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## **SINO-IRAQI RELATIONS: FROM DIPLOMATIC TIES TO ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

China and Iraq have developed a significant friendship over the past decades. Their relations developed after establishing diplomatic ties after the 1958 revolution in Iraq and intensified especially in the post-2003 period. China became one of the leading players in the Iraqi market due to its need of oil and Iraqi need of China's affordable inexpensive goods. This economic alliance has shifted from Western imports to Chinese products, reflecting their cost effectiveness. The dynamic Sino-Arab relations, particularly with Iraq, reveal China's abstention from the 1990 Security Council vote on Iraq and its opposition to the 2003 American invasion. China has provided support to Iraq, including a \$25 million pledge for reconstruction and writing off Iraq's debt in 2010. The two countries signed agreements that saw Chinese companies undertake major infrastructure projects in Iraq, enhancing sectors like oil, electricity, constructions, and education. China's aid, provided without political conditions, has facilitated numerous bilateral agreements and investments. Within the complex framework of global politics, the relationship between China and Iraq has changed dramatically, moving from diplomatic relations to a deep economic alliance. By examining the Sino-Iraq relationship, this paper takes into account some of the key historical events and looks at some examples of how China is economically engaging Iraq today showing their evolving ties. Overall, the deepening friendship between China and Iraq reflects their shared interests, mutual benefits, and China's growing influence in the region.

**KEYWORDS:** Sino-Iraqi relations. Economic alliance. Diplomatic ties. Reconstruction projects. Trade relations. Belt and Road Initiative

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Iraqi-Chinese relations are old, dates to the beginning of the Abbasid state, especially the era of Abu Jaafar al-Mansur and Harun al-Rashid, where the peak of commercial, political and social relations reached a great level. There is some historical evidence of the depth of these relations, including that the Tang Empire, in 757 A.D., requested from the Abbasid caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur military support to put down an internal uprising. Chinese forces, with the help of Abbasid forces, were able to put down the uprising. Most Abbasid soldiers reportedly settled in China, married, reproduced, and laid a new social foundation in China after the war. Later, there was some alliance

between Tang and the caliph Harun al-Rashid to subdue the King of Tibet, which led to more political stability in Tang Empire (Mohammed, 2022).

In modern times, the friendship between China and Iraq is founded on mutual understanding and continues to evolve in response to new opportunities. Over the years, China and Iraq have developed a good bond. The Republic of China first recognized the Kingdom of Iraq in 1942, though their relations remained limited. However, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Mao Zedong (1949–1976) actively supported nationalist and liberation movements around the world (Gulmohamad, 2021).

Following the 1958 revolution in Iraq, led by General Abd al-Karim Qasim, which overthrew the monarchy and the pro-British government, Iraq withdrew from the Western-backed Baghdad Pact and established a nationalist government under Qasim's leadership. China embraced this shift, seeing Iraq as an anti-imperialist nation. The People's Republic of China officially recognized the Republic of Iraq on July 16, 1958, leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations. That same year, Iraq and China signed their first trade agreement (Emadi, 1994).

Despite the coups in Iraq in 1963, which led to Qasim's death, and in 1968, which facilitated the rise of the Ba'ath Party, trade between Iraq and China continued to thrive. China imported Iraqi dates and oil, supported the nationalization of key Iraqi industries, including oil and manufacturing, and supplied Chinese-made cars to Iraq. Between 1960 and 1964, four trade agreements were signed, and joint committees were established to oversee their implementation. China aimed to provide Iraq with alternative trade options beyond the West (Gul, 2020). During this period, China assisted Iraq in acquiring machinery and organizing manufacturing exhibitions, such as the China Economic Rebuilding Exhibition in Iraq. Sino-Iraqi trade grew from several hundred thousand U.S. dollars in the late 1950s to over \$6 million by 1962 (Al-Hayali, 2015).

Sino-Soviet ideological and geopolitical rivalries in the region shaped Sino-Iraqi relations. The defeat of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war brought China closer to Iraq. In 1971, Iraq voted in favor of the People's Republic of China's admission to the UN, replacing Taiwan, and supported China's bid for a permanent UN seat. Despite good relations with Moscow, Beijing's rival, Iraq maintained cordial relations with Beijing throughout the 1970s. In the 1980s, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China began to open up and engage with the liberal international order. During this period, Iraq and China signed seven trade, economic, and technical agreements and memorandums. China participated in major projects, including building bridges in Baghdad and Mosul, sports halls in Baghdad, a highway in northern Iraq, and a wool-washing and spinning mill in Kifri, while also providing a \$40 million loan. Additionally, China sold weapons to Iraq during the 1970s (Gul, 2020).

