



Russian-Chinese Security Architecture in the Gulf: Role of China, Russia & Iran in the Gulf

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As an alternative to the U.S. security umbrella, China envisages a broadening of security arrangements in the Gulf region with the backing of Russia, based on a collective security concept. A balanced security architecture in the Gulf could generate cooperation and constructive rivalry, ultimately facilitating the development of new political-security coalitions associated with the region.¹ In this context, the redefining of China's, Russia's and Iran's regional roles and strategies is pivotal for the formulation of any new political/security arrangements relating to the Gulf region.

Any balanced regional security architecture will depend significantly on great-power involvement and the ways in which such powers are engaged in regional systems. The prevailing doctrine in the West, especially towards the Arab world, maintains that 'balance of power' is the major assurance of security and stability in the Gulf region. The U.S. has itself tried to influence regional dynamics through efforts to minimize Iran's role within the context of the new balance of power, but this has simply contributed to existing security dilemma in the Gulf.² A successful balanced solution will require the involvement of all regional actors and most probably additional external powers.

In the past decade, China has significantly increased its political, economic and security footprint in the Middle East, specifically in the Gulf, becoming the biggest trade partner and external investor for many countries in the region.³ China's growing economic presence is sure to expand to wider engagement with the Gulf region, thus increasing China's influence on regional stability and political dynamics, especially in relation to issues such as surveillance technology and arms sales. At the moment, when the long-standing U.S. influence over the region shows signs of depreciation, policymakers are paying attention to China's position and objectives in the region, focusing on China's increased geopolitical competitiveness as it relates to political dynamics in the medium to long-term, as well as its role within the framework of a security architecture.⁴ The centrality of China's economic cooperation and development in the region is reflected in its establishment of the 'Belt and Road Initiative', or a new 'Silk Road' as it were focusing on energy, infrastructure construction, trade and investment in the region. The joint projects between China and Iran exist in the context of China's economic and strategic influence across Eurasia through the 'Belt and Road Initiative' - an immense aid and investment program. China hopes to develop free-trade zones in Maku, in northwestern Iran; in Abadan, where the Shatt al-Arab river flows into the Gulf; and on the island of Qeshm.⁵

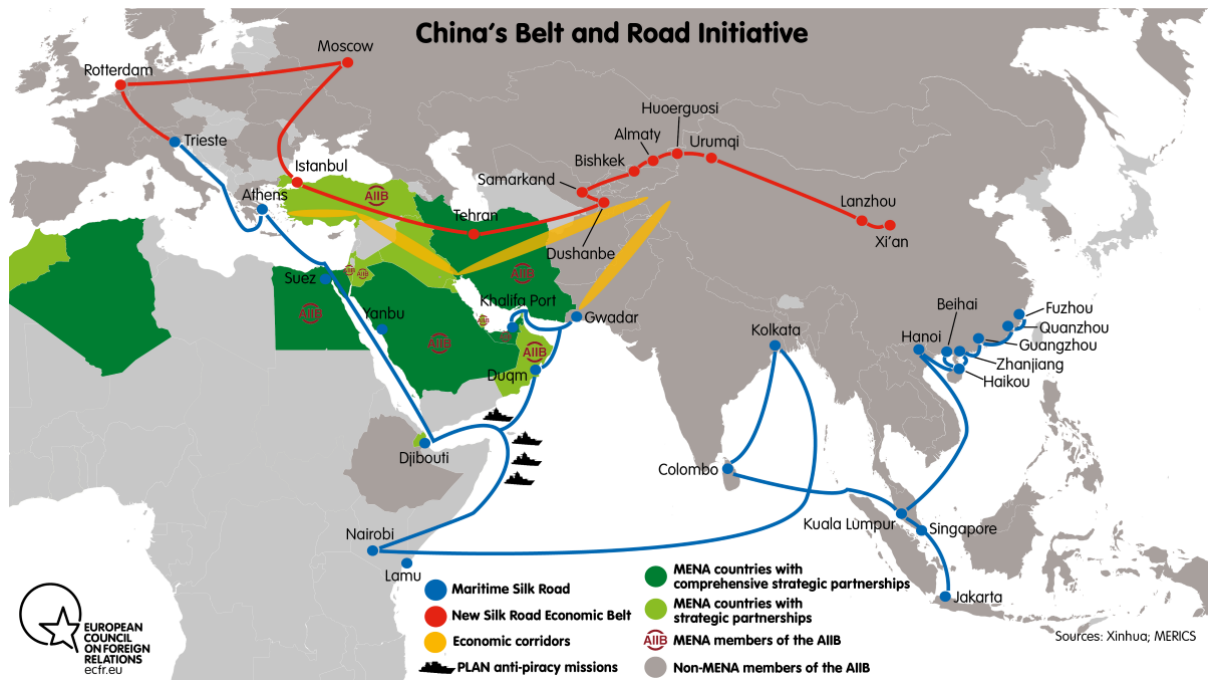


Figure 1: China's Belt and Road Initiative, European Council on Foreign Relations (2020)⁶

