

EXPERT ON CHINA IN MIDDLE EAST: IT IS NOT EASY TO DECIPHER BEIJING'S INTENTIONS

At the 6th Ministerial China-Arab Meeting Cooperation Forum (CASCF), Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that the upcoming decade will be marked by intense cooperation between China and the Gulf states. In an essay "China in the Middle East", Willem Oosterveld draw on China's inevitable expansion in the Middle East. The expert, who also mentioned that China's involvement in the region is not a matter of choice but an issue of necessity, explained the Beijing involvement in the Middle East in an interview for Defence24.com.

Małgorzata Krakowska: Why is it necessary for China to become involved in the Gulf?

Willem Oosterveld, Hague Centre for Strategic Studies: China's heavy dependence on fossil fuels is one of the main reasons why Beijing has expressed interest in playing a larger role in the Middle East (ed. China imported 3.2 million barrels- or more than 52 proc.- from the Middle East, mainly from Saudi Arabia).

Further expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative is set to reinvigorate Chinese economic interests, extend in West Asia, and deploy more political power in the region.

China's expansion holds two messages. To begin with history, neither Europeans nor Americans tamed regional conflicts or controlled regional security dynamics. It means that China will find the going more difficult than it thought. Western powers, including the United States, are not prepared to provide security umbrella for China's economic interests as they increase, so Beijing will- at some point- also become politically and militarily involved.

In February, mass media informed that China wants to list Saudi Aramco on the Hong Kong exchange. Russia has immediately spotted the opportunity, and is not only pushing, but also seeking investors for Saudi Aramco IPO (ed. Initial Public Offering). What are the possible political implications of this deal?

Russia's interest in taking stake in Aramco is driven by its apparently successful coordination policy of production cuts to hike up oil prices. It is not clear, however, whether we could translate Russia's involvement into political clout.

Many state actors hedge their bets, including the Saudis. Even though Saudi Arabia still remains Washington's closest ally, it prefers to keep all the options open. Russia is courting Saudi Arabia, yet due to Kremlin's support for Iran, the Saudis remain rather reserved. Saudis and Russians are also at odds in Syria.



Photo: Wiillem Osterveld/HCSS

Does China and Russia involvement in the Middle East resemble Sykes-Picot Agreement (ed. The Franco-British accord which in 1916 carved up the Ottoman empire between France, Great Britain and imperial Russia). Should we expect the same distribution of influence for China and Russia?

Russian and Chinese interests are converging, especially in terms of maintenance of stability and security in the region. Moscow and Beijing provide support for Iran and Syria, and fight Islamic terrorism.

On the other hand, China's expansion westwards could jeopardize Russian interests (ed. Russia has intensified its military actions and increased political presence in the Middle East following the eruption of Syria's civil war). Moreover, Kremlin's support for Iran is a thorn in the side of Saudi Arabia.

Russia and China are asserting their foreign policy interests in the Middle East. Yet, another Sykes-Picot Agreement is unlikely to occur again because Beijing and Moscow strive for hegemony in terms of economy and security.

So what security patterns can we expect in the post-Sykes-Picot Middle East?

China knows that the Sykes-Picot system has collapsed. Beijing will need to focus more on a region-wide peace diplomacy, either through bilateral or multilateral engagements.

Beijing strives to ensure neutrality. China wants to ascertain that regional actors-which play a role in the Belt and Road Initiative- will remain either pliant or neutral toward Chinese expansion. President Jinping is convinced that by reasserting China's role as main diplomatic player, he will strengthen country's relations with Saudi Arabia.

In reality, however, a balanced stance towards regional actors will be hard to maintain. China will need to devise a political formula, and gain incentives in return, for example by propping up dictatorial regimes in favor of foreign interests.

Could Belt and Road become a prologue to a more advanced collaboration in terms of security and military cooperation? What about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization?

SCO members maintain cordial relations with each other, however their political interests are driven by different goals. Look at Iran, India, and Pakistan. Even Turkey could become a potential source of discord. SCO could become a helpful conciliation tool in terms of dispute settlement between Member States, but it cannot be compared with NATO for example.

How does the Netherlands perceive China's ambitions to lead global economy?

I think the Netherlands is still a bit on the fence. The Dutch government plans to intensify economic cooperation with China. The Netherlands organizes a large number of trade missions. We have opened a number of new liaison offices in China in recent years. Yet, on the political and the security side, the Dutch maintain moderate approach. It is not easy to decipher China's intentions.

Thank you for the conversation.

Willem Oosterveld is a [Strategic Analyst at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies](#). He specializes in the areas of defence, security, development and the Middle East studies. He holds degrees in political science, law and history. He has experience of working for economic intelligence enti Johannesburg, Jakarta and Casablanca.