



China in the Middle East

The Wary Dragon

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This study examines China's interests in the Middle East and assesses China's economic, political, and security activities there to determine whether China has a strategy toward the region and what such a strategy means for the United States. The study focuses on China's relations with two of its key partners in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What explains China's increased attention to the Middle East?
- What are the implications of this development for the United States?



KEY FINDINGS

China Has Adopted a "Wary Dragon" Strategy Toward the Middle East

- China exhibits wariness in its engagement with the Middle East. China endeavors to protect its expanding interests by not taking sides in conflicts and controversies.
- China avoids the public articulation of a Middle East policy or strategy and the making of hard commitments to any states beyond what is required to maintain cordial business relations and pragmatic diplomatic and security ties.

China Has Four Key Interests in the Middle East

- Energy security and economic stakes seem to be China's paramount interests.
- China is also concerned with its geostrategic posture. China seeks to balance against U.S. influence in the Middle East, but China does not actively oppose the United States.

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- China wants to ensure domestic tranquility, which involves quashing any public criticism of Chinese policies, notably with regard to Chinese Muslims and the Uighurs of Xinjiang.
- China aims to enhance its great-power status.

China Does Not Pose a Threat to U.S. Interests in the Region

- China is correcting what has tended to be a lopsided eastward overemphasis in terms of economic development and national security protection.
- China's rebalance is neither a reaction to the Obama administration's own rebalance nor a new phenomenon.
- China and the United States have overlapping interests in the Middle East—both desire stability and unfettered access to energy.
- Maintaining a modicum of stability in the region requires the vigorous efforts of outside powers. This is a role that China has not been willing or able to play. The United States is the primary actor fulfilling this role, and, for the foreseeable future, China seems amenable to this.
- While China sees itself as locked in a great-power rivalry with the United States, it desires to maintain an overall climate of cordial and cooperative U.S.-Chinese relations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States should encourage China, along with other Asian powers, to become more involved in efforts to improve regional stability.
- The United States should work to reassure partners of its enduring security commitment to the region.
- The Pentagon should be open to new thinking in the Middle East and new approaches to working to protect key U.S. interests, including the possibility of cooperating with China in the Middle East.