

## From Energy Partners to Political Allies: Investigating Qatar and China's Changing Bilateral Dynamics

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This study aims to identify the general trends in the development of Qatari-Chinese relations after 2013, focusing on economic cooperation and energy, and to investigate the statistical impact of the evolution of bilateral cooperation relations on these areas on the political distance between Qatar and China during the period 2013-2022. The study sought to answer the following main question: Did the growth of Qatari-Chinese relations in the areas of general economic cooperation and cooperation in energy and natural gas after 2013, following China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, reduce the political distance between the two sides?

**Methods:** The study employed both descriptive statistical methods and the method of general trends.

**Results:** The study found that with the increasing pace of general acceleration in economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China after 2013, and following China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the pace of political rapprochement between the two sides began to rise, and the political distance between them gradually began to shrink.

**Conclusions:** The study concluded that the Qatari-Chinese strategic partnership is likely to witness several essential requirements in the coming years, contributing to the elevation of the strategic partnership to the level of a strategic alliance.

**Keywords:** Political distance; Qatar-Chinese relations; foreign policy; belt and road initiative; political proximity

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### من شركاء الطاقة إلى الحلفاء السياسيين: دراسة حول تغير динاميکيات الثنائيّة بين قطر والصين

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### ملخص

**الأهداف:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على الاتجاهات العامة في تطور العلاقات القطرية الصينية بعد عام 2013 على مستوى التعاون الاقتصادي والطاقة، والتحقق في التأثير الإحصائي لتطور علاقات التعاون الثنائي على تلك المستويات على واقع المسافة السياسية بين قطر والصين خلال الفترة 2013-2022. حاولت الدراسة الإجابة على السؤال الرئيسي التالي: هل أدى نمو العلاقات القطرية الصينية في مجالات التعاون الاقتصادي العام والتعاون في مجال الطاقة والغاز الطبيعي بعد عام 2013، أي بعد إطلاق الصين لمبادرة الحزام والطريق، إلى تقليل المسافة السياسية بين الطرفين؟

**المنهجية:** استخدمت الدراسة كل من استخدمت الدراسة المنهج الوصفي الإحصائي ومنهج الاتجاهات العامة.

**النتائج:** أتضح للدراسة إلى أنه مع تزايد وتيرة التسارع العام في علاقات التعاون الاقتصادي والطاقة بين قطر والصين بعد عام 2013 وبعد إطلاق الصين لمبادرة الحزام والطريق، بدأت وتيرة التقارب السياسي بين الطرفين في الارتفاع، وبدأت المسافة السياسية بينهما تتقلص تدريجياً.

**الخلاصة:** أتضح للدراسة إلى أن الشراكة الاستراتيجية القطرية الصينية من المرجح أن تشهد عدة متطلبات أساسية في السنوات القادمة، مما يساهم في نقل الشراكة الاستراتيجية إلى مستوى التحالف الاستراتيجي.

**الكلمات الدالة:** المسافة السياسية، العلاقات القطرية الصينية، السياسة الخارجية، مبادرة الحزام والطريق، التقارب السياسي.



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## Introduction

Qatar-China relations went through three major stages where bilateral cooperation witnessed an upward development, especially in economic cooperation and energy cooperation. To the extent that Qatar-China relations are now described as a strategic partnership supported by different factors, including political aspects like respect for non-interference in internal affairs and the principle of sovereignty. From the Chinese perspective, Qatar is considered one of the most important international players in natural gas production and export. Qatar views China as one of the most important international economies driving globalization strongly.

The first stage of Qatar-China relations can be described as the recognition and exploration stage, where the two parties got to know each other and explored opportunities and dimensions for cooperation. This stage extended from July 1988 when diplomatic relations were established between Qatar and China until 1998. The second phase, described as actually launching cooperation on the ground, began with the visit of Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani to China in 1999 (Lons, 2019). During this visit, Sheikh Hamad initiated the actual launch of cooperation requirements with China. As a result, Qatar and China signed many cooperation agreements in economic and energy fields, and this stage ended in 2012. In 2013, the third stage began, continuing until now, which has advanced relations between the two countries to the level of strategic partnership (Chaziza, 2020).

One main reason explaining the rise of Qatar-China ties to a strategic partnership after 2013 is China's launch of its massive Belt and Road Initiative (Dunford & Liu, 2019) that year, aiming to link China's mainland to various parts of the world economically and reshaping global balances to advance a multipolar international system where China has a role no less important than the United States. For Qatar, 2013 witnessed a change at the leadership with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani assuming power, succeeding Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, leading Qatari foreign policy into a new phase marked by openness to various countries and major emerging powers. In view of the foregoing, this study investigates the impact of Qatar-China cooperation relations after 2013 on their political distance, and whether their strategic partnership in economic and energy cooperation actually led to reduced political distance between them, that is, whether the two sides became closer politically (decreased political distance) or not.

For the purposes of this study, the term "political distance" refers to the degree of convergence or divergence between the foreign policy stances, strategic orientations, and overall political/diplomatic ties of two countries. It captures how closely aligned or far apart the two parties are on key political, security and geo-strategic issues and interests. A greater political distance indicates more divergence in foreign policy goals and less closeness in the political/strategic relationship, while a smaller political distance signifies convergence and closer political/diplomatic ties. This differs from simply describing the general "political relationship", as political distance provides a more specific measure of just how proximate or distant the two countries' political postures and interests are.

Defining it as "the degree of convergence or divergence between the foreign policy stances, strategic orientations, and overall political/diplomatic ties" helps quantify an otherwise abstract idea. The explanation that greater distance indicates divergence while less distance means convergence in key political/security interests is also helpful clarification. This operationalization allows the study to more precisely measure how closely aligned Qatar and China are politically beyond just characterizing their relationship (Hobson & Sajed, 2017). On a concrete level, the political distance analysis can guide policies pertaining to security partnerships, coordination on regional crisis diplomacy, pursuit of institutions for political engagement, or even calculations around unwanted forms of entanglement and risk mitigation. It allows capitals to assess more precisely the limitations and opportunities present in a bilateral relationship beyond just rhetorical public stances. Insights from analysing this distance could potentially shape Qatar's positions on issues like the Taiwan question, the role of the Quad, 5G infrastructure, or China's relations with rivals in light of its deepening energy and economic ties to Beijing (Nuruzzaman, 2022).

