



China Chooses Sides In The Middle East

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China's geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East took a giant leap forward over the weekend, when Chinese and Iranian officials convened in Tehran to formally sign a massive new cooperation agreement. The summit, which took place during a state visit to the Islamic Republic by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, codifies a trend that has been in the works for some time: a major strategic alignment between Beijing and Tehran.

The broad contours of the arrangement have been known for months. Last summer, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif revealed publicly that the country's parliament (or majles) was in the final stages of drafting a plan for long-term cooperation with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The notional agreement was a sprawling 25-year strategic accord valued at a staggering \$400 billion, encompassing everything from Chinese involvement in Iran's telecom sector to closer collaboration between the militaries of the two countries. And while the full details of the "comprehensive strategic partnership" just codified by the Iranian and Chinese foreign ministers have yet to be disclosed, they appear to be more or less the same as those being considered back in June.

For Beijing, the accord represents a clear strategic coup. Through it, the PRC has received – among many other things – preferential access to a bevy of Iranian infrastructure projects, and secured new ports and naval facilities to accommodate its burgeoning regional trade and growing maritime presence. In exchange, China has formally assumed the role of the Islamic Republic's main global partner – and its economic lifeline in the face of any future pressure that might be marshalled by the U.S. or Europe.

Yet the agreement is also an indicator that China's regional footprint is shifting. Over the past half-decade, Beijing has focused intently on expanding its influence in the Middle East through economic investments, political support for regional regimes and even deepening contacts with local militaries. Some of that attention is unquestionably tied to the country's "Belt & Road Initiative," a broad web of infrastructure projects and trade deals through which Beijing is now seeking to remake the global order. But China's Mideast push is opportunistic as well; as the United States has progressively pulled back from regional affairs in recent years, it has left empty political space that the PRC has been only too happy to fill.

Up until now, however, China has taken pains to straddle the Middle East's deep sectarian divisions. Beijing's overtures to Shi'ite Iran, for instance, have historically been balanced by outreach to Sunni states such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Those countries, in turn, benefited handsomely from massive Chinese investment, which has made them loathe to criticize China's brutal clampdown on its Uighur Muslim minority or to heed Washington's call about the need to choose sides in the emerging "great power competition" between the U.S. and the PRC.

Now, however, the new Sino-Iranian accord threatens to tip that balance. Through it, China's government seems to be sending the signal that Iran's clerical regime has become its regional partner of choice. The deal, while clearly designed to capitalize on Iran's current weakened state, also catapults the Islamic Republic to the very top of the PRC's regional agenda, and does so in a way that could end up significantly strengthening the current government in Tehran.

Beijing's bureaucrats will, of course, try to convince the region's Sunni regimes that nothing has changed. But officials in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and other Middle Eastern capitals would be prudent to press China about the details of its new strategic alignment with the Islamic Republic. They should also be asking how, precisely, the PRC plans to remain a reliable partner for them, given its growing economic, political and military bonds to the country that serves as their regional nemesis.