China and other Arab states and had proven to possess a surprising amount of diplomatic clout in this regard. As such, Beijing was not simply looking to make new friends, but to solidify and deepen existing relations; it was crucial that China not alienate any partners, potential or current, in the region, especially not in a region with deep-rooted tribal kinship between ruling families, as was the case in the Persian Gulf. Iran was the one state that became a true outlier in the region after its Islamic Revolution in 1979, but China was aware that it could continue to act as a bulwark against Soviet and US expansionism and that its markets were lucrative, especially its oil reserves, which could be used in bartering arrangements for China to then exchange with the West for technology. As such, the PRC had significant interests in maintaining and forging close diplomatic relations with all regional states. Importantly, though, given the focus of the international community on the Persian Gulf, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war, the region could have made or broken China's relations with key Western economies. As such, a salient concern for leaders in Beijing was for Chinese engagement in the region not to alienate the United States and its partners, lest the PRC miss out on the many benefits that it derived from its freshly renewed relations with capitalist states. With that said, China also wished to showcase its independent foreign policy in the region, and as such a careful balance was vital.

As was noted above, due in large part to the conflicts and rivalries that emerged in the region, which attracted the attention of the international community, the Persian Gulf was also a

noteworthy region for China to assert its new and aspiring identity in global politics. Beijing wished to be viewed by regional states as a reliable partner that would not interfere in their domestic affairs. It was crucial that the Chinese leadership dispel the ubiquitous notion in the region that it would seek to undermine their domestic rule by supporting subversive or destabilising groups. From this perspective, as a necessary pre-requisite of forging diplomatic relations, a further pre-requisite to facilitate strong economic exchange in support of its domestic development, Beijing wished to spread the idea among regional states that it was a reliable, trustworthy, and responsible member of the community that would oppose great power hegemony and imperialism. Furthermore, it wished to display to potential partners in the region that it would not attach expectations in its dealings with other states. Beijing wished to assert that its engagement with these states would not expect them to liberalise or set any conditional expectations for their domestic behaviour. Similarly, given that the Persian Gulf was a region to which external powers and the international community were paying great attention, it was a place in which China could assert its desired identity among key global powers as a responsible, but independent, great power. At times, as will be explored throughout this chapter, this ideal clashed with China's simultaneous desire to avoid interfering in regional states' domestic affairs, particularly in the case of the Iran-US rivalry (Boon, 2018). This would create tensions in the PRC's attempts to diffuse the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in its relations with regional states, a salient issue given that Beijing wished to be free from external scrutiny in its internal affairs, including regarding its treatment of Chinese Muslims, a point of special note as both Saudi Arabia and Iran claimed to be the global protectors of the Islamic community. A further dimension to this drive for diplomatic recognition was to side-line Taiwan and assert the PRC as the one true China. It would only be through states across the globe switching recognition from the ROC to the PRC that Beijing would achieve this goal. Nonetheless, this was the identity-based balancing act that Beijing tried to achieve. Given the severity of conflict and tensions in the Persian Gulf, the region provided fertile ground for these ideas to be tested and China's new identity to be asserted.

As was mentioned above, the Chinese military endeavoured to modernise, and it used foreign arms sales as a means of amassing the necessary wealth to meet this end. Accordingly, with conflict brewing in the Persian Gulf between Iran and Iraq, and other regional states seeking to obtain a stockpile of weaponry in case the conflict spilled over, the region became a highly-lucrative destination for Chinese arms. In particular, Iran's

isolation following the Islamic Revolution and its inability to gather a diversified portfolio of arms suppliers during its war with Iraq made the region an even more attractive destination for Chinese arms. As will be discussed later in this chapter, throughout the 1980s, a significant percentage of China's global arms transfers made their way to the Persian Gulf, rendering this an irreplaceable region for China's military (Shichor, 1988).

The above point calls into question a final possible interest in the region and one that cannot be definitely and objectively reconciled. Chinese officials expressed throughout the late 1970s and 1980s that they wanted the Persian Gulf to be stable and conflict-free, claims that were in keeping with wider Chinese assertions that a stable international environment would provide ripe conditions for its economic modernisation (Garver, 2016). It is certainly the case that becoming embroiled in conflicts would redirect funds away from economic development projects and towards military expenditure. Though, it is also true, as will be examined later, that the conflict was far away from Chinese borders, meaning that Chinese military involvement was unlikely. The conflict also generated substantial income for the PRC in the form of arms sales. Accordingly, it is hard to decipher whether these assertions were merely attempts at saying what Chinese leaders thought a responsible power should say or whether they were indeed genuine. What is likely, though, is that Beijing wished to avoid too much instability in the region as Chinese leaders were certainly concerned about either of the two superpowers, but especially the Soviet Union, expanding their reach into the region under the guise of fomenting international peace (Craig Harris, 1993).

To summarise briefly, the PRC's key interests from its engagement in the region during the period were: Establishing and maintaining positive relations with all regional states (which would include their shifting of support from the ROC to the PRC); expanding economic relations with these states; maintaining relations with the United States and other capitalist countries by acting responsibly whilst also asserting itself as an independent power; diffusing among regional states the norm of mutual non-interference and presenting an image of itself as being a responsible, but independent, great power and reliable diplomatic and economic partner; increasing its arms sales to regional states, particularly once it was evident that conflict had erupted; and, pushing back against superpower expansionism, hegemony, and imperialism, especially by the Soviet Union. What is up for debate is the extent to which Beijing wished for stability to prevail in the region, but it is certainly a possible interest during the period.

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex: Stark Transformations

Iran's Islamic Revolution, the US, and its Persian Gulf Neighbours

As was discussed in chapter two, the Persian Gulf experienced an event in the late 1970s akin in its magnitude to the reforms in China. In 1979, the Shah of Iran was deposed following a revolution that ultimately led to the installation of an Islamist regime and the commensurate founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a theocracy based around the tenets of Shi'a Islam. Aside from the domestic outcomes of the revolution, which were substantial given that previously-enjoyed freedoms were stripped from public life and all areas of policymaking were imbued with an Islamist twist, the regional environment in the Persian Gulf underwent an extreme recalibration.

The United States, which had formerly been a strong supporter of the Shah and had relied on him (and the Saudi regime) to act as regional stability guarantors as part of Washington's twin-pillar policy, was blindsided. The new regime was not only unable to provide a similar service to that of the Shah but would end up being, from Washington's perspective, a source of instability and tension for decades to come. Indeed, tension between the newly-formed regime and the US was quick to bubble over, not least of all due to the new Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini's, anger that the United States had propped up the Shah's regime for decades. Following a student-led takeover of the American embassy in Tehran wherein over fifty American diplomats hostages were held against their will for 444 days between November 1979 and January 1981, and which Khomeini and his entourage were fairly quick to encourage, it was evident that US-Iran relations were at rock bottom (Axworthy, 2013). Failed US attempts to rescue the hostages only served to weaken US President Carter's standing among the American electorate and did nothing to reduce tensions. As a final kick in the teeth for Jimmy Carter, Iran released the hostages moments after US President Ronald Reagan's inauguration in January 1981, perhaps hoping to signal Iranian openness to cooperation. Regardless of the motive for their release on that date, the years and decades to come would prove that the two states were locked in an intense and protracted rivalry.

The Islamic Revolution and its aftermath similarly caused a stir among Iran's neighbours in the Persian Gulf. Khomeini's government claimed that it would seek to export its revolution to neighbouring countries, a direct threat to the staying power of the Arab regimes. The monarchies of the region, most of whom were Sunni-led, and Iraq, which had a sizeable Shi'a population, became deeply concerned that their Shi'a citizens would feel an affinity

with Iran's Islamist government, potentially causing them to rise up against the ruling regimes. This concern was poignant in particular in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, and was fuelled by some Shi'a communities protesting against their governments in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Iraq witnessed riots and protests in 1979 and 1980, which Saddam Hussein quashed. Similarly, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, an Iran-supported movement, tried to oust the leadership in Bahrain, a Shi'a majority country under the rule of the Sunni Al Khalifa regime. Iran was further accused of orchestrating a series of bomb attacks in Kuwait. Finally, Saudi Arabia witnessed protests in its oil-rich provinces in the East, where Shi'a communities are plentiful. This, alongside the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a rival Saudi faction, left the Saudi regime feeling particularly vulnerable to alternative legitimacy claims. Indeed, as states that based their legitimacy to varying degrees on differing versions of Islamic governance, or in the case of Iraq on secular Ba'athism, the arrival of a Shi'a theocracy with expansionist designs next door heightened regional threat perceptions. From the Iranian perspective, the presence of so many neighbours viewing it as a threat also led to a stark increase in security concerns, not least of all as the regime was attempting to consolidate its power. A new period had arrived in Persian Gulf history, one driven by intense mutual threat perceptions between Iran and several of its neighbours.

The Origins of the Iran-Iraq War

While Iraq claims otherwise, most analysts and observers of the Persian Gulf agree that the Iran-Iraq war started on September 22, 1980, when Iraqi troops invaded Iranian territory and launched an offensive to capture the Arab-populated region of Khuzestan. As the principal instigator of the conflict given his recent consolidation of ultimate authority in Iraq, Saddam Hussein had numerous grievances with Iran that ultimately made him feel compelled to invade the Islamic Republic.

Iran's military was in a dire state following the revolution. Between the ousting of the Shah and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, the army had lost over 110,000 of its 170,000 personnel through desertions and government-led attempts to purge the army of potential Shah loyalists. To add insult to injury, a significant number of senior army officials were among these losses, leaving what was a well-trained and competent force depleted of its leadership and in a state of disarray (Chubin and Tripp, 1989). Saddam exploited the chaos in Iran to

launch a war driven by over a decade of grievances with Iran, some a result of the Shah's regional pre-dominance and some a direct challenge to the new Islamic regime.

The issue that Saddam placed the heaviest emphasis on at the start of the invasion was that of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, a geostrategically vital stretch of water that links Iraq to the Persian Gulf and beyond. Having been a point of dispute between the Iraqis and Iranians for a number of decades, the two sides agreed in 1975 to sign the Algiers Accord, an agreement that left Iraq with a bitter taste as it acceded more of the waterway to Iran than it had wanted to, namely demarcating Iraqi and Iranian territory along the thalweg of the river, rather than on the Eastern bank. Whilst unpreferable, the Iraqis arrived at this decision for at least two key reasons. First, the Shah's Iran was a far superior and stronger military force. Second, the Iranians had been supporting a Kurdish rebellion in the oil-rich northern provinces of Iraq, inflaming an already sensitive issue and acting as a genuine threat to the Iraqi military (Karsh, 1990). With the Algiers Accord, the Shah would halt its support for the Kurds, much as Iraq would cease working towards its desire to annex the Iranian province of Khuzestan. Saddam Hussein felt that the agreement was an embarrassment. His country had to accede what it deemed to be sovereign territory to its neighbour to stop it from interfering in its internal fight with the Kurds. This would play on his mind in the half-decade following the Algiers Accord and act as a strong motive behind his opportunistic decision to invade the newly-formed Islamic Republic, particularly when the Islamic regime began supporting Iraqi Kurds in 1980 (Swearingen, 1988).

With the coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini and his entourage in Tehran, a further territorially-sensitive, identity-driven issue arose. Eager to export its revolution to other nations, the Islamic regime was active in criticising its secular Ba'athist neighbour and stirring unrest among its enormous Shi'a population. Riots soon broke out across Shi'a-dense areas in Iraq. Furthermore, Iranian-supported groups tried to assassinate prominent government officials, including the then deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz (Sick, 1989). By June 1980, with Saddam Hussein threatening to strike back and encouraging similar unrest among ethnic Arabs in Iran's Khuzestan region, Khomeini called for the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime (Karsh, 1990). Thus, a stark escalation of tension ensued between the two regimes, with an acute personal mutual hatred developing between the two leaders. Over the following months, fighting increased, each state encroached upon the other's territory hundreds of times, and finally, on the September 17, 1980 Saddam Hussein ripped up the Algiers Accord. War, at least from his perspective, was inevitable (Swearingen, 1988).

The Iran-Iraq War

Given that the central requirement of this chapter is to examine how China navigated regional rivalries and conflict, this section solely identifies key trends and moments in the Iran-Iraq war and its regional consequences, rather than providing an exhaustive account of this highly-complex and lengthy conflict. The regional security complex dimensions of the war are particularly noteworthy; the conflict soon had important implications for regional dynamics as a whole, in addition to increasing the role of the United States in the region. This small section gives a brief overview of the fighting itself and subsequent sections deal with regional states' and the US' responses.

Following Iraq's offensive in late September 1980, Iran was caught on the back foot and in disarray. The Iraqi army swiftly managed to capture Khorramshahr, in addition to other key cities in Khuzestan. For the best part of a year, Iraq held on to these cities, with merely a tepid suggestion of restraint towards both sides emerging from the United Nations during the period in the form of United Nations Security Council Resolution 479, which failed to acknowledge that Iraq had invaded Iran and would no doubt appear to the uninformed observer that both sides were perhaps fighting in neutral territory (UNSC, 1980). Starting the following summer and leading into 1982, Iran launched a series of offensives to reclaim its territory. By late spring 1982, Iran had succeeded in this endeavour and had pushed Iraqi troops out of Iranian territory (Razoux, 2015). By this point, and with Iran rejecting an Iraqi ceasefire proposal with calls for Saddam to be ousted as the bare minimum requirement for any such cessation of conflict, the international and regional communities paid far greater attention to the war. It soon became clear, as will be expanded upon later, that Iran had very few friends in the international community and would need to rely on a small handful of partners to acquire weapons and military support. On the large part, and particularly after 1983 when Moscow ceased any meaningful support for Tehran, China, the DPRK, some Soviet states, Libya, and Syria were Iran's main sources of weapons and military support. Iraq, on the other hand, increasingly had support from the United States, particularly after 1984, France, the USSR, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, China, and a whole host of states, all of whom provided Iraq with far greater quantities of arms than Iran was able to obtain from its partners (Burton, 2020). Indeed, this widespread international and regional preference to avoid an Iranian victory in the war undoubtedly fed into increased attempts by the UNSC to bring an end to the conflict. UNSC resolution 514 was passed in July 1982 and resolution 522 followed in October of the same year, but both were rejected by the Iranians, who

insisted, and would continue to insist until 1988, on Saddam's removal from power as a pre-requisite to the cessation of hostilities (Razoux, 2015).

By this point, the region witnessed a sharp escalation of hostilities. Following an Iranian incursion into Iraqi territory, Baghdad targeted the Iranian city of Dezful with missiles. This direct attack against civilians would become a regular feature throughout the conflict and would be reciprocated on each occasion by the Iranians. Furthermore, the Iraqis are believed to have begun using chemical weapons in 1983 against Iranian troops, though some claim this started sooner. By this point, however, the war had escalated beyond imagination and the superpowers had made their beds, with the Soviets ceasing the small amount of support they had given Iran and simultaneously becoming Iraq's largest weapons supplier and the Americans forging relations with Iraq and providing Baghdad with vital intelligence and logistics aid. As Iran pressed on with offensives into Iraqi territory, Iraq made efforts to internationalise the war by attacking ships in an attempt to push Iran to shut down the Strait of Hormuz, something that no doubt would have led to increased superpower opposition towards Iran. In 1984, the first war of the cities ensued, in which both sides extensively bombed key cities. Following the UN's successful intervention to counter the bombing of civilian populations, Iraq increased its attacks on Iranian energy infrastructure, a cunning strategy to choke the Iranian regime of its principal revenue source. The war also expanded more noticeably into the wider Persian Gulf. Iranian jets encroached upon Saudi air space, leading Saudi fighter jets to engage in direct combat with the Iranian jets, one of which was destroyed. Within days, Iran also attacked a Kuwaiti tanker near the UAE. These actions only served to solidify the stances of these two states, both of whom had provided Iraq with considerable military and financial aid throughout the war. The following year, Saudi Arabia's ire was opportunistically exploited by American officials, who encouraged the kingdom to increase its oil production dramatically to lower global oil prices. This would simultaneously shock the Soviet economy and the Iranian economy, which relied on oil for over 80 percent of its revenue. The price of oil dropped from a three-year stable $29 to less than $10. While this would also have an effect on Iraq's economy, Baghdad was not as reliant on oil revenues as Tehran, and it was able to make use of a new pipeline connecting Basra to Saudi Arabia to ensure that it could export whatever it needed (Razoux, 2015).

By 1986, with the Iranian capture of the al-Faw peninsula, where it installed Chinese Silkworm anti-ship missiles that would later repeatedly attack Kuwaiti targets in 1987, the UNSC adopted resolution 582. For much the same reasons as before, though, Iran rejected

it. Despite the brief Iran-contra affair, which had led to Iran receiving Israeli and US weapons, tensions were on the precipice of bubbling over between Iran and its four key regional security subcomplex rivals: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the US. An Iraqi attack on a US frigate in 1987, the *USS Stark*, which left nearly forty members of its crew dead, entailed a muted response by Washington. The same could not be said, however, for acts of Iranian aggression. Following multiple Iranian attacks on tankers and several Silkworm missile attacks on Kuwaiti tankers and territory in 1986 and 1987, the Al Sabah regime was now desperate for support from the superpowers, now that the so-called Tanker War was in full-flight. Accordingly, it requested that global powers reflag its tankers in the hope that this would protect them from Iranian attacks. The Soviets agreed to reflag three and the Americans eleven. The US also stepped up its military presence in the region, stationing over thirty-five ships in the region, and by this point, Iran and the US were directly engaging in skirmishes, all of this while Iran continued to reject UNSC Resolution 598 (Braun, 1989). With the war intensifying and expanding, the most-deadly war of the cities ensued in 1988, as Baghdad and Tehran were both attacked several times a day for over one month with missiles. Both sides only agreed to cease this aspect of the conflict when their missile stocks were nearing depletion. Furthermore, Iranian intransigence over UNSC resolutions to end the war finally crumbled in August 1988. Iraq had recently recaptured the al-Faw peninsula and, tragically, in an accidental incident marked by poor leadership and sheer incompetence, the American *USS Vincennes* shot down an Iranian passenger jet travelling to the UAE, decimating all 290 souls on board. Iran did not view this as an accident and was fearful that America was on the brink of declaring all-out war (Razoux, 2015). The continuation of the conflict was no longer an option; Tehran swiftly accepted UNSC Resolution 598.

The eight-year long Iran-Iraq war was devastating for all countries involved, but particularly Iran. Of the 680,000 people that died during the war on all sides, 500,000 were Iranian. The war had entailed the shelling of civilian populations, Iran's strategy of attrition that led to the deaths of a significant number of Iranian youths who were pressured and incentivised to go to war and were equipped in many cases with one grenade and the promise of entry to heaven, great disruption to the region, the use of chemical weapons on multiple occasions by the Iraqi regime, and a devastating impact on Iranian and Iraqi infrastructure. The financial cost of the conflict for the two main belligerents was over $1 trillion, not to mention the costs incurred by regional supporters of Iraq, who loaned Baghdad tens of billions of dollars throughout the war (Nonneman, 2004; Razoux, 2015).

GCC States' Responses to the Conflict

While shared threat perceptions of Iran following its Islamic Revolution and fears of either Iranian or Iraqi aggrandisement were key drivers behind the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981, the six monarchies did not adopt a unified policy towards the Iran-Iraq war. While for all of the six states backing Iraq in one way or another was regarded "as entailing the lesser of two evils" as they were concerned that the demise of the Iraqi regime could facilitate the spread of Iran's governance style, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia played the most active roles of the GCC states and took the staunchest approaches towards Iran (Sterner, 1985: 14). At the start of the conflict, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and most of the Emirates were supportive of Saddam's invasion, granting him financial support in the sum of billions of dollars. By the time stalemate had kicked in, however, and Iran had pushed Iraqi troops out of Iranian territory in 1982, the GCC officially declared its neutrality in the war. This was not an accurate reflection of the member states' individual policies towards the war, however. Whilst Oman, Qatar, and the UAE sought to avoid becoming embroiled in the war, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait outwardly backed Iraq. Indeed, even those states seeking to keep their heads down during the war expressed their anger at Iranian incursions into Iraqi territory, reflecting an overall leaning towards Baghdad among the GCC members. They also felt compelled to condemn Iranian attacks on Kuwait, a common feature of the conflict in 1987. Furthermore, even despite the UAE's purported neutrality, it was quick to condemn the Iranian bombing of its Mubarak oil field in 1988 (Ehteshami and Nonneman, 1991).

With a general overview of the GCC states' responses now mapped, it serves to consider the roles of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the conflict, as they became the two most central external regional states in the conflict. Ever since the outbreak of the conflict, both states played a pivotal role in facilitating Iraq's invasion. Kuwait allowed Iraq to use its land to deliver cargo from shipments once the northernmost part of the Gulf was too dangerous to traverse. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia gave Iraqi planes permission to cross its air space when necessary in order to facilitate its attacks against Iran. Indeed, by 1986, by which point Iran had launched direct attacks against both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia or encroached upon their sovereignty in a threatening manner, the GCC had collectively given Iraq $40 billion in loans. With the exception of a few billion dollars, this came from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Nonneman, 2004). The string of Iranian attacks on Kuwaiti tankers, among tankers belonging to multiple states, and missile strikes on Kuwaiti territory even led the royal

family to invite superpower involvement by means of reflagging ships. While Riyadh had gladly accepted the help of the US at the beginning of the conflict, particularly in the form of Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), Kuwait had been staunchly against the presence of great powers on its territory or in its waters. As the war dragged on and its support for Iraq angered Tehran, it was unable to resist foreign support any longer. Indeed, by the latter stages of the conflict, Iran's relations with its Gulf neighbours were dire. Following riots in Mecca in 1987, which resulted in the deaths of several hundred Iranians, the Iranian government and civilians made Saudi Arabia aware of their disgust. Iran upped the ante on attacks against ships transporting Saudi oil and civilians let rip on the Saudi embassy in Tehran, where a diplomat was killed (Rubin, 1989). A seemingly inevitable rupture of diplomatic relations ensued, highlighting that their ties were firmly in tatters. This conflict was not a limited affair between Iran and Iraq, or indeed between Iran and the US, it was a region-wide affair that left few states entirely untouched.

US Responses to the Conflict and the Growth of the US Security Umbrella

When hostilities intensified between Iran and Iraq in late 1980s, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger allegedly proclaimed that it was "too bad they both can't lose" the war (Everest, 2003). Behind this professed cynical neutrality, which Washington attempted to peddle for the bulk of the war, was a far less even-handed approach to the conflict. While it was true that the US did not wish to see Iraq succeed given Baghdad's fairly close (though rocky in the early 1980s) relationship with Moscow, the series of events and consequences of the Islamic Revolution in Iran that directly threatened US interests in the region left American officials with little choice but to lean towards Baghdad. Furthermore, from a region-wide perspective, the US sought to deepen its ties with the Gulf monarchies. In the first two years, the US paid little concerted attention to either of the two belligerents, but importantly did not condemn Iraq for its encroachment of Iranian sovereignty. By 1982, however, as soon as it became likely that Iran would invade Iraqi territory, Washington's bias towards Baghdad, or perhaps simply its deep-set hatred of Tehran, surfaced. US President Reagan commanded the CIA to deliver weapons and equipment to Iraq but insisted that the weapons be of Soviet origin to obscure Washington's involvement. Further to this, the US began sharing intelligence with the regime in Baghdad, a practice that would persist throughout the conflict. Further to this, Iraq was taken off of the list of terrorism-supporting states, legally facilitating financial support to reach Baghdad and paving the way for the re-establishment of US-Iraqi diplomatic relations in 1984 (Razoux, 1985). American support

for Baghdad was no secret by the time diplomatic relations were established; in 1984 Saddam Hussein announced the successful receipt of satellite images from American AWACS in the Gulf (Gamlen, 1990). During this period, Washington was even providing flight training to Iraqi pilots, no doubt an attempt to redress the effects of having trained generations of Iranian pilots during the Shah's reign, some of whom were fighting on behalf of the Islamic Republic in the war against Iraq (Razoux, 2015).

On the other side of the coin, the US designated Iran a state sponsor of terrorism in January 1984, imposing unilateral sanctions and an arms embargo on the Islamic Republic, all part of the campaign launched the previous year against Iran, Operation Staunch (Sen, 2018). As was mentioned above, the US also encouraged Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production to damage the Iranian and Soviet economies, a cunning act designed to kill two birds with one stone, as it were. Naturally, one cannot discuss Washington's involvement in the Iran-Iraq war without mentioning the Iran-Contra scandal, however. Eager to secure the release of American hostages in Beirut, all of whom were being held by Iran-backed militias, Washington reached a top-secret deal with Iran to supply weapons to Tehran in exchange for their freedom. These weapons were first delivered by Israel, which was then reimbursed, and later were delivered directly by the United States. Over the course of fifteen months between August 1985 and October 1986, Iran received 300 Hawk missiles and 2,500 TOW missiles in exchange for the release of three prisoners and money. This money was then used to fund Nicaraguan rebels fighting the communist Sandinista government, hence the name Iran-*Contra* (Razoux, 2015). Once news of this arrangement broke, or rather was leaked by members of the Iranian regime that opposed dealing with the so-called Great Satan, in November 1986, Saddam was incandescent with rage, as was the American political elite, which had been kept in the dark of this affair as they would never have allowed it to occur. Aware that Washington had to get in Saddam and the Gulf monarchies' good books, the US upped the ante on its intelligence support for Iraq, refrained from condemning Baghdad's use of chemical weapons and its destruction of the *USS Stark*, and escalated operations and rhetoric surrounding Operation Staunch, even managing by the end of 1987 to get several European states and the USSR somewhat on board (McNaugher, 1989). By the time Kuwait had convinced the superpowers to protect tankers in the Persian Gulf, the US was ready to oppose Iranian aggression directly in the region through the use of its own military. Given that a brief overview of US involvement in the latter stages of the conflict was highlighted above, it suffices here to summarise the fact that the US engaged extensively and directly in

skirmishes with Iranian air and sea forces in 1987 and 1988 and attacked Iranian oil installations. US involvement in the Iran-Iraq war was anything but neutral; it appears most likely that Washington's support for Iraq was borne more out of opposition to Iran than any deep-seated love for Saddam Hussein, but the end result was that Iraq benefitted throughout most of the war from American support.

From the perspective of regional security, the Iran-Iraq war also played a central role in further entrenching Washington's role as security guarantor in the region. With the Shah deposed, its twin-pillar policy was in ruins, and the inception of the Islamic Republic now presented a new and unique threat to US interests in the region. As quickly as they could be mobilised after hostilities erupted in 1980, Washington stationed tens of warships in the Persian Gulf to protect oil tankers against potential hostilities, and US President Carter introduced the Rapid Deployment Force in the region (Gamlen, 1990). Throughout the war, US AWACS were stationed in the Persian Gulf to bolster the security of the GCC monarchies. Despite Kuwaiti hopes to the contrary, these states were unable to ensure their own safety and the security of oil traffic without American assistance. Thus, by the end of the war, Washington had played a pivotal role in bolstering regional security through the deployment of warships, troops, and advanced technology. The US security umbrella was now a definitive and crucial feature of Persian Gulf regional security architecture, and it was there to stay.

The Iran-Iraq War and the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex

A final brief debate about the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex is worth exploring here. The Iran-Iraq war was a conflict that attracted attention and responses from states across the Middle East. That is to say, its effects were not isolated to the Persian Gulf. For example, Israel bombed the Iraqi Osirak nuclear power plant in 1981. In 1982, Iraq destroyed a flight carrying the Algerian foreign minister, Mohammed Seddik Benyahia, killing him and all others on board. There were also important linkages between events in Lebanon and the war, due in large part to the role of Iran-backed militias in the country. Indeed, as was asserted in chapter two, this dissertation does not argue that the Persian Gulf is an isolated subcomplex. The wider Middle East regional security complex is crucial to understanding the Persian Gulf subcomplex and vice versa. However, it is also the case that the war was one that was primarily driven by Persian Gulf security dynamics and predominantly affected the states of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Some

data help to demonstrate differing threat perceptions towards this war. Arms imports in the Persian Gulf averaged around $9.4 billion a year between 1980 and 1988. In the Levant this figure was $3.4 billion. Among Iran's neighbours (Afghanistan, Türkiye, Pakistan, and India), this figure was $2.4 billion (Cordesman, 1989: 75). The Iranian revolution and the possibility of the spread of its ideological and strategic power into other territories were perceived as most threatening by the Persian Gulf states. Furthermore, given the spread of the war to the waterways of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, it was the energy exporting states of the Middle East, almost exclusively those in the Persian Gulf, that were most at risk of losing substantial revenue. For these reasons, among others, Persian Gulf states exerted considerable effort in the 1980s to develop and modernise their defence and military capabilities, far outpacing states in other subregions of the Middle East and in Iran's periphery. Thus, whilst the war definitely had implications for the wider region, the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex was certainly the central arena in which war dynamics played out.

China's Policies towards the Persian Gulf: The Emergence of its Hedging Strategy

Throughout the 1980s, Beijing made a concerted effort to cultivate relations with all members of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Given the abundant examples of hostility and tension present in the region, this required a careful balancing act on the part of Chinese decision-makers to ensure that no interests or relationships were sacrificed in the pursuit of other goals. This section explores China's attempt to balance relations between Iran and its adversaries in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. In the context of the late 1970s and 1980s, its main rivals were the United States, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Thus, this section emphasises Beijing's hedging strategy between these states amid regional tensions. The PRC's role in Persian Gulf conflicts and rivalries was most poignant in two areas during the late 1970s and 1980s, namely international diplomacy, particularly in the United Nations Security Council, and arms sales. Accordingly, this section focuses on these two areas. It should be noted that China's bilateral relations in areas such as trade and general diplomacy are examined towards the end of the chapter, rather than in this section, as the emphasis of this research is to explore whether China's hedging strategy amid rivalries and conflicts has hampered China's ability to realise its core interests. Thus, these areas are examined in the section addressing whether China realised its interests in the region during the late 1970s and 1980s.

China's Role in International Diplomacy: The Iran Hostage Crisis

Following the Islamic Revolution, China's relations with Iran were on the rocks. China's cultivation of relations with the Shah since 1971 and Chinese Premier, Hua Guofeng's, trip to visit the Shah in 1978 irked the new regime in Tehran and stirred concerns that Beijing, which had also recently normalised relations with the so-called Great Satan, the United States, was an untrustworthy country. Following almost immediate Chinese recognition of the Islamic Republic and an apology from Hua Guofeng to Ayatollah Khomeini, in which he stated that he had merely visited the Shah because his plane needed to be refuelled during a long journey back from Yugoslavia and that it would have been rude not to double-up the stop-over with a visit to see the Shah, the Iranian regime was somewhat pacified. Nonetheless, relations remained relatively stagnant for a year or so. Chinese diplomats spent a lot of energy in the first year following the Islamic Revolution engaging with members of the Iranian elite that were soon marginalised, such as the later-exiled Iranian President Abolhassan Bani Sadr (Garver, 2006). However, opportunities arose for Beijing to display its utility to the new regime in Tehran. Whether or not it would always succeed in winning Iran's favour was a whole other question, though.

By November 1979, still eager to smooth over relations with Tehran, but also dependent on maintaining positive relations with Washington, Beijing was confronted with its first significant diplomatic dilemma vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. Masses of Iranian students had stormed the American embassy in Tehran and had taken more than fifty diplomats hostage. Tensions between Washington and Tehran were palpable, especially after Khomeini expressed his support for the hostage-taking. Nearly four weeks after the seizure of the embassy, the Chinese Foreign Ministry broke its silence on the matter and within the contents of its message showcased its first attempt to balance its relations with the United States and Iran. Beijing asserted the following: "We always hold that the internal affairs of each country should be managed by its own people and that there should be no interference in the internal affairs of other countries… [b]ut at the same time we hold that the principles guiding international relations and the accepted diplomatic immunities should be universally respected" (Garver, 2006: 65). This statement reveals an overt attempt to appease both sides. Beijing's emphasis on non-interference in states' internal affairs was undoubtedly both a signal to the Iranian leadership that China would be a trusted partner in the fight against hegemonic imperialism, in keeping with the PRC's attempts to project this image of itself in the Global South, and a warning to Washington over perceived US interference in Taiwan.

However, in finally affirming the importance of recognised diplomatic principles, Beijing was also able to claim to the West that it had acted with the responsibility expected of a large power. Importantly, though, China did not directly condemn Iran in its statement and its final assertion was, at most, passive and relatively non-committal. This statement, which was seemingly primarily aimed at pleasing the Iranian audience, was somewhat contradicted by the PRC's slightly less balanced approach at the United Nations Security Council. During two votes in December 1979, China voted for UNSC Resolutions 457 and 461, the latter of which stated that the Council "[d]eplores the continued detention of the hostages" and "[u]rgently calls… on the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to release immediately all persons of United States nationality being held as hostages" (UNSC, 1979). Half a year later, however, and notably a few months after a Chinese delegation's visit to Iran, China abstained on a vote in the UNSC that would directly condemn Tehran for detaining American hostages (Garver, 2006). Now that relations between China and Iran were starting to pick up, China was not willing to put its name to the list of states condemning Iran directly. However, it should be noted that an abstention is not the same as a veto. If China had opted to exercise a veto, it would have acted as a direct protector of the Islamic regime. An abstention merely meant that the vote could go ahead without explicit Chinese support. Furthermore, China expressed its opposition to American sanctions on Iran due to the hostage crisis on several occasions (Garver, 2006). Thus, overall, China's response to the Iran hostage crisis in international diplomatic fora leaned towards supporting the United States, particularly in the immediate aftermath. However, as its relations with Tehran developed in 1980, Beijing adopted a more conciliatory approach towards Iran, sidestepping direct condemnation of the embassy seizure and detention of hostages. The beginning of China's hedging strategy in the Gulf was underway.

China's Role in International Diplomacy: The War and Persian Gulf Hostilities

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, China insisted that it pursued a policy of neutrality towards the conflict. Such a claim of neutrality came with the implicit suggestion that it would not support either side in the war. The reality, much as in the case of the other global powers, was almost entirely the opposite. As will be explored in this section and the following one, China provided support to both belligerents throughout the war, in addition to other Persian Gulf states pursuing overtly partisan policies, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In international diplomatic fora the PRC's mission was seemingly to avoid alienating either of the two states by condemning their behaviour. This was, in many respects, a hallmark of

China's attempts to refrain from interfering in other states' affairs through the introduction of generic statements and responses. What this often meant was that China's attempts to balance relations with the two states privileged cautious and often non-committal responses over meaningful policies that could be misconstrued as reflecting bias or partisanship. This section examines several examples to illustrate this.

At the start of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 479. Even though Iraq had invaded Iran, the resolution did not acknowledge that either specific side had acted with aggression or encroached upon the sovereignty of the other. The resolution simply called on both sides "to refrain immediately from any further use of force" (UNSC, 1980). For China, this provided a simple escape from a possibly challenging dilemma. Iraq had evidently been the primary instigator of the war's escalation. Indeed, according to a Persian-language journal article, in 1983 a senior Chinese official made it clear to Ali Akbar Velayati, Iran's Minister for Foreign Affairs, that Beijing was fully aware of who had shot the first bullet in the war but that the PRC would remain silent on the issue (Jamsheedi, 2010). Beijing wished to refrain from explicitly condemning either of the two sides, in keeping with its policy, as Garver (2006: 69) puts it, of "neutrality combined with professions of friendship". Thus, the PRC was content to pass the resolution. Iran's response to the resolution was one of disgust and Khomeini became deeply frustrated with each of the UNSC members for their seeming lack of concern about Iraq's aggressive expansionism. For China, in particular, which had still to win Khomeini's trust, this did not bode well. Though, as later sections will display, given Iran's isolation from most key global powers, Tehran had little option but to forgive Beijing for its acceptance of UNSC Resolution 479 (Razoux, 2015).

The PRC's unwillingness to single out either of the belligerents extended throughout the conflict and was not always, though usually was, to Iran's detriment. Following a series of attacks by both Iran and Iraq on tankers in the Persian Gulf waterways, culminating in an attack on a Saudi super tanker, the GCC states united to present a letter to the UNSC deriding Iranian aggression (and conveniently leaving out Iraq's many attacks on tankers in the region). The result of this letter was UNSC Resolution 552, which condemned "attacks on commercial ships" and called for "all [s]tates to respect… the right of free navigation" (UNSC, 1984). Crucially, while the GCC states' letter had envisaged condemnation of Iran, something that the US and France were perfectly content to go along with by this point in the conflict, China and several non-permanent members of the UNSC did not want to direct

their criticism solely and specifically at Iran. The outcome was a resolution that had once again been watered down in its specific condemnation of any particular state. Indeed, at no point after mentioning the GCC states' letter does the resolution mention the names of either Iran or Iraq. This was partly due to the efforts of the likes of China, which was keen to avoid alienating or singling out either of the two belligerents.

This pattern persisted, this time to Iran's chagrin, on two further occasions throughout the conflict, and both times specifically related to the use of chemical weapons. There was ample evidence from around 1983 that Iraq had used chemical weapons against Iranians on several occasions, a practice forbidden by the 1925 Geneva Protocol to which both Iraq and Iran were parties. The United Nations Security Council passed two resolutions related to the use of chemical weapons in the Iran-Iraq war, UNSC Resolution 582 in 1986 and UNSC Resolution 612 in 1988. Given that it was only Iraq that was believed to have actually deployed chemical weapons, the language of the final resolutions did not express this fact. UNSC Resolution 582 simply stated that the Council "[d]eplores… the use of chemical weapons", thereby passively avoiding placing the blame at either of the two states' feet (UNSC, 1986). Building on this, UNSC Resolution 612 affirmed that the Council "[c]ondemns vigorously the continued use of chemical weapons in the conflict between… Iran and Iraq… and [e]xpects both sides to refrain from the use of chemical weapons in the conflict" (UNSC, 1988). For the likes of the US and other members of the UNSC that leaned towards (or overtly sided with) Iraq, this was a slam-dunk. They could simultaneously avoid condemning Iraq whilst also implying that Iran was deploying chemical weapons. For China, this was a thorny issue. Beijing remained steadfast in its preference to avoid alienating either of the two sides by individually condemning their behaviour. The PRC was intent on balancing relations with both sides. On occasions like this, this strategy benefited Iraq while almost going as far as damaging Iran's reputation, but as the example of tanker attacks displayed, and as the sanctions example below will display, this was not always the case.

In July 1987, perhaps the most important resolution of the entire conflict, and the one that would lead to the cessation of hostilities, was adopted. UNSC Resolution 598 called for the end of fighting between both sides, as indeed many previous resolutions had. What changed with this resolution was the West's will to force Iran to accept it. Aware that Iraq had agreed to, and would support, ceasefire resolutions, the three Western permanent members of the UNSC outlined a proposal in March 1988 to impose an arms embargo on whichever state did not accept UNSC Resolution 598. To China, it was absolutely clear that this was directed

entirely at Iran, and, alongside the USSR, it rejected the proposal, offering the Iranian regime a lifeline to continue its war effort, something that China was benefiting from in the form of arms sales, as will be discussed in the next section. However, Beijing not only protected Iran in the UNSC during this period, but also Iraq. The USSR proposed an alternative solution to bring Iran to the table: The UNSC would acknowledge that Iraq had instigated the conflict by invading Iran. Alongside the US and France, China rejected this suggestion. All of these three states were eager to remain in Iraq's good books (Razoux, 2015). These two responses highlight China's unique position in the United Nations Security Council. Whilst the USSR opposed extreme measures against Iran that it perceived as being more about Western imperialism than about support of Iraq, such as the imposition of an arms embargo, China was the only state in the UNSC to shield both Iran and Iraq from embargos and condemnation throughout the war. Naturally, in the eyes of leaders in Baghdad and Tehran, Chinese responses were not always optimal. However, engaging with resolutions in the way it did was most likely the only way that China could prove to the West that it was a (relatively) responsible power. The PRC needed to agree to resolutions that condemned violence, conflict, and the use of chemical weapons, if it wished to be seen as responsible, but Beijing also ensured that it supported its two friends by avoiding singling them out or subjecting them to harsh measures or condemnation. Throughout the conflict, through its actions in international diplomacy, Beijing was not solely balancing relations with the two main belligerents, it was seeking to cultivate positive relations with a whole host of states, not least of all the United States and the GCC states. It was, therefore, a necessity that it engage with the process of the UNSC. Above all else, though, Beijing diverted attempts by other states in the UNSC to condemn Iran or Iraq individually. From this perspective, it actively balanced its relations with both belligerents.

The Persian Gulf at War: Chinese Arms Sales and Military Involvement

Throughout the 1980s, the Gulf proved itself to be the most lucrative arms market in the Global South. Indeed, between 1980 and 1988, the Persian Gulf states spent around $75 billion on weapons. The consistently-highest arms importer was Iraq, followed by Saudi Arabia and Iran (Cordesman, 1989). For China, in particular, which was eager to cement itself as a reliable arms supplier during this period, the region was highly attractive. Indeed, throughout the war, China would provide both Iran and Iraq, in addition to other Persian Gulf states, with substantial quantities of weapons and military equipment, some of which would prove controversial and the subject of intense international debates. For the majority

of the 1980s, the region accounted for nearly three-quarters of China's global weapons sales, with Baghdad alone accounting for over fifty percent (Shichor, 1988).

Over the course of the war, China was the only state to be among the top-three arms suppliers of both Iran and Iraq. Indeed, Beijing was Iraq's third-largest supplier, transferring over $4 billion worth of weapons to Baghdad, which had faced little challenge in procuring weapons from a strong variety of states, with weapons expenditure easily surpassing $35 billion between 1980 and 1988 (Burton, 2020; Ehteshami, 1990). Furthermore, China was Iran's largest supplier, transferring at least $4 billion worth of weapons to Tehran. Iran's experience in acquiring weapons was the polar opposite of Iraq's. Iran was isolated in the international system and was reliant on a handful of arms suppliers and black markets. With only a few exceptions, Iran was unable to acquire top-quality Western-made weapons and military technology and, during most of the war, could not even procure second-class Soviet-made weapons. As such, a reliance on inferior Chinese-adapted Soviet-made weapons grew in Iran, facilitating China's emergence as Iran's top supplier (Burton, 2020; Ehteshami, 1990; Ehteshami and Nonneman, 1991). Crucially, it should be noted that the PRC denied selling weapons to both belligerents, but especially Iran, throughout the conflict. It was clear to Arab states and the US that this was a lie, though. US intelligence reports were firm in their belief that China was supplying Iran with missiles and other weaponry by 1985 and Arab states, particularly Jordan, were being used as a conduit for Sino-Iraqi weapons transfers (Shichor, 1988).

Regarding the quality of weapons sold to Iran and Iraq, neither side was sold superior weaponry or anything that would tip the balance of favour to one side, though it is unlikely that Chinese weapons would have had this capability anyway. Both sides imported Silkworm missiles, something that is discussed in detail below, T-59 and T-69 tanks, F-7 fighter jets (copies of the MiG-21), and a wide array of light weapons and ammunition. In addition to this, Iran received patrol boats and mortar shells, in addition to equipment to build pontoon bridges, invaluable gear that would ultimately prove decisive in facilitating Iran's capture of the al-Faw peninsula in 1986 (Burton, 2020; Razoux, 2015). Whilst the quality of the weaponry supplied to each side was more or less the same, Iran's lack of access to other reliable suppliers (with the exception of the DPRK, which mostly sold Chinese weapons to Iran) cast a spotlight on Chinese sales to Iran. At the centre of this issue were Silkworm anti-ship missiles. The Islamic Republic installed these missiles in strategically advantageous locations, including the al-Faw peninsula and Qeshm island off of the Strait

of Hormuz, where they posed a direct threat to tankers and military ships alike (Razoux, 2015). The Silkworm missiles on the al-Faw peninsula posed a particularly grave threat to Kuwait. On multiple occasions, Iran fired these missiles at Kuwaiti territory and ships, including the al-Ahmadi maritime terminal (Washington Post, 1987). Silkworm missiles were also fired at US frigates, particularly during skirmishes in April 1988, adding fuel to international criticism of Chinese sales to Iran, the subject of the next section of this chapter (Razoux, 2015).[1] Nonetheless, and despite Chinese claims to the contrary, Silkworm missiles continually found their way to Iran throughout 1987, exacerbating regional tension and providing Iran with a type of weaponry that it would have struggled to obtain in large quantities from any other state. For China, these sales were particularly valuable. Iran and China arranged a barter deal, wherein Iran would pay for weapons sales with oil. Given that the PRC was able to meet its own energy needs, Beijing could then export the oil to energy-hungry Western states in exchange for advanced technology that only these states could provide.

Iran and Iraq were not China's only valuable arms importers in the Persian Gulf, however. Fearful of the Iranian threat and eager to modernise its military capabilities, Saudi Arabia searched far and wide for a supplier of medium-range ballistic missiles. Having met resistance from its go-to partner, the United States, due perhaps in large part to the fact that Washington was negotiating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces treaty with the Soviet Union, which would forbid the two from selling such weaponry, Riyadh turned to China. Even though the two states had not yet established diplomatic relations, trade between the two had been growing significantly throughout the decade, topping well over $100 million a year, no small achievement given their previously stunted ties. By around mid-1985, Beijing seized the opportunity of expanding relations further, agreeing in secret to sell Saudi Arabia around fifty *Dong Feng*-3A (also known as CSS-2) missiles to the value of over $3 billion (Calabrese, 1991; Ehteshami, 1990; Shichor, 1989). The news of this enormous transfer broke in March 1988, confirming China's arrival as a significant arms supplier to the entire region. For nearly a decade, the PRC had worked tirelessly to establish ties, at least insofar as weapons sales, with all three key regional powers. China was not a partisan player in the region, nor was it looking to watch from the side-lines from the perspective of

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[1] It should be noted that Iran was not the only state to fire Silkworm missiles at maritime traffic. Iraq did the same during the earlier phase of the conflict, though this did not receive the same levels of international condemnation.

arms sales, it was actively courting all of these conflicting states. Weapons transfers had provided a pertinent way to achieve this.

A final note on China's minimal military involvement is worth noting. Throughout the war, China played almost no military role in the Persian Gulf. It viewed the involvement of external powers, particularly the two superpowers, with great suspicion. Further to this, China did not have the capabilities to project sufficient military power as far away as the Persian Gulf by the 1980s. Indeed, this was the excuse used by the Chinese when Kuwait asked if Beijing would join the reflagging operation in the Persian Gulf (Kuwait News Agency, 1987b). Whilst perhaps partly true, the reality was far more nuanced. The PRC did not want to be seen as an imperialist or hegemonic power imposing its will on the region, nor did it want to join an operation that in many ways accentuated the idea that the region was stuck in a bifurcated conflict between Iran on the one side and the US, Iraq, and the GCC states on the other. Once again, Beijing wanted to tread carefully, and it perceived the best way to do this to be avoidance of overt military involvement, something that would also enable China to avoid potential discord with Washington.

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions

Primarily due to inadequate data collection, previous studies have misrepresented regional reactions to China's hedging strategy during the 1980s, claiming that Beijing's approach received no criticism from key belligerents in the Iran-Iraq war (Calabrese, 1991; Craig Harris, 1993). This early scholarship misinformed later pieces, leading to an exaggerated idea that China avoided attracting criticism from regional states for its strategy during the 1980s (Sassoon, 2018). This section redresses these errors by introducing previously-uncited reactions from regional elites.

Iran's Responses and Perceptions

Iran's vastly isolated position on the global stage rendered it highly dependent on its relationship with China for the large part of the Iran-Iraq war. There is no denying that it needed to stay in Beijing's good books and, accordingly, refrain from making a habit of criticising the PRC. In keeping with this, Iranian officials even attempted to bolster Chinese assertions that Beijing was not supplying Tehran with weapons. Former Iranian Ambassador to China, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, denied claims in a press conference that Iran had received Silkworm missiles, claiming instead in August 1987 that Iran had acquired Silkworm missiles by seizing them from Iraq (Tehran IRNA, 1987). If this indeed were the case, then

it was illogical that he proclaimed, alongside other top Iranian officials, that Sino-Iranians relations were progressing nicely. His statement exposed an Iranian belief that China was supplying weapons to Iraq – Silkworm missiles come from China, after all - and an assertion that the PRC was not supplying Iran with weapons. Based on this logic, Beijing would be an enemy of the Islamic Republic, not a friend. By January 1988, Boroujerdi's argument had changed, though. He still denied procuring weapons from China, but this time stated, "we have had many such weapons because we are capable of making them" (Beijing, 1988). As is discussed below, claims such as these did little by 1987 and 1988 to convince the US and Arab states but they expose an important feature of Sino-Iranian relations at the time. It was in both states' interests to pretend that China was not supporting Iran. Ali Khamenei, president of the Islamic Republic at the time, was trying hard to encourage a system of self-sufficiency in Iran. As such, claiming that it relied on China for weapons would hardly give this impression to the world or the Iranian public. For China, the benefit of denying weapons transfers was to maintain plausible deniability, allowing it to claim to the likes of the United States and Arab states that it was acting responsibly amid the Iran-Iraq war while enjoying lucrative arms exports to Tehran.

This is not to say, though, that Iran refrained from criticising China's hedging strategy or acting to counter it. A few examples serve to display Iran's frustration over Chinese support for, and weapons sales to, Iraq and the GCC states. At the outset of the war, Iran was furious with the fact that the PRC would refer to Iran as "the victim of territorial encroachment" whilst simultaneously avoiding condemning Saddam Hussein as the "violator" of Iran's sovereignty (Jamsheedi, 2010: 52). From a wider international perspective, this was embodied in UNSC Resolution 479 at the start of the war, which suggested that both sides were equally to blame for the conflict's intensity. Needless to say, top Iranian officials were deeply frustrated with China over this. Furthermore, in late 1986, aware that Chinese weapons and military equipment were ubiquitous among Iraqi troops, Iran seized and confiscated the contents of a Chinese cargo ship delivering weapons to Iraq. This included artillery parts and T-69 tanks (Razoux, 2015). Finally, in March 1988, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, expressed his disgust over China's missile deal with Saudi Arabia, claiming that it was a "mischievous deed designed to weaken our morale" (Tehran Domestic Service, 1988). Indeed, during Khamenei's visit to China in 1989, he directly expressed his concern about the Saudi missile deal to Chinese officials (Garver, 2006). Clearly, even though Iran largely had to forego directly criticising Beijing due its

intense dependence on Chinese arms transfers, on occasions its frustration would bubble over, leading it to make clear its negative feelings towards China's relations with its rivals.

Iraq and the GCC States' Responses and Perceptions

For most of the war, China did its utmost to pretend that it was not supplying Iran with weapons. This was partly to deflect claims that it was acting irresponsibly, but also to ensure the smooth development of relations with Iraq and the GCC states. For much of the war, Beijing kept up an air of plausible deniability that the Arab states were content to go along with. Indeed, in early 1987, Iraqi Defence Minister, Adnan Khairallah, asserted that he has "nothing to confirm or deny whether some of the missiles which hit Baghdad are Chinese" (Baghdad INA, 1987). Behind the scenes, though, Iraqi, GCC, and indeed Arab officials from the wider Middle East were working hard to pressure the Chinese to cease its weapons transfers to Iran and to encourage Tehran to end the conflict. Indeed, soon after Khairallah's statement, head of the Iraqi Popular Army, Taha Ramadan, visited China asking officials in Beijing to pressure Tehran to cease hostilities (Razoux, 2015). Furthermore, during his visit to acquire missiles from China, Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia tried desperately to encourage the Chinese to halt its support for Iran in the conflict, thereby displaying the extent to which China's role in the region could not be disconnected from the Iran factor in the minds of Arab Gulf leaders. Indeed, during the visit, Bandar bin Sultan even claimed that Saudi Arabia would make up for any losses that China may incur from ceasing its weapons sales to Iran by purchasing the arms and equipment itself (Shichor, 1988). Furthermore, as early as 1982, Sayyid Fahar, Oman's deputy prime minister, warned China of the "reputational costs" of "profiteering" in the Iran-Iraq war, further suggesting to Beijing that Muscat could help China to establish relations with GCC states if its policy towards the conflict aligned with theirs (Fulton, 2019b: 256). Finally, a delegation of several Arab states from the Arab Committee, including Iraq, travelled to China to demand that Beijing stop backing Iran. Indeed, even Saddam Hussein confirmed that he and his Arab counterparts were doing all they could to turn Beijing away from Tehran (Kuwait News Agency, 1988).

By mid-1987, when Silkworm missile attacks on tankers and Kuwaiti territory escalated, the Arab Gulf states, including Iraq, changed their tune. China's support for Iran became a subject of intense anger among these states, entailing public criticism of the PRC's approach to the conflict. Several statements and news reports are evidence of this. The Kuwaiti paper, *al-Ra'y al-A'am*, "singled out China for direct blame" following Iranian Silkworm missile

attacks against Kuwait and even described China as "imperialist" (Kuwait News Agency, 1987a; 1987c). Arab anger did not solely emanate from newspapers and journalists, however. In October 1987, Iraq's Taha Ramadan outwardly condemned Beijing's support for Iran. Even admitting his "regret over China's stand" he stated that "China's denial on the issue is false" (Manama WAKH, 1987). In the most serious public condemnation of the PRC's support for Iran, though, Iraqi Foreign Minister, Tariq Aziz (Beirut Voice of Lebanon, 1987), stated the following.

> The missiles fired at Kuwait were Chinese. No one can deny this. However, China has not obstructed Resolution 598. When the other four UN Security Council permanent members agreed to this resolution, China followed suit. China is now saying, in the UN Security Council deliberations, that if the other four members agree to discuss and pass a resolution on sanctions, it will do the same. We have nothing to complain about in this regard. Nonetheless, we have to keep our eyes open with respect to military cooperation, whether direct or indirect, between Iran and China, because it is results that count. The Chinese must reali[s]e that the availability of Chinese-made weapons to Iran is something that not only displeases the Arabs, but also upsets them and leads them to be cautious in their dealings with China. This will affect the traditionally cordial relations between China and all the Arabs, because the matter does not involve Iraq or Kuwait alone, but Arab security as a whole.

When viewed alongside the extensive attempts made by Arab officials to cajole China away from backing Tehran, these public condemnations of Beijing's stance display great frustration and concern about Sino-Iranian relations and Chinese weapons sales to Iran. By mid-1987, the impact of Chinese weaponry, and particularly missiles, in the hands of the Iranians had irked Iraq and its Arab allies to such a degree that they expressed their anger publicly. Thus, contrary to claims in the literature (Calabrese, 1991; Craig Harris, 1993), the warring states did express frustration with China's provision of weaponry to their adversaries.

US Responses and Perceptions

The US was far less nuanced in its responses to Chinese support for Iran. As soon as intelligence staff were confident that China was supplying Iran with weaponry, by around 1985, and especially after Silkworm attacks on Kuwait and tankers began, American

officials voiced their disapproval. Despite Chinese denial over selling weapons to Iran, US officials expressed their stance directly to Chinese officials on several occasions. For example, in July 1988, US Secretary of State George Schultz told Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang of the US' disapproval of weapons sales to Iran, to which Zhao Ziyang replied that the central Chinese government had not approved any such transfers (Craig Harris, 1993). Further to this, it was common to see condemnation of Chinese behaviour in American newspapers throughout 1987 and 1988 (LA Times, 1987; Moore and Ottaway, 1987). Importantly, though, and beyond simple rhetorical condemnation, the Reagan administration decided to play the Iran card against China in October 1987. Angry about recent Silkworm attacks on Kuwait and maritime traffic, the US delayed sales of advanced technology to China, a severe blow for the PRC given its desire to modernise its technology in service of economic development (Moore and Ottaway, 1987). Indeed, as was previously mentioned, China had even been selling Iranian oil in exchange for Western technology. In response, Beijing pledged to deploy further controls to hinder Chinese-made weapons from reaching Iran and to discourage Tehran from using Silkworm missiles against Kuwait and international maritime traffic (LA Times, 1987). Nonetheless, Iran continued to deploy Silkworm missiles in the Persian Gulf the following year, including to attack US frigates, further fuelling Washington's frustration towards Beijing. Indeed, Chinese support for Iran would continually act as a bone of contention in Sino-US relations for decades to come.

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?

While regional perceptions and responses to China's policies are a useful indicator of the efficacy of Beijing's hedging strategy, particular in scrutinising Beijing's image in the Persian Gulf, they only paint part of the picture. To identify fully whether China's strategy was efficacious, it is crucial to examine whether the PRC achieved its objectives in the region during the period and thereby scrutinise whether the hedging strategy in any way hindered or facilitated the realisation of these interests.

Diplomacy, Trade, and Arms Sales

Immediately following the reforms in the late 1970s, China's central aim in the Persian Gulf was to establish (and revive) diplomatic relations with the cash-rich regional states and increase its trade (in goods, labour, services, and arms) with them. In 1979, the PRC shared diplomatic relations with only four states, namely Oman, Iraq, Kuwait, and Iran. Furthermore, its relations with Iran were on the rocks following the Islamic Revolution. By

1988, however, Beijing had firmly revived relations with Iran, and had secured diplomatic recognition from the United Arab Emirates in 1984 and Qatar in 1988. Furthermore, the PRC was about to establish fully-fledged relations with Bahrain (1989) and Saudi Arabia (1990), thereby pushing the Taiwanese government out of the region and further bounding towards the goal of legitimising the PRC as the one true Chinese state. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this marked a particular triumph as Saudi-Taiwanese ties had been fairly strong. Built on this, Beijing also established relatively strong economic ties with regional states during the 1980s. Table 4.1 displays the growth of PRC-Persian Gulf trade ties, comparing 1979 with 1988. Overall, but with the exception of Iraq and Bahrain, China's trade with states in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex increased substantially over the years, displaying that the PRC's economic aims in the region had largely been achieved. Indeed, Beijing's annual trade with these states increased by over 300% during this period (IMF, 1980; IMF, 1991). What immediately stands out is the stark increase in trade between the PRC and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, given that previous exchange between them had been so minimal and China had actively supported their key rival in the Iran-Iraq war. The PRC's approach to the Iran-Iraq war clearly did not put them off of engaging with Beijing. Sino-Saudi trade witnessed an approximately three-fold increase and Sino-Emirati trade an approximately four-fold increase. Furthermore, Sino-Iranian bilateral trade continued to develop well, no doubt in large part due to Tehran's alienation from much of the international community.

Table 4.1 China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1979 and 1988 (in USD)

State	Trade in 1979	Trade in 1988
Saudi Arabia	$143 million	$442 million
United Arab Emirates	$66 million	$256 million
Islamic Republic of Iran	$195 million	$239 million
Iraq	$136 million	$89 million
Kuwait	$107 million	$206 million
Bahrain	$22 million	$12 million
Qatar	$14 million	$55 million
Oman	$13 million	$74 million
United States of America	$2.49 billion	$10 billion
Total (excluding the US)	**$696 million**	**$1.37 billion**
Total (including the US)	**$3.18 billion**	**$11.37 billion**

Sources: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1980; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1991.

Furthermore, the PRC continued to attract generous loans and aid from Kuwait to the sum of several hundreds of millions of dollars (Calabrese, 1991). Additionally, Sino-Saudi goods trade skyrocketed. Up until 1981, Riyadh had banned imports on goods made in China as part of its pro-ROC strategy (Wang, 1993). By the mid-1980s, Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia were consistently worth over $100 million and in 1987 surpassed $230 million by September (Calabrese, 1991). The Persian Gulf also proved to be critical to China's labour exports and foreign construction objectives. In the 1980s, the Persian Gulf was at the epicentre of China's foreign labour contracts. Over 70,000 Chinese labourers worked in the Middle East towards the end of the decade, the majority of whom were in Iraq (and plenty in Kuwait). Iraq was the top market for Chinese labour and construction contracts, bringing in over $1.2 billion of revenue (Shichor, 2006). Furthermore, Chinese labourers were involved in numerous reconstruction contracts in both Iran and Iraq throughout the war and in its aftermath. From a cynical perspective, by supplying both sides with weapons and support, and thereby partly facilitating the continuation of the war, the PRC (among many others) created ripe conditions for further destruction. This, in turn, entailed a boon in construction and reconstruction contracts that the Chinese were best-placed to undertake due to the attractive low prices that they quoted for these projects. This is not to say that China alone was responsible for the conflict's continuation, far from it, but it is clear that the PRC benefited economically from the war. The one true economic challenge that emerged as a direct result of China's hedging strategy was the American threat to cease exporting advanced technology to China in response to Chinese Silkworm exports to Iran (Moore and Ottaway, 1987). The fact that the US would respond so starkly to China's relationship with Iran showcases the sensitivity of the issue in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex and the careful balancing act that the PRC would have to adopt. Yet, overall, and despite this brief hiccup, Sino-US trade relations developed well over the course of decade. Indeed, according to American and IMF figures, bilateral trade between the US and China increased from just over $5 billion in 1981 to between $10 billion and $13 billion in 1988 (IMF, 1991; Wang, 2010). Though discrepancies existed, such as Washington's unwillingness to support China's accession to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, such issues were not the result of Beijing's policies in the Persian Gulf, but rather due to disagreements over appropriate financial and economic practices.

From the perspective of arms sales, by opting to supply both key belligerents in the war, the PRC's markets were widened. Given that Iran did not always have the means or desire to

purchase substantial quantities of weaponry and given that siding with Iran alone would have alienated Beijing from the international community, solely supplying Tehran with weapons would not have proven particularly lucrative. Conversely, unlike Iran, Iraq was not an isolated state on the international stage and had access for the majority of the war to vast quantities of superior weaponry and military equipment to that offered by the Chinese. As such, while Beijing was able to enjoy over $4 billion worth of arms sales to Iraq, it would not have been able to encourage Iraq to purchase much more, given that Baghdad could turn to states with superior weaponry. As such, choosing to arm both sides was a logical strategy to maximise revenue from arms sales. Furthermore, the *Dong Feng* missile deal with Riyadh, seen by many as rendering the establishment of Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations inevitable, was a direct response on Saudi Arabia's part to regional insecurity emanating from the Iranian threat. Given that Beijing was Iran's primary arms supplier, it is reasonable to argue that China played a role in creating the very environment that spurred Riyadh to turn to the PRC for missiles (Shichor, 1989). Indeed, the combination of superpower unwillingness to transfer missiles to Riyadh and the threatening regional environment that China was playing a role in fomenting pushed Saudi Arabia straight into China's arms. From this perspective, while the PRC's support for Iran may not have won it much goodwill among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Beijing's arms sales to both sides manufactured apt conditions for its rise as an arms supplier to the region by fuelling each side's ability to persist with hostilities. China's rise as an arms supplier in turn bolstered its relations with regional states. Indeed, the very fact that the PRC was willing to supply Saudi Arabia with these missiles represented to Saudi officials an important benefit of engagement with China: Beijing does not attach liberalising conditions to its engagement with regional states, even in sensitive areas such as arms transfers. Thus, while GCC states may have been frustrated with China's support for Iran, they too could benefit from Beijing's non-discriminatory approach. Overall, as Burton (2020: 81) asserts, the 1980s marked a high point for Beijing, with 1987 representing the "global peak for Chinese arms sales". Indeed, that year alone, well over half of its $2.6 billion worth of weapons exports went to Iran and Iraq. This was crucial to the Chinese military as it was now dependent on financing its own research and development by exporting weaponry. Thus, China had certainly realised its ambition of increasing arms sales during the 1980s, and the Persian Gulf had proven to be central to meeting this end.

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible but Independent Power

Beijing set out in the 1980s to juggle two seemingly mutually exclusive ideational ambitions. The first was to be perceived by great powers, particularly the United States, as a responsible great power. This would involve behaving in the international community according, largely speaking, to ideals set out by Washington, such as engaging actively and constructively with peace processes, not supporting communist revolutionary groups, and not backing so-called pariah states. The second ideational ambition was to be seen by states in the Global South, including the Persian Gulf, as a reliable and independent great power that respects sovereignty and rejects interference in other states' internal affairs.

Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, China assiduously attempted to balance these two objectives. In its role in the United Nations Security Council, it certainly went a long way in achieving this ambition. Whilst its decision to support UNSC Resolution 479 met the wrath of Iran due to its lack of condemnation of Iraq, the PRC made a concerted effort throughout the decade to align with resolutions calling for peace and the non-use of chemical weapons, in keeping with expectations of great power responsibility, whilst simultaneously avoiding condemning either of its partners in the Persian Gulf and watering down proposals from other UNSC permanent members that may impact upon the sovereignty and sanctity of either of the two key belligerents. Indeed, in the Security Council, the PRC did not single-out for condemnation or support the imposition of sanctions on either Iran or Iraq throughout the entire war. The same could not be said for any other permanent member of the UNSC. From this perspective, Beijing made great strides in its efforts to appear reliable to both Persian Gulf states vis-à-vis interference in internal affairs and independent from the other great powers. Naturally, as was discussed in the regional perceptions section, though, its extensive arms sales to Iran did little to bolster Chinese claims that it was a responsible power. Its support for Tehran was met with a great deal of resistance from both the United States and the Arab states. While this did not seemingly precipitate any long-term damage to its reputation, it certainly made clear to policymakers in the United States that there were limits as to how far China could be expected to act responsibly in global affairs. Of course, given that both Iran and Iraq acted irresponsibly throughout the 1980s, it is contradictory that Chinese support for Iran in specific would cast doubt on its global responsibility, rather than its support for Iraq as well. This underscores the extent to which Washington defines the parameters of global responsibility. However, it is key to remember that Beijing wished to be viewed as a responsible power by strong capitalist economies, of which the United States was undeniably the most important. As such, its actions to support Iran did little to support

this agenda, though no great damage was done to China's image in the US either, most likely as the China of the 1980s was much more aligned with the West in international fora than during the Mao period.

More widely, China's missile deal with Saudi Arabia worked towards asserting an image of itself as a reliable, non-interfering partner. The unwillingness of the United States to supply Riyadh with the missiles due to a plethora of reasons enabled Beijing to showcase its no-strings-attached approach to diplomacy. Unlike the West, China was willing to trade, even in sensitive areas, without placing any particular expectations on the other state, a hallmark of its Persian Gulf policies and point of considerable attraction to regional states for decades to come. The *Dong Feng* deal with the Saudis similarly gave Beijing the opportunity to boost an image of itself as a significant global power capable of providing Global South states with similar benefits – albeit in very limited ways - to those offered by the United States.

Preventing Superpower Interference and the Question of Regional Stability

From the perspective of discouraging superpower intervention, China's extensive arms transfers to both sides certainly fed into the continuation, widening, and escalation of the conflict. This made superpower interference more likely, particularly given that the PRC facilitated the Iranian war effort, something that Tehran may not have been able to keep up for as long had it not received Chinese support. However, to suggest that China's actions alone made superpower involvement in the region more likely would be a huge overstatement; the actions of a wide array of actors contributed to this. Naturally, Beijing could claim that its continuous support for UNSC resolutions seeking to end the conflict without US or USSR intervention displayed that it acted to avoid superpower involvement. However, its provision of weapons to both sides fuelled the continuation of the conflict and directly contradicted its support for UNSC resolutions. In particular, Iran's use of Chinese Silkworm missiles acted as a significant catalyst for increased great power involvement in the region. Thus, Beijing's extensive support for a regime that was viewed with suspicion by the superpowers was counterproductive in discouraging great power interference in the Persian Gulf. This was primarily in relation to the United States, though. The USSR's involvement, which the Chinese were particularly concerned about, was minimal as Soviet troops had become bogged down in the protracted and costly conflict in Afghanistan.

Similarly, and without overstating the point, whilst China supported UNSC resolutions that would put an end to hostilities, at no point did Beijing seriously predicate the continuation

of smooth relations with either Iran or Iraq on their acceptance of a ceasefire. On the contrary, much like other powers, the PRC cashed in on the substantial revenue emanating from weapons sales, thereby spurring on both Iran and Iraq. In the case of Iran, the removal of Chinese arms sales following the US threat to cease technology sales to the PRC may have gone a long way in encouraging Tehran to the negotiating table, though this cannot be proven. It is likely that Chinese leaders did indeed wish to see the Persian Gulf in a state of general stability, not least of all to pursue no-strings-attached economic relations with regional states, but it is certainly true that China benefited financially from the protracted nature of the conflict, particularly because it was selling weapons and completing reconstruction contracts in both countries.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, the PRC pursued an ambitious strategy in the Persian Gulf: To develop and maintain positive relations with all parties. Throughout the Iran-Iraq war, Beijing carefully tried to juggle its relations with Iran, Iraq, the United States, and the GCC states. In the United Nations Security Council, China actively and successfully avoided directly singling out either of the two parties for condemnation and worked to manage its desire to be seen by the West as a responsible partner by supporting key resolutions directed at ending the conflict whilst also rejecting proposals that would interfere in either Iran's or Iraq's sovereignty and domestic affairs. Despite denying selling weapons to Iran, its arms sales to Tehran certainly drew the attention and frustration of the Arab states and the United States, all of whom actively criticised the PRC by 1987 when Iranian Silkworm attacks on Kuwaiti and international targets escalated. Similarly, breaking its silence for fear of losing a key arms supplier and rare partner in the international community, even Iran expressed its frustration over the China-Saudi missile deal. However, overall, China's core interests in the region were met and its hedging strategy did not cause any irreparable damage to its image in the region or its wider interests. By the end of 1988, China had established diplomatic relations with all states except Bahrain, which would follow suit the following year, and Saudi Arabia, which would do the same in 1990. Its trade relations with the Gulf and the United States had only improved over the course of the decade and the region had proven to be a source of substantial arms sales revenue. Whilst Beijing's arms sales contributed to the continuation of the conflict, thereby encouraging superpower involvement in the region, the PRC largely managed to balance its seemingly-conflicting goals of appearing to regional states to be a reliable non-interfering power and framing itself as a responsible power to the

United States. Even though Beijing cast a serious shadow of doubt on its commitment to responsible diplomacy by selling Silkworm missiles to the Islamic Republic, its support for successive UNSC resolutions seeking to end the war supported its reintegration into the international community. Thus, whilst calling into question its reliability, as evidenced by poor regional perceptions of its strategy, the PRC rather successfully balanced relations with all regional states in the region, even managing to enjoy the benefits of diversified relations that other global powers had to forego by choosing to align with only one of the two states.

Chapter 5

1989-1991: China and the Kuwait Crisis

Introduction

Swiftly following the tumultuous events of the Iran-Iraq war, yet more conflict and destruction swept over the Persian Gulf region. Angry with his Arab neighbours and eager to make use of his bloated military sector, Saddam Hussein launched an invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and subsequently occupied the country for over six months. The international response was stark, with states across the world uniting to condemn this flagrant encroachment of Kuwaiti sovereignty and the United States leading a military effort in early 1991 to liberate Kuwait.

This chapter assesses China's response to the Kuwait crisis, particularly its efforts to manage relations with Iraq and its rivals. To achieve this, the chapter first discusses China's global and Persian Gulf interests in the period. An overview of the Kuwait crisis, including the international response, is then sketched. Following this, China's strategy is outlined and discussed in detail before analysis ensues of regional perceptions of China's approach and the question of whether China achieved its key interests in the region during the period.

The chapter concludes that the Kuwait crisis provided China with the perfect opportunity to realise its interests. Following the Tiananmen Square incident, China was treated as an international pariah and subjected to sanctions. Beijing's careful balancing act during the Kuwait crisis expedited its reintegration into the international community while enabling it to maintain positive relations with all regional states. While some regional observers were not greatly pleased with China's response to the crisis, Beijing did enough to manage its conflicting ideational objectives while securing its material interests during a challenging period in global politics.

Theoretical Insights

This brief section will give a sense of the theoretical insights enabled by the frameworks outlined in this research. Gaining from the neoclassical realist and constructivist framework outlined in chapter one, the chapter first displays the impact of isolation from the Tiananmen Square incident on China, placing this at the core of drivers of Chinese interests during the period. By utilising neoclassical realism, a clear appreciation of the domestic challenges facing the CCP is understood, in addition to the PRC's concerns about the encroachment of

foreign powers on other regions, including China, in the international system. Adding to this, the materialist emphasis of realism is key, for example, of the dire need for economic reintegration. Constructivist insights in relation to, for example, China's emphasis on the sacrosanctity of sovereignty in this period buttress claims made about Chinese interests in the region.

Building on this, the regional security complex paradigm provides a strong lens through which the region can be viewed amid the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent US-led operation to liberate Kuwait. The firm entrenchment of the US as the primary guarantor of GCC security is outlined, showcasing the centrality of the regional security complex paradigm in understanding Washington's role in the region. Further to this, the collective fear of the GCC monarchies amid Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the housing of US troops on GCC soil underscore the region-wide nature and the interconnectedness of security concerns.

Finally, the emphasis on the two-level nature of strategic hedging is explained in relation to Chinese behaviour in the Persian Gulf following the Tiananmen Square incident. From a systemic perspective, which takes precedence during the period, the PRC does everything it can to align with the US position while also attempting to appear independent in international affairs. However, despite concerns about the US, Beijing still attempts to court Iraq and to deploy its media resources to display opposition to Washington. In this sense, strategic hedging firmly explains China's behaviour. On the regional level, China works hard to balance its desire to sustain relations with the GCC states, Kuwait, and Iraq amid the Iraqi occupation while also trying to ensure that it is viewed as respecting sovereignty above all else. The framework forwarded to delve into the success of China's hedging strategy is deployed according to the interests analysed in the next section. The framework offers an attempt at assessing the efficacy of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf amid the Kuwait crisis, displaying that it was broadly a success. With that said, China did not succeed in gaining preferential treatment from Saddam Hussein in relation to securing Chinese citizens in Iraq and Kuwait. This deep-dive into the efficacy of the strategy once again highlights the innovative nature of this assessment framework.

China's Interests: Recovering from Tiananmen Square

The end of the 1980s and the early 1990s represented a tumultuous period in China's international relations that brought into sharp focus the linkages between its domestic

political situation and the international environment. Having recently witnessed increasing calls for the end of communist rule across swathes of the Soviet Union, including in Poland and across Central Asia, CCP leaders were concerned that similar discontent would surface in China. Moscow's moderate responses to these challenges, which ultimately facilitated a transition away from Soviet control and communist rule, similarly indicated to some elements of the Chinese leadership (though not all, such as Premier Zhao Ziyang) that a harsh response would be required if analogous issues emerged in the PRC. And they certainly did emerge. In mid-April 1989 student protests were held in Beijing with over 100,000 protestors participating towards the end of the month and over a million a day less than a month later across various cities in China. Protestors' qualms were many and varied, though more unified aspects included the perceived lack of government accountability, and inadequate freedoms, rights, and democratic processes (Zhao, 2001). To several key CCP officials the cause of these demands were clear: Western propaganda and the pernicious flow of Western ideas in China. A re-emphasis on state sovereignty would be a natural corollary to this line of thinking. By mid-to-late May 1989, the Politburo Standing Committee agreed (though only after a tie-breaking vote by Deng Xiaoping) that enough was enough; martial law was to be imposed. After a failed attempt by government forces from Beijing to restore state control over the city, back-up was drafted from forces spread all over the PRC. In the night leading into June 4, 1989, troops stormed the city with permission to use whatever force was deemed required to restore government control. Government forces did not stop at the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, but even shot swathes of civilians in the now-famous Tiananmen Square. By the end of the following day, between 241 (government estimate) and 2,800 (International Red Cross estimate) civilians had been killed and in the following days around 20,000 were detained, nearly 100 of whom faced the death penalty (Garver, 2016).

The response from the West and other key global economies was utterly damning. Western governments were unequivocal in their condemnation of the CCP. Within a day, US President Bush ceased all military sales and exchanges with the PRC and tasked his administration with a re-examination of all arrangements with China. Bush also sanctioned Beijing militarily and economically, while also laying out the US policy to reject loan applications made by China to intergovernmental organisations, including the World Bank. Furthermore, the US allowed nearly 50,000 Chinese students studying in the US to stay after graduation, something previously not possible due to visa rules (Garver, 2016). In keeping

with the US approach, and also driven by pressure from Washington, the US' G7 partners followed suit. The European Community and Japan ceased sending any form of financial support to the PRC and the possibility of China's accession to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade died overnight (Foot, 1997). Several of these states even halted all diplomatic engagement with China and openly called into question the future credibility of the CCP, including the surprising example of Brazil, which had previously remained silent on other states' domestic affairs. The PRC was plainly and simply an international pariah, and it was even unable to turn to previously friendly states in Eastern Europe as these were all undergoing upheaval of their own or transitions away from communism and Soviet influence (Garver, 2016).

Based on the above, to state that the Tiananmen Square massacre and its subsequent international consequences defined the parameters of China's global interests in the aftermath is an understatement. In the immediate aftermath, Beijing's priority was to gain some diplomatic traction by identifying states that would remain cordial despite this bump in the road. The Global South, and in particular states in the Middle East, were perfect in this regard. Within months, senior Chinese emissaries, including President Yang Shangkun and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, went on a diplomatic frenzy in the Middle East, trying to visit as many states as possible. Their efforts were not in vain. All of the Persian Gulf states that Chinese officials visited made clear to Chinese leaders that they were unfazed by the crackdown and emphasised their commitment to principles of mutual non-interference. Indeed, several Middle Eastern leaders were happy to continue formal visits to China in the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, unlike Western officials. The Emirati President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan even conducted his first visit to the PRC soon after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, a clear signal that Sino-Persian Gulf relations were far from in trouble (Shichor, 1992). Furthermore, Sino-Saudi ties became official in July 1990, highlighting that China's domestic politics did not hamper the inevitability of formal relations that emanated from increased bilateral trade and the signal *Dong Feng* missile deal during the Iran-Iraq war (Shichor, 1989). With this immediate diplomatic success in the Persian Gulf in hand, Chinese leaders were able to turn their attention towards other pressing concerns following the Tiananmen Square incident.

First and foremost, there was simply no denying the continued importance of China's economic development. Since the late 1970s, the successful development and modernisation of China's economy had become the bedrock of the CCP's domestic legitimacy. With each

year that passed, Chinese citizens were being exposed to a greater degree to the all-encompassing benefits of increased access to capital, comfort, and even luxuries. In fact, the protests that erupted in 1989 were in some respects a response to a sharp increase in the cost of living caused by inflation in the prior couple of years. Nonetheless, the annual GDP growth rate was around 11.3%, incomparable to the 1% GDP growth rate of the 1960s under Mao Zedong (Perkins, 2013). For the CCP, therefore, there was no escaping the fact that economic development was key, and the widespread protests had shown them the challenges they would face if they undermined (either through corruption or mismanagement) this development. Given that foreign trade, aid, and loans had played such a central role in lubricating Chinese economic modernisation, it was clear that Beijing would need to reintegrate into the international community as quickly as possible. A priority, thus, would be to discover routes to normalise relations with key economies, particularly the United States. Without normalised and relatively amicable relations with these states, the PRC would undoubtably slip back into the destitution caused by autarkic measures during Mao's tenure. Washington was at the centre of all of this. The US' diplomatic, military, and economic sway was palpable across the globe, a situation that was compounded by Moscow's diminishing influence caused by economic mismanagement, its dwindling grip of Eastern European countries, its failed and protracted war in Afghanistan, and Gorbachev's failed reforms. Washington held the keys to intergovernmental financial institutions across the world and would similarly be able to influence its G7 allies to reintroduce China into the international community if it so desired. As such, a core interest of the Chinese leadership after the Tiananmen Square crackdown was to improve relations with key Western economies as quickly as possible. A possible route to achieve this would be to reinforce its commitment to behave in a responsible manner in the international community, in keeping with its drive in the 1980s to engage in more multilateral institutions and sign key treaties (Boon, 2018).

There was a catch, or rather a caveat, to this need for a rapprochement with the West and the United States, though. Both CCP leaders' analysis of the causes of the 1989 anti-CCP protests and the Western response to the crackdown reinforced in their minds the threat that these states posed to China's sovereignty and domestic affairs. Boon (2018: 36) puts it best in stating that "China saw itself as the target of unjust American imperialism, whose ultimate goal was to subvert the Chinese political system". It was crucial, therefore, that Beijing did not subjugate itself to Washington and that it re-assert, both in its international practices and

its rhetoric, the sacrosanctity of state sovereignty and non-interference. In whatever way China was going to encourage a rapprochement with the United States, it must not be to the detriment of its sovereignty. Similarly, where possible, Chinese officials needed to maintain a strict adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and rhetorical and practical respect for other states' sovereignty, whilst also condemning other states' violations of these norms. In so doing, the CCP could at least keep out of trouble, claim to be ideologically consistent, and not cede sovereignty or allow others to interfere in its domestic affairs merely to achieve economic results. The fear that Western interference in China could incite domestic unrest was real in Chinese leaders' minds; it was not an abstract normative notion siloed from practical policy decisions. As such, and in keeping with a renewed sense of victimhood that emerged among the Chinese elite following the Tiananmen Square incident (Callahan, 2010; Boon, 2018), the PRC could not allow Western states to undermine its sovereignty and self-determination at the expense of being allowed to engage in the international economic community. Part and parcel of this would be continued resistance to unilateralism, particularly from the United States, in international affairs.

The Persian Gulf in this Equation

As this chapter will display, the Persian Gulf was a crucial region to China's global interests in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident. Over the course of the 1980s, the Gulf had proven itself not only to be an important region for economic engagement (for example in the sphere of arms transfers and construction contracts) but also a critical region in which great powers try to guide events to suit their own international agendas and reflect or reshape their international normative and material preferences. The Iran-Iraq war gave the PRC the opportunity to stand up to American and international pressure in order to pursue the relations that it saw fit and also taught Chinese officials the limits of such policies. Similarly, it had facilitated China's arrival as a power with fairly significant international sway and as an arms supplier. Over the course of the conflict and indeed following the Iranian revolution, there were opportunities for Beijing to behave responsibly in the eyes of Western powers and opportunities for it to take a stand against their influence in the name of the fight against great power interference and imperialism. The salient role of the Persian Gulf in this regard was not lost on Chinese leaders. As such, and as will be the focus of this chapter, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would offer an unparalleled chance for China to re-formulate its position in the international community.

In addition to the region's importance as an arena of great power interaction, China continued to pursue similar interests as during the bulk of the 1980s. In the interest of brevity and to avoid repetition, these do not need to be engaged with extensively here other than to say that Beijing was intent on maintaining positive relations with all regional states, increasing economic engagement with them, and ensuring the safety of its many thousands of citizens in the region. In addition to this, and in keeping with their early support following the Tiananmen Square massacre, Beijing was keen to enhance their mutual commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and to ensure their continued support for China's right to pursue whatever domestic policies it views as necessary, a continuous theme throughout China-Persian Gulf relations.

The Persian Gulf: Iraqi Aggression and US Entrenchment

Having only recently undergone the protracted, bloody, and costly Iran-Iraq war, the Persian Gulf found itself once again at the centre of international security attention with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Despite seismic shifts taking place in the international environment, including the decline of the Soviet Union and indeed the consequences of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the international community all found themselves focused diplomatically on the Persian Gulf in the summer of 1990 and the following months.

Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait: A Brief Overview

The Iran-Iraq war had dramatically changed the relationship between Iraq's military and political economy. By the end of the war, the Iraqi army was four-times its size prior to the conflict, now at nearly one million men, and Baghdad's access to military vehicles had also grown. Complicating the matter, Saddam Hussein was struggling to find a place for military personnel in the economy. Thus, with several grievances directed at Kuwait, the obvious choice for Hussein was to make use of this power and economic inflexibility by launching an invasion against a significantly militarily-weaker neighbour (Yetiv, 1992). Kuwait was an obvious choice to Saddam for a number of reasons. First, Hussein reverted to his penchant for revisionist territorial claims, leaning on what he believed to be historical injustices to lay claim on Kuwait. Around the time of the Ottoman Empire, the British considered the al-Sabah family in Kuwait to be the true patrons of Kuwait, viewing it as separate to Iraq. Over the course of nearly a century, this has caused repeated attempts by Iraqi leaders, including King Ghazi in 1938 and Prime Minister Qassim in 1961, either to cajole Kuwaitis to join Iraq or to invade Kuwaiti territory. Indeed, even though Iraq recognised Kuwaiti sovereignty

in the early 1960s, brief and intermittent fracases have taken place on the border, with some leading to military casualties (Sassoon and Walter, 2017). It comes as no surprise, then, that Saddam Hussein would harken to these territorial claims, but particularly over the Warba and Bubiyan islands, both with access to the Persian Gulf, as a partial pretext for invasion. Second, regarding himself as a defender of the Arab world against Iranian aggressors, and furious that his regional counterparts did not seem to share this perception, Hussein was incandescent upon hearing that Kuwait would not write off the debt that Baghdad owed it from the Iran-Iraq war. In Hussein's mind, the GCC states should have been providing him with economic assistance, never mind simply cancelling debt. Third, and intricately connected to this point, Baghdad also claimed that Kuwait was illegally siphoning oil from over 40 km^2 of the Rumaila oil field to the value of over $2 billion (Khalidi, 1991; Nufal, 1991). Fourth, he accused his Persian Gulf neighbours, especially Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, of over-production of oil and, thereby, of reducing oil prices in violation of OPEC quotas (Halliday, 1991). Indeed, Hussein levied the charge that the price of one barrel of oil had dropped to $7, instead of the agreed-upon $18, and that every $1 per barrel lost would amount to a shortfall of $1 billion in Iraq's annual income (Khalidi, 1991). Rather unsurprisingly based on this belief and his previous belligerence, during a summit of the Arab League in Baghdad, Hussein threatened his neighbours with war if they did not cease over-production (Sassoon and Walter, 2017). These four grievances together provided the pretext for increased tension in the lead-up to August 1990 and ultimately Saddam's decision on August 2, 1990 to conduct an invasion of Kuwait.

With well over 100,000 troops at the border, heavy artillery, and hundreds of tanks, Iraq's occupation of its comparatively-tiny neighbour was a simple operation (Salinger, 1995). Indeed, the violent invasion conducted by Iraqi troops paved the way for an occupation of Kuwaiti territory that lasted over seven months. With the Kuwaiti royal family in waiting in Saudi Arabia, and Iraq in control of Kuwait, stripping it of its assets, wealth, and oil, life was challenging for Kuwaiti citizens and foreigners alike. Sassoon and Walter (2017: 614) note the following:

> Life in Kuwait under Iraqi occupation was marked by chronic insecurity, fear of violent crime or arbitrary arrest, controlled movement due to curfews and checkpoints, scarcity of food and essential resources, crippled health care services, a shuttered school system, looted houses, and boarded-up shops. It was not possible for the local population to maintain any semblance of a normal existence, nor did the

> Iraqis maintain the ordinary functions of the state, like commerce or education. The regime's violent approach to managing Kuwait was not primarily the result of commanders improvising on the ground or of trigger-happy soldiers lacking discipline, though these were also features of the Iraqi occupation. Rather, this was the outcome intended by top leadership. Iraq tried to control Kuwait through public displays of terrori[s]ing violence, summary executions, and round-the-clock security patrols.

Further to this, Iraq's belligerence extended to foreigners in Kuwait. Hussein blocked the exit of foreigners in the country and even moved many foreign citizens to Iraq. It was not until December 6, 1990 that Baghdad finally allowed foreigners to leave, following intense condemnation by these states under Chapter VII of the United Nations charter (Warbrick, 1991). Within this context, a relatively unified international consensus was reached regarding the illegality of Iraq's actions and possible appropriate responses.

The International Response to Iraq's Aggression

The United Nations Security Council states were swift and decisive in their shared condemnation of Iraq. By August 6, 1990, two UNSC resolutions had been passed that condemned Iraq. UNSC Resolution 661, the second of the two, called on member states not to import Iraqi or Kuwaiti products or assist their exports in any way (including via trans-shipments or reflagging) and to ensure that their military products did not reach either Iraqi or Kuwaiti territory (UNSC, 1990b). The permanent members of the UNSC all voted in favour of these resolutions, in addition to several others in August and the following months, including: UNSC Resolution 664, which demanded that Iraq allow foreign citizens to leave (UNSC, 1990c); UNSC Resolution 667, which demanded the release of foreign nationals and condemned Iraq's violation of "diplomatic premises" (UNSC, 1990d); UNSC Resolution 670, which condemned Iraq's mistreatment of Kuwaitis (UNSC, 1990e); and, UNSC Resolution 674, which warned that the UNSC would be forced to use other measures if Iraq did not comply with previous resolutions (UNSC, 1990f). Most poignantly, and something that will be discussed at length later in the chapter, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSC Resolution 678 on 29 November, 1990, which allowed "Member States co-operating with the Government of Kuwait, unless Iraq on or before 15 January 1991 fully implements... the above-mentioned resolutions, to use all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660... and all subsequent relevant resolutions and to restore

international peace and security in the area" (UNSC, 1990g). In the eyes of the United States and the permanent members of the UNSC, whom Washington left in no doubt, "all necessary means" would entail the use of US military engagement to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. The UK, France, and the Soviet Union (the latter of which was keen to improve ties with the US) all voted for the resolution and China abstained, thereby allowing the resolution to pass (Rubinstein, 1994).

After failed and feeble attempts by Iraq and the US (in addition to the Soviet Union, China, and a few regional states) to end the issue diplomatically, the deadline for Iraq's compliance with the resolutions passed. Within two days, and having already amassed hundreds of thousands of troops in Saudi Arabia at the government's request, the US and its coalition partners (including the UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait) launched Operation Desert Storm. For over a month, the coalition used air strikes against Iraqi targets. Saddam Hussein felt emboldened, however, and fired Scud missiles at Israel and Saudi Arabia. The resolve of the coalition was firm, though. On February 24, 1990, the coalition matched their aerial assaults with a land offensive. The battle was quick and decisive. Within a few days, Hussein ordered his troops to retreat back to Iraq and a few days later he agreed to comply with the relevant UNSC resolutions (Freedman and Karsh, 1991). With the exception of a few states (none of which had much international influence), the international community was firm in its opposition to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. The coalition's response staunchly put Saddam Hussein back in his place and Kuwaiti sovereignty was quickly restored. In the process, around 150 US personnel were killed, a small figure given the scale of the conflict.

Regional Responses and the Entrenchment of the US Security Umbrella

Having unsuccessfully attempted to defuse tensions in the months prior to Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, were very concerned by his occupation of the country. Despite Iraq's promise not to break a non-aggression agreement with Riyadh, with the strongest military in the region and an appetite for war, the GCC states believed there were no limits to Hussein's belligerence (Yetiv, 2008). It was this widespread fear among the GCC monarchies that ultimately paved the way for the entrenchment of the US security umbrella in the region. Indeed, no single event was as pivotal in solidifying the US military presence in the region. Thus, after much deliberation, particularly due to concerns that allowing American troops into Saudi Arabia might offend the religious

establishment and thereby damage the delicate pact between the ulama and the Al Saud family, King Fahd opted to invite US troops into the kingdom to provide protection against Iraq in a mission that became known as Operation Desert Shield. In total, more than 500,000 US troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia, a fact that would cause great consternation among certain political Islamists in the kingdom, later leading to radicalisation against the Al Saud royal family (Al-Rasheed, 2010). In addition to the presence of troops (of which only around 5,000 remained a year later), Washington established an air combat operations centre in the East of the kingdom and continued to make use of the AWACS infrastructure previously set-up in the country. Saudi Arabia footed the bill for the bulk of the US security umbrella in the country over the following decade (Niblock, 2006). The US' central role in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, in addition to the introduction of US security architecture and military installations, made it clear that Washington would provide the lion's share of the regional security architecture for the foreseeable future, a reality that was catalysed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

China's Policies towards the Kuwait Crisis: A Reformulated Hedging Strategy

There are two main areas that allow an appreciation of China's hedging strategy towards the Kuwait crisis: Beijing's role in the United Nations, which acted as the central arena for international diplomacy towards the invasion and occupation, and China's relations with Iraq throughout the crisis. In examining Beijing's approach to the conflict from an international diplomacy perspective and how China managed its relationship with the new international pariah, a clear picture of its overall strategy towards the region during the period can be gleaned.

China's Role in the United Nations

China's response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was markedly different to its reaction to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran a decade prior. In the Iran-Iraq war, China was hesitant to condemn Iraq directly for its encroachment of Iranian territory. Thus, whilst Beijing called for both states to respect the other's sovereignty, Chinese officials did not specifically name Baghdad as the aggressor. With Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, though, China was clear that it viewed the invasion as an unjust encroachment of the sovereignty of another state and that Iraq should withdraw immediately. Indeed, in Chinese rhetoric, this particular offensive earned Iraq the moniker of the "little hegemonist" (Shichor, 2005: 203). With that said, Beijing's immediate, and somewhat hopeful, reaction was that Arab states should lead

the way in managing and mediating the crisis. Chinese officials were still convinced that foreign interference had paved the way for an increase in regional conflicts and that their continued interference would do nothing but exacerbate the crises facing the Persian Gulf. Similarly, given the Chinese belief that the UN was a product of Western hegemonic imperialism, officials were also hesitant for the UN to get overly involved (Shichor, 2005). This apparent stance would merely remain rhetorical, though; Chinese officials were quick to support deliberations in the United Nations Security Council over the Kuwait crisis. Indeed, in his memoirs, Chinese foreign minister of the time, Qian Qichen, notes that "[t]he Gulf is a place of strategic importance. Any crisis there affects the strategic balance of the whole world" (Qian, 2005: 57). Clearly, thus, Beijing could not afford to leave diplomatic activity entirely to other states and would need to play a role in international diplomacy if it wished to act as a great power and do what it could to serve its interests.

Throughout the entirety of the crisis, China's actions in the United Nations were more or less in keeping with Washington's expectations, underscoring both Beijing's opposition to Iraq's invasion and China's need to be in the US' good books. However, it is important to consider the nuance of the PRC's decisions in the UNSC in order to understand how China went about balancing its relations with opposing states and the conflict between its normative preferences and material needs. Of all twelve UNSC resolutions relating to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, it serves to consider them in two groups. The first eleven resolutions ought to be delineated from the final UNSC resolution (678) as the final relates to the ratification of the possible use of force against Iraq and hence is more controversial than those in the lead-up.

China voted in favour of all of the first eleven United Nations Security Council resolutions relating to the Kuwait crisis. Within only four days of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, China supported two resolutions orientated against Iraq. The first, UNSC Resolution 660, condemned Iraq's invasion and called for Baghdad to withdraw without delay (UNSC, 1990a). This decision represents a stark contrast to Beijing's response to Iraq's invasion of Iran, embodied in UNSC Resolution 479, which called for both sides to "refrain… from any further use of force" (UNSC, 1980). Several issues may have impacted upon China's decision to change tactics this time. First and foremost, the international consensus was behind supporting Kuwait. That is to say, condemning Iraq in August 1990, much like condemning neither side at the start of the Iran-Iraq war, was far from revolutionary and allowed the PRC to keep a low profile while meeting the West's expectations. Second, and

heavily linked to the first, was China's desire to align with the US wherever feasible so as to encourage its reintegration within the international community. Third, following the Tiananmen Square debacle, Chinese officials were very sensitive about protecting the sacrosanctity of sovereignty in the international arena. Of course, this could go both ways, meaning that China would double-down in its resistance to UNSC decisions that could be perceived as interference in the internal affairs of other states or that it unreservedly condemn the invasion. Iraq's overt and unprovoked encroachment of Kuwaiti sovereignty at such a time was evidently concerning from a Chinese perspective and could not reasonably be considered an Iraqi domestic issue, thus China would respond negatively towards Iraqi actions in international fora. The second resolution, UNSC Resolution 661, was a particularly profound one. It called for an embargo on international imports of Iraqi and Kuwaiti (now Iraqi-controlled) goods and a further embargo on transfers of military ware to Iraq (UNSC, 1990b). The PRC's support for this brought to a halt arms trade with one of its biggest customers and similarly rendered bilateral trade between China and Iraq largely unfeasible. Former Chinese Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, asserts that "it was not easy for China to vote for the sanctions against Iraq, as three of the five permanent members of the Security Council were imposing sanctions on China" (Qian, 2005: 59). Whether difficult or easy, the PRC nonetheless supported the resolution, once again aligning with the US' position on the conflict. This pattern persisted for another nine resolutions against Iraq between the 9th August 1990 and the 28th November 1990. China voted in favour of resolutions that, *inter alia*, did the following: Called on Iraq to allow foreign citizens to leave Iraqi and Kuwaiti territory (UNSC, 1990c); condemned Iraq's violation of embassies and other diplomatic buildings (UNSC, 1990d); and, condemned Iraq's abuse of Kuwaiti citizens and further imposed restrictions on ships and aviation (UNSC, 1990e). These provide a flavour of the measures that China took alongside the international community to try to dissuade Iraq from its invasion and occupation of Iraq. In all eleven of these resolutions, China stood alongside the US and the other permanent members of the UNSC in condemning and sanctioning Iraq for its behaviour. Thus far, Beijing's support for Iraq was minimal, if not negligible, in the security council.

November was a crucial month for the Kuwait crisis, particularly from a Chinese perspective. On November 29, 1990, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 678. This resolution would allow for states "to use all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660… and all subsequent relevant resolutions and to restore

international peace and security in the area" if Iraq did not leave Kuwait "on or before 15 January 1991" (UNSC, 1990g). This represented a profound challenge for the Chinese leadership and one that they had hoped to avoid. PRC officials were under no illusions about what passing this draft resolution would mean: An outright Western or Western-led military campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait and possibly one that would spillover into a wider US-led campaign in Iraq itself. China had tried hard over previous months to encourage a peaceful resolution of the issue and, as such, if it were to back the resolution then it would appear contradictory and hypocritical. Supporting the resolution was, therefore, not an option, as it could do untold damage to China's image both domestically and among states of the Global South, including Iraq. The opposite choice would be to veto the resolution, thereby denying the US the credibility of UNSC backing. Given the extensive sanctions package levied against the PRC following Tiananmen Square and concerns about what this could mean in the long-term, especially if they were buttressed with further sanctions, this was also not an option (Shichor, 1991). Indeed, according to Qian Qichen, during a November meeting in Cairo with US Secretary of State, James Baker, he was told that "if China would vote for, or at least not veto, the United States' draft [for what would become UNSC Resolution 678], an appropriate opportunity would be created for a… formal visit to Washington" (Qian, 2005: 75). This was a clear signal to PRC officials that Chinese acquiescence on the draft resolution could act as a direct springboard to China's reintegration into the international community and renewed ties with the US. As such, China did everything it could to balance these two conflicting positions by abstaining during the vote. As a permanent member of the UNSC, a veto would mean that the resolution would not be passed. By abstaining, China was able to put the decision into the hands of the other member states. This gave Beijing the opportunity to attempt to save face in front of both Iraq and states in the Global South resistant to Western hegemony and imperialism by allowing Chinese officials to claim that they did not actually support the resolution while also facilitating the successful passage of the resolution so as to give the Americans what they wanted. The result was that, by abstaining, China tacitly facilitated the resolution and subsequent military operations against Iraq (Shichor, 1991). However, once again, China attempted to balance both its relations with conflicting parties and the inconsistencies between its normative ideals - minimal use of force by the United Nations, which it perceives to be dominated by the US, solidarity in the fight against Western imperialism and US unilateralism, and a desire to avoid interfering in other states' affairs - and its material needs, at the centre of which was Beijing's desire to be reintegrated into the international

community. Of course, China may have hoped that Iraq would be too afraid to face military action and would accordingly retreat. However, this was not the case and China was therefore complicit in facilitating the use of primarily-US force against Iraq starting in January the following year.

China's Relations with Iraq throughout the Crisis

China's position was relatively unique throughout the Kuwait crisis in that it was the only major non-Arab power to maintain relatively close relations with Iraq. While Moscow had made some attempts to secure a diplomatic resolution prior to the need for the use of force, Gorbachev was content to go along with the US as long as Washington did not invade Iraqi territory, thereby displaying a willingness to break the Soviet Union's strong relationship with Iraq in favour of improving Soviet-US ties (Rubinstein, 1994). Similarly, Iraq's relatively close relationship with the likes of France crumbled after its invasion of Kuwait, leaving the Iraqi regime largely isolated in the international community. Thus, with the exception of a few regional allies, such as Jordan, the PRC was one of Iraq's rare partners during Baghdad's self-imposed crisis. In some respects, this is unsurprising. At the outset of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, China had fairly strong relations with both Kuwait and Iraq with several thousands of Chinese citizens in both countries and at least $2 billion worth of contracts at risk (Craig Harris, 1991). Furthermore, Iraq was China's biggest arms importer, accounting for around a third of all Chinese arms exports (Shichor, 2005). Eager to ensure the safety of these citizens and to maintain relatively strong relations with Iraq so that future economic engagement could persist after the resolution of the crisis, PRC officials did what they could to keep on good terms with Iraq while broadly aligning with the international consensus that opposed Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

While China ceased its weapons transfers to Iraq and more or less halted trade with Baghdad in August 1990 in keeping with UNSC Resolution 661, Beijing continued to encourage diplomatic interactions with Hussein's regime. By September, Taha Ramadan, Iraq's deputy prime minister, was invited to visit China. This visit was momentous as it marked the first time official diplomatic engagement between a non-Arab state and Iraq since the invasion in early August (Craig Harris, 1991). Furthermore, in early November 1990, Qian Qichen visited Baghdad to meet with Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz and Saddam Hussein. During these meetings, he warned Iraqi officials that the US may choose to make use of its military might with or without UN authorisation and that China was unwilling to mediate between

the US and Iraq in any such situation. Qian (2005: 60) asserts, "I was the only foreign minister of the five permanent member countries of the UN Security Council to visit Iraq during the Gulf crisis". This underlines the extent of Iraq's isolation. Even though China did not present great strength or willingness to exert any political or diplomatic clout on behalf of Iraq, this visit was a rare break from Saddam's international isolation. Indeed, even after Operation Desert Storm had begun, the PRC still welcomed an Iraqi emissary on Hussein's behalf in February 1991. The result of this meeting was that China begged for "restraint" from both Western and Iraqi troops, an attempt to balance between both key parties of the conflict (Craig Harris, 1991: 120). In addition to these engagements, two rather controversial reports emerged regarding Sino-Iraqi relations, neither of which surprisingly gained much attention. In late August 1990, the United States intercepted a Chinese ship carrying over 14,000 tonnes of fertilisers imported from Iraq (Baghdad INA, 1990a). The attempt to import goods from Iraq directly contravened United Nations Security Council Resolution 661 of early August, thereby showcasing the continuation since the Iran-Iraq war of China's clandestine trade practices. Furthermore, Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Sun Bigan, was forced to deny reports in February 1991 that China was providing Iraq with weaponry to repel the US-led military operations (Riyadh SPA, 1991). While the reports were left uncorroborated, the fact that China had already violated UNSC Resolution 661 suggests the possibility that weapons transfers did take place. Importantly, though, the emergence of these reports in the region show that there was concern in GCC circles that China was supporting Iraq.

In addition to this official engagement between the Iraqi and Chinese governments, China did what it could to support Iraq through less conventional means, namely media support. To be clear, this unofficial rhetorical backing was not aimed at giving Iraq's invasion of Kuwait credibility, but rather displaying solidarity with a strong regional power pushing back against US hegemony. Jencks (1992: 455) notes that PRC officials often espoused empathetic and supportive views towards Baghdad in media comments throughout the crisis, particularly framing Iraq as a strong regional power capable of bogging down US troops and possibly conveniently proving that the US was not as strong as Washington would like to think. Indeed, this view, which was forwarded by He Xin, a conservative, was granted considerable airtime among Chinese elite circles. PRC officials were firmly against Iraq's invasion but the possibility that Iraq might be able to keep the US busy and focused on a new international pariah while also diminishing its influence was certainly a ubiquitous and

hopeful prediction among these groups. In keeping with this, Chinese propaganda emerged throughout Operation Desert Storm that tried to portray the US as desperate and Iraq as highly skilled but lacking in sufficient resources. The Liberation Army News claimed on January 25 that the US was conducting so many night-time operations because of its superior equipment but lack of military acumen (Jencks, 1992: 458). Similarly, a Chinese newspaper "proclaimed that Saddam Hussein had already won" on February 20, 1991, because "he had held off the coalition for over a month" (Jencks, 1992: 460). There was a strong appetite in China, therefore, to use the conflict as an opportunity to downplay US preponderance and simultaneously express support for Iraq. This was likely both an attempt to showcase friendship with Iraq and an attempt to play down US predominance for domestic Chinese audiences.

While these diplomatic interactions and media comments did not represent significant support for the Iraqi regime, when viewed in tandem with China's actions in the United Nations, they nonetheless display a keen desire among Chinese officials to manage relations with both the coalition against Iraq and the Iraqi regime. Once again, PRC officials wanted to do all they could to remain friends with all parties. In the case of the Kuwait crisis, this involved doing what was necessary in the United Nations to coax Washington into re-establishing relations with China whilst maintaining sufficient diplomatic and rhetorical support for Iraq to prove to Saddam Hussein that he had not been entirely abandoned by Beijing.

China's Reformulated Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions

The GCC States' and US' Responses and Perceptions

The responses of the GCC states and the US to China's hedging strategy were certainly mixed. Speaking in early October 1990, Saudi foreign minister, Saud al-Faysal, referring to the stance of Beijing and others said that "their stands confirm the firmness of the international stand", suggesting that the GCC states had no real complaints about Beijing's response (Riyadh Television Service, 1990b). Similarly, even after China's abstention on United Nations Security Council Resolution 678, during a visit by Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah to China in late December 1990, the Kuwaiti entourage "expressed its great appreciation and thanks for China's principled stance toward the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait" (Riyadh Television Service, 1990a). This was echoed by the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the UN in March 1991, who expressed his "deep gratitude… to… China for

their cooperation… in deterring the aggression and uprooting it" (London KUNA, 1991). This rather diplomatic response to China's approach to the conflict was not entirely mirrored in less public fora. Indeed, during his visit to the PRC in December 1990, the Kuwaiti Emir tried to encourage China to further its pressure on Baghdad to ensure it complied with the UNSC resolutions (Riyadh Television Service, 1990a). Indeed, Chinese Foreign Minister at the time, Qian Qichen (2005), notes in his memoirs that Kuwaiti officials, but particularly Crown Prince Saad, were vehement in their attempts to lobby China to support the US as much as possible to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Given that this lobbying continued after the successful passing of UNSC Resolution 678, there is a suggestion that the Kuwaitis had hoped for a little more from the Chinese, namely either direct support for the UNSC resolution or direct military support for the coalition. Furthermore, according to an Egyptian official that was close to top officials in the GCC states, Beijing disappointed Kuwait and its partners with its response to the crisis, making them feel that China may not have abstained on UNSC Resolution 678 had it not needed to put an end to Tiananmen Square sanctions (Craig Harris, 1993). With that said, Kuwaiti officials and publications have used China's tacit support for the UNSC resolution as an opportunity in later years to express kinship with Beijing. Indeed, in 2002, an Arabic article published by the Kuwait News Agency expressed that "the Chinese people stood firmly on the side of the Kuwaiti people when they were subjected to Iraq's unjust occupation in 1990" (al-Fareej, 2002). Overall, thus, it seems that China's hedging strategy only briefly risked minorly damaging its relations with the GCC states. By allowing the passage of UNSC Resolution 678, though, the Kuwaitis and their partners obtained the outcome that they desired, namely Iraq's expulsion from Kuwaiti territory. Based on this, the PRC leaned sufficiently in their direction throughout the crisis to avert any potential diplomatic problems.

The United States, though, was ultimately easier to please. Whilst officials in Washington may not have been overly content with China's continued courting of Iraqi officials, particularly in allowing them to visit the PRC, their focus was on votes in the United Nations Security Council. Indeed, during a meeting in Cairo in November 1990, US Secretary of State James Baker lobbied Qian Qichen to give his blessing to the draft resolution that would ultimately become UNSC Resolution 678. Indeed, according to Qian (2005: 75, emphasis added), Baker "said that if China would vote for, or *at least not veto*, the United States' draft", an official visit to Washington could be arranged for the Chinese. While Baker (1995: 309) claims, in his own memoirs, that Chinese acquiescence would merely entail a visit by

an undersecretary to Beijing, not entirely in keeping with Qian's assertion, he notes that he told Qian "[w]e don't hold it against our friends that they are not joining us… [b]ut we *do* ask that they do not stand in the way". The fact that Baker hinted that even an abstention would be sufficiently pleasing underlines that Washington's key interest was in expelling Iraq from Kuwait. If China would at least not hinder this endeavour, then all would be fine. As the proceeding section about the realisation of Chinese interests displays, Baker's promises to Qian Qichen were not empty. Overall, thus, US officials were sufficiently pleased with China's response to the Kuwait crisis and were not overly concerned about Beijing's relationship with Saddam Hussein so long as China allowed the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 678.

Iraq's Responses and Perceptions

Iraqi officials' responses to China's hedging strategy were interesting throughout the period. In many respects, China was in a win-win situation. Whenever Beijing acted in a supportive manner towards Iraq, Iraqi officials expressed their gratitude to Beijing. Whenever the Chinese did not support Baghdad, though, Iraq would try to downplay the fact that the international community was collaborating against its interests by claiming that the United States was bullying other states or that international institutions were merely extensions of the American government. Indeed, in late August 1990, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz downplayed the credibility of UNSC resolutions stating that the US "exerts pressure on permanent Security Council members like the Soviet Union or China" (Die Presse, 1990). In keeping with this idea that the United States was acting as a malevolent entity pressuring other states, in referring to UNSC Resolution 678, Saddam Hussein called the UNSC the "U.S. security council". When his interviewer noted that the resolution passed due to the support of *all* permanent members of the UNSC, Hussein dismissed this, noting that "China did not vote" and that the Soviet Union's Shevardnadze was "a lackey of Baker's" (Baghdad INA, 1991). It was entirely beneficial, therefore, for the Iraqi regime to claim that the issue was simply a matter of unfettered American domination of the international system, a notion that Hussein was using to garner support for his leadership domestically and among certain demographics in the Arab world. Naturally, this was to China's benefit, given that it too wished to be seen in the Global South and at home as a counterweight to American unilateral hegemony and predominance.

As noted above, aside from actions in the UN, Iraqi officials were grateful that the PRC was facilitating diplomatic exchanges, such as Taha Ramadan's visit to China in September 1990, as it represented a break from fairly significant isolation in the international community. With that said, and in a lack of seeming logical coherence given suggestions by Iraqi officials that the United Nations was just an extension of the United States, Iraqi officials tried to convince China that "the presence of foreign fleets and military troops on the Arab territories… constituted… [a] threat to stability and security… to the region and the world" (Baghdad INA, 1990b). These attempts to get China on side suggest that Iraqi officials did not truly believe that the United Nations Security Council was a plaything of the US administration. It is not a great stretch to imagine, despite Saddam Hussein's above comments, that Baghdad was angry that the Chinese did not veto United Nations Security Council Resolution 678. Naturally though, Iraq's attention was primarily directed at the United States, given that it was about to lead a military operation to liberate Kuwait. For China, this meant that any private feelings of anger in Iraq towards its support for successive UN resolutions and its abstention on UNSC Resolution 678 were not aired publicly.

China's Reformulated Hedging Strategy: Job Done?

Diplomacy and the International Community: Successful Reintegration?

It is no overstatement to say that events in the Persian Gulf following the Tiananmen Square incident were central to facilitating China's successful reintegration into the international community, particularly regarding its relations with Western and Western-aligned economies. In the 1980s, China's top three trading partners were Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States (Garver, 2016). Thus, when the United States, with the backing of G7 partners including Japan and European states, imposed sanctions on China, the effects had the potential to be devastating with time. In particular, Beijing's attempts to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade received a sharp blow, rendering China reliant on the yearly renewal of Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status by officials in Washington and other capitals (Foot, 1997). Thus, while China managed to get away by the skin of its teeth in acquiring the MFN status renewal from the United States in May 1990, a product of President Bush's "constructive engagement" strategy that posited that total economic isolation would hinder the prospects for democratic reform in China rather than encourage it, Beijing was nonetheless subject to sanctions and treated as a pariah by key Western and West-leaning economies (Wang, 1993).

Fortunately for China, though not for the people of the Persian Gulf, the Kuwait crisis offered Beijing the perfect opportunity to cajole the United States into allowing China's reintegration into the global economy. With Saddam Hussein now emerging as the foremost international pariah having committed a grave encroachment of another state's sovereignty – and this time a friend of the United States - China was prescribed a fairly simple course of action by the United States: Support UNSC resolutions against Iraq and, as Secretary of State Baker informed Qian Qichen in Cairo in November 1990, do not hinder the draft resolution allowing the use of force against Iraq. All China had to do, according to Baker, was abstain or support the draft resolution allowing the use of force against Iraq. In so doing, Sino-US relations would have the potential of getting back on track (Garver, 2016; Qian, 2005).

These promises were not hollow and were echoed by Washington's partners. Following Chinese support for successive resolutions against Iraq, the European Community decided in late October to put an end to its boycott of China, facilitating normal relations in the realms of trade and diplomacy. Soon thereafter, Tokyo upped the ante on its engagement with China, finally resuming high-profile aid and loan agreements with Beijing (Foot, 1997). For the United States, though, the watershed moment would come from China's vote on what would become UNSC Resolution 678. For Washington, the ability to lead a UN-facilitated war was central to Bush's desires for a "new world order" in which law prevailed over tyrannical anarchy and where states united to pursue fairness and freedom (Foot, 1997: 247). As such, China's abstention worked to legitimise Bush's grand strategy. James Baker's pledge to Qian Qichen took no time to materialise. The day after China's abstention on the resolution, high-profile diplomatic engagement resumed between China and the United States, with Qian Qichen meeting President Bush. Within a week, the effects of American acquiescence in international organisations were similarly felt, with the World Bank granting China the first "non basic needs" loan since the Tiananmen Square debacle (Foot, 1997). The removal of sanctions, the renewed consideration of China's accession to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the resumption of formal high-level diplomatic engagements came swiftly after China's vote in the United Nations Security Council. Washington's decision, therefore, to tie China's response to the Kuwait crisis to its international isolation proved vital to Beijing's reintroduction into the international community. Even if mostly by American design, the Persian Gulf had proven itself once again to be a key arena in which China can pursue global interests.

It serves to note that the Kuwait crisis was not central (though it expedited aspects) in facilitating the normalisation of Sino-Japanese economic engagement as Tokyo had already resumed loans to China in July 1990 and was working to remove sanctions as well. However, in the case of US and European sanctions against China and the diplomatic isolation (with the exception of some surreptitious US visits to China) that had ensued after the Tiananmen Square incident, the Kuwait crisis provided Beijing with the perfect opportunity to reintegrate swiftly into the international community. A sceptic could argue that China's abstention on UNSC Resolution 678 provided a mere pretext for the United States to resume its engagement with Beijing, perhaps expediting an already certain outcome. Even if this were the case, the result of China's careful hedging strategy gave Western officials grounds to claim that engagement with Beijing was wise. The Kuwait crisis was ultimately crucial to China's swift reintroduction into the international community. From the perspective of global diplomacy, Beijing certainly achieved what it needed from the crisis. The United States laid out clearly what it required from Beijing. Thus, even though China maintained relations with Iraq and occasionally took significant risks (such as violating UNSC Resolution 661 to import fertilisers from Iraq), it leaned sufficiently in Washington's direction to realise its key interests.

Regional Relations and Trade

Since the introduction of economic reforms and modernisation under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, foreign trade and managing relations with foreign economic partners became a crucial focus of the CCP's agenda. With the threat of economic degradation ensuing from the West's response to the Tiananmen Square incident, it was critical that China ensure the continued smooth flow of trade and economic engagement with states across the world, including the Persian Gulf. Contrary, though, to Craig Harris' (1991: 116) damning assessment of the impact of China's strategy on its regional relations, in which she claims that "important Sino-Arab economic ties… have all been undermined", Chinese economic engagement with the region was in a better place after the Kuwait crisis than prior to it, with perhaps the exception of arms sales. Table 5.1 shows China's bilateral trade with all nine states in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex in 1989 (prior to the Kuwait crisis) and 1992 (a year following the operation to expel Iraq from Kuwait). With the exception of a brief decrease in trade with Kuwait, which is remedied by 1993/1994 when levels returned to normal and increased slightly, and Iraq, which was subjected after the Kuwait crisis to international sanctions, China's annual trade with states of the Persian Gulf regional security

subcomplex increased by over $6 billion. It is crucial to note that the PRC's trade with the United States witnessed a strong boost, a sign that relations were more or less back on track and had recovered from the effects of the Tiananmen Square incident. Furthermore, seemingly irrespective of some concerns among GCC leaders about the PRC's lukewarm response to the Kuwait crisis, economies ties with Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE all improved in the early 1990s. Given that Beijing had only recently established full diplomatic relations with some of these states, it would not have been hard to imagine these states turning away from China if they felt that it was an untrustworthy partner. This was certainly not the case, though, and, with the exception of sanctioned-Iraq, the PRC's bilateral trade with regional states and the United States saw an upturn.[2] Even excluding the United States, China's trade with Persian Gulf states in 1992 was worth nearly $1 billion more than in 1989, with Sino-Emirati trade doubling in value, Sino-Saudi trade nearly doubling, Sino-Iranian trade more than doubling, and Sino-Omani trade tripling in value. This increase, supported by the soon recovered levels of bilateral economic exchange with Kuwait, highlights that China's hedging strategy did not damage its core economic interests in the region. While its economic ties with Iraq took a hit, this was an inevitability unless China had taken the defiant stance of vetoing multiple UNSC resolutions, including Resolution 678. Any such move most certainly would have seen its wider economic and political interests damaged due to the US' stance on the issue. Indeed, within the context of the Western-led bloc of the international community isolating China following the Tiananmen Square incident, any further Chinese divergence from the US would undoubtedly have seen Chinese economic interests severely damaged and the emergence of an anti-China status quo.

