Covid and China’s BRI in Iraq and Syria

Anchi Hoh

Abstract
During the Covid-19 pandemic, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the Middle East first struggled but soon stabilized. This article studies the why and how by examining the cases of Iraq and Syria to observe the ways China handled its international business operations in the time of Covid. Prior to that, despite international criticism and doubts, China’s BRI had continued to thrive. In the Middle East and North Africa, China had been forming partnerships under BRI with many countries and sought to connect with national development plans such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, Kuwait’s Vision 2035, and Qatar’s Vision 2030. After the Covid-19 outbreak in December 2019, in anticipation of a resultant global economic recession, China’s economy experienced a 6.8 percent contraction in the first quarter of 2020. Recently, China reported 2.3 percent overall GDP growth in 2020 and an 18.3 percent growth spurt in the first quarter of 2021. These developments prompt one to ask, what impact has Covid-19 had—or what effects will it have—on China’s BRI projects in the Middle East?

To search for an answer, this study zooms in to two of the hardest-hit Arab countries: Iraq and Syria. Both represent an investment environment entirely different from those of the affluent Gulf Arab states. Throughout Covid-19, Iraq and Syria have been facing insufficient public-health facilities and a lack of medical equipment, on top of political instability and economic challenges. This study looks at how China managed its BRI operations in Iraq and Syria during this crisis.
INTRODUCTION

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has a considerable number of completed or ongoing infrastructure and economic projects in various Middle Eastern countries. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Arab countries such as Iraq and Syria have been among the hardest hit due to insufficient healthcare systems. Despite the tough circumstances in these host countries, as well as the obstacles to trade posed by the global pandemic, China’s BRI in the Middle East seems to have weathered this health crisis successfully. To understand why and how, this study takes a closer look at China’s strategy in Iraq and Syria.

Located on one of BRI’s main routes, the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, the Middle East is essential to China’s economic growth and a passageway to the more affluent European market. Countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf states possess large reserves of oil, gas, and other natural resources that China needs to secure for its domestic consumption. Beijing considers this region a key land route for shipping oil from the Middle East and West Africa—an alternative to the maritime routes of the Malacca Strait, the Bab al-Mandab, and the Strait of Hormuz, primarily controlled by the United States and Western countries.1

Although long plagued by civil wars and poverty, Iraq and Syria are considered by China to be important to the BRI. Iraq’s crude-oil reserves ranked fifth globally at the end of 2017, with close to 149 billion barrels. Iraq is the second-largest oil producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).2 As for Syria, while its oil reserves are more limited than Iraq’s, their quantity was estimated at 2.5 billion barrels in 2015.3 Syria was also estimated in 2015 to possess approximately 8,500 billion cubic feet of natural-gas reserves.4 Currently, Iraq’s political status is slightly more stable than Syria’s, but both countries continue, to varying degrees, to experience the political, social, and economic turmoil caused by civil conflict and its repercussions, as well as the interference of external powers. Both countries are looking to restore their economies, which will provide tremendous business opportunities. China is not a new player in Iraq’s crude-oil development and has been looking to expand further. In Syria, although plans are still in the exploratory stage while the country gradually recovers from the decade-long civil war, China has offered humanitarian aid and expressed interest in economic investment.

Since the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and in anticipation of a resultant global economic recession, China’s economy experienced a 6.8 percent contraction in the first quarter of 2020. Recently, however, China reported 2.3 percent overall GDP growth in 2020 and 18.3 percent growth in the first quarter of 2021.5 One might ask whether and how Covid-19 has affected China’s BRI projects in the Middle East. This study examines cases in Iraq and Syria, which have been facing high degrees of hardship, challenged by insufficient public-health facilities and a lack of medical equipment on top of political instability and economic challenges.

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1 Haider Hamood Radhi Al-Shafiy, “China and Iraq’s Oil Relationship: Opportunity to Deepen Cooperation,” Arab World Studies, no. 1 (2015): 106-120.
2 “Iraq,” International – U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 24, 2021, https://www.eia.gov/international/overview/country/IRQ.
3 “Syria,” International – U.S. Energy Information Administration, June 24, 2015, https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/SYR.
4 Ibid.
5 Gabriel Crossley and Kevin Yao, “China’s Q1 GDP Grows at Record Pace as Recovery Speeds Up,” Reuters, April 15, 2021 https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-q1-gdp-grows-record-pace-recovery-speeds-up-2021-04-16/.
CHINA-IRAQ TRADE

Beijing’s trade relationship with Baghdad started immediately following the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1958. However, in the following several decades, this bilateral trade was disrupted by major political events, including the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War, the Iraq War that began in 2003, and its aftermath. Since 1959, the two countries have signed a series of agreements concerning transportation and cultural and economic cooperation. In 1974, China began importing oil from Iraq; and in 1979, China began offering construction contracts in the areas of industry, agriculture, and transportation.\(^6\) By 1985, China held 444 contracts in the amount of $1.53 billion; by 1990, the number had reached 662, with a value of $1.98 billion. At the peak of this bilateral trade, there were 22,000 Chinese workers in Iraq.\(^7\) The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) brought uncertainty and challenges to China’s business development there, including Iraq’s overdue bill of $1 billion for China’s contract services.\(^8\)

Following the Gulf War, China’s trade with Iraq was restricted as a result of UN sanctions. However, China became a net oil importer in 1993 for the first time and is now the second-largest oil consumer in the world. Between 1993 and 1998, its main import partners included Oman, Yemen, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Indonesia, and Angola.\(^9\) In 1996, China resumed its trade with Iraq through the UN’s Oil-for-Food Programme, which began in 1995.\(^10\) In the ensuing decades, China pursued closer trade ties with Iraq, primarily driven by a constant need to secure more oil sources for its fast-growing consumption.

