

Xi of Arabia: Enjoying the Favor of the King

Yoel Guzansky and Tuvia Gering | No. 1671 | December 18, 2022

The visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia, which included three summit meetings, moved relations between China and the Arab world at least one step forward. Alongside signed agreements and partnerships agreed on by both sides, the visit had a substantial symbolic side aimed at projecting independence, consolidating Saudi Arabia's leading status among Arab states, and enabling Mohammed bin Salman to demonstrate his leadership to his people prior to his accession to the throne. The Gulf states may seem to overstate the significance of the visit, but there is no denying that growing Chinese involvement in light of the global energy crisis and great power competition gives them more options. They will most likely continue to hedge in order to advance their national interests and enjoy the best of both worlds; in their view, it is the United States that will need to make the necessary policy adjustments.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's official welcome in Saudi Arabia during a recent visit was noticeably different from that given to US President Joe Biden earlier this year. For the former, there were warm embraces and a lavish welcome party, and red and yellow contrails from the Royal Saudi Air Force colored the sky. The latter, however, received a low-key ceremony and icy fist bumps with the Crown Prince, whom he had initially aimed to make an international "pariah."

This was no coincidence. Although China's three summit meetings – with Riyadh, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Arab states – had been scheduled long ago, Xi's visit took place against a backdrop of increasing tension between Washington, Beijing, and Riyadh and the global energy crisis resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Commentators both inside and outside the Gulf noted that the summits, which included dozens

of Arab leaders, struck a defiant tone toward the US. The events were interpreted by them as further evidence of the United States' declining status in the region.

For the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, the timing could not have been better. As he seeks to implement his ambitious Vision 2030 program for the country, the visit allowed him to show the world his foreign policy independence, consolidate the leading role of the Kingdom in the Arab and Muslim world, and demonstrate his leadership to his people prior to his accession to the throne.

At the same time, China has shown over the past decade that its interest in the Middle East and North Africa goes far beyond energy security. It has gradually deepened its cooperation with Arab states while massively investing in infrastructure and technologies of the future: trade, investment, finances, ports, industry and logistics centers, green energy, communications infrastructure, smart cities, public health, space, weapons, cars, culture, and education. Xi's visit aimed to deepen the synergy between Chinese development strategy and regional states' vision plans, thereby linking their fates.

Beijing has wisely exploited every exposed nerve in US-partner relations in order to undermine US hegemony, which dictates a unipolar global order and serves the interests of Washington and its allies. Beijing, like Putin's Russia, emphasizes the ostensible shared fate of the Arab states and China as historic victims of Western colonialism and feudalism, making them natural partners in creating a multipolar world without Western supremacy. The present visit was therefore also intended to deepen the fissures in trust between the US and Arab states, undermine the US network of alliances, and strengthen the "strategic autonomy" of the Arab states. For example, the week of the visit, the Chinese Foreign Ministry published a comprehensive report on Sino-Arab cooperation in the "new era." It claimed that unlike "other countries," China supports the strategic independence of states in the region, does not interfere in their domestic affairs, does not link Islam to terror, and only seeks mutual benefit. "Arab

states are tired of arrogant Western condescension,” wrote a senior Chinese Middle East researcher in a party news outlet, and similar sentiments were echoed by Arab news outlets across the region. For example, the chairman of al-Arabiya group, Saudi media giant Abdulrahman al-Rashed, wrote that China is a “stable, predictable, and reliable” ally, implicitly contrasting China with the United States.

Either With Us, or Against Us

The primary goals of Biden’s visit this past July were to increase oil production in the short term, in order to lower market prices and ease the situation of American and European consumers, as well as to signal to Arab states that the United States is not abandoning them over the long term. “We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran,” he declared. “The United States isn’t going anywhere.” However, already then it was clear that the Arab leaders who convened in Saudi Arabia were not convinced. While the US administration believed that it had reached an understanding with the energy giants in light of the global crisis, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, sent him home empty-handed. Furthermore, the organization enraged Capitol Hill by deciding to further reduce oil production by two million barrels a day about a month before the midterm elections in the US. The royal visit by the Chinese leader aligns with the Saudi response to the White House, with both saying: the rules of the game have changed; don’t set conditions for us and don’t make us choose.

