

China's Foreign Minister Tours the Middle East: Outcomes and Implications

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Brief Analysis

The trip echoed Beijing's strategy of stringing together initiatives that seem insubstantial on their own but cumulatively threaten to undermine U.S. and regional interests.

In the last week of March, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi embarked on a weeklong visit to six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, Bahrain, and Oman. The trip aimed to highlight the region's growing importance in China's foreign policy and bolster Beijing's local appeal—not coincidentally, at a time when the United States is seeking to pivot away from the Middle East and focus on strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Key Outcomes

Wang started his trip in Saudi Arabia, where he proposed a “[Five-Point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East \(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1864767.shtml\)](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1864767.shtml).” The plan touched on pertinent issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear program, wider proliferation concerns, maritime security, counterterrorism, economic development, vaccine cooperation, and post-conflict reconstruction. China has emphasized these same issues for the past several years, so the plan does not offer any fresh information about its regional intentions. It does, however, seek to portray Beijing as a responsible great power that understands key local issues.

When Wang reached the UAE, a deal was signed allowing the Emirati firm G42 to begin domestically producing about 200 million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. Beijing has already distributed vaccine doses to seventeen countries in the Middle East, but this venture marks the first agreement for overseas production, fulfilling what Wang called China's “commitment to make vaccines a global public good.” The deal also signifies Beijing's trust in the UAE as a potential access point for incremental Chinese expansion in the region's development and

strategic sectors.

In addition, Wang agreed to establish a data security cooperation initiative with the Arab League in order to boost joint efforts on 5G, artificial intelligence, and big data. Details remain nebulous, but the deal is reminiscent of Beijing's "[Global Data Security Initiative \(https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/digichina/blog/translation-chinese-proposes-global-data-security-initiative/\)](https://www.newamerica.org/cybersecurity-initiative/digichina/blog/translation-chinese-proposes-global-data-security-initiative/)," a counter to the U.S.-led "Clean Network" program that has raised concerns about the security implications of Huawei's 5G infrastructure and other Chinese tech services.

More broadly, Wang emphasized the goal of synergizing Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with local development projects. He also raised the prospect of a potential Chinese free trade agreement with the Middle East.

While in Iran, Wang signed an oft-announced "Comprehensive Cooperation Plan" that serves as a roadmap for bilateral cooperation on security, economics, and cultural exchange. According to an [Iranian Foreign Ministry fact sheet \(https://amwaj.media/article/iran-china-strategic-comprehensive-partnership\)](https://amwaj.media/article/iran-china-strategic-comprehensive-partnership), specific areas of collaboration may include infrastructure, petrochemicals, energy, counterterrorism, the BRI, and technology.

Key Themes

Three main themes dominated the trip. First, Wang consistently hailed China's role as a champion of developing nations and a partner in times of need. According to this view, Beijing understands the needs of Middle Eastern countries better than other partners do because it belongs to the same "Global South" background.

Second, Wang reinforced Beijing's opposition to foreign intervention. Implicitly referring to the United States, he stated, "China encourages countries in the region to stay impervious to external pressure and interference, to independently explore development paths suited to their regional realities." He also implored them to "break free from the shadows of big-power geopolitical rivalry and resolve regional conflicts and differences as masters of the region

Third, Wang asserted Beijing's expectation that Middle Eastern countries show respect for China's core interests, avoid interfering with its domestic politics, and support the Chinese Communist Party when it faces Western criticism. In this vein, he expressed gratitude for regional backing of the "One China" policy and Beijing's "counterterrorism measures" against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. "The situation of a country's human rights shall be judged by its people rather than other countries based on their own preferences," he declared, then claimed that "the views of human rights held by some Western countries are not representative of the international perspective." This statement came on the heels of Western sanctions targeting Beijing's suppression of the Uyghurs, which the U.S. government regards as genocide. For their part, Arab officials generally applauded China's actions as pushback against extremism, while Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu expressed "sensitivity and thoughts on Uyghur Turks."

Implications for China's Middle East Strategy

Although the outcomes of Wang's tour may not appear groundbreaking, they meticulously reiterated [China's regional strategy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/china-and-united-states-middle-east-between-dependency-and-rivalry\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/china-and-united-states-middle-east-between-dependency-and-rivalry) at an important moment in U.S. foreign policy. Beijing systematically uses economic benefits to boost its ties with the Middle East in what it calls a "new style of cooperation"—namely, one that does not infringe on domestic politics. Wang's emphasis on vaccines, energy, trade, investment, infrastructure, and technology was aimed at bolstering his government's image and credibility in the region while at the same time distinguishing China from other great powers that interfere in their domestic affairs, meaning the United States. Yet the unspoken reality is that such investments allow Beijing to project power, reap financial benefits, secure energy supplies, and expand its export markets, regardless of each regional partner's domestic interests.

Wang’s trip also demonstrated how China balances its regional relationships as it strives for strategic gains. For example, he visited both Iran and Saudi Arabia despite their animosity toward one another. And the five-point initiative he rolled out in Riyadh expressed support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran nuclear deal that the Saudis opposed when it was reached in 2015. Elsewhere, he offered to facilitate talks between Israel and the Palestinians while encouraging implementation of a two-state solution—commitments China has expressed in the past whenever it seeks to cast its regional role in a positive light without actually getting involved in regional disputes.

Thus, rather than dismissing Wang’s new Middle East initiatives as old hat, Washington should view them as cumulative “salami tactics”—a strategy in which each “slice” helps foster a favorable environment for Chinese power projection in the region without any single move being enough to provoke a U.S. response. The “Comprehensive Cooperation Plan” with Iran puts this point into sharp relief, since its language echoes previous Chinese cooperation agreements with Middle Eastern states. In short, Beijing is incrementally boosting its presence and strength in the region just as the United States attempts to counter Chinese hostilities in the Indo-Pacific.

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