

THE MIDDLE EAST PIVOT:

CHINA'S BRI

**BETWEEN GEOSTRATEGY AND
COMMERCIAL OPPORTUNITY**

A conference organised by:



**Conference
Programme**

11-12 February 2019

Goodwood Park Hotel

Arundel & Dover Ballroom

22 Scotts Road | SG 228221

CONFERENCE STATEMENT

The Middle East is a central region around which Asia, Africa and Europe pivot. When the West went east towards China, it crossed the Middle East and stayed; this is also known as the history of colonialism. Today, as China moves west in reverse, with its Belt and Road Initiative, will China do things differently?

The Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore will host a conference to address two major sets of questions that arise as China's engagement with the Middle East deepens:

- What geopolitical challenges and opportunities does this present? Can the Chinese preference for focusing primarily on economics/business and minimising its geopolitical engagement be sustained in this volatile yet indispensable region?
- What is the scope for competition and collaboration among the US, Russia and China there? And what role will regional powers like Israel, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia play in the mix?
- What are the commercial and religious challenges and opportunities that come into view as China's engagement with the Middle East deepens: For China, for the Middle East, and for third parties like Singapore?

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2019

8.30	Registration
10.00	OPENING & KEYNOTE SPEECH by Minister for Trade and Industry, Mr Chan Chun Sing Q & A Chair: Mr Bilahari Kausikan Chairman, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
	GUEST OF HONOUR Emeritus Senior Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong
10.30	Photo Taking
10.45	SESSION ONE: INFRASTRUCTURE Session Chair: Dr Serkan Yolacan Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
	Professor Bai Gao Professor of Sociology, Duke University, United States Visiting Professor, Institute of New Structural Economics, Peking University <i>Land-bridge or Bypass? The Middle East and the OBOR</i>
	Assistant Professor Jatin Dua Anthropology, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor <i>Maritime Chokepoints: A view of BRI from the Indian Ocean</i>
	Dr Michael Hwang Chief Justice, Dubai International Financial Centre <i>The Creation of a Dispute Resolution Regime for the Belt & Road Initiative</i>
12.15	End of Session One and Participants to proceed to Tudor Ballroom for Lunch Address
12.30	LUNCH ADDRESS by Minister for Education, Mr Ong Ye Kung Q & A Chair: Mr Bilahari Kausikan, Chairman, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
1.45	Photo Taking

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2019

- 2.00** | **SESSION TWO: FINANCE AND ECONOMICS**
Session Chair: Professor Tan Kong Yam
Economics, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
- Dr Ariel Cohen
Senior Fellow, International Tax and Investment Center and Director, Energy Growth and Security Program, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council
Future Calling: Infrastructure Development in Central Asia
- Dr Nasser Saidi
President, Nasser Saidi & Associates
Is the Middle East Ready for China? The Middle East Countries Have Yet to Develop a China Policy
- Pang Yee Ean
Director-General, Investment Operations Dept, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
Infrastructure Investment in the Middle East and Central Asia
- 3.30** | **End of Session Two and Break**
- 4.00** | **SESSION THREE: PANEL DISCUSSION**
CHINA-MIDDLE EAST TRADE (COUNTRY CASES)
Session Chair: Dr Linda Matar
Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
- Mutlaq al-Morished
Chief Executive Officer, TASNEE, Riyadh
Petrochemical Industry in the GCC
- Dr Altay Atli,
Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Koç University, Istanbul
Turkey's View of China as an Economic Partner
- Professor Wu Bingbing
Qatar Chair Professor, Middle Eastern Studies, Peking University
China, Iran, and the Middle East
- 5.30** | **End of Day One**

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12, 2019

- 9.00 | **Registration**
- 9.30 | **SESSION FOUR: PANEL DISCUSSION
RELIGIOUS NETWORKS ALONG THE BRI**
Session Chair: Professor Joseph Liow
Dean, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences
S Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University
- Dr Serkan Yolacan
Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
Can Turkey's Muslims Solve China's Uighur Problem?
- Janice Jeong
Ph.D Candidate, Department of History, Duke University, United States
Chinese Muslims as Connective Agents Between States of China and Arabia: An Overlooked History
- Dr James Dorsey
Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Shaping the New World Order: The Battle for Human Rights
- Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi
Research Fellow, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies,
and Head of the Asian Studies Unit, University of Hong Kong
The "Religious Westphalian" Turn in Eurasia: The Consequences for Sino-Gulf Trans-Islamic Networks
- 11.30 | **End of Session Four and Break**
- 11.45 | **CLOSING ROUNDTABLE ON CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST –
THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT**
Session Chair: Professor Engseng Ho
Director, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore
- Professor Wang Suolao
Deputy Director, Institute of Area Studies
Associate Professor, School of International Studies, Peking University
How Can China Avoid Falling Into the Geopolitical Trap in the Middle East?
- Ehud Yaari
Lafer International Fellow, The Washington Institute
Middle East: China Loves Us All!
- Dr Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice-President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy
Director, Middle East Program, Centre for Strategic and International Studies
Separating Geostrategy from Opportunism: BRI and the Future of the Middle East
- Dr Nasser Saidi (Discussant)
President, Nasser Saidi & Associates
- 1.45 | **Lunch and End of Day Two**

SPEAKER PROFILES

Keynote Speaker



Mr Chan Chun Sing **Minister for Trade and Industry** **Republic of Singapore**

Mr Chan Chun Sing is Minister for Trade and Industry, which is responsible for driving Singapore's economic and industrial development. He was appointed to this role and as Minister-in-Charge of the Public Service from 1 May 2018. Mr Chan is also Deputy Chairman of the People's Association since 1 October 2015.