Conceptualizing and being able to measure political distance is useful for analysis of bilateral relations between countries. It provides a framework for assessing convergence or divergence in foreign policy priorities, security interests, orientation towards global issues like Ukraine etc. Analysing political distance can inform decisions about cooperation or

alignment on specific policies/issues where national interests may align or diverge (Hagan, 1987). It allows identifying areas of common ground versus potential friction points in the relationship. This could be applied to policies around security cooperation, economic statecraft, responses to regional crises and more.

To operationalize this concept, the study will analyse several indicators to assess the political distance between Qatar and China over the 2013-2021 period: 1) Voting patterns and convergence in the United Nations General Assembly; 2) Bilateral diplomatic engagement and high-level visits; 3) Cooperation in regional security issues and crisis situations; 4) Alignment on major global geo-strategic issues like the Ukraine conflict. Trends in these indicators will be examined to determine whether the political distance has contracted (indicating greater convergence) or expanded (signifying divergence) as economic and energy ties deepened after 2013. This operationalization provides a framework to quantify the often abstract political distance concept (Brannagan & Julianotti, 2018). Based on the operationalization provided, political distance seems to be conceptualized as a two-way measurement looking at the convergence/divergence in foreign policy stances and interests of both Qatar and China. The indicators outlined like UN voting, diplomatic engagement, cooperation on regional security issues etc. implicitly require examining the positions and actions of both countries to determine if their political distances are increasing or decreasing over time. Accordingly, it does appear to be a two-way concept analysing how both parties are becoming closer or further apart based on their behaviour and political orientations.

There are competing perspectives on whether deepening economic and energy cooperation between states necessarily leads to reduced political distance and greater convergence of strategic interests. One prominent view, rooted in the liberal traditions of commercial peace theory, is that increasing economic interdependence raises the opportunity costs of conflict and incentivizes political cooperation between trade partners. As summarized by (Blomkvist & Drogendijk, 2013), "the expansion of economic relations and contacts between two parties will lead to an increase in common and mutual interests between them, and as a result, the political distance between them will shrink." However, there are contesting realist perspectives that economic interdependence alone does not automatically ensure political-strategic alignment. States may compartmentalize economics from security, utilizing tools like economic statecraft to extract concessions or wield energy for geopolitical leverage (Okruhlik, 2011). The complicated example of U.S.-China relations illustrates how tight economic ties have persisted despite growing political-strategic tensions and distancing.

Beyond just economic factors, other variables could potentially impact the political distance between Qatar and China over this period, pushing them closer together or driving them further apart: their respective threat perceptions and perceived need for security cooperation against common challenges; degree of convergence or divergence over regional security issues and conflicts; compatibility of their broader geo-strategic interests and world order visions; strength of countervailing political/security alignments with other powers; ideological differences around governance models and human rights; development of global norms and rules around issues like non-interference (Rynning & Ringsmose, 2008). While economic/energy ties provide an important basis for cooperation, these other factors will likely interact with and mediate the impact of deepening Qatar-China economic relations on the political distance between them. The study will need to consider this complex web of variables shaping their political alignment over the 2013-2022 periods. Many academics believe that the expansion of economic relations and contacts between two specific parties will lead to an increase in common and mutual interests between them, and as a result, the political distance between them will shrink (political proximity), while the decline in economic relations negatively affects the political distance between two parties, leading to a wider gap (political divergence). From the above, the study's problematic stems from a general and main question: Did the growth of Qatari - Chinese relations in the areas of general economic cooperation and areas of cooperation in energy and natural gas after 2013, that is, after China launched the Belt and Road Initiative, lead to a reduction in the political distance between the two parties?

**The following research questions are considered for the presented study:**

1. What is the pace of acceleration in the development of Qatari - Chinese relations economically and energetically after 2013?
2. What is the pace of acceleration in the rates of political proximity between Qatar and China after 2013? Did the

increasing acceleration in the relations of general economic cooperation and cooperation in natural gas lead to a reduction in the political distance between Qatar and China?

3. If the pace of acceleration in the Qatari - Chinese economic and energetic cooperation did not lead to a reduction in the political distance between the two parties, what are the reasons that explain this?

4. Can the Qatari - Chinese relations advance in the future, from the stage of strategic partnership to the stage of strategic alliance?

**This study seeks to achieve several objectives, mainly:**

1. To identify the general trends for the development of cooperation relations between Qatar and China in the general economic fields and in the field of energy and natural gas after China launched the Belt and Road project in 2013.

2. To identify the impact of the development of economic and energy cooperation relations on the rates of political proximity between Qatar and China.

3. To present a vision on the future of the Qatari - Chinese relations and whether these relations are ready to advance from the strategic partnership of the strategic alliance.

The study holds theoretical significance as it explores a unique topic that has not been extensively examined in existing literature on Qatari - Chinese relations. While previous studies have focused on economic cooperation, this research aims to investigate the political distance between Qatar and China. It seeks to determine if this distance is growing, shrinking, or remaining unchanged, and to identify the reasons behind these possibilities. On a practical level, the study is important because it offers general recommendations to Qatari decision-makers regarding the possibility of political reconciliation with China, beyond economic and energy cooperation. This is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing transformations in the international systems, which are leading towards a non-polar or multipolar global order. By addressing this under-explored area, the study aims to enhance our understanding of the dynamics that shape the Qatari - Chinese relationship, especially in the political sphere. Its findings and recommendations have the potential to influence policy decisions and provide insights into the prospects for closer political alignment between the two countries, considering the evolving geopolitical landscape.

**Study Methodology:**

This study relies mainly on each of the descriptive statistical approaches, which in essence is based on the need to collect quantitative data on the course of a particular phenomenon and describe and analyse it. The energy cooperation relations between the two parties, then standing on the rate of acceleration in that development, then employing the same approach, to measure the variables of the political distance between Qatar and China and to judge the changes that occur at that distance considering the general development of economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China.

The descriptive statistical approach will be used to quantify and analyse the various indicators specified for measuring political distance between Qatar and China over the 2013-2022 period. For each indicator, relevant data will be collected:

1. UN General Assembly voting data will be used to calculate an annual voting similarity score between Qatar and China to gauge foreign policy convergence.
2. Data on bilateral diplomatic visits, strategic dialogues and official meetings will provide a metric for the level of political engagement.
3. Information on coordination between Qatar and China in responding to regional security issues and crisis situations will indicate their strategic alignment.
4. Their stated positions and actions regarding major global issues like the Ukraine conflict will further reveal commonalities or differences in geo-strategic orientations.

