

Limits to China's Strategic Influence in the UAE and Saudi Arabia



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (Ecuador, October 2016).

Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_Foreign_Minister_Wang_Yi_visits_Ecuador,_October_2016.jpg, Attribution: CC 2.0

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OE Watch Commentary

Alongside the headline-grabbing strategic cooperation agreement with Iran, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent six-country Middle East trip showcased China's deepening energy supply cooperation and advanced technology collaboration with Arab countries. Energy cooperation is the key priority outlined in the Chinese government's 2016 "Arab Policy Paper," and China imports more oil from the Middle East than from any other part of the world. Saudi Arabia is China's top supplier, and the relationship seems set to continue: a few days before Wang's trip, as reported in the prominent English-language Saudi daily *Arab News*, the CEO of the Saudi oil company ARAMCO noted that the company's "highest priority" is ensuring China's energy needs "for the next 50 [years] and beyond."

Writing in the influential Qatari-aligned daily *al-Araby al-Jadid*, a Jordanian expert on China mentions two factors that have stood in the way of a deeper relationship with Arab countries: China's association with the spread of COVID-19, and the government's treatments of its Muslim population. China's counternarrative on COVID-19, including its heavily publicized provision of supplies, equipment, and expertise to a majority of Arab countries, has helped improve its image vis-à-vis the pandemic. The latest and most substantial step in this regard, reported on by the UAE's official *Emirates News Agency* and announced during Wang's stopover in Abu Dhabi, is the official launch of a joint venture between China's Sinopharm CNBG and the Emirati tech company G42.

China's perspective on external criticism of how it treats its Muslim population, meanwhile, is summarized in the accompanying op-ed by its ambassador to Saudi Arabia, also published in *Arab News*. In it, Ambassador Chen Weiqing emphasizes Chinese opposition to interference in Saudi Arabia's internal affairs "under the pretext of so-called ideology and values." The leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and most other Arab countries likely agree. Thus, the relationship remains transactional, and as the author of the *al-Araby al-Jadid* opinion piece argues, prevents the Chinese-Arab relationship from blossoming into the "civilizational association" that would pull Arabs out of their "civilized backwardness."

“...the long-standing and increasingly strong China-Saudi Arabia relationship has become more strategic...”

Source: “Saudi Aramco offers China partnership in energy transition,” *Arab News* (prominent English-language Saudi daily), 23 March 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1830541/business-economy>

Speaking at the 2021 China Development Forum, Aramco Chief Executive Officer Amin Nasser said: “Ensuring the continuing security of China’s energy needs remains our highest priority – not just for the next five years but for the next 50 and beyond.”

Source:

Samer Khair Ahmed, (The Chinese Threat to Arabs),” *al-Araby al-Jadid* (influential Qatari-aligned daily), 23 March 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/fsazwvy2>

“الخطر الصيني على العرب”

China does not help other countries unless they help themselves by investing in Chinese political and commercial needs. In other words, unless the Arabs have a strategic plan that puts pressure on China, China will continue its policy of paving the way for the sale of its products across the world, by controlling transportation routes, ports and global markets...

On the other hand, China’s reputation has suffered greatly in the Arab region during the past two years, for two reasons, the second of which is the attribution of the emergence and spread of the COVID-19 virus to China. The first and most important of them is the issue of Muslim Uighur nationalism in Xinjiang (northwest)...

China seems content to buy Arab oil and expand its markets in the Arab region. The Arabs are content with commercial revenues, while continuing their political alliance with the United States. It is a frustrating reality at the level of decision-makers, and the worst of all is that the image of China has been damaged in the Arab region, which means that an economic alliance with it will not, in the short term, be a popular Arab demand. In the end, this means Arabs will miss a new historical opportunity for a “civilizational association” with China, which could pull us out of the civilized backwardness in which we live...

Continued: Limits to China's Strategic Influence in the UAE and Saudi Arabia

Source: "UAE commences COVID-19 vaccine production with Hayat-Vax rollout," *Emirates News Agency* (official UAE news agency), 29 March 2021. <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302922579>

In a historic move in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Arab Emirates today announced the commencement of the manufacturing of COVID-19 vaccine in the country. The vaccine, called Hayat-Vax [Hayat means life in Arabic], is the first indigenous COVID-19 vaccine in the region that will be manufactured by a newly created joint venture between Sinopharm CNBG, one of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the world that has supplied over 100 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine globally, and G42, the leading technology company based in Abu Dhabi.

Source: Chen Weiqing, "China, Saudi Arabia to cooperate in new ways," *Arab News* (prominent English-language Saudi daily), 25 March 2021. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1831976>

As China's comprehensive strategic relationship partner, developing relations with Saudi Arabia is the priority direction of China's Middle East policy. In the face of big changes unseen in a century and the new situation in the Middle East, the long-standing and increasingly strong China-Saudi Arabia relationship has become more strategic...

China supports Saudi Arabia in safeguarding its national sovereignty, security and stability, taking a development path that suits its own national conditions, and playing a greater role in international and regional affairs, while opposing interference in the Kingdom's internal affairs under the pretext of so-called ideology and values...

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