

Xi Jinping's Visit to Saudi Arabia and the Overthrow of Atlanticism

The historic China-Arab Summit currently underway in Riyadh symbolizes the emerging Eurasianism in the Persian Gulf.

By [Matthew Ehret-Kump](#)

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As Atlanticists continue their commitment to a future shaped by energy scarcity, food scarcity, and war with their nuclear-capable neighbors, most states in the Persian Gulf that have long been trusted allies of the west have quickly come to realize that their interests are best assured by cooperating with Eurasian states like China and Russia who don't think in those zero-sum terms.

With Chinese President Xi Jinping's long-awaited three-day visit to Saudi Arabia, a powerful shift by the Persian Gulf's most strategic Arab state toward the multipolar alliance is being consolidated. Depending on which side of the ideological fence you sit on, this consolidation is being viewed closely with great hope or rage.

Xi's visit stands in stark contrast to US President Joe Biden's underwhelming 'fist bump' [meeting](#) this summer, which saw the self-professed leader of the free world [falling asleep](#) at a conference table and demanding more Saudi oil production while offering nothing durable in return.

In contrast, Xi's arrival was greeted by a multi-cannon salute and Saudi jets painting the red and yellow colors of China's flag in the skies over Riyadh. Beijing's delegation of political and business elites, in the following days, will continue to meet with Saudi counterparts to strike long-term strategic deals in cultural, economic and scientific domains.

The visit will culminate in the first ever [China-Arab Summit](#) on Friday, 9 December, where Xi will meet with 30 heads of state. The Chinese foreign ministry [described](#) this as "an epoch-making milestone in the history of the development of China-Arab relations."

While \$30 billion in deals will be signed between Beijing and Riyadh, something much bigger is at play which too few have come to properly appreciate.

Riyadh's steps toward the BRI since 2016

Xi Jinping last visited the kingdom in 2016, to advance Riyadh's participation in China's newly unveiled Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). [A January 2016 policy report](#) by the Chinese government to all Arab states reads:

"In the process of jointly pursuing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, China is willing to coordinate development strategies with Arab states, put into play each other's advantages and potentials, promote international production capacity cooperation and enhance cooperation in the fields of infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear power, space satellite, new energy, agriculture and finance, so as to achieve common progress and development and benefit our two peoples."

It was only three months later that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) inaugurated [Saudi Vision 2030](#) which firmly outlined a new foreign policy agenda much more compatible with China's "peaceful development" spirit.

After decades serving as an Atlanticist client state with no viable manufacturing prospects or autonomy beyond its role in supporting western-managed terror operations, Saudi Vision 2030 demonstrated the first signs of creative thinking in years, with an outlook toward a post-oil age.

On the energy front, China Energy Corp is building a sprawling 2.6 GW solar power station in Saudi Arabia, and Chinese nuclear developers are helping Riyadh develop its vast uranium resources while also mastering all branches of the nuclear fuel cycle.

In 2016, both nations [signed an MoU](#) to build fourth generation gas-cooled nuclear reactors. This follows the UAE's recent leap into the 21st century with [2.7 GW of energy now constructed](#).

By early 2017, Riyadh had firmly bought its ticket on the New Silk Road with a [\\$65 billion agreement](#) integrating the Saudi Vision 2030 and BRI with a focus on petrochemical integration, engineering, refining, procurement, construction, carbon capture, and upstream/downstream development.

In the new post-American epoch, signs of this spirit of cooperation and bridge building have increasingly come to be felt, even while its effects have been forcibly restrained – as millions of Yemenis suffering under seven years of war can testify.

Unlike the Atlanticist fixation on [Green New Deals](#) which threaten to annihilate industry and farming, Riyadh's post-oil outlook is much more synergistic with China's idea of "sustained growth" that demands nuclear power, continued hydrocarbons, and robust agro-industrial development.

China's trade with Saudi Arabia rose to \$87.3 billion in 2021, which saw a 39 percent increase over 2020, while US-Saudi trade has collapsed from \$76 billion in 2012 to only \$29 billion in 2021.

Some of this Beijing-Riyadh trade may now be conducted in the [Chinese Yuan](#), which will only undermine the US-Saudi relationship further.

In the first 10 months of 2022, China's imports from Saudi Arabia were \$57 billion and exports to the kingdom rose to \$30.3 billion. China is additionally building 5G systems and cultivating a vast technology hub with a focus on selling electronic goods, all while helping Saudi Arabia build up an indigenous manufacturing sector.

A trend of Harmonization

Despite the continued chaos in Yemen, and economic devastation in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Beijing's subtle trend has nonetheless been one of healing with Saudi Arabia – and regional power Turkiye.

Saudi Arabia and Turkiye have often acted as rivals, and front two distinct foreign agendas with broad regional ambitions that overlap on many fronts. But despite this competitive past, higher necessities have induced both nations to harmonize their foreign policy outlooks with a new “look east” focus.

This was expressed during the Saudi crown prince's visit to Ankara in June 2022 where the two heads of state [called for](#) “a new era of cooperation” with a focus on political, economic, military and cultural cooperation outlined in a joint communique.

Only days after MbS's return from Turkiye, then-Iraqi Prime Minister [Mustafa al-Kadhimi visited Jeddah](#) to promote regional stability stating in a press release “they changed points of view on a number of issues that would contribute to supporting and strengthening regional security and stability.”

