

PEACE AND SECURITY

# A SAVIOR IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

The Extent and Limits of China's  
Soft Power in Lebanon

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China is Lebanon's largest trading partner and has an interest in investing in Lebanon's infrastructure in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and connecting Lebanon to Syria, which are key geo-economic objectives for China in Lebanon.



Avoiding direct involvement in Lebanese domestic disputes unlike other international players and providing manifold material support, China has been viewed favorably by many actors within Lebanon.



However, domestic and international factors (especially US pressure) may hinder a deeper cooperation between China and Lebanon and impose particular limitations for more strategic relations in the future.



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## INTRODUCTION

“Is Lebanon heading to the East?” – This was a question raised by many journalists, scholars and policymakers after the financial crisis that hit the country starting October 2019. During this period, many politicians viewed the crisis from the angle of US policy toward Lebanon and the sanctions against Hezbollah as a financial weapon to “punish Lebanon” due to Hezbollah’s domestic and regional policies.<sup>1</sup> As a result, politicians supporting this camp pushed the narrative that Lebanon must turn to the East and engage in economic relations with Russia, China, and Iran. Of course, this narrative was strongly opposed by other key actors who expressed resistance against Iran’s growing role in the country. Proponents of this group feared that China’s economic role in the country would be an extension of Iran’s role as Beijing and Tehran share key understandings when it comes to regional issues. Certainly, Hezbollah’s ties with Iran and its role in the country as well as the diverse opinions may raise certain challenges for Beijing’s interests in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> China is very cautious not to link its relations with Iran with its policy towards Lebanon, as Beijing still tries to portray itself as a “status quo power”, unlike Iran, which portrays itself as a “revisionist” power aiming to confront the US position in the region.<sup>3</sup> This debate is still ongoing in Lebanon and will shape the country’s foreign policy in the coming years especially when future governments deal with the economic and political reforms to revive the country from the ashes of the financial crisis and seek foreign investments and loans.

To understand the Chinese–Lebanese dynamics, the paper will address China’s key geo-economic interests in the country within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and regional interconnectivity by assessing Lebanon’s geo-strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean and near Syria, will analyze the perception of Lebanon towards China’s role, and will identify the main challenges and opportunities in these relations. As will be discussed in the paper, China’s relations with Lebanon are limited to soft power activities including trade, cultural activities, and investments, and not hard power in terms of defense or security cooperation. The first section of the paper will provide a historical reflection on the

relations between both countries, highlight the era of post-war reconstruction, and assess Lebanon’s role within the BRI. In the second section, it will identify and analyze the dominant narratives of China–Lebanon relations. Finally, in the last section, the paper will conclude by summarizing the key challenges and opportunities in both countries’ relations.

<sup>1</sup> Sweidan 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Perez-Des Rosiers 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Zreik 2015.

# A HISTORY OF CHINESE–LEBANESE RELATIONS AND LEBANON'S GEO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BRI

## A HISTORICAL REFLECTION ON CHINESE–LEBANESE RELATIONS (1971-2013)

Initially, Chinese–Lebanese relations were “uneasy”, mainly due to Lebanon’s Western-oriented foreign policy as revolutionary Beijing was spreading its ideology in the Global South by supporting leftist and revolutionary militant groups around the globe. Lebanon officially recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC) only in 1971, after Henry Kissinger, then United States National Security Advisor, had visited China, and both countries established diplomatic relations. Clearly, some segments of the Lebanese ruling elite were unhappy and cautious of China’s role in the country.<sup>4</sup> Muhammad S. Olimat illustrates how the Chinese government used to provide diplomatic and military support to Palestinian militias in Lebanon before the establishment of diplomatic relations. Starting in the late 1960s, Palestinian militias initiated cross-border armed attacks against Israel and later clashed with the Lebanese army and right-wing militant Christian groups, becoming a major catalyst in the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Many external countries, such as the Soviet Union, Libya and China, were involved in arming Palestinian leftist militias. As a result, Lebanese authorities were “alarmed by China’s intervention in its internal affairs”.<sup>5</sup> However, during the Civil War (1975-1990), China called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and halted its military support to the Palestinians; instead, its diplomats engaged in regular meetings with Palestinian leaders to provide advice on regional issues.<sup>6</sup>

