

Strategic Analysis Paper

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China in the Middle East: The Overarching Imperatives

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Key Points

- China has decided to actively engage with the Middle East for a variety of reasons.
- These range from its desire to securitise its energy imports and protect its manufactured exports to its attempts to increase its influence in the international system.
- It has, therefore, created an Arab Policy Paper, which sets out some of its goals in the region.
- Beijing also seeks to act as a peace-maker and possible arbiter in the Middle East.

Summary

Reflecting Deng Xiao Ping's philosophy of not taking a leading role, China did not seek to project itself on the world stage. That philosophy was overturned by current Chinese President, Xi Jinping, who, it would appear, was sufficiently confident in China's economic and military prowess to begin to actively engage with various regions in order to bring about his ultimate goal: the rejuvenation of China and its objective of taking its place close to, if not at, the very top of the international system. It is hardly surprising, then, that China turned its attention almost immediately to the Middle East.

Analysis

President Xi undertook a tour of the Middle East in January 2016, at a time when the usually restive region was more turbulent than usual. Just before his tour, Saudi Arabia had executed a leader, Sheik Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, of the country's minority Shi'ite community. This led to strenuous protestations from the Shi'ite leaders of Iran, the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the further deterioration of already-poor relations between several Sunni-majority Islamic countries, led by Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

That deterioration led to a change of tour plans for Xi. His planned tour of the Middle East, until that time, was to visit Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all Sunni-majority countries. A visit to Iran was planned to take place later that year. Visiting the three Sunni-majority countries, however, would now give the impression that Beijing placed its ties with the Sunni countries above those with Shi'a-majorities. Although Beijing had been at pains to point out that it sought to hold to a strictly-neutral Middle Eastern policy, it could ill afford to give the impression that it valued its relations with Sunni states above those with Shi'a ones.

Putting off the visit to the region until later was not an option, however, since it had already been postponed once before when, in 2015, a Saudi-led coalition of Sunni-majority states initiated a military campaign against the Yemeni Houthi insurgents, who were supported by Iran in overthrowing the Saudi-leaning president. No matter that this action was predicated upon pure geopolitical necessity – Riyadh did not wish to have Iranian-backed governments to its north in Iraq and, very slightly further afield in Syria, a belligerent Iran just off its north-eastern coast, and now a southern front from which Iran sought to test Saudi resolve – the fact that the various factions involved in these areas were divided along sectarian lines indicated that Beijing had to walk a careful path so as not to jeopardise its developing Middle East policy and to prevent further regional conflagration.

Postponing the visit to the Middle East, in Beijing's perception, also could give the impression to regional leaders that China was unable to take regional issues in its stride despite its tacit claims to major power status. Added to that was the issue of timing: at a time when the United States was reducing its dependence on Middle Eastern energy supplies, the Chinese leadership believed that Washington was losing its interest in the region. It made sense, therefore, for Beijing to use the opportunity to supplant the US in an important region of the world. The sense of urgency was compounded by Russia's participation in the Syrian Civil War. By supporting the Assad regime, no matter that it did so for purely pragmatic reasons, Russia has given the impression that it sides with the Shi'a faction. Washington's deteriorating relationships with many Arab states and its confrontational one with Iran ensures it can no longer play any kind of peace-making role in the region. This adds to China's desire to engage with the region and play an ostensibly neutral peace-making role there.

Other issues also compelled Mr Xi to visit the Middle East. China's harsh treatment of its Muslim-majority Uighur and Hui communities in its western Xinjiang province had received wide-spread coverage internationally. By most independent accounts, China is attacking the very fundamentals of Islam in its persecution of its Muslim minorities. China sought to

mitigate any fall-out from that coverage in Muslim-majority countries partly by having President Xi visit the region to explain Beijing's perspective of the issue. A visit to major energy exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran could also pre-empt potential political fall-out from the Uighur situation and, furthermore, allow China to diversify its sources of energy imports, the same energy on which China depends to keep its economy growing, which enables it, in turn, to advance its claims to great power status. Mr Xi could not postpone his visit to the Middle East for one other reason. Having visited other regions of the world to develop China's relationships with those, he did not wish to give the impression that Beijing was neglecting this one. He wished, furthermore, to put his own mark on China's geopolitical evolution and announce the end of Deng's "hide your light under a bushel" policy. China was ready to engage the Middle East.

