



### ISSUE BRIEF

## Present without impact?

### How the Middle East perceives China's diplomatic engagement

MARCH 2025 JONATHAN FULTON

#### Abstract

Since becoming a net energy importer in 1993, China has steadily expanded its presence in the Middle East, deepening ties through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and partnerships with regional countries and organizations. Despite economic advancements and high-profile diplomatic engagements, China's influence remains largely economic rather than political. Middle Eastern perceptions of China vary; it is seen as a cautious, transactional actor with limited capacity for addressing key regional conflicts and security concerns. While Iran views China as a crucial partner, Gulf states leverage their ties with Beijing to maintain strategic flexibility. Interviews with regional experts highlight skepticism regarding China's willingness and ability to assume a more influential political role. Economic pragmatism drives ongoing partnerships, but China is not yet considered a key political or security player in the region. The study concludes that China's regional role will likely remain focused on economic interests in the near term.

#### Introduction

Since becoming a net energy importer for the first time in 1993, China has steadily come to see the Middle East as a more consequential region, with its presence there expanding rapidly in the period since the BRI was announced in 2013. Over the past decade, China has made significant diplomatic inroads into the region. It released its first Arab Policy Paper in 2016, articulating its ambitions for deeper engagement with the Arab world. It has developed strategic partnership agreements with nearly every country in the Middle East and North Africa; Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen are the only exceptions. It has formalized cooperation with region-specific multilateral structures—such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation—and invited regional countries to join international organizations in which China plays a leadership role, including BRICS+ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Once perceived as a distant region of marginal importance, the Middle East has come to play a significant role in China's foreign policy.

Less clear is how actors in the Middle East perceive China's engagement. While everyone in the region acknowledges China's importance as a trading superpower, this has not resulted in diplomatic or political influence. Despite high-profile engagement like President Xi Jinping's visit to Riyadh

The **Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative** (SMESI) pays tribute to Brent Scowcroft's efforts to ensure a cohesive and robust relationship between the US and the region. Those associated with the Initiative engage on a myriad of critical, pan-regional topics, to include: China, Russia, and great power competition in the Middle East; the future of Iran; impending regional security challenges; the politics of Middle East states and decision-making of its leaders; intraregional tensions and conflict; climate and human security challenges; interstate warfare; emerging technologies and their impact on strategic relationships; and the underlying threats facing regional states. SMESI provides policymakers fresh insights into core US national security interests by leveraging its expertise, networks, and on-the-ground programs to develop unique and holistic assessments on the future of the most pressing strategic, political, and security challenges and opportunities in the Middle East.

in December 2022 and the announcement of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in Beijing in March 2023, Beijing's ability to play a meaningful role in the most pressing regional issues has been found wanting in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and the series of related crises since. Its response to the Gaza war damaged China's relationship with Israel and has not seemed to make an impression on the Arab public. China's self-interested response to Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping also strained its credibility as a significant extra-regional actor. That Chinese vessels continued to traverse the Red Sea while regional governments—Egypt's in particular—suffered economically did little to support the narrative of China as an emerging outside power.

## Middle Eastern responses to Chinese diplomacy

To better understand how regional elites view China's diplomatic engagement across the region, I conducted a series of long-form, structured interviews in December 2024 and January 2025 with experts from Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. I spoke with academics, current and retired officials, and think tank researchers. I asked them all the same six questions.

- How do you perceive China as a political actor in the Middle East?
- Is China a diplomatically important or useful partner for (your country)?
- Do you think China's messaging and approach to Gaza have been effective in establishing Beijing as an honest broker?
- Did China's response to the Red Sea shipping crisis affect your perception of China's influence in the Middle East?
- Does China's partnership with Iran affect your thinking on China as a regional actor?
- Do you think China will be a more or less important partner for (your country)/the Middle East in the next five years?