This quantitative data for each indicator will be compiled annually from 2013-2022. Analysing the patterns and trends within and across these indicators over the time period will allow assessing whether the political distance has contracted or expanded as economic/energy ties deepened. In addition to the descriptive statistics, the general trends approach will be employed to build time series models projecting the future trajectories of both the economic/energy cooperation variables as well as the political distance variable(s). Utilizing data from 2013-2022, statistical modelling software like ARIMA will

be used to construct time series forecasts extending to 2030 for:

- The yearly value of economic and energy cooperation indicators (e.g. trade volumes, investment deals, energy contracts)
- The quantified measurement of political distance derived from the analysis of the various indicators mentioned above.

By projecting the future paths of both economic/energy cooperation and political distance over the next decade, these time series models can then be analysed to assess whether continued intensification of economic/energy ties is associated with a contracting or expanding political distance between Qatar and China headed towards 2030.

The study will employ the general trends approach, which is based on a fundamental idea: to judge the future path of a phenomenon, its development path must be considered over a sufficient period of time, enabling the researcher to build a time series that anticipates its future trajectory. This approach will be utilized in the study by examining the general development path in the Qatari - Chinese cooperation relations energetically and economically from 2013 to 2022 and modelling that development in percentages or by being satisfied with its quantitative reality, to build a time series through which we anticipate the course of its development during the next decade.

Additionally, the study will subject the political distance between Qatar and China and its general development during the period 2013-2022 to the same modelling process, to anticipate the reality of the political distance between Qatar and China in 2030. By employing the general trends approach, the study aims to leverage historical data and patterns to forecast the future trajectories of the economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China, as well as the evolving political distance between the two nations. This approach will enable the researchers to build time series models and make informed projections about the nature and extent of the relationships in the coming years, based on the trends observed over the past decade.

### **Limitations of research study**

**Objective Limit:** The objective limit of this study is confined to discussing the reality and development of economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China after 2013 until 2022, and how the impact of development in economic and energy relations affects the reality of the political distance between the two parties, as well as how the expected economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China during the next decade can influence the reality of the political distance between them.

**Spatial Limit:** The study is limited to the State of Qatar and the People's Republic of China.

**Time Limit:** The time frame for this study starts from 2013 until 2022 as the main limit and extends to the year 2030 as a predictive limit. The year 2013 marks a significant point in Qatar's leadership, as Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani assumed the rule of the State of Qatar.

### **Literature Review**

Many studies have explored Qatar-China relations in general, as well as their economic and energy cooperation, but very few have examined their political cooperation or, more precisely, the reality of the political distance between Qatar and China. In other words, whether the political distance between them is increasing (political divergence), decreasing (political proximity), or remaining unchanged. However, some studies have attempted to address the discussion of political distance between Qatar and China in one way or another. Among these studies is one by (SAMAAN, 2021) entitled "Qatar and the US-China Rivalry: The Dilemmas of a Gulf Monarchy." In his study, the researcher indicated that the growth of Qatar-China economic relations was accompanied by diplomatic proximity between the two parties, albeit with limited security and military cooperation. Nevertheless, the researcher believes that despite Qatar's larger economic interests with China compared to the United States, Qatar cannot distance itself from the US because it is a major guarantor of Qatar's security and stability. Although Samaan (SAMAAN, 2021) deal with an aspect that this study seeks to discuss and analyse, his study did not aim to systematically and scientifically examine the political distance between Qatar and China by setting realistic indicators and variables to demonstrate the nature of their political distance and judge the extent of its expansion or contraction.

In his study “Kuwait’s Hedging Strategy Toward Iran and Saudi Arabia,” Salameh points out that in the Arabian Gulf region, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman engage with Iran through strategic hedging. Given their dynamic and uncertain security environment, these states are well-suited to this approach, which allows them to maintain various strategic options and provides flexibility in their responses. Salama also notes that after the Arab Spring revolutions, the Gulf states had to adapt to the new political landscape in the region. These adjustments were made in response to the changing policies of major powers, particularly the United States. The perception of a U.S. retreat from its commitments in the Middle East compels the smaller Gulf states to develop a new vision for their self-defence. (Salameh, 2024). Our study, therefore, seeks to determine the extent of political proximity between China and the State of Qatar through the Silk Road, considering the current changes on the international scene.

On the other hand, researcher in (Chaziza, 2020) indicated that Qatar-China relations have begun to witness remarkable growth in many economic, financial, commercial, energy, security, military, and political fields in recent years. According to the researcher, China sought to institutionalize its cooperation with Qatar across various previous fields. When the Gulf crisis erupted in 2017, China sought to invest in that crisis to strengthen its economic and energy cooperation with Qatar, in which Doha found an opportunity to mitigate the economic impact of the Gulf crisis. A significant limitation of the aforementioned studies is their failure to substantiate theoretical analyses with clear, quantified data regarding the levels of cooperation between Qatar and China across economic, trade, security, military, and energy domains. Specifically, Chaziza's study (Chaziza, 2020) lacks any quantitative indicators pertaining to the political proximity or divergence between the two nations. In a related vein, researcher in (Havlová, 2020) posits that Qatar-China ties constitute a strategic partnership catalysed by China's Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013. The author contends that the burgeoning economic cooperation between the two countries has concomitantly fostered development in their diplomatic and political relations. Havlová acknowledges certain constraints that may impede Qatar from deepening its engagement with China further, chief among them being Qatar's partnership and strategic alliance with the United States. Despite its importance, Havlová's study (Havlová, 2020) fails to explicitly explain how the diplomatic and political relations between Qatar and China have changed over time due to the Belt and Road Initiative or the growing economic ties between the two nations. The study does not outline how the development of economic relations between Qatar and China has influenced their political and diplomatic closeness. This current study aims to fill this gap by showing how the growth of economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China has affected their political relationship.

Apart from Havlová's study, other research has also explored the relations between Qatar and China. Saidy's (Saidy, 2017) discusses how the political closeness between the two countries is an ongoing process that will continue to strengthen periodically. The researcher attributes this analysis to several factors, including the fact that China has never colonized or invaded an Arab country like Qatar, which helps foster a positive relationship between the two nations. This study aims to address the limitations of previous research, particularly the lack of quantitative analysis regarding the political distance between Qatar and China. By quantifying political phenomena, researchers can make informed and precise evaluations, moving away from subjective assessments. This will enhance our understanding of their future political trajectory and strengthen their relationship in economic, commercial, energy, and political domains.

