

Sino-US Relations in the Persian Gulf during the Obama's Administration

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Abstract

The Persian Gulf is one of the most important regions of the world and has been vital for the great powers since a long time ago, not only for its energy resources but also for its strategic location. After the British withdrawal from the region in 1971, the United States filled the vacuum and tried to preserve the status quo during the Cold War. Since the 1980s, China has also found attraction in the region's vast energy resources and market. But in the 21st century, with the rise of China as the second-largest economy in the world, the importance of the Persian Gulf has been enhanced in China's view to manage its energy needs and benefit from its lucrative market and possible bilateral capital investment. This article intends to examine the relationships between China and the United States of America during Obama's administration. By using the "Power Cycle Theory," it is concluded that the United States has accepted the Chinese position as the rising power in the Persian Gulf region and that their relationships were based on collaboration and competition, not confrontation or hostility, which seems to continue in the foreseeable future as well.

Keywords: The Persian Gulf, China, The United States, Collaboration, Competition, Confrontation, Hostility.

Introduction

Despite its aid relationship with Yemen dating back to the 1950s, China has only taken the Persian Gulf seriously in the 1970s. In the first phase of its relations with the littoral states of the region, China appeared to have had contradictory impulses: the desire to establish ties with the existing conservative governments conflicted with the desire to support national liberation movements (Chubin, 1980: 2-3).

The Chinese, however, chose the former path and terminated direct Chinese arms supply Chinese arms supply to the liberation movements in the early 1970s because they thought that identification with opposition groups would seriously harm this effort. Rather than supporting subversive movements, the Chinese tried to develop amicable relationships with sovereign Third World states, whether their regimes were progressive or not. China began to decrease its aid to the PFLOAG (Popular Front for Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf) operating in the Dhofar province of Oman and granted recognition to various sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf region as they achieved independence (Yodfat, 1983: 14-15; Yodfat and Abir, 1977: 4-5). In addition to these and already existing relations with Iraq, the Chinese established diplomatic relations with Iran on August 8, 1971. This announcement came a short while after the conclusion of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation on August 9, 1971. Diplomatic relations were established with Kuwait as well (Yodfat, 1984: 33; Chubin, 1980: 4).

China's decision to establish relations with Iran in particular reflected a basic commitment to give priority to supporting governments, which shared its concern for containing Soviet influence by erecting strong barriers in the form of armed forces and regional security arrangements (the most prominent of which was the withdrawal of support for movements that might create instability in the region and thus be exploited by the USSR; Peking, therefore, terminated its support for the Dhofar movement in Oman in 1972-73). This interest in Iran as a potential barrier against the spread of Soviet influence was demonstrated time and again in 1973. In June 1973, Chinese Foreign Minister Ji Pengfi, on a visit to Tehran, endorsed Iran's arms buildup in light of the "hegemonic" threat in the region and supported the right of the littoral states to cooperate in ensuring security, particularly against subversion assisted by outside powers (Chubin, 1980: 4-5). He also gave assurance that China had no hand in subversive activities in the Persian Gulf and did not support the leftists in the region (Yodfat,

1984: 15). These themes were repeated by Vice Premier Li Xiannian in Tehran in 1975, and later on, Soviet pressure on Iran, criticism of its arms purchase, and Soviet espionage were extensively covered by the Chinese media, which contrasted them with Moscow's claims of "good neighborliness" (Chubin, 1980: 5).

China did not have a broad presence in the region, for it lacked diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and most of the Arabian Peninsula states. Moreover, China was seen as an atheistic state and not a technologically advanced country. Militarily, China's capabilities were not outstanding, and therefore it was not considered a provider of security for littoral states (Chubin, 1980: 7).

It is worth mentioning that China offered small amount of aid to certain countries in the Middle East/Persian Gulf region. Between 1954 and 1970 total credits extended by China were just over 300 million US dollars. In addition, China also conducted a small volume of trade with the region involving a total turnover (exports and imports) of 200 million US dollars in 1968 and slightly more in 1969. This did not include oil since China met its very low consumption from its estimated output of 25 million tons a year (500,000 barrels a day). China's main impact however was political rather than economic.

1. Theoretical Base

The power cycle theory tries to show the rise and fall of powers, how dominant powers are substituted by rising ones, and the consequences of such substitutions. The theory was first presented by Charles Doran in the early 1990s. It contains two parts: first, the dynamics of the rise and fall of powers, and second, the effects of it on international relations. He argues that the change in national power of a country follows a systemic pattern of configuration, growth, maturity, rising, and declining (Tesman & Chan, 2004: 131-134). He further explains that;

- A country determines its power through its capabilities.
- The power of a country is relative in comparison to power of other countries.
- The enhancement of the power of a country results in enlarging its role in the international arena.
- When the power of an actor exceeds the power of the dominant actor, the new power demands an increase in its role in the international scene, which creates a "critical point" in the structure of the international system.

In his view, the most important part of the theory is the critical

point, which brings about a shift of power in the international system. At this turning point, a competition between the hegemon power and the rising power may result in bitter wars. Another possibility is that the power and role of the rising power are accepted by the descending power, and wars will not take place (Doran, 2000).

2. Discussion

After Britain withdrew from the Persian Gulf region in the early 1970s, this region became the focus of American attention for three basic reasons: 1. Competing with the Soviet Union and preventing the influence of communism in the region; 2. Securing access to Persian Gulf energy resources, especially after the Arab oil embargo crisis against Israel's supporters; 3. Securing the security of Israel. At the end of the 1970s, the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran had wide-ranging effects in the Middle East, and the United States lost its most important ally in the region and saw its interests in serious danger. America's military and political presence in the region increased (Mousavi and Khodaie, 2016: 67).

The most important goals of the United States of America in the Persian Gulf are: access to oil and gas resources; preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction; keeping terrorism under control; and preventing the formation of a regional and extra-regional power (Dahshiri, 2004: 115).

By the end of 2011, all major US military units had left Iraq for a number of reasons, including reducing the economic costs of the war. The proposal for military withdrawal from Iraq was made by Obama as the major policy of his government in 2008 under the title "Pivot to Asia." In fact, it has been taken into consideration during the ten years of the fight against terrorism. The rise of China's power, India's global ambitions, the failure to resolve the differences between North Korea and South Korea, and the need to reassure historical strategic allies such as Japan and Australia, caused Washington to move towards the Pacific Ocean since 2011 (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2016: 81-96).

However, the United States still maintained a military presence in the Persian Gulf, which can be cited for reasons such as allies, curbing the threat of hostile governments, maintaining the security of the Strait of Hormuz, and fighting against terrorism and extremism (Mirzaei and Bozorgmehri, 2017: 2007-16).

China is the most important rising power in the world. The military spending of major powers since 2007 shows that during

2007-16, China's spending has increased by more than 100 percent, at the top of all other major powers. China's progress and technical capabilities are remarkable, from "ultra-long-range conventional ballistic missiles to fifth-generation fighter jets" and naval forces. China has a clear strategic aim: to push the US military power as far away from its shores as possible in the event of a conflict. This explains why China focuses on long-range air and maritime systems that threaten the US Navy carriers maintaining the security of groups. Thus, a turning point is reached where it is China and no longer Russia that is a menace to the US military power, which will make it the "peer competitor" for the United States (Marcus, 2018).

China's Military Budget 2000–2017, US\$(billion)

2000	43.261	2006	92.652	2012	162.382
2001	52.216	2007	103.67	2013	185.152
2002	60.682	2008	113.542	2014	200.915
2003	65.543	2009	137.512	2015	214.093
2004	72.467	2010	144.499	2016	215.178
2005	80.197	2011	158.009	2017	228.000

Source: (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure)

On the other hand, China's gross domestic product (GDP) has shown constant growth since the 1990s, to the extent that it is now the second-biggest economy in the world.

1990	36.855	2010	6.101
1995	734.548	2015	11.065
2000	1.211	2016	11.199
2005	2.286	2017	12.238

Source: (World Bank Group, 2017)

It is obvious that such an economy consumes huge amounts of energy, most of which is imported from foreign sources.

China's Oil Consumption from 2007 to 2017 (Million Barrels per Day)

2007	7.808	2012	10.230	2017	12.799
2008	7.941	2013	10.734		
2009	8.278	2014	11.209		
2010	9.436	2015	11.986		
2011	9.796	2016	12.302		

Source: (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2017: 15)

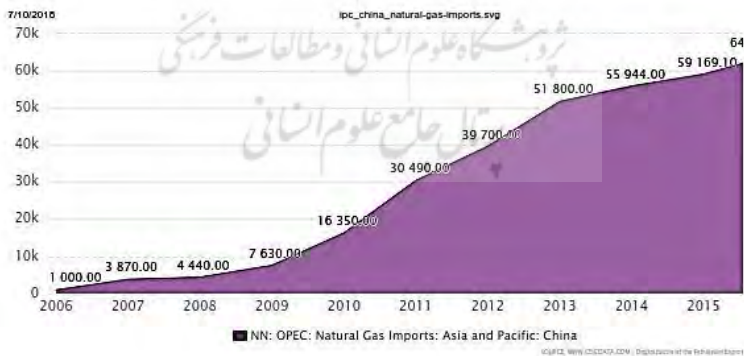
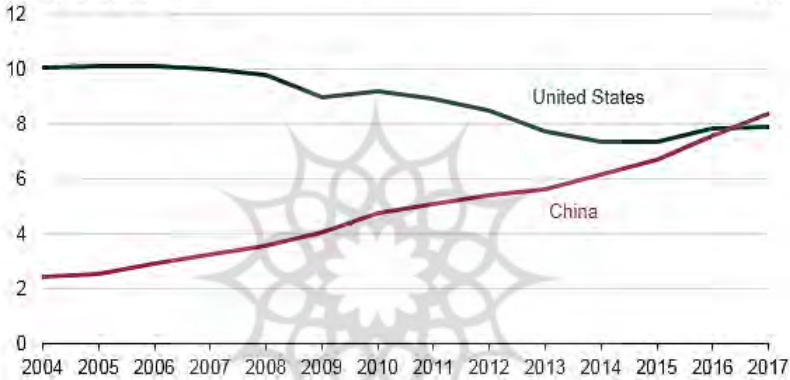
China's Natural Gas Consumption from 2007 to 2017 (Billion Cubic Meters)

2007	71.1	2011	135.2	2015	197.7
2008	81.9	2012	150.9	2016	209.4
2009	90.2	2013	171.9	2017	240.4
2010	108.9	2014	188.4		

Source: (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2017: 29)

According to the 2017 US Energy Information Administration (EIA) report, the China's oil import exceeded that of America by 2016 (more than eight million b/d), and the main source of this import is the Persian Gulf.

Annual U.S. and China gross crude oil imports (2004-2017)
million barrels per day



Moreover, it is estimated that China accounted for 37 percent of the world's increase in gas consumption during 2017–2023 above all other countries. In 2019, China was the largest natural gas importer in the world and will import 171 billion cubic meters of natural gas

by 2023(IEA, 2018).

What could be the consequences of China's demand for energy on the one hand, its increasing capital investment in the energy sector of the region (and vice versa), and its extensive and growing relations with the states of the Persian Gulf region on the other?

Before answering these important questions, let us look at the three crucial issues in US-China relations and the behavior of the two actors. First is China's growing military buildup in the South China Sea; second is the so-called trade war between China and the United States; and third is China's role in negotiations between North Korea and the United States to ease tensions in the Korean Peninsula.

2-1. Military Build-up in the South China Sea

First, China has long been constructing seven man-made islands in the South China Sea for military use, and on May 19, 2018, the first Chinese long-range bomber (H-6K) landed on an airport there. The move certainly created more concern about the Chinese intentions over the disputed islands there, which are crucial for global commerce and rich in fish and potential oil and gas reserves. Adm. Phil Davidson, then head of the Pacific Command said, "China has reached the tipping point in its control over the South China Sea." He also wrote in a testimony to the Congress that "China's South China Sea bases can be used to challenge the US presence in the region" (CBC, May 9, 2018). Moreover, China's first aircraft carrier was launched at the Dalian shipyard on April 26, 2017 (Marcus, 2018). The Chinese state media said that the country needed at least six more carriers. Military experts believed that developing such a force could eventually erode US military prominence in the region (CNBC, May 12, 2018).

2-2. The Trade War

Second is the trade war between the two countries, in which the United States was demanding a trade balance with China, threatening a \$50 billion tariff on Chinese exports to the United States. China, in turn, pledged a retaliatory tariff on US exports. Although it was said that China agreed to buy \$200 billion in American goods, the Chinese foreign ministry denied that such an offer had been made (Liptak & Shane, 2018). What is important is that, after months of tension, they agreed not to impose tariffs on each other after reaching an initial agreement on trade (Horwitz, 2018). Although they were said to impose sanctions on each other's

exports in late June of that year, one must take into consideration the amount of bilateral trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) between the two states. The US exports to China were \$115,873.4 million, \$115,545.5 million, and \$129,893.6 million in 2015, 2016, and 2017, respectively. During the same period (2015–2017) China's exports were \$483,201.7 million, \$462,542.0 million, and \$505,470.0 million, respectively (Trade in Goods with China, Census.gov). Regarding FDI, according to the Statistics Portal, US FDI in China was \$73.66 billion, \$84.53 billion, and \$92.48 billion in 2014, 2015, and 2016, respectively (statista.com/188629/). During the same period (2014–2016) China's FDI in the United States was \$10.07 billion, \$16.77 billion, and \$27.48 billion, respectively (statista.com/188935/). Thus, one can come to the conclusion that the US and Chinese economies are so interwoven that any loss for one would certainly mean the same for the other

2-3. Co-operation on North Korean crisis:

And third is China's vital role in persuading North Korea to start negotiations with South Korea and the United States to resolve the crisis. China seems to have gone much beyond United Nations sanctions on North Korea by reducing its total imports in the first two months of 2018 by 78.5 percent and 86 percent in value, respectively, which began in late 2017. At the same time, Chinese exports to North Korea also fell to 33 percent and 34 percent, respectively, in the same two months. We have to keep in mind that almost 80 percent of the total North Korean trade is with China. Therefore, trade with China is absolutely crucial to its survival (Talmadge, 2018).

The export reduction included coal, steel, motor vehicles, and oil products. Especially important is the level of reduction in oil product exports which went far beyond the 89 percent decrease stipulated by UN sanctions (Kynge, 2018). Thus, it is obvious that China has been doing more than ever regarding sanctions, which should not be ignored or neglected, in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table.

Despite their strategic differences and disputes over China's military activities in the South China Sea and the so-called trade war, if the United States and China could cooperate on the Korean Peninsula crisis, there is no reason they could not reach a similar agreement regarding the most strategic region of the world, namely the Persian Gulf.

2-4. Energy Demands in a Rapidly Growing Economy

First, considering that the Chinese economy is the second biggest and fastest growing economy in the world, it was estimated that by 2020 its GDP will surpass that of the United States. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Standard Chartered assessed that China's GDP would hit \$24.6 trillion in 2020, up from \$5.7 trillion in 2010, while that of the United States would be \$23.3 trillion, up from \$14.6 trillion in 2010 (Rapoza, 2011). Later, it was even assessed that the Chinese economy might overtake the US economy in 2018. In 2015, the US GDP was 16.7% of the world economy. By 2025, it was expected to fall to 14.9 percent. While the GDP of China was 15.6 percent in 2015, it was expected to rise to 17.2 percent in 2025 (Patton, 2016). It was obvious that such an economy has an ever-growing demand for energy, for which the most probable source is the Persian Gulf energy resources.