Even if the Gulf states overestimate their own importance, there is no doubt that increasing Chinese involvement in light of the global energy crisis and the great power competition gives them more options. They will continue to use the diverse range of connections to further their national interests, manage risks, and seek to balance them all. Meanwhile, in their minds, it is the US that must adjust its expectations to the new reality.

In spite of this position, the Biden administration is standing its ground and continues to claim that there is no true regional alternative to the US. In the security conference last month in Bahrain, several senior US figures sought

to sharpen the message that the US is the only power that can coordinate regional cooperation and create coalitions against Iran, and that "it would be a mistake for regional states to bet against it." They also warned that Chinese penetration of Gulf technology infrastructure would jeopardize the US-led Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD), which protects against missiles and drones from Tehran and its proxies. They argued that the effectiveness of the US defense umbrella would decrease the further the cooperation went with China. States in the region hear the United States saying, "You're either with us or with them," despite its continued claim that it is "not asking any state to choose a side."

For the Gulf states, the US administration's security commitment appears to be deteriorating. The US did not manage to prevent the attacks by Iran and its proxies on Saudi Arabia in 2019 and on the UAE this past January. The Biden administration not only delisted the Yemeni rebels from its list of terrorist organizations early in the President's term, but in the eyes of Saudi Arabia, it also publicly humiliated the Crown Prince and damaged the long-standing alliance with its "self-righteous complaints" about human rights. Arab states also believe that the US failed to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear threshold state.

Game Theory

Despite their repeated complaints, Arab states generally see their relationship with the US – with its superior military capabilities – as vital, and understand that China cannot and does not want to replace the US in this role in the short term. Looking ahead, they are concerned about the White House's lack of attention to their security challenges, hostile tones in Congress, and disagreements on issues such as political freedom and human rights. Even if the deployment of US military forces in the Middle East remains unchanged, the Arab states are growing skeptical of the US willingness to use them when the chips are down.

They are also deeply invested in their development plans and perceive Washington as attempting to limit their opportunities for development by forcing them to choose sides in a fight that is not theirs. The greater the

rivalry between the powers in every possible arena, the more the Middle East will be seen as a zero-sum game, with any move closer to Beijing seen as a loss for Washington, and vice versa.

Xi's visit demonstrates at the very least that Arab states in general and Gulf states in particular are not without options. The country that has become the greatest trading partner and investor in most Arab states signed memoranda of understanding and agreements worth tens of billions of dollars in over thirty strategic sectors. In tech, for example, Biden's visit to Riyadh included agreements on American-Saudi cooperation in 5G and 6G communications infrastructure. However, the package of deals that Xi signed this week included a memorandum of understanding with Chinese giant Huawei to establish high-speed cellular internet and computing facilities in the Kingdom. China is also involved in the Crown Prince's flagship project, construction of the futuristic city of Neom, much to the Americans' dismay.

On security, Chinese defense conglomerates offer excellent weapon systems at competitive prices. For example, Chinese media outlets reported that Saudi Arabia spent \$4 billion on weapons at a security expo in Zhuhai last month. They reported earlier this year that China would establish a factory in the Kingdom to produce advanced UAVs, and that it hopes to sell its new stealth plane after reaching an agreement to supply training/attack light aircraft to the UAE (against the background of the stalled F-35 deal). There has been an increase in reports of Chinese-Arab cooperation in the manufacturing of missiles and laser air defense weapons, cyber, intelligence, and counterterrorism, and even joint activity in the nuclear fuel cycle over the last decade. Such activities demand greater Israeli attention.

Finally, Arab states recognize that the United States remains indispensable in the military-security field. At the same time, they hope that their relationship with China will help their countries' development and stability while also giving them leverage with the US. Far beyond the energy sector or as a byproduct of their relations with the US, China's relations with

Middle East countries are becoming increasingly strategic and important in their own right. There is no doubt that the United States is an important part of the story, and senior American officials will continue to insist that their country "isn't going anywhere." Xi's visit demonstrates that the same is true for China.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen