

The Greater Middle East: China's Reality Check

James M. Dorsey

Abstract: If any one part of the world has forced China to throw its long-standing foreign and defense policy principles out the window and increasingly adopt attitudes associated with a global power, it is the greater Middle East, a region that stretches from the Atlantic coast of Africa to north-western China.

The Middle East's ability to influence Chinese policy stems from its decades-long, uncanny capability to foist itself high up on the agenda of the international community and its most powerful constituents.

The Middle East's relevance was facilitated by China's need to protect its growing economic and geopolitical interests bundled into the Belt and Road initiative, a US\$1 trillion infrastructure-driven effort to tie Eurasia to the People's Republic, coupled with China's desire to take advantage of President Donald J. Trump's damaging of US credibility by projecting itself as the defender of the world order.

Developments in the greater Middle East left China no choice but to either reinterpret or pile on more on to the dustbin of history principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, an economically-driven win-win approach as a sort of magic wand for problem resolution, and no foreign military interventions or bases.

Nonetheless, hampered by its reticence to articulate a Middle East policy that goes beyond economic, technical, military and anti-terrorism cooperation, China's progressive embrace of foreign and defense policies typical for a global power means that the People's Republic is increasingly likely to be sucked into the Middle East's multiple conflicts and disputes.

Introduction: Reality Kicks In

A series of incidents in 2011 during the popular Arab revolts sparked realization among Chinese policy makers and scholars that China's existing foreign and defence policy kit would ultimately not allow it to protect its exponentially expanding Diaspora as well as its Belt and Road-related, mushrooming investments in a swath of land encompassing North Africa, the Levant, the Gulf, the Caucasus, Pakistan and Central Asia – territory that stretches to its strategic but troubled north-western province of Xinjiang with its ethnic and linguistic ties to the region.

It all started in Libya during the 2011 uprising where China initially breached its principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, de facto a different label for the US equivalent of long-standing support of autocracy in the Middle East in a bid to maintain stability, moved beyond its diplomatic relations with the regime of Colonel Moammar Qaddafi to forge ties with the opposition National Council.¹ However, the outreach to the Council did not save it from being identified with the ancient regime once the opposition gained power.

On the contrary, shortly after Qaddafi's fall the Council made it clear that China would be low on its totem pole because of past Chinese support for the Qaddafi regime. The Council's animosity was a response to China's initial hesitancy to recognize the post-Qaddafi government and revelations that Beijing continued to discuss arms sales to Qaddafi as his grip on power was slipping.²

China's vulnerability and the potential price for supporting autocratic rule in the greater Middle East was reinforced when China realized that its nationals and assets in Libya and other countries in turmoil could become targets. To ensure the safety and security of its nationals, China was forced to evacuate 35,000 people from Libya, its most major foreign rescue operation. The evacuation was the first of similar operations in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.³

The evacuations didn't stop militants in Egypt's Sinai from kidnapping 25 Chinese nationals, nor radicals in South Sudan from taking several Chinese hostages or the attacks on Chinese targets in Pakistan. The kidnappings sparked significant criticism on Chinese social media of the government's seeming inability to protect

its nationals and investments.⁴ China has since moved aggressively by beefing up private security companies and more recently asserting that its elite counter-terrorism forces would play a bigger role overseas.⁵

To make things worse, the limits of China's traditional foreign and defense policy meshed with its increasingly repressive domestic approach towards Xinjiang province, as Uyghurs, an ethnic Turkic people, carried out knife attacks in 2011 in the cities of Hotan and Kashgar, rioted in Shache in 2014 leaving some 100 people dead,⁶ and joined jihadist groups in Syria.⁷

Finally, the mismatch between China's expectations and those of many in the greater Middle East were driven home in a brutal encounter between Arab businessmen and ethnic Chinese scholars and former officials in which the Arabs took the Chinese to task for wanting to benefit from Middle Eastern resources and trade relations without taking on political and geopolitical responsibilities that they associate with a rising superpower.⁸

In addition to all this, since 2011 it has become increasingly difficult for China to remain on the sidelines of the Middle East's multiple conflicts and rivalries. This is particularly true with President Donald J. Trump's coming to office.

The greater Middle East's problems have escalated with Mr. Trump's abandonment of any pretence of impartiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; his apparent initial backing of the Saudi-UAE led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar;⁹ his heating up of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran by withdrawing from the 2015 international agreement curbing Iran's nuclear program; and his toying



In addition to all this, since 2011 it has become increasingly difficult for China to remain on the sidelines of the Middle East's multiple conflicts and rivalries. This is particularly true with President Donald J. Trump's coming to office

with attempting to change the regime in Tehran that encouraged Saudi Arabia to step up Saudi support for Pakistani militants in the province of Baluchistan;¹⁰ the likely return of Uyghur jihadists in Syria to Central and South Asia that has prompted the establishment of Chinese military outposts in Tajikistan and Afghanistan and consideration of direct military intervention in a possible Syrian-Russian assault on Idlib, the last rebel-held stronghold in Syria;¹¹ and finally the potential fallout of China's brutal crackdown in Xinjiang.¹²

Tied up in knots

China's potential policy dilemmas in the greater Middle East were enhanced by the fact that it doesn't really have a clear Middle East policy that goes beyond its shaky, traditional foreign and defence policy principles and economics. That was particularly evident in January 2016 when China on the eve of President Xi Jinping's visit to the Middle East, the first visit by a Chinese head of state in seven years, issued its first Middle East-related policy white paper but fundamentally it contained no new thinking and amounted to a reiteration of a win-win-based approach to the region – a thin basis for a country that after an absence of ties for some 500 years maintained after the 1949 revolution relations primarily with socialist and revolutionary Middle Eastern regimes and movements.

China's network in the region only began to expand with its economic opening in 1978. It was then that the Middle East's importance for the People's Republic's

energy and maritime security and its impact on the international community and the Muslim world sank in. Yet, China continues to look at the Middle East primarily through the prism of economics and counter-terrorism and maintains an increasingly gradually changing military posture. The region's economic significance lies in the fact that almost half of China's oil imports, mounting up to 3.6 million barrels a day, and 41 percent of its natural gas imports travel either through the Strait of Hormuz or Babel-Mandeb at the entrance to the Red Sea. An estimated 20 percent of Chinese exports to the Middle East, North Africa and Europe take the same journey in the opposite direction.¹³ The Middle East's religious impact has grown in significance given that the Belt and Road stretches across a Eurasian landmass populated by numerous Muslim countries, several of which border on China's restive and troubled Xinjiang province.

Moreover, with China dependent on the US security umbrella in the Gulf, Beijing sees itself as competitively cooperating with the United States in the Middle East. That is despite the US-Chinese trade war; differences over the Iranian nuclear agreement which the United States has abandoned and China is eager to salvage; and Mr. Trump's partisan Middle East policy. The Chinese interests are aligned with that of Gulf countries who walk a fine line focusing geopolitically on an increasingly unpredictable United States and economically on China as well as the rest of Asia, including Russia, Korea and Japan.

China shares with the United States and especially with the Trump administration a fundamental policy principle: stability rather than equitable political reform. For all practical purposes, China's principle



China shares with the United States and especially with the Trump administration a fundamental policy principle: stability rather than equitable political reform. For all practical purposes, China's principle of non-interference is little more than another label for the US equivalent of long-standing support of autocracy in the Middle East in a bid to maintain stability

of non-interference is little more than another label for the US equivalent of long-standing support of autocracy in the Middle East in a bid to maintain stability. Outcomes of recent elections in Malaysia, Pakistan, the Maldives and Sri Lanka were likely to reinforce China's predilection towards more authoritarian and autocratic regimes. Elections in all four countries produced governments eager to review Belt and Road-related projects and at the very least re-negotiate terms.¹⁴

Nonetheless, China, in some ways, is learning the lesson, despite recent developments in Xinjiang, that US President George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice, his national security advisor and subsequent secretary of state, learnt on 9/11. Within a matter of weeks after the Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, Mr. Bush and Ms. Rice suggested that the United States was co-responsible for the attacks because of its support for autocracy that had fuelled anti-American and anti-Western sentiment. This was why Bush launched his ill-conceived democracy initiative.¹⁵

China, as a result of its political, economic and commercial approach towards Belt and Road-related projects has started to have a similar experience. Chinese overseas outposts and assets have become targets, particularly in Pakistan but also in Central Asia.¹⁶ The kidnappings

in 2011 in the Sinai and South Sudan were just the beginning. Uyghurs joined groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda not because they were pan-Islamist jihadists but because they wanted to get experience they could later apply in militant struggle against the Chinese.¹⁷ Beyond profiling themselves in fighting in Syria, Uyghurs have trained with Malhama Tactical, a jihadist-for-profit Blackwater, the private military company created by Erik Prince.¹⁸

Anti-Chinese sentiment in countries like Kazakhstan and Tajikistan is on the rise and also has a history in nations like Turkey and Iran that still walk a tightrope as they strengthen ties at the price of silence concerning the severe repression of Muslims in Xinjiang.¹⁹ In a report published in September 2018, Human Rights Watch identified 26 predominantly Muslim countries that China considers sensitive because of its crackdown in its north-western province.²⁰ Included in the list of countries are former Soviet Central Asian nations as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan, many of which border on Xinjiang, Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Indonesia, and key Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey that have historic, ethnic and linguistic ties to China's Turkic Muslims and for decades was empathetic to Uyghur aspirations.²¹

The Muslim world's silence constitutes for China a double-edged sword. China's campaign in Xinjiang is effectively enabled by the silence, much of which is due to countries that are deeply indebted to China. This allows China to largely ignore criticism by Western nations, human rights groups as well as the Uyghur Diaspora.²² Moreover, China has so far benefited from the fact that Muslim politicians and leaders see more political mileage in pushing causes like



