

**“INCREASED CHINA-GCC ENGAGEMENT:
WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. DO?”
SUMMARY OF A
‘MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE (MEI) WEBINAR**



14 DECEMBER 2022



OVERVIEW

Xi Jinping’s recent visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has managed to attract a great deal of worldwide interest – occurring as it did amid China’s expanding ties with MENA countries, the regional states’ more assertive and independent foreign policy postures, strained relations between Washington and Riyadh, and US-China great power competition.

In a MEI webinar, moderated by Johnathan Fulton (*Assistant Professor of Political Science at Zayed University in the UAE*), a panel composed of a number of regional experts looked at ways in which increased Chinese engagement across the GCC fits into Beijing’s overall ‘grand strategy’ for the region, and what the Gulf states hope to gain from this relationship. The panel also discussed how increased China-GCC relations will affect the U.S. policy approach toward this complicated yet geo-strategically vital region.

Interestingly, the tone adopted by the panel and especially former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas Freeman who had worked as the main interpreter for Richard Nixon during his historic 1972 visit to China – contrary to the current anti-Chinese rhetoric adopted by recent US administrations, was neither critical or hostile towards China.

The moderator, Johnathan Fulton who has been a resident of UAE since 2004, expressed his regrets because of the fact that the panel he was moderating did not include a speaker from one of the GCC states. He also criticized certain media coverage of Xi Jinping’s visit that had termed it as the first KSA/GCC-China Summit, saying that the media had forgotten its own coverage of past meetings that had taken place at previous times. Fulton was of the view that the visit had also taken at a time of what he called, “Massive disconnect between Washington and the region”. However, he was of the view that unlike current thinking in Washington, regional states including

Israel did not see China as a threat but more of an opportunity, given especially that China was now the region's number one economic partner (as opposed to the US which is the region's number one security partner).

In short, prior to the start of the session, Fulton did manage to set the scene for the discussion by suggesting that in an atmosphere where after China, India and Japan were the region's greatest economic partners (bearing in mind that the US was now no longer dependent on Gulf oil and was in fact a competitor with the region in the energy market) , there was nonetheless no question that neither China or anyone else had anything like Washington's current network of alliances and partnerships in the region.

KEY COMMENTS FROM THE PANELLISTS

1. **SUN DEGANG** (*Professor of Political Science, Institute of International Studies, Director of Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Fudan University*)
 - Xi's visit was a huge success but the bigger picture centres around the future of emerging links between the GCC and 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization' (SCO).
 - The visit also marked a departure for the GCC from its previous dependence on the West to a new position of strategic autonomy.
 - While in 2022, a number of Western leaders have visited the region (Boris Johnson in March, US Vice President Harris in May, President Biden in July and German Chancellor Schultz in September), there is little doubt that the GCC is looking much more towards the East as the SCO tries to expand Westwards.
 - With China as the region's number one economic partner (with trade amounting to US\$ 306 billion), moves towards closer GCC-SCO ties (as well as greater GCC-Central Asia relations) have also coincided with closer cooperation with Russia in the context of 'OPEC+'.
 - Indeed, the Russian Foreign Minister, Lavrov has already made 3 visits to the region in 2022.
 - Iran's recent membership of the SCO has also provided another point of interest to the GCC for greater collaboration at a time when Japan and India are increasing their own various involvements (labour, trade and military sales) with the region and as China expands its cooperation with countries like Iran and Iraq through the signing of long-term strategic agreements.

2. **CHAS FREEMAN** (*Chair, Projects International Inc.; former senior US diplomat and Ambassador to Saudi Arabia*)

