



PERSPECTIVES

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Rejiggering Gulf Security: China's Game of Shadow Boxing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: China and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a complex game of shadow boxing to shape a future security framework for the Gulf designed to contain regional conflicts. In a bid to ensure plausible deniability, the boxers are intellectuals and journalists rather than officials, at least for the time being.

China and its Gulf partners appear to be engaged in a game of shadow boxing.

At stake is the future of Gulf security and the management of differences between the region's conservative monarchies and revolutionary Iran.

While governments pass unofficial subtle messages to one another, intellectuals and journalists are the ones out front in the ring.

In the latest round, Baria Alamuddin, a Lebanese journalist who regularly writes columns for Saudi media, has cast subtlety aside.

Ms. Alamuddin [warned](#) in strong and rare anti-Chinese language that China was being lured by Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shiite militia, to financially bankrupt Lebanon.

Writing in *Arab News*, Saudi Arabia's primary English-language newspaper, Alamuddin suggested that Hezbollah's seduction of China was occurring against the backdrop of a potential massive 25-year cooperation agreement between the People's Republic and Iran.

Her tirade was as much a response to reports of the alleged landmark agreement as it was to a declaration by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah that China was willing to invest in Lebanon's infrastructure.

“Chinese companies are ready to inject money into this country. If this happened, it would bring money to the country, bring investment, create job opportunities, allow heavy transport, and so on,” Nasrallah [said](#).

In a state-controlled media outlet in a country that has studiously backed some of the worst manifestations of Chinese autocratic behavior, including the brutal crackdown on Uyghur Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang and the repression of democratic expression and dissidents, Alamuddin did not mince words.

“Chinese business and investment are welcome, but Beijing has a record of partnering with avaricious African and Asian elites willing to sell out their sovereignty,” she wrote. “Chinese diplomacy is ruthless, mercantile and self-interested, with none of the West’s lip service to human rights, rule of law or cultural interchange.”

She cited a Middle East expert at a conservative US think tank who warned that “vultures from Beijing are circling, eyeing tasty infrastructure assets like ports and airports as well as soft power influence through Lebanon’s universities.”

She went on to assert that “witnessing how dissident voices have been mercilessly throttled in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, Lebanese citizens are justifiably fearful that their freedoms and culture would be crushed under heavy-handed, authoritarian Chinese and Iranian dominance, amid the miserable, monolithic atmosphere Hezbollah seeks to impose.”

Ms. Alamuddin’s outburst implicitly recognized that [China was signaling to the Gulf States](#), at a time of heightened uncertainty about the reliability of the American regional defense umbrella, that they need to reduce tensions with Iran if the People’s Republic is to engage in helping to create a new regional security architecture.

Expressing concern about the recent US decision to withdraw troops from Europe, a day after Alamuddin’s stark criticism of China, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Assistant Secretary-General for political affairs and negotiation Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg suggested that “a more systematic framework, with organic feedback to the leadership and decision-makers” was needed for US-Gulf security discussions.

The GCC contains the Gulf’s six monarchies: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

China has been subtly pressuring Gulf states through academic and Communist party publications and public statements by prominent scholars with close ties to the government in Beijing.

Its messaging has primarily targeted Saudi Arabia, the one Gulf state that has so far refrained from engaging in any gestures toward Iran that could facilitate a dialing down of tension.

A recent article in a renowned Chinese journal laid out the principles on which China is willing to break with its longstanding foreign and defense policy principles to engage in Gulf security.

The principles included “seeking common ground while reserving differences,” a formula that implies conflict management rather than conflict resolution.

Most Gulf States have extended a helping hand to Iran, the Middle East country most hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The [Iranian and UAE foreign ministers](#) agreed in a recent video call to cooperate during the health crisis.

“We agreed to continue dialogue on [the] theme of hope—especially as [the] region faces tough challenges, and tougher choices ahead,” said [Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif](#) on Twitter.

UAE officials said earlier that there were limits to a reduction of tensions. They said a real détente would only be possible once Iran changed its behavior, meaning a halt to support for proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen and a surrender of its nuclear ambitions.

The Chinese-Gulf shadow boxing takes place against a slow-moving and seemingly troubled US- and Chinese-backed Pakistani effort to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

[Pakistani PM Imran Khan](#) said recently without providing details that he had averted a military confrontation between the two Gulf powers. He said mediation was “making progress but slowly.”

Ms. Alamuddin’s column coupled with Saudi Arabia’s refusal to capitalize on the pandemic as a way to reduce tensions suggests that the kingdom has yet to fully embrace Khan’s efforts.

Those efforts are likely to be further complicated by the disclosure last month by Pakistani law enforcement that a Baloch gang leader, who was detained in

2017, had [confessed](#) to giving “secret information and sketches regarding army installations and officials to foreign agents,” believed to be Iranians.

It was not immediately clear what prompted the disclosure.

Pakistan has long asserted that Iran and India have lent support to Baloch nationalist militants responsible for multiple attacks on military and Chinese targets in the South Asian state.

“The Iran-Pakistan border issues are mainly affected by the sectarian rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. For Pakistan, this is a costly and difficult diplomatic situation at this time,” said [Michael Kugelman](#), a South Asia scholar at the Wilson Center in Washington.

Pakistan has a vested interest in helping to dial down Saudi-Iranian tensions. It takes two to tango, however, and a mediator whose efforts are not burdened by bilateral issues of his own with any of the parties.

To move the pendulum, more will be required than a regional go-between or subtle nudging. With the US likely to refrain from doing the heavy lifting, that task may be left to China. If Ms. Alamuddin is any indication, China is already discovering that changing the paradigm in the Middle East is easier said than done.

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