

*Toward Well-Oiled Relations? China's Presence in the Middle East following the Arab Spring*

Edited by NIV HORESH

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Less than a year after the 2010 revolt in Tunisia kicked off the so-called Arab Spring, the Obama administration announced the “pivot to Asia,” a rebalancing of US military forces out of the Middle East. This shift in military assets coincided with a dramatic surge in hydraulic fracturing or “fracking” in the continental US, diminishing America’s reliance on Middle Eastern oil. Taken together, these developments signalled a decrease in US political and military engagement in the region. As Washington has divested from the region, China has surpassed the US as the world’s largest importer of oil, and, correspondingly, has taken a greater interest in the Middle East, prompting scholars and policymakers alike to ask whether Beijing will attempt to fill the vacuum.

A new volume of essays edited by Niv Horesh of the University of Nottingham takes a deep dive into China’s increasingly robust involvement in the region, assessing the Middle Kingdom’s Middle East policy and the implications for its relations with the United States. One recurring theme is whether the interaction between China and the US will be competitive or collaborative. *Toward Well-Oiled Relations* is an uneven amalgam of articles, but most of the contributions are well conceived and provide insight into China’s regional strategy. The book consists of 14 chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, covering a series of topics primarily divided by country, while a few of the sections provide a broader, region-wide policy context.

The study covers a lot of territory, but topics frequently overlap. For example, one section deals with China’s relations with Gulf Cooperation Council states, another with Beijing’s oil policy. There are also two chapters that assess China’s bilateral ties with Turkey and two dealing with Iran. Yet another Turkey-related (but not Middle East-focused) chapter concerns China and its Uyghur population. In addition to these discussions, there is a very dense statistics-driven chapter focused on Chinese–Egyptian relations, a treatment of China’s complicated balancing act between the Iraqi central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government in oil-rich Erbil, and a section about the motivations behind the Israeli right’s flirtation with Beijing.

Some of the repetition is frustrating, but the book provides useful context and perspective on the policy considerations and challenges for Beijing. Both Christina Lin and Zan Tao’s contributions consider the growing appeal of China – and membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) over the EU and NATO – for Turkey. Lin describes this Turkish tack as “Eurasian sentiment” (p. 32), driven by Ankara’s efforts to strengthen its defence posture. In his chapter on the Uyghurs, Robert Bianchi points out that President Erdogan – who had been so vocally sympathetic to China’s Muslims in 2009 – ultimately “traded economic gains” for quiescence on Uyghur issues (p. 49). Along these lines, Mohammed Shareef, in his chapter on Iraq, notes that China’s burgeoning contacts with the Kurds provide Beijing with leverage to dissuade Ankara from future meddling with Chinese Muslims.

The book also provides useful insight into China’s oil policy and its strategy of forging economic ties in the region. Shareef, for example, points to China’s willingness to pay higher prices per barrel than other states, in order to secure long term contracts

and access to oil. Yasser Gadallah describes how Beijing funded a US\$20 million administrative services centre in Cairo to help Chinese investors overcome Egypt's Byzantine bureaucracy. Horesh discusses how Israeli defence sales – including perhaps the design for China's J-10 fighter jets – paved the way for a Chinese state owned enterprise's purchase of a majority stake in Israel's largest dairy company, Tnuva. Neil Quilliam examines whether Beijing can develop its currently transactional regional relationships focused on oil into strategic partnerships.

Among the most valuable contributions in the volume are the chapters by (Washington Institute colleague) Michael Singh, and John Garver. Singh provides a useful overview of Chinese and US interests in the Middle East, and a thoughtful discussion of the challenges and opportunities of China's foray into the region. Garver's chapter on Iran is comprehensive, making a compelling argument that the Sino-Iran bilateral relationship is about "two ambitious emerging powers" that see one another as "potential and important partners in...a forthcoming era in which the US role in the world is much reduced" (p. 180). Of particular interest is Garver's treatment of how China "split the difference" on Iranian nukes, satisfying both Washington and Tehran through the sanctions era *en route* to the nuclear agreement.

Today, even as China's interest and influence in the Middle East is growing, the state remains a "free rider," benefitting from the ongoing albeit diminished US security umbrella in the Gulf. For the time being, with limited ability to project power, this volume suggests that Beijing is likely to cooperate with Washington. Indeed, the book concludes optimistically – and without much substantiation – that "[f]aced with growing threat of radicalization, China has tacitly shown more willingness to help the US combat ISIS in the Middle East, thereby upping the ante for a new type [of] Sino-American partnership" (p. 224). To be sure, China is increasingly concerned with Islamic radicalism, but with the exception of the chapter on Uyghurs and a passing assertion that Beijing views Turkish Islam as a "bulwark against extremism" (p. 26) this book largely avoids the topic of China and ISIS/al Qaida. While the study would have benefitted from a more comprehensive discussion of Beijing's views and responses to radical Islam in the region, the volume provides a solid overview of the key issues emerging from China's expanding Middle East presence.

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*China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*

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Within the sea of literature on Chinese engagements across African countries, Howard French offers an informative reading revealing many aspects of the complex Sino-African relationship. Through personal stories, French shows the dimensions of the "migration decision" as well as the co-existence – with all its contrasts – of different cultures, in particular, work cultures. Many Chinese who decide to move to Africa leave China "because of the pressures of life back home" (p. 132), including marriage, finding a job, earning as much as to provide financial support for parents