Mr Chan was Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) from 4 May 2015 to 22 May 2018. At NTUC, he expanded the labour movement network to represent all working people in Singapore, and led efforts to curate and deliver timely and relevant training for workers. Mr Chan also served as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office from 9 April 2015 to 30 April 2018, upon relinquishing his prior appointments as Minister for Social and Family Development (MSF) and Second Minister for Defence, both of which he had held since 1 September 2013. At MSF, he was responsible for improving social service delivery, enhancing social safety nets and strengthening support for families in Singapore.

His other previous appointments included Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (21 May 2011 to 31 October 2012) and Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts (21 May 2011 to 31 July 2012).

Mr Chan served with the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) from 1987 to 2011. He held various appointments, including Chief of Army (2010 to 2011), Chief of Staff, Joint Staff (2009 to 2010) and Commander 9th Division / Chief Infantry Officer (2007 to 2009). He left the SAF to run in the 2011 General Election and was elected Member of Parliament for Tanjong Pagar Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

Educated at Raffles Institution (1982 to 1985) and Raffles Junior College (1986 to 1987), Mr Chan was awarded the SAF (Overseas) and President's Scholarship to study Economics at Christ's College, Cambridge University in the United Kingdom in 1988 and graduated with First Class Honours. He was awarded the Distinguished Master Strategist Award 1998 by the US Army Command and Staff College. In 2005, he completed the Sloan Fellows Programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship.

Born in 1969, Mr Chan is married with three children and enjoys reading and jogging.

SPEAKER PROFILES

Lunch Speaker



Mr Ong Ye Kung **Minister for Education** **Republic of Singapore**

Mr Ong Ye Kung is the Minister for Education. He was elected Member of Parliament for Sembawang GRC in Sept 2015, and appointed to the Cabinet of Singapore on 1 Oct that year. He has held the positions of Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) and Second Minister for Defence. He is concurrently a board member of the Monetary Authority of Singapore and Chairman of the Chinese Development Assistance Council.

Prior to his Cabinet appointment, he held the position of Director of Group Strategy at Keppel Corporation, overseeing long-term strategic planning of the Group's activities.

Before joining Keppel Corporation, he was the Deputy Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, overseeing the labour movement's employment and employability programmes.

He also held various positions in Government earlier. These include the Chief Executive of the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), during which he spearheaded many initiatives to build up the Continuing Education and Training infrastructure.

He was the Principal Private Secretary to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong from 2003-2005, and Press Secretary to Prime Minister Lee from 1997-2003. Mr Ong was also the Deputy Chief Negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement.

Mr Ong graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK) with a Bsc(Econs) First Class Honours, and holds a Master of Business Administration from the Institute of Management Development, Lausanne, Switzerland. He is married with two teenage children.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Professor Bai Gao

Sociology
Duke University

Bai Gao is professor of Sociology at Duke University. He received his BA in Japanese language and literature and MA in comparative higher education from Peking University, and MA and Ph.D in sociology from Princeton University. His professional experiences include Visiting Professor at the University of Tokyo, Meijing University and Jacob University, Visiting Scholar at the University of Tokyo, Hitotsubashi University, Yokohama National University, Tokyo Keizai University, and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies at Cologne, the Ziqiang Chair Professor at Shanghai University, Director of the Center for China's High-Speed Rail Development Strategy at Southwest Jiaotong University, Chair Professor at Shanghai University of Finance and Economics, and Senior Visiting Professor at the Institute of New Structural Economics, Peking University.

His fields include economic sociology, comparative-historical sociology, international political economy and comparative political economy.

Bai Gao has authored "Economic Ideology and Japanese Industrial Policy: Developmentalism from 1931 to 1965", "Japan's Economic Dilemma: the Institutional Origin of Prosperity and Stagnation", and "Western Social Science Theories and the Japanese Studies". He has also co-authored "High-Speed Rail and China's Grand Strategy in the 21st Century", "High-Speed Rail: The Eurasian Continental Economic Integration and China's Grand Strategy in the 21st Century", "The Chinese Innovation System of High-Speed Rail", "The Political Economy of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", and "The China-Europe Freight Trains: State Building and Market Building".

He is currently working on industrial policy and the development of the digital economy in China.

Land-bridge or Bypass? The Middle East and the OBOR

E-commerce and railroad networks are the two major infrastructure projects that support trade and investments on the Eurasian continent. They have both played a critical role in supporting China's One Belt, One Road initiative.

However, in terms of economic impact on China-Middle East trade, rail networks have had limited success. There are multiple reasons for this: 1. The competition from air and ocean transportation, with Dubai as the hub; 2. The geopolitical risks are high, and; 3. Both sides' ambivalence towards such networks.

Things may change if China views the Middle East as a land bridge between Beijing and Africa, but until then, the main logistics networks will remain on land or in the ocean.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Asst Professor Jatin Dua

Anthropology

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

Jatin Dua is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. His research explores maritime piracy in the Indian Ocean, focusing on processes and projects of governance, law, and economy along the East African coast. His forthcoming book, “Capture at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean”, will be published by the University of California Press this year. In addition, he has published a number of articles on maritime anthropology, captivity, political economy, and sovereignty. He is currently studying port-making and the daily forms of circulation and governance that occur across the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, a key maritime chokepoint connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

Maritime Chokepoints: A View of BRI from the Indian Ocean

Central to China’s Belt and Road Initiative is the ambitious Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), which seeks to develop “blue economic passages” in order to connect Beijing to global economic hubs. Chinese investments have been especially active in the Indian Ocean region, from extensive infrastructural investment in ports and commitments to securitising the global shipping lanes that criss-cross this crucial maritime space. Some 90 per cent of global trade—approximately six billion tons of cargo—travels by sea on over 100,000 cargo ships that are operated by 1.25 million seafarers (UNCTAD 2018).

