



Written by [Angeline Tan](#) on December 12, 2022

Xi's Visit to Saudi Arabia Reinforces Sino-Arab Relations in Apparent Snub to U.S.

Chinese President Xi Jinping met Gulf Arab leaders in Riyadh on December 9 in the first of two “milestone” Arab summits depicting Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a potential leader of the Middle East and major partner for global powers.

Xi, who was [welcomed](#) in Saudi Arabia with a lavish ceremony, successfully concluded a strategic partnership pact with the world’s top oil exporter on December 8, before Friday’s meeting with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

China’s top leader was slated to have broader discussions later with leaders of Arab League states ranging from the Gulf, Levant, and Africa.

The United States is carefully monitoring the rising clout of rival Beijing in the Middle East region, where China has a vested interest as the world’s largest energy consumer. Chinese companies are also investing in and expanding into technology and other infrastructure in this region.

Xi’s visit also comes amid strained relations between Riyadh and Washington over human-rights issues, energy policy, the Ukraine-Russia crisis, as well as uncertainties among Gulf states about America’s security commitments in the region. Unlike Washington, [Beijing maintains good relations with Iran](#) and has displayed little interest in addressing Saudi political or security concerns in the region.

Growing Chinese influence in the Middle East has kept the United States on its toes, as the Asian giant is an economic competitor.

At the opening of the China-GCC summit, Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, hailed a “historic new phase of relations with China.”

The prince previously asserted that Gulf states would remain “a safe and reliable source to supply the world with its energy needs,” highlighting that oil and gas would continue to be key energy sources for decades.

Xi also said his visit heralded a “new era” in relations. “China looks forward to working with Saudi Arabia and Arab states to turn the two summits into milestone events in the history of China-Arab relations and China-GCC relations, and bring these relations to new heights,” the foreign ministry quoted Xi as saying.

In a lengthy joint statement, Beijing and Riyadh committed to boost cooperation and emphasized principles of sovereignty and “non-interference,” while reinforcing the importance of a peaceful resolution to the Ukraine conflict.

Saudi Arabia and Gulf allies have ignored U.S. pressure to cut ties with [fellow OPEC+ oil producers](#)



AP Images
Xi Jinping and Mohammed bin Salman



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[over the Ukraine crisis. Furthermore, U.S. pressure to restrict dealings with China](#) have gone unheeded by these countries, amid an increasingly polarized world order.

Oil giant Saudi Arabia is a top supplier to China, and the joint statement reaffirmed the significance of global market stability and energy cooperation, while seeking to enhance non-oil trade and cooperation in peaceful nuclear power.

“The two sides reaffirmed that they will continue to firmly support each other’s core interests,” the statement read.

Acknowledging Gulf security concerns over Iran, another key oil supplier to China and with whom Beijing has warm relations, both Saudi Arabia and China agreed on the necessity to “strengthen joint cooperation to ensure the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme” and for Tehran to respect “principles of good-neighborliness.”

Riyadh also articulated its support for Beijing’s “One China” policy on the issue of Taiwan. Xi also invited King Salman to visit China, according to Saudi state television reports.

Qatar’s emir, Kuwait’s crown prince, the kings of Bahrain and Jordan, and the presidents of Egypt, Tunisia, Djibouti, Somalia, and Mauritania were among rulers attending alongside leaders and prime ministers of Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, and Lebanon.

Prior to the summits, Xi conducted bilateral talks with leaders from Kuwait, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, and Palestine.

According to diplomats, the Chinese delegation would sign agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOU) with several states besides Saudi Arabia, [which signed MOU with Huawei on building high-tech complexes in Saudi cities as well as on cloud computing](#). The Chinese tech-giant Huawei has been involved in building 5G networks in most Gulf states, chafing at U.S. concerns over security risks in using its technology.

China is already the single-largest trade partner for most Middle Eastern countries, except for Israel, where the Chinese lag far behind the United States.

Yet the Middle East is a modest player in China’s global trade. For example, the past 10 years saw just about six percent of China’s exports go to the region, and about seven percent of China’s imports hailed from the Middle East.

That being said, the Middle East is still politically useful for Beijing, as the region offers access to oil and natural gas as well as a strategic global position.

Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, almost a quarter of all Middle Eastern exports of oil and oil products went to China, as did 12 percent of the Gulf’s liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports.

For all the Gulf countries, China is generally regarded as a customer with a broad manufacturing base and a huge appetite for carbon fuels, unlike Europe, where energy-hungry manufacturing is declining as a result of globalist “green” policies. In contrast to the Chinese government, European governments keep pledging the rapid downfall of the carbon economy, to the chagrin of the Gulf states.

The Gulf energy giant’s esteem for China was evidenced in 2015, when King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ascended to the throne. His first foreign trip as king was to China, mirroring the view of all Middle Eastern oil and natural gas producers that China is their best hope for the future. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has only enhanced China’s position in the energy sector.



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China has sought to maintain cordial relations with all state actors in the Middle East and so has no formal alliances with any country. As Chinese officials and foreign policy specialists like to highlight, Beijing's Middle East strategy is to establish partnerships rather than alliances. By declining to take sides in conflicts or restricting its diplomatic interventions to generalities such as urges for "unity and harmony" among Arab states or "a peaceful solution to the Palestinian problem," China can be touted to be a security "free-rider" in the region.

If Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen target Saudi cities with missiles, people would be quick to accuse the United States of either failing to defend Saudi Arabia or failing to prevent the Yemeni civil war. Few, if any, would question what China would be doing.

Also, although China is one of Iran's key economic and military partners, the Chinese were also permitted to buy Israel's biggest port on the Mediterranean Sea with few questions.

In short, most of the liabilities in the Middle East remain with the United States, whereas most of the benefits go to China.

China can get away with such a "free-riding" approach as it leverages an entrenched sense of anti-Western resentment. Even the pro-Western governments in the Arab world can use the Chinese presence as additional bargaining chips.

Observers have contrasted Saudi Arabia's warm welcome of Xi with its awkward encounter with U.S. President Joe Biden this past July. After all, Biden told Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that he held him responsible for [the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi](#), and has recently been asking him to help reduce oil prices by boosting production. As expected, the prince [ignored the U.S. request](#).



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