

China and Mideast Leverage: Hiding in Plain Sight

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Washington still has good cards to play in terms of Iran’s destabilizing activities, the U.S. security umbrella over Gulf energy supplies, and Arab public opinion toward China and America.

For the past decade and more, [U.S. foreign policy, \(https://www.cfr.org/us-foreign-policy\)](https://www.cfr.org/us-foreign-policy) under Democratic and Republican presidents alike, has been struggling to “compete with China” through a “pivot to Asia”—and away from [the Middle East \(https://www.newslooks.com/blinden-wraps-up-middle-east-tour-after-cease-fire/\)](https://www.newslooks.com/blinden-wraps-up-middle-east-tour-after-cease-fire/). The reality, however, is that this slogan ignores two basic facts about today’s world. First, Mideast oil and gas are still vital to the global (and therefore also the American) economy, as the current supply crunch and price spikes demonstrate. Moreover, this will remain the case for decades to come, even as the world gradually transitions away from fossil fuels, whether for climate change, technological change, or other reasons.

Second, China remains highly dependent on energy imports from the Middle East, with but little prospect of major short-term shifts in that predicament. So too are the economies of almost all the major Asian countries—most of them key U.S. allies, but major trading partners of China as well. As a result, China has a great stake both in overall regional stability and in decent working relations with key rival regional states: from Iran, across to the Arab Gulf states, and on to Israel. Moreover, for China itself, just switching from coal to Mideast natural gas would be of the largest and fastest short-term benefit to easing the worldwide climate change crisis.

All of this makes the Middle East a crucial arena for both great power competition and global cooperation, not a distraction from them. At the same time, it makes China an emerging competitor of the United States for regional access and influence. But it also gives the U.S. indirect leverage over China, in three ways that are seldom properly

understood.

First, now that Iran is in clear breach of the 2015 nuclear deal, the U.S. can cite the specter of confrontation over Iran's nuclear program, which would destabilize the entire region and send energy prices soaring even higher, in order to persuade China to cooperate on this urgent problem. Washington should honestly tell Beijing, "We would all rather avoid such a confrontation if possible, but Iran is pushing toward it anyway."

Unilateral U.S. sanctions, whether against China or Iran, will demonstrably not be sufficient to bring Iran back into nuclear compliance; but bringing China on board via that common danger might tip the balance, as it did for the original nuclear deal with Iran. From occasional conversations with Chinese experts and diplomats, I suspect Beijing currently dismisses the prospect of such heavy pressure on Iran. Yet a combination of stronger U.S. declarations, selected arms sales and deployments, and private consultations could move China's calculations back in a better direction.

Second, the U.S. can leverage its protective security umbrella over the Gulf in order to convince China, and the Arab Gulf countries themselves, to tread more carefully there on issues of concern to Washington. China most likely wants to preserve its "free ride" regarding the security of its vital Mideast energy supplies. And the Gulf states know that only the U.S. offers them that protection of last resort. So, on sensitive issues of port and other infrastructure deals, arms sales, cyber and related hi-tech transfers, intelligence, and the like, the U.S. can continue to prevail—as it generally has in the parallel cases of Israel and others in the region.

Third, and most surprisingly, the U.S. maintains its strong regional position, relative to China, in terms of elite and public opinion. It is true that China has edged up in popular attitudes, as measured in actual surveys that I have regularly conducted across the region over the past decade. It is also true, as I know from private discussions with Arab interlocutors, that many of them are less certain lately about their reliance on the United States. A few have even spoken out publicly to reject the "false choice" between the U.S. and China.

Nevertheless, the latest polls prove that the local populations put the U.S. at least on a par with China as foreign countries with which "good relations are important"—even though many are dissatisfied with specific American policies. Other evidence supports that judgment. For all the loose talk about China's "soft power," Mideast peoples—whether Arabs, Israelis, Turks, Kurds, or even Iranians—still overwhelmingly prefer to learn English, study in the U.S., and view American movies, TV shows, and social media—not Chinese ones.

For the regional governments, this provides the margin for maneuver they need to keep the U.S. connection that they know is still key to their own survival in a very tough neighborhood. They can, with American acquiescence, enjoy solid economic ties with China. But they will largely accept, however grudgingly, some limits on that relationship if it encroaches on American support.

Moreover, in the case of the single largest Arab country, and one with rising ties to the Gulf—Egypt, which recently passed the 100-million-population mark—the U.S. continues to hold a clear advantage over China. This is the case, as both surveys and in-depth seminars suggest, at many relevant levels: popular, business elite, and official attitudes. This provides some added insurance that Chinese influence will not extend far into North Africa or the Mediterranean. And at least indirectly, it helps to contain Chinese inroads elsewhere in the broader region, as the Arab states traditionally friendly to the U.S. increasingly seek to coordinate their international orientations.

To be sure, none of the above will solve the serious problems of Sino-American competition over trade, Taiwan, human rights, and many other issues. All of that is well beyond the scope of this brief argument. Still, in the Mideast arena that remains vital to both major powers, the U.S. holds many good cards to play. And if those cards are played correctly, they will have beneficial spillover effects in the global great power competition.

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