In the 1980s, Iraq became one of China's top military customers during the Iran-Iraq war. China supplied Iraq with military equipment, including combat aircraft (J-6 and J-7), Type-59 main battle

tanks, HY-2 Silkworm anti-ship missiles, artillery, and military materials such as lithium hydride. China maintained a neutral stance in the Iran-Iraq war, but nine percent of Iraq's weaponry, valued at \$4.2 billion, came from the PRC during the conflict (Bitzinger, 1992). Throughout the 1980s, trade and economic ties grew, building on contracts signed in the late 1970s. For example, one of the most important projects was an agricultural reclamation project from Babylon to Al-Shaanaf and Karbala, which reached a value of \$150 million (Dar Alrewaq Publishing House, 2024). By 1987, Iraq had become one of China's largest markets for labor, with numerous Chinese workers involved in contracting projects. Despite the war, many Chinese laborers remained in Iraq, with nearly 22,000 working on over 140 projects between 1979 and 1986. By 1985, China had 444 construction contracts worth \$1.53 billion, and by 1990, this had grown to 662 contracts valued at \$1.98 billion (Gul, 2020).

Ideologically, some political actors in Iraq adopted Mao's ideology and challenged the status quo in Baghdad. These included the Marxist-Leninist League in the early 1970s that became part of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a Kurdish political party that was established in 1975. The PUK's leader Jalal Talabani, who was inspired by Maoist and Marxist ideas, visited China in 1955 and met Premier Zhou Enlai when he was a politburo member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (Al-Khatib, 2017). Another actor was a faction within the Iraqi Communist Party called the Central Leadership lead by Aziz Alhaj in 1967. The Chinese Cultural Revolution attracted some of the leftist youth and students in Iraq. The idea of toppling the Iraqi regime through arm struggle gained some popularity among the Left in Iraq for a while.

Following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, China supported the UN Security Council Resolutions 660 and 661 that imposed sanctions on Iraq, but it didn't support Resolution 678 on November 29 to go to war against Iraq. China preferred diplomatic means and refused to participate in Kuwait's liberation. After imposing UN sanctions on Iraq, China called to ease the sanctions as they had taken a significant toll on the Iraqis. Chinese-Iraqi relations were strengthened when China abstained from voting in favor of Security Council Resolution No. 678, where force could be used against Iraq to expel it from Kuwait (Hoffman, 1990).

In 1990s, the Iraqi-Chinese relationships were improving. For example, in 1998, Iraq exported oil to China at a value of \$51.4 million, and Iraq imported goods at a value of \$105 million. Also, Iraq was China's top arms customer in the region and China engaged in Iraq's construction projects, but this was hindered during the UN sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s (Gul, 2020). The lack of colonial legacies between China and Iraq, China's economic rise, and the U.S.'s lack of a long-term commitment in the region contributed to growing Iraqi Chinese relationships.

### **The Development of the Iraqi-Chinese Relationships Following April 2003**

China rejected the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and called on the American administration to cease fire, stressing the need to respect Iraq's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to give full play to the role of the United Nations. But China's concerns about missing out on

productive projects steered China to support Iraq's new political process quickly. In July 2003, a few months after the U.S. invasion, China welcomed the establishment of the Iraqi Governing Council of Iraq (IGC). This interim governing body served under the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). China re-opened its embassy in Baghdad. In August 2003, Jalal Talabani, the rotating President of the IGC and the secretary-general of the PUK, visited China, and China was ready to assume a positive role in Iraq's reconstruction. China put forth a five-point proposal for the reconstruction of Iraq. On 23 October 2003, China attended a conference on Iraq's reconstruction in Madrid, Spain. It promised to cancel Iraq's debts to China and donated \$24 million to Iraq (Associated Press, 2004).

Soon after the collapse of the Iraqi former regime, the Iraqi merchants went to conclude large commercial deals with China. The connection between these two nations has taken a significant leap. China stepped into the Iraqi market providing it with a variety of affordable goods that quickly gained popularity. The shift from Japanese, Western, and American imports to Chinese goods became apparent, driven by their cost-effectiveness and compatibility with the financial constraints of the Iraqi population (Aziz, 2023). The Chinese materials are cheap and suitable for the financial conditions of Iraqis, especially for those with limited income. Some types of Chinese goods are distinguished by their high quality, which has proven their high quality in Western markets in general. However, Iraqi merchants tended to bring goods of lower quality and poorer quality. An attempt was made by Iraqi merchants to garner large profits without paying attention to the quality of the product and consumer demands, and this is what harms the Chinese industry reputations (Shabib, 2022).

