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Gulf Security: China Envisions Continued US Military Lead

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,425, January 28, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Notwithstanding the mounting rivalry between the world's two largest economies, China does not appear to aspire to supplant the American role in Gulf security any time soon.

The details of the [first-ever joint Chinese-Russian-Iranian naval exercise](#) signals that closer Chinese military ties with a host of Middle Eastern nations does not translate into Chinese aspirations for a greater role in regional security any time soon.

If anything, the exercise, coupled with notional Chinese [support for proposals for a multilateral security approach in the Gulf](#), suggests that China envisions a continued US lead in Gulf security despite mounting rivalry between the world's two largest economies.

That is the message China is sending by playing down the significance of the exercise and hinting that it would [only contribute non-combat forces](#).

China's participation is expected to involve its anti-piracy fleet, which is already in Somali waters to protect commercial vessels, as well as peacekeeping and humanitarian relief personnel rather than specially dispatched units of the People's Liberation Army.

China's preference for a continued US lead in maintaining Gulf security, even if it favors a more multilateral approach, was evident earlier this year in its willingness to consider participating in the US-led maritime alliance, created in response to several attacks on tankers in the Gulf of Oman, to escort commercial vessels in the Gulf and secure shipping lanes.

So far, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Britain, and Australia have joined the alliance, which [started operations last month](#).

While favoring a continued US lead, China sees a broadening of security arrangements that would embed rather than replace the US defense umbrella in the Gulf as a way to reduce regional tensions.

China also believes a multilateral arrangement would allow it to continue to avoid being sucked into conflicts and disputes in the Middle East, particularly the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

A multilateral arrangement in which the US remains the key military player would fit the pattern of China's gradual projection beyond its borders of its growing military power.

With the exception of a military facility in Djibouti, China's projection becomes less hardcore the further one gets from the borders of the People's Republic.

Proposals for a multilateral security architecture could also cater to President Donald Trump's transactionalism as well as his insistence on burden sharing.

Getting from A to B is, however, easier said than done.

If the US security umbrella was geared toward defense against Iran, a multilateral approach would nevertheless have to involve Iran.

Such involvement could be based on some kind of agreement on non-aggression, a proposal put forward by Iran and implicit in Russia's call for a regional security conference along the lines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (the OSCE).

To get there, Washington and Riyadh would have to reduce tensions with Tehran, credibly signal that they have no intention of toppling or destabilizing the Iranian regime, and resolve the crisis stemming from the US withdrawal from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program.

That would seem a tall order even if Saudi Arabia and Iran had not closed the door on [stalled contacts](#) aimed at dialing down tensions.

Chinese support has, moreover, been lacking for a Russian proposal that calls for the US, Russia, China, and India to be involved in a multilateral approach.

While backing Russia's proposal in general terms, Chinese FM spokesman Geng Shuang stopped short of specifically endorsing it. Geng welcomed "all proposals and diplomatic efforts conducive to de-escalating the situation in the Gulf region."

China's refraining from more wholeheartedly endorsing the Russian proposal is rooted in differing approaches toward multilateralism in general and alliances in particular. China shies away from alliances emphasizing geo-economics rather than geopolitics while Russia still operates in terms of alliances.

Looming in the background is the fact that in the final analysis China is likely to view security in South and Central Asia as interlinked with security in the Gulf, which in turn raises questions about the sustainability of the Chinese security approach.

The geographic layering of China's approach is evident not only in China's robust posture in the South China Sea but also in countries like Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

China recently made progress on the construction of a road through Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, a project that serves multiple geopolitical goals.

It will facilitate the movement of troops to a military base in Tajikistan as well as Chinese cross border operations in the corridor.

The question is whether the Chinese moves will jeopardize the presumed division of labor between Russia and China under which Russia shoulders responsibility for security in Central Asia while China concentrates on economic development, and if so what impact that would have on Chinese reliance on a potential Russian role in the Gulf.

There is little doubt that the Gulf is gradually moving from a unilateral security arrangement to a multilateral one driven by Gulf concerns following the September attacks on Saudi oil facilities and a US response that reinforced nagging doubts about the reliability of US security guarantees.

Those doubts are further fed by the direction of US policy starting with the Obama administration and now with the Trump administration that suggests a re-evaluation of US national security interests in the Middle East.

China's belief that economics rather than geopolitics is the key to solving disputes has allowed it to remain above the breach so far but has yet to prove its sustainability.

China's approach is unlikely to shield it from the Middle East's penchant for ensuring that it is at the heart of the concerns of major external parties.

Said Jiang Xudong, a Middle East scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences: "Economic investment will not solve all other problems when there are religious and ethnic conflicts."

This article is based on remarks made by the author at the workshop The Belt and Road Initiative: China-Middle East Cooperation in an Age of Geopolitical Turbulence organized by the Brookings Doha Center and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences.

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