

China in the Middle East: Expanding Political Clout and Maritime Space

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Despite being a relatively new entrant in the Middle East, China, with its ambitious leadership and ever-expanding range of interests, (not least amongst which remains the security of its energy supplies from the region), has now begun to pay consistent attention to this transcontinental area.

This attention is currently being represented through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and is being sold heavily as a mutually beneficial arrangement under which China supports infrastructure development in the Middle East and contributes to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, while sourcing a large volume of its energy supplies from the region in return. However, China's involvement in this part of the world is considerably more complex than the numbers from such economic engagements let on.

This essay focuses on two key aspects of Chinese activity in the Middle East — the political, and the maritime, and also occasionally touches upon the intersection between these two domains. From a political point of view, China's objective is to undermine or dilute the US influence by offering itself as an alternative fulcrum around which the regimes of the region can gather. At the same time, China has enough resources and diplomatic skill to ensure that the countries of the region toe the line on a number of issues that Beijing deems sensitive. Meanwhile, it also appears that many of China's political and economic investments in the Middle East are strongly correlated to its maritime objectives of extended access and control.

Driving New Politics

Alongside its effort at canvassing support from the Middle East via economic pathways, China has also employed its traditional methods of propaganda and rhetoric to paint itself as a benign and friendly power in the region. For instance, in January 2016, Beijing issued an ‘Arab Policy Paper’, where it tried to portray itself as a friend of Arab interests via several tropes – of relations dating to ‘ancient times’, ‘mutual benefit and win-win results’ and China’s ‘[firm support] for ‘Arab countries’ struggle to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity... and combat external interference and aggression’.ⁱ Naturally, China is not the only power that has supported these political goals and interests – India has done so as well – but China is the only nation that currently possesses both, the political and economic wherewithal to actually follow through on some of these claims.

Thus, in sharp contrast to the American position, which leans towards Israel, (and has leaned further still on the question of Jerusalem under Donald Trump), Beijing, through this policy, declared its support for an independent Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and has been consistent in labelling the Golan Heights as Syrian territory under Israeli occupation.ⁱⁱ These declarations have come despite an equally thriving China-Israel relationship that is based on, economic, and technology-based exchanges.ⁱⁱⁱ

China has also retained a sharp focus and emphasis on its own political interests. The policy paper, for instance, notes both Arab support for China ‘on the Taiwan question’, as well as promotes the BRI.^{iv} Meanwhile, there has been a significant shift towards nationalism (as opposed to religion), as the new tenet of Saudi foreign policy under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman,^v and China has tried to offer its support for this narrative in which Saudi actions are seen as an extension of its national interests, rather than those arising out of a given religious identity.

Referring to Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman’s Asia trip in February 2019, a *Global Times* op-ed argued that Saudi Arabia was ‘trying to achieve the multiple goals of diversifying its allies, economy and markets by “looking and turning to the east” and even “traveling to the east”.’^{vi} At the same time, the article also underlines the primacy of China’s own interests in two ways. First, it suggested that the Saudis were moving away from their reliance on the Americans and that it was the ‘east’ that now represented opportunity for the Saudis. Next, however, the author appeared to hint that

in the ‘east’ Pakistan and India did not really count – the two countries, at the time of the Prince’s visit, had been locked in their post-Pulwama tensions – and all news of the Saudis attempting to de-escalate tensions between the two was dismissed saying, ‘the feud between India and Pakistan is too deep to be easily settled by Saudi Arabia’s mediation’.^{vii}

In other words, the ‘east’ was represented by China, the only other pole besides the US, which could possibly take on the role of mediation between India and Pakistan, owing to its higher stature compared to that of either country, or that of the Saudi kingdom. These points were justified with a reference to the economic reality that China accounted for 15% of Saudi’s crude oil exports while India accounted for only about half this.^{viii} In fact, recent shifts in energy trade patterns in the region show that the dependence of the Gulf States on oil and gas exports to China has increased, while China itself has diversified its imports reducing its dependence on the region.^{ix}

