



No longer a new kid on the block – China in the Middle East

James Moran

Given China's growing role in the complex security dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa, the EU should intensify its dialogue and, where interests coincide, joint action with Beijing.

Last month's Chinese Communist Party Congress, with its stress on President Xi Jinping's strong leadership at home and abroad, has sparked much discussion on how the rest of the world, not least the EU, should deal with a new political behemoth in their backyards. There is nothing new, of course, about China's economic prowess. For some time now, it has been a major, if not indeed the, prime investor and trader in numerous countries around the world.

But with power vacuums appearing in the wake of the Trump administration's neo-isolationism, and following China's military-led expansion in the South China Sea, could it be that Beijing is about to become more of a global rule-maker, rather than a rule-taker in international security?

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is an interesting, and for Europeans, sensitive case in point. And there is some evidence that China is moving beyond its traditional interest in the stability of Gulf oil and gas supplies, and raising its profile in the region.

Top-level, two-way visits with countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are now commonplace, the Chinese navy is ever present in the area and it has set up its first overseas naval base in nearby Djibouti. Its role as an arms supplier in the region is also on the rise. And the country has played a constructive role in forging and monitoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal.

That said, when explaining the conclusions of the Communist Party Congress, senior Chinese officials poured cold water on any suggestion that their country is heading for Great Power status in the MENA region. They claim that regardless of speculation about a new assertiveness in world affairs, Deng Xiaoping's famous foreign policy maxims of maintaining a low profile and never claiming leadership remain the watchwords, at least in that particular region of the world.

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And while some argue that with its lack of historical baggage and generally perceived neutrality, China might take on greater political responsibilities in solving the many conflicts that plague the region, this seems unlikely. Any hope that it could assist in kick-starting Middle East peace negotiations is probably misplaced.

It is true that Beijing was among the first non-Arab states to recognise the state of Palestine some 30 years ago and has had a high level envoy in place for some time in regular contact with the Principals. Moreover, China announced its own peace plan three years ago. But its approach has been cautious and less than proactive in pushing any new talks. One explanation for that stance might be found in the value it places on its economic relationship with Israel, especially in high-tech fields.

Be that as it may, and while it will remain an important element in preserving the two-state solution, one should not expect any new Chinese initiative. The same is true in most other conflict areas, where China generally sits in the background on UN-led diplomatic efforts to reduce conflict, for example in Syria and Libya.

Unlike the Russians, who are clearly aiming at power projection in the region and after their Syrian intervention seem to believe, probably mistakenly, that military solutions are the order of the day, the Chinese continue to operate primarily along narrow, economic self-interest lines. So long as conflicts do not pose a fundamental threat to their trade and investment plans, they are likely to continue following that strategy. But that might change if a conflict gets in the way of their flagship 'Belt and Road' initiative.

And there is one conflict that might threaten their ambition to map a new maritime 'silk road', namely Yemen. Given the strategic importance of the Bab al Mandab strait at the southern end of the Red Sea, China is acutely aware of the dangers to shipping there. In addition to supporting peacekeeping operations in East Africa, this is a reason for the Djibouti base and why they have continued with their significant naval presence in the Gulf of Aden, originally deployed to help with the fight against piracy.

With no political solution in sight and the looming prospect of a disruptive fight for the main Yemeni port of Hodeida, currently held by the Houthi/Saleh alliance but now in the sights of the Saudi/UAE forces, Beijing is certainly concerned, as is the EU.

Indeed, there has for many years been very close and effective cooperation on countering piracy between the EU's naval operation Atalanta and the Chinese. Beijing values this cooperation highly and may be concerned that the Atalanta mandate is currently due to expire at the end of 2018.

Discussions on that mandate are due to take place in early December, and given the overall security worries, they will doubtless go beyond the piracy aspects per se. Among other things, the EU would do well to take good account of China's views, both in its own best interest and in terms of building confidence as a dependable security partner.

This is also important in the wider region: China is a key ally for the EU in keeping the Iran JCPoA on track, the more so given the unpredictability of the Trump administration.

While close cooperation with China in these areas makes good sense for the EU, there could well be a parting of the ways over the approach to the Assad regime on eventual post-war reconstruction. It is unlikely that Beijing will demand the sort of reforms that Europe will be looking for.

But all in all and whether it likes it or not, China is becoming more of a factor in the complex security dynamics at play in the Middle East and North Africa. And with its overriding interest in restoring stability in the region, the EU should intensify its dialogue and, where interests coincide, joint action, with Beijing.