# China's Military Presence in the Gulf

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

Sep 26, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Singh (/experts/michael-singh)

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

Articles & Testimony

Little noticed amid the tumult in Syria, two Chinese naval ships -- a guided missile destroyer, the *Changchun*, and a frigate, the *Changzhou* -- visited the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas on Monday and began a four-day joint exercise with Iranian naval forces. According to China's navy, this was the first visit by Chinese warships to Iran.

It was not, however, the first modern-day port call in the region by Chinese naval vessels; in March 2010, Chinese vessels docked at Port Zayed in the United Arab Emirates. Those vessels and the ones that arrived in Iran this week had been participating in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. A few months after the Port Zayed visit, Chinese jets refueled in Iran en route to exercises in Turkey -- the first visit to Iran by foreign warplanes since its 1979 revolution. In 2011, observers noted that the Chinese military's evacuation of thousands of Chinese nationals from Libya demonstrated the military's expeditionary capabilities.

This growing security presence in the region is just one element of China's deepening involvement in the Middle East, which has also included stepped-up diplomatic visits and ambitious new economic projects, such as a just-inked deal to build a port in Israel. While Beijing's interest in the Middle East is largely motivated by its thirst for markets and resources -- China's dependence on foreign oil is increasing as fast as the U.S.'s is decreasing -- economics is not the whole story. Reliance on oil imports compromises China's energy security, which paired with its desire to exercise greater global influence has led it to seek out not just commercial but also strategic partnerships.

Yet Beijing's path to expanded influence in the Middle East is far from clear. Thus far China has sought to cultivate cordial ties with all states in the region. But as its regional involvement grows, Beijing is likely to find itself pressed by allies and events to take sides, as it has done on Syria by using its veto in the U.N. Security Council to shield the Assad regime.

China's closest relationship may prove to be with Iran, which offers energy sources that can be accessed by both sea and land and which purchases arms from China. Tehran and Beijing have ties that predate the latter's need for oil imports. Iran is also the only country on the Gulf littoral not allied with Washington, a crucial fact for People's Liberation Army strategists who consider the U.S. China's likeliest adversary. Sino-Iranian cooperation has been tempered somewhat by international sanctions on Tehran but is likely to expand in the wake of a nuclear agreement.

None of this need be cause for alarm in Washington, but it's a long-term trend to which the U.S. must be attuned amid the Middle East's short-term demands. Today, China lacks the capacity (and probably the desire) to challenge the U.S. position in the Middle East. Indeed, the U.S. and China even have overlapping interests in the region, including a common aversion to ISIS. But China's reluctance to join the anti-ISIS campaign -- China sees counterterrorism as a veil for American power projection, while the West is concerned by China's tendency to conflate extremism and political dissent -- demonstrates how the starkly different strategies employed by the U.S. and China to advance their interests and broader bilateral tensions make cooperation unlikely.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

*Wall Street Journal*

## RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

# The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

## TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)