

China's Rise in the Middle East

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Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was in China this month touting the "new cooperation paradigm" between Ankara and Beijing. Just a week earlier, a top political advisor to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao spent five days in Syria signing deals and planting olive trees in the Golan Heights. The Middle Kingdom, it seems, is planting deep roots in the Middle East these days.

The reach of the People's Republic is far and wide, extending from the Far East to Africa to Latin America, and its interest in the Middle East is neither new nor surprising: China gets more than a quarter of its oil imports from the Persian Gulf and has billions invested in Iran's oil sector. Recently, though, Beijing appears to be making greater headway, a development fueled by Washington's creeping withdrawal from the region.

Starting in the 1990s, China filled a void in Syria left by a decaying Soviet Union, providing the terrorist state with a variety of missiles. Today, Syrian President Bashar Assad is fulfilling his 2004 pledge to "look East" toward Asia to escape the Western hold on the Middle East. In addition to serving as an ongoing and reliable source of weapons, China has invested heavily in modernizing Syria's antiquated energy sector.

More striking, however, has been Beijing's rapid inroads with the Islamist government in Ankara headed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In October, Wen was the first Chinese premier to visit Turkey in eight years. Erdogan and Wen inked eight deals, including an agreement to transform the ancient SilkRoad into a "Silk Railway" linking China and Turkey.

Of more concern than the budding economic relationship, however, is the nascent military relationship between NATO partner Turkey and China. The most recent manifestation of these ties was the unprecedented inclusion in October of Chinese warplanes in the Turkish military exercise Anatolian Eagle, maneuvers that previously had included the U.S. and Israel.

Although Turkey reportedly left its modern U.S.-built F-16s in their hangars during the exercises and instead flew its F-4s, which the U.S. Air Force retired from service in 1996, the damage was done. Chinese participation in the exercise exacerbated the already extant crisis of confidence between Washington and its NATO partner. The joint announcement in October that China and Turkey had formally upgraded their bilateral relationship to that of a "strategic partnership" only makes matters worse.

Beijing did not choose Iran, Syria and Turkey as the focal point of its regional "outreach" by accident. These northern-tier Middle Eastern states all have complicated if not problematic relations with the United States and increasingly close ties with one another. To complement this triumvirate, China appears to be looking to Iraq as the next target of its charm offensive.

China is the leading oil and gas investor in Iraq, and it is paying millions to protect its investment there. That's not surprising since Iraq has the world's largest known oil reserves. China has also purchased extensive goodwill with Baghdad by forgiving \$6 billion to \$8 billion in Iraqi debt accrued during the Saddam Hussein era. And Beijing has gotten in on the sale of weapons -- worth in excess of \$100 million -- to the new government in Baghdad.

Given China's extensive presence throughout the world -- attributable at least in part to the fact that its foreign policy is devoid of moral concerns -- it is unrealistic to expect that Washington could have somehow excluded Beijing from the Middle East. Indeed, the very absence of considerations other than national interest makes China an appealing partner to states in a region where authoritarianism is rife. Some Mideast states also likely view China as useful counterbalance against the West.

What is of concern, however, is that the rapid rate of Chinese progress occurs amid a growing regional perception that the United States is withdrawing from the Middle East.

Although China holds a significant portion of U.S. debt, and trade relations are strong, at the end of the day the two nations are competitors -- both strategic and economic -- with profoundly differing worldviews. It may be that this great game will end with Washington and Beijing as allies. More likely, though, a modus vivendi will emerge between the two powers. Until then, Washington should work to strengthen its remaining regional allies and reestablish a presence in the region. Absent this kind of renewed commitment, China will continue to expand its footprint, sowing the seeds of a new and even less advantageous strategic role in the Middle East for the United States.

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