Table 5.1 China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1989 and 1992 (in USD)

State	Trade in 1989	Trade in 1992
Saudi Arabia	$319 million	$571 million
United Arab Emirates	$304 million	$609 million
Islamic Republic of Iran	$179 million	$447 million
Iraq	$153 million	Data nebulous due to sanctions (estimate around $1 million)
Kuwait	$192 million	$63 million*
Bahrain	$12 million	$12 million

[2] Ties with Iraq would pick up to a certain degree over the course of the 1990s, as the following chapter displays. This underlines that the Iraqis, at least within the context of international isolation, were keen to pursue ties with the PRC.

Qatar	$50 million	$77 million
Oman	$151 million	$455 million
United States of America	$12.2 billion	$17.5 billion
Total (excluding the US)	**$1.36 billion**	**$2.23 billion**
Total (including the US)	**$13.56 billion**	**$19.73 billion**

Sources: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1991; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1999. *Note that trade with Kuwait swiftly picks up in the following years, reaching $227 million in 1994.

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible Power and Champion of Anti-Unilateralism

In the period following the Tiananmen Square incident, Beijing was sensitive to the need to reinforce several ideas related to its identity in the international system and, similarly, to use international affairs to reinforce its ideational claims at home. First, the PRC wanted to reassert itself as a responsible power in order to encourage a deeper economic rapprochement with the West and avoid scrutiny over its internal affairs. Second, Beijing wanted to diffuse an image of itself as a champion of state sovereignty in keeping with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. This was particularly important for a Chinese state that was becoming increasingly sensitive after the Tiananmen Square incident to the impact that interference from other states' could have on its domestic affairs and a state that had suffered from historic encroachments of its territory at the hands of imperial and colonial powers. Third, Chinese officials were keen to push back against unilateralism, particularly by the United States, to ensure that Washington could not dominate international affairs and set the normative agenda for global politics, thereby threatening states (including the PRC) that do not conform to the traditions of liberal democracy (Boon, 2018).

The Kuwait crisis provided almost the perfect opportunity for the realisation of China's ideational ambitions. While Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen (2005) notes that Beijing struggled with the idea of imposing sanctions on Iraq, Saddam Hussein's flagrant encroachment of Kuwaiti sovereignty rendered the issue fairly simple. In the hierarchy of normative concerns, sovereignty trumps all for the PRC. Accordingly, while it wished to be viewed as a reliable partner by Baghdad, it was crucial above all else for Beijing to assert its willingness to take practical steps to protect sovereignty in the international arena. Its rhetorical condemnation of Iraq, support for multilateral sanctions, and positive vote for eleven resolutions against Iraq all worked to highlight Beijing's disdain for territorial encroachments. As an opportunity to showcase China's responsibility in global politics, these actions all helped to paint China in a positive light in the international community as well. Naturally, though, its abstention on the use of force was a slightly trickier issue. Two issues in particular were at play. First, Beijing was concerned that the United States may

engage militarily against Iraq regardless of the UNSC vote. In such a scenario, China did not have the capability or desire to use force to prevent such an act of unilateralism. Thus, by tacitly giving the go ahead, China was able to maintain a cautious distance from the use of military force, gently criticising the United States for its actions in domestic outlets, but also avoiding a scenario wherein the Americans perceived unilateralism to be necessary. That is to say, by facilitating the passage of UNSC Resolution 678, China reinforced the salience of multilateral decision-making, thereby enabling it to avoid a clash with the United States over issues of unilateralism during a period in which Beijing needed to mend ties with Washington. Second, and more importantly, aware not only that vetoing the draft resolution would hinder China's reintegration into the international community but also send a message to states across the world that Beijing was not serious about protecting sovereignty, a veto was simply out of the question. Supporting the resolution outright, however, could signal to Iraq and other anti-US partners that China was unreliable, far from independent, and a mere lackey of the United States. Its abstention was, therefore, not only a cautious route to achieving its material objectives, but also an avenue to realise its similarly challenging ideational and normative interests. Beijing was largely able to strike the right balance between displaying its sacrosanct belief in state sovereignty, while also appearing responsible and engineering its approach to international diplomacy to avoid a situation that could lead to a clash with the United States over issues of unilateralism. As was displayed in the perceptions discussion, this calculated response to the crisis may have left some regional observers with a somewhat bitter taste in their mouths, but China overall managed to steer clear of alienating any states in the international community, thereby managing to achieve its core interests in the region throughout and beyond the crisis.

Regional Stability: Chinese Citizens Abroad

Chinese officials have rhetorically maintained a continued interest in regional stability in the Persian Gulf. Part of this concern emanated from the presence of several thousands of Chinese citizens working on lucrative projects in the region. From an economic perspective, the Kuwait crisis led to a loss of at least $2 billion for China following an abrupt halt to these projects (Craig Harris, 1991). This was an inevitable outcome and one that China's strategy had no impact on. Interestingly, though, on the matter of Chinese citizens in the region, the PRC's hedging strategy did not seem to win it any favours in Iraq. Throughout the crisis, Iraq did not allow foreign citizens to leave Iraq and even transported some that were previously in Kuwait to Iraqi territory. While Beijing did manage to extract its citizens in

Kuwait soon after the invasion, Baghdad did not allow Chinese citizens to leave Iraq in the ensuing months. It was only by early December, following a meeting between Iraqi and American officials, that Iraq allowed foreigners to leave (Salinger, 1995). The fact that Hussein did not allow Chinese citizens to leave prior to this shows that Beijing's balancing act had not entirely been a success. According to Craig Harris (1991), this issue particularly irked the Chinese. It is likely that the Iraqis simply perceived the Chinese position as being too aligned with the West to justify favouritism.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Unlike the Iran-Iraq war, China's position on the Kuwait crisis was less even-handed. While Beijing maintained relations with Iraq and was even reported on one occasion to violate UN sanctions, China largely aligned with the United States in order to see its successful reintegration into the international community. The PRC supported successive resolutions against Iraq, condemned its invasion, and ultimately facilitated the US-led operation to liberate Kuwait with its abstention on UNSC Resolution 678. With the effects of the international response to Tiananmen Square weighing down on Chinese leaders, the Kuwait crisis came at the perfect time for China. While some regional observers felt that Beijing's response to the crisis was not sufficiently damning of Iraq, China's approach to the invasion and occupation ultimately expedited its reintegration into the international community and enabled it to reassert its concern for global responsibility and state sovereignty while charting a slightly independent course. In addition to this, Beijing maintained relations with all regional states and even witnessed an increase in its bilateral engagement with the region in the ensuing years. Overall, therefore, much as following the Iran-Iraq war, while there were some concerns in the region about China's reliability, the PRC managed to achieve its core interests despite, if not partially thanks to, great volatility in the region.

Chapter 6

1992-2003: China and the 'Pariah' States

Introduction

In an era of almost unfettered US international predominance following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, this chapter examines China's navigation of Washington's rivalry with both Iran and Iraq between 1992 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. To achieve this, China's interests after the Kuwait crisis and the key events in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex are first outlined. Following this, the chapter discusses at length how China attempted to balance relations between Washington and its two adversaries, examining Beijing's responses and approaches towards Iraq from the perspective of sanctions, weapons inspections, Western aggression, and the US-led invasion, and towards Iran from the perspective of energy relations amid the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act and nuclear cooperation amid US pressure. The chapter then addresses how this hedging strategy impacted regional perceptions of China and whether it was conducive to the achievement of Beijing's core aims during the period, namely cultivating positive relations with all states, expanding and building upon existing trade ties, securing access to extensive and reliable energy supplies, avoiding criticism on the Xinjiang issue, and projecting an image of itself as a responsible great power.

Theoretical Insights

This section will briefly discuss the theoretical insights facilitated by the frameworks outlined in this research. First, the deployment of a neoclassical realist and constructivist framework supports a clear analysis of Chinese interests following the end of the Cold War, the emergence of US predominance, and the significantly increased Chinese need for energy supplies. The centrality of domestic pressure in this regard is covered by the neoclassical realist emphasis on domestic drivers of foreign policy. Similarly, constructivism supports an understanding of the salience of the Xinjiang issue as both a normative and territorial issue impacting China's interests in the Persian Gulf. In this regard, the tying together of neoclassical realist insights with constructivism offers an unparalleled inspection of Chinese interests during the period.

Building on this, the regional security complex paradigm allows a clear appreciation of regional dynamics amid the firm emergence of US preponderance and the concomitant

American drive to underwrite regional security from a highly partisan perspective while securitising Iraq and Iran to a significant degree.

Once again, the emphasis on the two-level nature of strategic hedging is explained in relation to Chinese behaviour in the Persian Gulf in the 1990s and leading into the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, though admittedly the systemic level is more salient in relation to this period. From a systemic perspective, the PRC places at the centre of its strategy the need to avoid upsetting the United States in the Persian Gulf to any severe degree, not least of all given the US' military preponderance and the power it wields in international institutions. However, despite concerns about the US, Beijing still attempts to maintain positive and wide-ranging ties with Iraq and Iran. From this perspective, strategic hedging firmly explains China's behaviour yet again; the centrality of avoiding upsetting the status quo vis-à-vis the US while still seeking to make inroads in the region is well explained by strategic hedging. On the regional level, China continues to view the Iran issue as one that deeply impacts upon the GCC states. As such, while the US factor takes precedence, the desire to balance ties with regional states remains central to the PRC's hedging strategy in the region during the period. The framework outlined to delve into the efficacy of China's hedging strategy is once again deployed with the view of ascertaining whether Chinese interests were secured in the region amid its hedging strategy. The framework offers yet another view of China's hedging strategy, ultimately viewing it again as a logical and durable strategy for a second-tier power to deploy amid the preponderance of another state in the international sphere, in addition to being a solid strategy amid protracted rivalries between regional states. This is not to say that China secured all of its interests during the period, though. By not standing up for Saddam Hussein's regime amid US aggression, Beijing lost an important partner in the region. This underscores some of the drawbacks of strategic hedging, though standing up to the US would undoubtedly have signalled more significant challenges for China.

China's Interests after the Kuwait Crisis

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991, in addition to the display of US predominance evinced in the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in the preceding months, had made one thing very clear in Chinese strategic calculations going into the final years of the millennium: Washington was now the single most powerful actor in the international system, and there was no individual or collective power that would be able to challenge the US and its authority over the international community. This notion had a profound impact

on how Beijing would approach international relations within the following decade, shaping not only its core objectives but also how it would go about achieving them. With Washington at the helm in the international community and with a high level of both normative and material power that meant it could dictate its preferences over most key global issues, Beijing would have to ensure that it carefully navigate its relationship with the United States, lest any of its core interests be undermined by a souring of their ties and subsequent US hostility towards the PRC. Much as in the case of the Kuwait crisis, without the Soviet Union to act as the foremost challenger to US actions in the United Nations Security Council, China would either need to take a stand on issues itself or find ways to safeguard or at the very least express its normative preferences on topics relating to external interference and protect its core material interests while fundamentally keeping the United States on side. It is this strategic context, thus, that primarily dictated Chinese behaviour during the period under study in this chapter. To appreciate the balancing act that Beijing needed to perfect during the period requires a deeper dive into China's key interests, though.

Ever since the late 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping spearheaded wide-sweeping reforms that saw the PRC pivot from a communist economic system to one that embraced the modern capitalist economic system, the focus of the CCP had been to ensure economic prosperity in China. With the turn of the 1990s and following the brief period of isolation caused by the Tiananmen Square incident, the notion that political stability was dependent upon continued economic growth and success played an indomitable role in the minds of CCP leaders during this period (Liping, 1991). Indeed, the objective of Deng's 1992 tour of Southern China was to reinforce the message that the economy was the foremost focus of the Chinese leadership, a goal that the soon-to-be president, Jiang Zemin, supported (Vogel, 2011). By solidifying the sacrosanct binding of economic prosperity to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, the salience of this particular interest cannot, and must not, be overlooked. This would require a steadfast emphasis on foreign trade and the maximisation of economic engagement with key global economies, not least of all the United States. The Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 only served to cement in CCP leaders' minds the salience of economic prosperity and the delicate tightrope that they would have to tread to achieve this goal. In many respects, therefore, the central goals elucidated in the previous two chapters continued in the 1990s and into the 21st century, but several new facets emerged that are worthy of discussion.

A core goal directly linked to this drive for economic success was China's desire to become a recognised member of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade or, as it became known

in 1995, the World Trade Organisation (WTO). There were several reasons behind China's desire to join the WTO aside from the clear economic benefits. First, to be considered a full member of the WTO was a point of prestige. For a nation seeking to bury its recent history of isolation and autarky in the past, to be considered by other global powers as a key economy was a point of "raw patriotic desire" (Freeman, 2013: 183). Second, it would galvanise support for the reform agenda among certain economic actors in China that were slow to adopt new practices by rendering them obsolete and unable to keep up with modernisation, leaving the space for economic growth available solely to those willing to keep up with the global economy and its particular proclivities and requirements. Third, and perhaps most importantly aside from the raw desire for further economic stimulation in the Chinese economy, until the PRC would become a full member of the WTO, it would be subject to a yearly debate about China's most-favoured nation (MFN) status in the United States Congress. Such a debate would frequently give US lawmakers and other political actors - including human rights groups - the opportunity to criticise the PRC, not to mention the chance to remove China from the MFN list which would render trade with the US costly and impractical in several areas (Freeman, 2013). Given that the United States had a disproportionately central role in facilitating Chinese accession to the WTO, managing relations with Washington carefully would be a necessary precursor to a successful membership bid.

While the Chinese leadership was cognizant of the need to keep the US as amenable to China as possible, certain ideological and normative interests continued to hold an important place in CCP leaders' minds. Indeed, during a speech at the US Foreign Policy Association in 1992, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen articulated, for the first time by any Chinese leader, that the PRC was a "responsible great power" (Boon, 2018: 40). Thus, while Beijing would continue to perpetuate the notion that China was a victim of foreign aggression - something that would provide a commonality with the likes of Iran and Iraq during the period - its credibility among states in the Global North would now be judged according to its adherence to responsibility in international affairs but with the commensurate respect afforded to a great power. This pronouncement of 'responsibility' would give US leaders, among others, the opportunity to use Chinese rhetoric against Beijing in the following years, necessitating careful navigation of sensitive international issues, not least of all in the Persian Gulf. With that said, Qian Qichen was not solely asserting that Beijing would behave responsibly, but also that it was a great power. This would mean that it would be expected

by the Chinese population and other states to have an agenda of its own, both normative and material, that it would pursue. As a state that placed continuous emphasis on the previously discussed Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, Beijing would have to ensure that it navigated a path that abided by both of these often-conflicting identities. The Persian Gulf, having already been a site of contestation in this regard, would continue to play a central role in this regard in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The Persian Gulf in Chinese Interests

While the Persian Gulf continued to offer many of the same benefits as before, namely an arena in which the PRC could display its international power, a market for labour and construction contracts, a region full of cash-rich economies, and strong import-export potentials, the region took on a renewed and greatly enhanced importance to China from the early 1990s. Having previously been able to rely on its domestic energy reserves to fulfil its needs, China became a net oil importer in 1993, meaning that it would become reliant on energy imports to satisfy its domestic energy requirements. This marked a profound turning point in China's strategic need for close engagement with the Persian Gulf, and indeed the wider Middle East. With a burgeoning middle class, large swathes of which would become increasingly dependent on ownership of personal motor vehicles over the course of the following decades - indeed, China became the world's largest market for personal vehicles by 2010 - and an enormous construction industry that was in need of substantial volumes of oil to function, it is no overstatement to say that China's economic security was dependent on reliable and ever-growing energy imports. Given that the CCP had staked its domestic legitimacy on economic prosperity, it requires no intellectual stretch to appreciate the centrality of energy imports to the Chinese Communist Party's staying power. Housing around 50 percent of the globe's proven oil reserves and 40 percent of its proven gas reserves, it is unsurprising that Beijing would turn to the Persian Gulf for the bulk of these import needs (Niblock, 2013). Indeed, to ensure that the PRC would have uninterrupted access to energy supplies, it became incumbent on Beijing from this period to ensure that it had a diversified portfolio of energy partners, lest volatility caused by relationship breakdowns, conflict, power transitions, and other issues undermine these supplies in a significant way. To achieve this, the meaning of China's hedging strategy in the region took on a whole new level of importance. Beijing had already witnessed - indeed with amazement and respect at the time - the shocking impact of the oil embargo led by Arab states against the West following the October War in 1973 and had learnt a valuable lesson. While it was

in the economic interest of these states to export their oil and gas reserves, the owners of these resources were ultimately in the driving seat and could choose to cut off exports if their core interests, be they ideational or material, were undermined. It would be crucial, therefore, to manage relations with Persian Gulf states very carefully while also attempting to retain diversified options in the case of any volatility. Maintaining *positive* ties with all key energy exporters in the region was, therefore, a central interest. In an unideal situation, this would allow for back-up options. In an ideal world, fostering genuinely strong relations with these states would put China in a position where it would be offered favourable terms on energy imports and opportunities to engage in joint ventures. Thus, effectively managing relations with Iran, Iraq, the GCC states, and their foes, rivals, and enemies would be crucial. This would become the centrepiece of China's approach to the region for decades to come.

A further issue of relevance to China-Persian Gulf relations, though less central than that of energy, emerged in the 1990s. With the recently-gained independence of Central Asian states following the demise of the Soviet Union, CCP leaders were concerned that similar separatist movements may emerge in China. This was a particular cause for concern in relation to the north-western region of Xinjiang, a place that had long been the subject of protracted contestation by the local communities, the majority of whom were Uyghur Muslims. In the 1990s, several events served to heighten CCP leaders' anxiety about what it would later call the 'Three Evils' - separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism - in the region, including demonstrations, numerous bomb attacks in 1992 and 1993, and violence between police and civilians. The state response to what it deemed as terrorism that it linked to a group known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) soon became formalised by the "Strike Hard" campaign (Millward, 2004). As the name suggests, the campaign would signal an increase in the use of controversial and often violent tactics to challenge Xinjiang residents who were, in the sheer majority of cases, Uyghur Muslims. Furthermore, following the 9/11 attacks, China succeeded in escalating its campaign with the backing of a United States hellbent on rooting out Islamic extremism across the globe (Roberts, 2020). While this issue would become even more controversial in later decades, and indeed will be given further attention in chapter seven, China was concerned about possible criticism emanating from the Muslim world. In particular, the Islamic identity of several Persian Gulf states played heavy on Chinese leaders' minds. Saudi Arabia, home to the pilgrimage sites in Mecca and Medina, had long considered itself the leader of the Muslim *ummah*. Indeed, with the exception of King Khalid, Saudi kings since Faisal bin Abdul Aziz (d. 1975) have

referred to themselves as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Similarly, Iran, as the only Muslim theocracy in the world, has regarded itself since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 as the true and legitimate leader of the Muslim *ummah* and defender of Muslims. For China, therefore, avoiding criticism directed towards its controversial policies against the Uyghurs, particularly from powerful and influential Muslim states was crucial. Within the context of a period in which the now-deceased Ayatollah Khomeini had recently issued a *fatwa* calling for the assassination of controversial writer Salman Rushdie after the publication of his book *The Satanic Verses*, it was not hard for the CCP to imagine significant backlash in the Persian Gulf regarding its policies in Xinjiang. Thus, while the Uyghur problem would not be as central to China-Persian Gulf relations as economic issues, China was eager to ensure that it avoid Persian Gulf leaders' wrath, and indeed would hopefully gain their acquiescence or support, in relation to its policies in Xinjiang. Further to this, given that the US had proclaimed itself as the defender of international liberalism and human rights globally, avoiding US antagonism or criticism towards China's policies in Xinjiang would be similarly very useful for CCP officials. In the context of US President William Clinton's coupling of Sino-American trade with China's human rights record, this was particularly poignant during the period. Further to this, the Xinjiang issue speaks to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Much as in previous periods, Beijing was very keen in the 1990s and into the 21st century to propagate these principles in its relations with the Persian Gulf, thereby freeing itself from external interference in its domestic affairs.

The Persian Gulf: American Predominance and the 'Pariah' States

Following the US' victory over Iraq in Kuwait and within the context of an international system that some described as heralding the United States' "unipolar moment", Washington pursued rigid policies aimed at Iran and Iraq, two states that it viewed as pariahs, over the course of the 1990s and into the 2000s (Krauthammer, 1990). Buoyed by its ability to pursue policies in the region with few meaningful obstacles posed by the new Russian Federation, which was busy gathering itself following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States adopted an approach that came a few years into the decade to be known as 'dual containment' of Iran and Iraq. In simple terms, the US spearheaded a strategy that would seek to isolate both Iran and Iraq diplomatically from the international community. Crucially, this was more or less a point of continuity between the George H.W. Bush, William Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations.

Iraq: From Containment to the US-led Invasion

While Iraq's invasion of Kuwait had been ended by the US-led coalition, concerns still existed in the international community surrounding Saddam Hussein's desire to pursue expansionist and aggressive policies. As such, in addition to inspections in Iraq for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), there were four main strategies employed by the international community, though often this was just the US and the UK acting against the wishes of France, China, and Russia. These measures were weapons of mass destruction (WMD) inspections, sanctions, no-fly zones, and direct rhetorical and military aggression towards Iraq. As will become clear, in most cases measures were led and executed by the United States with very little overt support, and often direct criticism, from permanent UNSC members.

One of the most profound issues underpinning the US' insistence on being tough on Iraq was the question of Iraq's possession of WMDs. In mid-1991 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered enriched uranium stocks in Iraq, suggesting that Baghdad was developing nuclear weapons. This led to the inception of a prolonged weapons inspection regime led by the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), a body formed in response to UNSC Resolution 715, and the pretext for one of the key justifications for the later-discussed US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. While Iraq soon announced that it had destroyed WMD material in 1992, UNSCOM was left unconvinced. As Hurst (2009: 124) puts it, "the unilateral and secret destruction of Iraqi WMD, and the consequent inability to prove to the satisfaction of the inspectors that they had in fact been destroyed, would prolong the inspections process indefinitely". And, indeed, this is what happened. While Iraq complied on the most part with inspections, something that led China, Russia, and France to soften their stance on Iraq, the United States continued to attach wide-ranging conditions to Iraq's rehabilitation in the international community. With that said, on the occasions that Saddam Hussein made life difficult for weapons inspectors, the issue became directly linked to acts of aggression by the US and its partners against Iraq, as will be discussed below. Though UNSCOM and the IAEA themselves oversaw the dismantling and destruction of hundreds of tonnes of chemical weapons material, biological and nuclear weapons facilities, and numerous long-range missiles, the issue of WMDs would still plague US-Iraqi relations, as became evident in the early 2000s as the US prepared its invasion (Byman, 2000-2001).

Economic sanctions played a similarly crucial role in the Washington-led drive to isolate Iraq diplomatically. Following Washington's expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, the UN Security Council passed UNSC Resolution 687, which acted as a continuation of UNSC Resolution 661, meaning that sanctions would exist on all areas of Iraq's economy except for food and crucial items required for civilians. Soon, though, the UN was keen to find a sustainable way to fund UN activities relating to Iraq. As such, UNSC Resolution 706 gave Iraq the ability to export oil to the value of $1.6 billion, the revenue of which would be used to buy food and essentials for Iraqis, compensate Kuwait for the Iraqi invasion and occupation, and to make payments to the IAEA and UNSCOM, the vehicle for weapons inspections in Iraq. While Saddam refused to engage with this, the following resolution (707) forced him to allow UNSCOM unfettered access in its weapons inspections. With the continuation of these sanctions and the crippling effect it was having on the Iraqi economy, in May 1996 Saddam finally acquiesced to the so-called oil-for-food agreement, brought into effect by UNSC Resolution 986, which would allow Iraq to export increasingly higher volumes of oil on renewable six-month bases. Over the course of the following half a decade, Iraq exported over $60 billion of oil under the umbrella of the oil-for-food scheme (Stansfield, 2007). Over the course of the sanctions period, though, the Iraqi economy was decimated, and many Iraqis lost their lives due to malnutrition and inadequate access to medicine and essentials. McCutcheon (2006) asserts that between 250,000 and over 500,000 children had died by 1995. It is evident, thus, that sanctions were a profound tool used primarily by the US and the UK to weaken Saddam Hussein. Indeed, against this backdrop, several of the states that had been against the sanction began to flout them in plain sight by the turn of the millennium. A delegation of Russian officials travelled to Baghdad, and numerous European states, including France, laid the groundwork for improved diplomatic relations with Iraq (Hurst, 2009).

The persistence of the sanctions regime was not a product of international consensus, though. The United States faced opposition from France, China, and Russia throughout much of the period leading up to the eventual US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Furthermore, even Saddam Hussein's acquiescence in 1996 to the oil-for-food programme was a product of intense securitisation and acts of aggression by the United States and its partners during the period. The less aggressive, but nonetheless stark and highly interventionist, example of this securitisation took the form of no-fly zones. Following the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein persisted in the mistreatment of Kurds and Iraq's Shi‘a population on a

massive scale. In addition to launching direct military offensives and shelling of these populations, Saddam did what he could to cut them off from essential services. Indeed, the UN special rapporteur for the Commission on Human Rights declared in 1994 that Saddam was "engaged in war crimes and crimes against humanity and may have committed violations of the 1948 Genocide Convention" against the Kurds (Brigham, 2014). As a direct response to these violations, the UK, the US, and France established no-fly zones in both the north - known as Operation Provide Comfort - and the south - known as Operation Southern Watch - of Iraq. Their justification, rather controversially as will be discussed in the section about the Chinese response, was United Nations Security Council Resolution 688, a resolution that in fact simply condemned Iraq's domestic repression and did not provide any overt or tacit authorisation for such measures (UNSC, 1991). As Wheeler (2002: 143) aptly puts it: "Although Resolution 688 employed the language of a threat to 'international peace and security' (the key enabling move that activates the enforcement provisions of Chapter VII), it did not explicitly invoke the latter". While the French withdrew from the no-fly zones by 1996, in keeping with its softening stance on the Iraq issue more generally, the UK and the US maintained these zones until their invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But no-fly zones were not Baghdad's primary concerns throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. Indeed, over the course of the period, the US and the UK deployed ever-growing numbers of military personnel and warships to the region, in addition to conducting direct air strikes on Iraqi targets. There were several key incidences of this that are worth mentioning to highlight the point. First, following threats from Baghdad on Western aircraft in the southern no-fly zone in 1992 and a brief Iraqi incursion into Kuwait during the same period, the UK, the US, and France executed several air strikes against key military targets, including a nuclear complex near Baghdad. Second, following an incursion of over 30,000 Iraqi troops into Kurdistan amid warfare between the two foremost Kurdish factions in 1996, the US extended the southern no-fly zone even further to hinder the manoeuvrability of Iraqi forces and conducted Operation Desert Strike, launching over forty cruise missiles at Iraqi military sites. Finally, furious with Baghdad's "obstruction, backsliding, and outright defiance" towards weapons inspections, in December 1998 the US and the UK engaged in its largest display of aggression against Iraq since the Kuwait saga in 1991. Operation Desert Fox, which lasted over four days, saw these two states - to the chagrin of other UNSC members – launch 400 cruise missile strikes and 600 air sorties on key Iraqi targets,

including palaces belonging to Hussein, intelligence facilities, and purported WMD facilities (Byman, 2000-2001: 509-510).

These strikes did not see an end to hostilities between Iraq and the West, though. Against a backdrop of further intransigence from Hussein and occasional strikes by the US and the UK, the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, known colloquially as 9/11, would lead to greater securitisation of Iraq in the West. With al-Qaeda terrorists killing nearly 3,000 US civilians and injuring thousands more, the George W. Bush administration was desperate to exact revenge. Though not a single one of the 19 terrorists that conducted the attacks was from Iraq, the Bush administration was quick to begin assembling a rationale for invading Iraq. Tying the 9/11 attacks to Iraq was part of this strategy, as was continuing to claim that Baghdad was close to possessing WMDs capable of attacking US interests - a claim that was debunked soon after. Bush quickly upped the ante in his securitising rhetoric of Iraq, declaring Iraq, Iran, and the DPRK "and their terrorist allies" as an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address (Washington Post, 2002). This securitising discourse was matched by a drive to gain support from international partners to launch an invasion of Iraq. By March 2003, aware that he would be unable to gain direct authorisation from the UNSC to invade Iraq, Bush used UNSC Resolution 1441 - a resolution that simply demanded Iraqi compliance with weapons inspections and made no reference to a military incursion – as justification to launch a direct military invasion of Iraq. Thus, in March 2003, Bush gave Hussein two days to exit Iraq, threatening him otherwise with invasion. Upon Saddam's refusal, the US invaded Iraq on 21 March 2003 with the support of a wide array of countries including the UK, Spain, Poland, France, and Australia. Very quickly into the war, the US-led coalition was governing Iraq. By December 2003, Saddam Hussein, who had been in hiding, was captured by coalition troops - any hopes of his return to Iraqi politics were swiftly dashed (Hurst, 2009). Over the course of the following eight years, US troops played a central and often perilous role in attempting to manage insurgencies, civil war, and profound hostilities in a country that had been damaged greatly by over a decade of sanctions and an invasion by the foremost global power and its allies. Between the invasion in 2003 and the US withdrawal in 2011, around half a million Iraqi deaths are estimated to have been caused by the war, in addition to the around 400 deaths of coalition forces (Hagopian et al, 2013).

Iran: Troubled Relations with the US

With such a protracted and bloody conflict having mired the bulk of the first decade of the Islamic Republic's history, Ghazvinian (2020: 380) notes that this period had "created a built-in constituency for something bigger and bolder [for Iran] – a need to hono[u]r the sacrifices made by the younger generation and to continue the fight, as Khomeini had instructed, from Karbala to Jerusalem and beyond". Thus, though Khomeini had died in 1989 and been replaced by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader with President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani at his side, both of whom were willing to be more pragmatic on the large part about relations with the outside world and indeed even the US, Washington felt in no position to extend an olive branch to the Iranian regime. Indeed, despite US President George H. W. Bush hinting in his inauguration speech in 1989 that the release of US hostages by Iran-linked Shi'a groups in Lebanon would offer a fresh opportunity for Iran-US engagement, when the hostages were finally released in late 1991 the White House spokesman simply stated that the Islamic Republic was "still a terrorist state, and there's no change in that" (Ghazvinian, 2020: 387).

With the arrival of the William Clinton administration in 1993, the United States doubled down on this strategy of rejecting Iran. As has been mentioned before, within months of his presidency, Clinton declared his 'dual containment' policy, in so doing recognising both Iran and Iraq as pariah states. In the case of Iran, Washington focused on its nuclear weapons programme, its support for groups that the US deemed as terrorists, such as Hezbollah, and Tehran's unfavourable position on the Israel-Palestine peace process (Ghazvinian, 2020). By 1996, the United States had passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), prohibiting American energy companies from engaging in or with Iran and banning any foreign companies engaging with Iran from conducting business in the US. This only served to compound the economic challenges facing a country that had recently experienced a protracted and crippling war, not to mention economic mismanagement.

As Mohammad Khatami became president in 1997, there was much hope that this reformist calling for better ties with the West and a so-called 'Dialogue Among Civilisations' would be able to bring an end to Iran-US hostilities. However, Iran and the US did not manage at any point during Khatami's leadership to allow their feelings of goodwill to coincide - with each side offering concessions or goodwill when the other was not open to such sentiments. The Saudi and Israeli regimes, along with hawks in Washington, tried to pin on Iran a terrorist attack at a US base in Saudi Arabia in Khobar in 1996, which had killed 19 US military personnel. While the evidence was tenuous, this presented the Saudi regime with

an opportunity to securitise their Shi‘a population, painting them as ‘fifth-columnists’ of the Iranian regime and thereby giving them the pretext to downplay the terrorist threat embodied by the likes of al-Qaeda. For a prolonged period, this was the focus of US concern, making any real rapprochement between Iran and the US appear highly unsavoury in the West, despite modest social and media reforms in the Islamic Republic. Indeed, by the time this had seemingly passed during William Clinton’s presidency, Khatami had lost so much goodwill from hardliners in Iran - who were negative about the prospects of any rapprochement with the West - that brief US attempts at the turn of the century to speak positively about Iran landed on deaf ears. This final opportunity before the arrival of George W. Bush to the presidency saw the US extend the provisions of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act for another five years. Further, any hope that things might improve under Bush were foolhardy. Despite the 9/11 terrorist attacks calling into question the previously accepted logic in Washington that Iran was behind all Islamic terrorism, in addition to Khatami’s remarks of support for the US following the event, Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ speech, in which he designated Iran a part of said axis, was the final nail in the coffin of Iran-US relations during this period.

Of particular note throughout the 1990s and into the new century was the nuclear issue. Throughout the period, the Israel lobby in Washington had played a pivotal role in securitising Iran’s nuclear programme. By 2002, a dossier had reached the US administration via the Mojahedin-e Khalq - an Iranian group opposed to the incumbent regime - and Israel, which detailed Iran’s nuclear development, including information relating to uranium enrichment at Natanz and plutonium extraction-related activity at Arak (Ghazvinian, 2020). Iran simply protested, as indeed it would continue to in the following decades, that uranium enrichment was taking place for civilian purposes, something that is permitted according to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Iran is a signatory (Axworthy, 2013). Thus, the view of many among the Iranian leadership at the time and in the following years was that “US uncompromising opposition to Iran’s possession of nuclear technology is linked to… wishing to prevent Iran from achieving real independence [and] establishing self-sufficiency” (Mousavian, 2015: 175). As such, it is clear that this issue represented a noteworthy thorn in Iran-US relations during the period under study in this chapter.

China’s Hedging Strategy: The US First, Iraq and Iran Second

Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Chinese decision-makers very much understood that the international environment was dominated by the United States. Accordingly, in the PRC's engagement with Washington's rivals and foes, Beijing's primary focus was on keeping the US content. When it was possible and would not undermine Chinese interests entirely, China maintained its hedging strategy while leaning slightly in the direction of the US. This was not a matter of preference, but rather necessity, given the numerous Chinese interests that hinged on US acquiescence during this period.

Between Iraq and the US

In the case of Iraq during the 1990s and early 2000s, this was certainly the case. Throughout the period, the PRC ultimately facilitated US (and US-led) actions towards Iraq while attempting to either water down or reject particularly heavy-handed policies and to provide basic - though often simply rhetorical - support to Iraq. It was only on rare occasions, and always as part of a broader coalition – that China lifted its head above the parapet to support Iraq directly. An exploration of China's approach towards the sanctions regime, weapons inspections regime, no-fly zones, and the US-led invasion of Iraq serve to illustrate the key dynamics of China's hedging strategy during this period.

As was made clear in the preceding section, the sanctions regime was the centre-piece of international efforts to curtail Iraqi aggression in the 1990s. Following the implementation of the sanctions regime during the Kuwait crisis, China worked with its UNSC partners to pass two UNSC resolutions - UNSC R706 and R712 - in the summer of 1991. The first of these two resolutions would allow Iraq to export oil to the value of $1.6 billion for the purpose of buying humanitarian necessities. Interestingly, given China's emphasis on sovereignty, the latter resolution oversaw the implementation of an escrow account that would specifically facilitate this process, thereby removing any illusion of Iraqi sovereignty over its financial affairs. For China, this decision was still made within a context in which it was desperate to be viewed as a responsible member of the international community following the Tiananmen Square incident and its aftermath. As such, standing on its own to block sanctions and their implementation for the sake of preserving its relationship with Iraq was simply not an option. In 1992, following Baghdad's refusal to comply with UNSC Resolutions 706 and 712, the UNSC debated draft resolution 778, which would authorise "states to seize revenues from Iraqi petroleum sales and transfer them to the escrow account" (Yang, 2013). China's response was to abstain on the vote, making itself the only UNSC

member to do so. In so doing, the resolution was able to pass, while Beijing was able to claim that it had attempted to protect Iraq from the ire of the international community. Much as in the case of UNSC Resolution 678, which had facilitated the US coalition's removal of Iraq from Kuwait, Beijing's abstention did not represent anything beyond a symbolic gesture towards Hussein's regime. Beijing's attempts to support the Iraqi regime, though ultimately to no avail, were not all symbolic, however.

With regards to the successive resolutions on the Oil-for-Food programme, China consistently aligned with the international community in allowing this programme to grow in size and reach, thereby aligning with Iraq in a way that did not clash with the United States. Further to this, China attempted in tandem with Russia and France to oversee the lifting of sanctions on Iraq in 1995 and indeed throughout the latter half of the 1990s. In publicising the plight of the Iraqi people and the specific impact of sanctions on them, China and its two UNSC partners played a key role in exposing the lack of any clear consensus among permanent UNSC members towards the Iraqi issue and thereby showcasing Chinese support for the Iraqi regime. Despite their efforts, the US and the UK made clear that they would veto any draft resolution on the issue, leading to it not being debated in the Security Council. While this did not lead to the disposal of the sanctions regime, driving awareness of Iraq's struggle under the sanctions regime placed significant pressure on the US to concede on one part of the policy. Specifically, the UNSC passed Resolution 986 in April 1995, which granted Iraq sovereignty over the provision of humanitarian necessities in all Iraqi provinces not under the UN's direct control. While this did not represent a profound turning point for Iraq in tangible terms, it was a small win for Iraqi sovereignty, and one that had been directly brought about by the actions of China, Russia, and France. Indeed, Li Zhaoxing, the PRC's Permanent Representative to the UNSC at the time, used the debate preceding the vote on UNSC Resolution 986 to call once again for the removal of oil export restrictions on Iraq (Yang, 2013). With that said, at no point did China actively vote against the imposition of sanctions.

With regards to the weapons inspection regime, China simply aligned with the international community on resolutions in the early 1990s to enforce the comprehensive surveillance of Iraqi weapons and its disarmament, supporting both UNSC Resolution 707, which would give UN inspections full access to appropriate sites, and Resolution 715, which simply allowed continued monitoring. Like many states on the Security Council, China made frequent references to concerns over Iraqi sovereignty when discussing the weapons

inspection regime. Further to this, China abstained on two important resolutions relating to the weapons inspection regime. UNSC Resolution 1134 in October 1997 sought to ban the travel of key Iraqi officials following their refusal to comply with weapons inspections. Alongside Russia, France, and two non-permanent members, China abstained on this, though ultimately voted in favour of UNSC Resolution 1137, which reaffirmed the same action following Iraqi consternation, alongside the other previous abstainers. Further to this, in a vote that in many ways acted as a litmus test for UNSC support for the continuation of the weapons inspection regime, China – again alongside Russia and France - abstained on UNSC Resolution 1284 in December 1999. This resolution simply called for the replacement of UNSCOM with the United Nations Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission. In keeping with Iraq's position, China once again used this vote as an opportunity to express its frustration at the continuation of the sanctions regime, and particularly its coupling with the weapons inspection issue. As with the other cases, though, this abstention still allowed the passage of the resolution, thereby displaying the limits of Chinese support for the Iraqi regime in an age of US unipolarity (Yang, 2013).

