

# CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

## Xi Jinping's Visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

1. **Subject.** Xi Jinping's Visit to the KSA (for China-Saudi Summit, China-GCC Summit and China-Arab States Summit)
2. **Purpose.** This paper aims to present the CSAG's analysis regarding Chinese Leader Xi Jinping's visit to the KSA and its implications for US/CENTCOM.
3. **Introduction.**
  - a. Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited the KSA to attend the China-Saudi Summit, the first China-GCC Summit and China-Arab States Summit from 7 to 9 December 2022.
  - b. By hosting the 3 summits, Saudi Arabia, with the motivation of Prince Mohammed Bin Salman for being an aspiring Arab leader, seems to present itself as the regional hub and is showing a determination to steer the world away from a polarized global order.
  - c. This visit was "the largest-scale diplomatic activity between China and the Arab world" (*Chinese media*) and President Xi's first visit since his election to the third term in power.
4. **The Facts.**
  - a. **Political Domain**
    - (1) CHN-KSA signed a "Strategic Partnership Agreement" that would see the two countries' leaders meet every two years.
    - (2) China and Arab states agreed to build a China-Arab community with a shared future in the new era, which is an "epoch-making milestone" in China-Arab relations.
    - (3) (CHN) China will continue to provide humanitarian assistance and support livelihood projects for Palestine.
    - (4) (CHN-Arabs) The leaders affirmed their support for all peaceful efforts of the UAE to reach a peaceful solution to the issue of the three islands in dispute.<sup>1</sup> (Iran condemned, "these islands have never been the subject of negotiations".)
    - (5) Arab states firmly adhere to the "One-China" principle and reaffirm that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China's territory.
  - b. **Economic Domain**
    - (1) CHN-KSA penned 34 investment deals (\$29.6 B) which included inviting Huawei to establish core IT infrastructure, constructing 300,000 units of housing, and building an electric vehicle factory that would produce 100,000 cars a year.
    - (2) CHN-KSA agreed to harmonize the BRI and Saudi Vision 2030.
    - (3) China will cooperate with GCC countries in the priority areas of energy, finance and investment, innovation, science and technology, aerospace, language and culture.
    - (4) China and Arab states will advance major cooperation initiatives including BRI, energy, food, investment, green development, aerospace, security and stability.

c. **Security/Military Domain**

- (1) China will continue to firmly support GCC countries in safeguarding their security and support the efforts of regional countries in this area.
- (2) China will support GCC countries on peaceful use of nuclear energy and technology.
- (3) Arab states value and appreciate the Global Development Initiative<sup>ii</sup> and the Global Security Initiative<sup>iii</sup> proposed by President Xi.