- The US has enjoyed a long and positive history with the GCC countries, while China's ties with the region are relatively more recent.
- However, it is a fact that recent US-GCC relations have been uneasy and somewhat problematic.
- In the name of economic competition, the US is now waging a global economic and technological war against China with the aim of trying to reverse China's gains.
- In the context of the GCC, the strengthening of China-GCC ties has nothing to do with any kind of Chinese military ambitions in the Middle East.
- The US expects GCC to adapt to America's anti-Chinese and anti-Russian narrative while at the same time ignoring Israel's blatant racism and gratuitous mistreatment of its 'captive population'.
- While America's arms sales to the region is being used as a lever of influence, it is a fact that China for its part has made no political demands of any GCC country with the exception of seeking their respect for Chinese claims to its sovereign territories - i.e., Taiwan.
- This is at a time when the US is competing with the GCC in the energy market while China is the region's number one client in this field.
- It has to be borne in mind that at this time, some 20,000 Arab students are in China where 16 Universities also teach the Arabic language.
- KSA has for its part, now added the teaching of Mandarin Chinese to its school curriculum
- Until recently, China had not wanted to compete with the US but policies of economic warfare seems to have convinced Beijing that it can no longer ignore America's

Indicator	US (%)	China (%)
Favored as a superpower	7	23
Favorable country to live	7	8
Preferred country to study	20	2
The country posing the biggest threat (2010) to the category of 36 yrs and over	80	4
Acceptance of it as a mediator to settle the problems of the Arab region	11	49
Acceptance of it as a mediator to settle international problems	8	51
General attitude toward the country (positive)	20	62
Would develop economic relations with it	24	54
More aid to Arab countries	48	57
The position of the elites on strengthening the relationship with the country	21	34
Taking a just position on the Palestine issue	8	88

'Zero Sum Gain' calculations

(see table on the subject of a study depicting how GCC states view China and the US on some issues):

- The fact that since the end of the Cold War, the US is seen by the Arab world to be somehow connected with the death of some 4 million Arabs is a factor. In Arab eyes, despite the mistreatment of Uyghurs Chinese Moslems in Xinjiang, China is not seen in the same light.
- While US military presence in the region may be a source of comfort for some GCC leaders, it is a huge source of resentment for the ordinary citizens.
- China has been taking part in military exercises with Iran and some GCC states – something that is seen as a provocative gesture by the US and its Western allies.
- This is at a time when military spending by key GCC countries have ranged from 8% of the GDP (Oman), to 4% (Qatar) and finally some 6% for KSA and UAE.
- For the US to compete with China, it is essential for the US to restore its non-military manufacturing base as well as rediscovering non-military instruments of statecraft and backing them with something more than rhetoric.
- Moreover, the US needs to show greater respect for the interests of its partners in the GCC as a well as adopting a more generous policies in the field of technology transfers.
- Sadly, the prospects for taking these steps at this time are poor!

3. **GRANT RUMLEY** (*Goldberger Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy*)

- Seen from the perspective of having worked at the Pentagon, there is no question that there now exists a major disconnect between Washington and the GCC region.
- People in the GCC region see China as an opportunity and not an adversary. But opportunities always come with a cost!
- The US does not need to compete with China at every level.
- In truth. there is no need for competition on the economic front.

- On the security front, it is a different matter and a case can be made for America's 'red lines' (e.g., sale of Chinese drones or granting of 5G licenses to Huawei).
- However, those red lines need to be clarified in no uncertain terms – something that has not yet happened.
- Today the messaging between the US and the GCC is not good, especially given the fact that China cannot under any circumstance provide the GCC with any kind of security guarantees.

4. **ANDREA GHISELLI** (*Assistant Professor, School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University*)

- For its part, the Chinese have no need for wanting to react in any way to US provocations, given that they can simply continue doing what they have been doing.
- It is quite possible that China may not have the same level of ambition in the GCC region as the US. This is because China has its own various problems in areas nearer to home and the fact that the GCC is not considered to be a critical region for Chinese long-term interests.
- Some local actors in the GCC may try to over emphasize China's role for their own purposes such as the reference made in a recent communique that was released following Xi's departure from KSA on the subject of the of the 3 so-called Arab islands that have been in possession of Iran since the early 1970s.
- China, for its part, is anxious to protect its interests in the region having seen how a UN Security Council Resolution calling for a no-fly zone in Libya was used to promote regime change in that country oblivious to China's ongoing economic interest – something that had left the Chinese authorities a sense of betrayal.
- While increased levels of Chines-Russia-Iranian cooperation in the region is not very likely in the near term for various obvious reasons, the Chinese seem content not to react in any meaningful way to various adverse US assertions against them.