China in the Gulf: New cooperation with Iran? The emergence of strategic trilateral relations

China's non-interventionist strategy is based on a multipolar order in the Middle East and partnerships with other states, promoting stability rather than the Western vision of 'democratic peace'. China may not want to strengthen its political and security engagement in the region; however, it has no other choice. Despite China's growing footprint in the Gulf region, China maintains a cautious yet a strategic security approach towards its partnership with Iran.⁷ This is based on not alienating regional actors. Arguably the latter is one of the main drivers for the ambitions and implementation of the comprehensive strategic cooperation between Iran and China. China's deep rivalry with the U.S. has extended to participating in maritime security operations in the Strait of Hormuz and involvement in a joint naval drill with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman and the northern Indian Ocean in December 2019.⁸ Russia commended this as an unprecedented exercise in naval cooperation and training. The four-day joint naval exercise involving China, Russia and Iran was the first time the three states engaged in cooperation of this type, as the three countries had only previously engaged in bilateral exercises.

The rise in U.S. strategic competition with China over trade in addition to the South China Sea dispute has led to many shifts in China's behaviour in the Gulf region. Last month on July 6th, Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif announced that Iran was negotiating an agreement with China, allowing the two countries to be equivalent strategic partners in the region.⁹ An 18-pages outline of the agreement in Persian was leaked. This agreement is based on a 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with billions of dollars' worth of Chinese investments in energy, banking, transportation, and cybersecurity in Iran.¹⁰ This deal also highlights the possibility of Chinese-Iranian cooperation on weapons development and intelligence sharing, and joint military drills. This has the potential to significantly expand U.S.-China competition, as it plans to strengthen China's relationship with Iran as strategic partners, thus challenging the U.S. position in both the Gulf and Indian Ocean regions.¹¹

The potential security partnership between China and Iran could weaken and challenge the Trump Administration's efforts to isolate the Iranian government in response to its nuclear and military activities, which could potentially exacerbate U.S.-China relations.¹² In fact, the signed agreement was partly the result of the Trump Administration's aggressive policies towards Iran since leaving the 2015 nuclear deal, which included American sanctions and limiting access to the international banking system for any company doing business with Iran. Waters around Iran have however become a focal point for international tensions, with the U.S. applying pressure to cut off Iranian crude oil and other trade ties. The U.S. has isolated Iran economically, which has complicated relations with China, the U.S.' largest global trade rival. This decision was to stop five of Iran's main allies from obtaining Iranian oil including Japan, South Korea, India and Turkey, all countries that have robust trade relations with the U.S. By retracting its oil exemption, the Trump Administration is overstepping on China's energy security. Among all of these complications, China remains the largest purchaser of Iranian oil with increasing consumption, despite the U.S.' stresses that it steadily decreases the imports to zero.¹³ Iran's desperation has pushed it into the arms of China, which supports Iran by importing its oil and its technological needs by the development of intelligence sharing and telecommunications, thus creating a sense of alarm in Washington. Already, the U.S. regularly brushes against Iranian forces in the busy Gulf waters and challenges China's internationally disputed claim to much of the South China Sea, with the Pentagon's national security strategy having outwardly recognised China as an adversary in this context.

Balance of power and aspects of great power competition – Is this cooperation biased towards Iran?

The strategic impact of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq has led to an increase of Iran's military presence in the Middle East and its influence in Iraq and the Levant. The U.S. failure to act in Syria has also led to an increased Russian presence and regional influence; this absence of a well-defined U.S. strategy in the region has helped create a power vacuum that Russia stepped in to fill as categorized by its growing influence in Turkey, its arm sales to Iran, and its destabilising role in Libya.¹⁴ In addition, the U.S. laissez-faire approach has opened the door for China to increase its presence in the Red Sea and Djibouti. The U.S. is increasingly focusing its efforts on competition rather than cooperation with Russia and China. The U.S. – China trade war not only destabilises the global economy, it also greatly reduces China's dependence on U.S. industries and stimulates China's growing relationships with third parties such as Russia and Iran.¹⁵ Deteriorating relations between China and the U.S. will only continue to encourage China to forge ties with partners considered undesirable by the U.S.; Russia and Iran are the two most significant partners for China in this context.