The Muslim world's silence constitutes for China a double-edged sword. China's campaign in Xinjiang is effectively enabled by the silence, much of which is due to countries that are deeply indebted to China

the Palestinians rather than ones that have not been in the Islamic world's public eye. "You gain popularity if you show you are anti-Zionism and if you are fighting for the Palestinians, as compared to the Rohingya or Uyghurs," said Ahmad Farouk Musa, director of the Islamic Renaissance Front, a Malaysian NGO.²³

On the flip side, silence potentially gives Muslim countries a degree of leverage. Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad seemingly exploited that leverage with China treading carefully in the face of an anti-Chinese election campaign that returned the 93-year old to office in May and Mr. Maharthir's subsequent suspension of US\$22 billion of Chinese-backed, Belt and Road-related infrastructure projects.²⁴ The leverage could also factor in financially troubled Pakistani intentions to review or renegotiate agreements related to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crown jewel in China's Belt and Road initiative and at US\$50 billion, its single largest country investment.²⁵

The risk for China is enhanced by mushrooming publicity about its crackdown in Xinjiang that includes pressure on Uyghurs abroad to return to the Chinese province and risk incarceration and has led to countries like Egypt, Turkey, Afghanistan the United Arab Emirates, and Malaysia, extraditing or moving to deport Uyghurs to China, will make it increasingly difficult for Muslim countries to remain silent.²⁶ The risks are further magnified by black swans such as a recent court case in Kazakhstan that has

forced the government in Astana to walk a fine line between avoiding friction with China and shielding itself from accusations that it is not standing up for the rights and safety of Kazakh nationals.²⁷

Kazakhs were taken aback when 41-year-old Sayragul Sauytbay, a Chinese national of Kazakh descent, testified in an open Kazakh court that she had been employed in a Chinese re-education camp for Kazakhs with 2,500 inmates. She said she was aware of two more camps reserved for Kazakhs.²⁸ Ms. Sauytbay was standing trial for entering Kazakhstan illegally. She said she had escaped to Kazakhstan after being told by Chinese authorities that she would never be allowed to join her family because of her knowledge of the camps. Ms. Sauytbay was given a six-month suspended sentence and allowed to stay in the country where her recently naturalized husband and children reside.

The inclusion of ethnic Kazakhs, a community in China that consists of 1.25 million people, in the crackdown sparked angry denunciations in Kazakhstan's parliament. "There should be talks taking place with the Chinese delegates. Every delegation that goes there should be bringing this topic up... The key issue is that of the human rights of ethnic Kazakhs in any country of the world being respected," said Kunaysh Sultanov, a member of parliament and former deputy prime minister and ambassador to China.²⁹

Anti-Chinese sentiment in the Pakistani Chinese border province of Gilgit-Baltistan ran high earlier this year after some 50 Uyghur women married to Pakistani men were detained on visits to Xinjiang as China refused to renew the visas of their husbands.³⁰ Another 350 Uyghur spouses are also being detained.



A delegation of Pakistani businessmen travelled in September 2018 in small groups to avoid being barred from Beijing, to lobby Chinese authorities for the release of their loved ones.³¹ At about the same time, Pakistan's religious affairs minister, Pir Noorul Haq Qadri, demanded in a meeting with Chinese ambassador Yao Jing that the Chinese ease restrictions on Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang.³²

For their part, Iranians are grateful for Chinese support not only in the current battle over the 2015 international agreement that curbs Iran's nuclear program that the United States effectively wants to see cancelled and China is eagerly trying to salvage, but also in the previous round of international and US sanctions. However, they feel that the last time around they were taken for a ride in terms of high Chinese interest rates for project finance, the quality of goods delivered, and a perceived Chinese laxity in adhering to deadlines.³³

Long-term stability or volatility?

Resentment in various countries of the fallout of the Belt and Road investment taps into the broader threat involved in supporting stability by backing autocratic regimes. That is nowhere truer than in the greater Middle East, a region that is in a period of volatile, often bloody and brutal transition. It's a transition that started with the 2011 Arab revolts and has been prolonged by a powerful Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led counter-revolution. Transitions take anywhere from a quarter to half a century. In other words, the Middle East is just at the beginning.

China, like the United States has been doing for decades, ignores the rumblings of discontent just below the surface even if the global trend is toward more

authoritarian, more autocratic rule. The events of 9/11 were a result of the United States and the West failing to put their ear to the ground and neglecting to take note of those rumblings.

Of course, current rumblings may never explode. But the lesson of the people's power movement in the Philippines in 1986, the video of a fruit and vegetable vendor in Tunisia who set himself alight in late 2010 that sparked the Arab revolts, months of street and online protests in Morocco in the last year,³⁴ the mass protests in Jordan earlier this year against a draft tax bill that have now restarted because of the legislation's resurrection,³⁵ and recent protests in the Iraqi city of Basra are all indicators of what could come.³⁶ All it takes is a black swan.

The Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang could just be said black swan on multiple fronts given the fact that its fallout is felt far beyond China's borders. For starters, the wall of Western and Muslim silence is cracking with potentially serious consequences for China as well as the Islamic world.

The Chinese crackdown in Xinjiang could just be said black swan on multiple fronts given the fact that its fallout is felt far beyond China's borders. For starters, the wall of Western and Muslim silence is cracking with potentially serious consequences for China as well as the Islamic world

What is happening in Xinjiang is fundamentally different from past incidents including protests against a novel by Salman Rushdie and Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa ordering his killing;³⁷ the 2006 Muslim boycott of Danish products because of controversial Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Mohammed,³⁸ and the more recent protests sparked



by the burning of a Qur'an by a Florida evangelist.³⁹ The Chinese campaign in Xinjiang challenges fundamentals of the Islamic faith itself.

The earlier incidents were sparked by protests, primarily among South Asians in either Birmingham or Pakistan. The first Xinjiang-related anti-Chinese protests were staged in Bangladesh and India. Pakistan's religious affairs minister, Noorul Haq Qadri, has raised the issue with China's ambassador to Pakistan as a group of Pakistani businessmen slipped into China to lobby authorities in Beijing for the release of their loved ones.⁴⁰

Malaysia was the first Muslim country to speak out with condemnations by Anwar Ibrahim, a senior figure in Malaysian politics likely to be the country's next head of government.⁴¹

Consideration in Washington of imposing Xinjiang-related sanctions by the Trump administration,⁴² coupled with the United Nations reporting on the crackdown and a German⁴³ and Swedish ban⁴⁴ on deportations of Uyghurs, puts the issue on the map and further increases pressure on Muslim nations, particularly those like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan that claim to speak on behalf of Islam.

This together with the fact that Chinese support for autocratic or authoritarian rule creates a potential opportunity to export its model of the surveillance state, the most extreme example of which is on display in Xinjiang, constitutes risks and involves potential black swans. To be sure, Pakistan can hardly be described as a liberal society, but it is not exactly an authoritarian state either, yet Pakistan is China's first export target.⁴⁵

"A new counter-narrative is also starting to emerge, which stands against this tale of an ever more powerful China that can name its terms and act without restraint or pretence. As more and more people learn more about the China model, and to see it manifested in their daily lives, doubts are rising. The harsh treatment of Taiwan, the actions in Xinjiang, the incredible, pervasive growth of the surveillance state in China and its annexation of almost every aspect of life without any institutional or legal restraint – all these register in some form and shape a little resistance," said China scholar Kerry Brown.⁴⁶

Those doubts are increasingly being couched by pundits and Islamists in comparisons to British colonialism, symbolized by the British East India Company.

"China is at risk of inadvertently embarking on its own colonial adventure in Pakistan— the biggest recipient of BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) investment and once the East India Company's old stamping ground... Pakistan is now virtually a client state of China. Many within the country worry openly that its reliance on Beijing is already turning it into a colony of its huge neighbour. The risks that the relationship could turn problematic are greatly increased by Beijing's ignorance of how China is perceived abroad and its reluctance to study history through a non-ideological lens... It is easy to envisage a scenario in which militant attacks on Chinese projects overwhelm the Pakistani military and China decides to openly deploy the People's Liberation Army to protect its people and assets, said Financial Times columnist Jamil Anderlini."⁴⁷



A similar warning was voiced by Sami ul-Haq, a hard-line Pakistani Islamist politician known as the father of the Taliban because his militant religious seminary, Darul Aloom Haqqania, was dubbed a 'jihad university'⁴⁸ because it counts among its alumni Mullah Omar, the deceased leader of the Taliban, Jalaluddin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani Network, Asim Umar, leader of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, Mullah Omar's successor who was killed in a 2016 US drone strike.⁴⁹ The provincial government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is controlled by recently elected prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-gave \$2.5 million to Darul Aloom Haqqania, a militant religious seminary in February 2018.⁵⁰

"I don't approve of a relationship that leads us to slavery. Given their handling of Muslims at home, the Chinese will behave like the British East India Company once they dig their feet deeper in Pakistan," Ul-Haq said, referring to the colonial-era trading company that led to the British occupation of the Indian subcontinent.⁵¹

Murky waters

Pakistan is increasingly becoming a focal point of potential Chinese pitfalls that go beyond growing opposition to Chinese commercial terms⁵² and the spreading of anti-Chinese sentiment.⁵³ When it comes to the Middle East Pakistan is a potential fulcrum for China being sucked into the region's multiple conflicts among which first and foremost is the bitter rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Pakistan's use of militants as proxies in its dispute with India that by implication or association link China to Saudi soft power and covert operations in Pakistan.

Central to the linkage is the figure of

Pakistan is increasingly becoming a focal point of potential Chinese pitfalls that go beyond growing opposition to Chinese commercial terms and the spreading of anti-Chinese sentiment

Masood Azhar, the fugitive head of Jaish-e-Mohammed, a banned group focussed on Kashmir. China has for years consistently shielded Mr. Azhar, a fighter in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and an Islamic scholar who graduated from an ultra-conservative Deobandi madrassah, Darul Uloom Islamia Binori Town in Karachi, the alma mater of numerous Pakistani militants, globally designated as a terrorist by the United Nations Security Council.⁵⁴

Mr. Azhar is believed to have been responsible for an attack in 2016 on India's Pathankot Air Force Station. The militants dressed in Indian military uniforms fought a 14-hour battle against Indian security forces that ended with the death of the last attacker. Mr. Azhar was briefly detained after the attack and has since gone underground. Mr. Azhar, who was earlier freed from Indian prison in 1999 in exchange for the release of passengers of a hijacked Indian Airlines flight, is also believed to be responsible for an attack in 2001 on the Indian parliament in New Delhi that brought Pakistan and India to the brink of war.⁵⁵

Mr. Azhar maintained close ties to Binori Town classmate, Tariq Azam, a leader of Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Saudi-backed, virulently anti-Shia group who was assassinated in 2003, and Fazlur Rehman Khalil, a Saudi protégé, who was designated by US Treasury Department. Counting a Saudi national among his several wives, Mr. Khalil, a signatory of Osama bin Laden's 1998 fatwa declaring the International Front Against Jews and



Crusaders, operates a madrassah guarded by AK-47 toting guards on the outskirts of Islamabad.⁵⁶

Mr. Khalil serves as secretary general of the Saudi-funded Movement for the Protection of the Two Holy Cities (Tehrike Tahafaz Haramain Sharifain) that is headed by Maulana Ali Muhammad Abu Turab, who was also designated by the US Treasury last year.⁵⁷ Mr. Abu Turab's designation coincided with one of his fundraising trips to the kingdom at a time when Saudi funds were pouring into militant, anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian madrassas in Pakistan's troubled province of Balochistan, a crown jewel in China's Belt and Road Initiative that borders on Iran in what amounted to putting in place building blocks for a possible attempt to destabilize the Islamic republic by stirring unrest among its ethnic minorities.⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia has similarly been forging closer ties to Iraqi Kurdistan on Iran's western border with the opening of a consulate in Erbil,⁵⁹ the initiation of Saudi flights from Jeddah to Erbil,⁶⁰ and the visit of Saudi businessmen.⁶¹

China has for years consistently shielded Mr. Azhar, a fighter in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and an Islamic scholar who graduated from an ultra-conservative Deobandi madrassah, Darul Uloom Islamia Binori Town in Karachi, the alma mater of numerous Pakistani militants, globally designated as a terrorist by the United Nations Security Council

Pakistani discussions with Saudi Arabia on billions of dollars of investment in a refinery in the Baloch port of Gwadar as well as energy and minerals that would complement China's funding of the Pakistani leg of the Belt and Road Initiative, the China Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC) to the tune of US\$60 billion plus, have not only economic and commercial value but also geopolitical significance. Saudi Arabia sees Gwadar as the key to countering Iran's Indian-backed port of Chabahar, a mere 70 kilometres further westward along the Arabian Sea's coastline.⁶²

"The incumbent government is bringing Saudi Arabia closer to Gwadar. In other words, the hardline Sunni-Wahhabi state would be closer than ever to the Iranian border. This is likely to infuriate Tehran," warned Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, a Baloch politician and former minister of port and shipping.⁶³

On the plus side, Aijaz Awan, a retired military official and defense analyst noted that "the nature of our ties with China is strategic. Beijing provides us with a number of defense related materials. Saudi investment, on the other hand, will create more jobs for Pakistanis, because unlike China, the kingdom does not bring its own engineers and workers for economic projects."⁶⁴

Conclusion

China's Belt and Road is pockmarked by numerous potential pitfalls in the greater Middle East, a region in at times brutal and bloody transition. The Belt and Road traverses an expanding minefield of political violence, regional rivalry, widespread public discontentment, nation state fragility, sectarianism, aspirations of ethnic and ethno-religious groups, and potential regime-threatening social, economic and political protest.

Increasingly developments in the greater Middle East challenge long-standing principles of Chinese foreign and defense policy, including notions of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, win-win economically driven policies, and the rejection of the development of a foreign



military presence. The challenge in the framework of China's rising global posture as a superpower is forcing the People's Republic by deed rather than word to gradually compromise if not abandon its lofty principles in a bid to secure its increasingly massive investments in the Middle East and North Africa and ensure the safety of rapidly growing Chinese expatriate communities.

The greater Middle East's volatile and convoluted process of transition as well as the greater assertiveness and intransigence of countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE further calls into question the viability of China's belief that it can either remain aloof from conflicts and disputes or position itself as a problem solver by emphasizing development, economics and the improvement of standards of living. As a result, China, despite its denials, risks falling into the same trap that has thwarted the United States: the contradiction between professed values and goals and the demands of national and economic security that are defined in ways that render those values little more than empty words.