The Persian Gulf Oil Reserves in 2017 (Billion Barrels)

Saudi Arabia	266.2	Iran	157.2	Iraq	148.8	Kuwait	101.5
U.A.E	97.8	Qatar	25.2	Oman	5.4	Bahrain	00.00
Persian Gulf Total: 802.1				World Total: 1696.6			

Source: (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2017: 12)

The Persian Gulf Gas Reserves in 2017 (Trillion Cubic Meters)

Iran	33.2	Qatar	157.2	Saudi Arabia	8.0	U.A.E.	5.9
Iraq	3.5	Kuwait	1.7	Oman	0.7	Bahrain	0.2
Persian Gulf Total: 78.1				World Total: 193.5			

Source: (BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2017: 26)

Although China was trying to diversify its sources to decrease its dependence on the region's resources, in the foreseeable future it would depend on the resources of the Persian Gulf. The International Energy Agency projected that China's oil imports from the Middle East would rise from \$2.9 million barrels per day (b/d) in 2011 to \$6.7 million b/d or 54 percent of total oil imports, in 2035 (Downs, 2013). Out of 89.2 percent of crude oil exported into China in 2017, 42.8 percent (nearly half) was exported from the Persian Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia exported \$20.5 billion (12.6 percent), Iraq \$13.8 billion (8.5 percent), Oman \$12.2 billion (7.5 percent), Iran \$11.9 billion (7.3 percent), Kuwait \$7.1 billion (4.4 percent), and the U.A.E. \$4.1 billion (2.5 percent) (Workman, 2018).

2-5. Trade and investment incentives

Second, we have to remember that the states of the region are developing and wealthy, having very lucrative markets for Chinese goods and services. Bilateral investments with the states of the region in the oil and gas sectors are also attractive to any country, including China. China was the leading investor in the Arab world region in 2016 with an investment worth of \$29.5 billion and held 31.9 percent of FDI in the region. According to the Investment Climate Report in 2017, the Middle East attracted \$92 billion worth of investment, of which nearly one-third came from China (Middle East Monitor, July 24, 2017). In 2012, trade between Iran and China was \$37 billion and \$155 billion with the GCC states of the Persian Gulf. GCC trade with China was expected to rise to \$350 billion in the next decade (Karasik, 2016). In March 2017, a \$65 billion deal was signed with Saudi Arabia during a state visit by King Salman to China (Fulton, 2017).

On the other hand, US petroleum imports peaked in 2005 but generally declined until 2015 as a result of increased domestic production of crude oil and hydrocarbon gas liquids, a decline in consumption, and increased use of domestic biofuels. Although petroleum consumption and imports increased from 2015 to 2017, the share of imports from OPEC and the Persian Gulf countries decreased (Oil Export Import, EIA). The US petroleum imports from the Persian Gulf region were 15.9 percent, 17.6 percent, and 17.3 percent of total imports in 2015, 2016, and 2017, respectively (statista.com/191254/). Moreover, the International Energy Agency (IEA) assessed that United States oil imports from the Middle East will decrease from 1.9 million b/d in 2011 to only 0.1 million b/d in 2035 (Downs, 2013). It is clear that the US reliance on Persian Gulf energy resources has declined tremendously when compared to the 1970s.

Regarding US trade relations with the region, according to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President, the amount of US goods and services trade with the GCC states in 2016 was as follows: Saudi Arabia: \$45.7 billion; U.A.E.: \$25.8 billion; Kuwait: \$6.6 billion; Qatar: \$6.1 billion; Oman: \$3.7 billion; and Bahrain: \$3 billion (Executive Office of the President).

In 2017, the American goods export to the Persian Gulf states, excluding Iran, were as follows: U.A.E.: \$20.005 billion; Saudi Arabia: \$16.260 billion; Kuwait: \$5.166 billion; Qatar: \$3.118 billion; Oman: \$2.095 billion; Iraq: \$1.197 billion; and Bahrain \$0.970 billion (Trade Outlook, 2017). This is far behind the Chinese trade with the Persian Gulf countries, including Iran.

Although these trends may have raised speculations regarding US military postures in the Persian Gulf, it does not mean at all that the United States would completely disengage from the Persian Gulf. As mentioned earlier, the United States is the preserver of the status quo to ensure the free flow of energy, capital, goods and services to the region, which is crucial to global security and the economy. Thus, even if the economic incentives of the United States were diminishing in the region, which might reduce its military presence in the Persian Gulf region, the ever-growing economic interests of China, especially its appetite for oil, which resembles that of the United States in the last three decades of the twentieth century, compels Beijing to play a larger role in preserving the stability of the region (Johnson, 2015; Downs, 2013). Even Washington has long been persuading China to accept more responsibility when President Barack Obama complained that Beijing has been a "free rider" for decades to benefit enormously from trade and energy deals made possible by the US military presence in the Persian Gulf (Johnson, 2015).