During the post-Civil War reconstruction period (1992-2010), China expressed its interest in the reconstruction projects of late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and pledged to carry out some of them. In 2002, Hariri visited China, renewed the trade agreement between both countries, and signed a cultural agreement, whose main objective was to foster tourism. In addition to governmental agencies, cultural organizations such as the Chinese–Lebanese Friendship and Cooperation Committee and Chinese–Lebanese Academic Seminar have played a role in facilitating a cross-cultural exchange pro-

gram. Therefore, it might come to little surprise that Lebanon was the first Arab country to host a Confucius Institute. Established in 2006 at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, the Institute started promoting Chinese language and culture among Lebanese students. Later, other major private universities also began offering Chinese language teaching to their students.

After Lebanon’s participation in the Shanghai Expo (2010) and China becoming Lebanon’s main trading partner (2012), Beirut made great efforts to attract additional Chinese investments. This cooperation, which materialized in trade agreements later, encouraged China to increase its investments in mobile telecommunications networks and solar heating systems, and to fund aid programs for Palestinian refugees. China’s main exports to Lebanon were plastics, furniture, electronics, and renewable energy technology, while its imports are mainly olive oil, wine, vegetables, minerals, and jewelry. It is worth mentioning that Chinese telecommunication companies also expanded in Lebanon where, in November 2013, Huawei signed an agreement with the Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunication to train Lebanese students in communication engineering and to expand internet service in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> China was also interested in northern Lebanon and especially in Tripoli due to its proximity to Syria and its strategic location on the Eastern Mediterranean. Already in 2009, the China Harboring Engineering Company (CHEC) signed a contract with the Authority of the Port of Tripoli to expand the port at an estimated cost of 80 million US dollars. As the expansion was completed, the port could accommodate large ferries and imports arriving at the port increased.<sup>8</sup> Even despite the eruption of the Syrian crisis, which created obstacles for trade between both countries as Lebanon’s only land route was blocked, China still showed interest in developing Lebanon’s infrastructure.

With regard to engaging in Lebanon and its politics, China has always been cautious. After Rafiq Hariri’s assassination in February 2005, Beijing supported the international inquiry into the murder, and after the 2006 Israel–Lebanon war, it voted in favor of the UNSC 1701 resolution and sent peace-

<sup>4</sup> Olimat 2015, 139.

<sup>5</sup> Sinchor 1979, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Behbehani 1981, 124.

<sup>7</sup> China Daily and Xinhua Press Agency 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Business News 2012.

keeping forces as part of UNIFIL.<sup>9</sup> During the 2006 war, a scandal arose as China became entangled in the conflict when Chinese-made C-802 missiles, launched from the Lebanese coast by Hezbollah, hit an Israeli anti-aircraft ship. Back then, it was reported that Hezbollah had obtained these missiles from Iran, while there was no evidence that China had provided them. Moreover, China is very cautious when dealing with Hezbollah.<sup>10</sup> As a result, and given its non-interventionist foreign policy and positive image in the region as a mediating actor, China not only condemned Israel's military actions toward Lebanon but also denounced Hezbollah's military actions of crossing the border and launching missile attacks on Israeli cities.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding security relations and arms sales, China has experienced limits as the Lebanese army and security forces are equipped with American and French weapons. In its fight against terrorism, China has sought to make Lebanon and other Arab countries recognize that its fight against the "Eastern Turkestan terrorist forces is an important part of the international anti-terrorism campaign",<sup>12</sup> thereby referring to its actions against Uyghurs and Uyghur separatist movements.<sup>13</sup>

## LEBANON'S GEO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF BRI

Lebanon's main importance for China is its geostrategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant within the context of China's BRI, which aims to connect Eurasia through multiple land and maritime routes to enhance trade interconnectivity.<sup>14</sup> The Levant can offer access to the Mediterranean Sea with an alternative route to the Suez Canal if the region is connected to the "Middle Corridor",<sup>15</sup> an economic corridor promoted by Turkey that aims to connect China to Central Asia, South Caucasus, Turkey and Europe.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Lebanon's strategic location would be an ideal launching point for future Chinese reconstruction projects in Syria. Interestingly, the fragility and instability of Lebanon's political

system has not hindered Beijing from offering projects and investment proposals to the Lebanese side.<sup>17</sup>

