



What Would a Larger Chinese Presence Mean for the Middle East?

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The U.S. should encourage a more active role in the Middle East for China for a simple reason: The risks are small, and the potential gains are more substantial. The risks basically boil down to the idea that China could eventually dominate the region, leaving the U.S. vulnerable to energy shutoffs and transit issues. However, at the risk of oversimplifying, oil markets, new technologies, and transit routes all contribute to the fact that the United States is simply not that dependent on Middle Eastern oil anymore. Its other regional interests are limited. And China is so far from being able to militarily dominate the region that it is an unrealistic concern, at least in the near-to-medium term.

The potential benefits of greater Chinese involvement in the region, on the other hand, are substantial. For starters, in his “stopped clock twice a day” way, President Trump is right that the Chinese are free-riding on the American military for their energy security. The military still secures the Gulf sea lanes that primarily transport Asia-bound energy supplies. Some burden-sharing there would not go amiss. Second, greater Chinese involvement in regional diplomacy and trade could constrain some of America’s worst impulses, minimizing the risk of further substantial U.S. military interventions, and multilateralizing regional security concerns, reducing the impulse in Washington to answer every regional concern with a military solution. A situation more like the mid-to-late Cold War period, where the U.S. pursued offshore balancing in the region and maintained its interests against the Soviet Union primarily through non-military means, is likely to be more stable than today’s chaotic military-first strategy.

Finally, there’s a broader strategic context: While most analysis of the U.S.-China military balance focuses on hotspots like the South China Sea or Taiwan, U.S. control of the sea lanes between China and the Gulf is actually a serious security concern for China. By free-riding on America’s protection of sea lanes, China has placed itself in a position of energy and trade insecurity in the event of future conflict. The political and strategic ramifications of this suggest that it cannot and will not likely sustain its non-interventionist, hands-off approach to the region. If the U.S. remains heavily involved and refuses to allow China access, these security concerns could engender direct U.S.-China military tensions. Inviting China to share the burden in the Middle East may be the best way of defusing future tensions and preventing a future potential flashpoint.

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