



China's emerging role in the Middle East

by Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Important shifts are occurring in the Middle East, just as China is re-positioning itself in this vital region.

Politics could explode as tensions grow between Christians and Muslims and international terrorism increases, amidst a worsening and increasingly uncertain Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the region holds more than half of the world's oil and gas reserves, which are necessary to feed China's (and India's) economic growth, as well as world prosperity and economic growth.

The recent visit of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to the East is noteworthy. The newly anointed Saudi monarch visited China, India, Malaysia, and Pakistan in a whirlwind visit to Asia and key Muslim nations, even before going to Washington, which still considers the Saudi kingdom a key ally in the Middle East and the linchpin of U.S. strategic policy in the region.

The king's visit to Beijing was focused on China's energy needs; both countries signed an agreement to expand cooperation in the oil, natural gas, and minerals industries, laying the groundwork for Beijing to secure vital energy supplies from the world's largest oil exporter. In New Delhi, the Saudi monarch assured India of a stable and increased volume of crude supplies, made available under a "strategic energy partnership." China's thirst for Saudi oil and gas is clear, and there is a "mutual recognition of benefits" between the world's fastest growing energy buyer and the world's biggest supplier. Meanwhile, the Saudis also noticed increased cooperation between the two Asian giants in tapping oil and gas sources to fuel their respective economies.

Beijing took the unusual step of assuring Washington that it was not creating a new alliance with Riyadh against U.S. vital interests; the Saudis probably did the same. The Saudis have not have forgotten the rough diplomatic patch with Washington of the past two years, when some in DC accused the House of Saud of "sponsoring" international terrorism through its Muslim foundations and charities. This episode apparently traumatized the Saudis and they realized that it was opportune to "diversify" this "strategic partnership" and their financial holdings as well.

Economics has primed this "new partnership" between Beijing and Riyadh, but there also appears to be a strategic and political background to this shift. Realism brought Abdullah to the world's largest communist country, even though the Saudi royal house was traditionally "reserved" toward communism. Business and politics appear to have mixed well in Sino-Saudi ties, as both sides seek a "new partnership" to counter Muslim extremism, as in post-Sept. 11 Sino-U.S. relations.

At the same time, the latest Palestinian elections dealt a blow to U.S. diplomacy in the region, and especially to President George W. Bush's vision of "open markets and democracy in the Middle East." Hamas' clear victory in the election was a setback not only to the mainstream Fatah, but was also an apparent rebuke to the U.S. presence and influence in Israeli-Palestinian politics.

Washington's (and the West's) threat to reduce aid to Palestine, if Hamas does not renounce the destruction of Israel, disarm and stop sponsoring terrorism, was ridiculed in the Muslim world. Many Muslims saw this threat as a double standard, just as radical Muslims charge Washington with supporting corrupt governments in the Middle East, as was alleged in the case with Fatah.

The U.S. must conduct a major public relations exercise to re-conquer lost ground within Muslim public opinion, from the Middle East to Indonesia and Malaysia. President Bush's State of the Union address, which underscored Washington's desire not to retreat into "the false comfort of isolationism" but "fight tyranny in the world," is reassuring, only if Washington can win the hearts and minds of Muslim public opinion. Americans must fight radical Islam strategically; Bush admitted as much in his address when he said although freedom would spread across the Middle East, "their democracies may not necessarily look like ours."

China (and Russia's) active diplomacy in Iran also appears significant, as they try to convince Tehran to abandon its nuclear option; both Beijing and Moscow have asked the West to allow diplomacy to work via a postponement of sanctions until March, even though Iran has been referred to the UN Security Council for not complying with the International Atomic Energy Agency specifications.

Iran's defiance, despite appeals from Beijing, is still met by Chinese and Russian determination to maintain a direct diplomatic line to Tehran. Moscow and Beijing have been roped in to "soften" Tehran and not confront the West openly, just as relations between Iran and Syria get closer.

Damascus, which sees itself under threat of a U.S. attack owing to the crisis following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the ensuing UN inquiry, which implicated Syrian leaders, remains defiant. The Syria-Iran axis may endanger the West as well as Arab governments that are perceived to be too closely aligned to the U.S., a factor in the Saudi "re-positioning" as well.

The Iranian-Syrian axis would have come out in discussions between the Saudis and Chinese, as the former fear that the radical axis could endanger conservative sheikdoms and moderate Arab governments across the Middle East. Beijing is seen as a possible moderator, thanks to its direct line to Tehran, although China's clout in Syria is

purportedly weak. Arab governments are therefore keeping an eye on how the West (and China) resolve the Iranian and Syrian imbroglios, just as they wait out the full ramifications of the latest uproar from the “insulting cartoons” (on Prophet Mohammed), published by Danish, Norwegian, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and other European newspapers.

Many moderate Muslims see this episode as a further radicalization of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West, which is a worrisome trend for them. For the moment, Beijing has been silent on this issue. China has its own 55-million strong Muslim community to contend with, although it has also seen it as inopportune to get involved in this controversy, especially if it wants to maintain sound relations with the Muslim world.

The re-positioning of the Middle East has thus begun with a search for a more “balanced” strategy between East and West, as the Saudi monarch’s visit clearly symbolized, not only because Asia and China have become economic partners, but also because of China’s growing strategic clout. Middle Eastern governments could not have missed Bush’s emphasis in his State of the Union address to move the United States away from its “foreign oil addiction,” thus reducing its dependency on Middle Eastern oil. Though domestic in thrust, there are strategic implications for U.S.-Middle East relations.

Unlike Washington, Beijing has imposed no stringent moral code on Middle Eastern countries. Beijing thus appears as a more accommodating partner than the U.S.

China is also re-positioning itself diplomatically in the Middle East as a strategic counterweight to Washington, as well as to effectively prevent any possible containment of China (which Chinese leaders truly believe in!) from its western flank, through the ex-Soviet Republics (as re-grouped under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO) and the crucial, yet explosive, Middle East.

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