Figure 1 offers a glance at China’s imports and exports with Iraq from 1997 to 2018. Roughly 99 percent of Iraq’s exports to China were petroleum. China’s exports were mainly consumer goods, machines and electronics, textiles, and clothing. In the past two decades, China’s trade deficit with Iraq continued to grow; in 2018, according to the World Bank, China’s exports to Iraq reached $7.9 billion, while its imports were close to $22.5 billion.\(^12\)

With oil being central to both China-Iraq trade relations and China’s economic development, in the past 20-some years, China has been trying to get involved in Iraq’s oil production. In 1997, soon after China’s participation in the UN Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and a number of its affiliates signed a production-sharing contract with the Iraqi Petroleum Sales Corporation to jointly develop the Al-Ahdab oil field. In this scenario, the Chinese stakeholders, while bearing all the risks and costs of exploration,

\(^6\) Minxing Huang, “Relations Between China and Iraq Since the Iraqi War,” *Arab World Studies*, no. 5 (2014): 94-105.

\(^7\) “中国与伊拉克的关系,” Embaixada Da Republica Popular Da China Em Portugal, May 9, 2004, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cept/chn/zt/ylkwt/196262.htm.

\(^8\) See note 6, p. 95.

\(^9\) Sergei Troush, “China’s Changing Oil Strategy and its Foreign Policy Implications,” Brookings, September 1, 1999, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-changing-oil-strategy-and-its-foreign-policy-implications/.

\(^10\) See note 7.

\(^11\) There may be discrepancies between import and export figures. According to the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) Forum, https://wits.worldbank.org/contactwits.html, “Imports reported by one country do not coincide with exports reported by its trading partner. Differences are due to various factors including valuation (imports CIF, exports FOB), differences in inclusions/ exclusions of particular commodities, timing etc.” See forum discussions https://groups.google.com/g/witsforum/c/hoaKe6tkIaw/m/JG_nmKdkr5pgJ, January 28, 2012 and https://groups.google.com/g/witsforum/c/hoaKe6tkIaw/m/-pk6UGP6Y8s8J, January 30, 2012.

\(^12\) “China Trade Indicators 2018,” World Integrated Trade Solution, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2018.
would be entitled a portion of the oil produced. However, with the continuing sanctions imposed by the United Nations for Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the Iraq War of 2003, and the political insurgencies and sectarian violence that followed, the collaboration never took off.\textsuperscript{13} Beginning in 2008, as the al-Maliki-led government was eager to revitalize the economy through oil production, Iraq’s Ministry of Oil held two rounds of international bids for the development of the country’s oil fields. At the end of 2008, CNPC was awarded a 22-year risk-service contract for the development of the Al-Ahdab field. Although the Iraqi government also was negotiating with other companies, such as ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and others,\textsuperscript{14} CNPC became the first foreign company to sign an oil-service contract following the fall of Saddam Hussein.\textsuperscript{15} In the midst of the 2008 financial crisis, some scholars believed that this contract represented an “aggressive global acquisition strategy launched by China’s NOCs [national oil companies] in the wake of the financial crisis, designed to boost their oil reserves and production and consolidate their global asset portfolio in high-potential markets.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13}Jun Zhang, Guizhou Liu, Rong Gao, “Some Enlightenment on Iraq Petroleum Service Contract Practice and Project Implementation,” \textit{China Petroleum Enterprise}, no. 3 (2019): 65-72.

\textsuperscript{14}Erica Goode and Riyadh Mohammed, “Iraq Signs Oil Deal with China Worth Up to $3 Billion,” \textit{New York Times}, August 28, 2008, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/29/world/middleeast/29iraq.html}.

\textsuperscript{15}“CNPC Completes First Phase of Al-Ahdab Field in Iraq,” Reuters, June 27, 2011, \url{https://www.reuters.com/article/iraq-china-cnpc/cnpc-completes-first-phase-of-al-ahdab-field-in-iraq-idUSL3E7HR10W20110627}.

\textsuperscript{16}John Calabrese, “China-Iraq Relations: Poised for a ‘Quantum Leap’?,” Middle East Institute, October 8, 2019, \url{https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-iraq-relations-poised-quantum-leap}. 
In 2009, Iraq initiated a joint venture with BP and CNPC to revive the Rumaila oil field. A few months later, CNPC, with the French oil company Total and the Malaysian oil and gas company Petronas, won a 20-year contract for the Halfaya oil field. Besides CNPC, two other Chinese energy companies were trying to get into the Iraqi energy market. The China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC) started off by trying to purchase a Swiss company, Addax, which had deals with the Kurdish region for the development of oil fields there. The arrangements were not recognized by the central government in Baghdad and, in fact, became the reason SINOPEC was disqualified from attending the second round of bidding in 2009. In 2010, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) International partnered with the Iraqi Drilling Company and a Turkish energy company, Turkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortakligi, to develop the Missan oil fields in southeast Iraq.

Chinese investments in Iraq have also extended to other sectors besides oil and gas. In the field of telecommunications, ZTE first entered the Iraqi markets in 1999, and Huawei followed. China extended its investments to medical equipment, construction, financing, education, and cultural exchanges. Following the Iraq War, China offered foreign aid, technical training, economic and technical cooperation, and similar agreements in other sectors. Some of the Chinese companies that established businesses in Iraq include Santai Technologies in the fields of medical equipment and software development; Sinoma (Suzhou) Construction Co. Ltd., which served as the operation-management and maintenance contractor for the Sulaymaniyah Cement Production Lines; and Shanghai Electric, which in 2008 won a contract to build a thermal-power station in Wasit in southern Iraq.

**BRI IN IRAQ**

Since 2013, when the Belt and Road Initiative was launched, Iraq has continued to be seen by many in the West as a high-risk environment for foreign investment. This is obviously due to the instability brought about by a series of major political events—the withdrawal of American troops, the Arab Spring, and the rise and fall of ISIS. As far as BRI is concerned, nevertheless, political...
instability and financial risks do not appear to be the causes for keeping China from pursuing its national interests in the region. In 2015, it is believed that more than 10,000 Chinese workers were in Iraq participating in the reconstruction of the country. Built upon the inroads Chinese businesses had made in the previous decades, BRI is designed to continue the expansion of China’s economic opportunities in Iraq and globally. To protect its economic investments in the highly volatile region of the Middle East, China also advocates bilateral and multilateral cooperation in security enhancement to fight against terrorism, extremism, and separatism.

Iraq plays an important role in BRI, foremost for its rich natural resources. In 2017, China became the world’s largest crude-oil buyer and has continued to import oil in order to meet the domestic demand that the country’s own oil production alone could not fulfill. In 2019, oil imports from Iraq accounted for 10 percent of China’s total imports, behind only Saudi Arabia (16 percent). Secondly, Iraq is strategically located at the intersection of BRI’s Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, both of which are essential to China’s access to the affluent Western European market. By China’s account, Iraq has been in need of the BRI, as this initiative could invigorate Iraq’s economy through, for instance, monetary investment and technologies needed to develop its oil fields. China also saw an opportunity in the construction of Iraq’s electric-power plants, roads, bridges, housing, and telecommunications infrastructure.

During the high-level diplomatic visits between the two countries from 2015 to 2017, Iraqi representatives showed strong interest and support for the BRI. In the following years, despite the frequent change of regimes, rising tensions between the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, protests and violence brought about by ISIS, and the subsequent international coalition’s fight against it, the Iraqi government’s interest in the BRI has seemed to grow. In March 2019, the Iraqi Ministry of Transport was reported to have met with Chinese officials to discuss working jointly with the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to develop cooperation in land and sea transportation and to obtain funds for postwar rebuilding. In August 2019, Wu Haitao, deputy permanent representative of China to the United Nations, stated that China would continue to actively participate in the reconstruction of Iraq’s energy and infrastructure under the framework of the BRI.

According to China’s Ministry of Commerce, China has been pursuing business in Iraq in a number of key areas, including finance, construction, currency exchange, and infrastructure. By

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26 “在伊中国人人数占万 中国早介入伊拉克重建” [More than 10,000 Chinese Workers in Iraq Participating in the Reconstruction of the Country], Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, December 23, 2015, http://www.gqb.gov.cn/news/2015/1223/37561.shtml.

27 Anchi Hoh, “From Qatar to Xinjiang: Security in China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Middle East Policy 27, no. 4 (Winter 2018), https://mepc.org/journal/qatar-xinjiang-security-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative.

28 “China,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 30, 2020, https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/CHN.

29 Zhongguo Xin Bao, “Economic and Business Environment Risk Analysis on Iraq,” International Financing, no. 1 (2018): 66-9.

30 “One Belt One Road: The Relationships Between Iraq and the BRI,” The History of Commerce – Ministry of Commerce, http://history.mofcom.gov.cn/?bandr=ylkyydldgx.

31 Zhong Mei You Bao, “伊拉克欲加入‘一带一路’和亚投行与中合作海运运输” [Iraq Intendes to Participate in the Belt and Road Initiative and AIIB and Cooperate with China in Land-Sea Transportation], December 27, 2020, http://echineseamericanpost.com/一带一路风情/9445/.

32 Wang Jianguang, “中友将继续在‘一带一路’框架下积极参与伊拉克重建” [China Will Continue to Actively Participate in the Reconstruction of Iraq under the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative], Xinhua, August 29, 2019, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2019-08/29/c_1124935388.htm.
2018, Chinese direct investment in Iraq had reached $600 million. In addition, more than 30 major Chinese companies were active in Iraq, mainly in oil-field development, power and infrastructure construction, communications, and building materials. In addition, that year more than 90 new engineering contracts were signed and close to 12,000 laborers dispatched for ventures that included the Graf Oil processing project contracted by China Petroleum Engineering Construction Co., Ltd.; a drilling and technical-service project contracted by CNPC Bohai Drilling Engineering Co., Ltd.; and a management-services contract for the Majnoon oil field by Anton Petroleum Technology (Group) Co., Ltd.33 In 2020, China’s direct-investment flow into Iraq amounted to $50.5 million; the total construction and service contracts amounted to $2 billion.34

As for construction projects, one example is the Salahaddin power plant located in the al-Jalsiyah area, west of the city of Samarra, which was built by the China National Machinery Engineering Corporation.35 Another example is the Wassit Thermal Power Plant southeast of Baghdad; built by the Shanghai Electric Power Construction Company, it accounts for about 20 percent of the country’s electricity supply. A third is the Maisan Combined-Cycle Power Plant in southeastern Iraq near Iran, to be developed by the engineering company CITIC Construction in support of the Iraqi Maisan Power Company starting in March 2021, with completion projected for 2022.36

Regarding infrastructure cooperation, in August 2019, the China Construction Third Engineering Bureau Corporation signed a $1.39 billion contract for the construction of low-cost housing units, and educational and medical centers.37 In December 2020, a group led by the China International Contractors Association and the Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Agency signed a Baghdad Air Force Club shopping-center contract, which includes a mall and a stadium with attached stores, with a reported value of $130 million. The contract was signed despite the challenges posed by the pandemic to Chinese laborers’ ability to travel in and out of Iraq.38

Since 2018, more than 30 Chinese companies have been in operating in Iraq. They include PetroChina, CNOOC, Oasis Oil Company, Shanghai Electric, Tianjin Electric Power Construction, Huawei, and ZTE Corporation. They span oil-field development, power construction, infrastructure development, communications, and building materials. China assumes that, with abundant natural resources and an improving security environment, Iraq will be able to use oil wealth to

33 “International Trade Cooperation Directory: Iraq,” Institute of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, 2020, http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/dl/gbdqzn/upload/yilake.pdf, 25.

34 “中国—伊拉克经贸合作简况” [Summary of China-Iraq Economic Collaboration], China Ministry of Commerce, http://xyf.mofcom.gov.cn/article/tj/hz/202008/20200802993700.shtml.

35 “Salah Aldin 2X630MW Thermal Power Plant Project, Iraq,” Chinese Machinery Engineering Corporation, December 12, 2016, http://en.cmecc.com/ywly/gct/dlnyy/yhldz/201612/20161227_133786.html.