Moreover, China's insistence on dealing with authorities and weak engagement with other segments of society ignores the fact that the waves of protest that have upset political apple carts across the globe is fuelled by a lack of confidence in institutions; a perception of political, economic and social leadership that fails to listen and is held to different standards of accountability for wrong decisions, misguided policies and mis- or improper management; a perception of failure that seeks to root out corruption at all levels of political, economic and social leadership, a perception that economic progress has failed to ensure that infrastructure as well as health and education facilities do not trail the lifting of huge numbers out of poverty

Increasingly developments in the greater Middle East challenge long-standing principles of Chinese foreign and defense policy, including notions of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, win-win economically driven policies, and the rejection of the development of a foreign military presence

resulting in a mismatch of expectation and reality; and a demand for social justice, dignity and inclusiveness.

The Belt and Road's vulnerability is enhanced by the intrinsic fragility of the greater Middle East's autocratic regimes that are either legacies of nationalist military coups or the ascent of tribal domination. With few exceptions, their fragility is buffeted by a lack of a pluralistic past that can serve as a reference point for transition, and a convoluted history of experimenting with different ideologies whose legacy is nothing but a bitter after taste.

China's own assumption that its model of economic openness and tight political control offers a panacea for autocrats in the greater Middle East adds to The Belt and Road's vulnerability. The greater Middle East's autocrats have bought into China's notion, but with few exceptions, there is little indication that they can make it work in their own countries.

The long and short of this is that for China to succeed, it will not only have to engage with local populations but will also have to become a player rather than position itself as an economic sugar daddy that hides behind the principle of non-interference and a flawed economic win-win proposition. The Belt and Road's vulnerabilities create ample opportunity for its competitors in the greater Middle East to ensure that China is one of several regional powers rather than the dominant power.



Endnotes

- 1- James M. Dorsey, China taking leaf out of Russia's script for Libya with more activist policy, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 22 June 2011, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2011/06/china-taking-leaf-out-of-russias-script.html>
- 2- James M. Dorsey, China scores fatal own goals in competition for post-Qaddafi Libya, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 4 September, 2011, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/09/2011/china-scores-fatal-own-goals-in.html>
- 3- Taylor Butch, China's evacuation strategy, Asia Times, 17 September 2015, <http://www.atimes.com/article/chinas-evacuation-strategy/>
- 4- Peter Ford, Why Chinese workers are getting kidnapped abroad, The Christian Science Monitor, 1 February 2012, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/0201/2012/Why-Chinese-workers-are-getting-kidnapped-abroad>
- 5- Ben Bland and Nicolle Liu, China seeks global role for elite counter-terrorism forces, Financial Times, 30 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/fad-58218c46d11-e-8670-8c5353379f7c2>
- 6- Emily Rauhale, China Now Says Almost 100 Were Killed in Xinjiang Violence, Time, 4 August 2014, <http://time.com/3078381/china-xinjiang-violence-shache-yarkand/>
- 7- Ben Blanchard, China envoy says no accurate figure on Uighurs fighting in Syria, Reuters, 20 August 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china/china-envoy-says-no-accurate-figure-on-uighurs-fighting-in-syria-idUSKCN1L5o8G>
- 8- The 2011 meeting was attended by the author
- 9- Bethan McKernan, Donald Trump appears to back Saudi Arabia in Qatar stand off with Gulf states, Independent, 6 June 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/donald-trump-saudi-arabia-qatar-us-diplomatic-gulf-uae-bahrain-egypt-emirates-yemen-a7775386.html>
- 10- James M. Dorsey, Pakistan caught in the middle as China's OBOR becomes Saudi-Iranian-Indian battleground, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 5 May 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/05/2017/pakistan-caught-in-middle-as-chinas.html>
- 11- James M. Dorsey, The battle for Idlib: A potential Catch22- for China, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 8 September 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/09/2018/the-battle-for-idlib-potential-catch22-.html>
- 12- James M. Dorsey, Turkic Muslims: China and the Muslim world's Achilles Heel, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 10 September 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/09/2018/turkic-muslims-china-and-muslim-worlds.html>
- 13- Bichara Khader, The Chinese Breakthrough in the Arab and Mediterranean Markets, IeMed Mediterranean Yearbook, 2018, http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2018/Chinese_Breakthrough_Arab_Bichara_Khader_Medyearbook2018.pdf
- 14- Marwaan Macan-Markar, China's infrastructure diplomacy takes a beating in Asian elections, Nikkei Asian Review, 30 September 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-s-infrastructure-diplomacy-takes-a-beating-in-Asian-elections>
- 15- James M. Dorsey, Trump's Middle East: Back to the Future, RSIS Commentary No. 15 ,2016/304 December 2016, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/12/2016/trumps-middle-east-back-to-future.html>
- 16- James M. Dorsey, Self-fulfilling prophecies: Chinese fear attacks by Uyghur jihadists, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 30 August 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/08/2018/self-fulfilling-prophecies-chinese-fear.html>
- 17- Associated Press, AP Exclusive: Anger with China Drives Uighurs to Syria Fight, 22 December 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/uighurs-leave-china-fight-syria/4175307.html>
- 18- Matteo Puxton, Malhama Tactical: les instructeurs mercenaires des djihadistes, France Soir, 7 September 2018, <http://www.francesoir.fr/malhama-tactical-les-instructeurs-mercenaires-des-djihadistes>
- 19- Bloomberg News, Muslim Governments Silent as China Cracks Down on Uighurs, 31 August 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/27-09-2018/china-u-s-tensions-are-over-far-more-than-trade-quicktake>
- 20- Human Rights Watch, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses," China's Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang's Muslims, 9 September 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/09/09/2018/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs?platform=hootsuite>
- 21- James M. Dorsey, China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 116
- 22- Josh Chin and Eva Dou, American Lawmakers Push to Sanction Chinese Officials Over Xinjiang Camps, The Wall Street Journal, 29 August 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/lawmakers-push-to-sanction-chinese-officials-over-xinjiang-camps1535554800->
- 23- Nithin Coca, Islamic Leaders Have Nothing to Say About China's Internment Camps for Muslims, Foreign Policy,