Iraq and Saudi Arabia had only re-established diplomatic ties in November 2020 due to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait 30 years earlier.

Between 2021-2022, Iraq had worked hard to host bilateral talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran with five rounds of talks held and Kadhimi stating his belief that “reconciliation is near.” Tehran-Riyadh diplomatic ties were cut in the aftermath of the 2016 execution of outspoken Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, prompting the storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran by angry protestors.

In March 2022, MbS [stated that](#) Iran and Saudi Arabia “were neighbors forever” and stated that it is “better for both of us to working it out and to look for ways in which we can co-exist.”

By August 23, 2022, the UAE and Kuwait created a new milestone by restarting diplomatic relations with Iran. And although nearly every Persian Gulf state (plus Turkiye) had devoted years to supporting regime change in Syria, [a new reality has imposed itself](#) with all Arab parties veering toward the Chinese BRI model of regional integration and economic development.

The Key Role of Iran

Not only is Iran a key player in the Greater Eurasian Partnership serving as a strategic hub for the southern route of China's BRI, but it is also a keystone of the Russia-Iran-India-led International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC) which has become a major force synergizing with the BRI.

Iraq and Iran themselves are in the final stages of building the long-awaited [Shalamcheh-](#)

[Basra railway](#) which will unite the two nations by rail for the first time in decades while also offering a potential extension to the already existent 1500 km railway through Iraq to Syria's border.

The climate for cooperation was undoubtedly made possible by the presence of Chinese economic diplomacy which established a 25 year, \$400 billion energy and security deal with Iran – but also Russia, whose similar but smaller \$25 billion, twenty-year deal with Tehran may easily expand to [\\$40 billion in Russian investments](#) in Iran's vast oil and natural gas fields in the coming years.

Saudi Arabia and Russia's relationship with OPEC+ demonstrated its potency this summer when Riyadh won the ire of Washington by not only denying Biden's requests for increased oil production, but cutting overall oil production and driving up global prices of oil. Saudi Arabia benefited by vastly increased imports of discounted Russian oil which were then sold to a desperate Europe.

Furthermore, Saudi plans to join the global hub of multipolarity itself, BRICS+ ([alongside Turkiye, Egypt, and Algeria](#)), in addition to recently becoming a full-fledged Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [dialogue partner](#), have placed its destiny ever deeper into the growing Multipolar Alliance.

With the increased potential for stability and harmonization of interests across various power blocs, an atmosphere more conducive to long-term economic investments is finally presenting itself to Chinese investors who had long looked upon conflict-ridden West Asia with justifiable trepidation.

In August 2022, the Saudi state oil company Aramco and China's Petroleum and Chemical Corporation Ltd [signed an MOU](#) expanding on the aforementioned \$65 billion cooperation deal of 2017, which involves the construction of Fujian Refining and Petrochemical Company (FREP) and Sinopec Senmei Petroleum Company (SSPC) in Fujian, China, and Yanbu Aramco Sinopec Refining Company (YASREF) in Saudi Arabia.

Rail and interconnectivity

Perhaps most exciting are prospects for interconnectivity that play directly into the development corridors tied to the BRI. In Saudi Arabia, this train has moved steadily apace with the [450 km high speed Haramain Railway](#) built by China Railway Construction Company connecting Mecca to Medina completed in 2018.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Discussions are well underway to extend this line to the 2400 km [North South Railway from Riyadh to Al Haditha](#) completed in 2015. Meanwhile, 460 km of rail connecting all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members is currently under construction, which is driving reforms in engineering, trade schools, and manufacturing hubs across the Arabian Peninsula.

In 2021, all GCC states gave their full support to a \$200 billion Persian Gulf-Red Sea high speed railway dubbed "The Saudi Landbridge," which also dovetails another \$500 billion megaproject with vast Chinese investments, dubbed the futuristic NEOM mega-city on the

Red Sea.

The Eurasianists stand to gain

It can only be hoped that this new chemistry of harmonization and win-win cooperation may soon provide a key to ending the fires of conflict in Yemen and other regional states.

Further, with Russia and China both helping to broker diplomatic backchannels, and with Iran playing an active role within this process, perhaps negotiations for reconstruction can begin in this war-torn zone of conflict.

It is not an extreme stretch of the imagination to see the new Persian Gulf-Red Sea rail project extending north into Egypt and south into Yemen.

Looking at a map of the region, one can imagine the reactivation of the “[Bridge of the Horn of Africa](#)” first unveiled in 2009, that would have extended rail across the 25 km Bab el Mandeb strait connecting pipelines and rail lines into Djibouti and East Africa, more broadly.

While a western-manipulated Arab Spring derailed that concept in 2011, and the Saudi war against Yemen drove it further under ground since 2015, perhaps this new spirit of inter-civilizational cooperation under a new economic architecture liberated from the Atlanticist-dominated dollar system may provide just what it takes to revive the idea once again.

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Matthew Ehret the Editor-in-Chief of [the Canadian Patriot Review](#), and Senior Fellow at the American University in Moscow. He is author of the [‘Untold History of Canada’ book series](#) and [Clash of the Two Americas](#) trilogy. In 2019 he co-founded the Montreal-based [Rising Tide Foundation](#). He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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