36 “一带一路项目助伊拉克解决长期电力不足问题” [One Belt One Road Project Helps Iraq Solve the Problem of Long-Term Power Shortage], HKMB, October 23, 2019, https://hkmb.hkt.com/sc/1X0AIY24/%E8%B7%B3%E5%87%BA%E9%A6%99%E6%B8%AF%E4%B8%80%E5%B7%AE%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE%E5%8A%A9%E4%BC%8A%E6%B8%8B%E5%8A%A7%E5%8B%B3%E9%95%BF%E6%9C%9F%E7%94%B5%E5%8A%9B%E4%B8%8D%E8%B6%B3%E9%97%AE%E9%A2%98.

37 “Chinese Company Signs Contract for Construction in Iraq,” China.org.cn, August 8, 2019, http://www.china.org.cn/business/2019-08/08/content_75077921.htm.

38 “集团参加第11届国际基础设施投资与建设高峰论坛并签订伊拉克项目合同_湖南省” [The Group Participated in the 11th International Infrastructure Investment and Construction Summit Forum and Signed an Iraq Project Contract], Sohu, December 7, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/436856454_723320.
diversify its economy and thus attract more foreign investment. However, while Chinese businesses have established a strong presence in Iraq under the BRI framework, not many discussions have focused on how Iraq’s strategic position in the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor could help achieve the BRI’s ultimate goal: connecting Chinese goods to the affluent European market.

**CHINA-SYRIA TRADE**

China began its trade with Syria in 1956, when the two countries established official diplomatic ties. These bilateral relations have been ongoing ever since, even during the civil war that began in 2011 following the Arab uprisings. Syria’s economy deteriorated severely, and only the coastal areas still maintain investments and capital projects. China, along with Russia and Iran, has been keeping the Syrian economy afloat; in 2020, their investments in Syria’s western cities have actually led the country to its first GDP growth since 2010.

Figure 2 below shows China’s trade with Syria from 1992 to 2018. Between 1992 and 2001, China’s exports remained at a median of $150 million per year before beginning to increase drastically. As the trade volume reached its peak in 2010, the rise of ISIS and the outbreak of the civil war exerted a negative impact on Syria’s economy. When the BRI was launched in 2013, bilateral trade between China and Syria had dropped sharply, from $2.42 billion to $690 million, and remained significantly lower, at $999 million, in 2019, according to China’s Ministry of Commerce.

China’s exports in 2018 offer a glimpse of the types of merchandise involved: machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers, electric and electronic equipment, vehicles, tires, iron and steel products, plastics, crocheted fabrics, cotton, and footwear.

According to UN Comtrade, Syria’s latest data (2010) indicate that exports to China included fuels, minerals, oils, distilled products, vegetable plaiting materials, cotton, meat and edible meat, salt, sulfur, stone, plaster, lime, and cement, among other items.

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39 Zhongguo Xin Bao, “Economic and Business Environment Risk Analysis on Iraq,” *International Financing*, 1 (2018): 66-9.

40 Zhang Po, “中国参与叙利亚重建 优势与挑战 (China's Participation in Syrian's Restoration: Advantages and Challenges),” *China and World*, November 2017, 43-5.

41 Francisco Tang Bustillos, “Syria Economic Outlook,” IHS Markit, May 4, 2020.

42 Ibid.

43 “China Trade Indicators: 2018,” World Integrated Trade Solution, https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/2018.

44 “中国—叙利亚经贸合作综况” [Brief Introduction of China-Syria Economic and Trade Cooperation], China Ministry of Commerce, November 28, 2019, http://syf.mofcom.gov.cn/article/tj/hz/201911/20191102917712.shtml.

45 “China Exports to Syria,” Trading Economics, July 2021, https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/syria.

46 See note 12.

47 “International Trade in Goods and Services Based on UN Comtrade Data,” United Nations Comtrade Database, https://dit-trade-vis.azurewebsites.net/. It is important to note the discrepancies between the UN Comtrade Data and the World Integrated Trade Statistics (WITS) data as some import/export data may be coded differently in the two databases and may not be accounted for. See WITS Forum discussions, August 3, 2015, https://groups.google.com/g/witsforum/c/tLpv6QwrJ7A/m/gDEiUf61FQAJ.
When Xi Jinping announced the BRI in 2013, Syria was deeply entrenched in civil war. By July of that year, an estimate of more than 100,000 deaths had been reported.\(^48\) In addition, the conflict was seen as further complicated by the alleged interference of external powers.\(^49\) A few months earlier, in August 2012, UN-brokered talks with Bashar al-Assad, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, had fallen through. Furthermore, the Geneva II international conference in January 2014 was also about to fall apart.\(^50\) In October 2011, China, along with Russia, vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian government’s crackdowns against civilians and proposing possible international sanctions should violence against protesters continue.\(^51\)

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\(^{48}\) “Syrian Civil War – Uprising in Syria, 2011–,” Encyclopedia Britannica, [https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War/Uprising-in-Syria-2011](https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War/Uprising-in-Syria-2011).

\(^{49}\) Nikos Serafetinidis, “The Syrian Civil War,” Medium, November 26, 2019, [https://medium.com/crisis-management-simulation-lab-by-adandprlab-at/the-syrian-civil-war-timeline-participants-and-impacts-d8c5a14fcb36](https://medium.com/crisis-management-simulation-lab-by-adandprlab-at/the-syrian-civil-war-timeline-participants-and-impacts-d8c5a14fcb36).

\(^{50}\) See note 48.

\(^{51}\) Colum Lynch, “Russia, China Block Syria Resolution at U.N,” *Washington Post*, October 4, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2011/10/04/glIQArCfBML_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2011/10/04/glIQArCfBML_story.html).
China’s veto was based on its long-term policy of “non-interference in domestic affairs and safeguarding national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.”

Despite a decade-long civil war and the desperate humanitarian and economic disasters it caused, Syria is one of the key BRI countries as far as China is concerned. Located in the BRI’s China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, Syria could be an important bridge connecting three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. China believes that Syria’s strategic importance outweighs the political turmoil it is experiencing; thus, full bilateral collaboration in the long run would yield more mutual benefits than currently meet the eye. Moreover, a politically stable and economically prosperous Syria could help keep terrorism and extremism under control and thus away from Xinjiang, China’s western autonomous region, which is culturally and religiously tied to Central Asia and the Middle East. Furthermore, following the conclusion of the civil war, business opportunities would arise for the restoration of the country’s economy and infrastructure. According to Assad’s estimate, it will cost $195 billion to rebuild Syria, while the UN estimates the cost at close to $250 billion. China realizes that navigating the troubled waters in this area means striking a delicate balance among the United States, Russia, Iran, and other regional powers. The US enactment of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 has certainly created more obstacles for Chinese companies doing business with Syria by placing sanctions on the Assad regime.