The stage was set, Mr Xi's tour was planned and Beijing published its [Arab Policy Paper](#) on 13 January 2016. Harkening back to ancient times and setting the scene for the present, the paper refers to 'the land and maritime Silk Roads [that] already linked the Chinese and Arab nations' over two thousand years ago. It also notes that between 1956 and 1990, China established diplomatic relations with all 22 Arab countries and, in order to demonstrate China's political ties to the region, adds that Beijing

firmly supports Arab national liberation movement [sic], firmly supports Arab countries' struggle to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity, pursue and safeguard national interests, and combat external interference and aggression, and firmly supports Arab countries' cause of developing the national economy and building up the countries.

To demonstrate that the relationship is not purely one-way, the paper goes on to state that China remains grateful that 'Arab countries have given China strong support in restoring its lawful seat at the United Nations and on issues like the Taiwan question.'

The paper comprises five parts that fall under the following headings respectively: Deepen China-Arab Strategic Co-operative Relations of Comprehensive Co-operation and Common Development; China's Arab Policy; Strengthen China-Arab Co-operation in an All-around Manner; China-Arab States Co-operation Forum and Its Follow-up Actions; and Relations Between China and Arab Regional Organisations.

Comparing itself to the Arab states in the first part, China notes that both itself and the Arab states are 'developing countries' that together account for around 16 per cent of the world's territory, 25 per cent of its population and 12.5 per cent of its economy. They need to, consequently,

collaborate with each other more closely, and learn from each other along the road of development, strengthen co-operation in seeking common development and promoting regional peace, and echo each other in building a new type of international relations, so as to safeguard state sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and to promote stability, economic development and well-being of [their] peoples.

China promises, therefore, to

continue to carry forward China-Arab traditional friendship, enrich and deepen our all-round, multi-layer, wide-ranging co-operation, promote sustainable and sound development of our strategic co-operative relations featuring all-round co-operation and common development, and safeguard peace, stability and development of the region and the world at large.

China places itself squarely on the Arab side and against Israel in the second part of its paper. Stating that it

upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, namely, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

Beijing states explicitly that it

supports the Middle East peace process and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine with full sovereignty, based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. China supports the Arab League and its member states' efforts to this end. We adhere to [a] political solution to regional hot spot issues, and support the establishment of a nuclear weapon-free and WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

It promises to

have pragmatic cooperation in the principle of mutual benefit and win-win results with Arab states. In particular, in the process of jointly pursuing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, China is willing to coordinate development strategies with Arab states, put into play each other's advantages and potentials, promote international production capacity cooperation and enhance cooperation in the fields of infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear power, space satellite, new energy, agriculture and finance, so as to achieve common progress and development and benefit our two peoples. China is willing to cooperate with Arab states to promote the new type of cooperation mechanism featuring openness and [reciprocity], mutual benefit and win-win results.

China, therefore, is

willing to work with Arab states to contribute to diversified development and mutual learning among world civilisations ...[to]... enhance people-to-people exchanges, strengthen co-operation in such areas as science, education, culture, health, radio, film and television, deepen understanding and friendship between the two peoples, promote mutual learning and integration between the two cultures, build a communication bridge

between the two peoples, and jointly contribute to the progress of human civilisation.