The BRI offers new prospects for China's relations with Lebanon. When Lebanon officially joined the BRI in 2017, a partnership was forged between both countries to facilitate trade and the flow of Chinese investments to Lebanon. For this objective, several workshops and conferences took place dedicated to infrastructural development in Tripoli. In 2017, the Arab Chambers of Commerce and the China Council to Promote International Trade (CCPIT) signed two MoUs to boost the BRI, including in Lebanon. In 2018, during the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), Chinese officials announced 20 billion US dollars in loans with aid packages worth more than 100 million US dollars to several Arab countries including Lebanon.<sup>18</sup>

China expressed particular interest to invest in the Tripoli port and to turn it into an important logistic hub for its BRI projects and reconstruction plans in Syria. China's investment in the Tripoli port is linked to the latter's significance for imports and exports throughout the Mediterranean Sea. In view of its proximity to Syria Tripoli could become a potential economic and logistic hub for China's reconstruction plans in postwar Syria. These considerations are no secrets, given that China has certain plans to revive the Beirut–Tripoli railway as part of a wider connectivity that would also incorporate the Lebanese and Syrian railway systems into the BRI. Meanwhile, there have also been talks that Chinese companies may reconstruct the Tripoli–Homs railway connection.<sup>19</sup> This idea was explicitly reflected in the words of the President of the China-Arab Association for Promoting Cultural and Commercial Change, when he stated that China is ready to support Lebanon not only with technical knowledge but also in creating regional interconnectivity by linking Beirut to Tripoli, Tripoli to Aleppo, Aleppo to Damascus, and so on.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, Chinese officials and several Lebanese politicians expressed willingness to go forward with these ideas. During the Belt and Road Initiative and its Role in Developing Northern Lebanon conference held at the Syndicate of Engineers in Tripoli, the former Chinese ambassador Wang Kejian shared that Chinese companies had visited northern Lebanon and showed interest in projects related to the expansion of Tripoli Port and Qulay'at Airport,<sup>21</sup> though the latter is still not operational.<sup>22</sup> Kejian also added that China, within the context of BRI, would be interested in constructing railways, roads, and bridges in the region. During the conference, many local politicians and businessmen were also present. Member of Parliament Samir Jisr from the Future Party, associated with former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, said that Leb-

<sup>9</sup> The UNSC 1701 resolution sought to end hostilities of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, calling "for the full cessation of hostilities, the deployment of Lebanese forces to Southern Lebanon, parallel withdrawal of Israeli forces behind the Blue Line, strengthening the UN force (UNIFIL) to facilitate the entry of Lebanese Forces in the region and the establishment of a demilitarized zone between the Blue Line and the Litani River", United Nations Peacemaker 2006; United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Zreik 2021a.

<sup>11</sup> Perez-Des Rosiers 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Olimat 2015, 147.

<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>14</sup> Zreik 2023.

<sup>15</sup> The Turkish-backed Middle Corridor, also known as Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, is a multiple railway and highway route connecting Europe to China via Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and as the northern route connecting China to Europe via Russia became inoperational due to the sanctions, China increased its focus on the Middle Corridor to trade with Europe.

<sup>16</sup> Eldem 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Mroue 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Perez-Des Rosiers 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Khoudari 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Lin 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Beijing helped to expand the Mouawad airport (formerly known as Qulay'at), some 15 miles north of Tripoli, to complete its transformation from a military into a civilian airport.

<sup>22</sup> Xinhua News Agency 2019.

anon's service and banking sectors can also contribute to Syria's reconstruction projects. Meanwhile, Toufic Dabbousi, head of the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, mentioned that the expansion of the Tripoli Port would be a milestone to develop northern Lebanon. Remarkably, after lobbying efforts from Lebanese politicians in Tripoli, the Union of Lebanon's Tripoli Municipalities became a member of China's Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce (SRCIC). Adnan Kassar, the Chairman of the Economic Bodies of Lebanese–Chinese relations, even stated that the SRCIC would be open to granting 2 billion US dollars of loans with low-interest rates to Lebanon to develop its transport networks.<sup>23</sup> However, these promises and interests have not materialized yet due to a lack of political will in Lebanon and China's reluctance to increase its investment in a highly unstable and risky environment.

Hence, China's geo-economic objectives in Lebanon are mainly related to its future plans in Syria. According to Waref Kumayha, China can contribute to linking Tripoli's Port to Homs via a railway that used to function before the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).<sup>24</sup> Before the Syrian conflict erupted (2011) and in addition to Turkish ports connected to Syria via different highways, Lebanon's ports were also used as transit routes to export goods to Syria and Iraq, bypassing the long sea route through the Suez Canal and around the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>25</sup> Back then, given the planned Tripoli Special Economic Zone adjacent to the port, the city may have become a major import-export hub for Syria's future reconstruction projects, if China had moved forward with its reconstruction plans. This context is key to understand the significance of the Levant as part of the BRI.

As a result, the BRI can be a win-win solution for both China and Lebanon, which might also serve as basis for subsequent joint initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI).<sup>26</sup> For Lebanon, joining the BRI was attractive since it would increase Chinese investments, allowed for preferential financing in terms of grants and interest-free and concessional loans, and made Lebanon a transit base for Chinese efforts in reconstructing Syria.<sup>27</sup> However, these plans are still on hold due to the US sanctions against the Syrian regime and the ongoing uncertainty in Syria as the country remains fragmented and affected by domestic economic decline and political instability.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Perez-Des Rosiers 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Author interview with Dr. Waref Kumayha, Founder and President of Lebanese-Chinese Dialogue Road Association, December 14, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Issa 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Xinhua News Agency 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Lin 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Cafiero 2023.

# DOMINANT NARRATIVES: HOW DO LEBANESE PERCEIVE CHINA AND ITS ROLE IN THE MENA?

According to the Washington Institute, the percentage of Lebanese desiring positive relations with China has increased from 51% in October 2017 to 72% in November 2022.<sup>29</sup> The poll reflects the sectarian disagreements on global powers and regional issues.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, China took the lead as a total of 45% answered that relations with China are “very important”, and 23% “somewhat important”, however 41% of Sunnis, 67% of Shias, 33% of Christians, and 44% of Druze answered that relations with China are “very important”, compared to 15%, 5%, 38%, and 27% respectively who answered that relations are “not important at all”.<sup>31</sup> A contributing factor behind this positive sign was that after Lebanon signed an MoU in 2017 to join China’s BRI, Beijing provided the country economic aid and proposed infrastructural projects. A closer look at sectarian breakdowns indicates that China’s popularity among the Shia community is increasing. In October 2017, November 2021, and March 2022, 74%, 82%, and 91% of the Shia respondents said that relations with China are “important”. This popularity among Hezbollah supporters in the Shia community reflects China’s closeness to Iran and Russia on issues related to Syria or its position vis-à-vis the US role regionally and globally. Meanwhile, 72% of Sunnis said relations with China are “important”.<sup>32</sup> This positive image of China among the Sunnis in Lebanon can reflect China’s burgeoning status in the Persian Gulf Arab states mainly related to its increasing positive relations with Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, while China’s popularity among Muslims is on the rise, its popularity has declined among Christians. In November 2021, while 60% of the Christian respondents argued that relations with China were important, this number dropped to 49% in the 2022 poll. In the same manner, when asked about their opinion on the Olympic Games being held in Beijing, 38% of both the Sunnis and Shias saw it as a positive occasion, compared to just 30% of the Lebanese Christians. When asking what each community expected from the great powers, the majority of Shias favored China to supply heavy weapons to the Lebanese army, while Sunnis and

Christians preferred Chinese investments and construction projects over arms agreements. Instead, the majority of Sunnis and Christians favored US defense cooperation with the Lebanese army. The decline of support among Lebanese Christians might reflect China’s support to Iran in the region or its ideological and political clash with the US or West in the international arena.

