



Biden's Mideast Policy Could Become A Victim Of Beijing's Success

March 3, 2021 **Ilan I. Berman** *Newsweek*

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Just weeks into its tenure, the Biden administration is already executing a profound pivot in the Middle East. Its new approach—diplomatic overtures toward Iran, a harsher line toward the Gulf Arab monarchies and a more distant relationship with Israel—represents a marked shift away from the priorities of the Trump era, which emphasized cooperation with Jerusalem and Riyadh, and the containment of Tehran.

As policy scholar Michael Doran has noted, this is deeply abnormal. For one thing, it elevates the region's Shi'a minority over its Sunni majority—precisely the same dynamic that contributed to a sidelining of the U.S. in regional affairs during the Obama years. But it is worrisome for another reason as well: it unwittingly confers a major strategic advantage to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Over the last half decade, China has become the single largest investor in the Middle East, sinking upward of \$120 billion into infrastructure-related projects there. China's interest, moreover, is surging. As of last year, the Chinese government had signed strategic partnerships with a wide range of Middle Eastern and North African states, ranging from Algeria to Qatar, with pronounced effect. Total trade between China and the countries of those regions is currently estimated at some \$290 billion.

This deepening involvement reflects a growing focus in Chinese foreign policy on engagement with the "developing world." It is also amplified by the PRC's signature initiative, the Belt & Road, which is designed to position China as a key global trading partner via a sprawling network of infrastructure and development projects. These same priorities, however, have made Beijing a potential spoiler for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

For instance, Beijing has hammered out more than \$100 billion in trade and economic cooperation agreements with Saudi Arabia since 2017, making the kingdom a key node along the Belt & Road. China has likewise become Iraq's biggest trading partner, and is now considered by officials in Baghdad to be their country's primary long-term strategic partner. The same situation prevails, or soon will, in Oman, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait. And, against the backdrop of the pandemic, China has begun leveraging "health diplomacy" to engage regional states (like Syria, Egypt and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council) more deeply.

Then there is Iran. This past summer, Iran and China came to terms on a massive strategic deal worth some \$400 billion. If its components are fully realized, that agreement would make the PRC a major stakeholder in Iran's telecommunications sector, establish port and naval facilities for the Chinese navy in southern Iran, and cement greater cooperation between the militaries of the two countries.

All of this has gone largely unnoticed, at least in Washington. The scope of China's ambitions in the Middle East has been overlooked by all but a handful of astute observers. So, too, has the degree to which China is supplanting the United States as the strategic partner of choice for regional states—a dynamic that's liable to accelerate as a result of the policy priorities of the new administration.

Thus, Saudi Arabia—which until recently was on a trajectory to become the latest entrant into the Abraham Accords—is likely to respond to the Biden administration's stern new stance toward its government by tilting further toward Beijing. In much the same way, the administration's rollback of Trump-era regional initiatives (like the sale of advanced fighter aircraft to the UAE) could accrue to the benefit of alternative allies, China chief among them. And if the Biden administration does manage to reengage meaningfully with the Iranian regime, it's liable to find itself playing second fiddle to a China that is already firmly entrenched within the Islamic Republic.

To date, the Biden administration has repeatedly reiterated its commitment to confronting China on the world stage. The president told the Munich Security Conference in late February that the West must prepare for "long-term term strategic competition with China." What administration principals still don't seem to realize, however, is that the Middle East represents an essential part of that contest, and a place where China's inroads are liable to come at America's expense. The White House would be wise to calibrate its approach to the Middle East accordingly.

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