The third part of the paper, entitled 'Strengthen China-Arab Co-operation in an All-around Manner', nominates how that co-operation is to take place. It is divided into five sub-headings, viz. Political Co-operation, Investment and Trade Co-operation, Social Development, Culture and People-to-people Exchanges, and Co-operation in the Field of Peace and Security. In order to enhance political co-operation, it nominates high-level exchanges, Intergovernmental Consultation and Co-operation Mechanisms, Exchanges between Legislatures, Political Parties and Local Governments, and Co-operation on International Affairs and co-operation on the Taiwan issue. To increase investment and trade co-operation it unsurprisingly nominates the Belt and Road Initiative and follows that with Co-operation on Production Capacity, Investment Co-operation, Trade, Energy Co-operation, Infrastructure Construction, Co-operation in Space, Civilian Nuclear Co-operation, Financial Co-operation and the Development of Economic and Trade Co-operation Mechanisms and Platforms. In order to enhance social development, the paper lists Co-operation in Health Care, Education and Human Resources Development, Co-operation on Science and Technology, Agricultural Co-operation and Co-operation on Addressing Climate Change, Environmental Protection and Forestry. The fourth sub-heading, 'Culture and People-to-people Exchanges' lists the following mechanisms: Exchanges Among Civilisations and [Religions], Co-operation on Culture, Broadcasting, Film, Television, Press, Publication and Think Tanks, Exchanges Between Non-governmental Organisations, Youth and Women, and Co-operation on Tourism. The final sub-heading, 'Co-operation in the Field of Peace and Security', calls for co-operation on regional security issues, Military Co-operation, co-operation on counter-terrorism, Consular, Immigration, Judicial and Police Co-operation, and co-operation on non-traditional security issues.

In the fourth part of the paper, entitled 'China-Arab States Co-operation Forum and Its Follow-up Actions', China promises to

remain committed to the development of China-Arab States Co-operation Forum, and together with the Arab countries, further enrich China-Arab co-operation, make innovative efforts on cooperation models and upgrade the level of cooperation, put into play the leading role of the ministerial meeting, and constantly enrich and improvement [sic] co-operation mechanisms in trade, culture, media, non-governmental exchanges and other fields, so as to promote China-Arab exchanges and co-operation across the board.

In the fifth and final part of the paper, China notes that it

attaches great importance to its relations with the Arab League, and respects the efforts by the Arab League in maintaining regional peace and stability and promoting regional development. We support a bigger role of the Arab League in other regional and international affairs. China is willing to continue to strengthen consultation and cooperation with the Arab League in various fields.

In keeping with its new policy of engaging with the Middle East, China lost little time in playing an active part in the Syrian War. It invited the Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Walid Mohi Edine al Muallem, and the leader of the opposition Syrian National Coalition to high-level meetings in Beijing to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Following the ransacking of the Saudi embassy in Tehran, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Ming visited Tehran and Riyadh in order to placate both sides. Mr Xi then replaced his trip to the UAE with one to Iran. In order to compensate Riyadh, however, he declared China's support for the Yemeni government, which Riyadh also supports.

The desire to engage actively in the Middle East has very materialistic motivations, despite the noble sentiments expressed in the Arab Policy Paper. Beijing's ability to grow its economy is almost entirely predicated upon its energy imports, a large proportion of which is sourced from the Middle East. It makes sense for China, then, to ensure the stability of its Middle Eastern imports. It cannot afford to stand back while other countries such as Russia and the US take actions in that region that could affect China negatively. As an all-but-declared major power, moreover, China is clearly behaving as one, seeking to influence other regions. By engaging with the Middle East, therefore, China hopes to achieve several objectives at once.

There is yet another major motivator for China's engagement with the region. Mr Xi's legacy achievement, the Belt Road Initiative, passes through that region. He can ill afford to see China's energy imports from and manufactured exports to and through the Middle East placed at risk due to conflict. A Chinese peace-making role in the region could mitigate much of that risk. From that perspective, its western Xinjiang region, if controlled fully, could act as a land port for China's exports to Central Asia and beyond, just as its recent efforts to bring Iran into the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation could give Beijing a little bit more influence over Tehran, thus enabling China to better dissuade Iran from taking any action that could endanger China's trade with the Middle East.

In short, China has many reasons to engage with the Middle East, most being pragmatic. Whether it can actually achieve those objectives in the region will be examined in forthcoming analyses.

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