The no-fly zones entailed a similar story with regards to China's hedging strategy. The execution of Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Southern Watch by the French, British, and Americans came as a direct, in their eyes, though indirect, in China's eyes, result of UNSC Resolution 688. The resolution condemned Iraq's treatment of Iraqi civilians and was subsequently invoked as the pretext for the establishment of no-fly zones and security zones in Iraq. As with other cases, China opted to abstain from voting, making it the only permanent member of the UNSC not to vote in favour of the resolution – though three non-permanent members voted against it and one non-permanent member abstained alongside China. According to Yang (2013: 109-110), "China took the position that it was allowing [the resolution] to go ahead due to the international dimension (namely refugee crises impacting Türkiye and Iran) but that it would not support the resolution directly as it involved the internal affairs of another state… on balance, China was sticking to a rigid reading of Article 2(7) and leaning towards priority[s]ing and safe-guarding the state sovereignty norm". Indeed, this gave Beijing the opportunity to claim that it was protecting Iraqi sovereignty while also acting as a responsible global power and aligning sufficiently with the US. Further to this, Beijing was quite reasonably able to claim that it did not expect the deployment of any military means in Iraq given that UNSC Resolution 688 did not make direct reference to Chapter VII of the UN Charter (Wheeler, 2002). Once again, China was

able to provide a level of symbolic support to Baghdad while ultimately allowing the US and its partners to do what they saw fit vis-à-vis Iraq.

The most profound of the US-led interventions, however, were the sporadic military operations throughout the period and, ultimately, the 2003 invasion that would topple Saddam's regime. In response to the most profound military operation in the 1990s, Operation Desert Fox, China expressed its profound opposition to US actions and used the issue to highlight once again its preferences in relation to the continuation of sanctions and weapons inspections on Iraq (Brigham, 2014; Byman, 2000-2001). Indeed, in direct response to Operation Desert Fox, Beijing worked with Russia to pressure for the cessation of UNSCOM, something that indeed happened a mere few days after the bombings, with Qin Huasen, China's representative to the UNSC proclaiming "the unilateral military strike against Iraq last December was the main reason the United Nations arms-verification programme in Iraq was suspended. This is a fact beyond dispute" (Yang, 2013: 144). Again, while China did not act in a profound way to curtail American actions, such as threatening force or any direct challenge to the US, the PRC did use the aftermath of Desert Fox to push for concessions in the international community's approach to Iraq, thereby reminding Baghdad of its (albeit highly limited) friendship.

With the turn of the century, the 9/11 attacks in the United States, and an increasingly hostile US administration towards Iraq, this pattern would very much continue. Beijing's view of UNSC Resolution 1441, which the US and its partners would go on to use as their legal pretext for an invasion, was that it was a necessary evil. Voting for the resolution, the Chinese representative, Zhang Yishan, affirmed that "the purpose of the resolution is to achieve the disarmament of Iraq through effective inspections. The text no longer included automaticity for authori[s]ing the use of force". Further to this, he noted China's pleasure that the UNSC members had all committed to "the territorial integrity of Iraq" (Yang, 2013: 175). Clearly, Beijing was aware that the UNSC Resolution 1441 was worded riskily enough that the US might use it as a justification to undermine Iraq's territorial integrity but wished to stamp its mark by showcasing to Iraq and the international community that it viewed the resolution as limited to weapons inspections. Upon hearing chatter that the US was seeking to table a draft resolution that would directly seek permission to invade Iraq or intervene militarily, China formed part of a loose coalition of states, including France, Russia, and Germany, that made clear it would not pass any such draft resolution. China's then-Foreign Minister, Tang Jiaxuan, urged Saddam to be steadfast in his cooperation with the

international community and to seek a political settlement. He declared that “there is no reason to shut the door to peace”, arguing that China would not support a resolution that authorises the use of force (UN Press, 2003). Upon the US leading its coalition to invade Iraq, China’s position still very much carefully balanced between its inability to risk falling out of favour with the US while showing glimmers of rhetorical support for Iraq. Even despite these attempts to show Iraq that it was a friend, Beijing’s concerted effort not to appear anti-US led it to make non-committal statements that suggested the blame and onus for progress lay at both the Americans’ and the Iraqis’ feet. On the 20th March 2003, the day that the US-led invasion began, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2003) stated the following:

> Bypassing the UN Security Council, the United States and some other countries launched military operations against Iraq. The Chinese Government hereby expresses its serious concern… We stand for settlement of international disputes by political means and reject the use or threat of force in international affairs. The Chinese Government strongly appeals to the relevant countries to stop military actions and return to the right path of seeking a political solution to the Iraq question… The Chinese Government has all along stood for a political settlement of the Iraq issue within the UN framework, urging the Iraqi Government to fully and earnestly implement relevant Security Council resolutions and calling for respect for Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by the international community.

Rather interestingly, while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs did clearly criticise the United States in this statement, particularly making reference to the notion that Washington had bypassed the UNSC, and while Beijing did make its usual reference to sovereignty, thereby standing with Iraq, its emphasis on Iraq needing to take appropriate actions and its use of passive language in terms of directly calling out any particular state when discussing “respect for Iraq’s sovereignty” clearly signalled an unwillingness to take a definitive stance against the invading coalition on the international stage. With that said, on certain occasions, Beijing did use less important government organs than the Foreign Ministry to showcase its support for Iraq and its opposition to the United States. For example, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the UN, 2003) released a statement on the 21st March 2003, only one day after the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ aforementioned message, in which it lambasted the US for “wantonly

us[ing] force against a sovereign country". It discussed the issue further, claiming the following:

> Those activities, trampling over the UN Charter and the basic norms of international relations, set a vicious precedent for international relations in the 21st century… Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity should be respected and maintained. We strongly call for the countries concerned to comply with the appeal of the international community, stop military actions and continue to seek a political solution to the Iraq issue within the UN framework.

While the above statement highlights China's disdain towards the US invasion, Beijing ultimately did not lift its head above the parapet in support of Saddam's regime. Chinese leaders made no concerted attempt to incite anti-US sentiment among the masses, unlike during other contentious periods in Sino-US relations. As Shichor (2005: 215) puts it, "China deliberately excluded itself from the 'antiwar axis'". Indeed, even reports by the People's Daily, a newspaper "theoretically and structurally still under the direct leadership of the Propaganda Department of the CCP" ranged from neutral on the invasion to overwhelmingly negative. Clearly, negative reactions would have suggested that Chinese leaders were keen to stand up for Iraq and for state sovereignty in the face of the American threat, but the fact that many reports were not negatively framed suggests that there was not a concerted attempt to create an environment of hostility towards the United States (Yu, 2016: 82). Thus, as a regime that had grown to be a fairly strong partner of China's in the region was toppled, the Chinese did little-to-nothing to influence events in favour of Saddam. Instead, China tacitly sided with the United States by once again limiting its opposition to statements of general concern about issues of sovereignty sprinkled with occasional direct utterances of condemnation. Because of US actions in Iraq, and in a very small way due to China's unwillingness to make the US invasion a red-line in its own approach to international relations, the regional environment in the Persian Gulf would shift, leaving Iraq a shadow of its former self and certainly no longer a regional heavyweight. With that said, as soon as regime change took place following the US-led invasion of Iraq, China was poised to establish ties with the new government.

Between Iran and the US

While China had managed successfully to establish ever-growing ties with several Persian Gulf states during the 1980s and early 1990s, Iran was still an important partner to Beijing.

As a state unwilling to follow blindly the dictates and contours of Western hegemony, Tehran would prove a useful friend in the case of any profound disputes between China and the US that may disrupt Chinese access to energy from the Persian Gulf. Further to this, the knowledge that Beijing would share significant solidarity with Iran in any such event, due to their shared (preferred, if not always acted upon) resistance to US unilateralism and a similar sense of victimhood that they both have with regards to Western-led imperialism in the past. As such, throughout the 1990s, Beijing attempted to maintain strong relations with Iran wherever possible. Naturally, given the US' vehement desire to contain Iran, though, such a strategy would inevitably force China to choose between Iran and the US. To illustrate this hedging strategy during the period, it serves to analyse the PRC's approach towards sanctions on Iran during the period briefly and then its approach towards the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme in greater depth.

Following the US imposition of extra-territorial sanctions on Iran through the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which targeted the greatest area of Chinese interest in Iran - its energy industry, there was significant concern in Beijing as to how it could proceed with energy acquisition and the establishment of energy cooperation contracts with Tehran. Fortunately for Beijing, having witnessed multiple Western countries and Japan ignore the extra-territorial dimensions of ILSA, and far more importantly having not seen the US punish or actually impose third-party sanctions, the opportunity to follow suit was palpable. Thus, while Beijing was concerned that it may face ire from Washington, unlike many of the US' allies, Chinese leaders cautiously allowed Chinese energy companies to continue engaging with the Iranian market. Throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, Chinese energy imports from Iran grew significantly. Having imported 114,990 metric tonnes of oil from Iran in 1992, to the tune of $15,574,000, Chinese oil imports from Iran would grow annually throughout the ILSA period. Indeed, in 1997, the year after the imposition of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, China imported 2,756,718 metric tonnes of oil worth around $418 million and by 2003 annual oil imports from Iran had skyrocketed to 12,393,834 metric tonnes worth around $2.64 billion. In 2001, Iran even represented China's foremost oil supplier (Garver, 2006). It is clear, therefore, that Beijing did not allow ILSA to become a thorn in Sino-Iranian energy cooperation during the period. Instead of opting to side with the US tacitly during the period by importing greater quantities from other states at the expense of Iran, the PRC opted to place Iran among its most crucial energy suppliers. While there was hesitation in Beijing after the imposition of ILSA, as soon as it became evident that

Washington would not punish foreign companies as per the specifications of the Act, China swooped into the Iranian market to ensure that it maintain strong energy cooperation with Tehran. Given the significant Chinese need for energy imports, it is not surprising that Beijing used this as an opportunity to reaffirm its relationship with Iran amid what it could claim to be a challenging external environment. The same cannot be said for nuclear cooperation, though.

China had an important role in the development of Iran's nuclear capabilities. During a visit to China in 1985 by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the two sides reached a clandestine agreement that Beijing would provide support for the establishment of Iran's nuclear capabilities for the purpose of peaceful and civilian needs. While this arrangement became known to the international community by 1992, their cooperation in this area continued for the next half a decade, with China sending Iran over 1.5 tonnes of uranium material, a plutonium-producing reactor, and significant scientific guidance to the Iranians, all of which were used in secret experiments that were likely known to the Chinese. By 1994, though, US pressure to cease such cooperation became commonplace in the Iran-US-China strategic triangle. With the signing of an ambitious agreement claiming that Beijing would support the construction of multiple Iranian nuclear power plants and the surfacing of an arrangement for the China National Nuclear Corporation to assist in the building of a heavy-water reactor, Washington put its foot down, claiming that Iran would be able to create nuclear weapons if Beijing went ahead with the deal. Following this intervention by the United States, while Beijing continued to cooperate with Tehran in the area of nuclear development for two-to-three years, the CCP pressured the China National Nuclear Corporation to abandon the deal (Scita, 2022b). This represented the first, though certainly not the last, moment in which China would succumb to American pressure to cease working with the Iranians in a sensitive area. Indeed, by 1997, China would go so far as to cease all nuclear cooperation with Iran following significant US pressure. The US intervention began in a series of letters and meetings between officials in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department following the Taiwan Strait Crisis in the mid-1990s. Attempting to find areas of commonality in a bid to reduce tensions between them, this correspondence culminated in a meeting in October 1997 between Chinese President Jiang Zemin and US President William Clinton. In the preliminary discussions before the meeting, US officials delivered evidence to the Chinese that Iranian nuclear development was not solely for civilian purposes, but rather had military intentions, too. Further to this, American

officials worked hard to convince China of the need to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf, something that could only be achieved if it ceased all nuclear cooperation with Iran. In addition to these tactics, the US also sanctioned two Chinese companies for cooperation with Iran for chemical weapons exports, adding a stricter dimension to the US drive to change Chinese policy vis-à-vis Iran. With this, despite Iran's warning to China that it expected Beijing to "remain a trustworthy ally at the time of crisis", Jiang Zemin acquiesced to William Clinton's demands and ceased all nuclear cooperation with Tehran in 1997. Thus, having been buoyed by a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesman's claim in 1996 that "China will never come to terms with one country over a third one", Iranian hopes, as expressed on the Voice of the Islamic Republic radio station in 1996, that Beijing "would not allow growing Sino-Iranian relations to be marred by Washington's propaganda campaign and pressure tactics" had been dashed (Garver, 2006: 221-224). As Scita (2022a: 93, emphasis removed) puts it, "acting as a responsible competitor vis-à-vis the United States and building the reputation of responsible stakeholder surpassed the importance of consolidating the role of Iran's friendly stakeholder". Beijing had made quite clear that in an area in which Iranian interests far outweighed Chinese interests, it would be unwilling to risk its relationship with the United States. Thus, whereas Chinese officials took the calculated risk to continue energy cooperation with Iran despite the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, given the PRC's profound and extensive energy requirements, they were not willing to extend the same courtesy to Iran in relation to nuclear cooperation, a node of connectivity that did not significantly benefit China. Hence, as is evident, although China did balance relations with both the US and Iran during this period, it was not willing in all domains to risk alienating the US by pursuing ties with Iran in sensitive areas. Beijing did push the envelope by offering support in the first place, but the pressure to keep the United States content during the period prevailed.

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Perceptions and Responses

Iraq's Responses and Perceptions

While the end of the period under study in this chapter witnessed the fall of the Saddam regime, and with that the removal of numerous heavyweights of his regime, it is important to assess briefly the impact of China's hedging strategy during the period on the Iraq regime's perceptions of China. Across the period, the most profound theme that emerges from analysis of key statements and speeches by Iraqi leaders that mention China is the

existence of two concurrent sentiments. Iraqi officials were pleased that Beijing was making public its support for Iraq and at the very least voicing its displeasure regarding sanctions on Iraq, though feelings of frustration that Beijing was not doing more to reject acts of US dominance and aggression were commonplace across the period. As early as 1992, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz expressed irritation at Beijing's acquiescence to US demands on the Iraq issue, stating that "for China, the best it can do is abstain from voting" claiming that all it took to make Beijing turn its back on Baghdad was for the US to take the edge off of its "propaganda campaign against China and agree to revive some of the trade privileges… [China] had obtained in the past" (Baghdad al-Thawrah, 1992). While some positive statements about China by Iraqi officials were forwarded - such as Saddam Hussein's statement that "we have seen and continue to see that China can be a close friend not only to Iraq but also to the entire Arab world" (Al-Bayan, 2000) – even a decade after the stark, though perhaps accurate, claim by Tariq Aziz, negative statements about Beijing persisted. On November 14, 2002, just under a week after the passing of UNSC Resolution 1441, Saddam Hussein's son, Oday, asserted that China was "playing a 'game' with Iraq", adding with pity that "although we dealt with China, this country did nothing [to support us]" (BBC News, 2002). With China, among others, not stepping up to resist the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, it is undoubted that these sentiments persisted and likely intensified.

Naturally, for the purposes of China's ongoing relations in the region, the perceptions of the outgoing regime were not as crucial as those of leaders and key officials in subsequent Iraqi administrations. While that is beyond the scope of this analysis into the impact of China's hedging strategy – not least of all due to the myriad factions in Iraq all of which have deeply varying opinions on the fall of Saddam and the US-led invasion – it serves to note that the stated stance of the Iraqi government in 2004 was one of open arms towards the Chinese. The Iraqi Foreign Minister in December 2004 spoke positively of Beijing's "fair stance" on the Iraq issue, stating that "Iraq is very appreciative of China's assistance to the Iraqi people in political, material, and humanitarian areas" (Al-Masaoodi, 2021: 243). Successive Iraqi governments – of which there were many following the US-led invasion – maintained the broad contours of this approach towards China. With that said, the years of Iraq being seen as a key regional heavyweight from China's perspective were very much over. The country continued, and indeed continues today, to be of great importance to the Chinese, due in large part to its extensive and largely untapped energy reserves, but in the years following the fall

of Saddam, Beijing would not focus on its relationship with Iraq to the same extent as its ties with Iran and several of the GCC states.

Iran's Responses and Perceptions

The Iranians, by contrast, were far less critical of China during the period, perhaps due to the fact that China did not undermine Iranian interests, despite intense US pressure, in any area other than nuclear cooperation. In a statement that would be reflected throughout the first six years of the decade, Hassan Rouhani, the then Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, was quick to praise Beijing's "independent policy" towards Iran in 1992 within a context of deepening anti-Iran sentiment in the United States (Tehran IRNA, 1992). Indeed, in the weeks following the emergence of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, the Vice Chairman of the Foreign Relations Commission of the Iranian Parliament hailed Sino-Iranian relations as "exceptional" (Tehran IRNA, 1996a; 1996b). Similarly, the Iranian Ambassador to China noted a week after US President William Clinton signed ILSA into law that Sino-Iranian relations were "taking a favo[u]rable turn" because the Chinese "explicitly denounced… [American] legislation against Iran" (Tehran IRNA, 1996b). While it would be reasonable to analyse these statements as diplomatic performances designed to raise the bar for China such that any betrayal of Iran would be viewed in the severest of lights, it is similarly not unreasonable to view these as the genuine perceptions of Iranian officials towards China during this period. After all, the Chinese had upped the ante on their trade with Iran despite ILSA and they appeared insistent on balancing ties between the United States and Iran during the period.

Iranian perceptions of China's approach towards the issue of nuclear cooperation were more contentious, though Beijing still remained largely immune to criticism. During the build-up to China-US talks on the topic, Iran cautioned China that it "would lose Iran's trust" if it acquiesced to US demands and that Iranian officials believed China must "remain a trustworthy ally at the time of crisis" (Garver, 2006: 225). However, following the Chinese decision to halt nuclear cooperation with Tehran, Iran focused its attention on the US' "false propaganda against what was purely peaceful cooperation between the IRI and the PRC" (Scita, 2022a: 93). Thus, although Iran was clearly frustrated that the Chinese had halted nuclear cooperation with them, and thereby allowing the Americans to get their way, there was evidently not strong feelings of negativity aimed at the PRC for this perceived transgression. With that said, some repercussions were felt on the Chinese side, as is

discussed below. Beijing had won enough credit with the Iranians due to its continued and ever-strengthening economic and political engagement with Iran amid ILSA such that any failures in relation to one area of cooperation could not overwhelmingly damage their ties. In this regard, China managed to balance its ties with the US and Iran effectively and, in so doing, protected its core interest in Iran, namely energy imports, while relieving itself of a less important but highly contentious area of engagement in the form of nuclear cooperation.

The United States' Responses and Perceptions

To say that the US approaches towards its rivals during this period were heavy-handed would be an understatement. The period of almost unfettered US hegemony witnessed an age of US unilateralism on a fairly unprecedented level. This strategy was not limited to the likes of Iran and Iraq, though, but rather similarly aimed at the PRC. Having made clear their opposition to Chinese support for both Iran and Iraq already, as early as 1993 the Americans made a significant fuss about a Chinese ship, the *Yinhe*, making its way to Iran. The Bandar Abbas-bound *Yinhe*, according to Washington, was loaded with chemicals for chemical weapons production. Following a stalemate that lasted nearly three weeks, in which the ship remained in limbo at sea waiting to reach its destination, the US finally forced China into accepting a Saudi-led inspection of the ship only to find that no chemicals were on board (Garver, 2006).

While the US would not continue to pressure the Chinese on the Iran and Iraq issues with such brutishness, the pressure already mentioned throughout this chapter remained in place for an extended period. American officials made no secret of their disdain for Sino-Iraqi and Sino-Iranian relations and their broader concerns about China's role in their military and nuclear proliferation. As late as 2001, US Secretary for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, lamented that China's support for Iraq's air defences was posing a direct threat to Western military personnel in the region (CBS News, 2001). With that said, the Bush administration knew that the Iraq war was a risky move vis-à-vis the US' position in the international community. Far from expecting Chinese support for the policy, Bush seemed content that the Chinese had not got in his way in any profound sense, expressing his goodwill towards China in December 2003 by focusing on the fact that the US and China were "working together in the war on terror" (Knowlton, 2003). Not forgetting that one of the declared motivations for the US invasion had been the Global War on Terror (GWOT), this was likely Bush's way of declaring that he was satisfied with the Chinese response to the Iraq issue.

Similarly, given that the PRC had leaned quite heavily in favour of the US on the Iran nuclear issue, it is not unreasonable to assume that American officials were content with the Chinese approach towards this issue. While officials in Washington were evidently frustrated with China's cooperation with Iran leading into 1997, as was evidenced by US Assistant Secretary of State Jeff Bader's warning in 1996 that "if we determine there are violations of our laws, we will not hesitate to take appropriate action against those responsible", Beijing's ultimate decision following negotiations to halt this cooperation was celebrated by the US government (Garver, 2006: 224). Given the profound importance the Americans attached to Iran's nuclear programme, they were willing to overlook – at least for the time being – Chinese violations of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act to keep the peace in Sino-American relations on the nuclear issue.

China's Hedging Strategy: A Successful Approach?

Trade and Energy

As was discussed in the first section of this chapter, the PRC's foremost interests in the Persian Gulf were sound economic relations, including the abundance of labour opportunities, and access to reliable energy supplies. Further to this, on a wider scale from an economic perspective, China was keen to be admitted to the World Trade Organisation, a move that would require Washington's acceptance, so that it could enjoy favourable trading conditions with other members and avoid the yearly drama of debates in the US about the renewal of its MFN status. It serves noting that, although the focus of this chapter has been on the rivalry between the US and both Iran and Iraq, this section considers all regional states because the GCC states (particularly Saudi Arabia) did have tumultuous relations with Iran during the period. As such, briefly analysing the state of China's relations with these countries is crucial in any discussion about Beijing's attainment in the region amid its navigation of regional competition and rivalries.

In terms of trade, to call the period a success from China's perspective would likely be an understatement. As Table 6.1 demonstrates, in 2002 the PRC's trade with states in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex was worth well over five times what it was in 1992, to the tune of $113.16 billion. While trade with the United States made up a significant proportion of this, economic engagement with the regional states themselves (the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq) had grown by over seven times during the period. While the region was crucial for China from an energy standpoint, Beijing managed to improve its exports to

the region significantly. In 2002, the value of Chinese exports to the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq totalled over $7.37 billion, an over three-fold increase even on six years prior, when Chinese exports to the region had reached $2.3 billion. Whilst economic engagement with Iraq had been seriously hampered by the international sanctions regime, Sino-Iraqi bilateral annual trade reached the period's record of $975 million in 2000, demonstrating Iraq's strong desire amid its international isolation to build upon economic cooperation with the PRC (IMF, 2003). From this perspective, the Iraqis had clearly not been put off of engaging with China, despite Beijing's hedging strategy.

On the Persian Gulf front, it is worth underlining some particular highlights for China during this era. Perhaps the most crucial of these was its nearly ten-fold increase in trade with Saudi Arabia in the decade after 1992, reaching a value of over $5 billion in 2002. Additionally, Sino-Iranian trade witnessed an over eight-fold increase, and Sino-Emirati trade saw an over seven-fold increase. Rather pressingly, and something of testament to the PRC's approach towards the region during the 1990s, bilateral economic engagement improved with every single state in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Further to this, China managed not only to weather the storm of the Asian Financial Crisis, keeping its global imports and exports steady throughout the period, but also to achieve the game-changing feat of being accepted by the United States to join the World Trade Organisation in 2001. The following year, Chinese exports to the US alone witnessed a $16 billion increase (IMF, 2003). Quite clearly, from a trade perspective, China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf did not damage its relations with any of the regional security subcomplex states. Indeed, this was a particularly successful era for the PRC in this regard. The very fact that Beijing managed to be admitted to the World Trade Organisation – something dependent on US acquiescence - while still enjoying positive ties with Iran and Iraq indicates the execution of a highly successful balancing act.

Table 6.1 China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 1992 and 2002 (in USD)

State	Trade in 1992	Trade in 2002
Saudi Arabia	$571 million	$5.11 billion
United Arab Emirates	$609 million	$3.90 billion
Islamic Republic of Iran	$447 million	$3.74 billion
Oman	$455 million	$1.51 billion
Kuwait	$63 million	$727 million
Iraq	Data nebulous due to sanctions (estimate around $1 million)	$517 million

Qatar	$77 million	$225 million
Bahrain	$12 million	$110 million
United States of America	$17.5 billion	$97.32 billion
Total (excluding the US)	**$2.23 billion**	**$15.84 billion**
Total (including the US)	**$19.73 billion**	**$113.16 billion**

Sources: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1999; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 2003.

A similar area of success for the PRC was in its acquisition of energy supplies from the region. As Table 6.2 and Table 6.3 highlight, by the turn of the millennium, Chinese oil imports from the Persian Gulf were abundant. In both 2001 and 2003, two years that act as good examples of broader trends for many years to come, all Persian Gulf states other than Bahrain were among China's 20 foremost global oil suppliers. In both 2001 and 2003, Iran and Saudi Arabia represented the two foremost suppliers, with the value of oil exports to China from these two states reaching over $3.5 billion in 2001 and a staggering $5.8 billion in 2003. In 2001, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Oman represented the PRC's three primary oil suppliers, with Oman dropping only into fourth place in 2003 following a strengthening of Sino-Angolan energy ties. (Garver, 2006: 267). Crucially, these data emphasise not only that China had managed during the period to cultivate sufficiently strong ties with each of the regional states to ensure reliable oil supplies, but also that it had fostered diversified relations with regional rivals such that any disruption-induced market volatility in one part of the region could be offset by another. Indeed, even if, for example, Iran were to get bogged down in a conflict, Beijing could ensure supplies from the GCC states. Similarly, if the reverse were to happen, then Iranian supplies would be available. With that said, it is worth noting that there was some hesitation among the Iranians to offer China lucrative energy-related contracts during the period. In what Garver (2006: 269) questions may have been "Iranian payback" for the Chinese decision to halt nuclear assistance to the Islamic Republic, Tehran gave the Japanese, rather than the Chinese, preferential development rights of the Azadegan oil field in June 2000, a project worth around $2.8 billion. While the Chinese were eventually offered the Azadegan project a few years later following the Japanese failure to reconcile the challenges associated with engaging in the Iranian market amid US pressure, it was under profoundly different circumstances, namely UNSC *and* US sanctions and Iran's growing isolation from West-aligned states (which will be discussed Chapter seven). In this regard, China's hedging strategy saw it lose out on a lucrative deal to none other than its Japanese neighbours. Naturally, had China dismissed the US pressure to cease nuclear cooperation with Iran, it is likely that the consequences would have been far more punitive

for Beijing, though. In the immediate period under study in this chapter, thus, the Iranians had not been willing to allow extensive Chinese engagement in oil exploration, excavation, and refinery contracts beyond small contracts in the tens of millions of dollars. From this perspective, while Beijing had done well to secure its oil supplies from the region, it had not succeeded in securing preferential arrangements or sound energy investments. Naturally, in the Iraqi case, this was similarly not possible due to the sanctions regime and the subsequent war, but the case of Sino-Iraqi relations after the war is discussed below. Similarly, while China had signed a strategic oil partnership with the Saudis in 1999, it was not until 2004 that it won a significant development contract in the Kingdom (Al-Tamimi, 2014).

Table 6.2 Value of China's Oil Imports from Persian Gulf States in 2001 (in USD)

Exporter (in order of quantity)	**Value**
Islamic Republic of Iran	$2.069 billion
Saudi Arabia	$1.629 billion
Oman	$1.600 billion
Kuwait	$268 million
Qatar	$257 million
United Arab Emirates	$137 million
Iraq	$73 million
Bahrain	Negligible.
Total	**$6.033 billion**

Source: Table re-worked from Garver (2006: 267).

Table 6.3 Value of China's Oil Imports from Persian Gulf States in 2003 (in USD)

Exporter (in order of quantity)	**Value**
Saudi Arabia	$3.232 billion
Islamic Republic of Iran	$2.635 billion
Oman	$1.978 billion
United Arab Emirates	$194 million
Kuwait	$186 million
Qatar	$140 million
Iraq	Negligible due to war.
Bahrain	Negligible.
Total	**$6.033 billion**

Source: Table re-worked from Garver (2006: 267).

Post-War Iraq: A Lost Partner?

With the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime due to the US-led invasion, the future of Iraq's political system was up in the air. Indeed, even 20 years after his demise, Iraq's political arena remains mired in conflict, instability, factionalism, and fragmentation. Given that the remainder of this dissertation does not focus in a detailed manner on Iraq – primarily because

Iraq soon became an arena of other regional heavyweights' rivalries competition rather than a competitor itself – it serves briefly to observe China's attainment of core interests in relations to the country in the following period to assess whether the PRC's actions towards the country in the 1990s and early 2000s impacted upon its ties after Saddam. As Table 6.4 highlights, despite the deposing of the PRC's partner at the helm of Iraqi politics, the removal of sanctions from the Iraqi energy industry significantly improved Beijing's ability to secure oil supplies from the country. Successive Iraqi governments facilitated the PRC's access, with Chinese oil imports from Iraq increasing at a dramatic rate over the following two decades – even reaching the value of $23.5 billion in 2021 alone (Gul, 2023).

Table 6.4 Value of China's Oil Imports from Iraq after the US-led Invasion (in USD)

Year	**2004**	**2008**	**2012**	**2016**	**2020**
Value	$284 million	$1.4 billion	$11.1 billion	$9.7 billion	$17 billion

Source: Table re-worked from Gul (2023: 353).

While the PRC's ability to secure energy-related - including upstream and downstream – contracts was limited in the immediate years following the US-led invasion due to US quasi-monopolisation, the 2007 visit to Beijing by Iraqi President Talabani paved the way for a significant rise in Chinese procurement of energy contracts in the country. Indeed, at the time of writing, two decades after the US-led invasion, Chinese companies dominate the Iraqi oil industry. In 2021, Iraq was even the largest recipient of Belt and Road Initiative-related investment in the region (Rasheed and Aziz, 2024). It is evident, thus, that Beijing's previous hedging strategy between Iraq and the United States did not alienate it from later Iraqi governments.

The Xinjiang Issue

As the focus of this chapter has been on China's hedging strategy between the United States and both Iran and Iraq, and given that the Xinjiang issue is of specific importance in relation to the United States – as the self-proclaimed leader of international liberalism – and Iran – given that Tehran proclaims itself to be the leader of the Muslim world – this section will analyse the responses of the US and Iran towards the Xinjiang issue to ascertain whether China managed to balance relations between them and protect its core interests in so doing.

Having previously sought to develop people-to-people ties with Xinjiang citizens, building mosques, and spreading religious literature in the region, the Islamic Republic was quick -

following Chinese pressure to respect its sovereignty – to avoid angering CCP officials. Along these lines, Garver (2006: 135) states, "presumably, Tehran scrapped export of the revolution to China for the sake of cooperation with China's government, especially when Chinese leaders told them this was the choice they faced". But Iran did not stop at mere silence. Instead, over the course of the decade, the Iranian regime opted to provide direct rhetorical support for Beijing's handling of the Uyghur population. During his visit to China in 2000, Iranian President Khatami visited Xinjiang and released a joint communiqué with Chinese President Jiang Zemin stating the following (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2000).

> The two sides [China and Iran] opposed interference in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of human rights, the politicising of human rights question and the adoption of double standards on this issue… The two sides condemned terrorism in all its forms and stressed the need for the international community to combat and root out terrorism and expressed their readiness to maintain close cooperation and coordination with international efforts against terrorism.

This statement, produced within the context of increasing tensions between the CCP and the Muslim citizens of Xinjiang, acted as a profound example of Iranian legitimisation of Beijing's approach towards the region. The particular emphasis on terrorism within the context of Khatami's presence in Xinjiang is especially poignant, as it mirrors the language deployed by the Chinese government in relation to events in the area – namely, that the behaviour of Muslim residents amounted to terrorism, rather than a legitimate strategy to achieve freedom and equality. At the heart of Iran's acceptance of China's approach towards the Uyghurs during the period is a crucial point: While Beijing may have had concerns that its hedging strategy between Iran and the US would cause anger at China in Tehran, Iranian officials similarly were concerned that they may miss out on the alluring economic opportunities available to them if they did not remain on China's good side. The growing interdependence in Sino-Iranian relations, termed by Teer and Wang (2018) as "asymmetrical" in favour of China, was proving to be crucial in allowing Beijing some latitude to upset Tehran. Further to this, the normative solidarity that this indicates between Iran and China signals the realisation of an important Chinese interest in the region, namely the propagation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, at least in relation to the Xinjiang issue.

In terms of Washington's response to the Xinjiang issue, China's relationship to the US-led invasion of Iraq was perhaps more profound in calibrating the US response than appears obvious at first glance. Having previously attached considerable importance to the CCP's human rights record throughout the 1990s, the emergence of the Global War on Terror offered Beijing a profound opportunity to reduce American criticism of human rights in the PRC. With US President George W. Bush intent on making his Global War on Terror the centrepiece of his foreign policy, Beijing lobbied for the East Turkistan Islamic Movement to be designated as a terrorist organisation. In the build-up to Bush's decision to invade Iraq, something that Bush partially justified under the umbrella of the GWOT, and eager to avoid a permanent UNSC member proposing a resolution to render it far more challenging, he opted not only to designate ETIM as a terrorist group but also to lobby (ultimately successfully) for the United Nations to follow suit. In doing this, the US not only abstained from criticising Beijing's Xinjiang policy, but rather provided the CCP with legitimacy for its approach. Roberts (2020: 80) notes "while the US and UN had not adopted the PRC's larger narrative that all Uyghur advocacy groups worldwide were part of a singular 'terrorist network', the branding of ETIM as a 'terrorist organi[s]ation' allowed the Chinese state to arbitrarily label virtually any Uyghur group or individual as a member or associate of ETIM". In this sense, the US' stance on the Xinjiang crisis became inextricably tied to China's response to the Iraq war. By choosing to chart a steady course to avoid openly challenging the US invasion or undermining it in any meaningful manner, Beijing had secured itself an unprecedented level of support – indeed perceived as a green light – to violate the human rights of a Muslim minority and to be free from American criticism in the process. Its position on the Iraq issue was, thus, undoubtedly central in giving the CCP a window of opportunity to receive US legitimation of its policies in Xinjiang. In this regard, its hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf was a great success for the CCP.

Ideational Ambitions: Responsible Great Power

Given Qian Qichen's declaration in 1992 that China would be a "responsible great power" (Boon, 2018: 40), it serves to consider very briefly whether China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf worked towards this goal or not. In the case of Iraq, China's approach towards the country was very much in keeping with numerous pivotal states in the international community. In supporting, or at the very least not vetoing, successive resolutions in the UNSC in relation to Iraq, China aligned sufficiently with the US to be perceived as working in the interest of international peace and, to a certain extent, the protection of human rights.

While putting it at odds with the United States, its opposition to Western air strikes in the 1990s on Iraq certainly gave the impression internationally that it was a responsible actor on the international stage. However, Beijing's unwillingness to stick its head above the parapet on this issue and specifically attempt to put an end to this behaviour left it in the camp of France and Russia, both of whom did not have, or at least did not attempt to exert, sufficient clout to counter the United States. In this regard, to be classified as a true great power, that being one capable of charting its own course in international affairs and accordingly holding its ground due to its extensive influence, China's actions fell short. The same can very much be said about its response to the US invasion of Iraq. While the Americans may consider China to have behaved responsibly in relation to this event, not least of all as Beijing's acquiescence strengthened the US' case that the invasion was for the protection of the international community, China did not stand up for what it believed in, namely that the invasion was illegal and contrary to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Of course, for the purposes of achieving wider interests due to the perception by key external actors of China's image as a responsible power, the most vital aim was to keep the US happy. Beijing's response to the Iraq invasion certainly rendered the Americans content that China was behaving responsibly, but it certainly did not give the impression that it was a great power capable of standing up for its beliefs in the international system. In this regard, its hedging strategy in relation to the US-Iraq rivalry only achieved half of its aims.

In the case of Iran, it can be claimed more easily that China achieved its goal of appearing to be a responsible great power. While Beijing did surrender to US demands in relation to the, from China's perspective, far from critical area of Sino-Iranian nuclear cooperation, thereby raising questions about its independence in international affairs, the continuation and growth of Sino-Iranian energy ties despite ILSA pointed towards a power capable of protecting its core interests despite Washington's antagonism. In this regard, Beijing certainly managed to project itself as a great power. Similarly, the PRC's decision to halt nuclear cooperation with Iran won it considerable favour in Washington, helping it to be viewed as a responsible actor on the international stage when it ultimately mattered. As such, in the case of Iran, it is not unreasonable to claim that Beijing achieved its dual aims of appearing both to be a responsible power and a great power. It protected its core interests in Iran, thereby showcasing its independence, and behaved according to US preferences in terms of international responsibility on the nuclear issue, an area of Sino-Iranian relations that was far from a priority for the Chinese. While this may have upset the Iranians, Beijing

ultimately succeeded in securing its core interests in Iran, thereby at the very least projecting to its own population that it was an independent power.

Conclusions and Perspectives

While it is evident that the PRC's primary focus during the 1990s and early 2000s was to avoid upsetting the United States, its hedging strategy throughout the era was palpable. The ever-increasing desire for strong trading relations with Global South states and the intense need for extensive and reliable oil supplies from 1993 onwards rendered the Persian Gulf an unparalleled region of importance compared to the wider Global South outside of China's immediate neighbourhood.

China's hedging strategy was in many ways a stark success leading into the new millennium. All of the PRC's core interests in the Persian Gulf had been secured. Having carefully managed its relationship with all key regional states, it had secured itself reliable energy supplies on an historically-unprecedented scale. Similarly, its trading arrangements with the region, and indeed with the wider world due to its accession into the WTO, were going from strength to strength. Further to this, even having witnessed – and not attempted with any real zest – to stop the downfall of the Saddam Hussein regime, China would go on over the coming two decades to have wide-ranging relations with Iraq despite its domestic volatility. As such, while the PRC certainly put the US first and its two adversaries, Iran and Iraq, second, the carefully choreographed balancing act worked wonders for China during this period.

Before moving into the post-Saddam era, though, it serves to reflect on an event that impacted China's relations with the region, and in particular Saudi Arabia. The terrorist attacks in the United States of America on September 11, 2001 entailed challenges in Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States due to US complaints about the fostering of terrorism in Middle Eastern states emanating from the fact that 15 of the 19 terrorists were Saudi citizens. While this period of cooling did not have extreme long-term implications for Saudi-US ties, it did afford Riyadh the opportunity to consider its relationships abroad. For China, this meant that growing economic and energy ties would be able to spread into political and strategic cooperation. As such, upon his accession to the throne in 2005, Saudi King Abdullah made his first foreign trip abroad to Beijing, breaking with the previous tradition of first visiting Washington (Al-Tamimi, 2014). This act, in keeping with the fact that China had become, and would remain for many years, Saudi's primary oil importer, was

a sign to come of deepening Sino-Saudi cooperation in a variety of spheres. While not directly pertinent to the balancing act discussed in this chapter, it represents an important development when understanding Beijing's engagement with the region in the post-2003 era. China was now a deeply important external power in the region. The stage was set, and the years to come would only further cement its role.

