
China's Great Game in the Gulf: Implications for India

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Abstract

Chinese interaction with the Gulf started under Deng Xiaoping when its economy was opened and Beijing felt that it needs to interact with the outside world. China's relations with Persian Gulf countries can be divided into three phases: one, wherein it first interacted amicably with the countries in the region in 1978; two, furthering of relations due to Chinese thirst for energy security and economic investments through BRI; and three, China's extra-economic or strategic footprints in the Gulf. It is the last phase that will have some implications for India, thus is of much interest globally and in particular for New Delhi which has huge stakes in the region based on its own energy security, human security due to its 9.5-10 million strong diaspora and economic and trade investments. Therefore, the article argues that New Delhi should be watchful of Chinese intent with regard to the Gulf, though as of now it need not worry.

Introduction

China has not only emerged as an important player and a rising/risen power of the 21st century but has also, during the same time, become an increasingly significant and active player in the West Asia/Middle East. However, its engagement with the Middle Eastern region has been

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restricted to economic investments and import of crude oil. It is only recently, since 2013 that with its over ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has increased its engagement with the region in the other spheres as well, military and naval cooperation being the significant ones. Nevertheless, this transition is a new phenomenon and many western analysts such as Jonathan Fulton, Guy Burton and Camille Lons believe that China still seems reluctant to fill in for the United States (US) in terms of playing the role of a security guardian to the Middle East.¹ However, many policymakers are yet clueless or have little knowledge on China's actual motives, objectives and its position vis-à-vis the Middle East. Additionally, the uncertainty regarding China's potential role in the Middle Eastern security architecture is also evaluated in terms of mid-term and long-term regional stability and political dynamics of West Asian economies.

The recent beyond economic investment Chinese posturing especially with Iran and Turkey raises a question as to what is China's 'Great Game' in the region. India has huge stakes in the Middle East—especially, with respect to the Gulf economies, New Delhi's energy security interests with investments in major projects such as Chahbahar, around 9.5-10 million Indian diaspora in the Gulf alone, and strategic partnership with significant regional actors. Thus, needless to mention that China's growing interest in the Middle East, which is India's extended neighbourhood, calls for New Delhi to have a close watch on Beijing's intentions in the predominantly Islamic region.

'Made-in-China' products are flooded in the region's markets ranging from a cigarette lighter to traditional Arabic attires, all are manufactured by China.² Thus, while Chinese investments are omnipresent in the Middle East, its recent economic and beyond economic adventurism in the Gulf should be of particular interest to India. The reasons are obvious and already stated above! The paper is divided into four sub-themes, namely China's engagement with the Gulf; China's economic and energy

interests in the region; its extra-economic aspirations; and finally, Chinese Great Game in the Gulf region and its implications for India.

For practical purposes, as per Nicholas Lyall,³ China's engagement with the Persian Gulf can be divided into three distinct phases, namely: Phase I: 1978-1991 or the slow emergence of China from the shadows of the US and the then USSR; Phase II: 1992-2007 or the era of Thirst for Oil and Phase III: 2008 to present or the time with China's increasing security footprint and geostrategic focus in the Gulf. It is to be noted that Phase II and Phase III merge with each other and the timeline given is not suggestive of the fact that China had economic and energy interests in the Gulf only until 2007. It continues to invest economically and is the largest importer of crude oil from the region; however, it has started to have extra-economic or strategic footprints in the region, which is a new phenomenon, given Chinese reluctance earlier to engage with the region other than economy. This clearly indicates that China feels it is ready to take that responsibility but will do it differently; that is not by might but through investments and projects!

Phase I: Chinese Engagement with the Gulf

Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in his recently published book *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*,⁴ wrote that both India and China, the two ancient and great civilisations, missed the industrial revolution (1760-1840) because of their closed economy and reluctance to interact with the outside world and Communist thinking in China. And thus the world saw the emergence of Western powers turning into superpowers for more than two centuries. This transition in power was not smooth and resulted in bloody wars (First and Second World Wars) followed by a Cold War period.