In July 2007, then the Iraqi President Talabani visited China and met President Jintao. Both countries signed four agreements, including one that cancelled some Iraqi debt to China. It was decided to cancel 100% of Iraq's government debt, while 80% of the non-governmental debt related to companies was reduced (Dar Alrewaq Publishing House, 2024). Iraq's debt that was canceled was amounted to \$8.5 billion was done in exchange for strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries (Qiao & Huang, 2024). Also, Iraq had purchased light military equipment from China for the Iraqi police worth \$100 million, due to the United States' inability to provide some equipment to the Iraqi security forces as quickly as possible (Al-Badri, 2024). These steps had an impact, and Chinese companies began to enter Iraq gradually. At that time, an agreement was signed for economic and technical cooperation and a human resources training program and investment in the oil field (Shabib, 2022).

In November 2008, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) secured the first major oil service contract in Iraq at a value of \$3 billion to develop the 1 billion-barrel al-Ahdab oil field for 23 years partnered with Iraq's State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) and China North Industries Corporation. The Chinese company received service charges of \$6 per barrel which gradually reduces to \$3. CNPC overtook Western oil companies in securing Iraq's first oil project. The agreement modifies the terms of a 1997 agreement made between China and Iraq (Goode &

Mohammed, 2008). In June 2009, CNPC secured a second deal of technical service for Rumaila's oil field which was shared with British Petroleum (BP), SOMO and Iraq's South Oil Company (SOC) (NS Energy, 2009). CNPC's third deal was in December 2009 to develop the al-Halfayah oil field that was shared with France's Total, Malaysia's Petronas and SOC (Reuters, 2022). CNPC's fourth achievement was buying 25 percent of equities from ExxonMobil (60 percent) in 2013 for West Qurna 1 oil field; in 2014, CNPC's equities increased to 32.7 percent. In 2021, Sinopic won a 25-year contract to develop Iraq's Mansuriya gas field with a 49 percent stake (Middle East Economic Digest (MEED, 2021; Gul, 2020).

In July 2011, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited China and met Premier Wen Jiabao, President Jintao, and business leaders. In that year, Iraq exported oil to China at a value of \$9.6 billion, and Iraq imported goods at a value of \$3.82 billion. A year later, in the year 2012, Iraq became the 4th largest Arabic trade partner of China. The bilateral trade volume reached 17.569 billion U.S. dollars, with a year-on-year growth of 23.13%. China imported 15.68 million tons of crude oil from Iraq, with a year-on-year growth of 13.87% (Embassy of PRC in Iraq, 2013). Over the following 10 years, this has at least doubled. Therefore, China's share of Iraq's total trade increased gradually.

In 2013, China purchased over half of Iraq's oil production, roughly 1.5 million barrels per day (Arango & Krauss, 2013). Globally, China has become one of the world's largest oil importers. On the other side, in 2015, Iraq acquired weaponized drone technology and guided missiles from China, which helped win back territory from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on the battlefield in Mosul and Ramadi. China's military firms support Iraq by developing drones, machine guns, mortar shells and military communication equipment (Al-Farttoosi, 2022; BBC, 2015). During the height of the war on ISIS and the urgent need for armament in 2017, a contract was signed with China worth \$2.5 billion to supply Iraq with light and medium weapons, on a deferred payment basis, for both the Ministries of Interior and Defense, the Popular Mobilization Authority, and the Counter-Terrorism Service (Al-Badri, 2024). Also, during the Iraqi conflict with ISIS, China provided significant humanitarian aid. The Chinese Red Cross supplied emergency relief, such as medical supplies, food, and tents for Iraqi refugees. Additionally, China dispatched medical teams to offer healthcare services in Iraq.

Between 2015 and 2018, Iraq accounted for around 10% of China's crude oil imports, consistently ranking second or third among China's oil suppliers. Iraq is currently the third largest trading partner in the West Asia and North Africa region, a major market for engineering contracting, and one of China's largest overseas investment destinations (Qiao & Huang, 2024).

In December 2015, the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi visited China, establishing a strategic partnership and joined belt (BRI) during a two-day visit and met President Xi Jinping. The BRI, officially launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping, is described as the world's largest infrastructure program. It seeks to increase global connectivity across Asia with Africa and Europe via land and sea through production, trade and supply chains, cooperation and economic growth. China new economic and

trade model sometimes refers to as the new globalization. The "Belt and Road" initiative is considered to be the new Silk Road of this era, in reference to the network of branching roads that Chinese tribes used in the past to sell their goods around the world, and Iraq occupies a fundamental pillar in this initiative (Xinhua, 2015). Therefore, Beijing is interested in developing its relationship with Baghdad so that it can be a cornerstone in its commercial communication between the countries of the Middle East and the rest of the countries that fall within the scope of the Chinese initiative, which amounts to 125 countries according to China.

Iraq, which has the fifth largest oil reserves in the world and a strategic geographical location in the heart of the Middle East, is considered by China as its keystone for directing trade across Europe and Asia, in addition to its suitability to play the role of a shipping passage for transporting its goods to other countries in the Gulf, Turkey, as well as to Syria and Lebanon. According to the World Bank, Iraq has an oil reserve of 145 billion barrels, which is equivalent to supplying oil over 100 years at the current production rate (Almada, 2024). Historically, Iraq played a key role in the Chinese trade route, which was greatly supported by the Han Chinese imperial dynasty thanks to the close ties that have developed between China and the Arabs since ancient times.