On the other hand, Wood (Wood, 2017) contends in his study that the overall development in Qatar-China economic relations has, in fact, facilitated a significant expansion in their security and political cooperation. He posits that China requires Qatar due to its position in natural gas markets, while Qatar needs China as the proprietor of the largest economic project at the international level – the Belt and Road Initiative. Given the mutual interests, with Qatar aspiring to benefit from the BRI and China seeking Qatar's contribution to its energy security, their political relations began to develop positively, culminating in the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between the two parties in 2014. Although Wood explored the general progression in Qatar-China political and security relations spurred by their burgeoning economic ties, the researcher neither elucidated the implications of this political relations development nor provided indicators through which one could assess the extent of their political proximity (Wood, 2017). This study primarily aims to address this gap by overcoming the limitations of previous literature. While Wood discussed the overarching advancement in political and

security cooperation between Qatar and China prompted by their economic relation's evolution, he did not explicate what constitutes the development of Qatar - China political relations. Moreover, he did not furnish indicators through which one could evaluate the degree of political convergence between the two nations – a shortcoming this study principally seeks to surmount.

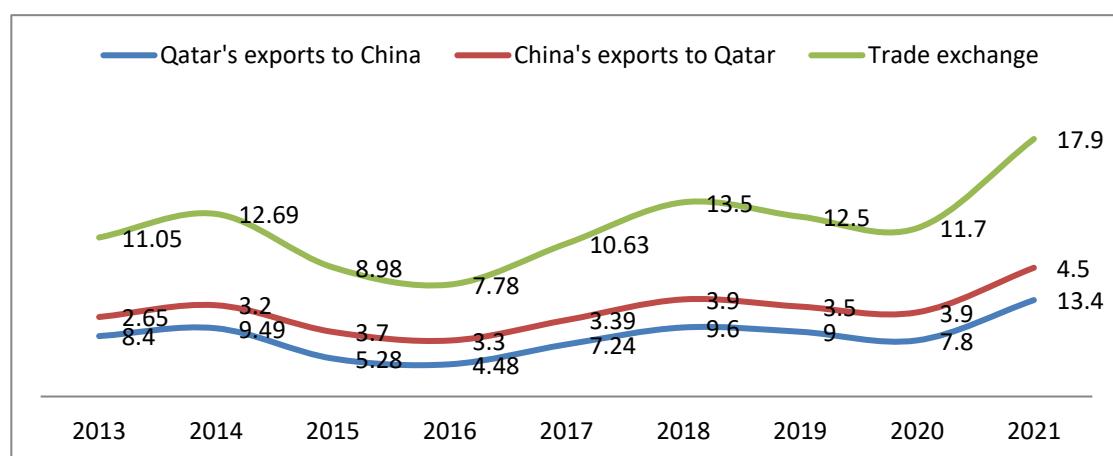
In "The Political Dimensions of Arab-Chinese Relations in Light of the Belt and Road Initiative," Khsabah and Salameh explore how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is reshaping alliances in the Arab world. They argue that the BRI not only strengthens economic ties but also helps Arab countries reduce their dependence on Western powers. By aligning with China, which is viewed as a supporter of Arab positions on key issues, these countries are enhancing their political relations. The study suggests that the growing trade, particularly the increase in Chinese exports to the region, will further solidify these connections, fostering a more robust partnership between Arab states and China based on shared principles of justice (Khsabah & Salameh, 2024).

In the same context, Bani Salameh, in his study "Bahrain's Vision in the New Gulf Order", believes that hedging strategies for small Gulf states, and their efforts through concluding cooperation agreements with emerging countries such as China, have become one of the most important strategies that small Gulf states seek to expand in order to protect their security and interests in light of the general decline of the American role in the Middle East and the Gulf region, which Bani Salama indicates that Bahrain, as a model for small Gulf states, is working on continuously and permanently. (Bani Salameh, 2023). Accordingly, the hedging strategy in this context represents one of the most prominent variables and factors that can work to reduce the political distance between China and the State of Qatar, as it is another Gulf model for small states.

#### **First: The Development of Economic and Energy Cooperation Relations between Qatar and China after 2013**

In an attempt to test the hypothesis that increasing economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China will lead to greater political proximity and reduced political distance, this study first examines the size and trajectory of their economic and energy relations. Analysing trade and energy partnership data (natural gas and oil products), the study finds that China has surpassed the United States as Qatar's primary trading partner in 2021 ("Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority"). Qatar's exports to China amounted to \$13.7 billion in 2021, while its imports from China stood at \$4.5 billion, resulting in a total bilateral trade volume of approximately \$17.9 billion. This represents a significant increase from 2013 – the year China launched the Belt and Road Initiative and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani assumed power in Qatar – when the trade volume between the two countries was \$11 billion.

To ascertain whether these relations exhibit an upward or downward trend and predict their future trajectory until 2030, the study employs time series analysis (Monshipouri & Motameni, 2024). This systematic approach facilitates the forecasting of Qatar-China political distance by the end of the current decade, based on the acceleration or deceleration of their economic and energy cooperation (Sun & Zoubir, 2015).

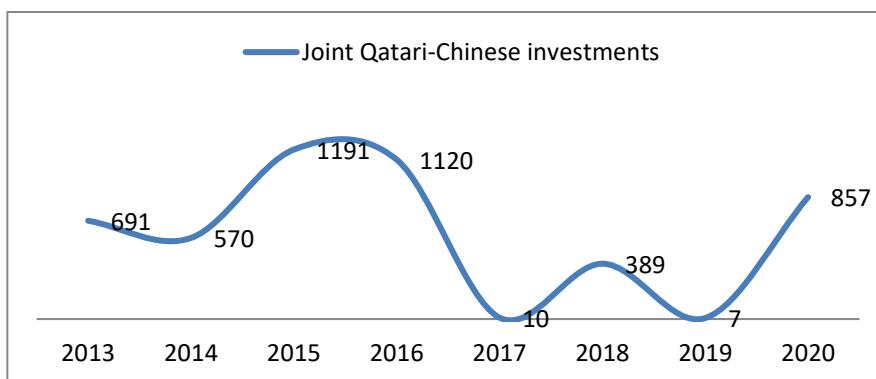


**Figure No. 1: General Qatari - Chinese Trade Exchange during the Period 2013-2021 in Billions of Dollars Annually**

Figure prepared by the researcher based on data: International Trade Statistics (IMF): 2013-2021.

The data illustrates that the overall trend of Qatar-China trade exchange rates is positive, exhibiting a continuous upward trajectory despite fluctuations in certain years, such as the decline observed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on global economies. More significantly, by applying the law of acceleration to the trade exchange indicators, including Qatar's exports to China and China's exports to Qatar, it becomes evident that the acceleration rate of the bilateral trade volume during the period 2013-2021 reached an annual level of \$761 million. Specifically, the acceleration rate of Qatari exports to China annually during the same period amounted to \$555 million, while the acceleration rate of Chinese exports to Qatar stood at an annual volume of \$205 million.