Chapter 7

2004-2023: China's Persian Gulf Hedging Strategy in the 21st Century

Introduction

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein as a competitor for regional hegemony, the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex primarily became defined by the rivalry between Iran and some its GCC neighbours and Washington. The removal of Hussein from the equation and the discovery in the early 2000s that Iran was likely attempting to build nuclear weapons led all eyes in the US to turn to the Islamic Republic. Over the last two decades, Iran has been the subject of multilateral UNSC and unilateral US and EU sanctions and has been caught up in a protracted rivalry with Saudi Arabia and to varying degrees other GCC states. Furthermore, cracks even began to re-emerge between the GCC states themselves, with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE all blockading Qatar between 2017 and 2021. As such, this chapter examines how China has pursued its hedging strategy amid these two fault lines, exploring the dimensions of Chinese behaviour towards the sanctions/nuclear issue, its military sales and cooperation with rivalling states in the region, its navigation of episodes of tension between Iran and its rivals, and its approach towards the GCC split. The chapter then goes on to analyse how China's hedging strategy impacted regional perceptions of Beijing and whether the strategy was conducive to the realisation of the PRC's central objectives in the region during the period, namely: Maintaining positive relations with all regional states and building upon ties; ensuring reliable and favourable access to energy supplies; securing strong export, trade, construction, and investment links, especially within the context of the BRI; building resilience in its relations with regional states to pressure from the United States; breaking into cooperation in new fields, such as renewable energy; and ensuring normative solidarity extends to support from Persian Gulf states for its controversial policies in Xinjiang.

Theoretical Insights

This brief section will explore the theoretical insights enabled by the theoretical and analytical frameworks outlined in this dissertation. First, the utilisation of a neoclassical realist and constructivist framework supports a clear analysis of Chinese interests following the fall of Saddam Hussein, the emergence of the more assertive Hu and Xi administrations in China, the ever-growing Chinese need for energy supplies, and the continued period of US preponderance that viewed Washington go from the pinnacle of its attempts to act as

global policeman to an actor that increasingly wished to re-prioritise its interests. Neoclassical realism offers a helpful lens through which an understanding of the impact of China's position within the international system (especially vis-à-vis the US) can be gleaned, in addition to an appreciation, for example, of the domestic challenges felt by the CCP to offer continued economic advancement for its burgeoning middle class. Furthermore, the deployment of constructivism supports an understanding of, for example, the great power identity that the PRC was hoping to diffuse across the world, especially in the US' eyes and in the Global South. Constructivism and neoclassical realism both complement each other in underscoring the complexities of China's interests in this regard, especially in viewing it both as a material power issue but also from the perspective of wishing to create a normative system that challenges the US-led liberal order. These examples demonstrate some of the ways in which the analytical framework used in this dissertation offers unparalleled perspectives on Chinese interests in the region.

Furthermore, the regional security complex paradigm enables a strong understanding of regional dynamics following the US-led invasion of Iraq, particularly in relation to the regionalisation of the US' and certain GCC states' rivalry with Tehran and its impact on the GCC split in 2017. The paradigm draws a clear bridge between constructivism and a realist emphasis on anarchy and enmity in international politics, facilitating an appreciation of the dynamics relating to Iranian sanctions and the protracted rivalry between Tehran and its foes. The regional security complex paradigm is also brought into focus, though, from the perspective of amity, with Saudi Arabia and Iran achieving a rapprochement in 2023 thanks to Chinese (and other states') mediation. This displays that the regional security complex is not always imbued with a negative understanding of security and that patterns of amity do indeed matter.

The two levels of strategic hedging are explained regarding Chinese actions in the Persian Gulf in the first two and a half decades of the 21st century. During this period, both the regional and systemic levels were salient from China's perspective. From a systemic perspective, the PRC was keen to make impressive inroads in the region, not least of all in relation to its Belt and Road Initiative, a mark of a potential great power. With that said, Beijing has very cautiously approached the region, still keen not to risk its relationship with the United States for the sake of its ties with Iran. Thus, strategic hedging thoroughly explicates China's actions in the region during the 21st century. The importance of not upending the US-led status quo while still making impressive inroads in the region is a

hallmark of strategic hedging. On the regional level, China has not been able to hide from the intensity of the rivalry between Iran and the GCC states, in addition to the challenges of the GCC split. The need to secure its ties with conflicting regional states has been at the core of Beijing's hedging strategy in the region across the time period. The framework forwarded to assess the success of China's hedging strategy is utilised with the aim of viewing whether China secured its interests in the region amid its hedging strategy. The framework offers a view of China's hedging strategy in the 21st century, ultimately arguing that it has proven to be a highly successful strategy for a second-tier power to use in the region. Not everything has been rosy for China in the region, but this chapter confirms that, in broad terms, strategic hedging is a viable strategy for (at the very least) Beijing in the region, at least when the realisation of interests is taken as the dependent variable.

China's Interests after the Fall of Saddam

Amid a shift as seismic in the international order as China's continued rise in the 21st century, Beijing's navigation of its relationship with the United States provides the foundation for any discussion of China's role and interests in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex over the last two decades. As such, this section begins with this discussion before moving onto China's economic, political, normative, and security interests in (and from) the region.

"Coopetition" with the United States and China's Great Power Identity

The last two decades have witnessed China's emergence on to the international scene as a viable superpower. The extraordinary economic growth, which had been taking place since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s and which weathered the storm of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 with little damage to show, would see the PRC become the world's second largest economy in GDP terms in 2010, the world's foremost automobile market and foremost exporter in 2009, and have the most sizeable foreign currency reserves of any state (Citeco, 2024). Furthermore, in 2008, China became the second largest military spender in the world (Geeraerts, 2011). When highlighted alongside the challenges that the United States was facing in the first decade of the 21st century to maintain its unipolar hegemony, typified by the devastating impact on the US economy of the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis and the stark effects of protracted intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is unsurprising that many – though there is no consensus - scholars have begun to declare the emergence of a multipolar international system, or at least a system in which competition for the top spot is active (e.g., Geeraerts, 2011; Chan, 2013). This has been concomitant with

an increasing assertiveness from the Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and Xi Jinping (2012-)[3] administrations in international affairs. Indeed, in 2009, President Hu declared that China would move on from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of *tao guang yang hui* (generally viewed as "hide capabilities and bide time") to "proactively get some things done" (Chen and Pu, 2014). According to Doshi (2019), while this may not seem a profound statement, it represented a departure from *tao guang yang hui* into a new more assertive era of Chinese international relations. It is no wonder, thus, that rifts have emerged in the scholarship on China, with many viewing a clash between China and the United States as inevitable (Allison, 2017) and others arguing that Beijing can rise peacefully due to the constraints brought about by the nuclear taboo (Glaser, 2011) or the role of liberal institutions and economic interdependence (Ikenberry, 2013). What scholars can certainly agree on, though, is that the PRC's rise as a global power is taking place within a context of US predominance in the international arena. It is this which has led David Shambaugh (2013: 4) to term the relationship emerging between the two as one of "coopetition", that is to say a mixture of competition and cooperation. Thus, contrary to the idea that China is a power-hungry state desperate to upstage and behave aggressively towards the United States at every opportunity, CCP leaders have displayed an awareness that they must manage their relationship with Washington in order to maximise their benefits in the international system. There are certainly areas of significant disagreement between China and the US, not least of all over China's human rights record, contested regions such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Hong Kong, China's behaviour in the South China Sea, and indeed in terms of the US' neoliberal policies abroad, hence the competition between them, but the two states are also deeply economically interdependent, hence why cooperation also plays a salient role in their ties. Indeed, the United States has long been the PRC's top export partner, accounting for between a quarter and a fifth of all Chinese exports (IMF, 2018). As such, from Beijing's perspective, it is crucial that it maintain strong ties with the United States to ensure that its economic prosperity continues. Any substantial disruption to Sino-US exchange would have a stark impact on China's economy. The trade war launched on China by the Donald Trump administration underlined the precarity in this relationship. In particular, it highlights that China must avoid upsetting Washington in core areas so as to avoid a backlash from the US that may impact negatively on Chinese interests. Carefully navigating ties with the US'

[3] While Xi became Chinese President in 2013, it was in 2012 that he became viewed as the paramount leader. At the time of writing, he is still the PRC's President.

Persian Gulf rival, Iran, is one example of these areas, as was evidenced in 1987 by the US delaying technology transfers to China following the Iranian Silkworm missile attacks on maritime traffic in the Persian Gulf.

In keeping with this notion, this dissertation argues that, while China does not act to bolster US interests in the Persian Gulf and at times does actively undermine them, Beijing is not currently seeking to displace the United States in the region. As Fulton (2019c) and Garlick and Havlová (2020) agree, Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf are, in most cases, dependent on the extant status quo. This status quo is underwritten almost entirely by the US' extensive security architecture in the region. As such, whereas the PRC may be willing to showcase greater assertiveness in East Asia, for example in the South China Sea, its reliance on Washington's security umbrella for the safe passage of energy supplies from the region – its primary interest in the Persian Gulf - leaves it in great need of the United States. With limited power projection capabilities and its nearest – and indeed its only – foreign military base being located in Djibouti, there is little scope for China to overtake the United States as the foremost power in the region (Sun, 2018).[4] Indeed, former US President Barack Obama even declared the Chinese "free-riders" in the region, hardly thereby painting the picture of a power seeking to displace Washington from the region in any profound security or military sense (Obama, 2014).

There are at least two important qualifications to this argument, though. First, while the PRC is not competing with the United States on a security level in the region, Beijing must compete with all key external powers in the region to win high-profile contracts in a broad range of fields, including construction projects, energy contracts, digital initiatives, military transfers, and others. For several GCC states that have begun engaging in their own hedging strategy between the United States and China, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, increasing levels of competition between Washington and Beijing to curry favour with them have become commonplace (Dannreuther, 2024). Indeed, US officials have attempted on many occasions to drive a wedge between Persian Gulf states and China; the case of the US discouraging the UAE from using Huawei for 5G represents a good example of this. As such, while Beijing is not seeking to displace the United States or become embroiled in some kind of proxy war in the region with Washington, it does have to compete with the US in

[4] At the time of writing, US intelligence has reported that it believes China is planning on constructing a second foreign military base in Duqm, Oman. This is unconfirmed at present but would represent an important step in China's role in the Persian Gulf (Jamrisko and Jacobs, 2023).

other fields, and it would like to cultivate ties with regional states that can withstand pressure from Washington. As was discussed in chapter six in reference to Japan winning energy contracts in Iran at China's expense, Washington is not the PRC's only competitor in the region in this regard. European states, other Asian states, and Russia all compete with China for alluring commercial and, at times, military contracts in the region. As such, ensuring that it is viewed as a reliable external power is crucial for the Chinese, and any perceived transgression in areas of core or sensitive interest to regional states could impact this.

Second, the above discussion about Beijing's desire to maintain the status quo in terms of the US security umbrella does not mean that China does not view itself as a great power and that is does not wish to be taken seriously by foreign states. Indeed, Xi Jinping has devoted considerable attention in his writings to the notion of China as a "great power". Forwarding a model for great power ties, Xi is keen for the US and the world to view China as a "top tier" power "equal" to the United States (Boon, 2018: 134). Indeed, in 2013, Xi declared at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference that the PRC should focus its attentions firmly away from *tao guang yang hui* and should be "striving for achievement" (Boon, 2018: 135). That this came in the same year as the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, which will be discussed later, is no coincidence. Some Chinese scholars, including Zhao Kejin of Tsinghua University, have argued that this drive for international recognition is due to both the domestic call for greater assertiveness and pressures of the international environment (Boon, 2018). Part of the equation is also that Beijing wishes to propagate norms that are more conducive to its internal and external behaviour. The previously-discussed Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence continue to feature heavily in Chinese rhetoric, especially in the Global South. If China is to achieve its aims of spreading these norms to safeguard itself from external interference in its domestic affairs, it needs to be viewed as a power capable of withstanding pressure from other global powers. Furthermore, in order to ensure the buy-in of dozens of states into the BRI and other Chinese-led institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Beijing needs to be viewed by participating states and potential future participants as a reliable, long-standing, great power capable of managing the pressures of these projects. Accordingly, China requires that its status be versatile enough that it can be perceived as: (1) An alternative to the United States by those states (such as Iran) that hold anti-US sentiments; (2) as complementary to a multipolar order in which the US remains a prominent power by those states (such as the GCC states) that have strong relations with

Washington but that also seek maximum benefits from a multiplicity of actors; and (3) as a credible great power by the United States and other significant global powers such that its interests are treated with respect but that it is not viewed as an overwhelming antagonist that may threaten outright conflict.

Energy, Trade, Diplomatic Relations, and the Belt and Road Initiative

As with previous periods studied in this dissertation, the intense requirements for economic growth and the need for substantial energy supplies in support of this growth and indeed in service of reliable public services in China continue to drive the PRC's primary interests in the Persian Gulf. Despite China's impressive economic growth as a whole, China's GDP per capita still lagged behind the sheer majority of advanced economies and was less than a fifth of US GDP per capita in 2010 (OECD Stats, 2024). That is not to say that economic advancement was not benefitting the population, indeed far from it. Many millions of Chinese have been pulled out of poverty in recent decades, and the middle class has grown at lightning pace. It underscores, though, that the CCP still desperately needs to ensure that it can keep its population content with reliable access to public services. One important dimension to achieve this is to ensure that its exports to foreign states continue to grow. Indeed, the announcement in 2015 of the Made in China 2025 initiative, which seeks to secure China's status as a "global powerhouse in high-tech industries such as robotics, aviation, and new energy vehicles such as electric and biogas", underscores the modernising intentions of the CCP in terms of manufacturing, industry, and exports (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2018). With the expressed desires of several Persian Gulf states to accelerate their modernisation and transition away from rentier economies, expressed through national initiatives such as Saudi Vision 2030 and Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030, the region promises to be an important export destination that benefits the core objectives of Made in China 2025.

Just as, if not more, important though is the PRC's need for ever-larger quantities of fossil fuels to drive construction (especially projects related to the later-discussed BRI), the functioning of services, and individual usage of oil for personal vehicles. Indeed, the latter is significant, as China became the globe's foremost market for personal vehicles by 2010. It should be noted that the PRC's yearly oil imports have grown every single year since 2003, with the possible exception of the years during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, daily oil imports averaged at 10.12 million barrels per day (Aizhu, 2020). In 2003, this figure

was 1.8 million bpd (Business Recorder, 2004). Further to this, cultivating a diversified energy portfolio has also been important to Beijing. Relying solely on oil is not viewed as sustainable for the PRC, and as such, gas imports have grown in significance for China. Indeed, in 2006, the PRC imported less than five billion cubic meters of liquefied natural gas. In 2021, China's LNG imports were to the tune of 110 billion cubic meters, a staggering 20-fold increase (Zhang, Nie, and Downs, 2023). Given that Qatar and Iran account for just shy of one third of the world's gas reserves, they are central to China's attempts to enjoy a diversified energy portfolio, both in terms of energy type and supplier. The gas element also acts as an important reminder of the importance of Iran to the PRC; Tehran is not a partner that China can simply discard.

As is evident, therefore, energy imports have skyrocketed in significance for the CCP; the PRC is importing each year well over five times the amount it did two decades ago. Energy security has truly become the bedrock of the PRC's economic security. By extension, it is the pillar upon which the CCP's regime security rests. Indeed, in the PRC's tenth five-year plan (The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2010) outlined in 2001, Premier of the State Council, Zhu Rongji, asserts:

> Energy, oil in particular, is of strategic importance. Domestic development and production of oil can no longer keep pace with the needs of the country's economic and social development, resulting in an increasing imbalance between oil supply and demand. Therefore, we need to take all possible measures to conserve and substitute for oil, accelerate exploration and exploitation of oil and natural gas resources, and make effective use of overseas resources.

The Persian Gulf, home to around half the world's proven oil and gas reserves, is an unquestionably key part of this equation for China. As in previous periods, an important facet of China's energy strategy in the region is to win energy contracts in many domains, including joint exploration, long-term supply deals, and upstream and downstream activities. A further desire of the CCP is for exporting states to accept the RMB as payment for energy instead of the dollar, as this would both strengthen the perceived importance of the RMB on the international stage and reduce partially the supremacy of the dollar, granting the PRC greater latitude if Sino-US relations ever sour. Naturally, with all of this said, it is fundamentally ensuring reliable and abundant energy supplies that China is most concerned with when it comes to the region's extensive energy reserves. Crucially, in 2016, Beijing

released a document entitled "China's Arab Policy Paper", in which the government outlined the hierarchy of its core interests in the region. It called for the establishment of a cooperation framework that would follow a 1+2+3 strategy in order of importance. The foremost priority (1) would be energy cooperation. Second to this (2) would be infrastructure construction and trade and investment. The third priority area (3) would be termed the "three breakthroughs" of nuclear energy, space satellite, and new energy (State Council, 2016). All three of these core Chinese interests would be covered by the most ambitious foreign policy made by the Chinese leadership for decades: The Belt and Road Initiative. Established in 2013 by Xi Jinping as his flagship foreign policy, the BRI was introduced with the aim of establishing China as the centre point around which global, but particularly Asian, trade will orbit. The mega-project, which has been touted to cost in the trillions of dollars, revolves around multiple land corridors, a Maritime Silk Road, and a Digital Silk Road. To achieve the monumental objectives of the BRI, the PRC has placed considerable financial and political weight behind infrastructure projects across Asia. In terms of the Persian Gulf states, while Iran sits on the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of the BRI, several of the other Persian Gulf states are keen participants of the project, both as part of formal and informal land corridors but also via the Maritime Silk Road and Digital Silk Road. A critical issue associated with the BRI for Beijing is the need to ensure that it attracts consistent interest from regional states in the project. Ehteshami (2018) notes, accordingly, that ensuring the "goodwill" of participating states is a necessity. From this perspective, ensuring that diverse partners in the region are generally content with the PRC is crucial. Any perception that Beijing is undermining their fundamental security would quite possibly derail the BRI's progress, particularly in states (such as the GCC countries) that already enjoy diversified relations with key global powers. Further to this, China is dependent on the maintenance of regional security on a scale that it previously has not been. The political and economic weight that has been thrown behind the BRI means that any great failure could spell trouble for the CCP, or at the very least the Xi administration. It cannot, therefore, risk expensive projects repeatedly failing. The nature of the BRI, with its emphasis on corridors, also means that ensuring geographical continuity is important. That is to say, while many disparate projects are completed in the BRI's name across broad geographical locales, the central idea of the BRI is to facilitate connectivity across Asia and beyond. This particular point nods towards the importance of Iran in the equation. Occupying a huge landmass between Central Asia and West Asia, maintaining close ties with the Islamic Republic is crucial to China in a very specific way. Indeed, while the GCC states are often viewed as

being more important to Beijing than Iran is, China needs to ensure that it maintains diversified relations to extract the specific interests that it has in each partnership. While there are wide-ranging similarities between all cases, not least of all energy supplies and investment opportunities, Iran is a valuable partner to China as it is not politically close to the West, meaning that Beijing has the option of approaching Iran for a variety of needs in the event of any profound move from Washington that drives a wedge between China and the GCC states. Furthermore, the ability to transport energy from Iran via train, something that the GCC states cannot offer, cuts transport times down significantly and would be able to circumvent any disruption to the waterways between the Persian Gulf and China (Garlick and Havlová, 2020). On the other side of the coin, engagement with Iran consistently comes at a cost, and in that regard the GCC states broadly offer no-strings-attached opportunities. As such, more than ever before, the so-called BRI age necessitates a solid approach to managing relations with states at loggerheads with one another in the region.

The Xinjiang Issue

For brevity here, this section will not repeat the discussion surrounding the dynamics of the Xinjiang issue and why the responses of the US and the Persian Gulf states matter so much but will rather discuss key developments in relation to the topic in the 21st century. While the treatment of minorities, and especially the Uyghur Muslims, in Xinjiang continued to be controversial in the first decade of the 21st century, Xi Jinping's leadership has witnessed a stark worsening in the CCP's approach towards these groups. Building on the campaign that was discussed in the previous chapter, by 2015 the CCP had firmly adopted a wide-ranging "de-radicalisation" programme, leading to the erection of "Education and Transformation Centres", wherein the treatment of subjects has frequently been cited as infringing upon their most basic human rights (Tobin, 2020: 2). It is believed that more than 10% of the Uyghur Muslim population has been forced into these camps (Zenz, 2019). These so-called centres have been one of several tactics aimed at controlling the Uyghurs and subjecting them to constant surveillance and so-called "re-education" (Roberts, 2018: 246). What has attracted particular criticism from large segments of the international community is the fact that these tactics have targeted Uyghurs indiscriminately with little in the way of engagement to differentiate law-abiding Uyghurs from separatists or terrorists. Indeed, it has even been the case that any displays of Islamic religiosity – even religious weddings or particular beard styles - or engagement with ethno-religious rituals can be viewed as terrorist-related activity. This has led the CCP to engage in widespread surveillance activities of Uyghur citizens. The

inability for Uyghurs to express their ethno-religious identity has been profound and hard-hitting for the community (Roberts, 2018). In addition to the above, substantial evidence has surfaced highlighting state-led forced labour in Xinjiang (Lehr, 2020). There have even been frequent reports of Uyghurs being subjected to forced sterilisation, leading many international groups to claim that what is taking place in the region is "ethnic cleansing" or a "genocide" (Zenz, 2020). In a report on the situation in Xinjiang in 2022, the Office of the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights (2022: 44) said the following: "The extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups… may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity". Further, both the Trump and Biden administrations have condemned the CCP for its behaviour in Xinjiang, labelling it a "genocide" (BBC News, 2021). In 2020, the US Congress even passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, entailing the sanctioning of the CCP's Xinjiang Secretary (BBC News, 2020b). Other, primarily Western, states have aligned with the US position on this issue. As such, Beijing is desperate for solidarity on this issue wherever it can receive it. To have the support of majority-Muslim states, and indeed the highly influential Persian Gulf states, would be no small source of support in relation to this. In many respects, this particular point gets to the heart of the normative-material nexus in China's foreign interests. Propagating normative solidarity is both important if Beijing is to attempt to construct an international order built around the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence but also materially to avoid criticism in its own domestic affairs. It also points towards whether or not China has sway over the normative agenda in international affairs, a strong indicator of its influence abroad outside of purely material means. The Xinjiang issue provides a strong litmus test in the case of China's relations with the Persian Gulf states, as it gets to the heart of whether Beijing's approach to the region is enabling it to realise interests that may present ideological, normative, strategic, material, economic, or political challenges.

The Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex had as its main fault line the intense and protracted rivalry between Iran and both the United States and several GCC states. This shared securitisation of Iran between the GCC states and Washington provided a driver of cooperation that justified and further cemented the extant US security architecture in the Persian Gulf. Rather profoundly, though, the securitisation of Iran fed into other areas too during the period, with Saudi Arabia, the

UAE, and Bahrain – all of which represented the core of the anti-Iran contingent among the GCC states – overseeing a rupture of their ties with Qatar in 2017 that lasted three and a half years, due in large part, though not entirely, to Doha's relations with Tehran. As such, this section examines the contours of Iran's rivalry with the GCC states and the United States following the US-led invasion of Iraq before analysing the nature and dynamics of the so-called GCC split.

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry

With the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime, one of the US' two primary enemies in the region, Iraq's potential to vie for regional leadership and predominance had firmly ended. Amid this shift in the regional balance of power, not only had Iran's antagonistic neighbour been vanquished, but a vacuum had opened up in the Iraqi system for outside influence, leading a whole host of regional states, particularly Iran, to seek influence in the country. But this drive for increased influence in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East was not limited to Iraq. Indeed, in 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan warned his Arab counterparts of the emergence of a Shi'a Crescent, namely a band of uninterrupted Iranian influence stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. While the primary determinant of this influence in King Abdullah's eyes – or at least in how he framed it – was built around sectarian identity, several Arab leaders, and particularly those in Riyadh, Manama, and Abu Dhabi, became deeply concerned about Iranian influence both in their own countries and across the wider region. This apprehension converged neatly with the US' actions and narrative towards Iran, which had long represented a quintessential example of securitisation, namely the attempt to portray Iran and everything it does as a security threat. What quickly solidified after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime was a US security architecture built almost entirely around buttressing the GCC states against the - perceived or real - Iranian threat.

Before examining the contours of this rivalry throughout the period, it serves to note that the rivalry between Iran and the GCC states was not profoundly felt in all GCC capitals. While Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar have had occasional concerns about Iranian actions, the primary states involved in this rivalry in the 21st century are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. Furthermore, the UAE's role in this rivalry became particularly prominent after the 2008 financial crisis, when Abu Dhabi emerged as the leading Emirate; indeed, leaders in Dubai have long fostered good ties with Iran, particularly in the economic sphere (Bianco, 2020).

With that said, disputes over the three contested islands of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa have soured Iran-UAE relations for decades. It should be noted, furthermore, that Saudi Arabia has spearheaded this rivalry from the GCC perspective, driven by its deep apprehension that Tehran may use its clout among the wider Shi‘a community to inspire unrest in the predominantly Shi‘a Eastern regions of Saudi Arabia, not to mention its wider desire for influence across the Middle East, where Riyadh hopes to predominate. Bahrain shares this fear about Iran due to the fact that its Sunni regime governs an almost entirely Shi‘a population. Thus, while broader power concerns are of intense importance in the Iran-GCC rivalry, it is evident that the fear of so-called fifth columnists in the GCC states is a real driver for cold ties. For the GCC states, this anxiety was far from irrational. After all, following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini had made clear that Tehran would seek to export the revolution across the Islamic world. Examples soon after the Islamic Revolution of unrest by Shi‘a citizens and groups only added fuel to the fire of GCC fears. It should be noted, for balance, that several GCC states have sought to exaggerate the presence of so-called fifth columnists in order to downplay the legitimacy and credibility of anti-government protests. In painting all protesters with the same brush, namely claiming they are agents of the Iranian regime, several GCC regimes have sought to delegitimise calls for democratic and liberalising reform and justify heavy-handed policies seeking to cement their regime security.

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry: The Nuclear Issue

While the rivalry between Iran and its GCC neighbours has been a consistent and profound dimension of regional security, the United States has played a pivotal role in securitising and attempting to contain, squeeze, and undermine Iran and its interests. At the centre of this has been Iran’s nuclear programme, which has caused significant anxiety in Washington and several regional capitals, not to mention that it has provided an issue around which Iran’s rivals have rallied to legitimise their attempts to contain Tehran. Observing the contours of this issue, thus, provides a key background against which China’s approach to the region can be analysed later in the chapter.

Having long bubbled as a point of contention in US-Iran relations, in 2002 the issue of Iran’s nuclear development exploded and gained prominence, remaining the foremost challenge in their relationship, and indeed in Iran’s international relations, for at least the following two decades, and who knows for how much longer. Indeed, in 2002, the National Council of

Resistance of Iran, a dissident group, shared undeniable evidence that the Islamic Republic was seeking to construct nuclear weapons. Of particular note, they shared evidence of a secret centrifuges site near Natanz and a clandestine heavy water reactor project in Arak. While Tehran claimed that this was in keeping with Iran's rights according to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran instantly became the US' primary focal point abroad. The possibility that, as it deemed, a rogue state could possess nuclear weapons, was deeply concerning. While the Europeans were keen to find a diplomatic solution so as to avoid another intractable war in the Persian Gulf, the permanent members of the UNSC were all united in their desire to bring an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions. The November 2003 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which outlined that developments at the Natanz plant suggested a project far more ambitious than one aimed at civilian uses, brought the international community more firmly together. Indeed, by 2006, Iran was referred to the United Nations Security Council in keeping with UN Charter Chapter VII. The result of this referral was successive rounds of multilateral sanctions between 2006 and 2010 on Iran if it did not cease all enrichment activities and comply with international demands in relation to its nuclear programme. These gradually intensifying sanctions led to the cutting off of Iranian banks and other organisations to external finance and wide-ranging sanctions on its oil exports, among other things. UNSC sanctions were met by even more stringent sanctions by the United States and the European Union. In addition to forcing all European companies to exit Iran, the EU imposed sanctions on every single central bank, invalidated shipping insurance so that European companies would not ship from Iran, and denied Iran access to SWIFT, the globe's foremost electronic payment forum. Further to this, Washington upped the ante on the extra-territorial nature of its unilateral sanctions on Iran, beginning to punish companies and states that engaged with Iran. Naturally, these sanctions began to have a crippling effect on the Iranian economy. By the first half of the 2010s, the Islamic Republic was undergoing a monthly revenue loss to the tune of $5 billion and a monumental loss of purchasing power. Additionally, its currency had collapsed, and hyperinflation was taking hold of the economy, but the Ahmadinejad government doubled down, playing up its independence and resistance to pressure (Ehteshami, 2017).

The nuclear saga did not end there, though. With the election of the far more moderate Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, not to mention the warning by a senior Saudi prince, Turki al-Faisal, that Saudi Arabia would develop nuclear weapons if Iran was not stopped fully in its tracks, the drive for a diplomatic solution increased substantially. Rouhani was

swift and proactive in his approach to negotiations with the group of countries that soon became known as the P5+1, namely the five permanent members of the UNSC and Germany. Following a series of Iranian concessions, in July 2015, the seven parties agreed to a wide-ranging nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA). In return for the lifting of sanctions and Iran's reintegration into the international community, Tehran agreed the following (Ehteshami, 2017: 240).

> To cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98 per cent, use no more than 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges, eliminate its medium-enriched uranium, limit enrichment to only 3.67 per cent until 2030, not build pressuri[s]ed water reactors for the next 15 years, not enrich uranium in its second-generation centrifuges until 2025, give IAEA inspectors regular access to Iran's facilities, and either close or convert facilities which could serve proliferation.

Coming into effect in January 2016, the deal was a major diplomatic feat for Rouhani and US President Barack Obama. By May 2018, though, Republican US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the JCPoA, rendering the agreement null and void. Following this withdrawal, the Trump administration went on to launch a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, which included the most stringent unilateral sanctions to date. Soon realising that the JCPoA would unlikely be revived, not least of all due to growing pressure from President Trump in relation to Iranian activities in the wider region, Tehran ceased to keep to the spirit of the deal in its nuclear activities (Crisis Group, 2021). Even at the time of writing, over five years later, and even despite the election of Barack Obama's former vice-president, Joe Biden, to the US presidency, negotiations have failed to revive the JCPoA. As such, Iran's economy continues to be isolated from large swathes of the world.

The Iran-GCC/US Rivalry: Other Key Issues and Developments

The effects of the rivalry between Iran and the GCC states and the US were certainly not limited to the realm of sanctions and the nuclear issue, though. Much as in previous periods, episodes of hostility and aggression, in addition to a pervasive spirit of mutual securitisation and enmity, were ubiquitous. While relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran had been unusually pleasant during the bulk of the Khatami period, with the two sides even exchanging top-level diplomatic visits and signing a security agreement in 2001 (Al-Maeena, 2001), the ascendancy of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian

presidency, alongside the revelations about Iran's hitherto-clandestine nuclear development, entailed a steady regression in Saudi-Iranian relations to their usual state of rivalry. While Ahmadinejad did make two visits to Saudi Arabia during his leadership, increased competition in both the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East (for example, following the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri in Lebanon) rendered ties between the two states challenging (Kamrava, 2013a). The so-called Arab Spring in the early 2010s, which saw regional fractures emerge along political, economic, sectarian, and republic/monarchy lines, heightened perceptions in Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners of Iran's threat to their domestic stability. Fearful and directly accusatory that Iran was working with Shi'a citizens in GCC states to overthrow the incumbent monarchies, the stance of Saudi Arabia and its partners became increasingly antagonistic towards Iran. The swift and heavy-handed thwarting of protests in Shi'a-majority Bahrain by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar is testament to the severity and no-nonsense approach taken by Riyadh and its partners towards perceived Iranian interference. Indeed, episodes such as this even led Saudi Arabia and some of its partners to instrumentalise sectarian identity to undermine legitimate calls for democratic and liberal reforms, claiming that all protesters in their countries were agents of the Iranian regime, something that was far from reality (Matthiesen, 2013). Further to this, the fact that Saudi Arabia found itself at loggerheads with Iran in several security arenas across the Middle East from Syria to Yemen, with each side supporting the enemies of the other, only cemented the sense in both capitals that they were deeply embroiled in a struggle for regional predominance. As Juneau (2014: 97) aptly explains, "leaders of the GCC states naturally interpret Iran's actions through the prism of what they see as Tehran's hegemonic ambitions. These ambitions, in their view, can only be reali[s]ed at the expense of their own security and, in Saudi Arabia's case, can only clash with its own ambitions". By the time that upheaval had taken hold of numerous states within the wider Middle East, thus, deep and wide-ranging competition between Iran and several GCC states had firmly become a staple of Persian Gulf regional security dynamics. Within the context of the protracted Iran-US rivalry, typified during the early 21st century by the nuclear-related sanctions, the region was largely defined by an anti-Iran US-GCC coalition of sorts.

To appreciate the nature of China's navigation of regional rivalries during the first two decades or so of the 21st century, it serves to outline some of the key episodes and events in Iran's relations with the US and the GCC states following the Arab Spring. In 2016, Saudi-Iran ties witnessed one of their all-time lows. Following the execution in Saudi Arabia of a

prominent Saudi Shi‘a cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, who was sentences to death for “inciting violence and leading anti-government protests” in 2011, protesters stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran. According to the Saudi government, the Iranian regime even ignored multiple pleas from the Saudi embassy for help. In response, Riyadh cut off diplomatic ties with Tehran (Al-Jazeera, 2016). In 2019, following years of intense hostility between Iran-backed groups and Saudi Arabia and its proxies in the Yemen conflict, two drone strikes hit the Saudi Abqaiq oil processing facility and the Khurais oilfield. While this was not the first time that missiles had been fired on Saudi Arabian territory from Yemen, given that Abqaiq is the site at which over 60 percent of Saudi oil is processed, the strike was seen as an attack on “the heart of Saudi Arabia’s oil infrastructure” (Safi and Wearden, 2019). The United States and Saudi Arabia quickly pointed their fingers at Iran, arguing that it was responsible for the attack via its Houthi proxies in Yemen. Iran denied this, but the event nonetheless had a significant impact on Gulf threat perceptions in relation to Tehran. In late 2019 and early 2020, Iran-US ties became even more heated. Amid US condemnation of Iran’s brutal crackdown on protesters and imposition of sanctions on a prominent member of the Iranian government during what became known as ‘Bloody November’ and concomitant US complaints that a standoff with violent protesters at the US embassy in Baghdad had been orchestrated by Tehran, US President Trump authorised the assassination of Iran’s Quds Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, in Baghdad (BBC News, 2020a). In response, Iran launched ballistic missiles on the al-Asad US military base in Iraq, injuring over 100 US military personnel (Ayash and Davison, 2020). These events give a strong sense of the profound mutual securitisation and aggression between Iran and its key rivals during the 2010s.

Interestingly, though, and particularly so given that this dissertation focuses on China’s role in the regional security subcomplex, while tensions persisted in Iran’s relations with the United States into the Biden administration era, Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed in March 2023 to restore diplomatic relations (Houghton, 2023). While Iraq played a significant role in Saudi-Iran negotiations since 2021, and while Oman similarly provided its diplomatic support, the deal was brokered in Beijing with the support of Chinese officials. Naturally, China’s role in the agreement will be explored later in the chapter in more depth, but by August 2023 both sides had taken the momentous step of re-opening their embassies in the other’s country (France 24, 2023). Thus, while it is unclear whether this period of warming

relations will survive the test of time, for now tensions between the two states have been reduced.

The GCC Split

Despite being a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Qatar's ties with its GCC partners have long suffered peaks and troughs. Prior and following its independence in 1971, Qatar was the subject of external interference by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. In the 1990s, border skirmishes emerged between Riyadh and Doha, which on at least one occasion resulted in military deaths on Qatar's side. Furthermore, Qatar and Bahrain experienced territorial disagreements and significant tension in relation to the Hawar Islands in the 1980s (Wiegand, 2012). Vitally, multiple examples of multilateral collaboration between several GCC states have surfaced over the years in which they have attempted to exert pressure and control over Doha. In the wake of the Qatari coup in 1995, which saw the replacement of Khalifa Hamad Al Thani with his son, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt – all of which are especially relevant in the period under study in the 2010s – planned a subsequently-aborted coup in retaliation. Furthermore, in 2014, the ambassadors of the three aforementioned GCC states in Qatar were recalled, with Riyadh and its partners referencing Doha as a security threat. This episode followed the ascension to power of Emir Sheikh Tamam bin Hamad Al Thani, and it was in all likelihood the troika's attempt at forcing Qatar to align with their regional policies – especially in relation to Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood and its ties with Tehran. This iteration of tension persisted for eight months and was only resolved thanks to mediation by Kuwait.

With these events in mind, it was not surprising on June 5, 2017 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt launched the most significant display of their anger towards Doha in the form of a blockade. Straight after the mysterious hacking of the Qatar News Agency, which created a political storm due to a fake story about the Emir of Qatar, the blockading quartet introduced numerous punitive measures against Doha. First, they withdrew all of their ambassadors. Second, they forced all Qataris to leave their countries. Third, they launched a land, sea, and air blockade of Qatar. Fourth, they prohibited Qatari aircraft from using their airspace. Their demands for the cessation of these measures were that Qatar end its relationships with Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, that it close the Al-Jazeera news network, and that it align its foreign policy with the other GCC states (Ulrichsen, 2020).

Doha's ties with Tehran, especially, have been a source of GCC irritation for many years. For Qatar, though, the relationship is an economic necessity. Primarily built on their shared ownership of the globe's biggest gas field, the North Dome/South Pars field, Qatari-Iranian relations are one of pragmatic necessity. Indeed, nearly half of Qatar's gas endowments in the field are technically situated in Iran's maritime territory. As the foremost exporter of liquefied natural gas, this is no insignificant thing for Doha. Relations with Tehran are nothing short of essential for the Qatari regime, thus. Ironically, though, the Saudi-led blockade only forced Qatar closer to Iran, with Tehran playing a crucial role in buttressing Doha's food security following the blockade (Boussois, 2019). Crucially, the blockading quartet were supported in their endeavours against Qatar by the Trump administration, which deployed securitising rhetoric aligned with that of the blockading quartet. This was largely the case due to Trump's unrelenting securitisation of Tehran. The blockade was finally resolved three and a half years later by the al-Ula Declaration in 2021, which ever since has heralded a steady rapprochement between Qatar and the blockading states (Batrawy and Nabil, 2021). With that said, both Bahrain and the UAE have been fairly slow to reintegrate Doha or display total trust in their GCC neighbour. Critically, the GCC split has underlined the security cleavages in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex beyond the binary lens of Iran-GCC competition (Krieg, 2019). While the Iran factor was a pivotal driver behind the quartet's decision, it was not the sole bone of contention in Doha's ties with the GCC troika.

Further Context: Shifting Eastward Focus of Persian Gulf States

Before engaging in depth with China's hedging strategy, regional responses, and the outcomes of this strategy, it is vital to acknowledge that Persian Gulf states have been undergoing their own foreign policy transformations in recent decades. With the turn of the century, and particularly following the 9/11 attacks and the US-led invasion of Iraq, regional states found themselves seeking diversified relations with powerful states abroad. In the case of many Persian Gulf states, the benefits of increased economic engagement with China, in addition to the lack of "liberalising strings" to the PRC's ties with them, have made China a very attractive partner (Breslin, 2011). Whereas several GCC states' international relations have been deeply dictated by their partnerships with the United States and other Western states, many began to engage in various strategies of hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning between China, Russia, and the United States (Dannreuther, 2024). That is not to say that regional states have abandoned the United States - indeed far from it – but rather that they

are enjoying the diversified benefits and leverage that come from engagement with multiple strong powers. From Iran's isolated perspective, the need to look to the east actually necessitated the introduction of an entire strategy called 'Look East' during Ahmadinejad's leadership (Fan, 2022). Iran continued to value ties with European states but deeper engagement with China was necessary following the imposition of sanctions. Amid this, China has become the primary trading partner of multiple regional states in the 21st century, something that must not be overlooked when examining its hedging strategy amid rivalries during the period. While this discussion does not require further engagement at this point, it helps to understand this dynamic before exploring China's positionality in the region during this redefined era of international relations and seeking to understand the impact of China's hedging strategy on its ties with regional states. For many, China is a key partner.

