Closing Washington's China Gap with Middle East Partners

by **Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)**

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Brief Analysis

For the first time in decades, America's top strategic priority diverges from that of its key regional partners, but Washington can close the gap by increasing their understanding of China and removing the blinders from their threat perceptions.

As U.S. policymakers have focused more on competition with China in recent years, their concerns over Middle East relations with Beijing have grown as well. This has contributed to a vicious cycle—growing Chinese influence and ambitions around the world result in decreased American attention to the Middle East, which in turn incentivizes U.S. regional partners to deepen their ties with Beijing, which in turn increases tensions with Washington and leads some to conclude that the Middle East is a lost cause. Underlying this dynamic are frequent suspicions of bad faith. Washington worries that its partners are cynically using China ties as leverage to extract favors from the United States or, worse, that they share an authoritarian affinity with Beijing; for their part, regional partners worry that Washington is either unreliable or so focused on domestic politics that it no longer ascribes strategic value to its Middle East relationships.

What these assumptions often neglect are two more fundamental differences. First, the parties differ substantially in the threat they perceive from Beijing. From the U.S. perspective, there is no greater threat than China's growing economic and military might and revisionist intentions. Yet Middle Eastern partners perceive only minor threats from China, if any. They are far more likely to see Beijing as a valuable trading partner and a benign, even helpful, political partner and occasional great-power counterweight, especially when faced with inconvenient U.S. demands. These differences mean that for the first time in decades, Washington and its regional partners sharply diverge on what they consider their primary national security threat.

Second, both sides differ in their capacity to understand China. In the modern era, Beijing has had little meaningful engagement in the Middle East, while regional elites have spent relatively little time there compared to other international capitals. Compounding this unfamiliarity is the scarce analytical capacity of most Middle Eastern

governments. Even Israel, the most capable regional intelligence ally, naturally directs most of its analytical resources toward what it considers its top threats (e.g., Iran and terrorism). This gap in understanding only widened over the past few years as the United States directed more of its resources toward the Indo-Pacific and China underwent historic political change, from dramatically concentrating domestic power to embracing a more ambitious foreign policy. The speed of these shifts has left Middle Eastern partners struggling to keep up.

Closing the Gap

Given these differences, America's numerous warnings about Chinese technology (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-retreat-china-5g-could-signal-growing-distance), military activities (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-security-presence-middle-east-redlines-and-guidelines-united-states), diplomatic initiatives (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-track-record-middle-east-diplomacy), and other matters tend to be received skeptically in the region. In many cases, partners view these messages as requests for favors to the United States with little connection to their own interests or priorities; in other cases, they believe they are being asked to act against their interests and essentially choose between Washington and Beijing. More cynically, U.S. requests have created leverage for partners to play the two great powers off one another in hopes of extracting maximal benefits from both.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that American concerns about China often straddle the boundaries of foreign policy, economics, and technology in ways that conversations about Iran, terrorism, and other traditional Middle East topics do not. This can place U.S. officials at a disadvantage, as they tend to be more specialized portfolio-wise than their regional counterparts (especially in the Persian Gulf) and may therefore know less about broader trade or technology matters—or even about U.S. policy on these global issues. In such cases, Middle Eastern officials will not hesitate to draw on their deeper knowledge to point out hypocrisy or double standards when rebuffing Washington's requests.

Attempting to close these analytical and policy gaps is a tall order and may prove quixotic in some respects. The increase in Middle East ties with Beijing stems not just from Washington pursuing the right or wrong policies, but also from deeper tectonic shifts that are unlikely to abate in the foreseeable future: namely, China's growing (and the West's declining) demand for oil, Beijing's determination to play a diplomatic (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assessing-xi-jinpings-middle-east-trip) and security role in the region, and the decreasing importance of Middle Eastern conflicts in Washington's national security strategy. Yet none of this should dissuade U.S. policymakers from doing what they can to reach a better mutual understanding with regional partners on the China challenge.

Policy Recommendations

In light of all these factors, the U.S. government should take the following steps:

Doctor, heal thyself. First and foremost, the State Department should reconsider its recent "China watcher" model at U.S. embassies in the Middle East, under which officers with specialized training are designated to handle issues related to great power competition. This program was based on the "Iran watcher" program of the early 2000s, but unlike that relatively narrow portfolio, China competition has come to dominate U.S. national security strategy and should be treated accordingly. All American diplomats overseas need to understand the key tenets of U.S. policy toward Beijing and have at least a basic grounding in Washington's concerns about trade, technology, and related matters—particularly the steps that have been taken to restrict Chinese trade and investment. Some of this training is already taking place, but it must be accelerated and greatly expanded.

Creating a China knowledge network. The U.S. intelligence community should partner with allies in the Indo-

Pacific (e.g., Japan and Australia) to train their Middle Eastern counterparts—especially in the Gulf—on China analysis. This training should not focus specifically on Beijing's policy in the region, but rather on broader issues such as China's civil-military fusion, recent domestic changes, and problematic activities worldwide (e.g., espionage, cyberattacks, influence operations, technology transfer). The ultimate purpose should be to cultivate a network of China experts in Middle Eastern governments and provide them with the tools and data to vet China-related risks to their national interests, while keeping relevant channels open so they can turn to their U.S. counterparts when needed. To make this initiative less provocative to Beijing—and, by extension, more likely to elicit regional participation—the training should also focus on other global challenges such as Russia and Iran.

Replicate the U.S.-Israel Strategic Technology Dialogue. In September 2022, Washington and Jerusalem launched a bilateral "Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology." Led by two countries' national security advisors, the interagency group's mandate covers clean energy technology, pandemic preparedness, artificial intelligence, and other tech issues. Although China was not mentioned in statements announcing **the group's initial meeting (https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/30/fact-sheet-u-s-israel-strategic-high-level-dialogue-on-technology/)** or latest talks **(https://www.state.gov/united-states-israel-strategic-technology-dialogue/)** , it was undoubtedly what spurred the dialogue's creation, as U.S. concerns over Israeli tech cooperation with Beijing had become a **significant irritant (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-new-israeli-governments-china-policy)** in the relationship. The United States should consider replicating this model with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps Qatar. Although their tech sectors are not as well-developed as Israel's, all three are investing heavily on this front and have partnered extensively with Beijing in ways concerning to Washington. If the bilateral dialogues prove viable and successful, Washington should consider combining them into a multilateral framework.

Reframe threat perceptions. Despite demarche after demarche, even America's closest partners in the Middle East simply do not see China as a threat to their interests (apart from the friction that their Chinese ties are creating with Washington, perhaps). This is not to say they are blindly trusting of Beijing's intentions, merely that they do not view its actions as threatening. In fact, they see China's desire to be more active in the Middle East as an opportunity, whether in terms of attracting trade and investment or balancing their dependence on the United States.

Yet this threat perception is deeply mistaken. For example, if China attempts to take Taiwan by force or other methods, the resulting crisis would likely entail enormous disruptions in global trade that wreak severe economic damage in the Middle East. Even short of that drastic scenario, Beijing could weaponize its economic leverage over the region at any time for political purposes, as it has already attempted to do against Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and others. Chinese cooperation with Iran remains deeply problematic as well—despite Beijing's efforts to frame it in positive terms (e.g., the recent **Iran-Saudi rapprochement (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-beijings-iran-saudi-deal-means-and-what-it-doesnt)**), such activity has helped shield Tehran from economic and diplomatic isolation while enhancing the threat it poses to neighbors.

U.S. officials should emphasize these threats rather than rehashing messages about democracy vs. autocracy or risks to the international order, which do not resonate among most U.S. partners in the Middle East. Much like China, the majority of these partners see themselves as rising powers who have not been accorded their fair share of global influence.

In addition to pointing out threats, U.S. officials should work with regional partners on initiatives that appeal to them while still tacitly countering Beijing. For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the capital to rival Chinese investments in infrastructure and mineral extraction in the developing world and could benefit from Western partnership in this regard. Failing that, they may wind up facilitating Beijing's strategy by pursuing such

opportunities with Chinese partners, which are proffered more readily at present.

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