



China's New Position on the Middle East

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: China has taken several actions relating to the Middle East since the beginning of 2016 that suggest a new approach to the region. The Chinese president visited the Middle East, a new law was passed permitting China to be involved in military action beyond its own borders, and a new Chinese forum was established to promote peace in the region. These actions represent a departure from the traditional Chinese stance of “non-interference” and reflect a change in China’s perception of the region.

In January of this year, shortly before the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Middle East, Saudi Arabia executed the Shiite cleric Nimr Baqr al-Nimr for “attempting to involve foreign powers in the affairs of the Kingdom, disobedience to the laws of the Kingdom, and possession of a weapon.” Iran, which sees itself as the leading Shiite power and is an old rival of Saudi Arabia, bitterly denounced the execution. The ever-present tension between the two states was heightened even further, endangering the Chinese visit.

This was not the first time a planned visit to the Middle East by the Chinese president had been jeopardized ahead of time. Indeed, the visit was supposed to have taken place in the spring of 2015, but it was canceled and rescheduled due to the fighting in Yemen between Saudi Arabia and Iran’s Shiite protégés, the Houthis.

This year, despite the ongoing Shia-Sunni tensions, the trip went ahead, with President Xi visiting Tehran, Riyadh, and Cairo. Since assuming the presidency three years ago, Xi had visited almost every area of the globe apart from the Middle East. A second cancelation might have been seen as

expressing a lack of respect for the region, and might have hurt China's economic interests.

This was not, however, the sole motivation behind the decision to go ahead with the visit – particularly during an uptick in tensions between the two strongest states in the Gulf, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. The visit represented an opportunity for the Chinese leadership to present its new approach, which calls for “talking with all sides and trading with all states.”

The Saudi-Iranian tensions did not bring about the cancelation of the visit, but they did lead to changes in the schedule. A visit to the United Arab Emirates was replaced by a visit to Iran, with an accompanying emphasis that the Chinese president was the first leader to visit Iran after the lifting of sanctions. At the same time, China publicly expressed its support for the government of Yemen – the ally of Saudi Arabia – in its war with Iran's Houthi proxies.

China is concerned about the inter-Arab conflict between Shia and Sunni. The Gulf region, inhabited as it is by members of both Islamic affiliations, provides China with a third of its natural gas supply and 52 percent of its oil supply, with its use of both expected to double by 2035. Any deterioration of the Sunni-Shia struggle into violent conflict thus threatens to paralyze the Chinese economy.

China's interest in the region is also connected to the Chinese president's “One Belt, One Road” initiative, which seeks to link China to Europe via the shortest possible routes, including the Middle East. The aim of the initiative is to gain access to new markets for Chinese goods. This is one of the most ambitious projects in human history, and its cost is estimated at many hundreds of billions of dollars.

Any violent conflict in the Middle East might seriously damage this initiative and lay waste to an enormous investment. The Chinese leadership understands that it cannot erase the immense enmity and inter-Arab conflicts that afflict the Middle East, but it can help to preserve the status quo and prevent deterioration. It would seem that the visit of the Chinese president at this moment of heightened tensions was intended to convey this message.

Beyond following through on the presidential visit, China is taking steps to maintain stability and reduce Islamic tensions by creating links between the two sides. It is promoting joint Shiite-Sunni initiatives, such as the natural gas pipeline that passes through Iran and Afghanistan, which give the sides a common interest in minimizing conflict. China has taken similar action elsewhere, too, for example by linking the Xinjiang province of northwest

China with Shiite Tehran via a high-speed train that passes through the Central Asian Sunni states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

Another aspect of China's new Middle Eastern policy is the legislation passed in December 2015 permitting the Chinese army to carry out anti-terror operations outside Chinese borders, with the agreement of the country in which the operations are to be conducted. This law paves the way for China to play a more meaningful role in the fight against Islamic State or any other organization harming international stability, rather than just providing troops for UN peacekeeping forces.

The law might have been passed to allow China to play a much more prominent role in the Middle East, but this motivation cannot be assumed. The legislation might be little more than Chinese lip service to international efforts to maintain global stability.

The announcement of the establishment of the Middle East Peace Forum, to be set up jointly by China's Middle East Foundation for Peace and Development (MEFPD) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, is another indication of new Chinese policy in the Middle East. Qin Yong, the secretary-general of MEFPD, said this is a step on the path toward fulfilling the declaration made by China's president to the general assembly of the Arab League in January of this year: "We need to be the ones who are promoting peace and launching development...in the Middle East." Qi Qianjin, Minister Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Cairo, expanded on the latter idea: "Peace and development are interlinked, and are desired by all the nations of the world. This initiative [One Belt, One Road] can contribute a great deal to the development of the region."

All these Chinese actions point to a change in its approach to the Middle East. The region remains supremely important to China, which continues to be deeply energy-dependent. It is also an arena in which China can demonstrate its power and capabilities on the global stage. These capabilities are mainly expressed in trade and in the maintenance of relations with countries in conflict with one another, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, or Israel and the Arab world. China is also taking practical steps, such as constructing the Iranian-Afghani gas pipeline, to temper Shia-Sunni tensions.

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