The Indian Ocean is central to this world of trade, with some of the busiest container ports and more than half of the world’s maritime trade in petroleum transiting through it. While containerisation and logistics have transformed maritime transport, seaborne trade is far from seamless. Chokepoints - physical and social passages of slowdown - are threats to the blue economic passages envisioned in the MSRI. Drawing on fieldwork in maritime chokepoints (ports in the Middle East and Horn of Africa and physical spaces like the Bab-el-Mandeb), this paper considers the possibilities and perils of chokepoints in shaping maritime infrastructure in this region. It will show that chokepoints heighten the tensions implicit in BRI’s infrastructural vision, providing a laboratory for testing the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges and opportunities in China’s westward turn.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Michael Hwang

Chief Justice

Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) Courts

Dr Michael Hwang SC is the Chief Justice of the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) Courts. He is a graduate of Oxford University both at undergraduate and post-graduate levels and a former Visiting and Adjunct Professor at the National University of Singapore. In 1997, he was appointed as one of the first 12 Senior Counsel (SC) of the Supreme Court of Singapore. His former appointments include Judicial Commissioner (a Contract Judge) of the Supreme Court, President of the Law Society of Singapore, a Vice-Chairman of the International Court of Arbitration of the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), a Vice-President of the International Council for Commercial Arbitration (ICCA), and a Court Member of the London Court of International Arbitration (LCIA). He is currently Singapore's non-resident Ambassador to Argentina, having previously been Ambassador to Switzerland. He was appointed as the Chief Justice of the DIFC Courts in June 2010, having served as Deputy Chief Justice since April 2005. In 2014, he was conferred an Honorary LL.D by the University of Sydney, where his legal career began as a law teacher in 1966-7.

The Creation of a Dispute Resolution Regime for the Belt & Road Initiative

Despite the huge scale of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese authorities have not yet announced meaningful measures to deal with BRI disputes in general, other than setting up the Chinese International Commercial Court last year. This talk will discuss in broad terms what existing measures could be adapted to resolve the specific nature of BRI disputes.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Ariel Cohen

**Senior Fellow, International Tax and Investment Center and
Director, Energy Growth and Security Program
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council**

Dr Ariel Cohen is a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center and a Senior Fellow and Programme Director at the International Tax and Investment Center. Dr Cohen also serves as principal of International Market Analysis, an advisory firm specialising in energy, natural resources, political risk, and public affairs.

He previously served as a Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian studies as well as international energy policy at the Heritage Foundation, where he directed its simulation exercises. Additionally, he was a policy adviser with the National Institute for Public Policy's Center for Deterrence Analysis. He consults for multiple Fortune 500 companies and international law firms, and frequently testifies before congressional committees. Dr Cohen has published six books and monographs, and has appeared on CNN, NBC, and C-SPAN, among other networks. He received his LLB from Bar-Ilan University Law School, and holds an MA and a PhD from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Future Calling: Infrastructure Development in Central Asia

The Central Asian Republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – are in a period of transition. Leveraging their critical geography between the world's largest markets, Central Asian governments are embarking on development strategies to increase connectivity and diversify and modernise their economies. Behind their varying strategies for growth lie a common thread: Infrastructure growth and a need for investment.

This inaugural report represents the launch of the non-profit International Tax and Investment Center's (ITIC) new Energy, Growth, and Security Programme. Dr Cohen, the Director of EGS, will discuss topics related to Central Asia's development initiatives, including China's Belt and Road Initiative, renewable energy resource technologies, digital infrastructure, and investment potential.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Nasser H. Saidi

President

Nasser Saidi & Associates

Dr Nasser Saidi is President of Nasser Saidi & Associates, a niche consultant and adviser to the banking & financial sector, governments, central banks, regulators, multi-national and regional companies. He is the former Chief Economist and Strategist of the Dubai International Financial Centre. Dr Saidi served as Minister of Economy and Trade and Minister of Industry of Lebanon and First Vice-Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon for two mandates. He is Chair of the MENA Clean Energy Business Council, a member of the IMF's Regional Advisory Group for MENA, a member of the Advisory Board of the Official Monetary and Financial Institutions Forum (OMFIF) and a member of the advisory board of the Lebanon Oil & Gas Initiative (LOGI). He is the founder & former CEO of the Hawkamah Institute for Corporate Governance & the Mudara Institute of Directors. He is active in fintech, crowdfunding, clean energy and corporate governance.

Is the Middle East Ready for China? The Middle East Countries Have Yet to Develop a China Policy

The links between China and the Middle East/GCC/UAE can be traced back to 200 BCE, along the old Silk Road trading routes. Trade and investment links have been growing, but are mainly driven by energy. China has developed a “China Arab Policy” with guiding principles. The region needs to develop a clear China Policy, strategy and objectives. Promoting trade and investment requires free trade and investment agreements, integrating banking, financial and payment systems, cooperation on infrastructure and logistics, clean energy and technology, as well as the ambitious Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). China has already created an imposing array of international financial institutions to fund its BRI ambitions, which can enter into joint ventures and partner GCC sovereign wealth and investment funds. The strong presence of Chinese banks in the GCC provides the financial underpinnings for deeper and wider linkages.