Some of those interviewed had professional Chinese expertise, but the majority were international policy experts with China-adjacent knowledge. Many stated that their knowledge about China is tangential rather than the result of formal study. While they need to consider China in their work, few see themselves as China experts. This in itself is interesting, given the perceived importance of China to the Middle East; one would expect much deeper

awareness of Chinese political behavior from foreign policy specialists. That few have chosen to specialize in China studies is consistent with my own professional experience. Since mid-2022, I have led China-focused discussion forums in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, and Israel and found a surprising lack of Chinese expertise in all but Israel, where there is a robust, but small, community of China watchers. With little in the way of area studies programs in regional higher education, few formally study China.

## Perceptions of China as a political actor in the Middle East

The question about China as a political actor of consequence in the region generated consistent responses from all respondents. Across all countries, interviewees did not yet consider China to have political influence in the Middle East and still saw it primarily as an economic partner. Within this consensus opinion, however, some interesting themes were expressed frequently.

One was the widespread perception of China as a status quo actor. Several interviewees said that China has adopted a cautious approach to regional politics, avoiding bold moves that might disrupt existing power structures. A Saudi China expert noted, "I think China in many ways is a state that abides by a status quo approach that ultimately emphasizes stability and engaging with the current configuration of actors on the ground. So whatever kind of diplomatic efforts it has often exerted, it is toward the end of reinforcing that status quo . . . I don't think it's an actor that is necessarily willing to invest the political capital necessary to bring about dramatic shifts diplomatically that would even go to serve that status quo. So it supports the status quo on the cheap or on a very severe discount." An Iranian interviewee expressed a similar opinion: "As an actor with political ambitions there are still limits, and I haven't seen any kind of Chinese political initiative as such. It's been more a case of China joining preexisting initiatives or ideas." The idea of China playing a leading political role in the Middle East is not consistent with the experience or understanding of regional observers.

This status quo orientation creates a clear divide between China's economic involvement and its political presence. Economically, China has made significant inroads, funding and constructing major infrastructure projects across the Middle East. However, despite its extensive economic ties in the region, China's influence in political and military matters remains limited. Some analysts argued that Beijing harbors long-term ambitions to expand its political role,

but this was generally described as a long-term projection based on current economic trends. The more commonly held opinion was that China lacks both the capacity and the desire to become a serious security actor in the region. Israelis were particularly skeptical, with experts describing China as “passive,” “reticent,” and “tentative.” An Emirati interviewee cautiously noted that China “may not necessarily have a proactive approach to diplomacy in the Middle East in addressing the geopolitical issues in the Middle East.” An Egyptian official agreed, saying, “We don’t really consider China a main player when it comes to the issues that we care about.”

Trust was another recurring theme. Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are beginning to cautiously build stronger ties with China. An Emirati China expert described a process whereby “we are in the phase of building trust with China in a proactive way. But at the same time, we are also evaluating China to see if it’s going to be a trustworthy partner or not.” This was consistent with Gulf Arab countries’ efforts to diversify their partnerships, though they remain wary about China’s capacity and willingness to provide long-term geopolitical stability. Skepticism was more pronounced in Israel and parts of the Arab world, where doubts persisted regarding China’s willingness to engage deeply with the region’s complex political challenges. An Egyptian expert described China as a self-interested actor in the region “trying to secure their BRI and a pathway for Middle East oil and gas to reach them more than playing an actual role in the political and security map of the region.”

In these discussions, comparisons between China and the United States frequently arose. Despite frustrations with US policies, many in the region still viewed the United States as the primary security provider and a more effective political actor than China. Beijing’s reluctance to take on significant security responsibilities, coupled with its focus on economic rather than political engagement, is seen as contrasting sharply with the US approach. While China promotes a narrative of “win-win” cooperation, commentators—particularly from Israel—express doubts about whether China’s actual actions align with this messaging. Referring to the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and the ensuing wars, an Israeli interviewee said, “October 7 revealed the continuous impact of the United States as the major diplomatic actor and security provider in the region, and by contrast corrected our assessment of China’s foreign policy in the region.” When asked what that reassessment meant, she dismissed Chinese regional diplomacy as “more of a buzzword than real diplomatic

engagement that has a real and long-term effect on the lives of the people living in the region.”

Some speculated that China might be quietly seeking to fill gaps left by diminishing US influence—though these efforts appeared more salient as rhetoric or normative affinity, rather than material. An Egyptian interviewee claimed Egypt “cannot rely on United States in the difficult moments” and described China as a more consistent political partner. Another described China as a useful tool: “China is important to oppose and antagonize the West, mainly the United States. They don’t care about us in the Middle East. They don’t care about the Palestinian issue. They just pursue the West’s interests. So to have somebody like China to antagonize and oppose the approach of the West is very much needed.”

One important and frequently expressed point was the need for extra-regional powers to contribute to regional security, an issue on which China is absent. Without a role in this space, regional analysts see China’s diplomatic role as peripheral. An Iranian interviewee articulated this point.

In a highly securitized region like the Middle East, it’s almost impossible to be an effective political actor without being a military and security actor as well. China is not a military security actor. The United States is. And in the end, it was the United States that could finally bring ceasefire to Gaza. Not the United Nations, not the [International Criminal Court], not the [International Court of Justice], not Russia and not China. I think as long as the foundation of China’s influence in the region remains geoeconomic, it will lack the necessary tools to be an effective political actor in the region.

## Views on the utility of China’s diplomatic support

When discussing China with Middle Eastern analysts, the word “transactional” came up frequently. China was perceived as useful in economic terms. And as a rising power with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the world’s second-largest economy, and the second-largest population, it is a country that cannot be dismissed easily. However, few described China as a genuinely engaged diplomatic partner with the capacity to shape events in Middle Eastern affairs. An Israeli analyst noted the lack of Beijing’s regional expertise compared with that of the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union (EU), or

even Russia: “There is this this impression that they're disconnected from the region's dynamics and a deep understanding of what is going on.” Given the competitive nature of Middle Eastern affairs, tensions at the regional level drive the foreign policy agendas of most countries, and there is a relatively low ceiling on China's influence.

In Israel, China's diplomatic presence was perceived as problematic yet largely irrelevant. China's voting patterns at the United Nations often contradict Israeli interests, and its strategic role is almost nonexistent in Israeli foreign policy discussions. This lack of focus on China was likened to a “blind spot” for Israeli policymakers. China's engagement is seen mainly in economic terms, characterized by trade and business ties, rather than in political terms. One Israeli China expert said, “Most Israelis don't think about China. They think about China in the sense that that they're ordering stuff from Alibaba.” Another explained this lack of local focus on China: “I think in Israel, there is no discussion whatsoever about China's foreign policy. It's a nonissue. Russia is important to a certain extent. The United States, crucial. And China is this kind of invisible distant actor. It's present, but it has no impact.”

Iran places far more strategic importance on its relationship with China, though the relationship remains deeply asymmetrical. An Iranian interviewee described China as a “lifeline” for the Iranian government, but noted, “I don't think the Chinese view Iran at all as a crucial partner. It's useful to annoy the Americans and to buy cheap oil, and that's about it. I don't think Iran has any other value beyond that for China.” The vulnerabilities inherent in any asymmetrical relationship result in a high level of mistrust, and Iranians generally perceived China as an opportunistic partner that prioritizes economic gains over long-term strategic support. Politically, China was seen as disengaged from Iran's regional ambitions, which frustrated those hoping for greater alignment to counterbalance US pressures.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia regards China with strategic pragmatism, using its relationship with China to maintain leverage in its dealings with the United States. This “China card” is particularly useful as Saudi Arabia seeks to diversify partnerships while signaling to Washington that it has alternatives. A Saudi analyst made this point, saying, “The Saudis want to reinforce good ties with the US, but there has been a drift that has become apparent over the last ten years. Using the China card at different junctures has been useful in terms of increasing attention on Saudi Arabia at different points in time.” Economically, China plays a significant role in supporting mega-projects

like the planned city NEOM, demonstrating Saudi Arabia's reliance on Chinese infrastructure and logistics expertise.

