How China Aims to Navigate the Complex Middle East

While China has already made its mark in the Middle East and is already outsmarting the US, the recently signed China-Iran pact is perhaps the biggest economic venture China has made in the Middle East so far. However, while China does have big ambitions with respects to its economic engagement with countries in West Asia, Middle East remains a deeply complex region beset by multiple layers of inter and intra-state conflicts and rivalries. While the region has been complexing for all powers, this is even more complex for China given that its ambitions include balanced relations with all countries, including as bitter rivals as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the crucial question for China in the Middle East is not if it can establish itself economically, but if it can build ties with rival states without getting embroiled in the existing conflicts? How can the Chinese policy makers insulate their economic ties with rival states from tensions, and avoid intentionally and/or unintentionally succumbing to and reinforcing the same?

China appears to have developed a navigation strategy that includes, amongst other things, bi-lateral non-interference in political matters. In other words, whereas China has offered economic partnership to both Saudi Arabia and Iran, it continues to avoid language that seeks to play a mediatory role, or emphasise reconciliation. In other words, China has tactfully refrained from emphasising peace in the Middle East as a pre-condition for its economic investment. On the contrary, China has developed a strategy whereby it emphasises economic development more than it mentions political and ideological rivalries. By doing so, China hopes to avoid getting caught in the complex web of tensions.
As mentioned above, a guiding principal for China is bi-lateral non-interference. As such, by charting a course of action that does not rely on regional politics, China has been able to obtain Gulf and Arab states’ support for Uyghur issue as well.

For instance, after Chinese foreign minister’s recent meetings with Saudia’s top officials, China’s state media announced that “Wang and Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on Wednesday agreed to oppose any interference in the internal affairs of other countries”.... And that “Mohammed said Saudi Arabia firmly supports China’s legitimate position on affairs related to Xinjiang and Hong Kong, opposes interference in China’s internal affairs under any pretext, and rejects the attempt by certain parties to sow dissent between China and the Islamic world.”

As such, where China has refrained from succumbing to the pressure that the Biden administration is putting on Muhammad Bin Salman for his involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, MBS, too, has largely accepted China’s position vis-à-vis the Uyghur Muslims. This is nothing short of a tactical convergence that serves both countries in the face of the well-known US position with regards to both issues.

What is obvious here is the fact China is following a path that stresses economic interest over political and democratic values. This strategy, the Chinese policy makers believe, will help them escape the quagmire that other states, including the US, have not been able to avoid. China’s foreign minister, Wang Yi, while visiting six Middle Eastern countries in late March, deplored “the bad consequences” that “external interference” has inflicted on the region. China, as it stands, is following a policy that is essentially non-interventionist.

This strategy is a continuation of what China’s Xi had said in his 2016 address to the Arab League. President Xi Jinping said that China sought no spheres of influence or geopolitical proxies in the region. Instead, he described a vision of progress built around economic growth, declaring that “Turmoil in the Middle East stems from the lack of development.”

While Chinese officials have recently been talking about China playing a “due role” in promoting long-term peace and stability in the region, it remains that China, unlike Russia and the US, has no intention of jumping into these conflicts to “resolve” them. China, on the contrary, aims to help “manage” these conflicts in ways that can prevent any escalation. Any military escalation in the Middle East will inevitably have consequences for Chinese interests as well; hence, China’s policy of limited engagement to void getting overwhelmed by geo-political tensions.

It is for this reason that China’s involvement in managing the JCPOA issue and its multi-billion dollar pact with Iran is unlikely to raise eye-brows in Riyadh. Riyadh, despite its bitter opposition to Iran and China’s close ties with the latter, has been able to carve out its own space and secure US$28 billion in economic cooperation agreements with Beijing.

A lot of what is China is also being facilitated by the fact that these Gulf states are themselves looking to rely on China to diversify their economies. As it stands, in a post-Khashoggi world, where Riyadh’s long-time bond with the US is facing its biggest crisis in years, the kingdom is working to ensure it has a range of options at its disposal. With falling oil prices and a highly fossil-fuel dependent economy, the Kingdom is also racing against the clock to diversify its revenue streams and bolster partnerships with larger powers to secure trade. China, therefore, becomes a handy option.

Iran, too, has its own economic needs to address and cannot afford to lose Chinese economic support by unnecessarily mixing regional geo-political tensions with economic development.

This explains how China has been able to simultaneously become the largest trade partner of Saudia and the biggest foreign investor in Iran. China has apparently pulled off an exceptional feat that on other super-power has been able to do so far.

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