5. **Assessments.**

- a. Being in the beginning of a “decisive decade”<sup>iv</sup> in regards to Strategic Competition, the visit is very important in terms of its timing:
  - (1) The US-Saudi relation is at the lowest in decades while the US is significantly pivoting to Indo-Pacific, reaffirming its indefectible support to Taiwan, and currently making huge efforts to support Ukraine.
  - (2) A price cap was imposed on Russian oil while the war in Ukraine is affecting global energy security.
  - (3) Russia and Iran are stepping up their partnership.
  - (4) China wants to revive its economy whose GDP is now increasing at a slower pace due to several factors and is exacerbated by the Zero-Covid Chinese policy.
- b. With these summits, China offers all Arab countries an equal opportunity to work together without leaving anyone behind, without any precondition. The Chinese debt trap observed in some counties in Africa, Asia, and South America is assessed as a low probability to occur in wealthy GCC countries.
- c. While the US is reducing its commitment, the ME invited China as a new “extra-regional balancer”, who has the opportunity to be the partner of necessity for now and the partner of choice in the near future.
- d. China strives to achieve its goals, such as increasing its political influence, ensuring a steady supply of energy to keep its economy growing, and with the dual-use concept securing BRI.
- e. In the long term, countries may think that China's economic growth will eventually translate into increased military power in the ME.
- f. Although the US remains as a preferred security partner, the GCC countries’ relation with China is progressing rapidly in pursuit of mutual benefit and sustainable development.
- g. China's presence in the equation will provide room for maneuvering the Gulf States' relations with Washington and make them more robust at the negotiating table.
- h. Exploiting the ongoing lessons learned from the war in Ukraine, by strengthening ties with Arab states (including the statement in regard with the 3 islands’ dispute), China may be shaping the geopolitical environment to overcome the US/Western sanctions regarding a potential Taiwan conflict.
- i. Strategic engagement of China and Arab countries through economic ventures like Neom City project<sup>v</sup> is showing the importance of the Red Sea.
- j. The ME region is facing serious challenges, a strong and unconditional economic tie with China is essential for stabilizing their economy and balancing Iran.
- k. The GCC countries' partnership with China is not at the expense of their historical and strategic relationship with the US. However, the GCC countries do not deal with single tracks or enter into polarization. Given the GCC efforts for development and prosperity and the US’ reducing engagement to the region, economic relations between the ME and China are progressing at a rapid pace in light of the regional visions and the BRI.
- l. China is the largest trading partner with the ME. Thus, economic relation with China is essential for growth and development. In addition, cooperation with China could be very important for balancing against Iranian ambitions.

6. **Recommendations.**

In general, to counter Chinese influence in the region, differentiate the concept of "One China" carried alone by China versus the concept of "One Coalition" carried by the US and many other nations at its side. Understand China's approach to protecting its interests to anticipate possible areas of collaboration and competition (through the lens of the peer-competitor)

- a. In the field of Security Cooperation (Training and FMS):
  - (1) If the political or technical constraints do not allow the US to compete against the Chinese, then enable the other nations of the Coalition to do so.

- (2) Shape individual security cooperation for countries in the region and do not let the breadth and depth of security cooperation activities undertaken by the US lag behind China's activities.
- b. In the area of Regional Partnerships and Innovation, given the case that Huawei would play an important role in the region's Internet infrastructure, additional caution is needed in cybersecurity. Find ways to mitigate the risk in the context of the integration and interoperability of means within TF 39, TF 59, and TF 99.
  - c. Be aware of the long-term Chinese strategy which includes the concept of dual use and inform your partners of the future Chinese threat. Identifying and then exploiting the hidden predation conditions of the Chinese.
  - d. Exploit through STRATCOM and IOs the possible dissensions that are emerging between China and Iran to weaken this marriage of convenience.

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<sup>i</sup> The islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, all located in the Strait of Hormuz between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. For over forty years since the UK left this area, the dispute over the three islands has been a sore in relations between the United Arab Emirates and Iran.

<sup>ii</sup> Introduced by Xi Jinping in a speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, the Global Development Initiative outlines China's vision to be a leader in global development efforts. The initiative aims to support developing countries in poverty alleviation, public health, and other issues, but has also sparked questions about its impact on the more well-established Belt and Road Initiative.

<sup>iii</sup> Proposed by Xi Jinping during the annual Boao Forum on 21 April 2022. Officially, the initiative is meant to "uphold the principle of indivisible security, build a balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture, and oppose the building of national security on the basis of insecurity in other countries."

<sup>iv</sup> The term "decisive decade" is an important term that has taken its place in both the US and Chinese documents. It was emphasized in the 2022 NDS by the US, whereas China aims to turn the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a modern military force by 2027 and wants to become a "moderately developed" economy by 2035.

<sup>v</sup> Neom is a city being built in Tabuk Province in northwestern Saudi Arabia. It is planned to incorporate smart city technologies and function as a tourist destination. The site is north of the Red Sea, east of Egypt across the Gulf of Aqaba, and south of Jordan. It is planned to cover a total area of 26,500 km<sup>2</sup> (10,200 sq mi), extending 170 km along the coast of the Red Sea.