Since 2009, Bashar al-Assad has been promoting a Four Seas Strategy to make Syria a commercial hub, capitalizing on its good relationship with Turkey at the time for access to the Black Sea and including the Caspian Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Persian/Arabian Gulf. Once the civil war began, with Turkey involved in the northern Kurdish region and Egypt siding with Russia to veto a 2016 Security Council resolution calling on Assad for a ceasefire and the establishment of a no-fly zone, Syria’s relations with Turkey deteriorated and, subsequently, the term “Five Seas Strategy” appeared to include the Red Sea. While Assad continues to work closely with Russia and Iran to solidify Syria’s position in the Middle East, China’s financial clout could accelerate the

52 “观察:中国为何只呼吁政治解决叙利亚问题?” [Observation: Why Does China Only Advocate for Political Solutions for the Syrian Crisis?], BBC News Chinese, April 14, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-43760093.
53 Zhang Xinping, “中国参与叙利亚重建的动因:挑战与方式 (China’s Participation in Syrian Reconstruction: Motives, Challenges, and Approaches),” International Perspective, no. 1 (2019).
54 Qi Qianjin, “叙利亚的外交政策与中叙关系的新时代 [China’s Diplomatic Policy and Sino-Syria Relations in the New Era],” al-Watan, August 4, 2018, https://alwatan.sy/archives/161448.
55 Zhao Manfeng, “China Extends Helping Hands to Rebuild Syria,” China Daily, February 10, 2018, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201802/10/WS5a7e4f48a3106e7dcc13bee2.html.
56 See note 40.
57 “McCaul, Engel, Risch, Menendez Statement on Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act,” U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, June 8, 2020, https://gop-foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-engel-risch-menendez-statement-on-caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/. See the full text of H.R.31 – Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act of 2019 at https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/31/cosponsors.
58 “Syria’s Assad Pushes ‘Four Seas Strategy,’” UPI, June 1, 2011, https://www.upi.com/Energy-News/2011/06/01/Syrias-Assad-pushes-Four-Seas-Strategy/98471294335880/.
59 Christina Lin, “China and the New Middle East Security Arc,” Nato Defense College Foundation, https://www.natofoundation.org/food/china-and-the-new-middle-east-security-arc-christina-lin/, accessed January 28, 2021. See also “Saudi: Egypt Stance on Syria Resolution ‘Painful,’” Al Arabiya English, October 9, 2016, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2016/10/09/Saudi-Egypt-s-stance-on-UN-Syrian-resolution-painful/, accessed January 30, 2021.
60 Andrew Korybko, “China’s Belt & Road Initiative Can Help Syria Rebuild after the War,” CGTN, November 13, 2020, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-13/China-s-Belt-Road-Initiative-can-help-Syria-rebuild-after-the-war-VnFaOz8Kvm/index.html.
country’s restoration process. Being part of the BRI could help Syria realize its maritime strategy and thus strengthen its geopolitical position.61

Prior to the Caesar Act, there had been a series of contacts between China and Syria, paving the way for BRI. In July 2017, Beijing hosted the First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects, during which China unveiled plans to invest $2 billion to establish industrial parks in Syria.62 What is in it for China? It is believed that linking to Mediterranean port cities such as Tartus could extend a network that China has been developing as an alternative to the Suez Canal, connecting the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean through Chinese-invested ports in the Persian Gulf, Egypt, Djibouti, and Israel.63 Moreover, in November 2017, Syrian news media reported on the postwar Chinese investment in infrastructure restoration and oil fields in the regions of Hasaka, Raqqa, and the Syrian Badia.64

In addition to infrastructure and financial investments, China has been using its financial capabilities in soft-power diplomacy. In November 2017, China delivered 1,000 tons of rice to Syria as part of its BRI Food Aid program.65 In July 2018, at a China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Xi pledged $20 billion in loans for infrastructure development, as well as $100 million earmarked for humanitarian assistance in Syria and Yemen.66 In September 2018, more than 200 Chinese companies attended the 60th Damascus International Fair. Subsequently, both Syrian and Chinese media made several announcements of business deals and opportunities, including a Syrian manufacturer to produce Chinese cars and Chinese companies to build power plants and telecommunications infrastructure in Syria.67

While the US Congress was working through its legislative process for the Caesar Act, in a December 2019 interview with the Syrian Arab New Agency (SANA), Assad confirmed China’s continuous engagement in reconstruction and humanitarian aid, stating that Chinese firms have been discussing with the Syrian government ways to evade sanctions and maintain access to markets in Syria.68 Despite Assad’s confirmation, China would proceed with caution in dancing around the presence of the United States and Russia and wait patiently, while continuing its soft-power diplomacy and humanitarian assistance.

61 Seth J. Frantzman, “Syria Wants to Play a Role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Jerusalem Post, April 27, 2019, https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/syria-wants-to-play-a-role-in-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-587988.
62 See note 55.
63 Abdullah Al-Ghadhawi, “China’s Policy in Syria,” Chatham House, March 2020, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/chinas-policy-in-syria. See also Giorgio Cafierno, “China Plays the Long Game on Syria,” Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-plays-long-game-syria.
64 Abdullah Al-Ghadhawi, “China’s Policy in Syria,” Chatham House, March 2020, https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/chinas-policy-in-syria. See also “The BRI Needs Syria Just as Syria Needs It,” China Daily, December 19, 2019, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/19/WS5dfae54aa310cf3e3557f382.html.
65 “China Delivers Food Aid to Syria under the Belt and Road Initiative,” CGTN, November 21, 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3263544d78637a633566d54/share_p.html.
66 Wang Jianfen, “ Highlights of Xi’s Speech at China-Arab Forum,” China Daily, July 10, 2018, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201807/10/WS5b441634a310334914e1ecb7.html.
67 Logan Pauley, “ China Stakes out a Role for Itself in Post-War Syria,” Asia Times, October 3, 2018, https://asiatimes.com/2018/10/china-stakes-out-a-role-for-itself-in-post-war-syria/.
68 Giorgio Cafierno, “China Plays the Long Game on Syria,” Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-plays-long-game-syria. See also Silk Road Briefing, “Syria Reaches Out To Join China’s Belt & Road Initiative,” Silk Road Briefing, December 17, 2019, https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2019/12/17/syria-reaches-join-chinas-belt-road-initiative/.
COVID IN IRAQ