China's Hedging Strategy: Approaches and Dynamics

Moving beyond the US-led invasion of Iraq, the PRC continued to cultivate diverse relations on a deeper and broader level with key rivalling states in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex. Indeed, despite tensions between Iran and its neighbours and Washington, Beijing still placed considerable weight behind its ties with Tehran rather than simply siding with the US/GCC states. Further to this, while its relations with Qatar could never be considered a frontline priority in the region, China did engage in strategic hedging during the protracted GCC split to a degree that mirrored its interests in each state. Indeed, the hierarchical framework that China uses to underline the current significance of each relationship in the region is that of strategic partnerships. According to Sun (2022: 300), "there are several considerations in implementing partnership diplomacy, such as the partner state's capacity (including factors such as its economic strength, regional influence, and/or political stability) and willingness for deeper levels of cooperation, reflected in existing levels of economic interdependence or political friendliness". Following the hierarchy from highest levels to lowest levels, the types of partnerships are: Comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSP); innovative comprehensive partnerships, and strategic partnerships (SP). If China has not yet signed a partnership with a state, it signifies a lack of current desire on one or both sides. Table 7.1 displays the nature of Chinese partnership diplomacy in the Persian Gulf and the years in which the most recent agreements were signed in each case.

Table 7.1 China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Persian Gulf

State	Partnership Level	Year Signed

Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
UAE	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
Bahrain	N/A	N/A

Source: Sun (2022: 306).

Thus, even before engaging deeply with the nature of China's hedging strategy between 2004 and 2024, it becomes clear that China has been forging strong ties with most key rivalling states in the region. China's foremost priorities in the region, based on the partnership framework, are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, all of which enjoy the status of comprehensive strategic partners. As such, keeping these key states content is central to China's engagement in the region. Further, with the exception of Bahrain, an ardent rival of Iran, China enjoys at least a strategic partnership with every single Persian Gulf state. This is not to say that Beijing has no interest in Bahrain, though. Indeed, the final section analysing the efficacy of China's regional hedging strategy will examine the inroads in Sino-Bahraini relations and whether China's strategy has affected their ties.

The Iran Nuclear and Sanctions Issues

The thorniest issue affecting China's hedging strategy between Iran and its rivals over the last two decades has been Iran's nuclear development and the successive rounds of multilateral and unilateral sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic. There are two realms in which China's actions towards Iran during the first sanctions period (2006-2015) and ever since have been most salient. The first is in the United Nations Security Council and the second is in its direct ties with the Islamic Republic. The latter is significant because Tehran became highly isolated in the international community following the imposition of sanctions. As such, the very fact that the PRC maintained relations with Iran is relevant to understanding China's hedging strategy.

According to Scita (2022a: 94), during the UNSC sanctions period, Beijing was eager to balance its desired role of being perceived as "responsible" in the international community while "minimising the impact on the relationship with Iran". In the United Nations Security Council, China voted in favour of all six UNSC draft resolutions related to Iran and, in particular, all four rounds of multilateral sanctions. With that said, the PRC made an effort on each occasion to attempt to "minimi[s]e damage to Sino-Iranian cooperation" either by

delaying the passage of UNSC resolutions or by insisting on changes to them (Garver, 2018: 127). For example, in 2007, the Chinese managed to soften the harshest elements of UNSC draft resolution 1747 to include the assertion that the Iranian economy and people should not be harmed and that the UNSC's actions should be "incremental and proportionate" (van Kemenade, 2010). Additionally, during discussions in 2010 about a fourth round of UNSC sanctions, Beijing asserted that it would only accept less punitive measures than those being pushed for by the West (Scita, 2022a). Across several resolutions, Chinese officials forwarded proposals that would see "the deletion of entire passages" (Grajewski and Scita, 2024). Indeed, in the discussion prior to the vote on UNSC Resolution 1929, the Chinese representative to the UNSC, Li Baodong, even expressed: "We [China] are of the view that sanctions can never fundamentally resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. To bring about a comprehensive and appropriate settlement of the issue, it is imperative to return to the track of dialogue and negotiation" (UNSC, 2010). While these actions produced minimal results and were more likely intended to signal support for Iran than to ensure concrete mitigation for the Islamic Republic, it is worth remembering that, other than Russia, China was the only permanent member of the UNSC making any effort at all to protect Iran. Unlike Russia, which drafted a resolution in relation to Iran's nuclear development in September 2008, China did not propose any resolutions to the UNSC (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2018). This does not change the fact that China voted in favour of all key resolutions, though, thereby ultimately siding with the US-led Western bloc in the UNSC. Significantly, though, in addition to opposing unilateral US and EU sanctions, the Chinese acted as informal mediators of sorts between the US and Iranian administrations, calling on them for years during the UNSC sanctions period to seek a diplomatic solution to their rivalry and providing them with informal diplomatic channels via Chinese officials. Further to this, between June 2013 and July 2015, once diplomatic channels had been opened and talks were in full-flight, Chinese officials lobbied the Iranian government on no fewer than 17 separate occasions to go with an open mind to the negotiating table and consider ways to meet the international community half-way. Xi Jinping even played a role in these discussions, highlighting the importance attached to the issue by the Chinese leadership (Garver, 2018). In terms of JCPoA negotiations, therefore, the very fact that China enjoyed positive ties with Iran generated a dimension to diplomatic discussions that buttressed movements towards a positive outcome.

Crucially, though, aside from watering down proposals in the UNSC, the primary realm in which Beijing sought to make up for its siding with the international community during the UNSC sanctions period was in its bilateral ties with the Islamic Republic. Soon after the imposition of the first round of UNSC sanctions, China overtook the European Union as Iran's primary trading partner. This very fact offered the Islamic Republic a vital "lifeline" following the exodus of European and other West-aligned East Asian countries from Iran after the ratification of sanctions-related UNSC resolutions (Hong, 2018). Before, and to a certain degree after, the imposition of unilateral sanctions by the US and the EU in the early 2010s, China showcased a willingness to circumvent sanctions and continue trading with the Islamic Republic. Among the tools used by Beijing have been "barter arrangements", such as the exchange of Iranian oil for Chinese goods, the use of transshipments via third-party countries,[5] and even the transferal of Iranian oil at sea with tankers flagged by third-party countries (Slavin, 2011; Hong, 2021). More recently, the PRC has simply pretended that Iranian oil is actually from another country, with Malaysia being a prominent and frequent example of this (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). Overall, over the UNSC sanctions period, Sino-Iranian trade grew significantly from less than $10 billion annual trade in 2004 to a peak of around $50 billion in 2014 (Yetiv and Oskarsson, 2018). Further, Table 7.2 displays Chinese oil imports from Iran between 2012 and 2022, displaying that oil imports remained strong and even increased year-on-year during the UNSC sanctions period and the JCPoA period. As is evident, thus, throughout the UNSC sanctions period, the PRC balanced its ties with the United States (not to mention the anti-Iran states in the West and the Middle East) and Iran by voting in favour of sanctions, while working to water down the impact of them, attempting to support diplomatic moves aimed at a solution to the impasse, improving economic ties with Iran, and circumventing sanctions wherever possible. Naturally, this still underscores the fact that Beijing is not willing to privilege its relations with Iran over its ties with the United States, but it is similarly not willing to abandon its relations with Iran due to US pressure.

Table 7.2 China's Oil Imports from Iran (2012-2022) (Barrels per day)

[5] These third-party countries include Dubai in the UAE. In recent years, some Emirati companies have been sanctioned by the United States as per extraterritorial provisions in US unilateral sanctions for facilitating Sino-Iranian energy trade. This dynamic underscores that the Iran-GCC (and even Iran-UAE) rivalry is not as binary or simple as some frame it. In the case of the UAE, Dubai's relatively positive ties with Iran complicate the picture.

Year	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022
Barrels per day	426,000	439,600	549,250	620,000	650,000	Approximately 200,000	276,000

Sources: Statista (2011); Reuters (2015); S&P Global Commodity Insights (2020); U.S. Energy Information Administration (2021); Statista (2023).

Things have not remained so simple from the Chinese perspective since the US withdrawal from the JCPoA in 2018 and subsequent unilateral US sanctions on Iran. As Table 7.2 shows, official Chinese oil imports from Iran decreased after 2018.[6] Furthermore, several Chinese companies have abandoned high-profile projects following the imposition of unilateral sanctions on Iran and the thorny issue of extraterritoriality built into them. This worsened following the US withdrawal from the JCPoA in 2018 and US President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, which saw China pull out of the potentially lucrative South Pars gas projects, among others (Radio Free Europe, 2019). Amid an increased willingness by the US to sanction third-party countries for engaging with Iran, in addition to hostilities directed by Donald Trump's administration towards China, Beijing opted during the remainder of Trump's presidency to tone down its circumvention of sanctions. Indeed, the Bank of Kunlun, long regarded as the vehicle that many Chinese companies used to circumvent sanctions on Iran, even made the decision to cease engaging with the Iranian economy in 2019. Thus, while the PRC made clear its opposition to unilateral measures, especially those that target third-party states, the pressure of a hawkish US administration was sufficient for Chinese organisations core to Sino-Iranian relations to abandon Iran (Motamedi, 2019). At the heart of this were concerns that the Trump administration may use Sino-Iranian relations as a pretext to escalate the Sino-US trade war and other hostilities between them. Beijing was simply unwilling to risk any such escalation. Indeed, beyond frequent proclamations that Beijing was furious at US unilateralism, the only way that China proactively supported Iran during this period was in defying a US draft resolution in August 2020 that would extend the Iran arms embargo. Alongside Russia, China voted against the proposal, and the majority of the other members abstained. Indeed, the Chinese ambassador to the UN used the opportunity to scold the US for its "bullying" and "unilateralism" (Nichols and Tétrault-Farber, 2020). Given that China was part of a long list of states that

[6] A small caveat to this is that China has continued to make use of third-party transshipments and previously mentioned tactics to downplay these figures.

were not aligned with Washington on the topic, this was far from a profound move but nonetheless presented Beijing with an opportunity to showcase its friendship with Iran.

With the arrival of the Biden administration in 2021, China relaxed its approach to Iran once again. By March, the 25-year Sino-Iranian deal had been signed, and during the September summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Xi Jinping announced that Iran's admission into the organisation as a full member would take place (Xinhua, 2021). Iran had been requesting to join the SCO since 2008, and it is believed that China had been the state stopping this from coming to fruition (Grajewski, 2022). Beijing finally accepting Iran's admission to the SCO in 2021 represents an important turning point. It is likely that Beijing allowed Tehran to join as Donald Trump's administration had been replaced by that of Joe Biden, a less hawkish leader on China, and such a move did not directly contravene any sanctions. While the significance of the SCO can easily be overstated – it is not an anti-US coalition preparing for war with the West – Iran hopes that its admission will signal to Washington that Tehran "can come out isolation without revising the JCPoA" (Fulton, 2023; O'Connor, 2023). In addition, Chinese economic engagement soon improved with Iranian exports to China increasing in 2022. According to data by ship-tracking company Vortexa, in the first ten months of 2023, China imported a staggering 1.05 million barrels of oil per day. It should be noted that, to achieve this, the PRC is once again using a variety of tactics to conceal the origin of this oil, from using old tankers known as the "dark fleet" that turn off their transponders to ship-to-ship transfers at sea and pretending shipments have come from Malaysia and other transshipment hubs (Xu, 2023). Much like during the UNSC sanctions period, under Biden's administration Beijing is building ties with Iran once again by circumventing US sanctions. This, in addition to allowing Iran to join the SCO and BRICS (in 2024), displays that China is back to a solid strategy of hedging between the United States and Iran.

Between Iran and its Rivals: Arms Sales and Military Cooperation

In broad terms, before engaging with specific episodes of tension and hostilities between Iran and its rivals, it serves to consider China's role in arms supplies and military cooperation with key states in the subcomplex, as these are particularly sensitive areas of engagement when considering regional tensions.

As Table 7.3 shows, between 2004 and 2022, China supplied Iran and its key rival, Saudi Arabia, with major weapons[7] to the combined value of nearly $1 billion. Over the period, China supplied Iran with $472 million worth of arms and Saudi Arabia with $423 million worth. The UAE came next, importing $166 million worth of arms from the PRC. The next most vehement rival of Iran, Bahrain, barely imported any weapons from China during the period, with the value reaching a meagre $4 million (SIPRI Data, 2024). But there are two further dimensions that elucidate China's role in this regard. The first is the issue of China's share as a total percentage of these countries' weapons imports. The second is the question of quality and the nature of weapons transferred. When it comes to China's share as a total percentage of these countries' weapons imports, what immediately becomes clear is that Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain (Iran's three foremost rivals in the GCC) account for around one percent of their arms imports. When contrasted against the fact that Chinese exports to the Islamic Republic account for over a quarter of its arms imports, Beijing cannot be viewed as an inconsequential player in Iran's military portfolio. While this area of Sino-Iranian relations has clearly been frustrated by the UN arms embargo (2006-2020), there is no denying the salience of this node of connectivity between the two states. Indeed, the highest share that China has represented of Saudi Arabian weapons imports over the last two decades was 2.5% in 2018. In the Iranian case, China accounted for between 47% and 75% (depending on the year) of Iran's annual arms imports between 2008 and 2015, albeit Iran actually imported small quantities of weaponry overall after 2012. Indeed, Chinese weapons supplies to Iran, in line with those of other exporters with the exception of a brief Russian surge in 2016, have been non-existent since 2016. Even following the lifting of the arms embargo in 2020, China has not properly resumed arms sales to the Islamic Republic. As will be discussed, though, this did not spell the end of military engagement between the two states.

Table 7.3 Chinese Arms Exports to Iran and its Rivals (2004-2022) (Trend Indicator Values, Figures in Millions of USD)[8]

	Iran	**Saudi Arabia**	**UAE**	**Bahrain**
2004-2007	216	0	0	0

[7] By major weapons, any of the following can be included: Aircraft, air defence systems, anti-submarine warfare weapons, armoured vehicles, artillery, engines, missiles, sensors, satellites, ships, turrets, and air refuelling systems (SIPRI, no date).

[8] "The TIV [Trend Indicator Value] is based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons and is intended to represent the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer" (SIPRI, no date).

2008-2011	200	72	0	0
2012-2015	56	35	45	0
2016-2019	0	211	110	4
2020-2022	0	105	11	0
Total 2004-2022	472	423	166	4
China's Share of State's Total Arms Imports (%)	26.7%	1.2%	0.83%	0.36%

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Data (2024).

The second issue is of a more qualitative dimension. In the years since Chinese arms sales to Iran have stopped, military trade has grown between the PRC and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Central to this trade has been the provision and shared development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Indeed, the UAE even turned to China for Wing Loong and CH-4 drones when Washington refused to supply Abu Dhabi with them (Bin Huwaidin, 2022). In the Saudi case, China's provision of UAVs is particularly noteworthy as Riyadh has been using them in its war against Iranian proxies in Yemen. Beijing has made no secret of this trade, agreeing in 2017 to construct a drone factory in the Kingdom to make CH-4 Caihong UAVs (Al-Tamimi, 2022). Iran has enjoyed no such benefit from its ties with China in the 21st century. With that said, in other military spheres, China has maintained a cautious balancing act between Iran and its rivals. The primary domain for this has been shared military drills, of which Beijing has engaged in multiple with key states. Indeed, between 2010 and 2019, China conducted four joint drills or technical port calls with Saudi Arabia and three with Iran, always making sure to hold them within a close time period to one another so as to avoid upsetting one side (Greer and Batmanghelidj, 2020). Between 2019 and 2023, China has conducted approximately a further two trilateral drills (2022 and 2023) in the Gulf of Oman with Iran and Russia (Nissenbaum and Han Wong, 2023). Beijing also held a joint maritime drill with Saudi Arabia in 2023 (Lucente, 2023). Maintaining the optics that neither side is preferred has clearly persisted after the Chinese brokered Saudi-Iran deal was signed. Indeed, even in February 2024, China announced an upcoming naval drill with the Iranians in the same week as its attendance at a high-profile military air show in Riyadh (Al-Monitor, 2024).

Navigating Tense Episodes between Iran and its Rivals

To provide a strong flavour of China's navigation of Iran's regional rivalries over the last two decades, this section will provide three brief vignettes examining how Beijing attempted

to balance its ties with all key parties. While China's trade with Iran has been significantly outpaced by its trade with several GCC states (Fulton, 2021: 210), not least of all due to the exceptional challenges associated with such engagement with Iran, these episodes display Beijing's concerted desire to balance its relations between Iran and the GCC states.

In 2016, Xi Jinping toured multiple regional states and signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with both Tehran and Riyadh during the same week. Far from a coincidence, this was a concerted effort by the Chinese government to balance ties with each state and avoid upsetting them, as this trip came within weeks of the execution in Saudi Arabia of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shi'a cleric, which sparked protesters in Tehran to storm the Saudi embassy there. Diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran were swiftly severed, and regional tensions grew in intensity. Amid this tension, Beijing was clear that it would "not pick sides" between its two friends (Houghton, 2022: 136). Indeed, the PRC's Vice-Foreign Minister, Zhang Ming, declared that when it comes to regional rivalries "China has always taken a balanced and just position" (BBC News, 2016). This declaration left no doubt that Beijing was intent on balancing between its two partners and avoiding becoming embroiled in their hostilities. The clear intent behind signing the comprehensive strategic partnership with each state during the very same trip to the region fits squarely within this hedging strategy.

The two other episodes that are explored here happened within a very short time period. The first relates to the Saudi-Iran rivalry and the second to the US-Iran rivalry. In late 2019, the PRC engaged in military maritime exercises with Iran and Saudi Arabia separately within weeks of each other. Cognizant that such sensitive engagement with one state could be misperceived by the other as a break from the position of neutrality that China had long adopted, Beijing made sure to mirror its engagement with each state. The particular impetus for such careful balancing between the two states was that, two months prior, the Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities in Saudi Arabia had been attacked by drones. Alongside Washington, Riyadh blamed the attack on Iran and its proxies in Yemen. China's stance on these attacks had been, once again, concertedly to avoid blaming anyone. Hua Chunying, the Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, did condemn the incident but argued that there was no basis upon which to blame any particular state. Doing everything they could to keep a distance from the issue between their two partners, the Chinese simply asked for all "relevant parties to avoid taking actions that bring about an escalation in regional tensions" (Reuters, 2019; Houghton, 2022). Once again, Beijing made sure not to lift its head above

the parapet and to ensure that it not become embroiled in finger-pointing or allowing any perceptions to emerge that it had picked sides. Naturally, there are question marks over whether this actually works as a strategy when a state (in this case, Saudi Arabia) has been attacked and is convinced of the provenance (in this case, Iran) of an attack.

The month after the December maritime exercises, the United States assassinated Iran’s Quds Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, in Baghdad, to which Tehran responded by launching ballistic missiles on the al-Asad US military base in Iraq. Within a context of poor Sino-US relations typified by the so-called trade war that US President Donald Trump was spearheading, Beijing followed its usual pattern of calling for all parties to de-escalate, but rather interestingly singled out the United States to “exercise restraint” (Wu, 2020; Fulton, 2020). In a series of phone calls with Iranian and Russian leaders and officials, China’s rhetoric was far starker, describing the US’ actions as “bullying” (Panda, 2020). Following the retaliatory Iranian ballistic missile attack on the al-Asad military base, China called for restraint from all parties, thereby avoiding directly criticising Iran in the same manner that Beijing had criticised Washington following Soleimani’s assassination (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Much as during other periods, China tried to keep to the sidelines, while displaying in the least impactful way possible its frustration with the US’ unilateral aggression.

Further Developments and the 2023 Saudi-Iran Deal

Any discussion about China’s engagement with the region during the 2020s would be incomplete without mentioning the 25-year deal signed between China and Iran in 2021. The reason for discussing this is not because it represented a watershed moment in China’s engagement with the region, indeed far from it, but rather because it attracted significant debate in the West and in Arab capitals about the contours and apparent durability of Sino-Iranian relations. While this will be explored in the section examining regional perceptions of China’s hedging strategy, in short the agreement seeks to cement the comprehensive strategic partnership signed between the two states in 2016 offering a roadmap for “comprehensively expanding commercial, economic, political, cultural, defence, and security cooperation between two ancient Asian civilisations” (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2021). This signalled both China’s and Iran’s desires for their relations to progress smoothly and in a variety of fields. Although majorly constrained by sanctions in practicality, Beijing wished to showcase its preference for durable, long-term relations with Iran. On the other side of the coin, though, China seemingly relegated Iran momentarily in

late 2022 giving the impression of siding with the United Arab Emirates over the contested islands of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa in a joint PRC-GCC statement (al-Youm, 2022). This certainly represented a very rare event in which China would display an overt opinion on such a politically-contentious regional issue, though.

In Spring 2023, following a series of negotiations since 2021 in Baghdad and Musqat, Saudi Arabia and Iran signed an agreement in Beijing to re-establish diplomatic relations. Riyadh agreed to "tone down" Iran International, a news channel despised by Tehran, in exchange for the Iranians attempting to cease Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia (Cafiero, 2023). Further, the two states agreed to re-open their embassies, something that was realised in the summer. While some question whether Beijing's role was merely symbolic, based not least of all on the fact that significant energy had already been exerted by Iraq and Oman, the negotiations did require more than one visit to Beijing by Iranian and Saudi officials, suggesting that China's role was not negligible. Indeed, Xi Jinping was asked whether he would play a peace-brokering role during the same visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022 that had produced the controversial joint statement on the contested Iran-UAE islands (Azimi, 2023). Thus, while China's role was not sustained over a long period, it is clear that it did have to engage in some specific discussions with the two sides. Naturally, as will be discussed in more detail below, the successful brokering of the deal was a huge boon for Beijing, as it represented its breakthrough into the region as a mediator. Further to this, if the deal stands the test of time, it may mean that China comes under less pressure when seeking to maintain positive relations with all regional states.

China and the GCC Split

Given that Qatar did not represent a direct priority for China during the period of the blockade, this section will be brief, allowing greater scope for detail on issues between Iran and its rivals. When the GCC split first happened, with the signalling by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (in addition to Egypt) that their ambassadors would be recalled, China was surprised. Beijing had been trying to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the GCC for several years by this point, and the split would present yet another stumbling block that would render the whole enterprise unlikely. At the beginning, Beijing offered to mediate between Qatar and its blockaders, but none of them accepted the offer (Burton, 2020). In so offering, though, China set out its stall as yet again an external power that was looking to maintain relations with all parties. Indeed, within days of the beginning of the rift, both

Qatari and Emirati officials had formal meetings with the Chinese to discuss the issue and their relations. During the meetings, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed that he was "confident that Gulf countries have the wisdom to resolve divergence" and that Beijing would be "willing to play a constructive role to help ease tensions according to the will of regional parties" (The National, 2017). Interestingly, though, aside from the rejected offer to mediate, China's ties with Qatar, much like its ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, did improve over the course of the blockade. To be clear, Saudi Arabia and the UAE still represented China's priorities among the Gulf states – indeed China upgraded its ties with the UAE to a comprehensive strategic partnership during the GCC rift in 2018 and did not offer the same to Qatar - but Sino-Qatari ties did grow in absolute terms, too (Burton, 2020). Indeed, the fact that the PRC upgraded the strategic partnership with the UAE is likely demonstrative of the wide-ranging ties that they had built over the course of the preceding three decades, rather than as an attempt to display preference for the UAE over Qatar. Given that previous sections have outlined growth in China's ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, here the focus will be on its ties with Qatar.

Interestingly, far from focusing relations solely on fields unrelated directly to security and the military, Sino-Qatari ties grew in sensitive areas. Qatar imported $118 million worth of weaponry from China during the blockade (SIPRI Data, 2024). A mere few months after the start of the blockade, Beijing supplied Doha with a SY-400 short-range ballistic missile system (Panda, 2017). While active military hostilities were not taking place between the GCC rivals, China's decision to supply Qatar with an advanced military system during a period in which it had also agreed to construct a UAV factory in Saudi Arabia displays that it was firmly balancing relations between regional states. While the extent of its engagement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE far outstripped its engagement with Qatar, China was broadening its ties with Doha in areas that it had hitherto not been able to – the military trading sphere being an important one. Indeed, Chinese arms sales to Qatar accounted for 15 percent of Qatari weapons imports in 2018, the first full calendar year of the blockade (SIPRI Data, 2024). Further to this, several significant business and trade deals were concluded during the blockade. For example, in September 2018, QatarEnergy, a state-owned enterprise and the globe's foremost liquefied natural gas producer, reached a 22-year agreement with PetroChina International to export 3.4 million tonnes of LNG each year. Additionally, China was supporting construction for the Qatari Football World Cup, an event that would bring considerable prestige to Doha if executed successfully (Chaziza,

2020). Finally, in December 2018, China and Qatar held their first strategic dialogue in Beijing, on that occasion between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani. This was an important step in establishing such a mechanism between the two states and represented a mark of respect from the Chinese government towards the Qataris (Wu, 2021). With that said, it was not until after the al-Ula Declaration in 2021, which marked the end of this episode in GCC politics, that senior Chinese officials would visit Qatar, with key meetings prior being held in China (Fulton, 2022). This was quite evidently an effort to avoid upsetting the blockading quartet.

As is evident, thus, while Beijing did not upgrade Doha's status to that of a comprehensive strategic partner, unlike the UAE and (previously) Saudi Arabia, China did not align with the blockading states during the GCC split. Instead, China kept away from the dispute and attempted to improve relations with all states, something that had firmly been the staple of its foreign policy in the region for over four decades.

China's Hedging Strategy: Regional Responses and Perceptions

The United States and GCC States

Officials in Washington and the GCC have never made a secret about their disdain and fears surrounding China's relationship with Iran. By far the more striking and predominant feature is their persistent condemnation of the relationship and their frequent attempts to coax Beijing away from Tehran. The Iran sanctions issue provides a strong example of this. In the build up to the vote in June 2010 on UNSC Resolution 1929, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah met with Yang Jiechi, the Chinese Foreign Minister, to offer Beijing guaranteed oil supplies in exchange for China backing sanctions without watering them down or seeking to circumvent them. That it was King Abdullah himself that undertook this assignment on behalf of the Kingdom and its anti-Iran partners speaks to the immense importance attached to Sino-Iranian relations in Riyadh (MacGillivray, 2019). Clearly, there was the sense in Saudi Arabia that those seeking to contain Iran and its nuclear development were being hampered to a certain degree by the actions of China. The offer to ensure reliable oil supplies in exchange for China abandoning Iran was evidently an attempt at creating a win-win for Beijing and Riyadh, but it highlights that the Saudis did not appreciate the myriad reasons why China seeks diversified ties with regional states. The Americans similarly expended effort during the period to get China out of Iran's orbit. In 2009, the Deputy Secretary of

State and other key officials pressured China on the topic, making Beijing aware that Washington views the Iran issue as central to its national security and that China's willingness or lack thereof would be an important "litmus test" of its ties with the US (Garver, 2018: 128-129). Further, in addition to US officials making frequent requests of Beijing to cease oil trade with Iran (Mohammed and Irish, 2021), Washington has sanctioned numerous Chinese business and individuals for engaging commercially with Iran, thereby placing considerable obstacles in the way of entities that attempt such engagement with the Islamic Republic (*see, for example,* U.S. Department of State, 2019).

Much as in previous periods, US and GCC states have expressed consistent frustration at Sino-Iranian relations that has been reflected both in statements made by officials and in public discourse. Responses to the signing of the 2021 25-year deal between Iran and China provide an excellent insight into these states' perceptions of Sino-Iranian relations. Following the announcement of the agreement, tensions certainly heightened among these states. When questioned about the deal, US President Joe Biden responded that he had "been worrying about it for a year" (Iran International, 2021). Aligning with this, several commentators and officials in the GCC states expressed deep concern about the deal (Houghton, 2022). Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, the previous head of Saudi news network, al-Arabiya, argued that the Sino-Iranian deal "could upend the regional order", further questioning if it signalled China's readiness to be Iran's international sponsor (Sahaffah, 2021). In keeping with this sentiment, in the year prior to the deal, al-Ghamidi, a Saudi political analyst, asserted that "China's intentions in getting closer to Iran are suspicious. Arab states, particularly Arab Gulf states, should get to the bottom of China's future intentions vis-à-vis its rapprochement with Iran" (al-Ghamidi, 2020). This sentiment was broadly shared by officials, too. During a speech at Durham University, UK, half-a-year after the signing of the China-Iran deal, Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al Saud, the Saudi ambassador to the UK, affirmed that while Beijing "*can* be friends with both Iran and us [the GCC states]… we would, *of course*, prefer it if they weren't friends" (Houghton, 2024a). While this statement once again highlighted the Saudi preference that China stay away from Iran, the pragmatism behind it and awareness that Riyadh must learn to live with the China-Iran partnership shine through. Indeed, GCC officials are aware that Beijing's interests in the GCC are equal to, if not greater than, its interests in Iran, and that no significant Chinese action in favour of Iran will emerge that threatens them. Fahad Araeshi (2020), a Saudi emissary to the PRC, declares that Sino-Iranian ties "will not impact upon

China's future relations with the Arab Gulf states, unless Beijing supports Iran militarily against the Gulf states, which is an unlikely outcome given China's extensive interests there". It is likely that this pragmatism is what ultimately led Saudi Arabia to sign the China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal in 2023.

Indeed, even Washington has displayed pragmatism towards the Sino-Iranian relationship amid its complaints. Examples have also surfaced over the period of Washington trying to make use of the Sino-Iranian relationship by encouraging China to discourage Iranian policies that are deemed unfavourable by the US. More recently, this has been seen in relation to Iran's support for Hamas and the Houthis with regards to the 2023 war in Gaza and Houthi attacks on international shipping (Sevastopulo, 2024). This, in addition to the fact that the US had used China as unofficial intermediaries between the West and China during the protracted UNSC sanctions period, displays that there is another dimension to this tale. Successive US administrations believe that Beijing is aiding and abetting an aggressive and revisionist actor, but their wide-ranging ties can provide the opportunity for stronger dialogue between Iran and the international community if Beijing listens to US pleas for support.

The signing of the Saudi-Iran deal, and the very fact that both states gave the win to an external power that had been courting them both, signals a very positive response from regional heavyweights towards China's regional policies. Amid a period in which Middle Eastern states more widely are attempting to mend their relations with their neighbours, it is probable that China's hedging strategy is viewed as favourable and in keeping with the preferred directionality of regional states. Amid the sense in most GCC states that their bilateral ties with China are progressing at an exceptional pace and in a wide range of areas, Beijing has won significant goodwill from them, as is evidenced by the very positive claims made by regional states in statements about their ties with the PRC. As such, despite concerns about the Sino-Iranian partnership, such a breakthrough (even if it ends up being short-lived) represents deep acceptance of China's role in the region. Even the Biden administration has responded fairly positively to the news, with John Kirby, the National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications stating: "Regardless of what the interest was or who was sat down at the table – if it [the deal] can be sustained… and Saudi Arabia doesn't have to continually try to defend itself against attacks from the Houthis who are funded and supported by Iran, in the end we welcome that" (Widakuswara, 2023).

Thus, while the Americans have tried to play down the significance of China's role within the deal, the agreement has generally been viewed as a positive step.

Iran

The debate in Iran on China has been lively and multi-faceted since the PRC's emergence as the foremost external power in the country after the imposition of UNSC sanctions. With claims as stark as that China has been engaging in a process of "peripheralising" Iran by supporting multilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic and then monopolising its markets (Nazrboland, 2020), it can be challenging to ascertain which sentiments prevail. Indeed, Ehteshami, Horesh, and Xu (2018) argue that the debate among Iranian politicians is broadly bifurcated along the reformist/hardliner chasm, with reformists adopting a cautious approach towards China that often mirrors the claim outlined above and hardliners arguing for closer ties with the PRC. Almost irrespective of these concerns, though, Iran's isolation from the international community has left it little choice but to move closer to China. This has necessitated a deep-seated pragmatism and acceptance that Beijing must manage its ties with other states. In a paper produced by the Research Centre of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (2016), gratitude is hinted at towards China for its role in softening the nature of the UNSC sanctions despite Beijing voting in favour for them. Indeed, despite references to unfavourable Chinese policies, the paper views China as a positive force that can help improve Iran's image in the international community and there is an understanding that the PRC cannot relegate its ties with the US for the sake of Iran. Further to this, successive Iranian officials have expressed publicly their support for China, including their gratitude for China's role in "promoting dialogue and reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia" (Embassy of the PRC in the UK, 2023).

This does not mean to say, though, that Iranian officials consistently shy away from criticising Chinese support for Iran's rivals. Following the controversial China-GCC statement that hinted at Chinese alignment with the UAE's position on the contested islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, the ire from Tehran was palpable. Iran's Ambassador to China, Mohammad Keshavarzzadeh, gave the Chinese government a note of protest (Tehran Times, 2022a) and the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi raised it as a complaint at a meeting with the Chinese Vice Premier (Tehran Times, 2022b). Additionally, several Iranian politicians released furious statements complaining that Iran would have to take a starker stance on Taiwan and indeed relating to the treatment of Muslims in China if

this was to be the PRC's stance on the islands (Alfoneh, 2022; Iran Students' News Agency, 2022). While Sino-Iranian relations experienced barely a hiccup in reality, this criticism of China's statement underscores the precarious balancing act that China has been navigating. The reality for Iran, as it has been for the majority of the last four and a half decades, is that it is too internationally isolated to allow such criticism and concerns to seep into all areas of the relationship with China. This has meant that it must keep its criticism limited and focus on the future rather than on perceived Chinese transgressions. Finally, the fact that Iran wanted China to take credit for the Saudi-Iran deal represents not just an attempt at making the US lose face but also a chance to display that Iran is broadly content with the way in which China has approached the region.

Qatar

The Qataris have been very positive towards China. Given that their ties were not wide-ranging prior to the GCC split and given that the PRC's relations with Saudi Arabia and, to a certain degree, the UAE were already so strong, it is likely that their expectations of China were very minimal at the start of the blockade. With the exception of the Chinese transfer to Qatar of the SY-400 ballistic missile system, which the UAE and Saudi Arabia were concerned could be used to strike them (Chaziza, 2020), the blockading states were generally content with, as the UAE Minister of State Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber put it, the PRC's "objective and impartial position" on intra-GCC affairs (The National, 2017). While the Qataris momentarily removed their active support for China's Xinjiang policies in 2019, which is discussed below, Qatar appreciated "the Chinese non-interventionalist approach" that was embodied by its sale of the SY-400 during the GCC rift (Havlová, 2020: 18). Furthermore, on many occasions Qatari officials "laud[ed] China's constructive stance… in the Middle East and Gulf issues" (Xinhua, 2019). Overall, observing such statements and the growth of Sino-Qatari ties both during and after the blockade, for example in Doha becoming a dialogue partner of the SCO (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022), it appears that Qatari officials are very content with China and its approaches to regional affairs.

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?

In December 2022, Xi Jinping went on what China's foreign ministry spokesperson termed an "epoch-making" visit to Saudi Arabia (El Yaakoubi and Baptista, 2022). The lavish reception enjoyed by Xi Jinping, something that the Americans – especially President Biden – were experiencing less and less in the kingdom, underscores the impressive inroads that

Beijing has made in the Persian Gulf. While the trip would result in the shared China-GCC statement that deeply (but momentarily) offended the Iranians, the depth of positivity towards China from the GCC states was palpable. Indeed, the trip witnessed the first China-Arab States Summit, which brought together the leaders of 21 Arab League states and China for the first time, and the first China-GCC Summit (Ghiselli and Ehteshami, 2024). Xi's visit was largely viewed as a lap of honour celebrating the impressive depth of friendship that China had cultivated with the Arab world and especially with the GCC states.

Energy, Trade, and the Belt and Road Initiative

As was made apparent in China's 2016 Arab Policy Paper, the PRC's foremost interests in relation to the Persian Gulf are energy, trade, and investment and construction, with a particular focus on that associated with the Belt and Road Initiative. The core question when considering the impact of China's hedging strategy on its ability to achieve its central goals in the region is whether China has been able to maintain favourable ties with key states in the Persian Gulf in the domains that it prioritises. As was discussed, this means everything from ensuring access to reliable energy supplies to procuring competitive contracts, gaining the buy-in of regional states to the BRI, AIIB, and SCO, and the desire for the RMB to be used more in trade. The key issue at play here then is the quality of its relationships with Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states and whether this has been impacted by its hedging strategy.

Table 7.4 highlights the impressive growth in trade that the PRC has enjoyed with most regional states since 2004. China's bilateral trade with the Persian Gulf states (excluding the US) has increased more than ten-fold over the last two decades, reaching an astonishing $384.84 billion in 2022. Beijing's economic engagement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE particularly stands out, totalling $215 billion in 2022. But is also in the less eye-catching cases that similarly impressive growth is witnessed. Between 2004 and 2022, Sino-Bahraini trade has increased just short of ten-fold and trade with Qatar has skyrocketed from $438 million in 2004 to $26.49 billion in 2022. It is only in the case of Iran that trade has been stunted. While Sino-Iranian trade performed well in the UNSC sanctions period and during the JCPoA period – indeed at $31.6 billion in 2016 – bilateral trade sat at half this in 2022 due mainly to fears that Chinese businesses would be sanctioned by the US if they engaged in Iran. It should also be noted that, with the exception of the impact of third-party sanctions on selected Chinese companies, the PRC's hedging strategy did not damage Sino-US trade.

Even following the hostilities between the US and Iran after the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and US irritation at China for its lack of response in the UN to the Iranian attack on the US al-Asad base in Iraq, Donald Trump signed the Phase One deal with China to ease the trade war that had been ongoing between them for well over a year (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2020). Sino-US trade has continued to grow, with trade in 2022 reaching $761.51 billion, 76 per cent of which was Chinese exports to the US. Thus, while US frustration over Sino-Iranian ties may be a sizeable enough thorn to lead Washington to sanction Chinese entities, it has not damaged China-US economic relations.

Table 7.4 China's Bilateral Trade with States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 2004, 2016, and 2022 (in USD)

State	Trade in 2004	Trade in 2016	Trade in 2022
Saudi Arabia	$10.3 billion	$43.3 billion	$115.9 billion
United Arab Emirates	$8.15 billion	$40.8 billion	$99.1 billion
Iraq	$470 million	$18.3 billion	$53.78 billion
Oman	$4.39 billion	$14.1 billion	$40.32 billion
Kuwait	$1.25 billion	$9.5 billion	$31.38 billion
Qatar	$438 million	$5.6 billion	$26.49 billion
Islamic Republic of Iran	$7.05 billion	$31.6 billion	$15.84 billion
Bahrain	$213 million	$900 million	$2.02 billion
United States of America	$169.9 billion	$525 billion	$761.51 billion
Total (excluding the US)	**$32.26 billion**	**$164.1 billion**	**$384.84 billion**
Total (including the US)	**$202.17 billion**	**$689.1 billion**	**$1.146 trillion**

Sources: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 2006; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 2018; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (No Date).