As the BRI takes shape, the GCC countries can partner China to drive greater economic diversification through privatisation and public-private partnerships. The BRI could also boost the internationalisation of the RMB by encouraging its use in both trade and financial transactions. The other game-changer would be a partnership with China in establishing an Arab Bank for Reconstruction and Development (ABRD), which would play a key role in the reconstruction of Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Yemen, Libya and other countries that have been victims of violence and war.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Pang Yee Ean

**Director General, Investment Operations Department,
Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)**

Yee Ean, a Singaporean, is the Director General, Investment Operations, of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). He has responsibility for strategically identifying and executing infrastructure investments in the region for AIIB. He leads a team that has invested and manages an active portfolio of more than 20 investments. He started the Private Sector Financing Operations of the Bank, and is currently focusing on energy and urban infrastructure, investing in both sovereign and private sectors.

Yee Ean was formerly the CEO of Surbana Consultants (Surbana) and Group Chief Operating Officer of Surbana Jurong Private Limited (Surbana Jurong). During his tenure at Surbana, he led transformational growth of the annual order book by more than 50 per cent, and revenue by more than 20 per cent. Before joining Surbana, he was Senior Vice-President in charge of Real Estates Funds, where he co-led a team in the SGX listing of a S\$700 million market value Ascendas Hospitality Trust. Prior to that, Yee Ean was the Assistant Chief Executive Officer of Ascendas Services Pte Ltd. He also spent six years stationed in India with Ascendas, including being Head of Ascendas North India and Head of Hyderabad, setting up offices in various locations and investing in industrial parks.

Yee Ean graduated with Bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering and Masters in Business Administration from the National University of Singapore and began his career as an electrical project engineer.

A devoted Buddhist who is married with two children, his interests include urban planning, engineering, basketball, Chinese calligraphy and community work.

Infrastructure Investment in the Middle East and Central Asia

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) began operations in January 2016 with a mission to foster sustainable economic development, create wealth and improve infrastructure connectivity in Asia by investing in infrastructure and other productive sectors. From its 57 founding member countries, membership in AIIB has quickly grown to 93 countries. The Bank has also approved \$7.5 billion worth of loans to 35 projects for 13 member countries. Amongst AIIB's first loans in the Middle East and Central Asia was to Oman for the Duqm Port Commercial Terminal and Operational Zone Development Project. Since then, the bank has approved loans to Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Egypt, and Turkey, and is actively seeking to scale up its investments in the region.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Mutlaq H. Al-Morished

Chief Executive Officer

TASNEE, Riyadh

Mr Mutlaq H. Al-Morished is the Chief Executive Officer of Tasnee, one of the largest Saudi diversified industrial companies, with investments in several fields.

Prior to his present post, he was Executive Vice-President of Corporate Finance (CFO) at Sabic, Vice-President of Metals SBU, EVP of Shared Services, and President of Sadaf and Hadeed, consecutively. He was also Chairman of the Board of Yansab, Sabic Capital in the Netherlands, Saudi Kayan, Sabic Captive Insurance Limited in the United Kingdom and Alinma Investment Co. He was a board member of Gulf Bank in Bahrain and the Advisory Board for Economic Affairs of the Supreme Economic Council of Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Mr Al-Morished is a board member of General Organization of Saudi Arabian airlines, Alinma Tokio Marine (ATMC), Aluminum Bahrain (ALBA), Gulf Petrochemical & Chemical Association (GPCA), CITI Group in Saudi Arabia and Alinma Bank.

Mr Al-Morished holds an MBA from Stanford University, a Master of Science degree in Nuclear Engineering from Princeton University, and a Bachelor of Science degree in Nuclear Physics & Mathematics from the University of Denver.

Petrochemical Industry in the GCC

Germany, the United States and Saudi Arabia are three countries that shaped the modern chemical industry with unique contributions over the course of the past century, reaching a global size of USD 4 trillion. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries account for ~7 per cent of global petrochemical capacity, with a compounded annual growth rate of ~9 per cent. Approximately 22 per cent of all proven natural gas reserves are located in the GCC, and the region has historically enjoyed advantageous feedstock prices. Feedstock advantage accounts for ~60 per cent of the global annual EBITDA pool that the chemicals industry generates, and is therefore a key success factor for growth.

Today, GCC petrochemical players are facing a number of challenges: (i) Price advantage for gas feedstock is steadily eroding, driven by competition from US shale gas and Chinese coal-to-olefins; (ii) Significant volumes of gas feedstock are no longer available in the GCC; and (iii) Regulators are pushing GCC players to use liquid feedstock despite the absence of a clear pricing framework for it in the region. As a result, GCC players are pushing for operational improvements and more efficiency at home, while pursuing growth opportunities internationally. Future capacity growth in the GCC will require regulatory support, particularly around the use of liquid feedstock.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Altay Atli

**Lecturer, Department of International Relations,
Koç University, Istanbul**

Dr Altay Atli is a lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Koç University Istanbul, and a partner at Reanda Turkey, a member firm of Reanda International, one of the world's top 20 auditing and consultancy networks, with headquarters in China. Dr. Atli's teaching and research areas include international political economy, Asian economies and the economics of Turkish foreign policy. Having studied in Turkey and Australia, he obtained his Ph.D in Political Sciences and International Relations from Boğaziçi University. Dr Atli was affiliated with Boğaziçi University's Asian Studies Center, as well as the Sabancı University Istanbul Policy Center, and Shanghai University's Center for Global Studies. He also worked as research coordinator at Turkey's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK); and is currently an expert member at the China Network of Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSIAD) as well as a columnist at the Hong Kong-based international news portal Asia Times.

Turkey's View of China as an Economic Partner

As its economy encounters dire straits in the aftermath of the local currency's plunge in the summer of 2018, Turkey faces the need to secure external financial resources, and, accordingly, access to Chinese financing has become, under these circumstances, increasingly crucial for Ankara. Based on an examination of Turkish government policy papers, such as the recently released 100-day action plan, and interviews with relevant stakeholders from the government and the business community, this paper suggests that while China is indeed an alternative source of external finance, what Turkey expects from Beijing is more than just a short-term fix for the economy.

Placing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) at the centre of the inquiry, this paper aims to show that for Turkey, China is a valuable source of not only finance, but also infrastructure, technology, and know-how, which potentially turns it into a major contributor to the country's long-term economic development. Making use of quantitative data, the paper also aims to show that, contrary to the much-subscribed belief that Turkey's axis is shifting away from the West and towards the East, its economy is still deeply anchored within Europe, and China is a complement rather than a substitute.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Professor Wu Bingbing **Qatar Chair Professor, Middle Eastern Studies** **Peking University, Beijing**

Dr Wu Bingbing is Qatar Chair Professor in Middle Eastern Studies at Peking University, a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute for International and Strategic Studies (IISS), Peking University, and Deputy Director of the Department of Arabic Language and Culture as well as Director of the Institute of Arab-Islamic Studies, Peking University. His research interests focus on the politics of the contemporary Middle East, China-Middle Eastern relations, Shi'a Islam and Iranian studies, and Islamist movements. He is the author of *The Rise of the Modern Shi'a Islamism* (CASS Press, 2004), and has also published a number of academic articles. He is a board member of the Chinese Society of Middle Eastern Studies, as well as board member of the China-Arab Friendship Association and China-Iran Friendship Association.

China, Iran, and the Middle East

China prefers to develop normal economic relations with Iran, while the US regards Iran as a main threat to its national security. But there are deep misunderstandings over China-Iran relations. The GCC countries regard Iran as China's main partner in the region, and worry that the BRI could bypass them. Iran, meanwhile, views a strategic partnership with China as an expected development, but without enough concrete and detailed content. Energy cooperation is most important between Iran and China, as well as infrastructure construction. Chabahar Harbour is one of the main projects in which Iran expects China's involvement, and China is not unwilling.

For the BRI, China would have cooperation with both sides of the Gulf, i.e., with Iran and the GCC countries. There are several examples of cooperation between China and GCC countries, like the Five Islands Development Project in Kuwait, the Khalifa Harbour Project with UAE, the Duqm Harbour Project with Oman, and the Jizan Industrial City Project with Saudi Arabia.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr Serkan Yolaçan **Research Fellow, Middle East Institute** **National University of Singapore**

Serkan Yolaçan is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. His research examines diasporic networks of business, religion, and education as conduits of social and political change. His book project, “The Azeri Triangle: Conversion and Revolution in West Asia,” brings to light the role of the Azeri diaspora in connecting the modern histories of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. He holds a Ph.D in cultural anthropology from Duke University and a master’s in sociology and social anthropology from the Central European University.

Can Turkey’s Muslims Solve China’s Uighur problem?

As infrastructure projects connect China to Europe through several westward routes, they also approximate Muslims in between, including those in China. As business ventures bring China deep into the Muslim world, Beijing needs to find a way to integrate Uighurs to this economic expansion while ensuring their political loyalty to the centre. But how can China keep its internal hold over an externally connected Muslim population?

This paper offers a model of Muslim connectivity that looks beyond the Middle Eastern context, where borders dissolve into frontiers and states into sectarian or tribal networks. The model’s setting is the Caspian Basin, where the post-Soviet autocratic states invest heavily in internal stability (for political power) and external connectivity (for higher shares in the export business). This double agenda generates connectivity across national borders even as it reifies those very borders, giving each state a demarcated zone of sovereign control. I term this type of bordered connectivity “the Caspian model”.

The paper then turns to two Muslim movements from Turkey that thrive in such settings. Their business connections outside and political quietism inside give these horizontal networks a vertical dimension in the autocratic regimes, where they begin to mediate between the government and the aspiring youth of humble backgrounds. I call these orderly movements the Turkish model. Together, these two models offer China a way of looking beyond the vertical to the horizontal. As Xinjiang’s economic integration to Chinese expansion implicates Uighurs in a bordered connectivity à la the Caspian Basin, Beijing can manage this connectivity through the orderly movements of Muslim Turks, who can articulate Uighurs into the Silk Road Economic Belt and to Beijing simultaneously.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Janice Hyeju Jeong **Ph.D Candidate, Department of History,** **Duke University**

Janice Hyeju Jeong is a Ph.D Candidate in Duke University's History Department. Her dissertation project explores the role of Mecca as the mediator and a hub for Chinese Muslim (Hui) networks of kinship, religion and politics in the 20th Century. Through Mecca as a conceptual and geographic entry point, the dissertation shows the durability and flexibility of Chinese Muslim diaspora connections that could periodically be used as channels of diplomacy in an age known as that of nationalism and secularism. Her broad interests include historical anthropology, religious and diaspora networks between East and West Asia, and socio-cultural studies of the Arabian Peninsula through transnational approaches.

