

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

The Middle East: China Venturing into the Maelstrom

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit this month to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, the first by a Chinese leader to the Middle East in seven years, acknowledges growing Chinese concerns about instability in the region that potentially threatens vital Chinese interests. It demonstrates Beijing's difficulty in maintaining its policy of non-interference while expanding economic cooperation.

Commentary

CHINESE PRESIDENT Xi Jinping has effectively acknowledged that increasingly China will be unable to remain aloof to multiple crises in the Middle East by deciding to visit the region - at a time that two of its major powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are at loggerheads. It was only last year that Xi dropped plans to visit the region after a Gulf alliance headed by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Yemen. Xi feared at the time that his visit would be seen as taking sides.

Since then, China has signalled its grudging recognition that it no longer can limit relations to economic ties and has no choice but to play a greater role in Middle Eastern affairs. A long-standing supporter of President Bashar Al-Assad, China has recently sought to position itself as a mediator in the brutal Syrian conflict by inviting representatives of the government and the opposition to visit Beijing.

US Remains Top Dog

Chinese interest in Syria is fuelled by the rise of Islamic State (IS) that has singled China out as one of its targets, the group's demonstrated ability to launch attacks across the globe, and the fact that hundreds of Uighurs, a rebellious Turkic Muslim

ethnic group in northwest China, have joined the ranks of IS as foreign fighters. IS recently broadcast its first Chinese-language recruitment video. In November, IS executed a Chinese national.

Like in Syria where a negotiated settlement that would put an end to the violence remains elusive, Xi is likely to find that there is little incentive for a resolution of the Saudi-Iranian dispute. Saudi Arabia, in its current defiant mood and willingness to pursue a risky foreign policy and military strategy in a bid to force the United States to re-engage in the Middle East, has little reason to resolve its dispute with Iran. Iran meanwhile is riding high with the lifting of punitive international sanctions as part of the implementation of its agreement to dismantle its potential military nuclear capabilities.

Beyond realising that neither Saudi Arabia, China's foremost oil supplier, nor Iran, with whom China has long had close relations are interested in serious mediation, Xi is likely to discover that the United States remains the only power potentially capable of managing the dispute even if appears unwilling at this stage to get involved more deeply.

Ironically, Xi's visit at a time of rising tension in the Middle East, coupled with China's efforts to mediate in Syria, denotes the significance of this month's publication of China's Arab Policy Paper with its stress on upholding traditional Chinese foreign policy principles that are increasingly being challenged in the Middle East and focus on energy and economic cooperation. The paper is China's first articulation of a policy towards the Middle East. However, rather than spelling out specific policies it emphasises in generalities China's core focus in its relations with the Arab world: economics, energy, counterterrorism, security, technical cooperation and its One Belt, One Road initiative.

Domestic Hindrances

Xi's visit to the Middle East is nonetheless aimed at more than securing China's energy imports, countering terrorism and discussing infrastructure projects to further his Silk Road initiative. It constitutes a recognition that China needs to become a player in the Middle East as part of the protection of its interests and if it wants to be taken seriously as a major power. Arab officials and pundits have long demanded that China act as a superpower and adopt a more active role in the region.

Yet, in doing so, China like the US with its close ties to Israel, is also hindered by domestic considerations in its approach to the Middle East. Taking sides in the Middle East is a risky business and in China could have negative repercussions in Xinjiang. As a result, China has long been careful not to adopt positions that would upset Turkey because of the latter's close ties to the Uighurs who speak a Turkic language.

China's recent anti-terrorism law nevertheless constitutes a first step towards greater Chinese engagement. The law allows the Chinese military to stage overseas counterterrorism operations provided it has the agreement from the relevant country. Similarly, China is establishing its first military base in Djibouti. The policy paper further says China intends to "strengthen exchange of visits of military officials,

expand military personnel exchange, deepen cooperation on weapons, equipment and various specialized technologies, and carry out joint military exercises” with Arab countries.

Xi is likely to conclude from his visit that dabbling in the Middle East is easier said than done. Engagement in a region that is fraught with ethnic conflict and political disputes that frequently are cloaked in religious terms is not something to which China has had much exposure. If anything, its efforts to suppress dissent in Xinjiang hold out little promise for Chinese deftness in seeking to lower tensions or resolve conflicts in the Middle East. Moreover, it will take more than promises that China is not seeking hegemony in the Middle East to enable it to manage the region’s multiple pitfalls.

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Wurzburg, Germany.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg