

The Middle East at the U.S.-China Summit

by [Paul Haenle \(/experts/paul-haenle\)](/experts/paul-haenle), [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Paul Haenle \(/experts/paul-haenle\)](/experts/paul-haenle)



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Brief Analysis

Discussions with Chinese officials and analysts highlight the need for measured cooperation on various regional issues, including endgame diplomatic proposals for Iran and de-escalation in Syria.

The upcoming California summit between President Obama and new Chinese president Xi Jinping is one of great consequence for many reasons, from establishing personal relations between the two leaders, to discussing key regional hotspots such as North Korea and the East China Sea, to dealing with thorny trade and economic issues. Yet despite other pressing business, both leaders should give priority to the Middle East. The dramatic war-and-peace immediacy of Iran and Syria is clear, but regional cooperation could also help deepen the trust, understanding, and diplomatic interoperability needed to tackle sensitive bilateral and Asian security issues, which could spark future conflict if left untended.

IDENTIFYING MUTUAL INTERESTS

Over the past week, the authors held extensive discussions with senior Chinese officials and foreign policy analysts in Beijing and Shanghai under the auspices of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy. These consultations indicated that China is eager for more cooperation with the United States on the Middle East. If grounded in realistic expectations, such cooperation could yield real results; if too ambitious or theoretical, however, it will yield only disappointment. The key to success is for Beijing and Washington to understand each other's interests.

Mainstream Chinese interests are in fact similar to America's. Both are threatened by Iran's quest for nuclear weapons capability, the prospect of greater spillover from Syria, the turbulence caused by two years of Arab uprisings, and the perception of sharp retrenchment in Washington's posture toward the region. The Chinese are

increasingly aware of the mess in which the Middle East finds itself. They understand the impact these problems have on China's trade and, especially, energy supply -- more than half of Chinese oil imports come from Arab states or Iran. They are also concerned about Washington taking too precipitous or broad a stand-down in the region. In light of these factors, many in Beijing are now asking, "What can we do?"

CHINA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

To help answer that question, Washington can draw on a history of growing Chinese engagement in the region. This includes expanded U.S.-Chinese dialogue on Middle East issues, culminating in the State Department's undersecretary for political affairs visiting Beijing for consultations in August 2012.

Economic and military considerations are part of the equation. China's overall economic activity in the region has been limited, but the impact of its energy ventures should not be overlooked. For example, Chinese state oil companies play a very active role in petroleum exploration and production in northern and southern Iraq. These activities represent a significant investment by Beijing and, therefore, a political opening for Washington. On the military front, China has contributed troops to various UN missions in the Middle East, beginning with UNIKOM on the Iraqi border in the 1990s, and later in Sudan and southern Lebanon. The latter is Beijing's largest overseas deployment ever -- a battalion-sized contribution to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon.

But China's track record in the diplomatic arena has been the most significant aspect of its regional involvement, for better and for worse. Beijing has played a positive, if quiet, role in the P5+1 nuclear talks with Iran and in passing sanctions resolutions at the Security Council. Its repeated blocking of Syria resolutions, however, has been a negative for Washington.

HOW CAN CHINA HELP?

A word of caution is necessary in any effort to combine Chinese capabilities with U.S. and international stabilization efforts in the Middle East. Like other global powers, China will be tempted to assert its place at the table based solely on its size, economic stature, and interests, instead of showing a real willingness to put forward concrete ideas and engage in the hard work required to make progress on difficult issues. And Washington will be tempted to favor its need for freedom of action in the security sphere above all else, which could lead it to treat China as it so often treats the EU -- that is, paying lip service to equal billing while expecting other parties to assume burdensome U.S.-choreographed roles. To avoid those temptations, Washington should focus on specific, realistic areas of cooperation.

Iran. On the most critical regional issue, China can help the United States put down a serious endgame proposal in the P5+1 talks along the lines [recently proposed by Dennis Ross and David Makovsky](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-nuclear-games-demand-a-tougher-u.s.-approach) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-nuclear-games-demand-a-tougher-u.s.-approach>) in the *Washington Post*. Such a proposal should acknowledge Iran's right to a civilian nuclear program and offer to lift sanctions -- in some cases immediately -- if Tehran agrees to abide by the deal's requirements on enrichment, verification, and other matters. In terms of history and interests, China would be far better placed than other P5+1 states to persuade Iran that it should accept the offer. But such risky Chinese engagement is possible only if President Obama can convince President Xi that Washington's goal is resolution of the Iranian nuclear threat, not disguised regime change. He must also make clear that absent an agreement, the United States will carry out its prevention policy through military action if necessary -- a scenario that would pose far greater risks to a massive oil importer like China than any diplomatic exposure with the Iranians. An Israeli strike would probably spur a strong Chinese rhetorical response, but as long as such action does not produce a regional conflict that threatens oil supplies, Beijing would limit itself to words and, most likely, UN condemnation.

Syria and its neighbors. The United States cannot expect China to decouple itself from Russia or abandon its own

principle of noninterference overnight. And similar to Moscow, Beijing remains disappointed about NATO's regime change goals following passage of the Security Council's 2011 resolution on Libya, which China opted not to block. Yet given the risk of Syria's war igniting regional conflict, Washington should encourage Beijing to leverage its influence with Damascus and Moscow, pressing both toward serious compromise and concessions. This includes calling for Russian restraint on weapons deliveries to the Assad regime, an unhindered UN investigation of chemical weapons use, a Security Council delegation to assess the refugee situation in Jordan, and Hezbollah's removal from Syria.

The war is also exacerbating instability next door in Iraq, threatening the country's projected potential to provide 45 percent of all new crude production worldwide this decade -- perhaps a vital factor in China's economic growth. Beijing is already active in the Iraqi oil sector; cooperation with the United States to keep Iraq stable and united would yield immense dividends to all three countries.

Peace process. Washington could also encourage China to support Secretary of State John Kerry's renewed focus on the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, albeit only at the margins. Given its historical bond of trust with the Palestinians and strengthening relationship with Israel, China could help build trust between the parties. Beijing's hosting of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu last month offered a glimpse of the beneficial part it could play.

CONCLUSION

China's potential new roles in the Middle East security dynamic are not far reaching, with the possible exception of the Iranian nuclear question. If handled properly, however, greater Chinese involvement could complement both U.S. initiatives and Beijing's extensive regional trade relations. Moreover, by increasing trust and interoperability with the United States, such engagement could pave the way for eventual progress on the most sensitive and contentious bilateral issues beyond the Middle East.

Paul Haenle is director of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center (<http://www.carnegietsinghua.org/experts/?fa=490>) in Beijing. James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz distinguished visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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