To change the status quo, China under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping underwent reform phase and subsequently opened its economy in 1978. This incident not only brought a sea-change domestically but

also facilitated China to expand its foreign relations with Persian states. Other historic events that increased the engagements were Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁵ Both the Persian Gulf countries and particularly Iran were looking for stable relations with outside nations and similarly with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China needed new associations.⁶ Additionally, to control and contain its Western province of Xinjiang, a predominantly Muslim populated region, from any probable “unrest,” China required heightened alliances with the Islamic nations. Therefore, these combined concerns led to China being drawn to the Middle East and more specifically to the Persian Gulf countries.⁷

This shift in China’s stance towards the Persian Gulf has not been smooth and was guided by China’s own reluctance to indulge with the monarchies as well as international player’s active role in the region in terms of power projections. Prior to 1978, China’s relation with the Persian Gulf states was purely based on ideological differences. The communist regime in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) viewed the monarchical Gulf States with deep suspicion throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Classic example in this regard being China’s expansion of its ties with Iraq in 1958 after the nation’s ruling regime was overthrown.⁸ It is to be noted that during 1967-1971, China has been supporting revolutionary movements in the region. However, with improved PRC-US relations during that time and its growing hostility towards Russia, China adopted a softer approach in the Gulf by focusing on socialist modernisation instead of revolution. Tables turned since the 1990s when the US’ active support to Kuwait against Iraq secured it a stable role as a security provider in the region and marked its regional dominance. That along with disintegration of Soviet Union and global condemnation of the Tiananmen Square massacre isolated Beijing at the global stage and therefore it maintained a low profile in the Gulf. As per Wu Bingbing, China remained “detached generally, involved appropriately” in the

region⁹ for a very long time until its drive for economic growth and energy security kick started!

Phase II: China's Economic and Energy Considerations in the Gulf

During Phase II (1992-2007), with China's intentions for economic expansions to be at par with the world powers, energy security became crucial. China became net petrochemical products importer by 1993. Most importantly, throughout this phase, China's relationship with the region was largely defined by China's "insatiable need for Gulf petrochemicals to fuel its rapid growth."¹⁰ Until 2008, Beijing avoided any political interference in the larger Middle East and restricted its engagement with the conflict-ridden region to economy and energy.

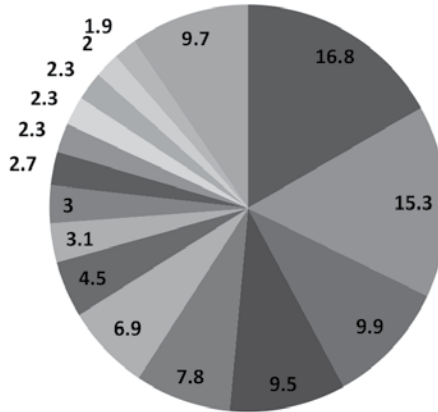
As stated earlier, in the 21st century, China has emerged as a rising/risen power. The transition or shift of power from western hemisphere to eastern hemisphere has not been achieved merely through military prowess but because of rapid economic growth. This is a unique feature in world history! And even though, there has been a decline in the Chinese economic growth by 1.1 per cent annually, China continues to be the world's largest energy consumer of crude oil and will account for about 22 per cent of world's energy consumption by 2040.¹¹ Therefore, the core Chinese concern has been to ensure a regular and uninterrupted supply of oil since 1949. Even though, China has been self-reliant and self-sufficient in catering to its domestic demands by home production of coal, yet import of crude has played a very important role in sufficing the needs of its huge population and its growing economy.

Moreover, while China is a world leader in terms of renewable energy production and is the largest producer of hydroelectricity, solar power and wind power globally, crude oil imports have begun to play a crucial role in catering to the growing demand. According to International Energy Agency (IEA) 2019 study, China's oil import dependence is likely

to increase from 67 per cent in 2017 to 76 per cent in 2040.¹² This means that China will have to ensure a sustainable supply of crude oil to meet its growing demand and requirements and it is in this context that the country has shown more interest in the Persian Gulf countries.¹³

As the largest consumer of energy and leading importer of Gulf oil and gas, by 2035, China is projected to become the largest importer as its demand is speculated to rise from the current 6 million barrels per day (bpd) to 13 million bpd.¹⁴ Additionally, Paris-based IEA has speculated that by 2035, Chinese imports from Persian Gulf will be doubled. Similarly, other estimates suggest that 90 per cent of Middle Eastern oil will go to Asia as there is a decline in American imports due to fracking, hydraulic fracturing and shale gas production.¹⁵

An estimate by Daniel Workman reveals that over 44 per cent of the total Chinese crude oil imports in 2019 came from the Gulf (see Figure 1) and that Saudi Arabia is its top exporter of crude oil (16.8 per cent) followed by Russia (15.3 per cent) and Iraq (9.9 per cent). In the list of top 15 exporters of oil to China, six countries are from the Persian Gulf. This in itself suggests that Persian Gulf is crucial to China to meet its crude oil requirements. Interestingly, given the sanctions on Iran, the official figures stand at 3 per cent export of crude to China, however, the increased bonhomie between the two countries is suggestive of the fact that much of the crude oil trade must be happening under the table. This is confirmed by a report published by the Reuters in July 2019 where it was claimed that research by three data firms have revealed that between 4.4 million and 11 million barrels of Iranian crude were discharged to China. The firms calculated this to be around 1,42,000-3,60,000 bpd. Moreover, as per Trump Administration official estimates, about 50-70 per cent of Iranian exports flow to China and the rest 30 per cent goes to Syria amidst Iranian sanctions.¹⁶

