

# China's Governance Workshops Seek to Promote China's Brand in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

## China is increasingly backing up its narrative of good governance by providing governance training to foreign officials in an attempt to develop the Chinese brand in the Middle East.

**A**t the Munich Security Conference on February 17, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi yet [again](#) ([https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202402/t20240219\\_11246970.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202402/t20240219_11246970.html)) touted Beijing's role in the Middle East, stating that "China has worked to explore a Chinese way , China's active mediation is setting off a "wave of reconciliation" across the Middle East." This rhetoric seeks to build political capital after the meeting Wang hosted in Beijing last August for Iranian and Saudi officials, credited in part with thawing ties between the two countries. The CCP has since been tirelessly promoting a narrative that a "wave of reconciliation"—brought by China—is gripping the region, despite the Israel-Hamas war, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and tensions in Iraq and Syria.

Beyond its direct economic and security competition with the United States, Beijing places a premium on its competition with Washington in the court of global opinion. It sees the Middle East as an important region in this respect given its vast resources, seemingly exploitable historical issues, and an existing value system Chinese officials perceive as incompatible with liberal democracies. In pursuit of this goal, China is increasingly backing up its narrative of good governance by providing governance training to foreign officials to develop the Chinese "governance" brand in the Middle East. This is occurring at the expense of models associated with the United States, Europe, and other advanced industrialized democracies in East Asia.

### Exporting the Chinese Governance Model

In advancing its vision of a new global order to the region, Beijing has begun actively marketing its governance style as a potential model for Middle Eastern countries. In 2016, Beijing published its [first](#) ([https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/13/content\\_5032649.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/13/content_5032649.htm)) foreign policy blueprint for the region [titled](#)

[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/tytj\\_674911/zcwj\\_674915/201601/t20160113\\_7949944.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/tytj_674911/zcwj_674915/201601/t20160113_7949944.shtml)

“policy instruction for the Middle East.” The document is divided into five sections detailing 29 action items Beijing hoped to pursue in the region, including exporting its governance preferences and practices.

Since its release, Chinese officials have routinely trumpeted this policy blueprint: the Chinese Ministry of Commerce’s most recent [performance review \(http://data.mofcom.gov.cn/report/中国与阿拉伯国家合作回顾与展望2022.pdf\)](http://data.mofcom.gov.cn/report/中国与阿拉伯国家合作回顾与展望2022.pdf) report on its activities in the Middle East referenced its implementation of items relevant to the policy blueprint. This included the establishment of the China-Arabic Banking Union, which works to facilitate financial governance for more regional trade settling in Renminbi. Chinese [experts \(https://brgg.fudan.edu.cn/articleinfo\\_3205\\_3.html\)](https://brgg.fudan.edu.cn/articleinfo_3205_3.html) on the Middle East have followed suit in their rhetoric, linking security issues with poor governance performance and capacity and suggesting that Chinese practices would address these challenges.

However, one recent foreign policy development specifically designed to advertise the Chinese style of governance is the offering of professional trainings for regional government officials on the Chinese model. Following the 2016 policy blueprint for the Middle East, China [opened \(http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/20/c\\_1120845601.htm\)](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/20/c_1120845601.htm) the Center for China and Arab States Reform and Development Studies at the Shanghai International Studies University in 2017—dedicated to offering various governance trainings for Arab officials. In its first two years, the center held [ten \(http://sd.china-embassy.gov.cn/nwksd/201912/t20191203\\_6756441.htm\)](http://sd.china-embassy.gov.cn/nwksd/201912/t20191203_6756441.htm) workshops on governance training and attracted nearly [three hundred \(http://m.xinhuanet.com/sh/2019-12/06/c\\_138609753.htm\)](http://m.xinhuanet.com/sh/2019-12/06/c_138609753.htm) participants from sixteen Arab countries, including ministers from [Egypt \(https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/df/f9/c7877a122873/page.htm\)](https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/df/f9/c7877a122873/page.htm), [Syria \(https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/b2/71/c7877a111217/page.htm\)](https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/b2/71/c7877a111217/page.htm) and [Yemen \(https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/b2/6a/c7877a111210/page.htm\)](https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/b2/6a/c7877a111210/page.htm). At the Middle East center, Chinese instructors have [repeatedly \(https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/c8/a2/c7877a116898/page.htm\)](https://carc.shisu.edu.cn/c8/a2/c7877a116898/page.htm) emphasized to their pupils that the Chinese governance model is the key to advancing regional security. And while events at the Center for China and Arab States Reform and Development Studies were hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic, trainings resumed to near pre-pandemic levels last year.

Such efforts are supported at the highest levels of the CCP. Re-engaging Middle Eastern participants was a key focus of Xi’s 2022 trip to the region, where he likewise vocally promoted the Chinese governance model. In Riyadh, Xi [said \(https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202212/t20221210\\_10988443.shtml\)](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202212/t20221210_10988443.shtml) that Beijing is ready to “share Chinese wisdom for advancement towards a peaceful Middle East”. And at the China-Arab States summit, Xi announced a new plan to begin training [fifteen hundred \(https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/10/content\\_5731138.htm\)](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-12/10/content_5731138.htm) regional law enforcement officers on “smart policing,” a controversial digitalized security practice that in China combines population monitoring with instant physical [restriction \(https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-bank-protest-stopped-by-health-codes-turning-red-depositors-say-2022-06-14/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-bank-protest-stopped-by-health-codes-turning-red-depositors-say-2022-06-14/) of individual access to public spaces according to state demands.

Moreover, other Chinese entities that don’t normally have a mandate for this type of training have also involved themselves in similar programs. Recently, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce—which traditionally provides intergovernmental training related to economic topics—has begun trainings on public administration, judicial affairs, and non-governmental organization (NGO) management. Some of these trainings have even been offered in Arabic. One particular class on public administration in 2021 featured over twenty officials from the region and covered nearly twenty topics, including public sector reform, development and management of “smart cities,” mass demonstration management, and resettlement and labor programs.

### **Coupling Economic Incentives with Governance Training**

To increase their reach, governance trainings are combined with targeted trade-related capacity-building programs that Beijing has identified as sectors of special interest to the region. Combining professionalization training with economic incentives is a common tactic used by Beijing to attempt to raise its overall image in the Global South. Often, China identifies niche sectors where countries are not receiving Western support. For example, many of the Gulf countries have sought support for nuclear energy programs for years from nuclear-advanced countries with little success. In 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce—together with the China National Nuclear Corporation, which is China's lead state-owned civil-military nuclear energy company—hosted (<https://www.caea.gov.cn/n6760338/n6760342/c6830113/content.html>) a training program for regional decision-makers on nuclear energy in Beijing. This occasion allowed Beijing to directly access senior officials from the Middle East for productive discussions before beginning formal government-level dialogue on nuclear energy cooperation. Officials from countries such as Bahrain, Sudan, and Tunisia attended, and in recent years some (<https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newschina-to-cooperate-with-gulf-nations-on-nuclear-energy-10433380>) have subsequently deepened (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-signs-nuclear-energy-cooperation-agreements-with-china-bodies-2023-05-07/>) their ties with China on nuclear cooperation.

In mining too, where the region could tremendously increase its output given access to advanced satellite-related technologies, the Chinese Ministry of Commerce instructed the China Geological Survey to begin hosting a training program for regional decision makers on energy and mineral resources in 2019 ([https://www.cgs.gov.cn/gzdt/zsdw/201909/t20190910\\_493902.html](https://www.cgs.gov.cn/gzdt/zsdw/201909/t20190910_493902.html)). The first batch of participants includes officials from Jordan. Beyond their effect on economic and political ties, the Chinese organizer explained that the choice of hosting the training in Ningxia is so that participants can at the same time experience the “similar cultural background” between China and the Middle East. Keeping in mind that Ningxia is one of the more modernized of the Chinese Islamic autonomous regions, having Arabic officials spend time there is likely to have an effect on perception of the situation in Xinjiang.

## **Conclusion**

By deploying a variety of tools in their toolbox, China is attempting to create a cycle tying its economic success with political merits, thereby promoting an image of Beijing's model of good governance. This attitude is in turn designed to spin the wheel against the established order, furthering its global ambition and rallying foreign countries to boost its resiliency to criticisms of Chinese domestic issues.

If China can work with Middle Eastern states to put forward a highly competent image of its authoritarian model, Beijing believes it will have a much stronger effect elsewhere in undermining weak democracies and, by extension, the liberal Western order. Some Chinese scholars have said (<http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2022/12-08/9910413.shtml>) as much explicitly: “Many developing countries, including the Middle East countries, try to mimic modernization the Western way...but as the past hundreds years of history have shown, the Western way only lead to further deterioration...by comparison, the Chinese way of governance and model is recognized as attractive by developing countries including the Middle East for our ascend to the second economy in the world.” Shifting popular perceptions of the comparative benefits of these two governance models could, in turn, pose a serious challenge to a vast number of American spheres of influence beyond the Middle East, including a process already evident (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/exporting-autocracy>) in certain parts of Latin America.

China's efforts in the region further underscore how the Middle East has become a theater of strategic competition in recent years. China understands its advantage in the region is economic in nature, but that through these economic ties it can also advance its image as a global power and, subsequently, its governance style. Washington should take this ideological contest seriously, recognize its stakes, and respond accordingly. Beijing hopes to promote its narratives and reinforce like-minded governments partly in order to undermine relationships between these

countries and the United States. In so doing, China hopes to create a model for expanding its influence around the world. ❖

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