- 24 July 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/24/07/2018/islamic-leaders-have-nothing-to-say-about-chinas-internment-camps-for-muslims/>
- 24- Bhavan Jaipragas, Mahathir Mohamad. Malaysia's Anti-China Rebel? Not So Fast..., South China Morning Post, 22 August 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2160719/mahathir-mohamad-malaysias-anti-china-rebel-not-so-fast>
- 25- Jamil Anderlini, Henny Sender and Farhan Bokhari, Pakistan rethinks its role in Xi's Belt and Road plan, Financial Times, 10 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/d4a3e7f-8b11-282e99-8ca68-cf89602132>
- 26- Heba Afify, Muslim countries prove dangerous for Uighur exiles, Asia Times, 25 September 2018, http://www.atimes.com/article/muslim-countries-prove-dangerous-for-uighur-exiles/?utm_source=The+Daily+Report&utm_campaign=365e1fc1df-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_58_11_25_09_2018&utm_medium=email&utm_term=1_of8bca137f-365e1fc1df31513393-
- 27- James M. Dorsey, The Uyghur militant threat: China cracks down and mulls policy changes, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 13 August 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/o8/2018/the-uyghur-militant-threat-china-cracks.html>
- 28- Agence France Presse, China's 'prison-like re-education camps' strain relations with Kazakhstan as woman asks Kazakh court not to send her back, 17 July 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2155638/chinas-prison-re-education-camps-strain-relations>
- 29- Gene Bunin, Confiscated passports and «political re-education» centers, ouTube, 8 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FVBOEzBVgM>
- 30- Memphis Barker, Chinese crackdown separates Pakistani husbands from Uighur wives, The Guardian, 15 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/15/chinese-crackdown-separates-pakistani-husbands-from-uighur-wives>
- 31- Christian Shepherd and Philip Wen, «China's big mistake»: Pakistanis lobby to free wives trapped in Xinjiang, Reuters, 25 September 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-pakistan/chinas-big-mistake-pakistanis-lobby-to-free-wives-trapped-in-xinjiang-idUSKCN1M51R7>
- 32- Atif Khan, Pakistan asks China to soften restrictions on Muslims, 20 September 2018, <https://nation.com.pk/-20-Sep2018-/pakistan-asks-china-to-soften-restrictions-on-muslims>
- 33- Joel Wuthnow, Posing Problems Without an Alliance: China-Iran Relations after the Nuclear Deal, INSS Strategic Forum, February 2016, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u1004293/2.pdf>
- 34- Christoph H. Schwartz, Morocco's social protests across time and space, Open Democracy, 13 June 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/christoph-h-schwarz/moroccos-social-protests-across-time-and-space>
- 35- Osama Al Sharif, Months after tax crisis, Jordanians protest new law, Al-Monitor, 20 September 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/09/2018/jordan-prime-minister-draft-law-income-tax.html>
- 36- Pavan Kulkarni, Basra's Protests Hold Larger Significance for the Region, NewsClick, 12 September 2018, <https://www.newsclick.in/basras-protests-hold-larger-significance-region>
- 37- Samuel Osborne, Salman Rushdie: Iranian state media renew fatwa on Satanic Verses author with 600,000\$ bounty, Independent, 21 February 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/salman-rushdie-iranian-state-media-renew-fatwa-on-satanic-verses-author-with-600000-bounty-a6887141.html>
- 38- The Telegraph, Prophet Mohammed cartoons controversy: timeline, 4 May 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11341599/Prophet-Muhammad-cartoons-controversy-timeline.html>
- 39- Associated Press, Florida pastor Terry Jones arrested on way to burn Qur'ans, 12 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/12/florida-pastor-terry-jones-qurans>
- 40- Jeremy Page, Eva Dou and Saeed Shah, Backlash grows over mass internment of Uighurs as Pakistani traders press for action, The Wall Street Journal, 27 September 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-detentions-of-muslims-trigger-protests-in-islamic-world1538040605->
- 41- Free Malaysia Today, Anwar slams Suu Kyi, China's Muslim camps in HK interview, 12 September 2018, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/12/09/2018/anwar-slams-suu-kyi-chinas-muslim-camps-in-hk-interview/>
- 42- Owen Churchill, US urged to use sanctions and block surveillance tech sales to squeeze China over Xinjiang, South China Morning Post, 28 September 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2166265/us-urged-use-sanctions-and-block-surveillance-tech-sales-squeeze#comments>
- 43- Deutsche Welle, Germany halts Uighur deportations to China, 23 August 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-halts-uighur-deportations-to-china/a45190309->
- 44- Agence France Presse, Sweden interrupts Uighur deportations to China, 24 September 2018, <https://www.thelocal.>