The proposed Silk Road project is one of the projects that China was trying to convince Iraq to build, stretching from the port of Faw through Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region, to Turkey and Europe. The Silk Road network of ancient trade routes established during the Chinese Han Dynasty connected regions of the ancient world commercially from 130 BCE to 1453 CE, linking the East to the West. This project will connect Iraq to Europe and create many opportunities, enhancing its strategic importance and geographical location and transforming Iraq into an important central market (Shali, 2023). Iraq is located at a crossroads of BRI's Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Silk Belt and Road has a couple of lines that go through Iraq and connect China to Europe. A line starts in China, goes through Central Asia and Iran and enters Iraq from the West. Al-Faw port which is located in Basra and lies on the Persian Gulf, connects Iraq to the BRI's networks. In 2021, construction began in al-Faw port and on one of the routes called Al-Harir (Silk) Tunnel in Basra's southern port (Iraqi News Agency, 2021). The \$2.7 billion deal to construct the Silk Tunnel and al-Faw port has been given to South Korea's Daewoo company. This reflects Baghdad's efforts to diversify foreign companies' involvement and of better deals for Iraq.

The value of trade exchange between Iraq and China was more than \$22 billion in 2017, an increase of 21.8% over 2016. In 2018, China's investments reached \$20 billion, mainly in the oil sector (Rwanduzy, 2019). In 2018, China imported 27% of Iraq's total oil, and thus China paid \$22 billion out of the total \$83 billion that Iraq earned that year from selling its oil to countries around the world (Irfaasawtak, 2022). In 2021 alone, China imported approximately 44% of Iraqi oil, ranking first in the world in Iraqi oil demand, with a quantity exceeding 60 million tons of crude oil (Irfaasawtak, 2022; Hoffman, 1990). The volume of trade exchange between the two countries increased to \$53.37

billion in 2022 up from \$20.6 billion in 2015, which is an increase of 160%. Currently, Iraq exports 35% of its oil to China (Almada, 2024).

In September 2019, the Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi visited China and signed eight agreements with China. This was the framework agreement between the Iraqi Ministry of Finance and the China Export and Credit Insurance Company, which includes projects related to roads, railway networks, housing, ports, hospitals, schools, water dams, energy, and transportation (Rwanduzy, 2019). There were two large energy projects, one north of Baghdad and the other south of Iraq. The first was in the field of fuel and the second in the field of electric power generation. Work has resumed on them by Chinese companies, and they were among the projects that were not completed in previous years. The agreement was to last for at least ten years, and Iraq would secure reconstruction in infrastructure, transportation, industry, health, education, communications, and media, without paying money, but rather exporting 100,000 barrels per day outside of OPEC's quota without affecting the financial budget (The Cradle, 2024). This was called oil-for-reconstruction deal with China. Also, in exchange for oil, China will contribute to building huge factories to produce heavy materials, such as cars, electrical materials, and daily consumer goods, in addition to investing in the agricultural sector. These projects will open wide doors to employ hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers of all kinds, whether graduates or skilled workers. It is noteworthy that the amount of money accumulated in the Iraqi Chinese Reconstruction Fund amounted to half a billion dollars until 2019 (Fakher, 2019).

Under the agreement signed in 2019, Chinese companies were to build a thousand schools in Iraq, with a pledge to consider building another 7,000 schools later in the future. Work had also begun to build an airport in the city of Nasiriyah, 90,000 homes in Sadr City and a thousand medical facilities. Also, the project was implementing an improvement process, including sanitation in Baghdad and building a "science city" in northern Iraq that will include a huge university, research laboratories, and public parks. Dozens of other projects in Iraqi infrastructure were implemented by Chinese companies with funding from Chinese banks (Irfaasawtak, 2022).

In 2021, China's construction contracts reached \$10.5 billion which is considered the highest construction work for China abroad. Regarding oil production, more than half of Iraq's oil production comes from fields operated by Chinese companies, such as China National Petroleum Corporation and PetroChina. These companies hold significant stakes in major oil fields and are looking to acquire more fields in the future (Al Mashhad, 2024).

Certain Iraqi elites, including Prime Minister al-Kadhimi, were opposed to China's dominance or separating Iraq from the West. China-Iraq relations are predicted to improve under the leadership of Mohammed al-Sudani, the new prime minister of Iraq. Because of the quality of China-Iran relations, his pro-Iranian government coalition contributes to the strengthening of ties with China. China does not see the unstable security situation in Iraq as a major issue. Its tight ties to Iran and the likely pro-

Iranian military forces in Iraq provide security for its assets in a manner that is not typically found in Western firms (Irfaasawtak, 2022).