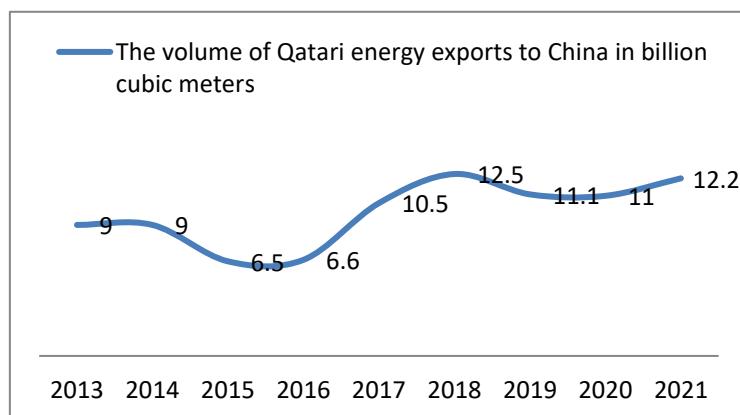
Regarding the level of joint Qatar-China investments, during the period 2013-2021, they totalled \$4.835 billion, with annual inflows exhibiting a general increasing trend despite fluctuations in certain years, as illustrated in Figure 2. Consequently, there are currently 179 Chinese companies registered in the Qatari market and 83 joint ventures between Qatar and China, funded by combined Qatari and Chinese capital (Guangzhou).



**Figure 2: Qatari - Chinese Joint Investments during the period 2013-2023 in Million Dollars Annually**

Figure prepared by the researcher based on: Direct foreign investment.(IMF): 2013-2020 &The American Enterprise Institute, (statistics): 2013-2020.

In 2014, Qatar and China signed an agreement to invest equally in various sectors such as energy, infrastructure, trade, and others, valued at \$10 billion. During the period 2013-2020, the average annual investment flow between the two parties stood at \$20.7 million. Regarding Qatar-China cooperation in the energy sector, specifically natural gas, the general trend has been one of continuous growth since 2013, as depicted in Figure 3. Qatar's natural gas exports to China increased from 9 billion cubic meters in 2013 to 12.2 billion cubic meters in 2021, with an annual acceleration of 355 million cubic meters.



**Figure 3: The Volume of Qatari Natural Gas Exports to China in Billion Cubic Meters Annually**

Figure prepared by the researcher based on data: (BP-statistics) Review of World Energy: 2013-2023

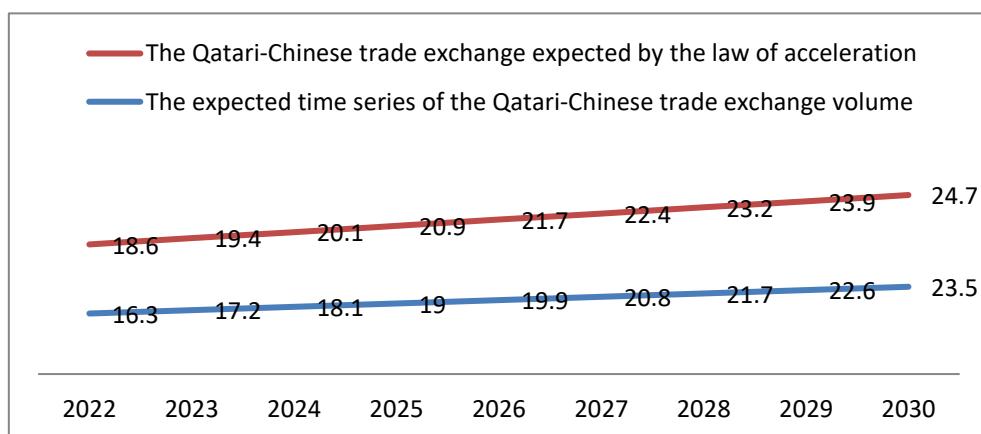
Notably, since 2018, Qatar has become the second-largest exporter of natural gas to China after Australia (Muyu Xu, 2021). Furthermore, China has been the third most significant Asian destination for Qatari natural gas exports since 2020, and its appetite for natural gas is expected to continue rising in the coming years (Calabrese, 2022), potentially making China the most important importer of Qatari natural gas within a few years. The growing economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China can be attributed to several factors, chief among them being China's desire to enhance the prospects for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative, and Qatar's aspiration to maximize its benefits from that initiative.

Much of the literature on Qatar-China relations considers the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a turning point in their cooperation across various economic levels. After launching the BRI, China began institutionalizing its relationship with Qatar, a leading producer and exporter of natural gas, as a party that can support the initiative geographically and economically through Gulf free zones (Fraihat & Leber, 2019). Conversely, Qatar viewed the Chinese project as a factor that could bolster its economic diversification efforts under Vision 2030 and reduce dependence on natural gas export revenues (Chaziza, 2020).

To ensure Vision 2030's success, Qatar has recently shifted its investment focus to emerging Asian markets, rather than developed European and American markets. It established a \$10 billion joint investment fund with China, as emerging markets like China offer vast opportunities for Qatar to invest and diversify its non-energy income sources. Reciprocally, Qatar receives Chinese investments across sectors beyond energy, including technology, trade, and services ("American Enterprise Institute," 2013-2020). On the other hand, China views the Gulf region, especially Qatar, as crucial for the BRI's success, not only because it serves as a gateway to the Middle East but also because the initiative's success hinges on China's energy security, wherein Qatar plays a pivotal role in natural gas (Havlová, 2020). Without ensuring its energy security, China cannot guarantee the economic growth necessary to fund the BRI, which aims to push the international system toward multipolarity.

Additionally, given Qatar's political stability, vast financial reserves in foreign currencies (particularly the US dollar), and rising importance as a stable energy source for China, Beijing began aspiring to leverage Qatar's attributes to contribute to the internationalization of its currency, the renminbi (RMB). This entails increasing the RMB's use compared to the dollar at the global level or, at the very least, augmenting the Middle East's reliance on the RMB relative to the dollar. Consequently, in 2014, China established the first RMB clearing centre in the Middle East in Qatar to facilitate the use of the RMB across borders between China and Qatar, as well as between China and various Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, thereby enhancing investment and trade opportunities (Rakhmat, 2015). Based on the aforementioned discussion and assuming the persistence of the various factors and issues currently underpinning the development of Qatar-China cooperation at the economic (trade and investment) and energy levels, we expect, based on the law of acceleration, general trends, and time series analysis, the following:

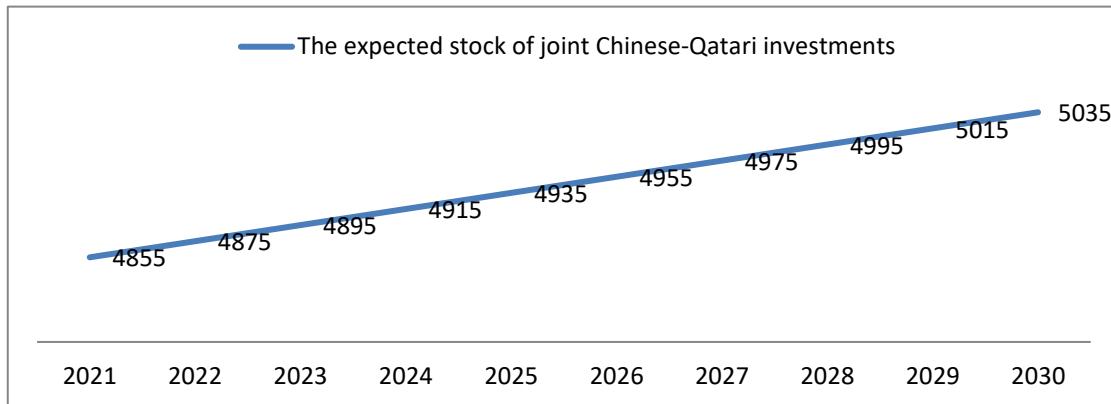
1. The bilateral trade volume between Qatar and China is projected to escalate from \$17.9 billion in 2021 to at least \$23.5 billion in 2030, based on the natural evolution of the time series values of Qatar-China trade exchange during the period 2003-2021. If the trade exchange maintains its general acceleration rate of \$761 million annually, observed during 2013-2021, the trade volume could reach \$26.7 billion in 2030.



**Figure 4: The Expected Qatari - Chinese Trade Exchange during the period 2022-2030 in Billions of Dollars Annually**

The figure was prepared by the researcher by applying the time series methodology to the Qatari - Chinese trade exchange rates during the period 2003-2021 and by applying the general acceleration law to the trade exchange rates during the period 2013-2021.

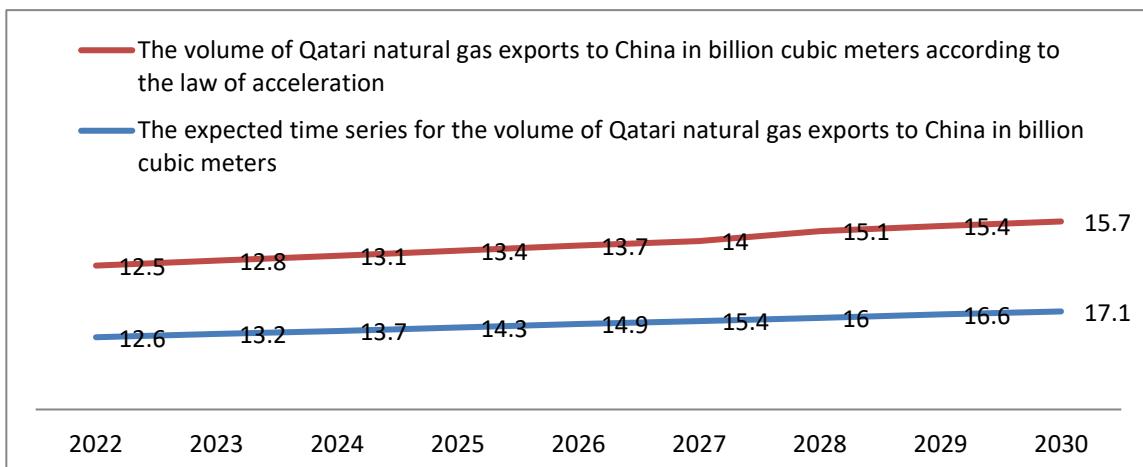
2. The value of joint investments between the two parties should increase from \$4.835 billion in 2020 to \$5.035 billion in 2030, presuming that joint investment flows between Qatar and China sustain their current annual rate of \$20 million.



**Figure 5: The Volume of Qatari - Chinese Investments Expected during the Period 2021-2030 in Billions of Dollars Annually**

The figure was prepared by the researcher based on the general acceleration law applied to the volume of joint Qatari - Chinese investments during the period 2013-2020.

3. China's dependence on Qatari natural gas is expected to rise from 12.2 billion cubic meters in 2021 to 17.1 billion cubic meters annually in 2030, based on the natural progression of the time series values of China's annual dependence on Qatari natural gas. If Qatar's natural gas exports to China maintain the annual acceleration rate of 355 million cubic meters observed during 2013-2021, China's dependence could reach 15.7 billion cubic meters annually by 2030.



**Figure 6: Expected Qatari Natural Gas Exports to China during the Period 2022-2030 in Billion Cubic Meters Annually**

The figure was prepared by the researcher by applying the time series methodology and the general acceleration law on the rate of Qatari natural gas exports to China during the period 2022-2030.

The economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China has witnessed a sustained and rapid expansion since 2013. This burgeoning relationship is underpinned by a confluence of factors and shared interests. Firstly, China's strategic objective of forging deeper ties with Qatar, a major exporter of natural gas, aligns with its energy security imperatives. Secondly, Qatar's aspiration to capitalize on the Belt and Road Initiative presents an opportunity to bolster its Vision 2030

developmental agenda. This symbiotic dynamic is poised to further strengthen the nexus of common interests between the two nations over the next few years, thereby amplifying their interdependence across economic, commercial, investment, and energy domains (Fulton, 2018). By 2030, the intertwined nature of their bilateral relations is expected to intensify, with the volume of mutual dependencies experiencing a marked escalation.

This trajectory underscores the strategic significance of the Qatari - Chinese partnership, which transcends mere economic considerations and extends into the realm of geopolitical influence and regional stability. As such, the evolving dynamics of this relationship warrant close examination from policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders alike, as it holds profound implications for the power dynamics and economic landscape of the broader Middle Eastern region.