How can all this be explained? While Lebanon was suffering from the financial crisis, China jumped in and provided some aid and proposals to implement certain energy and infrastructural projects. In 2019 a delegation of Chinese businessmen visited Lebanon and held meetings away from media and offered to fund numerous infrastructure projects.<sup>33</sup> One of these projects was to develop the Arab highway connecting Beirut to Damascus and build a parallel railway, which would be connected to the railways linked to the BRI in the region. They also offered to construct highways connecting south Lebanon to the north and build solar power plants that would generate electricity at affordable prices. According to Tamara Berro, Chinese investors and companies also offered suggestions to build power plants, waste management factories, and tunnels; however, even though former Prime Minister Hassan Diab received all these proposals and later met the Chinese ambassador, there were internal and external pressures to hamper these proposals.<sup>34</sup> Although these suggestions were merely proposals and not projects, the Lebanese public opinion was divided as some, led by Hezbollah and its allies, welcomed the proposals while others aligned with the US had reservations and pressured the Lebanese consecutive governments not to go a step forward.<sup>35</sup>

China first stepped in by investing in the country’s state-owned telecommunications service company Ogero and over 8 million US dollars from Chinese donations to install solar energy panels. Since Lebanon’s main electricity provider EDL stopped providing round-the-clock services, Ogero had started experiencing numerous service interruptions and was buying its own fuel for electricity generation, so it aimed to

<sup>29</sup> Silber 2022.

<sup>30</sup> McDonough 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Silber 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Houssari 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Author interview with Dr. Tamara Berro, a Lebanese expert on Chinese affairs, November 27, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> The Cradle 2023.



invest in green energy.<sup>36</sup> China agreed to deploy solar panels at around 380 locations, which will decrease Ogero's annual cost as it pays around 20 million US dollars for fuel.<sup>37</sup> The solar energy project is expected to be operating in the summer of 2024.<sup>38</sup> However, many Lebanese were concerned that donations from China may spark certain problems, as the US has multiple times voiced its concern over Chinese involvement in Lebanon's telecommunication service. In July 2020, when former Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced that China had offered to end Lebanon's decades-long electricity supply crisis by building power stations and tunnels that cut through the mountains to shorten the trip between Beirut and the eastern Beqaa Valley and a railway along the coast, Americans were alarmed.<sup>39</sup>

Hezbollah took advantage of the situation, and its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah gave a televised speech advocating for a larger Chinese role in Lebanon to minimize US economic influence and soft power in the country. Economist Hasan Moukalled who visited China multiple times between 2018 and 2019 said that the projects that China has offered to Lebanon are worth 12.5 billion US dollars. From Hezbollah's perspective, such an investment is mutually beneficial for Lebanon and China.<sup>40</sup> Following the financial crisis in the country, Hezbollah favored China's bailout and opposed the IMF considering it as another "imperialist" tool to impose political conditions on Lebanon.<sup>41</sup> Correspondingly, China, by investing in Lebanon, could seek to launch its reconstruction plans in Syria and have access to the Eastern Mediterranean via the Lebanese and Syrian ports, while Lebanon could turn into a launch pad for Syria's reconstruction projects and attract foreign investments. However, for Hezbollah, Lebanon would have missed the opportunity, as the US ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, in an interview with the Saudi-owned TV station Al-Hadath, warned that Chinese investments might come "at the expense of the country's prosperity, stability or fiscal viability, or of course, on the long-standing relations with the United States."<sup>42</sup> When in a televised speech on Al-Manar TV, Hezbollah's Secretary General Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah claimed, "Chinese companies are ready to inject money into his country,"<sup>43</sup> US ambassador Dorothy Shea responded indirectly arguing that Hezbollah's statements are an attempt to jeopardize the prospect of Lebanon's economic recovery plans.<sup>44</sup> To which the Chinese embassy responded, "Chinese loans have no political strings".<sup>45</sup> Due to internal divisions in the cabinet, Prime Minister Diab failed to move forward with the plan.

Hence, from these polls, it can be concluded that, unlike the majority of Muslims, most Christians have concerns over China's role in the future, most probably due to its relations with Iran and the Syrian government. Finally, the majority of Shias support the idea of China providing arms support to the Lebanese army, mainly due to political reasons, whereas Christians and Sunnis have reservations and rather prefer the US playing that traditional role.

<sup>36</sup> Telecom Review 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Author interview with Dr. Waref Kumahya, Founder and President of Lebanese-Chinese Dialogue Road Association, December 14, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Crean 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Mroue 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Robbins 2021; Reuters 2020

<sup>42</sup> Mroue 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Tahmizian Meuse 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Al Arabiya 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Crowe 2020.

# CHALLENGES AND CHANCES: POLITICAL LIMITATIONS AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

China's interaction with Lebanon and Chinese soft power is full of opportunities but also has certain constraints mainly as a result of external pressures and internal challenges.