Chinese Muslims as Connective Agents Between States of China and Arabia: An Overlooked History

Chinese-speaking Muslims are currently classified as a minority nationality within the territorial boundaries of the People's Republic of China (Huizu). They have, however, assembled capacious networks of trade, pilgrimage and scholarship across China and the rest of Eurasia at different points in history. For this reason, Chinese Muslims have periodically performed connecting roles between states in this geography.

This presentation highlights the mobility of Chinese Muslim political actors as conduits through which initial diplomacy between (Republican/Communist) China and Saudi Arabia unfolded. I focus on the moments during World War II and the Cold War, when newly-established states of China, whether in mainland China or Taiwan, needed entry points for foreign engagements. In this context, Mecca represented not only the symbolic centre of the Islamic world, but the site of real congregation, where dignitaries and diasporas gathered.

The Saudi leadership, on its part, capitalised on pan-Islamism for cultural diplomacy, and utilised the pilgrimage season as a means to hold unofficial meetings with foreign envoys. Mecca thus provided China's pilgrim delegates grounds to transfer messages between heads of states, even in the absence of formal diplomatic relations; organise side meetings with representatives of other states (whether in Mecca or in transit points); and to attempt to mould the image of their home state as a protector of Islam. In contrast to the radical political overturns that China faced, a strand of religious networks between China and Arabia offered constant pathways of exchange that could work in favour of its states.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Dr James Dorsey **Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow focused on the Middle East and North Africa who publishes widely in peer-reviewed journals as well as non-academic publications. A veteran, award-winning foreign correspondent for four decades in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the United States for publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, James has met a multitude of the region's leaders. As a journalist, James covered primarily ethnic and religious conflict, including some of recent history's most dramatic events, such as the 1973 Middle East war; the Lebanese civil war; the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the US-backed insurgency that ultimately led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops; the Palestinian intifadas; the Iranian revolution, the US embassy hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war; the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the toppling of Saddam Hussein; the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; the wars in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Serbia; the armed struggles in the Western Sahara, Algeria, the Philippines, Kashmir, Eritrea, Tigre, the Ogaden, Chad, Niger, Chechnya, the Caucasus and Georgia; the Columbian drug cartels; the fall of Manuel Noriega in Panama; the wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador; the Kurdish insurgency in south-eastern Turkey, post-revolution Iran and the war on terror. James writes a widely-acclaimed blog, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, has published a book with the same title, and authors a syndicated column. He is a frequent speaker at international conferences, workshops and seminars and is consulted by governments, corporations and judicial authorities. James won the Dolf van den Broek prize in 2003 and was a two-time nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in 1980 and 1988, as well as a finalist for the 2012 European Press Prize; the Kurt Schork Award and the Amnesty International Media Award in 2002 and the Index on Censorship Award in 2012. James also co-directs the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Wuerzburg.

Shaping the New World Order: The Battle for Human Rights

China is leading the charge in a bid to undermine accepted concepts of human rights accountability and justice. The Chinese effort, backed by autocrats elsewhere, has turned human rights into an underrated, yet crucial battleground in the shaping of a new world order. China is manoeuvring against the backdrop of an unprecedented crackdown on Turkic Muslims in its north-western province of Xinjiang, the accelerated rollout of restrictions elsewhere in the country, and the export of key elements of its model of a 21st century Orwellian surveillance state. Mounting Western criticism of the crackdown puts Muslim nations on the spot.

The criticism is likely to initially lead to Western companies boycotting products made in Xinjiang by inmates of the re-education camps, which China describes as institutions for vocational training, or people who were recently released but forced to work in factories associated with the crackdown. Western pushback will likely involve escalating criticism by the United States and Europe that calls into question the position of governments that use Islam to legitimise their power and policies while turning a blind eye to what amounts to the single most frontal attack on Islam in recent history. Cracks in the Muslim wall of silence have already appeared in countries with major civil society groups, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and Pakistan, and there is mounting anti-Chinese sentiment in countries that have ethnic links to China's Turkic Muslims. That sentiment is fuelled by perceptions of Chinese commercial terms for project finance and loans associated with the Belt and Road initiative as onerous and potential debt traps.

SPEAKER PROFILES



Mohammed Al-Sudairi

Research Fellow, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and Head of the Asian Studies Unit, University of Hong Kong

Mohammed is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in comparative politics at the University of Hong Kong. He holds a master's degree in international relations from Peking University, and a degree in international history from the London School of Economics (LSE). Mohammed is a graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is fluent in Arabic, English, and Mandarin. His research interests encompass Sino-Middle Eastern relations, Islamic and leftist connections between East Asia and the Arab World, and Chinese politics.

The 'Religious Westphalian' Turn in Eurasia: The Consequences for Sino-Gulf Trans-Islamic Networks

Since the early 1980s and well into the post-9/11-decade, religion functioned as a facilitating symbolic asset for the normalisation and development of China's relations with the states of the Arabian Peninsula. This utilisation took place in parallel with a worldwide revival of Muslim religiosity and the re-awakening of trans-Islamic solidarity, which first took off in the 1960s. Over the past few years, however, states across Eurasia have begun to push back against trans-national religious affiliations and solidarities, emphasising sole allegiance to idealised "indigenous" and authorised forms of religion while also creating regulatory and legal frameworks to disrupt and undermine presumably foreign ones.