[se/20180924/sweden-interrupts-ughur-deportations-to-china](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/09/24/sweden-interrupts-ughur-deportations-to-china)

45- James M. Dorsey, One Belt, One Road: A plan for Chinese dominance and authoritarianism, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 18 May 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/05/2017/one-belt-one-road-plan-for-chinese.html>

46- Kerry Brown, How China Is Losing the World, The Diplomat, 25 September 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/09/2018/how-china-is-losing-the-world/>

47- Jamil Anderlini, China is at risk of becoming a colonialist power, Financial Times, 19 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/186743b-8bb11-25e94-8b17176-2fbf93f5>

48- The News, Darul Uloom Haqqania to get further Rs 277 million grant, 22 February 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/-284324darul-uloom-haqqania-to-get-further-rs-277-million-grant>

49- James M. Dorsey, China's dilemma: Balancing support for militants with struggle against political violence, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 28 February 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/02/2018/chinas-dilemma-balancing-support-for.html>

50- The News, Darul Uloom Haqqania to get further Rs 277 million grant, 22 February 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/-284324darul-uloom-haqqania-to-get-further-rs-277-million-grant>

51- Ismail Dilawar, 'Father of the Taliban' calls on China to aid Afghan peace talks, Bloomberg, 2 October 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/01-10-2018/-father-of-the-taliban-calls-on-china-to-aid-afghan-peace-talks>

52- Brahma Chellaney, Backlash against China could jeopardize its 'free ride,' Asia Times, 28 September 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/backlash-against-china-could-jeopardize-its-free-ride/>

53- A2 Global Risk, Trend Assessment: Rising Anti-Chinese Sentiment Poses Challenge For Beijing, Undated, <https://www.a2globalrisk.com/analysis/asia-pacific/trend-assessment-rising-anti-chinese-sentiment-poses-challenge-for-beijing/>

54- Lalit K Jha, China Defends Block on Bid to Declare Masood a Global Terrorist, The Quint, 1 October 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/china-defends-blocking-indian-bid-at-un-to-list-masood-azhar-as-a-global-terrorist>

55- James M. Dorsey, Protecting Militants: China blocks UN listing of Pakistani as a globally designated terrorist, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 8 February 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/02/2017/protecting-militants-china-blocks-un.html>

56- James M. Dorsey, Pakistani crackdown: One hand works to neutralize the other, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 31 January 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/01/2017/pakistani-crackdown-one-hand-works-to.html>

57- US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Targets Pakistan-Based Terrorist Leaders and Facilitators, 11 May 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/smoo8o.aspx>

58- Ibid. Dorsey, Pakistan caught

59- Kurdistan 24, Saudi Arabia to open consulate in Kurdistan, 2 February 2016, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/166c43-8040e8-4322-4a5c007-a7d3a7c2b/saudi-arabia-to-open-consulate-in-kurdistan>

60- Aarti Nagraj, Saudia begins flights to Iraq's Erbil, Gulf Business, 1 October 2018, <http://gulfbusiness.com/saudia-begins-flights-iraqs-erbil/>

61- Rudaw, Saudi Arabia eyes Kurdistan as starting point for investing in Iraq, 24 July 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/business/240720181>

62- Zahid Hussain, Dealing with the Saudis, Dawn, 3 October 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1436522/dealing-with-the-saudis>

63- S. Khan and Shamil Shams, Saudi investment in China-Pakistan economic corridor may upset Iran, Deutsche Welle, 2 October 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-investment-in-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-may-upset-iran/a45725957-?maca=en-Twitter-sharing>

64- Ibid. Khan and Shams, Saudi investment



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. James is the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog, a book with the same title and a co-authored volume, Comparative Political Transitions between Southeast Asia and the Middle East and North Africa as well as Shifting Sands, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa and just published China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org

    / SharqForum

 / Sharq-Forum

**الشرق
منتدى**
ALSHARQ FORUM