Figure 1: China's Crude Oil Imports, 2019

Source: Prepared by the Author with reference to Daniel Workman.¹⁷

Similarly, Table 1 suggests that Chinese imports and total trade with the Persian Gulf has been increasing. The data available is limited to 2012-15 because of two reasons: Chinese National Bureau of Statistics has not been releasing data on the subject post-2017 most probably owing to sanctions on Iran and that the Chinese Bureau of Statistics cannot be accessed by India as of now given the standoff at Eastern Ladakh. Nevertheless, it is obvious from the table that Saudi Arabia continues to be net major exporter of crude to China. However, net imports from Saudi Arabia to China have considerably reduced from US\$ 54,861.80 million in 2012 to merely US\$ 30,021.05 million in 2015. Likewise, total trade has also reduced for the same period from US\$ 73,314.22 million to US\$ 51,633.98 million in 2015 (Table 1).

It is in this regard that the sudden Chinese bonhomie with sanctioned Iran is precarious! As per the table, Iran does not figure as major oil exporter to China, that it is under sanction, is supposedly belligerent, and does not have much to offer except for safe passage of BRI project lines. It is noteworthy that even when Chinese dependence is more on

Table 1: China's Imports and Total Trade from Gulf (in US\$ million), 2012–2015

Countries	2012		2013		2014		2015	
	Imports	Total	Imports	Total	Imports	Total	Imports	Total
Bahrain	348.03	1,550.81	305.18	1,544.11	183.96	1,415.75	111.54	1,123.39
Iran	24,868.39	36,465.84	25,389.36	39,426.51	27,503.85	51,842.34	16,057.54	33,827.55
Iraq	12,655.77	17,567.59	17,984.86	24,878.85	20,761.24	28,505.08	12,674.63	20,583.86
Kuwait	10,467.81	12,556.99	9,586.94	12,262.15	10,004.96	13,433.69	7,497.04	11,269.84
Oman	16,965.44	18,787.02	21,040.61	22,941.46	23,795.86	25,861.24	15,047.42	17,163.81
Qatar	7,27,810	8,483.20	8,46,335	10,174.26	8,336.73	10,590.74	4,614.37	6,890.01
Saudi Arabia	54,861.80	73,314.22	53,450.71	72,190.53	48,508.03	69,083.27	30,021.05	51,633.98
UAE	10,851.97	40,420.29	12,823.83	46,234.82	15,768.36	54,797.86	11,514.03	48,534.20
Total	8,58,829.21	2,09,145.96	986916.49	2,29,652.69	154862.99	2,55,529.97	97537.62	1,91,026.64

Source: Adapted from National Bureau of Statistics of China.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia, the latter is a US ally, is Wahhabi and thus conservative and is entangled in its domestic affairs. Thus, Beijing seems to be careful in wooing Saudi Arabia and does not want to rub the US the wrong way. Therefore, the Chinese posturing in the region will have to be supported even by Iran, which has its proxies running across the region despite economic sanctions, under table trade deals are possible with Iran and as it has fairly anti-US sentiments, it seems slightly more desirable to China. Additionally, one must keep in mind that both Iran and China are seen as revisionist powers, Persian Iran in the Middle East and China globally. Therefore, even when the extent of expansionist aspirations is different, they both have near similar intentions! And this is something that New Delhi needs to be watchful of!

Apart from energy considerations, China has economic stakes and investments in the region under its BRI project. Jeremy Garlick and Radka Havlova argue that through BRI, China has forged its economic diplomacy with the Gulf nations. Therefore, to fully implement its economic diplomacy in the region PRC needs to equally indulge with Iran as well as Saudi Arabia and also needs to ensure to not rub off the US the wrong way! The scholars opine that “to implement the trade and infrastructure connectivity goals of the BRI and to secure the continued flow of diversified energy supplies, China needs to boost relations with both regional powerhouses, Iran and Saudi Arabia, without alienating either of them or the regional hegemon, the United States.”¹⁹

Much along the same lines, Julia Gurol and Jacopa Scita from *The Atlantic Council* believe that BRI serves as a non-political leverage point for China to get its way in the region without getting much involved in the regional disputes. The authors argue that this apolitical stance is important for China to stay away from choosing sides even when there is a strategic component attached to BRI. Both further state:

This allows China the almost impossible—which is to expand its economic and military activities in a highly competitive environment—without being bogged down in the turmoil of regional, political and security conflicts. However, the success and consolidation of this strategy seems to be bound to a minimum degree of stability in the Persian Gulf.²⁰

Guroi and Scita are in agreement with Garlick and Havlova on “keeping Tehran and Riyadh content.” Another regional player of interest to China is UAE. It is stated:

China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia since 2016 and the United Arab Emirates since 2018. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, Beijing’s investments in the two countries between 2008 and 2019 reached a total of \$62.55 billion, while the total amount that China invested in all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries during the same period is around \$83 billion. Current developments notwithstanding, this puts the Gulf monarchies into the center of Beijing’s economic projection towards the Middle East. Against the backdrop of China’s growing hunger for oil, it is not surprising that most Chinese investments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE were made in the energy sector, albeit not solely.²¹

Thus, while the economic and energy interests of China in the Persian Gulf are on the upswing, few experts believe that under the garb of BRI, China has strengthened its counter-terrorism, military and naval cooperations with the major countries in the Gulf.

Phase III: Chinese Strategic Footprint in the Gulf

In 2008 when China dispatched its three naval vessels to participate in the multilateral counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden,²² it gave the first hint of its beyond economic footprint in the region. However, given

the centrality of the larger Middle East and Persian Gulf in particular in China's BRI; the latter has increased its strategic footprint in the region, and this marks the phase III of the relations between China and the Gulf. This is seen in China's drive to elevate its relations with the region by signing "strategic" or "comprehensive strategic partnerships"²³ with majority of the Gulf economies post-2013 (see Table 2). It is noteworthy that except for Bahrain, China has either strategic or much elevated comprehensive strategic partnership with all the other Gulf economies.

Table 2: China's MENA Partnerships

Countries	Level of Partnership	Year Signed
Algeria	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Djibouti	Strategic Partnership	2017
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Iran	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Iraq	Strategic Partnership	2015
Israel	Comprehensive Partnership for Innovation	2017
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015
Kuwait	Strategic Partnership	2018
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016
Oman	Strategic Partnership	2018
Qatar	Strategic Partnership	2014
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2016
Turkey	Strategic Partnership	2010
UAE	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2018

Source: Prepared by the Author.

Of all the strategic interactions with the Gulf, China's growing nexus with Saudi Arabia and Iran are of particular concern and interest. Immediately after elevating its relations with Saudi Arabia to "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2016, Beijing and Riyadh

started to deepen their ties in the security realm. Since October 2016, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Saudi military have been conducting joint counter-terrorism exercises in China's Western province of Xinjiang, which is predominantly Muslim populated.²⁴ To note, Riyadh has conducted such exercises only with Washington, as of now.

On another occasion, Chinese navy vessels have visited Jeddah port on anti-piracy manoeuvre in the Gulf of Aden in November 2019; a month before the Iran-Russia-China trilateral exercise,²⁵ in order to hold joint drills at the King Faisal Naval Base. Arms exports and technology transfer are future areas of cooperation and China has already hinted that it is ready for such arrangements. For instance, the US has shown its unwillingness to sell armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to Saudi Arabia and China has stepped up to build a manufacturing plant for CH-4 UAV drones which is similar to US MQ-1 Predator already there with the Kingdom.²⁶ The UAE and Pakistan along with Saudi Arabia have also purchased the Wing Loong model from China.²⁷

More significantly, in August 2020, it was reported that China and Saudi Arabia were cooperating in the construction of a nuclear facility to extract Uranium yellowcake from Uranium ore. This was seen as a major shift from Saudi Arabia's civilian nuclear programme. For the unversed, such extractions are also used in nuclear weapon development—an idea that Riyadh has been pursuing for decades now with the Chinese help. This is yet another example of Saudi Arabia and China's closeness and confirms that Riyadh is ready for a Plan B after US withdrawal from the region. As of now, allegedly only Israel possesses nuclear weapons in the region; while Iran's nuclear programme has been time and again foiled by the US and its allies. Therefore, Saudi Arabia's possession of such weapons is a matter of concern for the West, because of its regional clout and sour relations with other regional powers. Furthermore, given Israel's democratic set up, its image at the global table binds it towards holding a 'responsible behaviour', which may not be the case with the monarchical Saudi Arabia.²⁸

These are enough hints that even the strongest US ally in the region, Saudi Arabia, sees China as sort of an alternative just in case the US withdraws from delivering security blanket to the country. Although in the long-term, China is aware of its limitations to fill in for the US as a security provider to the region given Beijing's economic aspirations, however, its growing strategic footprint in the region cannot be ignored. Also, one does not know China might surprise by playing the guardian angel to the region as the US withdraws. The likelihood of such an instance seems bleak as of now though!