In 2021, Iraq became the third largest oil supplier to China; it supplies around 10 percent of China's oil market share, after Saudi Arabia (17.4 percent) and Russia (15.5 percent) (Salem, 2022). In 2022, as part of the oil for reconstruction agreement, several infrastructure ventures were still at the initial stages, including building schools by Power China and Sinotec, rehabilitating Iraq's Nasiriyah International Airport by China State Construction Engineering Corporation, building 90,000 houses in Baghdad's Sadr district, and 1000 healthcare facilities and electric power stations such as the one in Basra by Power China (Gul, 2020).

In the field of electricity, there is also great cooperation, as Chinese electric power companies generate more than 50% of the electricity supplied to Baghdad and its environs. The Chinese say frankly that they have the financial investments, scientific and technological capabilities, expertise and desires, and they are ready to enter into cooperative partnerships with countries around the world, including Iraq (Xinhua, 2022)

The trade balance between China and Iraq is still the largest compared to Iraq's trade relations with various countries of the world, which were estimated at about 50 billion dollars annually, according to oil prices. (1; 2). China's need for Iraqi oil will reach the year 2065, and Iraq aims to achieve development in the country by benefiting from international expertise, including Chinese. Iraq suffered from all foreign companies that entered the country, but not with Chinese companies (Salem, 2023). (3; 4).

In 2024, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani announced the potential integration of China's Belt and Road Initiative with Iraq's Development Road Project. Also in 2024, the Iraqi-Chinese Business Council announced the execution of over 200 projects, with an estimated value of \$5 billion from Iraqi funds in China. Among the most notable projects was the development of Nasiriyah International Airport, which aims to accommodate 2.5 million passengers annually, and the construction of thousands of modern-style schools (Al Mashhad, 2024). On the other hand, Iraq has adopted the Chinese Yuan in its trade dealings with China instead of the U.S. dollar, which facilitates and speeds up financial transactions and reduces import costs. The Central Bank of Iraq announced in February 2023 that it intends to allow trade settlement from China directly in yuan to compensate for the shortage of dollars in local markets. (5; 6).

In 2024, based on an agreement between Iraq and the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, Iraq purchased Chinese drones of the type Cai Hong-5 (CH-5), in addition to anti-tank missiles. The operational range of the CH-5 aircraft extends to 250 kilometers and can be expanded to 2,000 kilometers when using satellite communications. China's view of its military exports is no



different from its view of its commercial exports, as they are ultimately a Chinese commodity looking for a buyer (Al-Badri, 2024).

### **Why Iraq Engages in Strategic Partnerships with China?**

Iraq needs to advance its economic situation and development and to seeks to strengthen its relationship with China in order to diversify its international relationship in the world. One way to do that is by strengthening its economic relationship with China. Therefore, Iraq participated in the Arab Chinese summit, which was hosted by Saudi Arabia and attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping, with the participation of 30 countries and international organizations to discuss the prospects for economic and development cooperation. The summit opened a great scope for cooperation and joint investment for all countries participating in it. Arab economic openness to China came about because it has economic, informational, technological and cultural tools to benefit from Chinese technology and expand trade relations with the second largest economy in the world (Eslami & Papageorgiou, 2023). For China, Iraq is geopolitically and strategically important as it lies on the BRI's vital routes and networks. Nevertheless, Iraq's long-lasting instability does not persuade a wide range of Chinese companies to deal with it as they do with those in the Gulf Cooperation Council's states.

China's foreign policy which is based on the Communist party ideological stand established diplomatic relations with all 22 countries of the Arab League between 1956 and 1990. China, based on socialist and anti-colonial ideas, supported Arab national liberation movements in the last century and support Palestinian people's strife for an independent Palestina state. China, having experienced occupation and colonial rule and understanding people's dislike for foreign control, presents itself as a successful partner that can help developing countries. In return, Arab countries gave strong support to China in restoring its legitimate seat in the United Nations and on the Taiwan issue, among other issues (Xinhua, 2024).

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative enjoys the support of Arab countries, as well as the countries neighboring Iraq and its regional surroundings. In terms of tangible cooperation, China is currently Iraq's largest trading partner, and its third largest trading partner among Arab countries, and this advantage is the relative balance in the trade balance. China was the only major country whose citizens continued to work on contracted projects in Iraq, despite the risks resulting from the terrorists' occupation of Mosul and the western provinces in 2014, and they did not withdraw or break their pledges to work, after all foreigners left Iraq (Kadimi, 2018; (Irfaasawtak, 2022).

To advance its interests, Iraq applied to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in August 2021. China, being a key member, facilitated Iraq's application to deposit its financial surplus. The AIIB offers large loans with more favorable terms and lower interest rates compared to the World Bank. Iraq's membership was accepted in December 2021 (AIIB, 2021; Xinhua, 2019). This move provides financial support for Chinese-led projects in Iraq (Idhaib, 2022).