Naturally, given the staggering sums of money being transferred between China and the Persian Gulf states, it begs the question whether the PRC has succeeded in securing reliable energy supplies with favourable terms and contracts in the region. Table 7.5 displays China's oil imports from several key Persian Gulf exporters in 2022. That year, oil imports from Saudi Arabia and the UAE totalled over 2.5 million barrels per day, accounting for nearly a quarter of the PRC's oil requirements. While the story of Sino-Iranian oil trade was mired by the same sanctions issue that has left its bilateral trade so stagnant, in the first ten months of 2023 China became far more daring, opting to import over 1.05 million bpd from the Islamic Republic. This evidences quite clearly that any dip in Sino-Iranian trade is merely an issue of Chinese wariness; it is not related to Iranian frustration at China's approach to

the region. Impressively, the six Persian Gulf states listed in Table 7.5 accounted for nearly 60 percent of the PRC's total oil imports in 2022. Quantitatively, there is little doubt that the region has become deeply reliable for Beijing in energy terms. Indeed, Qatar has proven to be a strong gas exporter to China. The two states have ratified several lucrative, long-term deals on LNG supply, including the 2022 $60 billion deal that would see Qatar send four million tonnes of LNG to China every year for 27 years (Dargin, 2022). In terms of contracts, China has signed numerous high-level, long-term agreements with multiple states in relation to energy. A good example of this is Aramco's 2022 decision to construct a $10 billion refinery in China (Reuters, 2022). Another strong example of China acquiring favourable terms is the agreement with Iran that its oil imports be heavily discounted at around 25 per cent (Dawi, 2023). While at risk of stating the obvious, without maintaining ties with Iran, this would simply be impossible, and other energy importers simply do not engage with Iran and thus cannot enjoy these terms. It is crucial to note that at no point in the previous two decades has China faced any profound disruption to energy supplies from Persian Gulf states due to their concerns about the PRC's strategy in the region. Further, China's acquiring of lucrative energy deals in the region indicates that its core energy-related objectives are being achieved.

Table 7.5 China's Oil Imports from Key Persian Gulf Exporters in 2022 (Approximate Quantity of Barrels per Day)

Key Exporters (in order of quantity)	Approximate bpd
Saudi Arabia	1.75 million bpd
Iraq	1.15 million bpd
United Arab Emirates	0.80 million bpd
Islamic Republic of Iran[9]	0.76 million bpd
Oman	0.75 million bpd
Kuwait	0.70 million bpd
Total	**5.91 million bpd**
China's Total Global Oil Imports	**10.2 million bpd**

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration (2023); The Cradle (2023).

With that said, it is also important to consider whether China has been successful in becoming involved in renewable energy projects, as this is one of the three breakthrough areas that China outlined in its 1+2+3 framework. China has managed to make strong

[9] Estimating Chinese oil imports from Iran is challenging as the PRC is known to have used transshipments and other tactics to give the impression that Iranian oil came from Malaysia, the UAE, and Oman during the period (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2023). In reality, Chinese oil imports from Iran were likely higher than stated here.

inroads into the renewables sector, supporting the Persian Gulf states with their transition away from fossil fuel dependence. The Silk Road Fund has become the owner of 49 per cent of Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power Renewable Energy Holding and has invested over $10 billion into ACWA projects. Additionally, China won the bid (alongside ACWA) to extend the Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Solar Complex in 2017 (Fulton, 2019a), a prestigious victory for China (Al-Sulayman and Alterman, 2023). Further to this, one pivotal development that is music to the ears of Chinese officials is that Saudi Arabia is considering accepting RMB as payment for oil. While this has not been finalised, and indeed Riyadh has come under pressure from Washington not to follow through, this is part of a broader acceptance of the RMB in the region, with several Persian Gulf states agreeing to currency swaps with the Chinese (Ali, 2024).

China has also won several high-profile contracts in the region in other spheres. The UAE opted to work with Huawei to organise 5G in the UAE. Following substantial pressure from the United States – indeed, Washington threatened not to sell F-35s to the UAE if it worked with Huawei due to concerns that China would use the infrastructure for espionage on US assets – Abu Dhabi opted to go ahead with the deal (Hatch, 2022). The very fact that Sino-Emirati cooperation in such a sensitive area withstood pressure from the United States, when it came down to a government-led decision at least, is a noteworthy victory for Beijing. With that said, in December 2023, the UAE's foremost AI company, G42, abandoned ties with Chinese companies following significant pressure from the United States. This underscores the challenges faced by entities in GCC states attempting to balance between their interests in China and the United States and indeed the challenges faced by Chinese entities amid US pushback (Peel and Kerr, 2023). Importantly, though, regional governments and companies have strongly desired to engage with China. As such, it cannot be argued that China's hedging strategy has created an environment in which Beijing or Chinese companies are viewed as unfavourable or untrustworthy. Indeed, both in qualitative and in quantitative terms, China's economic engagement with the region is growing at a very fast pace. Its regional hedging strategy has not seen it being treated as a second-class external power.

Another helpful dimension to observe in this regard is Chinese exports. Given the abundant energy supplies (listed in Table 7.5) reaching China, one would be forgiven for assuming that China-Persian Gulf trade is limited to energy exports from the region. While this accounts for much of their trade, as Table 7.6 showcases, Beijing has acquired strong export partners in the Persian Gulf, something central to its attempts to cultivate a diverse portfolio

of destinations for Chinese products and labour. In 2022, the PRC exported $130.99 billion worth of goods to the region, around 3.7 percent of its total global exports and around 4.4 percent of its total exports when you exclude the United States. When including the United States, Chinese exports to the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states totalled $713.53 billion worth, around a fifth of all Chinese exports in 2022.

Table 7.6 China's Exports to and Imports from States in the Persian Gulf Regional Security Subcomplex in 2022 (in USD)

State	Chinese Exports	Chinese Imports	Total
Saudi Arabia	$38.1 billion	$77.8 billion	$115.9 billion
United Arab Emirates	$53.95 billion	$45.15 billion	$99.1 billion
Iraq	$14.5 billion	$39.28 billion	$53.78 billion
Oman	$4.22 billion	$36.1 billion	$40.32 billion
Kuwait	$4.98 billion	$26.4 billion	$31.38 billion
Qatar	$3.99 billion	$22.5 billion	$26.49 billion
Islamic Republic of Iran	$9.47 billion	$6.37 billion	$15.84 billion
Bahrain	$1.78 billion	$243 million	$2.02 billion
United States of America	$582.54 billion	$178.97 billion	$761.51 billion
Total (excluding US)	**$130.99 billion**	**$253.84 billion**	**$384.84 billion**
Total (including US)	**$713.53 billion**	**$432.81 billion**	**$1.146 trillion**

Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics (No Date).

Furthermore, as Table 7.7 underlines, the uptake of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Persian Gulf has been successful for Beijing. More than 140 projects are underway or have been completed in the region, with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran accounting for over 70 percent of these (Chaziza, 2023). China has faced no resistance from these states, all of which are convinced by the promises of the initiative and of the PRC's reliability in spearheading it. The total number of ongoing or completed projects is even outpacing Central Asia and the Caucasus, which have collectively hosted around 30 fewer BRI projects (IISS, 2024). Uptake has even been strong by Bahrain – indeed, more than ten projects are underway or have been completed there - a state that Beijing long struggled to form close relations with given its incredibly strong relationship with the United States.

Table 7.7 Belt and Road Initiative Projects (Digital and Physical) in the Persian Gulf States

State	No. of Projects (not including cancelled)
United Arab Emirates	>60
Saudi Arabia	>20
Iran	>20

Bahrain	>10
Oman	>10
Kuwait	>10
Iraq	>5
Qatar	>5

Source: Chaziza (2023).

Regional Relations and China's Great Power Identity

Naturally, a big part of the BRI's salience in the minds of PRC officials is that it represents China's true emergence as a great power capable of commanding respect from states across the world and leading Asian trade. The BRI is one of several institutions that represent this, though. Indeed, states signing up to the BRI, AIIB, and SCO all suggest a strong affinity with China and a desire to reinforce China's emergence as a great power. Interest in these institutions has been noteworthy in the Persian Gulf. All regional states have signed up to the BRI and have active projects underway within them. In terms of the AIIB, Bahrain, Oman, the UAE, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are all members, and Kuwait is a prospective member (AIIB, 2024). Indeed, Bahrain even joined the AIIB in 2018 despite its minimal relations with the PRC compared to other GCC states and despite the fact that China was actively courting both Iran and Qatar, both of which Bahrain vehemently despised at the time. Further, Iran became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2023, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE have all become SCO dialogue partners since 2022 (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, 2024). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE all agreed to become dialogue partners of the SCO at a time in which it was known that Iran would be a full member of the organisation. This fact clearly did not put them off of joining the SCO, displaying the depth of success of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf. Rather interestingly, Bahrain has even upped the ante in its diplomacy with China in recent years, with Bahraini leaders frequently referring to the kingdom as China's "strategic partner" despite no such strategic partnership having been signed (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2022). The use of this phrase is likely no slip of the tongue. Rather, alongside Bahrain's accession into the BRI, the SCO as a dialogue partner, and the AIIB, it indicates Manama's desire to be included in the list of states with whom the PRC shares a strategic partnership. Even with the hawkish state of Bahrain, China is finally making inroads despite decades of courting its rival, Iran, and years of pursuing relations with Qatar amid the GCC rift.

In terms of the Iran issue, China's stance on the UNSC - and especially in its commitment to opposing Iran's development of nuclear weapons, thereby aligning with the US and other key powers - undoubtedly contributed to the idea of it being a responsible power capable of broadly upholding the key responsibilities expected of UNSC permanent members. While its trade with Iran may have undermined these sanctions to a certain degree, the PRC did not trade nuclear material with Iran and indeed abided by the spirit of the 1997 deal with the United States that it would cease all such trade. While the GCC and US were clearly frustrated with Beijing's (albeit limited) support for Iran in the UNSC, as is evidenced by Saudi King Abdullah's request of the Chinese to cease helping Iran in the buildup to the vote on UNSC Resolution 1929, the very fact that the United States reached out to China on several occasions to bring Iran to the negotiating table highlights an awareness in Washington of China's importance in relation to the issue and a sense that Beijing would be responsible enough to support the process. Indeed, with the exception of its veto vis-à-vis extending the Iran arms embargo in 2020, China aligned with the core of the international community in the UNSC on multiple key votes pertaining to Iran's nuclear development. While its behaviour outside of the UNSC often conflicted with its role in the UNSC, its support for sanctions and opposition to Iranian nuclear development following the revelations in the early 2000s allowed Beijing to appear responsible in the eyes of the international community in the ways that mattered the most.

Finally, and of central importance to this dissertation, the Saudi-Iran deal marks a momentous turning point for China's identity as a great power in the Persian Gulf. Having been called upon by the Saudi leadership to mediate between the two parties, something that the Iranians were content with, Beijing managed to see the deal over the line. The fact that the Saudis and Iranians called upon China for this is significant. First, it clearly underscores that there was no bad blood towards China from either of the two parties. This is no small feat given that the PRC has spent the best part of three to four decades balancing its ties with them and carefully navigating tensions between them. Second, it demonstrates an awareness from each party that China is close to each of them and, as such, can be trusted to help them sort out their differences. Third, not only does their decision to go to Xi mark great respect for the Chinese leadership – and debatably a swipe at the US – but the success of the negotiations has actually boosted China's status as a great power capable of achieving remarkable feats. The signing of the Saudi-Iran deal should be viewed as a wide-ranging success of China's hedging strategy in the region. Beijing has managed to navigate their

rivalry with painstaking precision over decades. Yes, Beijing has upset both Riyadh and Tehran at one time or another – indeed only three months prior in the case of Iran – but both states clearly view China as a credible and reliable great power. In this sense, not only has China's hedging strategy not affected the realisation of its interests in the region negatively, it has actually opened the door for a new era of relations between its previously rivalling partners in the region. Naturally, China's role as mediator raises the question as to whether it will be expected to mediate if relations sour between Iran and Saudi Arabia. With the conflict in Yemen, not to mention disagreements over multiple arenas in the Middle East and in several fields, this is far from impossible. In such a securitised episode, would it be able to stick to its decades-old strategy of maintaining relations with each side while avoiding becoming embroiled in their dispute? Only time will tell, but for now China can relax knowing that it has succeeded triumphantly.

Normative Solidarity: Xinjiang

As has been noted, China has been particularly keen to propagate the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence among Global South states, such that other countries do not interfere in China's internal affairs. A helpful litmus test of this in the case of the Persian Gulf is the question of regional responses to China's illiberal and authoritarian behaviour in Xinjiang towards Chinese Muslims.

Iran and the GCC states have not only broadly kept silent on the issue of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, they have provided support – ranging from tacit to active, depending on the case – for China's policies, viewing them as part of a fair and lawful anti-terror strategy. Indeed, in 2019, Iran and all of the Gulf Cooperation Council states put their names to a letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council implying that certain states were "politicising" the issue and lauding China's anti-terror policies (United Nations Digital Library, 2019). Qatar pulled its name from the letter soon after, but never directly sought to criticise the PRC for its behaviour (Younes, 2019). Furthermore, Bahrain has been less reliable on this topic than several other states from China's perspective. Despite having signed the letter, a member of the Bahrain Council of Representatives directed overt criticism towards China over the Xinjiang issue in January 2020, though key officials have since reiterated their belief that the CCP is in the right (Xinhua, 2020). In both of these cases, it is hard to ascertain the key driver behind the flip-flopping, as they both share very close ties with the United States, which has been known to pressure Middle Eastern states over the Xinjiang issue (Harris,

2020). It is unlikely, therefore, that the Qatari and Bahraini positions were in protest at China's hedging strategy in the region, unlike, for example, brief Iranian criticism of China's Taiwan policy and treatment of Muslims following the shared China-GCC statement on the three Iran-UAE contested islands.

It must be noted, though, that Iran and the GCC states have not limited their support for China to mere rhetoric. Indeed, they have been actively supporting the CCP in oppressing Uyghurs. Research for the China's Transnational Repression of Uyghurs Dataset points to around 300 cases of Arab states imprisoning or deporting Uyghurs (Jardine and Greer, 2022: 2). Despite removing its name from the 2019 letter, Qatar has been prominent among these states, alongside Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia has even been accused of contravening the United Nations Convention Against Torture for deporting Uyghur activists at risk of maltreatment back to China (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Other reports, corroborated and uncorroborated, have emerged over the years of Persian Gulf states supporting China in relation to Xinjiang in controversial ways. As is clear, therefore, profound normative solidarity has emerged between the Persian Gulf states and China, even bleeding into them actively supporting the oppression of Muslims abroad (Houghton, 2024b). Given that many of them proclaim themselves as protectors of the Muslim community, this underscores the noteworthy inroads that the PRC has made in this regard. Indeed, with the exception of Qatar's withdrawal from the 2019 letter and brief Iranian anger directed at China following the China-GCC statement on Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, in which Iranian officials made reference to the CCP's treatment of Muslims and the Taiwan issue, China's hedging strategy does not seem to have led to any stark criticism directed at China over its treatment of the Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang. In the case of Iran, this sits in stark contrast to its condemnatory response to the controversial introduction of a citizenship law passed in India that relegated the rights of Muslims (Houghton, 2024b). If anything, minus these few examples, it seems that by generally avoiding becoming embroiled in regional conflicts and rivalries, Beijing may have actually reinforced the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, thereby proving to regional states that it is worthy of them staying out of China's internal business. Naturally, it is likely due to at least two reasons beyond Beijing's hedging strategy that regional states have aligned with China on the Xinjiang issue. First, several states have become economically dependent on the PRC. Second, China has followed through on its own promises not to intervene in their internal affairs when it comes to human rights abuses, something that

Garlick and Qin (2023) term China's "do-as-I-do" approach. What this demonstrates at the very least, thus, is that China's hedging strategy has not negatively impacted upon the CCP's desire for normative solidarity in the Persian Gulf in relation to its policies in Xinjiang. Situations like Iran's response to the shared China-GCC statement showcase that the hedging strategy could pose a problem for issues like this, but Beijing has firmly displayed that it has achieved a remarkable balancing act between regional rivals such that this core interest is not undermined in any long-term sense.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The two decades since the US-led invasion of Iraq have seen Beijing orchestrate a careful balancing act to maintain positive relations with several states locked in protracted rivalries. Over the period, the PRC has painstakingly choreographed a hedging strategy to balance ties with Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states amid several volatile episodes. While several scholars (for example, Fulton, 2021) assert that China has prioritised its ties with the GCC states over Iran, which this dissertation does not necessarily dispute, Beijing has had to expend considerable energy during certain periods to manage its relations with Tehran and its rivals. On occasions when China has overstepped the mark, such as with the China-GCC joint statement on the Iran-UAE contested islands, it has risked facing wide-sweeping criticisms that go to the heart of Chinese interests, such as regarding the Xinjiang issue and Taiwan. With that said, China's navigation of Iran and its rivalries, in addition to the GCC split, while controversial at times and worthy of significant attention and concern in regional capitals and Washington, has seemingly not damaged the PRC's standing in the region or the realisation of its interests in any negative way. Indeed, it could even be argued that, concomitant with its emergence as the foremost external economic actor in the region and a great power with which regional states share normative solidarity, China's focus on being "the friend of all and enemy of none" (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4) has allowed it to carve a unique position in the region as an external power that has a certain level of trust of all key rivalling states. Saudi Arabia and Iran choosing Beijing to act as the mediator that would enjoy the triumph of normalising relations between them is naturally a mark of prestige for the PRC. Furthermore, that China has succeeded in achieving all of its primary objectives in the region with very few hiccups underscores the depth and breadth of its success in hedging its ties with regional states. Yes, Beijing has attracted criticism and pressure from rivalling states to align its behaviour with them. But it has also weathered multiple storms in this regard and has come out of each episode with strong ties with all

regional states in multiple domains. Its energy ties have grown well, the BRI is in full-swing in the region, Beijing has won prestigious contracts in the breakthrough area of renewable energy, most regional states are aligned with Beijing on the Xinjiang issue, and several regional states are even starting to push back against US pressure in relation to China. In these ways, China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf has been a true success. If Xi's incredibly warm reception in December 2022 in Riyadh was not a victory lap, the signing of the Saudi-Iran deal in March 2023 certainly was.

Conclusions and Perspectives

Everyone's Friend, No-One's Foe?

This dissertation has set out to examine China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex and specifically to assess whether the strategy has impacted Beijing's ability to realise its interests in a regional security subcomplex characterised by such stark and protracted intra-regional hostilities, mutual securitisation, and rivalries. Four and a half decades on from the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Beijing has continuously balanced its relations with rivalling states in the region. While its approach to hedging has not always produced equitable outcomes for its partners in the region – for example, China did not stick its neck out to protect Saddam Hussein's regime from the US-led invasion – it has not made a habit of abandoning its ties with regional states in the face of international or regional pressure, often risking upsetting friends in one or multiple capitals. Thus, Iran, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Qatar amid the GCC split have all received levels of support from China even when large swathes of the regional or international community have snubbed them. Indeed, amid each and every key rivalry or conflict that has emerged in the region, China has been insistent on "being the friend of all and enemy of none" (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4).

China's Hedging Strategy: Dynamics

There are perhaps two core dimensions to China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf: China's navigation of rivalries between regional states themselves and China's navigation of rivalries between regional states and the United States. When it comes to navigating conflicts and rivalries between regional states, the PRC's approach has long been incredibly equitable. Indeed, with the exception of the Kuwait crisis, during which the PRC's stance leaned much more heavily towards the Kuwaiti side but nonetheless still involved maintaining ties with Baghdad, Beijing has painstakingly deployed an approach that seeks to favour no party over another amid conflicts and rivalries. From the Iran-Iraq war to the protracted GCC-Iran rivalry in the 21st century, Beijing has been careful to maintain positive ties with all states, adopting middle-ground positions that avoid condemning either side in international diplomatic fora or in statements, developing an approach of tit-for-tat engagement in sensitive affairs, and opening the door for all regional states to engage meaningfully in Chinese-led multilateral institutions. Even during the GCC split, which involved Qatar, a hitherto less significant Chinese partner compared to Saudi Arabia and the

UAE, Beijing took a neutral stance and even developed military trading ties with Doha while continuing ties with its GCC rivals. While Beijing upgraded ties with the UAE to a comprehensive strategic partner during the GCC split and did not reciprocate for Qatar, this is perfectly easily argued as being reflective of the broader ties that China had developed with Abu Dhabi over the course of the 21st century rather than as a means of displaying favouritism for the UAE over Qatar.

In terms of China's navigation of rivalries and conflicts between regional states and the United States, though, Beijing has charted a far more cautious path. While the broad contours of Beijing's hedging strategy have involved extensive engagement with the US' rivals in the region despite US frustration, when Washington has put its foot down or suggested that an issue is central to its conception of US national security, China has acquiesced. In (eventually) ceasing providing Iran with Silkworm missiles towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, stopping nuclear cooperation with Iran in the 1990s, abandoning Iraq in the face of the US-led invasion, and significantly reducing trade with Iran during the Trump administration, Beijing has displayed that it will never privilege ties with the US' rivals in the region over its ties with Washington when significant pressure is exerted on Chinese officials by the US. This does not mean, however, that China will not push the envelope as far as it can without attracting pressure. Indeed, Beijing can be expected to pursue ties with the US' rivals in the region – these days, mainly Iran – in a variety of fields and to a significant degree. After all, China's long-term approach to the region is one of strategic hedging. Chinese officials have exerted far too much effort to cultivate relations with all Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex states to bid goodbye to the strategy any time soon.

A final point is worth considering. The notion that Iran comes last compared to other Persian Gulf states has undoubtedly been overstated due to the emphasis on poor economic outcomes in recent years. This portrayal depicts the limited Chinese economic ventures in Iran compared to the GCC states as indicating that Iran is the "last among equals" in the Persian Gulf (Greer and Batmanghelidj, 2020). While there is some truth to this, given that Chinese enterprises have not had a lasting appetite to risk engaging extensively in Iran amid sanctions, what often gets lost in analysis that seeks to portray China's interest in the GCC states as *far* outstripping its interest in Iran is the effort that the PRC has had to exert in order to enjoy wide-ranging relations with Tehran. For the entirety of the last four and a half decades, in order to have a relationship with Tehran, China has had to navigate pressure and

anger from multiple fronts. From supplying Iran with Silkworm missiles during the Iran-Iraq war, exporting material for Iran's nuclear development for the bulk of the 1990s, to circumventing sanctions in its engagement with the Islamic Republic in the 21st century, the PRC has long showcased a willingness to maintain relations with Iran despite the controversy of doing so. Yes, Beijing has succumbed to pressure on multiple occasions and has ceased certain sensitive dimensions of engagement with the Islamic Republic when Chinese leaders have sensed that such cooperation would risk alienating it from the United States in a profound manner, but at no point has China outright abandoned Iran for political expediency. The need for such stark effort to navigate ties cannot be said for Beijing's ties with any of the GCC states – indeed, if any party in China-GCC relations experiences pressure or anger from a third-party, it is the GCC states being pressured by Washington to tone down ties, not China. Thus, while it is true that outcomes in Sino-Iranian relations from an economic perspective have been poor in recent years, with all Persian Gulf states' trade with China (except Bahrain) outpacing Sino-Iranian trade in 2022, this is not a long-standing feature and is certainly not demonstrative of a long-term Chinese plan to relegate China-Iran relations. Indeed, in allowing Iran to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Bank, and BRICS, Beijing is clearly signalling to the Iranian regime (and to the world) that it is still seeking strong ties. Furthermore, the signing of the 25-year deal with Tehran, while a signal of goodwill to the Iranian regime, is an act that Beijing simply did not need to undertake in order to benefit from the isolated Iranian economy. China is well-aware that officials in Washington and in several GCC capitals keep a close eye on developments in Sino-Iranian ties. Nonetheless, the 25-year deal was signed in plain view for all to see. Furthermore, even if China's role in brokering the Saudi-Iran deal was more symbolic of the Persian Gulf states' desire to elevate China's status than reflective of Beijing's hard diplomatic graft, in being at the centre of the deal, the PRC was signalling that it is keen to bring Iran into the fray of normalised regional politics. Put simply, while there have been many ebbs and flows over the decades in terms of China's willingness to stick its neck on the line for Iran, Beijing is certainly not looking to abandon Iran or substantially relegate Sino-Iranian ties going into the mid-2020s. Substantially increased Iranian energy exports to China in 2023 demonstrate this further.

China's Hedging Strategy: Mission Accomplished?

At the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, China's penetration in the Persian Gulf was minimal. Suffering from image problems in the region in relation to its ideological zeal

during the Mao period, characterised most centrally in Persian Gulf leaders' minds by the CCP's poor treatment of Muslims and its support for anti-monarchical groups in the region, Beijing only had diplomatic ties with Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman. While diplomatic relations had been established with the Shah in Iran, the new regime took this very fact as an affront to them and a signal of China's untrustworthiness. Thus, while ties with the Islamic Republic were soon re-established, by the turn of the 1980s, China enjoyed only minimal ties with four regional states. Fast forwarding over four decades on, Beijing is one of the foremost external actors in the Persian Gulf.

By the end of the volatility of the 1980s, which witnessed the emergence of China's hedging strategy in the region, the PRC had managed not only to establish ties with all Persian Gulf states, it had also succeeded in nearly doubling its trade with regional states and cementing itself as a reliable arms supplier. While China's actions towards the Iran-Iraq war did little to convince the US that it was a responsible power – due, in large part, to the US' anti-Iranian stance – Beijing aligned significantly enough with the international community in diplomatic fora to support its image as a responsible, but independent power. The *Dong Feng* missile deal certainly represented a stark turning point in the PRC's acceptance as a legitimate external power in the region. Both materially and ideationally, this was significant for Beijing. Materially, this sale supported the modernisation of the Chinese military, bringing it much-needed revenue. Given that the modernisation of the military had been an important Chinese interest during the period, Beijing's hedging strategy certainly succeeded in realising this particular objective. Ideationally, the deal gave Beijing the chance to shine as a non-interfering global power offering no-strings-attached trade, an important aim of the Chinese leadership.

Moving into the 1990s, the Kuwait crisis was a boon for the Chinese. Amid widespread international condemnation of the CCP for the Tiananmen Square incident, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait gave Beijing the opportunity to showcase its normative stance on the sacrosanctity of sovereignty, its commitment to multilateralism, and its responsibility in international affairs. Its support for many key UNSC resolutions and its abstention on UNSC Resolution 678 did just enough to see it removed from international isolation following the Tiananmen Square incident. In this regard, it avoided aligning completely with the US and other global powers, thereby showcasing some support for Iraq, while fundamentally supporting the resolution. The only way in which its strategy failed was in procuring a favourable outcome for Chinese citizens in Iraq, perhaps one of the least important Chinese interests during the

period. Indeed, Baghdad did not release Chinese citizens sooner than citizens of other extra-regional countries. This is perhaps no surprise, as Beijing's hedging strategy leaned very heavily in the direction of the international community.

By the early 2000s, China's navigation of the US' dual containment strategy and subsequent invasion of Iraq had produced mixed results. First, by choosing to hedge between Iraq and the US, and not take any bold steps to protect Iraq from the US-led invasion,[10] Beijing had lost a regional partner. Fortunately for China, the subsequent Iraqi governments have been very positive towards China in the following decades, allowing significant Chinese penetration of Iraq's markets. Broadly, though, Chinese engagement with the Persian Gulf had deepened by the turn of the 21st century. Trade between China and the Persian Gulf states had increased nearly seven-fold, the US had allowed China to join the WTO, and the region had become an incredibly reliable source of diversified oil imports, now a core interest of the PRC. While Beijing had been snubbed for the lucrative Azadegan contract in Iran following its decision to halt nuclear cooperation with the Islamic Republic at the behest of Washington, Iran and Saudi Arabia (among others) had become important energy suppliers for Beijing. Furthermore, its positive engagement with regional states and the PRC's lack of sharp opposition towards the US invasion of Iraq saw it receive regional and US legitimisation (at least for a period) of its policies towards Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, a boon for a Chinese leadership concerned by possible foreign attempts to interfere in sensitive domestic affairs.

Moving into the first 24 years of the 21st century, in which the PRC has engaged in a protracted hedging strategy between Iran and its GCC/US rivals and a short-lived hedging strategy between Qatar and its GCC rivals between 2017-2021, Beijing has undoubtedly achieved great strides in the Persian Gulf. China has secured extensive and reliable energy supplies from multiple regional states, including Qatar. Further, it has cultivated strong trading relations with most regional states – indeed, even economic ties with the previously less-than-forthcoming Bahrain are progressing nicely. All regional states have signed up to the BRI and projects in the region even outpace those in Central Asia. All states are interested or have become members to some degree of the SCO and the AIIB, representing great regional interest in Chinese-led initiatives. Additionally, while Beijing is not

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[10] This is not to claim that it would have been a remotely logical foreign policy choice for China to stake its ties with the US on the Iraq issue, but merely to demonstrate that China did not attempt to protect Iraq in a bold manner, something that was an – albeit foolhardy - option.

threatening the US-led status quo in the region, it is giving the US a run for its money in certain areas, with the UAE opting to forego US F-35s in order to engage with China on 5G development. On Xinjiang, China has amassed profound normative and material solidarity from most regional states, with several actively supporting China by returning Uyghurs to the PRC and others rhetorically backing China in international fora. While Qatar removed its name from the 2019 letter to the UN Human Rights Council, it has actively supported Beijing by deporting Uyghurs to China. Finally, and this is the *pièce-de-résistance* for the PRC, Riyadh approached Beijing to broker its normalisation deal with Iran. Given that its hedging strategy has been a source of concern for officials in GCC capitals – they have even travelled to Beijing on several occasions over the decades to discourage Sino-Iranian ties – this represents an acceptance on an unprecedented level of China's strategy to be everyone's friend. A boon for Beijing's great power identity, not to mention a signal from regional states that it is viewed as a reliable partner, its acceptance as broker of the Saudi-Iran deal is perhaps the most noteworthy of China's accomplishments in relation to its hedging strategy.

Interesting insights in relation to regional perceptions of China's hedging strategy have emerged over the decades. In Iran, from Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's anger at the Sino-Saudi *Dong Feng* missile deal in the 1980s, to claims that China is isolating Iran to monopolise its markets, to officials' fury in relation to the China-GCC statement on Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs in 2022, irritation at Beijing's hedging strategy has been ubiquitous. Though Iranian officials and media personalities may complain about the PRC's approach at times, the effects of Iranian isolation in the international community have been palpable on Sino-Iranian ties. While the PRC's hedging strategy amid the US' dual-containment strategy may have seen it lose out on the Azadegan contract, in the 21st century Iran has had little option but to open its arms wide to China. Its isolation from the international community, not to mention the fact that very few states are willing to circumvent sanctions, has rendered it deeply reliant on China. Iranian officials may bark, therefore, but they do not bite. Among the GCC states, a similar pragmatism has surfaced as the years have progressed and their economic reliance on China has grown. While officials from GCC states have made several trips to China to coax Beijing away from Tehran from the 1980s to the 2010s, and while several officials and media personalities have expressed concern about Sino-Iranian relations, China-GCC ties do not seem to have been negatively affected by China's hedging strategy. At no point have GCC states outwardly snubbed China or treated Beijing unfavourably due to its hedging strategy. Of course, there is no way of

knowing whether the PRC's ties with the GCC states would be even stronger if Beijing had aligned with them since the late 1970s on the Iran issue, but ties are strong enough that China does not need to find out. The United States has been much more willing than regional states to match language with action, delaying technological cooperation with China due to its Silkworm trade with Iran, directly tying China's re-acceptance into the international community following the Tiananmen Square incident with its vote on UNSC Resolution 678 in relation to the Kuwait crisis, and sanctioning Chinese entities circumventing Iran's sanctions. With that said, US officials seem to accept that China cannot be expected to behave according to Western dictates in a broad sense, even if Chinese behaviour in specific ways can be manipulated with the use of carrots or sticks. Thus, while they complain about, for example, Chinese ties with Iran, they have even attempted to make strategic use of these ties by encouraging China to engage with Iran on issues of concern to the US, such as Houthi attacks on shipping lanes.

Thus, from a state with minimal exposure to the region in the late 1970s to one of the foremost external powers in the region over four decades later, China's Persian Gulf hedging strategy has been an overwhelming success. With very specific conditions guiding the region over recent decades, the PRC has achieved what no other state has consistently set out to: It has secured wide-ranging, positive ties with all regional states. Alongside this, it has protected its ties with the United States from being overly damaged by its actions in the Persian Gulf, always ensuring that it does not step too far in supporting the US' rivals in the region. Thus, in using a framework that draws on neoclassical realist and constructivist insights, thereby considering material, ideational, and normative interests, this dissertation can quite clearly assert that China has secured the realisation of the sheer bulk of its interests amid its hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex despite the intense mutual securitisation, conflicts, and rivalries that exist between states in the subcomplex. With the signing of the Saudi-Iran deal, the question arises: Will the coming period of Chinese engagement in the Persian Gulf require a less concerted hedging strategy or will the Saudi-Iran deal falter, forcing Beijing to hedge carefully between its rivalling partners once again? Only time will tell.

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation has provided several theoretical innovations. The first of these is the framework that is deployed to understand Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf. Drawing on

Barkin's (2010) assertion that constructivism and realism can be bridged to improve insights, the dissertation bridges neoclassical realism with constructivist insights to provide a holistic view of the PRC's interests in the Persian Gulf. The dissertation has argued that of the main sub-schools of realism, neoclassical realism offers the best explanatory powers as it enables an appreciation of the impact of both systemic and domestic factors in driving states' interests in the international arena. Further to this, neoclassical realism provides a strong bridge to synthesise realism and constructivism, as some core notions inherent to the theory underscore the need to understand "inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, 2016: 67). Given that constructivism is interested in norms, identity, how ideational issues relate to the material, and social construction, it is evident that a clear bridge can be constructed between neoclassical realism and constructivism. In deploying this analytical framework to understand Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf, the dissertation diverges from much of the literature on China-Persian Gulf relations, which is heavily dominated by realism.

The second theoretical contribution is the acknowledgement in the deployment of the regional security complex paradigm that it is broadly constructivist but is also driven by realist assumptions, not least of all given its emphasis on anarchy within regions and the focus on enmity over amity. Drawing on Buzan and Wæver's (2003) work, which outlines a regional security complex as a region defined as "a set of units whose major processes of securiti[s]ation, desecuriti[s]ation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analy[s]ed or resolved apart from one another", the dissertation has argued that the Persian Gulf represents a regional security subcomplex. The dissertation has sought to understand China's positionality in relation to this subcomplex by examining its hedging strategy across the entire life-span of the current manifestation of the subcomplex, namely since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

Finally, the dissertation has contributed significantly to the theory of strategic hedging. By viewing it as a two-level strategy that sees it as both a response to systemic pressures and regional pressures, the dissertation has understood it in two complimentary ways. First, it is a strategy deployed by a second-tier state (in this case, China) to manage the supremacy of another power in the global system (in this case, the United States of America) in a way that makes direct conflict or hostilities less likely while also enabling the second-tier state to gain power and influence abroad. This view of strategic hedging aligns with the thinking of Tessman (2012). The second dimension is on the regional level. As a highly tense regional

security subcomplex mired by persistent conflict and rivalry, the Persian Gulf is a challenging region for external powers to navigate. Strategic hedging in this sphere must be understood within the context of China seeking to maintain balanced, positive relations with all regional states, irrespective of the conflicts and rivalries between them, aligned with the analysis of Fulton (2021) and Garlick and Havlová (2020). In viewing hedging as a two-level issue, the dissertation offers an innovative view of strategic hedging. Furthermore, the dissertation is particularly innovative in its deployment of an original analytical framework to assess the efficacy of strategic hedging. This research has been driven by an emphasis on the realisation of interests as a means of ascertaining the success of a state's hedging strategy. In this case, the realisation of Chinese interests in (and vis-à-vis) the Persian Gulf is deployed as the core dependent variable of the research. This has been buttressed by a methodology that has employed Arabic, Persian, and English sources, all of the key languages used by regional elites.

Originality and Scope for Future Research

This dissertation is the first in-depth study of China's hedging strategy in the Persian Gulf since Iran's Islamic Revolution. While some research (Fulton, 2021; Garlick and Havlová, 2020; MacGillivray, 2019) has paved the way for this study by identifying that China is engaging in strategic hedging in the region or, at the very least, seeking to be the "friend of all and enemy of none" (Alterman and Garver, 2008: 4), this dissertation is the first study to analyse the contours of this strategy, regional perceptions of China's hedging strategy, and the efficacy of this strategy in terms of whether the strategy has impacted upon the realisation of Chinese interests in the region across the entire time period in which the PRC has had strong interests in the Persian Gulf. To achieve this, the dissertation has been undergirded by an analytical framework drawing on neoclassical realist and constructivist insights, thereby aligning with other studies (for example, Fulton, 2019a) in outlining the immense analytical utility of neoclassical realism while also acknowledging that constructivist insights are necessary in order to appreciate fully the broad and rich tapestry of Chinese interests in the Persian Gulf. For the purposes of understanding and analysing the PRC's normative and ideational interests, in addition to the ideational importance attached to material interests which helps in appreciating the centrality of particular interests, constructivism is helpful to any analysis. As such, in deploying constructivist thinking alongside neoclassical realism, this dissertation has constructed an important intellectual bridge that allows for a fuller and deeper analysis of whether its interests in the region have

been realised amid its hedging strategy. Further, the use of English, Arabic, and Persian – the three languages often used in the region politically - primary and secondary sources has facilitated a wide survey of regional perceptions of China's hedging strategy, something that has hitherto not been examined in relation to the PRC's approach towards regional security. The conclusions of this dissertation, namely that China's strategy has not been the preference of regional states but that it has not impacted the realisation of the PRC's interests in the region in any profound or extensive manner, offer an original insight into Chinese engagement in the region and the efficacy of strategic hedging as an approach for China to adopt towards the Persian Gulf. In so doing, the dissertation provides a full account of China's place within the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex and the PRC's positionality in relation to the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex across the last four and a half decades. Finally, the dissertation is the most up-to-date account of China's navigation of the Persian Gulf regional security subcomplex, allowing engagement with China's 2021 25-year deal with Iran and the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iran deal, among other recent events.

There are several avenues that future research could take to complement this dissertation. Perhaps the foremost avenue for future research that complements this dissertation, a study could open up analysis to the entire Middle East regional security complex. This could facilitate two helpful dimensions of analysis. First, it would facilitate an analysis of China's hedging strategy between Persian Gulf states that accounts for Chinese policies towards areas of interest to Persian Gulf states in the wider Middle East. For example, Iran and Saudi Arabia have had a series of proxy conflicts or have backed opposing sides in regional conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and others. Examining how China has approached these issues and how this has played into its hedging strategy between them would be very interesting. Second, analysing the Middle East regional security complex as a whole would facilitate analysis of China's hedging strategy between many other states, including Iran and Israel, a key faultline in Middle Eastern relations. As such, the key recommendation for future research would be to open up analysis to the wider Middle East, either to deepen an appreciation of China's Persian Gulf hedging strategy or to broaden the analysis to include China's hedging strategy amid conflicts and rivalries in the broader region.

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