For both Saudis and Iranians, China's role in the rapprochement announced in March 2023 was evidence of its potential to play a constructive role in addressing their countries' strategic concerns. At the same time, Beijing was described as having convening power rather than diplomatic influence. The widespread view on the diplomatic achievement was that it was largely established within the region, with support from Iraq and Oman, and then finalized in Beijing.

Emiratis generally expressed a perception of China's growing influence and utility as a partner. One claimed, “China is now being treated as a power that is on par with the UK and more seriously than the EU. We want to see if China can enhance its presence, especially in the Gulf Cooperation Council.” This statement was indicative of a broader assumption across the region: China is potentially useful, so most countries are trying to enhance relations today for expected future gains. However, transactional remains an apt description for the time being.

## China's messaging on Palestine

Because the dominant perception in the region is that China has limited diplomatic influence, its position on the issue of Palestine was seen as less important than those of countries that have the capacity to contribute to its resolution. As such, many saw China's messaging and approach as politically motivated, although Arabs appreciated a powerful country expressing a pro-Palestinian position in international forums.

As far as China's approach to the crisis and its messaging, regional responses have been muted. In Israel, where one would expect anger with China's approach, few outside of the small community of China experts are aware of China's position on Israel-Palestine relations. One Israeli analyst said, “Most Israelis I talk to say ‘We haven't heard anything China said.’ We don't care; nobody knows about China.” This was consistent with the broader discourse. A China expert expressed an alternative viewpoint: “The people who know China were very, very shocked by China's clearly antagonistic and adversarial position with regard to Israel. It didn't even try to maintain any modicum of transactionalism. You would have thought that China could have kept the door open.”

Many in the Arab world assume that China lacks the capacity to act as a mediator or exert diplomatic influence on Israel-Palestine. The deeply entrenched role of the

United States and its dominance in regional diplomacy leave little room for China to make an impact. There is a strand of thought that Washington would never allow China to play a prominent role on any regional issue. A retired Egyptian official articulated this belief vis-à-vis the crisis in Gaza, saying that China cannot be a significant actor because “it’s not accepted by the Americans of the Israelis. Of course not. But for many years, they were trying to play a diplomatic role. They were always blocked by the Americans or Israel. So there’s no place here for China.”

More generally, Egyptians tended to acknowledge that while China’s statements might enhance its image in the developing world, they do not translate into tangible political influence. This view is also shared across the Arab world. When asked about Arab narratives on China’s position on Gaza, a Saudi specialist claimed, “I’ve not picked up on anything that would suggest in the Arab debates or media that there is any particular attention accorded to China.” Those who paid attention to Chinese messaging have not found it particularly effective in changing perceptions of China as a supporter of the Palestinian cause. As one Gulf Arab interviewee said, “I don’t see that China’s positions are necessarily unique, and I don’t think that they are prominent in the debates in the region. I don’t see people talking about China’s position.”

## Perceptions of China’s response to the Red Sea crisis

Middle Eastern elites’ perceptions of China’s response to the Red Sea crisis are consistent with views of China as having modest political and diplomatic influence. The widespread assumption is that Beijing has no capacity to have an impactful role in the crisis. Observers from outside the Middle East might have expected a disappointed reaction from the region, but the reality is few expect China to play such a role. As one Emirati interviewee said, “China is not yet there when it comes to regional players’ perception of who the external powers are. People talk about the US all the time, then to a lesser degree about Russia, but China is not yet a very important security provider or stakeholder in the region.” A Saudi interviewee concurred: “Is China the external actor that immediately pops up in people’s minds when they’re thinking about this issue? No.”

Given the economic impact of the Red Sea crisis on the Egyptian economy, one would expect disappointment from Cairo. However, elites there generally state that their

expectations of China’s response were not confounded. One former official stated, “My impression is that they don’t want to pay the price that the US is paying to protect those waterways to secure their own trade, oil, and gas. And they are leaving it up to the United States and the Western nations in general. China will not project any military power outside its region, not in the Middle East. It is happy that the US is doing that for them.” Another also reflected on China’s lack of influence: “The problem itself is with the Houthis. I don’t see a big role for China here.”

Perceptions in the Gulf were consistent with this logic. A Saudi interviewee said, “I think it just really reinforces the logic of the way in which China engages with the region, which is very practical. They’re very pragmatic, and they engage with actors just to support their economic interests.” An Emirati interviewee made a similar point, saying, “We didn’t really expect China to take a very clear position on this or condemn the Iranian action or at least do something in terms of a clear decision to be made toward the parties involved.”

Iranians were more inclined to see China’s response to the Red Sea crisis less as a response to a local crisis than as part of a larger systemic competition between China and the United States. One Iranian analyst said China should not have been expected to contribute to solving the Red Sea crisis because it could be used to demonstrate the tenuous nature of the US-centered security architecture: “They can go to their own constituents and people in the Middle East and say ‘Look—they failed. Their system is not working anymore. We need a new system. We need a new world order.’” Another Iranian made a similar point about this crisis undermining the West’s credibility, believing leaders in China “enjoy seeing chaos. It could be chaos on the streets in London. It could be chaos in the streets in Orlando. It could be chaos in the Red Sea. Chaos is good in the liberal world as far as they’re concerned because it shows that the West is failing.”

In less ideological terms, other Iranian analysts also pointed to the Red Sea crisis as evidence that China has less influence than is commonly assumed. One said, “It shows that China doesn’t have that amount of influence on Iran, and it also shows that China is still not ready to be a huge actor in the region in the future.” Another pointed out that the Houthis’ attacks on Red Sea shipping hurt China’s economic interests and that its inability to intervene “is another indication of both political and operational limits of China.”

## China's partnership with Iran

China's partnership with Iran elicits different responses across the Middle East. For Israelis, China's ties with Iran are a cause for concern, while Arabs see opportunities, both as possible leverage with Tehran or simply to build stronger bilateral partnerships with Beijing. Iranians view China as a crucial ally, especially given their country's international isolation.

For Israelis, China's economic support for Iran is seen as a direct source of funding for Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. China's engagement with Iran is perceived as a direct threat to Israeli national security and regional stability. An Israeli China expert said, "To the extent that people think about China, I don't think it's seen as a neutral because it's a regional actor whose actions strengthen our enemies. It might be too simplified a view, but I think that is the view." Another made a similar point, saying, "In Israel's perspective anybody who's not sanctioning Iran, anybody who's not harming Iran and is actively helping Iran, is somebody who's not promoting Israeli interests."

Gulf countries, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, take a more pragmatic approach. They recognize that China's relationship with Iran is inevitable but believe that confrontation is neither necessary nor beneficial. Instead, these nations have adapted their strategies by fostering closer economic and diplomatic relations with China. By doing so, they aim to influence Beijing's role in the region and maintain a balance of power. Through outreach and collaboration, Gulf states hope to position themselves as valuable partners in China's long-term regional plans, effectively countering Iran's influence without direct conflict. They also understand that their much denser economic relations with China provide far greater opportunities, making them more useful to Beijing in material terms. With their business-friendly environments, reputations as magnets for foreign direct investment, and higher levels of development, the Gulf Arab countries know they have more to offer China than Iran does.

Another point frequently made by Gulf Arabs was that an isolated Iran is more threatening. Iranian aggression during the "maximum pressure" campaign was frequently cited as evidence that Iran, when backed into a corner, creates a less stable security environment in the Gulf. That Tehran is supported by China—a country with which Gulf Arab countries enjoy strong relations—was seen as a stabilizing influence. There was also a perception that China presents a potential source of positive leverage in

Iran; here the logic was that Gulf countries can use their partnership with Beijing as possible leverage with Iran, although there is not yet any evidence of this working in practice. An Emirati interviewee said, "We would like Iranian power to be moderated. We do not want Iranian rockets and drones flying over us in Abu Dhabi and in Dubai. We need a moderating presence. We think that China can play a bigger role, but we also think that we need to make a more vigorous outreach to our Chinese partners and to bring them in and to 'softly educate' them on how to play this kind of a role, which is something that they are not accustomed to."

