



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Greater Middle East May Force China to Project Military Power Sooner Rather than Later

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,127, August 18, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: China may have no short-term interest in contributing to guaranteeing security in parts of a swath of land stretching from Central Asia to the East coast of Africa, but that does not prevent the People's Republic from preparing for a time when it may wish to build on longstanding political and military relationships in various parts of the world to project power and maintain an economic advantage.

Determined to exploit the principle of allegedly win-win relationships that are underwritten by economics, trade, and investment as the solution to problems, China has so far delayed if not avoided bilateral or unilateral political and military engagement in conflicts beyond its borders.

The question is how long it can continue to do so.

China took a baby step toward greater power projection with the creation in 2017 of its first overseas military base in the East African state of Djibouti, [a rent-a-base nation](#) that hosts multiple military facilities for, among others, the US, France, and Japan, and potentially Saudi Arabia. The base signals the importance China attributes to regions like the Gulf and the Horn of Africa.

A recent article in a [Chinese military publication](#) sheds further light on Chinese preparations for a day when it may have to project military might in different parts of the world. The article laid out Chinese thinking about the virtues of offering Middle Eastern, Asian, and African militaries and political elites training and educational opportunities.

“Students who can study in China are mostly local military and political elites or descendants of notable families. After they have studied and returned to

their country, they have a high probability of becoming the top military and political leaders of the local country. This is very beneficial for China to expand its overseas influence and corresponding armaments exports,” the publication, *Military Express*, said.

The publication asserted that Chinese military academies were more attractive than their Western counterparts that impose “political conditions,” a reference to students having to hail from countries aligned with the West.

“[A] Chinese military academy does a better job in this regard. There are no political conditions attached here. Foreign military students here learn Chinese strategies and tactics and learn to operate Chinese weaponry by themselves,” the publication said.

The publication failed to mention that China, unlike Western producers, also refrains from attaching political conditions to its arms sales, like adherence to human rights.

Recent months have not been entirely kind to Chinese aspirations to remain aloof to conflict beyond its borders, suggesting that realities on the ground could complicate Beijing’s strategic calculations.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan threatens to put an ultra-conservative religious regime in power on the border with Xinjiang, the northwestern province where China is attempting to brutally Sinicize Turkic ethnic and religious identity.

Recent Taliban military advances have already bolstered ultra-conservative religious sentiment in neighboring Pakistan, which celebrates the group as heroes whose success enhances the chances for austere religious rule in the world’s second-most populous Muslim-majority state.

“[Our jihadis will be emboldened](#). They will say that ‘if America can be beaten, what is the Pakistan army to stand in our way?’” said a senior Pakistani official.

Nine Chinese nationals were killed recently in an explosion on a bus transporting Chinese workers to the construction site of a dam in the northern mountains of Pakistan—a region more prone to attacks by religious militants than by Baloch nationalists, who operate from the Iranian province of Balochistan and are responsible for the bulk of attacks on Chinese targets in the South Asian nation.

This was the highest loss of life of Chinese citizens in recent years in Pakistan, which is the largest recipient of Beijing's Belt and Road-related infrastructure and energy investments. China sees Pakistan as a key to the economic development of Xinjiang and part of its effort to Sinicize the region.

Indicating its concern, China [advised its citizens to leave](#) Afghanistan and recently evacuated 210 Chinese nationals on a chartered flight. China also delayed the signing of a framework agreement on industrial cooperation that would have accelerated implementation of projects that are part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Complicating Chinese calculations is the fact that both Russia and Turkey are maneuvering for different reasons to strengthen Turkic identity in the Caucasus, which potentially would be more sympathetic to the plight of the Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims.

Turkey moreover may see Afghanistan as another stepping stone toward recreating a Turkic world. Turkey has reportedly asked Azerbaijan, which Ankara supported in last year's Caucasus war against Armenia, to contribute forces to a Turkish contingent that would remain in Afghanistan after the US and NATO withdrawal to secure Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport.

Turkish influence among Afghanistan's Turkic minorities has been bolstered by the operation of Turkish schools, an increased number of Turkish scholarships, training of Afghan military and police personnel, the popularity of Turkish movies and television series, and efforts to mediate an end to conflict in the country.

The Taliban have rejected the continuation of a Turkish military presence that for the past six years was part of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission. The Taliban called the Turkish soldiers "occupiers in Afghanistan" and demanded that they leave with NATO and US forces, even if they are also representatives of a "great Islamic nation."

In anticipation of a threatening development in Afghanistan, China quietly established a small military post in 2019 in the highlands of Tajikistan, a stone's throw from where Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor meets Xinjiang.

More recently, Chinese FM Wang Ji advised his interlocutors during a visit to Central Asia that going forward, Chinese private military companies would play a greater role in securing Belt and Road-related strategic infrastructure projects.

Some analysts suggested that the Chinese companies would also be employed to train Central Asian militaries—a domain that was largely a Russian preserve until now.

In a similar vein, France's withdrawal of its forces from West Africa steps up pressure on China to defend its overseas nationals and interests. [Three Chinese construction workers](#) were among five foreigners kidnapped by gunmen not long ago in southern Mali. No group has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.

All of this leaves aside the question of how long China will feel it can rely on the US defense umbrella in the Gulf to secure the flow of energy and much of its trade against the backdrop of a reconfigured US regional commitment and increasingly strained relations between Washington and Beijing.

It also does not consider China's ability to manage expectations of the People's Republic's willingness to engage, in some cases not only politically or militarily, but also economically.

That was evident during FM Wang's most recent visit to the region, and particularly Syria, which for much of its civil war was home to Uighur jihadists who distinguished themselves in battle.

It was Wang's second visit to the Middle East and North Africa in four months. Furthermore, he discussed Afghanistan and Gulf security with his Saudi counterpart on the sideline of a regional cooperation meeting in Uzbekistan.

Syrian officials have for domestic and foreign policy reasons long touted China as an imaginary white knight who would come to the rescue in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country.

[“China is far less interested in Syria than Syria is in China...”](#) Syria has never been a priority in China's economy-driven approach to the Middle East,” noted scholars Andrea Ghiselli and Muhammad Sudairi.

The scholars cautioned, however, that “the significant potential impact of narratives created by local actors in the context of international politics,” a reference to Syria's projection of China as its savior, cannot be ignored.

Implicit in the scholars' conclusion is the notion that Chinese policy may in future be increasingly shaped as much by decision-making in Beijing as by developments on the ground in a world in which powers compete to secure their interests and place in a new world order.

Ultimately, the fundamental question underlying all these factors is, according to *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rahman, whether China has not only the capability and aspiration to become a superpower but also the will.

“If China is unwilling or unable to achieve a global military presence that rivals that of the US, it may have to find a new way of being a superpower—or give up on the ambition,” Rahman argues.

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg’s Institute for Fan Culture.