

China's Growing Role in the Middle East: Implications for the Regional and Beyond
The Nixon Center with the Gulf Research Center - November 2009
Reviewed by Lauren Williamson
In the Nixon Center's joint publication with the Gulf Research Center entitled "China's Growing Role in the Middle East," several experts probe the recent history of China's influence in the Gulf and use that background to discuss expectations of the political role China might play in the future. While the publication gives enduring insight to China's strategic interests, foreign relations and political objectives, parts of the report are outdated and the diversity of opinions presented fails to provide any cohesive answers.
At first glance, it seems strange that The Nixon Center, a prominent non-partisan think tank aimed at promoting an enlightened US foreign policy, would promote a November 2009 publication on their website, even ahead of more recent reports. But "China's Growing Role in the Middle East" contains relevant facts and perspectives about China's recent engagement in the Gulf and offers an array of perspectives about what specifically motivates China's foreign policy. Though richly informative, the publication has some information that is not current and the diversity of opinions does not provide the reader any clear answers about exactly what drives China's interests, aside from the obvious energy and security. Yet this is perhaps indicative of the complexities facing foreign policy decision makers today.
The publication stems from a November 2009 workshop that was co-hosted by The Nixon Center and the Gulf Research Center and attended by a variety of scholars and diplomats from nations across the world. The 107-page instalment combines five research papers from prominent experts on China and the Middle East, followed by a written synopsis of discussions held between the workshop participants and the experts.
The writers admit that some questions about China cannot be addressed fully through the publication. But there is an overwhelming focus on energy and security matters which are predominantly one and the same as China must secure oil for its increasing population and energy needs. Authors Abdulaziz Sager and Zhu Feng reaffirm this and lay out China's strategic interests in maintaining maritime security, minimizing piracy, and stabilizing the Middle East, particularly Pakistan. Though one expert argued China's foreign policy strategy is separate from its business ventures, the bulk of research provided in the report suggests otherwise.
Fortunately the opinions of other scholars brought in less obvious motivations that account for China's interest in investing in the Middle East. Expert Luo Yuan discusses China's desire to limit Muslim extremism. Zhao Hongtu explains Western misperceptions about China, which have led to the country feeling victimized by undue suspicion as it pursues its interests abroad. And Shahram Chubin brings to light an issue that may intensify Chinese-Gulf relations: so far GCC states have tended to overlook the treatment of Muslim minorities in China. Yet this might not always be the case, particularly if China grows increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil. This would give GCC states leverage to pursue the issue in the future.
The discussion sections of the report provide plenty of mental fodder. But an untrained reader might not realize many of the statements in these sections are not sourced or staunchly researched. For example, in one discussion, several participants were adamant that China must eventually choose a side on the Israel-Palestine conflict lest they estrange themselves from other Arab nations. Others argued that this would be counterintuitive to the overarching Chinese strategy of pursuing a Peaceful Rise, or pleasant even if not close relationship with all nations. It is up to the reader to do his or her own research and choose between the perspectives offered in The Nixon Center piece. Another statement was made during the discussions that "the US may be unwilling and unable to continue providing security in the Middle East." This argument

completely lacked sourcing or supporting evidence.

Several issues considered in the report are outdated. One expert mentions the ongoing Free Trade Agreement discussions between China and the GCC in reference to oil trading. But newer developments on this agreement, according to an article for the Khaleej Times on December 26, show the FTA is much more comprehensive than addressing the oil trade; in fact, it focuses on diversifying trade for GCC states, particularly in the service sector. This is not mentioned in The Nixon Center report, but it will undoubtedly alter business relations between China and the GCC.

Additionally, as experts probe the question of China's relations with Iran, which is one of China's top oil suppliers, Zhu Feng states that "only if Iran's nuclear capabilities are imminent will China choose sides" on the nuclear issue. In December 2010 Iranian officials announced that the country can now make yellow cake, or uranium powder which, when refined, can become fissile nuclear bomb material. Even in light of this development China has yet to take a clear stance on Iran and in fact has been hesitant to support US-led sanctions against the country for faltering on Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations.

This publication is not the ultimate resource on China's impact on the Middle East, as it is in need of some updating to make the research more compatible with recent international events, and it only considers China's more recent engagements in the Gulf. For a more thorough history of Chinese-Middle Eastern relations, one would need to consult other works, such as that of Janet L. Abu-Lughod whose research traces relations between the two back to the Middle Ages. These drawbacks are minor as the publication does provide excellent information on China's impact in the region over the last few decades, particularly in the post Cold War era, and it gives the reader a variety of ideas about trilateral relations between China, the West and Gulf states. In short, the publication states that China is expected to play a more active role in the Middle East in the future. Evidence to support this exists, rendering the publication a solid platform from which other scholars can jump into deeper analyses of more specific issues relating to China's expansion in the Gulf.

You can view the report in its entirety [here](http://www.nixoncenter.org/full-monograph-chinas-growing-role-in-me.pdf).

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