2-6. Enhanced Active Presence

It seems that Beijing was making its way towards the Persian Gulf. Gwadar Port, a deep, warm seaport at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormoz, built with Chinese technical aid and investment of nearly \$46 billion, is a case in point. It is said that Gwadar will become one of the largest transit and transshipment cargo ports in the world (Gul, 2017). It was even reported that Pakistan may allow China to construct a military base in Jiwani near Gwadar Port (The Economic Times, February 9, 2018). Although China lacked formal alliances in the Middle East/Persian Gulf or air and naval bases nearby and was years away from matching the US firepower, it was helping to improve the security conditions in the region. For example, in November 2014, China offered some \$10 million to the United States to aid displaced people in Iraq. Later in December, China offered Iraq military support in the form of air strikes against ISIS (Johnson, 2015).

Even farther from the Persian Gulf, the same understanding prevailed in their relations. China has been constructing its first overseas military base in East Africa, in Djibouti, close to the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait, which is one of the most important choke points connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. The base is just a few miles away from Camp Lemonier, which is the only permanent and one of the largest and most important foreign US bases in Africa. China

has escorted 6,000 ships from different countries by its vessels through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, off Somali waters. In addition, China also kept 2400 peacekeepers in Africa (Jacob & Perlez, 2017). In 2013, China sent 170 troops to Mali to help its government control the internal turmoil from escalating into neighboring countries, and in 2014, it mediated between the warring factions in South Sudan to start negotiations (Johnson, 2015). Thus, China participated in peacekeeping operations, providing manpower and means. It has also observed the Security Council sanctions against countries accused of terrorist activities, and in the fight against global terrorism, it could assist the United States as it has so far.

3. Summary

Soon after the communist revolution in China, attention was drawn to the Persian Gulf region, which started supporting the revolutionary movements in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular. From the 1950s until the 1970s, China's policy was ideological-oriented and saw the region as ripe for Marxist-type revolutions. Thus supported the so-called progressive countries (e.g., Iraq) and revolutionary movements (e.g., the Dhofar Liberation Movement in Oman). It was also partly due to China's competition with the Soviet Union over the leadership of the communist world. But in the early 1970s, it changed the course of its policy, started establishing relations with existing conservative states in the region and stopped its limited material support for revolutionary movements like the Dhofar Liberation Movement of Oman.

In the 21st century, China, as the most important rising power, has had some tensions with the United States, some of which were serious. For example, China's military buildup in the South China Sea, which threatened the US military hegemony in the region, and the so-called trade war over huge imbalance of trade between the two countries. But they collaborated on some other issues, like containing Korean Peninsula tensions; and coping with terrorism and radical groups active in the Persian Gulf region.

It is clear that these collaborations to preserve the status quo in the region were not only due to the huge dependence of China's fast-growing economy on the oil and gas reserves of the region but also to take advantage of the potential trade and investment opportunities of the vast markets of the Persian Gulf countries.

On top of these, there is the economic interdependence of the two countries. They are major economic partners. Their economies are so interwoven that a loss for one is definitely translated as a loss

for the other. All these make the collaboration of the two countries imperative for world affairs in general and the Persian Gulf in particular.

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, China has had a mercenary attitude, not an ideological-oriented one, avoided taking sides in multi-faceted disputes and conflicts in the Persian Gulf region, and acted as a stabilizing power. Therefore, the relationships between the United States and China continued on the same path of deeply understanding each other's sensitivities and vulnerabilities, which was the consequence of their interdependence. It appeared that the United States accepted the power and role of China as a "rising power" during Obama's administration. Hence, in the author's view, it is unlikely that Beijing wants to change its direction and policies in the foreseeable future, and the relationships between the two countries in general and in the Persian Gulf would be those of collaboration and competition, not rivalry or hostility.