In many ways, Islam – and other religious traditions as well – have lost their utility in the context of bilateral engagements. Ironically, in China and the Gulf and elsewhere, this process has unfolded in conjunction with growing official support for globalisation, whether through the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative or that of newly-unveiled national development plans. What are the causes behind this Eurasian-wide change that can be observed with respect to religion? And how does the state "square the circle" between globalisation (and the concomitant movement of ideas, peoples and goods it entails) and this (de-globalising) attempt to limit global religions to the bounds of the nation-state? What is the logic underlying this? And lastly, what has been the tangible impact of this development on Sino-Gulf Trans-Islamic networks?

SPEAKER PROFILES



Professor Wang Suolao

Deputy Director

Institute of Area Studies, Peking University

Wang Suolao is Deputy Director of the Institute of Area Studies and Associate Professor in the School of International Studies at Peking University. He received a Ph.D. in International Politics from Peking University in 2000 and went on to pursue further studies in Cairo University of Egypt, 1992-1994. He also did research as a visiting scholar at Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2001-2002, and at Leiden University of the Netherlands in 2007-2008. He can speak English as well as Arabic, and teaches courses including International Relations in the Middle East, Political Economy and Diplomacy in the Middle East, Contemporary Relations between China and the Middle East.

How Can China Avoid Falling Into the Geopolitical Trap in the Middle East?

The recent controversy over President Donald Trump's withdrawal from Syria shows that the United States is caught in a geopolitical trap over Syria. Also in Syria, Russia has been dragged into a complex geopolitical conflict by Israel's strikes on Iranian military bases there. Compared with America and Russia, how can China, another great power with significant strategic interests in the Middle East, avoid falling into the geopolitical trap there?

Based on China's diplomatic practices and economic activities in the Middle East over the last decade, I think there are at least two aspects of policy design worth paying attention to: First, partnering, not allying; and second, providing public goods. From 2013 to 2018, China announced plans to establish strategic partnerships with nine Middle Eastern countries. In the previous 13 years (1999-2012), however, China had established strategic partnerships with only five countries in the region. Among China's Middle Eastern partners, some are staunch allies of the United States, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan and Egypt.

Why would staunch allies of America want to become close partners with China? The reason is that China can provide cheap public goods that have quality. Before 2013, these were manifested in economic, trade, energy and investment cooperation. These have been incorporated into the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013. Given the importance and interests attached to the BRI, America's stalwart allies, like Israel and Saudi Arabia, will have to tolerate the close partnership between China and Iran, their troublesome foe in the Middle East.

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Ehud Yaari **Lafer International Fellow** **The Washington Institute**

Ehud Yaari is an Israel-based Lafer international fellow of The Washington Institute and author of *Toward Israeli-Palestinian Disengagement and Peace by Piece: A Decade of Egyptian Policy* and *Sinai: The New Front?*

A Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television and former associate editor of *Jerusalem Report*, Mr. Yaari has been a commentator for Israeli television since 1975. Among his numerous awards for journalism are the Israeli Press Editors-in-Chief prize for coverage of the peace process with Egypt, the Sokolov Prize for coverage of the Lebanon War, and the Israel Broadcasting Award for coverage of the Gulf War.

Mr Yaari's articles have appeared in respected newspapers and journals such as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. He is also the author of eight books on the Arab-Israeli conflict, including "Fatah" (Sabra Books, 1971), "Egypt's Policy Towards Israel in the Fifties" (1974), "A Guide to Egypt" (1982), "The Year of the Dove", co-authored with Ze'ev Schiff and Eitan Haber (Bantam, 1979), "Israel's Lebanon War", co-authored with Ze'ev Schiff (Simon and Schuster, 1984), and "Intifada", co-authored with Ze'ev Schiff (Simon and Schuster, 1990).

Middle East: China Loves Us All!

China steers away from the political quagmire in the region, but strives to do business and acquire some control, mainly over infrastructure (e.g. ports) and the financial institutions in most countries of the region. In Israel, it seeks primarily technologies. In other countries, access to energy resources is its aim. But in some nations – certainly in Israel - efforts are underway to regulate/restrict Chinese acquisitions. In the security realm, a blue water navy presence from China is not expected beyond Gwadar and the Arabian Sea. China may also decide later to lead reconstruction in Syria, but the burden of funding might be prohibitive. Among the issues China will face is balancing relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, which will be a challenge.

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Dr Jon B. Alterman

**Senior Vice President, Director of Middle East Program
Centre for Strategic and International Studies**

Jon B. Alterman is a Senior Vice-President, holds the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and is Director of the Middle East Programme at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS in 2002, he served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State and as a special assistant to the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. He also previously served as an expert adviser to the Iraq Study Group (also known as the Baker-Hamilton Commission). In addition to his policy work, he often teaches Middle Eastern studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and the George Washington University. Before entering government, he was a scholar at the US Institute of Peace and at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 1993 to 1997, Alterman was an award-winning teacher at Harvard University, where he received his Ph.D. in history. He also worked as a legislative aide to Senator Daniel P. Moynihan (D-NY), responsible for foreign policy and defence.

Dr Alterman has lectured in more than 30 countries on five continents on subjects related to the Middle East and US policy towards the region. He is the author or co-author of four books on the Middle East and the editor of five more. In 2017, he wrote a report for CSIS entitled “The Other Side of the World: China, the United States, and the Struggle for Middle East Security”, which is available in English, Arabic and Mandarin.

Separating Geostrategy from Opportunism: BRI and the Future of the Middle East

China’s Belt and Road Initiative has generated remarkable excitement despite the commitment of relatively modest resources. Presumptions that China is a fast-rising power and an actor that is both strategic and centrally controlled have energised governments throughout the Middle East, which seek to establish themselves as key nodes in Beijing’s grand strategy. The prospect of China sweeping into the Middle East is especially enticing for governments that believe that US domestic energy production and fatigue with Middle Eastern conflicts is driving it away from the region.