Meanwhile, Iranians described China as a source of much-needed material support but also perceived Beijing as a self-interested actor in pursuing the bilateral relationship. One Iranian analyst said China "has its own agenda, and whatever they're doing is to advance their own political objectives." Another expressed the belief that Iran's vulnerability is a positive for China in its economic relations with Tehran: "China is predictable in what it wants and how it treats Iran. Of course, it benefits from the sanctions. Iranians know this." Another Iranian interviewee focused on the pressures the Islamic Republic is facing with the Donald Trump administration threatening a return to maximum pressure: "I think Iran is in a very difficult situation. China would be very important because China can provide Iran with the much-needed financial resources, as limited as it might be. The only country left to buy Iranian oil and help them is China. Would they carry on doing it? Would they support Iran in its regional agenda? I think there would be limitations to that."

## Perceptions of China's future role in the Middle East

In the near term, few expect significant changes in China's role in the Middle East. There is general agreement that China's economic importance will remain strong and its current trajectory will continue. However, few anticipate Beijing expanding its diplomatic and political engagement; they instead expect minimal involvement in regional security and conflict resolution. A Saudi expert noted the continued centrality of the United States in regional political affairs and saw little space for China to make significant gains: "I don't really have any big expectations about big transformations or shifts. It's all contingent on whether something dramatic happens that alters current patterns of power." A former Egyptian official predicted, "I don't think in five years' time we can see China as a major political or security actor in the region. They are definitely trying to develop that role, but with very limited abilities."

There was broad agreement on certain points. China's continued importance as a major regional economic partner was unquestioned. An Egyptian interviewee said, "I think most regional countries think pragmatically. They need the money, they need the cooperation, they need the infrastructure." China, he believes, is important in addressing the region's economic and development agenda. Having developed this presence, China's involvement in large-scale infrastructure projects and trade is too deeply rooted to be easily replaced. Similarly, regional pragmatism drives continued engagement with China, as countries seek to secure economic benefits while diversifying their political partnerships.

Despite speculation about China's potential to take on a more prominent diplomatic role, most interviewees agreed that any significant shift will depend on evolving global power dynamics, primarily as a response to US-China tensions. There is a broad consensus that the Middle East is a pivotal region in great-power competition and specific countries' relations with China are often viewed through that prism. The Israelis know that they will never derive the same kind of benefits from China that they get in their relationship with the United States. Israel will continue to see China as a useful trade partner and a political or diplomatic actor to be kept at arm's length. Arab countries are more inclined to see it as a hedge; few expect a relationship with China to come with the political and security support that is needed from extra-regional powers, but many see transactions with China as a means of drawing attention from the United States. Iran, of course, sees the West as hostile and Chinese support as crucial in navigating a difficult regional and international landscape.

## Conclusion

- China is viewed more favorably in Middle Eastern countries than it is in Western countries. That said, it was not described as a benevolent regional actor in any of the conversations. Interactions with China were described as interest-based transactions rather than a result of strategic recalibration or shared values.
- Within the region, there is little in the way of knowledge production being generated about China, with the exceptions of Iran and Israel, both of which have small but strong China-watching communities. This lack of local expertise results in blind spots about Chinese strategic ambitions or foreign policy behavior. China expertise from the United Kingdom—and the United States—could support Middle Eastern governments in making better informed policy decisions.
- Perceptions of China's role varied across countries—Israel views China as a distant and politically irrelevant actor, Iran considers China a crucial but opportunistic ally, and Gulf nations use their relationship with China to diversify partnerships and maintain leverage with the United States. In no country was China described as a reliable partner. It was widely perceived as a transactional, self-interested partner with a shallow diplomatic presence in the region.
- China's limited diplomatic and political influence in the Middle East creates opportunities for trusted long-term partners like the United Kingdom (and the United States). There are clear openings on issues, particularly in intra-regional cooperation, counterterrorism, or maritime security, where China has no footprint and no depth of expertise.
- Most analysts believed China's political and security role will remain minimal in the near term, although its economic importance will continue to grow, driven by infrastructure investments and trade partnerships. This underscores the widespread view of China as a limited regional actor.

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