



China's Xi Jinping Heads for Middle East - Defusing an Explosive Region

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China's President Xi Jinping is heading to the Middle East, aiming at defusing the tensions in the volatile region of greatest importance for geopolitics and energy-security. China has also domestic security challenges which are closely linked to the Middle East and then there is business.

President [Xi Jinping](#) will be visiting a number of countries including Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Tensions between Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members on one hand, and Iran and Shi'ite politicians and clerics in Iraq reached a boiling point after Saudi Arabia executed 47, including the controversial Shi'ite cleric [Nimr Al-Nimr](#).

The [Persian Gulf](#) / Arab Gulf is one of the world's most important shipping lanes through which much of the world's hydrocarbons are shipped. A conflict in the region would lead to a global energy crisis that naturally also would have an impact on China's energy security. China is Iran's top oil client  while it has close ties to the GCC member States and imports oil from GCC member States too.

[pictured right: President Sisi and President Xi Jinping during Al-Sisi's 2015 visit to China - Courtesy YOUM7]

The crisis in the Gulf and the expansion of the [Suez Canal](#) in 2015 has led to increased focus on Egypt. Egypt, however, is itself feeling threatened due to the ongoing conflict in Yemen, an insurgency in Egypt's Sinai peninsula and the ease with which militants from Libya can infiltrate the country. Egypt considers any potential threat to shipping via the [Bab Al-Mandeb](#) Strait south of the Suez Canal as an existential threat that also would impact global energy security.



Strait of Hormuz

It is within this context that a senior Chinese official, on Monday, commented on President Xi Jinping's visit to the region, saying China is seeking a balanced stance as it always does. China's State news agency Xinhua notes that Xi Jinping's visit aims at reestablishing regional stability. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming stated:

"Regarding some of the region's problems, China has always taken a balanced and just position. ... If the Middle East is not stable, I'm afraid the world can't be very peaceful. If a country or a region is not stable, it cannot realize development. ... China firmly supports regional countries individually exploring a development path that suits their national conditions."

It is noteworthy that China also considers Iran as a key part of its New [Silk Road](#) project that aims at developing transportation and other infrastructure and at developing trade throughout Asia, the Middle East as well as Europe.

Referring to the lifting of sanctions against Iran, Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming also noted that Iran could expect a rapid development in the post-sanction era and an economic comeback. A prospect that is interesting for Chinese investment capital, provided that the region is relatively stable.

The Minister also signaled Chinese interests in investing in Iran, saying that Tehran would need foreign investment, technological support and infrastructure updates to put it on the course toward this development. Earlier this month the Chinese government published [“China’s Arab Policy Paper for 2016”](#). In the paper, the government states that:

« China firmly supports Arab national liberation movement, firmly supports Arab countries’ struggle to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity, pursue and safeguard national interests, and combat external interference and aggression, and firmly supports Arab countries’ cause of developing the national economy and building up the countries. » ...



Bab Al-Mandeb Strait

« The world is experiencing profound and complex changes. The trend toward a multipolar world and economic globalization is deepening, and cultural diversity and the information society continue to move forward. Changes in the international configuration and international order are accelerating. All countries in the world are seizing the opportunity to readjust their development strategies, promote reform and innovation, speed up economic transformation and open up new development horizons. At the same time, the world economy is still in a period of deep transformation, with geopolitical factors becoming more prominent, regional turbulences rising one after another, non-traditional security and global challenges increasing and the gap between the North and the South widening. It remains an arduous journey to advance mankind’s noble cause of peace and development. »

« China and Arab states are both developing countries with their combined territory, population and economic aggregate accounting for 1/6, 1/4 and 1/8 of the world’s total respectively. Different in natural endowment and development level, China and Arab countries are all in an important development stage and have a shared mission of rejuvenating the nation. We need to collaborate with each other more closely, and learn from each other along the road of development, strengthen cooperation in seeking common development and promoting regional peace, and echo each other in building a new type of international relations, so as to safeguard state sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, and to promote stability, economic development and well-being of our peoples. ... China supports the Middle East peace process and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine with full sovereignty, based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. China supports the Arab League and its member states’ efforts to this end. We adhere to political solution to regional hot spot issues, and support the establishment of a nuclear weapon-free and WMD-free zone in the Middle East. » ([read the full text here](#))

 While the Middle East is locked in a crisis, China has its own problems with insurgents and

terrorism; and some of these problems are closely related to the Middle East. While there are legitimate grievances among some of China's ethnic groups, Beijing also faces militant ethnic or religious insurrection.

One of these challenges arises from Turkish and US sponsored [Uyghur](#) / Turkmen in China's Xinyang province. Other threats emerge from the presence of Islamist militants including the growing presence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (a.k.a. [ISIS](#), [ISIL](#), [Daesh](#)) in northern Pakistan. Also this security threat is closely tied to the Middle East; That is, particularly Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the USA and "some" of its NATO partners, as well as elements within Pakistan's intelligence and military establishment.

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