Iraq also plans to submit an application to join the BRICS countries (a group that includes China, Russia, South Africa, India, and Brazil) and another application for membership in the Shanghai Conference. Shanghai Conference is a cooperation organization established in 2001 that currently includes ten member states of China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, and Iran. This is to create a state of balance with competing economies (Ozheb, 2023; Qiao & Huang, 2024).

In the area of people-to-people exchanges, Iraq and China have developed cooperation in education, culture, and tourism. Currently, China offers 40 scholarships annually to Iraqi students, and Iraq, in turn, allocates study places at the Arabic Language Institute for Chinese students who wish to study the Arabic language. Also, it provides training opportunities for Iraqi employees and technicians in management and technical services institutes in China, which actually happens annually (Kadimi, 2018). In addition, one form of Iraq's good relations with China is that they signed a "visa exemption" agreement for specific categories of citizens of the two countries, headed by investors, in an effort to facilitate trade operations between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). The "Iraqi-Chinese Friendship Association" was also announced in Baghdad, which began providing Chinese language lessons to Iraqis. These lessons witnessed a turnout from Iraqi businessmen who cooperate with Chinese companies in their country or import goods from them and sell them in the local Iraqi market.

Iraq now needs to improve its economic reality and enhance its global position. Chinese investments in the world have proven their effectiveness in addressing the economic challenges of developing countries and are referred to with praise as they can be used in Iraq to create effective economic sectors in the fields of production and services in order to ensure the distribution and employment of resources. Iraqis also hope that the Chinese government will increase cultural openness through cultural institutes and teaching the Chinese language, to introduce Iraqis to the Chinese people in a real way (Mohammed, 2024).

Guided by the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese companies are widely and deeply involved in oil, electricity, schools and other projects in Iraq and have contributed to Iraq's economic growth. Chinese oil companies, with their rich technology, experience and advanced management, have made significant contributions to the development of Iraq's oil industry (Al-Baidar, 2023). Chinese companies respond to the Iraqi government's call for sustainable green development. For example, PetroChina's Halfaya natural gas processing plant was opened in June 2024, which will achieve 100% associated gas recycling and utilization and make the Halfaya field the first Iraqi oil field in which all associated gas burners are extinguished (Al-Baidar, 2023).

As reflection and appreciation of the Iraqi growing relationship to China, UN ambassadors from 50 countries, including Iraq, co-signed a letter to the UNHRC supporting China's handling of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region. Iraq also praised China's efforts in combating

terrorism and extremism (Wired, 2019). In June 2020, Iraq was also among 53 nations that expressed support for China's Hong Kong national security law at the United Nations. Some argue that the law-imposed restrictions on freedom of demonstration and expression against any local calls for secession from China, for which it received severe Western criticism, but in return it received support from Beijing's allies (Lawler, 2020).

On the other hand, China seeks, through its relationship with Iraq, to achieve a kind of balance in its regional influence in the face of American influence in the region. China's power and influence in any crisis with the United States will depend on its ability to maintain energy supplies in a way that allows the military economy to continue operating (Al-Badri, 2024).

### **China's Relations with Iraqi- Kurdistan Region**

In regard to Kurdistan region of Iraq, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the experience of federal governance in Iraq that includes the Kurdistan Region, global and regional actors sought to strengthen their relations and expand their sphere of influence in the Kurdistan Region. After 2003, Chinese state-owned enterprises established trade relations and lines of communication for cooperation with the Kurdistan Region through official channels such as the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and unofficial channels such as the heads of major companies. China opened a consulate general in Erbil in late 2014, becoming the last of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to do so.

In terms of trade relations with the Kurdistan region, China is competing with regional powers like Iran and Turkey for a place, especially in the region's domestic market. The Kurdistan Region has oil reserves in addition to huge amounts of natural gas reserves, so the Chinese are keen to invest there (Aziz, 2022).

In recent years, hundreds of Chinese citizens have been living in the Kurdistan Region, and China's investments in oil fields and infrastructure in Kurdistan are increasing rapidly. In 2009, Sino Epic began investing in the oil sector in Iraqi Kurdistan. Another important example of Chinese engagement is the Chinese petrochemical company buying a Swiss company and a contract with the Kurdistan Region regarding the right to oil energy (Azad & Sadaqatah, 2024).

