

Countering CCP Global Influence: China's Growing Influence in the Middle East

Bottom Line Up Front:

- Stability in the Middle East remains a key U.S. national security interest. While the American military footprint in the region has decreased over the past 15 years, the United States remains engaged with partner countries to build up their security capacity & deepen economic cooperation.
- The People's Republic of China (PRC) plays on the perception of American "disengagement" and continues to use its growing economic heft to deepen its relationships with countries across the Middle East. For countries like those in the Persian Gulf, China represents a significant market for oil & gas as well as a potential partner on infrastructure & technology development in their countries.
- The CCP has also positioned itself as a mediator and seeks to supplant America's traditional role as the region's external stabilizing force. By successfully [brokering normalized relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran](#), the CCP has shown its willingness to intervene to advance its interests.
- Beijing's response to the 10/7 Hamas attacks has damaged China's once positive relationship with Israel.

Background:

While CCP leadership portrays its Middle East policy as respectful of territorial sovereignty and in solidarity with developing countries, in reality Beijing is working towards a geopolitical architecture that advances its own authoritarian agenda. In a region beset by chronic violence and internal clashes that often result in foreign intervention, China's non-interference agenda resonates with regional leaders eager to protect their power. As a result, China's favorability and influence within the region remains strong.

The Biden Administration's thematic emphasis of dividing the world between [democracies and autocracies](#) has [alienated Middle East partners](#) who prefer an approach in which they enjoy close economic ties to the PRC as well as a U.S. security relationship. While it is appropriate for Washington to ask partners to protect U.S. and mutual interests, this focus on democratic purity does little to deepen ties with leaders inclined to pursue [geopolitical hedging](#). In contrast, China's approach of flexible strategic partnerships is well-suited to the prevailing conditions in the Middle East.

Key Issues:

- **China's Response to the Israel-Hamas War:** Beijing has refused to condemn Hamas, prompting Israel to reconsider its relationship with China. The CCP's longstanding ties with the Palestinians dates to the 1960s as part of the CCP's support for national liberation movements. However, since the 1990s, China has also built a robust modern relationship with Israel. Israel sees China's refusal to condemn Hamas's role in the conflict as fundamentally hostile. From Beijing's perspective, the damage to the Sino-Israeli relationship may be worth it given China's relationships with Iran & the Gulf States, its need to ensure unlimited energy flows, and perceived commitments to the Global South.
- **China-Middle East Trade:** China is now a major trading partner for several countries in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This relationship extends beyond oil, encompassing sectors like technology, renewable energy, finance, and infrastructure. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a key driver of this engagement, with investments in critical projects like ports and industrial zones. At the same time, CCP controlled companies like Huawei have secured major contracts to expand telecommunications infrastructure across the region, further expanding China's economic and technological footprint.
- **China's Energy Demands:** The Middle East's large oil reserves and China's growing domestic needs for energy have driven an unprecedented expansion of the energy trade between the two regions. For example, the PRC is now the [top consumer](#) of oil exports from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Seventeen countries across the Middle East & North Africa [have joined the BRI](#). The Middle East's central position between Europe, Asia, and Africa makes the region critical to BRI's overarching goal of building up transportation infrastructure connecting China to the rest of the world.
- **Growing Security Presence:** China has used its economic investments to expand its military position in support of the PRC's plan to build a global military network. As recently as August, the United States detected resumed construction of a purported Chinese military facility in the United



Arab Emirates. In addition to purchasing ballistic missile technology from China, Saudi Arabia is now [manufacturing these weapons](#) with Chinese support.