Tamara Berro argues that this pressure is due to the fear of Lebanese politicians either being neglected by the US or worse to be sanctioned.<sup>46</sup> The logic behind this argument is that Lebanon, unlike the Gulf States, does not have the luxury of economic and political resources to show flexibility and needs Western financial support to reform its financial system. Hence, it can be argued that China's proposals have not been put into action due to:

1. External pressures mainly from the US. There is a lack of political will among some Lebanese political circles to establish a strategic partnership with China due to its troubled relations with the US. This can be considered a reflection of sometimes direct or indirect US involvement, as some political groups in Lebanon are closely aligned with the US policies towards the Middle East and would prefer not to engage with states that are rival to the US.
2. Internal challenges as Lebanon is facing political and economic instability. There is widespread systematic corruption and a politically unstable situation, and such factors may hinder Chinese companies to increase their investments in a risky and uncertain environment.

For these reasons, China's relations with Lebanon can be characterized as an uneasy one.

From an American perspective, the US has no interest in a Chinese–Lebanese partnership which may later develop into strategic cooperation. Therefore, Lebanon can be considered as a pawn of superpowers and their interests. A clear example is when Huawei established an office in Lebanon; many assumed that Lebanon could become the spearhead of China's 5G technology in the region, given that Israel refused to grant the Chinese company permission to build its 5G network there. However, US sanctions against the company

substantially affected its credibility and Lebanon did not go forward in deepening its cooperation with the Chinese tech giant.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, Mohamad Zreik, a Lebanese expert on China, argued that another obstacle to improving Lebanese–Chinese relations is that Chinese investors are concerned about the risks of investment due to the unstable political situation in the country. As Lebanon is not immune from regional conflicts such as the escalation in Gaza, the flow of Chinese investments to the country may further be slowed or even postponed. Mohamad Zreik argued, "Due to internal constraints, Lebanon may not be able to accept a powerful economic partner and huge Chinese investments", and as a result of the deteriorating internal security, financial and regional situation, the relations between both countries would not reach their peak in the short term.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, widespread institutional corruption, the collapse of the banking and financial system starting in October 2019, and the lack of political will to undertake economic reforms, raise specific concerns for foreign direct investments. Despite this, China has shown a willingness to invest in Lebanon, but the government has been unable to make a solid decision due to above-mentioned external pressure and internal disagreements mainly for sectarian and political reasons as one group, led by Hezbollah, pushes for close cooperation with Iran, China and Russia, while others prefer close ties with the Western world and the Gulf states.

Finally, Chinese–Lebanese relations also have political limitations. In 2019, wary of international mobilization against China's policies towards the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the Chinese government invited a group of foreign diplomats to visit the Chinese province. Lebanon was also invited. However, it declined the invitation, and in UN meetings, it either abstained or voted along with Western countries' criticism against China, often distancing itself from Arab partners who either remained silent or supported China's position.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, there was concern in Beirut that Moscow and Beijing would veto the extension of UNIFIL's mandate in late August 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Author interview with Dr. Tamara Berro, a Lebanese expert on Chinese affairs, November 27, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Zreik 2021b, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Zreik 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Blanchard 2023.

It should be noted that China views the deployment of its peacekeepers around the globe as part of its “Global Security Initiative” which reflects Beijing’s perception on safeguarding global security and peace.<sup>50</sup> However, in the last minutes of the vote, the extension of UNIFIL was secured as the US and France struck a compromise with Russia and China to extend UNIFIL’s mandate for one year after the Russian and Chinese envoys abstained from the voting sessions in the UNSC meeting. Lebanon’s UN envoy expressed concern about the abstention of Chinese and Russian delegates. China justified its action by arguing that the resolution “failed to fully address the concerns of the state concerned and UNSC members”, while Russia disputed the “wording” of the resolution.<sup>51</sup> The main argument was that France and the US were trying to include wordings strongly reaffirming UNIFIL’s freedom of movement and its ability to conduct “announced and unannounced patrols” in its zone of authority, which Russia and China opposed.<sup>52</sup> Also the Lebanese government and Hezbollah had pressured the UNSC to remove Article 16 related to the freedom of movement of the UNIFIL troops and to limit its movement only with permission of the Lebanese army.<sup>53</sup> Still, subsequent to the vote, Lebanon expressed that the resolution constituted “a fundamental step in safeguarding Lebanon’s rights and sovereignty”,<sup>54</sup> and that the eventual clause requiring UNIFIL to coordinate with Lebanon’s government still represented “a factor of satisfaction”.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of these limitations both Lebanon and China have continued to pursue opportunities for cooperation and joint action in economic, cultural, and humanitarian areas.