Today, China is one of the main trading partners of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and is expanding its involvement in telecommunications infrastructure, education and other soft power. The most important activities and investments was in September 2020, when a Chinese company proposed to the Erbil Investment Commission to build a tourist city called Shahr Shad worth \$ 5 billion. This project will be built in a very large area. In addition, another Chinese company began building the largest shopping malls in Erbil in January 2021. Furthermore, the Ministry of Agriculture in the Kurdistan Regional Government and Power China International Group signed a memorandum of understanding to build four dams in this area. This Chinese company offered the best deal at the lowest cost for the region. Chinese companies such as Huawei Sajo and a machinery engineering company have taken the

initiative to invest in northern Iraq. With Chinese assistance, Kurdistan Region is currently implementing a cement factory construction project for a machinery engineering company. Moreover, Chinese companies intend to build a science city in northern Iraq as part of the oil contract project (Rogers, 2022).

In cultural and humanitarian arenas, the Chinese language teaching department was opened at Salahaddin University in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan region in 2019, and plans were made to open a Kurdish language teaching department at Peking University in Beijing. During the outbreak of the Corona epidemic, China has shifted its attention to Iraq, along with other countries in West Asia, and provided vaccines to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. China also exported its medical equipment to the region (Azad & Sadaqatah, 2024).

### **China Challenging Western and U.S. Influence**

It seems that the competition between the United States and China over the Middle East in the commercial fields will have a negative impact on these countries, including Iraq, whose trade relations with China have expanded. Chinese companies are present in Iraq with large investments in the oil, electricity, construction and entertainment sectors in various Iraqi cities, where Chinese workers are noticeably widespread in cities such as Baghdad, Basra and Erbil. Perhaps the increase in these investments and the justifications for protecting Chinese interests have raised American fears of establishing Chinese bases in the Middle East, including Iraq. The deal with China has which opened the door wide for China to flow into the Iraqi economy, caused Western fears that Baghdad would become a hostage to the “Chinese dragon,” like many emerging Asian capitals that have been hindered in several economic crises due to their absolute dependence on Chinese investments (Irfaasawtak, 2022). Of course, Iraq stands apart from other Asian countries due to its wealth and revenue, primarily driven by the continuous large-scale sale of oil.

The Pentagon issued a report in which it warned the countries of the region, especially Iraq, against dealing extensively with the Chinese government. At the same time warned the Chinese government against provoking the United States in the Middle East. Also, it warned both Iraq and the countries of the region against the consequences of harming American interests by dealing extensively with China. There is a fear of the expansion of Chinese influence in Iraq, especially in the energy sector, as Beijing buys the share of any foreign oil company that exits the oil market. Chinese companies expressed their readiness to buy Exxon Mobil's share when it was offered for sale, noting that the Iraqi government rejected the Chinese offer for fear of Western companies refraining from coming to Iraq, in addition to avoiding arousing the fear of the United States (Al-Tarfi, 2022).

Iraq favors China for many reasons. China, unlike other great powers, does not have an intrusive military and security agenda in Iraq. Chinese companies win tenders in Iraq more easily than Western companies because they are state-owned and have the flexibility to prioritize energy over profit. At the same time, Western companies, constrained by regulations, are less willing to do business in a risky

environment (Azad & Sadaqatah, 2024). Many Western oil companies have begun to reduce their presence in Iraq because they consider the country a risky investment environment and because of the spread of corruption in the country, most notably the withdrawal of the American oil company Exxon Mobil from the “West Qurna 2” oil field despite official government appeals not to do so (Irfaasawtak, 2022; McFarlane & Mohammed, 2022). Unlike the West, China provides generous aid to Iraq without imposing political conditions on Iraqi leaders, such as achieving more democracy or following structural reform policies for the local economy, so cooperation with China seems more attractive (Irfaasawtak, 2022).

Chinese companies are willing to work in Iraq's conditions, whether security or environmental. In Iraq, Chinese people are in the southern provinces roaming the markets without fear, while American foreigners' movements in Baghdad and in all cities are troubled with danger because they have been subjected to kidnappings and assassinations in several provinces. This aspect certainly has an important impact on whether Western companies enter or not. The Chinese are reconciled with the Iraqis to the point of understanding the country's culture. When an attack or an incident occurs that requires conciliation, the Chinese attend tribal events and agree with tribal sheikhs to provide blood money in the pacification to reach an agreement on any of the existing issues, while this is not what other companies do (Al Mashhad, 2024).

Chinese are willing to obtain their contracts at cheap prices compared to the bids of Western companies. The costs offered by the Chinese are a competitive factor. Western companies could not keep up with such bids. Chinese companies' bit in some sectors is about one third of what non Chinese companies offered (Al Mashhad, 2024). Of course, Iraq benefits from such offers and the interests here are mutual.