The great power competition is increasingly dividing the international community into two camps, i.e. those who continue to support U.S. interests and those supporting China and Iran, backed and supported by Russia. However there remain countries, like Saudi Arabia for example, who maintain good relations with both the U.S. and China simultaneously, with energy relations being at the heart of the Saudi-China partnership. This close cooperation is evidenced through joint projects such as, refining, petrochemicals and energy infrastructure between Saudi Aramco and China.¹⁶ This Saudi-China partnership is focused on energy and trade and less of a military-political alliance, with China being Saudi Arabia's top economic trading partner and importer of Saudi oil. Saudi Arabia's strategic political/military partner remains the U.S., and almost its entire arms supply and military services comes from the U.S. and other Western states, protecting Saudi Arabia's national security and its territorial integrity. The Gulf region therefore stands at the crossfire of U.S.-China tensions, which will likely signify a geopolitical trend of the upcoming decade, a difficult dynamic that the Gulf states will have to seek to navigate.¹⁷

Do trilateral China-Russia-Iran relations support stability in the Gulf?

The trilateral China-Russia-Iran naval drill demonstrates China's support of Iran against unilateralism and bullying in the region as well as an effort to follow the basic norms of international relations emphasising non-aggression or conflict-based interventions.¹⁸ The emphasis on norms is key, as Chinese leaders are consistent in their opposition to the use of force in international politics, preferring development-based solutions over political and security pressure in the Gulf region. The naval drills involve developing a series of commercial relationship that are not supported by conventional military force. China has expressed that its interest in the Gulf remains to promote a stable Middle East, through for example, developing economic assistance in the region. This is different from U.S. security assistance as China's strategy is based on economic ties with all regional actors, irrespective of existing rivalries. The Chinese approach is driven by China's energy interests and its ambitious expansion that can be seen through the Belt and Road Initiative, and for China to remain neutral in regional power discrepancies, despite the strategic nature of the economic infrastructure under the BRI.¹⁹ This allows China to grow economically in the Gulf region, without being sucked into political and security conflicts. However, the Trump Administration's policies impacting the Middle East have led to a more divided region, for example, through the complete pull-out of U.S. troops from Syria last December creating a power vacuum in the region, only to reverse his policies and declare further military deployments in the region to counter Iran six months later.²⁰ The Trump Administration has recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, opposing UN resolutions and the overwhelming majority position of the international community. This in turn is increasing the process of China's economic engagement in the region. The timing of the joint exercise may have been deliberate, given it was announced shortly after the drone strikes on Saudi Aramco's facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais last September, a potential implication that China will support Iran should there be any military conflicts between Iran and countries in the region. Iran had expressed the need for a joint exercise to control vital waterways to combat piracy and terrorism, and referred to this exercise as the new triangle of power on the seas. Chinese officials described the joint exercise merely as normal military cooperation.²¹

Blue Sword 2019, the Chinese-Saudi bilateral naval exercise that took place the month prior, involved the Saudi Royal Navy and the Chinese PLA Navy, and focused on building mutual trust as well as developing cooperation, exchanging experiences and improving the capability to combat maritime terrorism and piracy. The rapprochement of Saudis and Iranians represents another signal that China wishes to adopt a 'balanced' strategy in the region as it wishes to continue leading trade and investments with ease. China aims to keep close ties with Iran and Russia in the region in the context of its ongoing trade disputes with the U.S. This is also strategically important for Iran, who stands to benefit from such ties in the context of its current isolationism and U.S. maximum pressure policies.²² However, while it may seem that China is defending Iran in the absolute sense, one must keep in mind that China's alliances are predominantly designed to safeguard China's own capability to wield influence in the Gulf region.

In conclusion, the current geopolitical dynamics in which the Middle East, and specifically the Gulf finds itself, are an example of a broader regional security architecture that stands to emerge within the context of great power competition. The countries of the Gulf region should be prepared to act as constructive partners with each other as well as with external powers— both in facing regional challenges, as well as in dealing with global engagements with superpowers such as China and Russia. This could be seen as defying the U.S. position in the region, however the Gulf countries should be well positioned in order to lead and balance the developing great power competition in terms of regional and global security and stability. A way forward can be seen through a collective and balanced security architecture, with each of the countries, both the regional states and external powers having their own interests; however what binds them together is a stable, prosperous and secure Gulf, which collectively benefits all the state actors involved.



Notes

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