After Lebanon acceded to the BRI, China increased its humanitarian aid to Lebanon. In 2017, Beijing provided school supplies for more than 86,000 children enrolled in public and private schools in Lebanon.<sup>56</sup> In 2019, China, Italy, and Lebanon signed a trilateral agreement for a water project aiming to supply Beirut with fresh water. Beijing accelerated its humanitarian aid to Lebanon during the COVID-19 era and the Beirut Port Explosion (August 4, 2020). When the first COVID-19 case was reported in Lebanon on February 21, 2020, the Chinese authorities rushed to send medical assistance. In Najia Hussari’s words, “The promptness of the response created the impression in some circles that China was seeking to gain a strategic foothold in Lebanon, which had long been viewed as a political playground for major powers and the Middle East’s gateway of sorts to the West”.<sup>57</sup> A year later, Lebanon was one of the first countries to receive the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine as a donation from the Chinese embassy, where 100,000 doses were distributed to the

Lebanese army and public sector employees.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, after the port explosion China sent a group of its peacekeepers enrolled in UNIFIL to assist in the rescue operations.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, to help Lebanese companies seeking ways to export their products to China, in October 2022 a workshop titled “Cross-Border E-Commerce and Mobile Payments in Lebanon” was held in Beirut, organized by the Shandong International Vocational College in China and with the participation of the Arab-Chinese Cooperation and Development Association in Lebanon.<sup>60</sup> Representatives from the Lebanese ministries of economy, trade, and agriculture were also present in addition to several merchants and manufacturers.<sup>61</sup> As China has the world’s largest e-commerce market, with platforms such as Alibaba and JD.com, Lebanese exporters were introduced to new market opportunities in China by using these platforms. Finally, as part of cultural investment, China has contributed to building and equipping the National Higher Conservatory Music building. The project is expected to cost 62 million US dollars, covering an area of 39 thousand m<sup>2</sup>, and featuring a teaching room, library, lecture and auditorium halls, and a theater that can host up to 1,200 guests.<sup>62</sup>

Politically, on March 10, 2023, Hassan Nasrallah welcomed the Chinese-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia calling it a “good development”. Nasrallah added that if the deal proceeds in its natural course “it could open up horizons in the entire region, including in Lebanon.”<sup>63</sup> Lebanese *Al Akhbar* newspaper, closely affiliated with Hezbollah’s politics, argued that the deal would have a positive impact on Lebanon and was a blow to US allies in the country.<sup>64</sup> While *Nada al Watani*, a newspaper famous for its criticism of Hezbollah’s politics, mentioned that the deal was a blow to the presidential candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh (a Christian leader backed by Hezbollah).<sup>65</sup> While many analysts were assuming the Chinese-brokered deal would bring stability to the region, the events after October 7, 2023, the war in Gaza, and the involvement of multiple state and non-state actors have increased instability in the region, including in Lebanon.

Amid the escalation in Gaza and the border clashes between Israel and Hezbollah, on November 23, 2023, the Chinese government decided to send one million US dollars of humanitarian aid to displaced people in Southern Lebanon. This was announced when China’s ambassador Quan Minjian met the Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and reaffirmed his country position regarding the Palestinian–Israeli conflict on the basis of the two-state solution.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, China’s envoy to the Middle East, Zhai Jun, who visited the region in

<sup>50</sup> Yunsong 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Hernandez 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Le Poidevin 2023.

<sup>54</sup> L’Orient Today 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Le Poidevin 2023.

<sup>56</sup> UNICEF 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Houssari 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Republic of Lebanon Ministry of Public Health 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Xinhua News Agency 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Khoury 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Global Times 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Reuters 2023.

<sup>64</sup> Rizk 2023.