Moreover, currently, China has concluded partnership agreements with at least 15 West Asian countries after initiating its BRI project. As already stated, it participates in anti-piracy and maritime security missions in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Beijing conducted large-scale rescue operations for its nationals stuck in Libya in 2011 and in Yemen in 2015. It has increased its mediation efforts in Syria and Yemen crises. It has increased its regional clout by persuading Iran to sign the Nuclear Deal. Further, China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti and has militarised Pakistani port of Gwadar—all of these have increased its military presence in the Gulf and near the crucial maritime chokepoints, Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb.²⁹

Notwithstanding these, China's most crucial and noteworthy step has been increasing its relations with sanctioned Iran. While protecting Tehran, Beijing went to the extent of ignoring Washington's imposed sanctions and warning over waivers. Not only that, its continued support for Tehran was also noticed when Mahan airlines flew to and fro Tehran and Beijing despite COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and warnings on the flights. It is worth noting, Tehran was put on radar for uncontrolled spread of coronavirus and for becoming the super-spreader in the region.³⁰ Nevertheless, the most notable development in the Tehran-Beijing relations is the July 2020 "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" for 25 years wherein, China promised to invest around US\$ 400 billion in economy, trade and military. As per the 18-page agreement, China would expand its "presence in

banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of other projects [in Iran]. In exchange, China would receive a regular—and, according to an Iranian official and an oil trader, heavily discounted—supply of Iranian oil over the next 25 years.”³¹ This created a hue and cry in India as the deal coincided with Iran going along with the construction of railway project under Chahbahar development on its own citing Indian delay to invest in the project. However, Iran clarified that the two are not linked and Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar’s visit to their counterparts further emboldened the relations between New Delhi and Tehran. During Foreign Minister Jaishankar’s halt at Tehran on his visit to Moscow for Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September 2020, it was stated that he discussed Chahbahar and Afghanistan with his Iranian counterpart.³²

Chinese Great Game in the Gulf and Implications for India

The Chinese Great Game in the Gulf, if not clear in entirety but is apparent that China has started to spread its strategic footprint in the region under the garb of BRI. It may act as a security provider to the region the same way it has become a rising power, that is through economic growth and investments. Besides, on the sidelines of BRI, Beijing has started to develop counter-terrorism, anti-piracy, military and naval cooperation and is conducting joint exercises with some of the major countries in the Gulf. Therefore, New Delhi must note that China is not in competition with India in the region rather it is seen as a potential substitute to the US in the wake of the latter’s disengagement from the region.

Needless to mention that India has huge stakes in the Gulf in the form of 9.5-10 million strong diaspora, energy security consideration as of the total 84 per cent of India’s energy requirement, more than 45 per cent is fulfilled by the Gulf. Economic and trade investments is another area of concern. Moreover, Gulf being the extended neighbourhood is crucial

for India's national security, especially with regard to India's own Muslim population.³³ Thus, growing Chinese presence in the Gulf is indicative of its "all weather friend's" presence in the region too, which happens to be India's western adversary and a notorious one!

Notwithstanding these, New Delhi needs to stop harping on the fact that Indian diaspora and its contribution is the strength! It could be argued that for a potential actor to be a net security provider, number of natives in the region is not the prerequisite condition. The US had its naval and air bases, while China under its rising/risen power dynamic, has and will have BRI investment projects, that includes its bases in the Gulf as well. In addition, on the sidelines of BRI, China is also developing military and security cooperation with major regional actors. Therefore, New Delhi needs to pull up its socks, rise to the occasion, and work on its delayed delivery syndrome and act responsibly!

India needs to be watchful of China's extra-economic indulgence in the Gulf, if not now the situation will be worrisome in the future. India needs to work on its investments projects and prove its mettle, otherwise William Clay's permanency in mutual interests in International Relations will prove fatal for India. For instance, India's incapability to deliver on time allegedly forced Iran to carry on the railway project under Chahbahar on its own. This should act as a learning lesson for New Delhi in pursuit of its future projects.

As the Gulf is the extended neighbourhood to India, it needs to increase its interaction with the region in multi-directional ways to keep it engaged through its innovative projects and investments. Private companies should be encouraged to invest in the region as much of the needed infrastructure has already been developed. Notably, in International Relations, extra points are given for intent and not just for capability. Thereby, New Delhi needs to fathom Chinese intent and its 'great game' in the Persian Gulf, and fasten its seat belt accordingly!

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