Similarly with Turkey, while China has not held back in its criticism whenever the Turks have raised the Uyghur issue, it has also tried to offer scope for the Turks to come around. Thus, an editorial in the *Global Times* on the one hand accused Turkey of “playing tricks with China” and said that “What’s most unacceptable is that Turkey was adding fuel to the Xinjiang question”, but on the other hand, also suggested that “There is no contradiction between the two countries that can’t be resolved” and that “China needs the pragmatic vision that accords with China’s strength and mission”.^x

In fact, China has confidently articulated its position on its ongoing internment of possibly up to a million of its Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.^{xi} In a 2018 white paper titled, “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang”, published by the State Council Information Office, China defended itself on the Uyghur issue declaring that its “government is committed to protecting its citizens” freedom of religious belief while respecting and protecting religious cultures” and offered examples of how the State had funded translations, publication and distribution of religious texts, and protected religious heritage.^{xii} These claims are in sharp contrast to its actual practice.^{xiii}

Like economic engagement, China’s propaganda too, has no doubt, helped it ensure governments in the Middle East kept their silence on the Uyghur issue.^{xiv} The United Arab Emirates even awarded the Zayed Medal to Xi Jinping during the latter’s visit to the country in July 2018.^{xv} And despite Saudi Arabia’s identity as a staunch

defender of Islam, its Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman did not raise the subject (at least not publicly) during his visit to China at the end of February 2019.^{xvi} China is simply too important an economic player and/or supplier of military equipment for countries in the region to go out of their way to worry about the Uyghurs.

However, China's apparent political neutrality in the Middle East also means that it, much like India, has the hard job of balancing Saudi Arabia and Iran; the bigger China grows in the region as a player, the harder this act will be. Further, Beijing will need both, Saudi help, as well as Iranian cooperation if it is to also protect its interests in Pakistan, especially the Gwadar port in Balochistan that borders and sits astride the Arabian Sea. While Chinese media has reported approvingly of Saudi investments in Gwadar, (including a US\$10 billion refinery^{xvii}), and in Pakistan in general,^{xviii} Iran's sensitivities cannot be far from its mind. It has been suggested that Iranian silence over a March 2019 US-Oman agreement, which allows American military access to Omani ports and airports, including Duqm, is a sign of where Teheran stands on the US Indo-Pacific strategy against the Chinese.^{xix}

Images of China in the Middle East have, in fact, tended towards neutral or indifferent rather than favourable and it was not until the launch of the BRI that views about China and Xi Jinping began to look up.^{xx} China also faces the dilemma over time of becoming a bigger source of attention and negative views despite its efforts – on the Uyghur issue, for example – as it becomes more and more involved in the region. In this respect, China's experience might soon begin to mirror the American one of being both courted by the ruling regimes and despised or suspected on the street or sometimes by both a government and its public as in Iran.^{xxi}

The Maritime Sphere

For the moment, China's economic resources and its work in the political sphere in the Middle East allows it to be increasingly unapologetic about its need to show military/maritime presence in the region. China had a modest beginning to its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden in December 2008; at the end of a decade, the PLA Navy (PLAN) had used a 100 ships and over 26,000 personnel in 31 taskforces to escort more than 6,600 Chinese and foreign ships. Alongside the evacuation of both, Chinese and foreign civilians from conflicts in Libya and Yemen, China has also curiously had submarines accompany some of these taskforces, driving home, in no uncertain terms,

how the PLAN has used, and continues to use its deployments in the Gulf of Aden as a service-wide learning exercise.^{xxii} The fact that none of the countries in the Middle East have been bothered by China's somewhat larger, (or more advanced than necessary), naval assets being deployed on anti-piracy missions, speaks volumes of the success of China's political and diplomatic work.

It should also not come as any surprise that China has chosen the location of many of its investments in the Middle East region with an eye to maritime access and observation points. For example, in Egypt, China's Dongfang Electric and Shanghai Electric are building a 6,000MW clean coal-fired power plant in Hamrawein while Sinohydro has completed a feasibility study for a 2,400MW hydropower project in Mt Ataka in Suez province.^{xxiii} Hamrawein is a port city on the Red Sea, and Mt. Ataka itself is in the southern Sinai Peninsula, not far from the Egyptian tourist destination and naval base of Sharm El Sheikh. Chinese developers are also involved in Egypt's Suez Canal Economic Zone in Ain Sokhna district that lies on the Gulf of Suez.^{xxiv}

On the opposite coast of the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia, the Chinese are even engaged in an archaeological dig in the old Al Serrian port. The five-year project involving China's National Center of Underwater Cultural Heritage,^{xxv} has apparently discovered Chinese porcelain dating back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279) as well as to subsequent Chinese dynasties.^{xxvi} Activities such as these provide greater ballast to China's attempts to portray its Maritime Silk Road under the BRI as the natural inheritor and a benign continuation of older trade routes. It might be pointed out here that India's own Project Mausam launched in 2014 by the Ministry of Culture with the Archaeological Society of India as its nodal agency also includes among its goals "[r]eviving lost linkages with nations"^{xxvii} and counts Saudi Arabia (among others in the Middle East) as one of the target countries. However, there is little information to be found about any concrete action and nor do the budget figures suggest any possibilities of large-scale activities.^{xxviii}

China, meanwhile, also exercises a combination of economic and political influence all along the Red Sea coast in Sudan^{xxix} and Eritrea^{xxx}, all the way down to Djibouti, where it opened its first overseas military base – ostensibly just a “logistics center”^{xxxi} - in mid-2017. In the run-up to the construction of the base, China had softened up Djibouti with substantial economic infrastructure development projects,^{xxxii} and the latter has consistently dismissed US concerns about Chinese activity in the country.^{xxxiii} Beijing even offered to mediate a border dispute between Djibouti and

Eritrea in 2017. While a former Chinese diplomat denied any connection between the offer for mediation and the military base in Djibouti, an African studies scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argued, “Wherever Chinese interests go, means and tools to protect them should follow”.^{xxxiv}

The growing ability of Chinese companies to win bids for managing terminals in foreign ports has even created tensions in the US-Israeli relationship. China’s Shanghai International Ports Group signed a deal with Israel’s Ports Authority to operate a new terminal in Haifa in 2015, with the 25-year agreement coming into force in 2021. The US fears that this has security implications for its Sixth Fleet that uses Haifa as one of its bases, while sections within the Israeli strategic community fear negative consequences for their own naval base that is located across from the new terminal as well.^{xxxv} The Haifa port terminal is just one of a larger basket of Chinese infrastructure projects in Israel that have riled relations between Tel Aviv and Washington DC.^{xxxvi}

China has also managed to establish a degree of presence in two ports in the Middle East where India has, in recent years, tried to build up stakes – Chabahar in Iran, and Duqm in the Sultanate of Oman.

Following Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi’s 2016 visit to Iran during which the Chabahar contract was finalized, China’s *Global Times* commentary suggested that there was “no reason for jealousy in China”^{xxxvii} and that “Iran may not always align itself with India’s geostrategic goals” given that “China is also crucial to Tehran’s core interests... [and] Iran never publicly articulated its opposition to the Sino-Pakistani project in Gwadar”.^{xxxviii} Indeed, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif invited both Pakistan and China to participate in further developing Chabahar in March 2018. The Iranian minister even called the Chinese-funded Gwadar port (in Pakistan’s Balochistan province) and Chabahar, (about 170kms away), “sister ports” that could both benefit from greater connectivity.^{xxxix} This, of course, would have been music to Beijing’s ears. There is also the curious case of Indian Ports Global, (a joint venture of two Indian public sector enterprises – Jawaharlal Nehru Port, Mumbai and Kandla Port), which is responsible for developing the Chabahar port, awarding a contract for supplying cranes to a Chinese entity ZPMC, the world’s top supplier, which had been banned from supplying to Indian ports by New Delhi.^{xl}

Meanwhile, in Oman, India had gained access under the terms of a February 2018 MoU on military cooperation to “certain facilities at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (Sea Port, Dry Dock and Air Port) by Indian armed forces”.^{xli} However, China is not an insignificant presence in Duqm either having been engaged since 2016 in setting up a nearly US\$10 billion industrial park in the SEZ under the BRI framework. Besides petrochemicals and e-commerce, Chinese enterprises in Duqm will also invest in tourism and desalination plants.^{xlii} Meanwhile, India had only begun considering participation in the Duqm SEZ as of early 2018.^{xliii}

Image-building

China’s military diplomacy in the Middle East in the form of high-level military delegation visits and port calls by its naval vessels has kept up a steady pace since it began to participate in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.^{xliv} Chinese military delegations to the Middle East push not just China’s political line, but also the sales of its military equipment. For instance, Chinese Defence Minister Gen. Wei Fenghe was in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia at the end of March 2019 plugging the BRI,^{xlv} while Chinese media also offered commentary about how Chinese weapons were being increasingly used by the Saudis.^{xlvi}

In addition to the frequent port calls during or after completion of the anti-piracy escort duties, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has also had its top officials visit or host important countries in the region. During his long tenure as PLAN Commander, Adm. Wu Shengli visited Israel in December 2010 and again six months later in June 2011, Saudi Arabia in October 2015, and Egypt in May 2016. Adm. Wu also hosted the Omani navy chief in Beijing in January 2013, the Turkish navy commander in July 2014, and his Iranian and Saudi counterparts in October 2014 and October 2015 respectively.^{xlvii}

The seriousness with which the Chinese view maritime access as well as operations in the Middle East is also evident from the reportage of its state-run media. For instance, Djibouti is described as “an important choke-point that links the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden”, offering some insight into why the Chinese found it necessary to set up a military facility there. While anti-piracy operations are rhetorically at least posited as an initiative for the global good and should not normally involve the use of high-end warship capability, for the Chinese, their deployments to the Gulf of Aden are about showcasing and testing both, advanced war fighting assets, as well as indigenous capability. Consider

China's latest deployment to the Gulf of Aden, (their 32nd), and the way that it was described in the Chinese press. The guided missile destroyer Xi'an, the missile frigate Anyang were participating for the first time – the Xi'an is an indigenously developed destroyer of the Type-052C class while the Anyang too is domestically developed. In both instances, the report made it a point to highlight the destroyer's "over-the-horizon strike capability at sea" and the frigate's capability "of attacking surface ships and submarines" and "strong long-range alert and air defense capabilities".^{xlvi}

This latter description of combat capability can also be viewed as a not-so-subtle effort in building up the image of China's military in the region. Even as China claims its Djibouti base "has not been established for China's strategic deployment of military forces, but for implementing the country's escorting, peace-keeping and humanitarian aid missions in Africa and West Asia", the same *Xinhua* commentary also states that the base "should not be underestimated, nor should it be exaggerated".^{xlix} The stress on other countries not underestimating China is worth highlighting here, even as it faces allegations of hidden intentions behind its investments and military activities in the region.

Meanwhile, the problems of instability in the Middle East, including those of piracy, are useful to promote a case for China's continued maritime presence in the region, as well as a sense of its importance both abroad, and at home. It is interesting that two recent, extremely successful Chinese movies, *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* – released in 2017 and 2018 respectively – both had plotlines about instability in the Middle East and of Chinese rescue operations supported by the PLAN.

Conclusion

China's growing influence in the Middle East owes entirely to its economic heft backed by diplomacy and clear political messaging. Beijing is increasingly attractive and useful to several regimes in the region – from Iran to Saudi Arabia to Sudan – as a bulwark against US pressure. To conclude by way of a few thoughts for India, it should be clear against this background that New Delhi has its work cut out for it. While its country has certainly upped its game in the Middle East since the second National Democratic Alliance government took office in New Delhi in 2014, there remains much to be done if India is to regain the historical centrality in the politics, security, cultural and economic flows of the region that it enjoyed under the British Raj. However, India's many inconsistencies and

slow pace in the region – “institutional incompetence”, “internal incoherence”, and “rather porous track record in delivering promises” as one Chinese op-ed put it¹ – signify not just more money in the bank for China, but also create a case for the countries of the region to agree to an even greater role for Beijing.

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