<sup>65</sup> Nida al Watan 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Xinhua News Agency 2023.

late October 2023, warned of spillover effect of the conflict as armed clashes have spread to the Lebanese–Israeli and Syrian–Israeli borders, and he argued that it is “making the outlook worrisome”.<sup>67</sup> However, China only exhibits limited influence over parties to the conflict such as Hezbollah,<sup>68</sup> and displayed reticence in its engagement with the conflict, refusing to condemn Hamas and continuing to “call for calm.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The New Arab 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Aboudouh 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Le Poidevin, Sueur, Hage Boutros, Goursaud, Kovic & Hamadi 2023.

## CONCLUSION

Lebanon, in terms of its geo-strategic location bordering the Mediterranean Sea and Syria, plays an important geo-economic role within the context of the BRI and China's future Syria reconstruction plans. The implementation of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects would be a win-win situation for both countries, as Lebanon, by developing its infrastructure, will attract foreign investments in its service, tourism, and energy sectors. However, as discussed, there are certain obstacles to the realization of this plan.

The first obstacle is related to the external pressure imposed by the US on Lebanese politicians to limit their cooperation with China. Second, the political instability and uncertainty in Lebanon is not attractive for major Chinese investment companies. This aspect is also linked to the developments in Syria. A lack of stability in the region may not be an attractive environment for investments. Moreover, despite the strong political ties between Damascus and Beijing, China is not in a rush to turn northern Lebanon into a transit hub to launch its reconstruction projects in Syria, fearing US-imposed Caesar Act sanctions that target the Syrian regime, the unstable security situation, and the threat of terrorism.<sup>70</sup> As security and foreign investments go hand in hand, attracting foreign direct investment to Lebanon requires a high level of security and stability.

Interestingly, as mentioned in the analysis of dominant narratives in Lebanon, like on many issues, Lebanese are divided on their attitude toward China along to sectarian, political, and regional views. While the majority of Shias support seeing an increased Chinese role in the country, Sunnis have a more undecided position, whereas the majority of Christians have reservations about China's role. Meanwhile, external and domestic factors are hindering the deepening of ties between both countries. Even though enhancing economic relations between both countries would bring many advantages and opportunities for Lebanon, still it is too early to assume that Lebanon can become a suitable economic partner for China in the near future. Also, collaboration in other fields such as security and defense cooperation appears unlikely due to domestic constraints in Lebanon and external pressures mostly from the US.

However, despite substantial challenges such as the economic crisis and the Beirut Port explosion, experts such as Kumayha remain optimistic about the future of Lebanese–Chinese relations within the context of BRI. He argued that key areas such as energy, electricity, gas exploration, and transportation could turn into cooperation opportunities and could serve as means to tackle the multilayered crises the country is facing.<sup>71</sup>

On a regional level, it still has to be seen which repercussions and effects may arise for Lebanon from Chinese foreign policy efforts, such as the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Similarly, despite Chinese support to Lebanon in order to mitigate the regional effects of the war in Gaza, it remains unclear how much influence China can exert on the conflicting parties during the course of the conflict.

<sup>70</sup> Zreik 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Xinhua News Agency 2024.

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## A SAVIOR IN TIMES OF CRISIS?

### The Extent and Limits of China's Soft Power in Lebanon



This paper will examine China's foreign policy within the context of soft power (trade, BRI, investments...) towards Lebanon and how the Lebanese view their relations with China. China is Lebanon's largest trading partner and has an interest in investing in Lebanon's infrastructure in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and connecting Lebanon to Syria, key geo-economic objectives for China in Lebanon.



Moreover, unlike other international players, China has avoided direct involvement in domestic disputes in Lebanon and, using its supportive attitude towards the Lebanese government, has maintained a one-distance approach from all major players. This is why many actors within Lebanon view China's role for Lebanon as a "win-win" situation. Moreover, with China's BRI, Lebanon can play the role of an important transit hub for reconstruction efforts toward Syria, allowing for greater economic ties with Beijing.



However, domestic and international factors (mainly US pressure) may hinder such cooperation and impose certain limitations. The paper will examine Lebanese-Chinese relations in the context of Chinese soft power and BRI and highlight the dominant narrative, the key opportunities and challenges to develop future strategic relations between both countries.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/index.html>



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CCPIT	China Council to Promote International Trade
CHEC	China Harboring Engineering Company
GDI	Global Development Initiative
PRC	People's Republic of China
SRCIC	Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

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