

Chinese Policy in the Middle East in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings

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

Nov 25, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Michael Singh is the Managing Director and Lane-Swig Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

The following is an excerpt from Mr. Singh's unpublished manuscript on China's current and future role in the region. To read the full paper, [download the PDF](#).

Even as it pursues greater economic engagement with the Middle East to satisfy its energy needs, it is not at all clear whether China desires or is capable of greater political and security involvement there. Yet its calculus may change if events continue on their present trajectory. If the American disengagement from the region continues, instability there is unlikely to abate, and China may feel compelled to -- or possibly see an opportunity to -- adopt a more active approach to advancing its regional interests, especially its energy security. It may also be drawn further in by regional states, who tend to look for external support in their regional conflicts. Indeed, signs of increasing Chinese involvement in the region already abound -- whether PLAN missions to combat piracy and evacuate Chinese citizens from Libya, the appointment in 2002 of a Chinese special envoy for the region (matching similar positions in the US, Japan, and many European states), or the increased pace of high-level official Chinese visits to the region and vice versa.

However, deeper Chinese involvement in the Middle East is not inevitable, but will depend on a variety of factors. Foremost among these will be China's own fortunes domestically and in its neighborhood. Precisely how these factors will affect China's Middle East policy is difficult to predict, though it seems likely that the greater China's own economic difficulties, and the greater the extent to which it must devote diplomatic and security resources to Asian conflicts, the less it will seek to be involved in the Middle East. In addition, Central Asia may not only compete for China's diplomatic attention but, if it provides a reliable land route for Chinese energy imports, diminish Beijing's dependence on the Middle East's sea lanes.

China's involvement in the region will also be affected by the extent to which the apparent American disengagement from the region is temporary or permanent; a more robust American role in the region will likely "crowd out" some Chinese involvement. The extent to which this is true will depend also on the course of Sino-American relations, especially whether increasing tensions between the US and China in East Asia spill over to their relations in other regions, or whether cooperation in theaters such as the Middle East is seen by Washington and Beijing as a balance to their conflicts in the East and South China Seas. Already there are concerning signs that the Chinese partnership

with Iran is driven by a desire to counter US power in the region. Similarly, Chinese involvement in the region may be driven in part by the extent to which its Asian rivals, such as Japan, South Korea, and India, themselves become more involved in it.

The extent to which China becomes more involved in the political and security affairs of the region will also depend on the success of its early steps in this direction. If, for example, China pays no price in its relations with Gulf Arab states for its strong diplomatic support of the Assad regime or Iran, it may be encouraged to believe that it can successfully manage conflicts among its interests in the region. Chinese involvement in the region will also depend on events; in particular, a nuclear agreement between the P5+1 and Iran will open the door for a deeper Sino-Iranian strategic relationship. Even if China chooses to step up its involvement in the region, it will likely do so slowly, and will seek to hedge its bets rather than stake out a clear policy direction or unequivocally take sides in regional conflicts.

Despite many obstacles, constructive US-China cooperation in the Middle East in advancing mutual interests could be of benefit to both countries and to the region as a whole. Whether such cooperation can be realized depends deeply on the path each country chooses to take not only in the region but in the world: it depends on whether the United States recognizes the costs of disengagement from the Middle East and rebuilds its leadership role and the security architecture it undergirded; and whether China can shake off a zero-sum approach to foreign affairs and emerge as a responsible partner for Washington and others. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[An Israel-Lebanon Agreement May Not Be Worth the Costs](#)

May 14, 2024



David Schenker

[\(/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-agreement-may-not-be-worth-costs\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis](#)

May 14, 2024

◆
Michael Knights,
Amir al-Kaabi,
Hamdi Malik

(/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The Arab Approach to Mediation—Reshaping Diplomacy in a Multipolar World](#)

Spring 2024

◆
Nickolay Mladenov

(/policy-analysis/arab-approach-mediation-reshaping-diplomacy-multipolar-world)

TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)