

# Risks for China, and U.S., in Beijing's Growing Involvement in Middle East

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



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## China has stepped up its economic, diplomatic, and military involvement in the Middle East. But Beijing is learning that the road to influence in the region is hardly smooth.

China's negotiations to establish a naval base in Djibouti—where the U.S. has its own military installation, Camp Lemonnier—is sure to heighten concerns in Washington about Beijing's geopolitical aspirations. As China rises and its global ambitions expand, it has stepped up its economic, diplomatic, and military involvement in the Middle East. But the Chinese—like the outside powers that preceded them—are learning that the road to influence in the Middle East is hardly smooth.

Chinese interests in the region—energy, counterterrorism, the free flow of commerce—are not unique. But as the sheer size of China's needs and the magnitude of its pretensions to global power have grown, it has shifted away from its philosophy of “non-interference” and reliance on U.S.-provided order to a more forward-leaning role. Chinese naval vessels have made port calls in Iran and the United Arab Emirates, conducted expeditionary missions to evacuate Chinese nationals from Libya and Yemen, and in recent days have conducted unprecedented joint drills with Russian forces in the Mediterranean.

Greater involvement in the Middle East means a greater chance of becoming enmeshed in its troubles. This has bedeviled China, which has long sought to cultivate all sides of every conflict in the region. Arab states have been displeased with China's repeated vetoes of U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding Syria. That conflict and the one in Yemen have pitted China's Gulf Arab allies—from which it obtains significant supplies of oil and seeks infrastructure contracts—against its best friend in the region, Iran.

As fighting intensified in Yemen this year, Beijing issued an anodyne statement that avoided taking sides. Chinese President Xi Jinping canceled a planned visit to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, reportedly angering the Saudis in his effort

to avoid being drawn into the fray. Mr. Xi also has not taken a long-rumored visit to Iran, which suggests that it is not just the United States that has difficulty balancing its relationships in the region.

Similarly, China's "Belt and Road" initiative, which envisions transportation corridors and infrastructure projects stretching from East Asia to the Mideast, has gained little purchase in the region. The China-Arab Cooperation Forum in June 2014—the first such meeting after Mr. Xi's initiative was unveiled—concluded without endorsing the plan. Only Egypt and Iran have shown enthusiasm, yet this has paid few dividends for Beijing. It is India, not China, that is set to develop Iran's Arabian Sea port of Chabahar. And in late 2014 Cairo passed up Chinese bidders for billions of dollars of contracts related to the planned companion waterway to the Suez Canal, though Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had hinted that China would be favored.

Amid all the other items on Washington's Mideast agenda, China's activities mean that the possibility of contending for regional influence with a great-power rival cannot be excluded. Yet China's struggles to translate power and resources into influence present an opportunity for U.S. leaders: They have an opening to convince Beijing that its resources and energies would be better spent in support of an U.S.-led regional order that advances interests shared by both powers and their regional allies, rather than striking out on their own as they have done in East Asia. Given broader U.S.-China tensions, this will be a tall order. It will be all the more so if the U.S. lacks a strategy behind which it can rally others.

*Michael Singh is managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2005 to 2008, he worked on Middle East issues at the National Security Council. ❖*

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