

The Limitations of Chinese Influence in the Middle East

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Despite claims that China could help reduce the threat that the Houthi rebels in Yemen pose to maritime traffic in the Red Sea, Beijing has neither condemned these attacks nor has it joined the US-led international coalition against them. China may not be interested in using its influence to help resolve the crisis and may be willing to sustain the economic damage that it is causing. At the same time, the crisis might exemplify the limitations of Chinese influence in the Middle East.

The attacks by Houthi rebels against maritime vessels in the Red Sea have disrupted the global supply chain, and around half of the ships have now decided to circumnavigate Africa to avoid the risk of being attacked. Other vessels have started to signal they have no ties with Israel, hoping that this will protect them from attacks by the Houthis, who claim that their aggression is intended to help their Palestinian "brothers" in their struggle against Israel. In the meantime, the cost of transporting cargo by sea has risen sharply, due to greater insurance costs and the extended journey time, which has increased by about three weeks.

In response to these attacks, the United States formed a coalition of forces, mainly British, but with the support of additional countries from Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. This coalition has attacked Houthi targets and protects ships sailing in the region. Thus far, however, it seems that the coalition's operations have neither significantly altered the situation nor dampened the Houthis' determination to continue attacking ships. Although China could help resolve the problem, with the US administration having directly asked for Beijing's assistance on the matter, China has neither condemned the Houthi attacks nor joined the international coalition seeking to counter them. Similarly, Chinese ships, which are in the region and are supposed to act whenever pirates attack a vessel, have not responded to distress calls.

The behavior of the Chinese is often perceived as seizing any opportunity to defy the United States by exposing its alleged duplicity. Against the backdrop of American criticism of China's human rights record, China has suggested that the United States ignores the rights of the Palestinians. China also has portrayed the

United States as a warmongering nation to the countries in the region, while it offers a different path of resolving conflicts by peaceful means.

Nonetheless, China should have many reasons for wanting to stop the Houthi attacks:

- Economically, China is the largest exporter in the world; in 2022, China exported goods with a total value of \$3.6 trillion. Around two-thirds of Chinese exports are delivered to European markets via the Red Sea, either as cargo on Chinese vessels or those registered in other countries. Therefore, the longer the Houthi crisis drags on, the more it will damage global trade—most of which is based on goods from China—and will directly harm Beijing's interests, all while China faces escalating economic problems.
- Geopolitically, the Houthi attacks are targeting a number of China's strategic partners in the region, especially Egypt, which has seen about 50 percent decrease in income from the Suez Canal since the crisis erupted, and Saudi Arabia, which transports oil to European markets via the Suez Canal. Chinese involvement in persuading the Houthis to stop their attacks would indicate to these countries that China could help them in times of need.
- From a geostrategic perspective, the stated goal of China's Global Security Initiative is, *inter alia*, "taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously" and "resolving differences and disputes between countries through dialogue and consultation." In 2023, Beijing bragged about the agreement it ostensibly brokered between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the current crisis could provide China with an opportunity to bolster its standing and to demonstrate this different path that it has proposed. If it manages to convince Tehran to rein in the Houthis, it could strengthen its image as "peacemaker" and as an alternative to the United States in the Middle East.

Therefore, one might expect China to exert its influence in the region, if not to protect global trade or the economic interests of its strategic partners, then at least to safeguard its own interests. However, the events of the past few months show that this has not happened. China may not want to use its influence to help resolve the crisis, and it may be willing to sustain the economic damage that it is causing. At the same time, this crisis could illustrate the limitations of China's influence in the Middle East.

One incident that stands out in this context is the tragic story of Noa Argamani, the Israeli hostage whose mother was born in the Chinese city of Wuhan. When news of Argamani's abduction was confirmed, many people contacted the Chinese embassy in Israel to ask for Beijing's assistance. The response they received was that Beijing does not recognize Chinese nationals who also hold foreign citizenship. This chilling response was reiterated countless times on Chinese social media platforms. Surprisingly, after some three months of fighting in the Gaza Strip and after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally contacted the Chinese ambassador, a senior official from the bureau of the China's military attaché claimed—in a private conversation with the author—that Beijing has been communicating with both Egypt and Qatar “for a number of weeks,” in an effort to secure Argamani's release. However, the official added, these efforts have yet to bear fruit. Given China's size, its massive investment in the Middle East, and its importance to the global economy, one cannot help but wonder why Chinese efforts have failed while other smaller and far less influential countries, such as Russia, Thailand, and the Philippines, have managed to secure the release of their nationals—men and women alike—who were kidnapped by Hamas.

Similarly, China has not managed to influence Iran and persuade it to rein in the Houthis. In late January 2024, some two months after the start of the Houthi attacks, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan met with the Director of the [Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission](#) Office and the [Minister of Foreign Affairs](#) Wang Yi. According to the White House, Sullivan asked China to use “its substantial leverage with Iran to call for an end and bring an end to these dangerous attacks.” Similar requests were made by other US officials in their meetings with Chinese counterparts, who, in turn, confirmed that they have been raising the issue in their talks with their Iranian counterparts. Iranian officials have also said that they have received requests from China to rein in the Houthis, or risk damaging commercial and other ties between the two countries. However, it is evident that these Chinese efforts are not bearing fruit. Chinese shipping firms are also currently having to divert their vessels to a much longer route that circumnavigates Africa. Ironically, on December 14, 2023, a few days after the reports that China and Iran were engaged in talks, the Houthis hit a vessel carrying a Hong Kong flag (as mentioned, even if a vessel is not carrying a Chinese flag, the cargo on board is usually made in China).

Therefore, it appears that China's handling of the crisis is enabling continued economic harm to itself and its partners. Moreover, Beijing's image as a peacemaker, an honest broker, an alternative to the United States, and even as a superpower with global influence is also suffering. The fact that the United States

is acting to protect maritime traffic in the Red Sea highlights China's helplessness and its inability to influence the situation. It has been claimed, including by the Houthis themselves, that Chinese vessels are immune from attack when they pass through the Red Sea. Additionally, reports that some Chinese companies are taking advantage of the crisis by offering cargo services in the Red Sea, supposedly under cover of this immunity, does not help China's image.

While China could help resolve the crisis, it is possible that it does not want to. This could mean that Beijing is willing to take the hit to its economy and its image, and it is not activating economic and other leverages to exploit this crisis to attack the United States or, alternatively, to force the United States to lose even more. This explanation, however, is illogical, especially given the harm being done to China's image, to which Beijing is especially sensitive.

There is another explanation: China wants to bring its influence to bear but it cannot. Despite China's massive investment in the region and despite the Chinese—and sometimes also Arab—rhetoric about how the United States is leaving the Middle East and how China is rising as an alternative, in practice, Chinese influence is significantly less than one would expect. In part, Beijing does not want to be seen as “interfering in internal affairs,” especially when the United States is involved, nor does China view itself as a player with influence. It is worth recalling the words of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi: “We believe that the relevant actors, especially large countries with influence, should play a constructive and responsible role in protecting maritime traffic in the Red Sea.” Is it possible that China does not see itself as “a large country with influence?”

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