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between February 2020 and January 2021, confirmed Covid cases in Iraq grew to more than 600,000, with close to 13,000 deaths.69 This put Iraq above all the other Arab countries in terms of its Covid case count, followed by Morocco’s approximately 450,000 cases and Saudi Arabia’s more than 360,000.70 In November 2020, the WHO confirmed that Iraq had entered another surge, and in December, in addition to continually enforcing the wearing of face masks and a broad lockdown, Iraq banned travelers from eight countries—Australia, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Iran, Japan, the Netherlands, and South Africa—and closed all ground border crossings except for emergencies.71

In an interview with the People’s Daily, General Secretary Raid Fahmi of the Communist Party of Iraq stated, “The Iraqi government has issued a series of very strict epidemic-prevention measures, including night curfews, closing all shopping malls, parks and schools, reducing or suspending working hours, and so on. At present, the Iraqi government has also introduced a package of economic assistance measures, including plans to provide financial assistance to approximately 2 million households with no income; personal and corporate loan repayments can be delayed during curfews and city lockdowns; and rent and utility bills for those in need are reduced or exempted.”72

It has been widely observed that Iraq’s economy has been faring poorly during the pandemic. The decline in oil prices due to Covid meant a reduction of revenue from the sales of Iraq’s key financial source.73 The first eight months of 2020 saw a 47.5 percent decrease in Iraqi government revenue while expenditures remained unchanged.74 Iraq’s health system has been severely strained; Covid exposed longstanding issues, such as the failure of hospitals and health services to keep pace with population growth. Social challenges such as domestic violence and poverty have worsened during the pandemic and exerted a damaging impact on women, children, and adolescents.75 Corruption and ineffective governance have been blamed as key factors in Iraq’s fragile status and a call for reform has been sounded to salvage the deteriorating humanitarian situation.76

69 “Iraq,” World Health Organization, https://www.who.int/countries/irq/.
70 “Coronavirus (COVID-19),” Google News, https://news.google.com/covid19/map?hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US%3Aen&pinned=%2Fm%2F0161c%2C%2Fm%2F01z88t.
71 “Iraq Bans Travel to 8 Countries as COVID-19 Cases Reach 586,503,” Xinhua, December 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/22/c_139611412.htm.
72 “General Secretary of the Communist Party of Iraq: Only by Adhering to the Concept of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Can We Finally Defeat the Epidemic,” People’s Daily, April 20, 2020, http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0420/c1002-31680794.html.
73 “Iraq’s Economy Hit by Falling Oil Prices, Coronavirus Lockdown,” Washington Post, May 4, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iraqs-economy-is-collapsing-under-the-double-blow-of-sinking-oil-prices-and-coronavirus-lockdown/2020/05/04/61b26a3e-8897-11ea-80df-d24b35a568ae_story.html.
74 “COVID-19 and Low Oil Prices Push Millions of Iraqis into Poverty,” World Bank, November 11, 2020, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/11/11/new-world-bank-report-calls-for-urgent-fiscal-stimulus-and-economic-reforms-to-help-the-poor-and-the-most-vulnerable-in-iraq.
75 “العراق: كوفيد-19 يععر مجالي جوانب الحياة,” [Iraq: Covid-19 Beleaguer All Aspects of Life], Carnegie International Endowment for International Peace, November 30, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83352.
76 “العراق: كوفيد-19 وانعدام اهمام الرابع ينبثقان الأوضاع الاقتصادية والسياسية والإجتماعية,” [Iraq: Covid-19 and Low Oil Prices Exacerbate Economic, Political and Social Conditions], United Nations, August 26, 2020, https://news.un.org/ar/story/2020/08/1060372.
COVID IN SYRIA

According to WHO, as of the end of January 2021, Syria reported a total of 13,998 confirmed Covid cases, with 916 deaths, out of a population of 18.4 million.\(^77\) It is suspected that this is a gross undercount. In August 2020, an assistant director of health in Damascus estimated as many as 112,500 cases in the Damascus area alone.\(^78\) That month, according to the Russia Today website, country-wide Covid cases were estimated to exceed 1 million.\(^79\) As Syria is trying to recuperate from the 10-year civil war, the pandemic has exposed the inadequacies of the country’s health and medical systems. With a lack of sufficient testing and hospital facilities and an already fragile economy, Covid has pushed the country and the remainder of its citizenry into deeper desperation.\(^80\)

The Syrian government has adopted some measures to address the impact of the pandemic: issuing unemployment funds; stabilizing market prices, especially of cleaning and disinfectant products; increasing capital investment in the medical and health industries; ensuring normal operations of the banking system; and releasing long-term plans to promote the development of the national economy.\(^81\) However, the Caesar Act sanctions will no doubt impede recovery.