The enthusiasm China has engendered is despite the fact that it has been vague about exactly what its new western-facing strategy entails, and what the broader consequences of greater involvement might be for its partners. The government of China has shown little interest in promoting transparency and anti-corruption efforts as it has extended into markets in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and appears ambivalent about multilateral agreements and organisations in which it does not have an outsized role.

What is left unanswered is how China sees its growing global role. Will it be a major driver of global development, and if so, does it intend to exist alongside other global players, displace them, or compete with them? What kind of security arrangements will China seek to make to secure an increasingly global set of interests, especially if tensions with other powers continue to rise? For Middle Eastern states, the question is quite plainly the ways in which China will make its greater presence felt in the region and how other powers will react.



Bilahari Kausikan **Chairman, Middle East Institute** **National University of Singapore**

Mr Bilahari Kausikan is the Chairman of the Middle East Institute, an autonomous institute of the National University of Singapore. Mr Kausikan was Permanent Secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2013, having served as Second Permanent Secretary since 2001. He was subsequently Ambassador-at-Large until May 2018. His earlier appointments at the Ministry include Deputy Secretary for South-east Asia, Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and Ambassador to the Russian Federation. Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York all attempted to educate Mr Kausikan.



Professor Engseng Ho **Director, Middle East Institute** **National University of Singapore**

Engseng Ho is Director of the Middle East Institute and Muhammad Alagil Distinguished Visiting Professor of Arabia Asia Studies at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. At Duke University, he is Professor of Anthropology and Professor of History. He is a leading scholar of transnational anthropology, history and Muslim societies, Arab diasporas, and the Indian Ocean. His research expertise is in Arabia, coastal South Asia and maritime South-east Asia, and he maintains active collaborations with scholars in these regions. He serves on the editorial boards of journals such as *American Anthropologist*, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *History and Anthropology*, and *Modern Asian Studies* and is co-editor of the *Asian Connections* book series at Cambridge University Press.

He previously worked as Professor of Anthropology, Harvard University; Senior Scholar, Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies; Country and Profile Writer, the Economist Group; International Economist, Government of Singapore Investment Corporation/Monetary Authority of Singapore. He was educated at the Penang Free School, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago.



Professor Joseph Liow

**Dean, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

Joseph Chinyong Liow is Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, where he is also Professor of Comparative and International Politics and former Dean at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies. He held the inaugural Lee Kuan Yew Chair in Southeast Asia Studies at the Brookings Institution, Washington DC, where he was also a Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy Program.

His research interests encompass Muslim politics and social movements in South-east Asia and the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Asia Pacific region. He is the author, co-author, or editor of 14 books. His most recent single-authored books are “Ambivalent Engagement: The United States and Regional Security in Southeast Asia after the Cold War” (Brookings 2017), “Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia” (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and “Dictionary of the Modern Politics of Southeast Asia”, fourth edition (Routledge, 2014). A regular columnist for The Straits Times, his commentaries on international affairs have also appeared in New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, National Interest, Nikkei Asian Review, and the Wall Street Journal. He has testified to the United States Congress, and been invited to deliver a special closed-door briefing to the Asean Defence Ministers’ Meeting.



Dr Serkan Yolaçan

**Research Fellow, Middle East Institute
National University of Singapore**

Serkan Yolaçan is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. His research examines diasporic networks of business, religion, and education as conduits of social and political change. His book project, “The Azeri Triangle: Conversion and Revolution in West Asia,” brings to light the role of the Azeri diaspora in connecting the modern histories of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. He holds a Ph.D in cultural anthropology from Duke University and a master’s in sociology and social anthropology from the Central European University.



Professor Tan Kong Yam

Economics

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Tan Kong Yam is Professor of Economics at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. From June 2002 to June 2005, he was a senior economist at the World Bank office in Beijing, where he worked on issues of macro stabilisation, integration of the fragmented domestic market, banking reform, international trade and investment as well as regional inequality. In 2004, he was a member of the World Bank expert group on the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) for the State Council in China. The expert group provided analysis and policy recommendations on urbanisation, regional inequality, innovation policy, energy and water policy, as well as strategy on banking reform to the Chinese government.

Prior to that, he was the chief economist of the Singapore government at the Ministry of Trade and Industry (1999-2002 May), and Head, Department of Business Policy, Faculty of Business Administration at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a graduate of Princeton (1975-79, class of 1931 scholar, Paul Volcker Thesis prize) and Stanford University (1980-83). Prior to joining NUS, he worked at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, World Bank, the Monetary Authority of Singapore, and was the Director of Research at the Ministry of Trade and Industry in Singapore.



Dr Linda Matar

Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute


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Linda Matar is a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute in NUS. She is also a lecturer at NUS College of Alice and Peter Tan. Her research and teaching involve the political economy and economic development of the Arab Near East and South-east Asia. She is the author of “The Political Economy of Investment in Syria” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Her other recent publications include “Syria’s Economic History: Bumpy Road from National Economy to Neoliberalism” in Hanssen, J. and Ghazal, A., (eds), “Handbook Of Contemporary Middle East History” (Oxford University Press, 2017) and “Investment and Neoliberalism in Syria,” in Kadri, A. (ed.), “Development Challenges and Solutions after the Arab Spring” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). She obtained her Ph.D in Economics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.


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