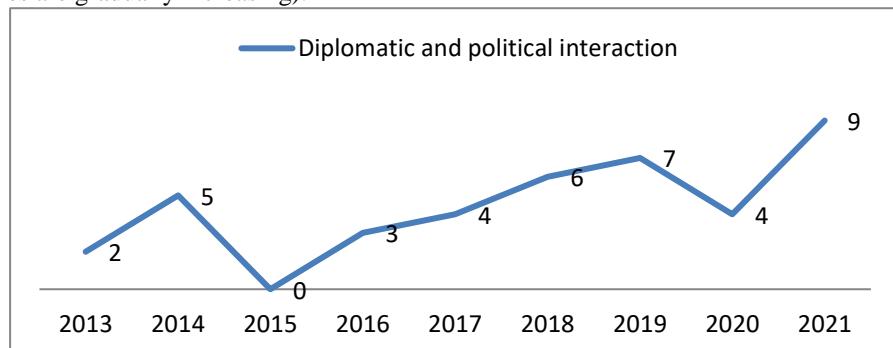
### **Second: The Development of Qatari - Chinese Political Relations after 2013**

After establishing the growing and accelerating development in economic, commercial, investment, and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China, this study aims to investigate the extent to which this general acceleration has impacted the reality of the political distance between the two nations. Specifically, it seeks to answer whether the acceleration in economic and energy cooperation relations has affected the political distance between Qatar and China, and if so, whether the effect has been positive, leading to greater political proximity, or negative or non-existent, with no positive impact on reducing the political distance.

To address these questions and test the hypothesis that deeper economic and energy cooperation relations lead to a shrinking political distance between two parties such as Qatar and China, several indicators must be examined to determine whether the political distance between the two countries has contracted (political proximity), expanded (political divergence), or remained relatively unchanged during the study period between 2013 and 2022 (Husain & Sahide, 2023). According to the literature on political distance between countries, one of the most crucial indicators is the voting patterns on resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly over a given period (al-Mutairi, 2017). The more identical voting patterns increase and conflicting voting patterns decrease, the more it indicates a shrinking political distance (political convergence) between two parties, and vice versa.

Another significant indicator is diplomatic and political interaction, which can be statistically expressed through the number of mutual visits between senior officials, political meetings, and discussions between officials of two parties over a relevant period (Havlová, 2020). An increase in diplomatic and political interaction during a certain timeframe suggests a shrinking political distance (political convergence) between the two parties, while a decline indicates a widening political divergence.

In the first place, by counting the political meetings between senior officials of the State of Qatar and China during the period 2013-2022, and by counting the number of bilateral talks and political meetings between officials of the two countries during the same period, it becomes clear that the general trend of political and diplomatic interaction between the two parties is an interaction that tends to escalate and increase continuously. This indicates that the political distance between the two parties, according to this level of discussion and analysis, is gradually shrinking (that is, the rates of convergence between the two parties are gradually increasing).

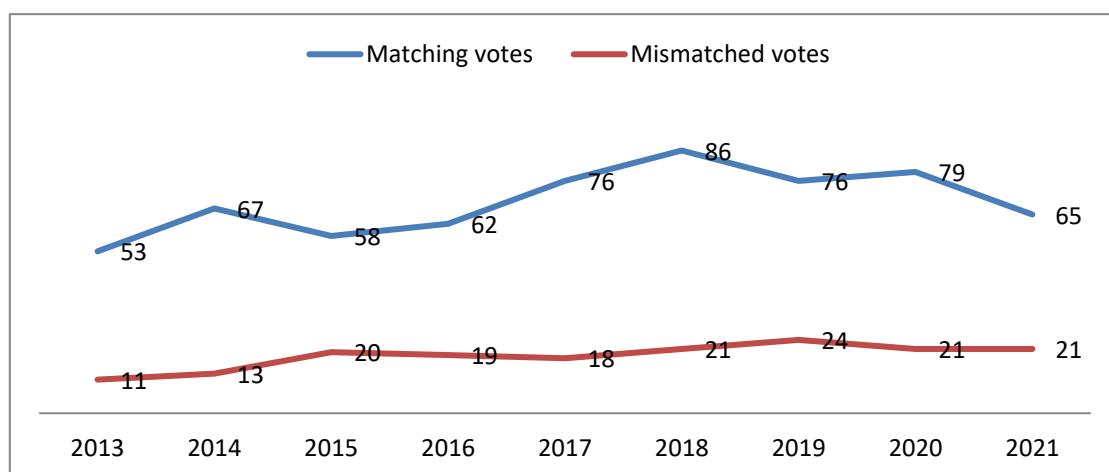


**Figure 7: Diplomatic and Political Interaction between Qatar and China during the period 2013-2023**

The figure was prepared by the researcher based on the data of ("Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs ") during the period 2013-2021.

It is evident from the figure that the rate of acceleration in the reality of diplomatic and political interaction between Qatar and China during the period 2013-2021 amounted to 0.77 diplomatic and political interactions, meaning that the volume of diplomatic and political interaction between Qatar and China is increasing by approximately one interaction annually since 2013. On the other hand, the study assumed that whenever the political distance between the two parties decreased, this could be evidenced by the increasing size of congruence in the Chinese-Qatari voting patterns, which can be demonstrated statistically when studying the Chinese-Qatari voting patterns on the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly during the period 2013-2021.

By analysing 790 vote records on United Nations General Assembly resolutions during the period 2013-2021, we were able to draw the following figure. The figure shows that the rate of convergence in the voting patterns between Qatar and China on United Nations General Assembly resolutions during the period 2013-2021 increased by approximately 0.74 votes per year. This indicates that the political distance between the two countries is shrinking, as evidenced by the increasing similarity in their voting patterns on international resolutions.



**Figure No. 8: Qatari - Chinese Vote Patterns on United Nations General Assembly Resolutions during the period 2013-2021**

Figure prepared by the researcher based on our analysis of voting records in the United Nations that we extracted manually from the database of ("United Nations Digital Library ") during the period 2013-2021.