Beijing's good relationships with Iran, which the Iraqi ruling Coordination Frame collation is affiliated with make the work of its companies and project relatively safe comparing to Western companies. Therefore, Iraq seems to have motivated Chinese construction companies to engage in billions of dollars in investments. One advantage of Chinese companies in Iraq is their ability to operate in challenging environments (Fakher, 2019), as they are also trained to understand and effectively navigate Iraqi culture. The government of the current Pime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani intends to build strategic relations with many countries, including China and Russia, and not to rely solely on the United States to develop the country's infrastructure (Al-Tarfi, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Sino-Iraqi relationship is playing an extensive role in Iraq's efforts for its reconstruction and development. The alliance forged between China and Iraq is a stunning case in point of transforming the diplomatic connect into an economic driving force. The journey touches upon historical sites and contemporary collaborations to provide a comprehensive picture of the history and significance Sino-Arab relations, using Iraq as a case study. With this, a comprehensive economic cooperation road has

been opened for the two countries together with China's investments that will also deepen Iraq strategic ambitions in near and long term. A new political system in Iraq relies on a form of pragmatism rather than ideology.

China has invested heavily in Iraq's infrastructure development. This investment covers initiatives in the areas of telecommunications, transport and energy. China's involvement and investment in Iraq expanded recently, making it the country's largest investor. Chinese companies have also worked on oil development and exploration projects in Iraq and other locations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There are balanced trade relations as China is one of Iraq's most important trading partners.

It appears that the increasing cooperation between China and Iraq reflects massive investments in several vital sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and housing. Trade agreements between the two countries, like the "oil-for-construction" deal, have resulted in major projects, including the construction of cities, airports, and factories, strengthening China's role as a key investor in Iraq. However, this cooperation raises questions about the sustainability of this partnership in the long term. While these investments may contribute to Iraq's revival and the development of its infrastructure, there are concerns about Iraq's excessive dependence on China, especially in energy and trade sectors. If global economic relations shift or China faces economic challenges, Iraq could find itself in a difficult position (Step Video Graph, 2024). In short, China may significantly contribute to Iraq's development, but heavy reliance on this partnership could pose potential risks. Generally, the relationship between Iraq and China is primarily a relationship of interest. Both countries have a genuine desire to cooperate for mutual benefit and even multilateral cooperative projects.

In light of international balances, Iraq is striving through its foreign policy to achieve strategic balance. Iraq has a strategic relationship with the United States, as well as with Europe, China, France, and the European Union. Iraq is capable of strengthening its strategic relationship with China while also maintaining its strategic relations with the United States.

In conclusion, the Sino-Iraqi relationship has evolved from diplomatic ties to a strong economic partnership, with China playing a pivotal role in Iraq's reconstruction and development plans. The future seems promising as both nations continue to explore avenues for mutual growth and cooperation. As both nations embark on a path of extensive economic cooperation, the lasting impact of China's investments and Iraq's strategic aspirations signal a promising future.

**End Notes:**

1. China-Iraq trade: In August 2024, the top exports of China to Iraq were Air Conditioners (\$93M), Light Fixtures (\$51.6M), Iron Pipes (\$47.8M), Motor vehicles; parts and accessories (\$44.2M), and Rubber Footwear (\$42.9M). In August 2024 the top imports of China from Iraq were Crude Petroleum (\$2.63B), Petroleum Coke (\$128k), Prepr binder for foundry (\$33.5k), Commodities not elsewhere specified (\$10.5k), and Flavored Water (\$256) (OEC, 2024).

2. Origins of export and import: In August 2024 the exports of China were mainly from Zhejiang Province (\$491M), Guangdong Province (\$214M), Shandong Province (\$114M), Jiangsu Province (\$79.7M), and Beijing (\$61.3M), while imports destinations were mainly Beijing (\$2.72B), Zhejiang Province (\$415M), Jiangsu Province (\$341M), Fujian Province (\$249M), and Shandong Province (OEC, 2024).
3. Between June 2022 and June 2023, China's exports increased by \$174 million (14.2%) from \$1.22 billion to \$1.4 billion, while imports decreased by -\$410 million (-15.4%) from \$2.66 billion to \$2.25 billion (Shali, 2023).
2. In November 2023, China exported \$1.15 billion and imported \$2.8 billion from Iraq. Between November 2022 and November 2023, the exports of China have decreased from \$1.43 billion to \$1.15 billion, while imports decreased from \$3.83 billion to \$2.8 billion (The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC, 2024).
5. China-Iraq Trade: China sent \$14 billion to Iraq in 2022. Air conditioners (\$711 millions), rubber tires (\$425 millions), and light fixtures (\$419 millions) were China's top exports to Iraq. China's exports to Iraq have grown at an annualized pace of 10.9% over the last five years, from \$8.33 billion in 2017 to \$14 billion in 2022 (OEC, 2023).
6. Iraq-China Trade: Iraq sent \$34 billion to China in 2022. Iraq's top exports to China were petroleum (\$33.8 billion), refined petroleum (\$173 million), and petroleum coke (\$46.6 million). Iraq's exports to China have grown at an annualized pace of 22.6% over the last five years, from \$12.3 billion in 2017 to \$34 billion in 2022 (OEC, 2023).

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