IMPACT OF COVID ON BRI

Back in February 2020, when Covid began rapidly storming through countries beyond China, the BBC reported that Beijing had started to experience delays in transporting personnel and materials overseas for its BRI projects, as a result of the lockdowns, denials of border crossings, and other control measures that many countries had introduced. In addition, the interruption of international trade has also hindered the circulation of equipment and materials required for BRI infrastructure.\(^82\) These negative impacts have been confirmed by the China International Contractors Association.\(^83\)

Also in February 2020, perhaps as an attempt to mitigate the economic impact of Covid and to appease domestic concerns, China’s State Council Information Office announced at a press conference that more than 80 percent of China’s manufacturing subsidiaries had resumed operations, as had 95 to 100 percent of its major industries, such as petroleum, power generation, and communications.\(^84\)

\(^77\) “Syrian Arab Republic,” World Health Organization, January 31, 2021, https://www.who.int/countries/syr/.
\(^78\) Danny Makki, “Syria Is Facing a COVID-19 Catastrophe,” Middle East Institute, August 6, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/syria-facing-covid-19-catastrophe.
\(^79\) “叙利亚当前新冠肺炎疫情形势分析—现状、应对措施和分析” [Analysis of the Current Situation of Coronavirus Epidemic in Syria-Status Quo, Response Measures and Analysis], Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Syria Arab Republic, August 30, 2020, http://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/202008/20200802996880.shtml.
\(^80\) See note 78.
\(^81\) See note 79.
\(^82\) “肺炎疫情:‘一带一路’海外项目进展受阻” [Covid: the Progress of BRI Overseas Projects Are Delayed], BBC News Chinese, February 18, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/business-51548364.
\(^83\) “新冠疫情是否将开启‘一带一路’新阶段” [Would Covid-19 Be Able to Open a New Phase of the Belt and Road Initiative], China International Contractors Association, May 8, 2020, https://www.chinca.org/CICA/info/20050808122811.
\(^84\) See note 82.
In March 2020, the CNPC issued the second edition of the “China National Petroleum Corporation Issues Guidelines for Prevention and Control of Covid-19,” which offers information about Covid and health guidelines to be observed by employees and contractors in offices, public-service locations, households, and elsewhere. 85 In April 2020, China’s Ministry of Commerce published “Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Covid for Overseas Enterprises and Projects,” meant to provide guidance on the spread of the pandemic and the protection of Chinese outside the country. 86 At the end of April, CNPC held a special conference in Beijing to review and discuss pandemic prevention and control measures deployed by China’s international businesses. The emergency meeting was held under the auspices of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, the State Council, and the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council. 87 It was pointed out at this meeting that, in the ensuing months, there would be an ongoing large-scale investigation that was to be treated as the implementation of Xi’s “Two Maintenances”: 1) the core position of Xi’s Party Central Committee and the core position of the whole party; and 2) the authority of the Party Central Committee and centralized and unified leadership. 88 Essentially, the purpose of the inspection referenced here was to ensure the stability of the leadership of the country and its international companies, and to strictly enforce preventive and control measures through tightly supervised coordination between headquarters and overseas branches.

In May 2020, Chinese news media outlets displayed optimism in reporting on the BRI during the pandemic. While international air shipping and transportation were impacted by various country lockdowns, it was reported that the China-Central Asia-Europe freight trains played an important role during this period. According to China Today, in the first quarter of 2020, the China National Railway Group Limited reported a total of 1,941 trains in operation and 174,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) transported. This indicates a 15–18 percent increase compared to the previous year. 89 It was asserted that, unlike aerial and maritime conveyors, the China-Europe express trains implemented an approach that did not involve personnel quarantine and thus held unique advantages during the pandemic. 90

85 “中国石油集团发布新冠肺炎疫情防控工作指导手册 (第二版) —中国石油新闻中心” [China National Petroleum Corporation Issues Guidelines for Prevention and Control of New Coronary Pneumonia Epidemic (Second Edition)], CNPC, March 12, 2020, http://news.cnpc.com.cn/system/2020/03/12/001766563.shtml.
86 “境外企业和项目新冠肺炎疫情防控指引” [Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of the New Coronavirus Epidemic for Overseas Enterprises and Projects], Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, April 2, 2020, http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/k/202004/20200402951510.shtml.
87 “指导原则‘四自’‘四同’ 保障海外机构’” [Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of the New Coronavirus Epidemic], Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, April 2, 2020, https://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/k/202004/20200402951510.shtml.
88 Shi Zhihong, “‘四个意识’‘四个自信’ 两个维护’” [The ‘Four Consciousness’, ‘Four Self-Confidence’ and ‘Two Maintenance’ Are a Complementary Whole], CPC News, March 12, 2020, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0312/c40531-31628571.html.
89 Shi Zhihong, “‘四个意识’‘四个自信’‘两个维护’” [Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of the New Coronavirus Epidemic for Overseas Enterprises and Projects], Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, April 2, 2020, https://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/jyjl/k/202004/20200402951510.shtml.
90 Qi Hui, “高质量共建‘一带一路’中欧班列成国际供应链重要支撑” [High-Quality Co-Construction of the ‘One Belt One Road’], CE, May 18, 2020, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/202005/18/t20200518_34925681.shtml.
Chinese news media also predicted that the pandemic and its global impact would accelerate the Digital Silk Road and the Health Silk Road. The two elements together encompass information and communications technology, e-commerce, and medical technology. Xi announced the Health Silk Road in 2016 during his visit to Uzbekistan and advocated for deeper collaboration in health and medicine with the BRI countries. China subsequently signed a memorandum of understanding with the WHO for international collaboration in the field of health and disease prevention. With the Covid outbreak and its rapid spread, China is said to have sent medical personnel and equipment to the BRI countries hit by the epidemic to provide assistance and to enhance cooperation for the purpose of improving global public-health governance.

Regarding the Digital Silk Road, prior to the outbreak of Covid, China had already made significant advances domestically in a number of areas, including e-commerce and telecommunications, the wide adoption of facial recognition, and the launch of a digital currency. China’s major internet companies, such as Alibaba, Baidu, and Tencent, had begun expanding beyond China. Prior to Covid, telecommunications companies such as Huawei and ZTE had already been active in expanding globally. While the pandemic-related social distancing and large-scale lockdowns prevented free physical movement, it encouraged the shifting of more human activities online. In China’s view, most of the BRI countries need improvement in digital technology and infrastructure support. Thus, further development of this aspect can be expected.

In June 2020, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs held a BRI conference, “Strengthening ‘Belt and Road’ International Cooperation and Joining Hands to Fight the Covid Epidemic.” At this virtual meeting, China announced that it had provided anti-epidemic assistance to 122 Belt and Road partners and sent medical teams to 25 countries to share comprehensive prevention, control, diagnosis, and treatment experience.