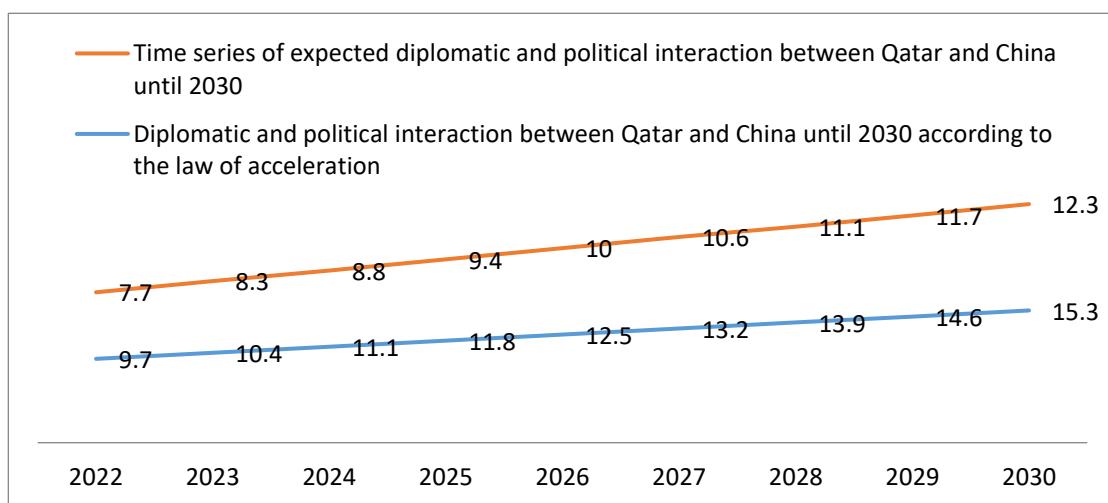
As from the figure above, we can record several very important observations, on top of which are:

1. The number of matching Qatari - Chinese votes on the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly totalled 622, compared to 168 non-identical Qatari - Chinese votes. This means that the average of identical Qatari - Chinese votes was 78.7% during the period 2013-2021, while the percentage of non-identical votes during the same period was 21.3%.
2. Additionally, it is evident from the figure that despite the increase in the number of non-identical votes between the two parties in the general direction during the period 2013-2021, the rate of acceleration in the number of non-identical votes does not exceed 1.1 votes per year. In contrast, the rate of acceleration in favour of identical votes reached, during the same period, a volume of 1.3 identical votes every year, meaning: the number of identical votes increases by 1.3 votes every year steadily.
3. The general trend of the number of non-identical Qatari - Chinese votes is increasing over the study period between 2013-2021. However, the increase in the number of identical Qatari - Chinese votes is also increasing in a more profound way, especially after 2017, which constitutes a new starting point in the rates of development of trade exchange between the two countries. This represents, at the same time, a new starting point in China's growing dependence on Qatar for natural gas supply, as previously indicated by the study in the previous part when it discussed the general direction of the development of Qatari - Chinese economic cooperation relations commercially and energy-wise.

4. It also becomes clear that there is a coincidence between the increasing number of identical votes, the beginning of the Gulf crisis in 2017, and the tendency of the American ally at the beginning of the crisis to support the Emirati-Saudi-Bahraini-Egyptian discourse at the expense of the Qatari discourse, and at least stand on the side of neutrality and urge the parties to the crisis to the need for calm. Former US President Donald Trump accused the Qatari side of supporting and financing terrorism (al-Nuaimi & Bishara), which constituted a kind of political shock for Qatar from the American ally, including what motivated it to discuss the need for proximity with other major countries such as China to be a possible international support in times of crises and tensions.

Based on the discussion above and assuming the survival and continued development of indicators of political proximity between Qatar and China, we can expect, based on the law of acceleration and the approach of general trends and time series, the following:

1. The momentum of political and diplomatic interaction between Qatar and China is expected to develop from around 9 interactions in 2021 to up to 12 interactions annually by 2030 as a natural result of the evolution of the time series values of Qatari - Chinese political interactions during the period 2013-2021. The volume of interaction is projected to reach approximately 15 interactions by 2030.



**Figure 9: Diplomatic and Political Interaction between Qatar and China Expected until 2030**

The figure was prepared by the researcher by applying the time series methodology and the general acceleration law on the rate of Qatari - Chinese diplomatic and political interaction during the period 2013-2021.

2. As a consequence of the anticipated growth in the indicators of political interaction between Qatar and China during the coming years, we expect the percentage of symmetry in voting patterns between the two countries to increase at the expense of a decrease in the percentage of conflicting voting patterns. The increasing momentum of diplomatic and political interaction is likely to contribute to bringing the divergent considerations between the two parties closer together, which may result in greater similarity in voting patterns, as both sides strive to deepen their cooperative ties in order to preserve their common interests.

3. These projections are based on the observed trends and patterns in the data from 2013 to 2022, and they suggest a continued trajectory of growing political convergence between Qatar and China in the coming years, driven by the deepening economic, commercial, investment, and energy cooperation between the two nations.

## Results

1. With the increasing momentum and development of economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China, the rate of political proximity between them is expected to increase by the end of the current decade. This will consolidate the size and depth of the strategic partnership between the two parties, especially since the mutual need for each other is constantly increasing, as demonstrated in the body of this study.

2. The study concludes that the growing development in economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China may contribute to the creation of qualitative and advanced military cooperation relations between the two countries in the coming years. This is similar to how the growing and developing economic and energy cooperation relations have contributed to reducing the political distance and enhancing the rates of political convergence between Qatar and China.

3. The study expects that the coming years will witness the emergence of prerequisites that contribute to the development of Qatari - Chinese relations from the level of strategic partnership to the level of strategic alliance. This could occur if the development of economic and energy relations leads to the emergence of military cooperation relations in the field of Chinese arms sales to Qatar, the localization of weapons industries in Qatar with Chinese assistance, and the establishment of military cooperation relations at the level of communications, cooperation in combating terrorism, and joint military exercises.

In summary, the study predicts that the deepening economic and energy ties between Qatar and China will further strengthen their political

proximity, potentially leading to enhanced strategic partnership and paving the way for the development of military cooperation and, possibly, a strategic alliance in the future.

## Conclusion

The study commenced with a general and main question: Did the growth of Qatari - Chinese relations in the areas of general economic cooperation and in the fields of energy cooperation after 2013 lead to a reduction in the political distance between the two parties? As an answer to that question, the study hypothesized that with the general acceleration of economic and energy cooperation between Qatar and China after 2013, following China's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the political proximity between the two parties began to increase, and the political distance between them started to gradually shrink.

After analysing the dimensions of the economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China, the study found acceleration in the development of these relations. The study revealed that the general development and acceleration in the economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China contributed to reducing the political distance between the two sides, thereby deepening their political proximity. The symmetry in voting patterns on the resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly increased between Qatar and China after 2013, in the wake of their growing economic and energy cooperation relations. Simultaneously, the momentum of political and diplomatic interaction between the two parties significantly increased after 2013.

Thus, the study answered its main question and proved the validity of its hypothesis: the more economic and energy cooperation relations between Qatar and China increased, the more it led to a reduction in the political distance between the two sides, serving the interests of both parties in developing these cooperation relations. The increase in economic and energy cooperation relations contributed to expanding the scope of common interests between Qatar and China at the expense of contradictory interests. The increase in common interests at the expense of contradictory interests, in turn, contributed to advancing the momentum of political proximity between Qatar and China.

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