



The Risks Of Sino-Saudi Partnership

February 20, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *Al-Hurra Digital*

Related Categories: Energy Security; International Economics and Trade; Resource Security; China; Middle East

What does Riyadh really think about China? It was one of the questions on my mind last week, when I led a research delegation to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the invitation of the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The answers I found, gleaned from extensive conversations with officials and businessmen in the Saudi capital, were both surprising and concerning.

Most directly, the visit made clear that the House of Saud does not remotely share the dominant view of China that now prevails in Washington. Saudi officials took pains to stress that they see the PRC as largely a "positive actor" in the region, and believe that Beijing's interests there, as well as in adjoining Africa, are "mostly economic" in nature.

They further emphasized that the Saudi government believes greater engagement will make the Chinese government behave more responsibly on the world stage. That formulation closely resembles the "responsible stakeholder" paradigm that prevailed in America's approach to the PRC for much of the past two decades – and which has been thoroughly discredited by the increasingly neo-imperial, adventurist foreign policy that has been adopted by the country since Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2013.

Yet, because of this view, Saudi officials do not appear overly concerned about the growing Chinese economic presence in their country, even as that footprint has grown by leaps and bounds. In the Spring of 2017, Saudi monarch Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud oversaw the signing of deals worth as much as \$65 billion when he visited Beijing. Half-a-year later, during his reciprocal visit to the Kingdom, Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli spearheaded the conclusion of nearly \$70 billion in additional investment and trade deals.

Since then, in Zhang's words, a "new era" has prevailed in Sino-Saudi ties. Last year alone, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's visit to the PRC yielded some 35 more economic cooperation agreements worth an estimated \$28 billion, formally aligning the Kingdom's "Vision 2030" plan with China's vaunted "Belt and Road Initiative."

To be sure, Saudi officials acknowledge that similar Chinese economic investments have led to a significant erosion of sovereignty among more than a few African states. Yet they seem confident that their country won't suffer the same fate, perhaps on account of the Kingdom's robust global economic status or maybe because of China's extensive – and growing – dependence on Saudi energy.

Today, officials in Riyadh are quick to portray China as a benign – indeed, a benevolent – geopolitical and geo-economic actor, and just as eager to downplay the potential pitfalls of closer engagement with Beijing. Behind that depiction lies a sober calculus: that Chinese capital is needed to grease the wheels of the rapid economic and political changes now taking place within the Kingdom. "It's simple," one prominent Saudi businessman confided to me. "We are using China."

Yet it is equally clear that China's deepening presence could leave an indelible mark on the House of Saud in at least two ways.

First, it has started to threaten the Kingdom's moral standing in the Muslim World. That's because, despite the position of religious authority that has been carefully curated and cultivated by the House of Saud over the past century, Saudi officials are failing to speak out forcefully against the Chinese government's abuses of its co-religionists in the western province of Xinjiang. To the contrary, when they have weighed in on the subject, Saudi leaders have tended to strike a deferential attitude toward Beijing's policies, which have included the internment of a million or more Chinese Uighur Muslims in mass "reeducation" camps, efforts designed to break up Chinese Muslim families, and the use of what amounts to coercive labor throughout the province.

In February of 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Sultan went so far as to mount a defense of these policies, saying that China "has a right to carry out anti-terrorism and de-extremization work for its national security." Subsequently, last July, Saudi Arabia joined 36 other nations in an open letter defending Beijing's strategy in Xinjiang, and simultaneously commending China's advancements in development and human rights.

Second, the Kingdom's growing proximity to China could adversely impact its older and more enduring partnership with the United States. Today, worries over China's changing global role are a rare subject of bipartisan agreement in a polarized Washington. As a result, the growing proximity between Riyadh and Beijing has begun to set off alarm bells in Washington.

Yet, as my visit made all too clear, this mounting unease is still poorly understood and largely unappreciated within the Kingdom. And, coming amid the current turbulence in U.S.-Saudi ties over issues such as the ongoing war in Yemen and the controversial 2018 killing of opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi, U.S. concerns over China tend to be dismissed in Riyadh as a marginal issue.

That, however, is a potentially grave mistake. The 75-year-old relationship between Riyadh and Washington is today at a unique inflection point. Changes in the region, and in the Kingdom itself, make a "paradigm shift" in ties necessary, Saudi opinion-shapers say. But these same factors also require that Riyadh take Washington's concerns about China seriously if the partnership is to prosper.