Although Covid exerted some impact at the beginning of the outbreak, with the various remedies described above, from January to October 2020, China’s total foreign imports and exports with the countries along the Belt and Road was 7.58 trillion yuan ($1.17 trillion), an increase of

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91 Bee Chun Boo, Martin David, and Ben Simpfendorfer, “What Impact Has Covid Exerted on China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” World Economic Forum, May 22, 2020, https://cn.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/fei-yan-yi-qing-zhong-guo-yi-dai-yi-luan-shi-yi-yong-he-ying-xiang-he-ying-xiang/.
92 Ibid.
93 “Wang Yi: 在全球疫情局势下，各国政治经济的共同利益在增加,” China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 18, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dz_674981/qttzx/kjzbdqyq_699171/t1790046.shtml.
94 Martin Raiser and Marcin, “China 4.0: Sharing the Dividends of Digitalization,” Brookings, November 10, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/11/10/china-4-0-sharing-the-dividends-of-digitalization/.
95 “2020 Report on Digital China – The Other Digital Superpower,” Intrado, February 6, 2020, http://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/02/06/1980878/0/en/2020-Report-on-Digital-China-The-Other-Digital-Superpower.html.
96 Caleb Foote and Robert D. Atkinson, “Chinese Competitiveness in the International Digital Economy,” Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, November 23, 2020, https://itif.org/publications/2020/11/23/chinese-competitiveness-international-digital-economy.
97 Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Digital Silk Road Initiative,” Diplomat, December 17, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/chinas-digital-silk-road-initiative-a-boon-for-developing-countries-or-a-danger-to-freedom/.
98 See note 91.
99 See note 93.
1.4 percent from 2019, despite the growth rate’s being 0.1 percent lower than in the previous three quarters.\(^{100}\)

According to Chinese news media, in August 2020, an estimate of 10,000 employees of Chinese-funded enterprises remained in Iraq to maintain the operation of energy equipment in locations such as the Huashid Power Plant in Wassit Province in central Iraq, which is under contract to Shanghai Electric Group. The closure of airports in Iraq and the cancellation of flights prevented normal staff rotation, as well as the resupply of materials for daily maintenance of the power plants and other facilities. In some cases, Chinese workers had to contact businesses in Iran to facilitate the purchase of needed materials.\(^{101}\)

In Syria, Chinese businesses were asked to adhere to the “Notice on the Requirements for Nucleic Acid Testing of Passengers Transiting to Third Countries from China”\(^{102}\) and conduct their own counter-epidemic measures.\(^{103}\) In March 2020, the Chinese ambassador to Syria, Feng Biao, and the director of the Syrian Planning and International Cooperation Agency, Imad Sabuni, signed a bilateral economic and technical cooperation agreement, committing China to continue to provide assistance and support to Syria, to participate in the reconstruction of Syria, and to promote China-Syria cooperation.\(^{104}\)

With China’s development of a Covid vaccine, it is reported that at the beginning of 2021, China began its “vaccine diplomacy” in the Middle East, offering doses to countries such as Bahrain and the UAE.\(^{105}\) Syria had already expressed interest in participating in the testing of the Chinese-made vaccine.\(^{106}\) Considering the desperate situations in Iraq and Syria, it is likely that China will extend the same offer to these two countries through loans and/or humanitarian aid arrangements.

\(^{100}\) National Development and Reform Commission, December 24, 2020, https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fgzy/jjsjgl/202012/t20201224_1260163.html.

\(^{101}\) Bai Ping, “‘一带一路’抗疫复工记 | 中企坚持生产保障伊拉克民众电力供应_疫情” [One Belt One Road’ Anti-Epidemic and Resumption of Work: Chinese Companies Persist in Production to Ensure Power Supply for Iraqi People], Sohu, August 10, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/412459735_114911.

\(^{102}\) “Notice on the Requirement Adjustment of the Nucleic Acid Rt-PCR and IgM Serum Antibody Tests,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, December 19, 2020, http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/notices/t1841416.htm.

\(^{103}\) “0811 驻叙利亚使馆经商处抗击疫情工作简报” [0811 Briefing on the Fight against the Epidemic by the Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy in Syria], Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Syria Arab Republic, August 11, 2020, http://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/202008/20200802991433.shtml.

\(^{104}\) “中叙签署经济技术合作协定” [China and Syria Sign Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement], Economic and Commercial Office of the People’s Republic of China in Syria Arab Republic, March 5, 2020, http://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/202003/20200302942283.shtml.

\(^{105}\) Austin Bodetti, “China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in the Middle East,” Diplomat, January 16, 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-in-the-middle-east/.

\(^{106}\) “叙利亚当前新冠肺炎疫情形势分析—现状、应对措施和分析” [Analysis of the Current Situation of Coronavirus Epidemic in Syria-Status Quo, Response Measures and Analysis], Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Syria Arab Republic, August 30, 2020, http://sy.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/202008/20200802996880.shtml.
CONCLUSION

Throughout the pandemic, China’s BRI projects in Iraq and Syria have gradually resumed. This is partly due to the fact that the two Arab states have been eager to prevent the further collapse of their already fragile national economies. Moreover, with the Chinese government’s overseas pandemic prevention guidelines in place, some Chinese businesses and workers have largely remained in those two countries, while others have returned from China to continue pursuing BRI projects.

This study set out to examine the question of if and how Covid-19 has impacted China’s BRI projects in the Middle East, using Iraq and Syria as case studies. Looking back at the past year, the impact of Covid on China’s BRI seems to be brief and limited. From at least the following two examples, China has turned this global health crisis to its advantage where it could. First, the context of social distancing and city-wide lockdowns offered China an opportunity to pursue the Digital Silk Road through the expansion of its telecommunication and technology companies in the Belt and Road regions. Second, the Chinese-developed vaccine has become diplomatic currency for China’s further pursuit of BRI in the region. Considering that, since the 1950s, China has persevered in the Middle East through wars, conflicts, interventions of foreign powers, and the Covid pandemic, it is safe to conclude that China has seen and been through it all in the Middle East. Beijing’s diplomatic approach seems to have taken root in the region, one result being the likelihood of further progress in its BRI efforts.

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