



Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz receives China's President Xi Jinping on 19 January 2016 in Riyadh.

Pivoting East? Sino-Saudi Relations Amid Regional Crises *by Geoffrey F. Gresh*¹

The prolonged period of revolutionary change and spread of violence in the Middle East following the Arab uprisings of 2011 raises important questions about the future of the US military basing presence and sustained influence in the Arabian Peninsula and across the region. The US military may indeed maintain its strategic regional basing presence for many years to come, but in the past several years there has also been a growing trend of Gulf monarchies bolstering their ties with the emerging powers of Eurasia to the east. China, in particular, is on the hunt to secure greater regional natural resources while many Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, welcome the increased presence of China as a way to offset US influence in the region due to its widespread and domestic unpopularity.² Amid the spread of regional violence and religious extremism, the United States should seek to leverage the increased Chinese presence and its regional interests to assist in seeking solutions for greater regional stability and security.

China's motives

China's increased focus on the Gulf is predicated on securing energy resources for its expanding economy. In 2015, China finally surpassed the US as the world's biggest oil importer at an average of 7.4 million bpd compared to the US at 7.2 million bpd.³ Despite aggressive pursuit of supply diversity, as much as 70 to 80 percent of China's future oil imports will have to come from the Middle East and North Africa.⁴

To meet this growing demand, over the past 10 years China has actively courted the Gulf monarchies through a variety of economic and political inducements. In 2004, for example, the China-Arab Cooperation Forum was established to promote greater trade, energy cooperation, information sharing and other political exchanges.⁵ Recently, the 2013 propo-

sals to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as part of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative was also seen as an important inducement for closer alignment with China.⁶ China's relations to Gulf monarchies is likely to deepen significantly in coming years.

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The impact of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the events of the recent Arab uprisings and spread of violence in Syria and Yemen, have placed the traditional great power regional alliance structures in significant flux. Saudi Arabia and China's seemingly intensified diplomatic outreach in the wake of US support for President Hosni Mubarak's ouster in Egypt and for the protests in Bahrain symbolizes regional alignment shifts currently underway across the region amidst an ever-changing security landscape.⁷ The Saudi monarchy, as well as other GCC members, has grown frustrated with US inaction in Syria since it believes that Iran has gained an upper hand in the conflict and that it now possesses a greater capacity to promote Shia militia groups and to increase its regional influence.⁸ Beijing has welcomed this emerging tilt away from the United States and seized upon the events of the past several years to enhance its ties to and support for Saudi Arabia. Moreover, China has become an increasingly attractive partner for the kingdom as it offers improved economic relations without insisting on political reforms. Indeed, China's model of rapid economic development within an autocratic framework is cited by many in the Al-Saud royal family as a template for Saudi Arabia's transformation to a modern knowledge economy. The model offers economic growth without democratization, an attractive formula as autocratic regimes have been destabilized in the region.⁹

China's increased focus on the Gulf became more apparent during the 2000s as it sought to secure strategic natural resources for its growing economy. In fact, by 2009 Saudi Arabia had become the leading supplier of crude oil to China. China is also the top importer of oil and gas from Oman, while it is the second-largest trading partner with the United Arab Emirates behind India.¹⁰ In 2013 Sino-Saudi trade was estimated at \$73 billion, up from \$40 billion in 2008.¹¹ This compares to US-Saudi bilateral trade at \$43 billion in 2010.¹² In February 2009, China's President Hu Jintao and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia concluded a \$1.8 billion contract to build a railway line between the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, to be completed in 2016.¹³

Military cooperation

The strengthening of economic ties between Saudi Arabia and China has increasingly corresponded with greater political and security cooperation. From 2008 to 2011, China sold \$700 million worth of armaments to Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ It has also been reported that China has sold weapons systems that could assist Saudi Arabia in a possible Iranian attack, including Chinese DF-21 intermediate range ballistic missiles.¹⁵ This trend of Chinese weapons and arms sales to Saudi Arabia is likely to continue and grow in the future.

Certainly, the United States continues to dominate arms sales to Saudi Arabia by comparison. In 2011, for example, US arms sales topped \$33 billion, including 84 Boeing F-15 fighters and dozens of Apache and Blackhawk helicopters. In 2012, Saudi Arabia struck another multi-billion dollar deal with the

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United States for 25 Lockheed C-130J and KC-130 transport and refueling planes.¹⁶ Nevertheless, China's relationship with the Gulf, and Saudi Arabia in particular, is in its relative infancy, with great potential for a Chinese bilateral security partnership to grow. In fact, China is already becoming more competitive in the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or drone market. China reportedly concluded a recent agreement with Saudi Arabia, and possibly the United Arab Emirates as well, for the sale of drones. According to one report, "Saudi Arabia has signed an agreement to purchase China's Wing Loong medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicle."¹⁷ China's sale of drones to Saudi Arabia also aligns with its greater ambitions of competing in the global drone market against the United States.¹⁸

The growth in arms sales aligns with the heightened political rhetoric and bilateral cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. During a bilateral summit in June 2011 between Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Saudi Arabia's Speaker of the Majlis Al-Shura Council Abdullah Bin Mohammed Bin Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, Premier Wen said that "China and Saudi Arabia hold wide consensus and identical interest on such major issues as coping with the international financial crisis, maintaining regional peace and stability, and respecting civilization diversification." In the same statement, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, "Saudi Arabia expects to join hands with China to lift the bilateral relations to a higher level."¹⁹ Months before this meeting, it is also interesting to note, China's sixth naval escort flotilla arrived in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia for the first time on a goodwill visit in November 2010. The symbolism of this naval visit is significant considering that the United States ended its basing presence in 2003 and now maintains only military training missions and other technical advising teams.²⁰ In a similar vein, China was also reportedly pleased to see that following the recent death of King Abdullah, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud vowed to uphold the kingdom's strong ties and other foreign policy initiatives with China.²¹

Conclusion

China's security engagement with Saudi Arabia matches with its ratcheting up of economic and political ties throughout the region. China is an important emerging power and it would make sense that the Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia would want to attach to the growing power, strength, and influence of China. China is a more popular alternative to the widely unpopular United States.²² Possible positive spillover for China from its new regional role could include assuming, willingly or not, the responsibility of becoming a go-to regional power broker. The United States should try to leverage this emerging dynamic for the future security and stability of an increasingly volatile Middle East.

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