Appendix: Recent Developments in China's Relations with the Persian Gulf

In light of new developments in the Persian Gulf region regarding the relationships of China with the regional states, the author deemed it necessary to write a few words.

President Xi Jinping's state visit to Saudi Arabia started a new era in China's relations with states in the Persian Gulf in that it was without precedent since the 1970s. Ostensibly, China abandoned its traditional and long-standing policy of neutrality and non-interference in the regional disputes between the Persian Gulf countries by supporting Saudi Arabia, and the GCC (Persian Gulf Cooperation Council) stands on the disputes with Iran.

President Xi Jinping of China visited Saudi Arabia from December 7 to 10, 2022. In Saudi Arabia, he was received very warmly, a grander reception than President Biden in July. His state visit was historic in that he attended three major regional events: the Sino-Saudi summit, and the Sino-GCC summit and Sino-Arab summit. Xi held bilateral meetings with nearly 20 Arab leaders (out of 23 members of the Arab League countries), which was the largest and highest-level diplomatic move with Arab countries since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry (Marks, 2022).

During his visit, China and Saudi Arabia signed a strategic partnership agreement and 34 investment deals in different fields of

technology and energy. Besides, they also signed deals valued at \$30 billion on December 8 (China Briefings, December 9, 2022).

What is particularly critical from Iran's point of view is the joint statement of Xi with the GCC countries regarding the three islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa in the Strait of Hormuz, which belong to Iran. Regarding the three islands, the statement said, "The leaders affirmed their support for all peaceful efforts, including the initiatives and endeavors of the U.A.E. to reach a peaceful solution" (Taslimi, 2022). The China-GCC joint statement also announced that Iran is a "supporter of regional terrorist groups" and a "proliferator of ballistic missiles and drones". It also declared the importance of addressing "the Iranian nuclear file and destabilizing regional activities".

The statement was shocking to Iranian officials and the media. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian tweeted that "the three islands Abu Musa, Lesser Tunb, and Greater Tunb in the Persian Gulf are indispensable parts of the pure land of Iran and belong to the mother land forever. With regards to respecting the territorial integrity of Iran, we show no complacency with any side." In a subsequent meeting with the Chinese ambassador to Tehran, the Deputy Minister for Asian Affairs of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed "strong dissatisfaction" with the declaration. President Raisi also complained to Chinese Vice President Hu Chunhua, who visited Tehran, that "some of the remarks made during President Xi's trip to the region have caused dissatisfaction from the people and government of Iran." Kamal Kharazi, the former foreign minister of Iran, now the head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, announced that the Chinese position on the territorial integrity of Iran was wrong and that it was as if we took a similar position on Taiwan (Taslimi, 2022; Marks, 2022).

For his part, Wang Wenbin, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman stated in a press conference that China and Iran "enjoyed traditional friendship, and GCC countries and Iran are all China's friends, and neither China-GCC relations nor China-Iran relations are targeted at any third party. " He said that China "supports the GCC countries in improving relations with Iran based on principles of good neighborly friendship, conducting [a] win-win cooperation with Iran, and jointly promoting the development and stability in the Persian Gulf," and that China "is willing to continue to play a constructive role in this regard." He further added that "Vice-President Hu Chunhua's visit to Iran starts today. We believe this visit will play a positive role in deepening the comprehensive

China-Iran strategic partnership" (Xinhua, December 13, 2022).

To summarize, four out of the eighteen points of the joint statement of China and GCC states are directly related to the Islamic Republic of Iran, but the language used was not as neutral as the normal Chinese communiqués and instead took the tone of Saudi and Emirates words regarding I.R. Iran. The reactions of Iran's officials and public were sharp. The evident strains in US relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have created opportunities for China to deepen ties with the two countries. This opening has decreased China's need to cultivate a deeper partnership with Iran to check the US influence in the Persian Gulf. While Iran tries to turn to the east, China may be shifting away. Although China is trying to show that it is keeping a balance in its relations with Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, it is leaning towards the latter.

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