

# Seek Knowledge Even If It Takes You to China (Via Washington)

*Saudi Arabia and China in the Twenty-First Century*

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## Abstract

For much of the last twenty years, China's ties with Saudi Arabia have been understood in commercial terms, with most scholars arguing that the relationship has little cultural or historical depth. Drawing on multiple trips to China between 2011 and 2015 along with a ten-month period living continuously in Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2014, this paper argues that there are factors other than economics that should be considered: namely, historical ties dating back to the seventh century, Saudi cultural and geo-strategic linkages to the United States, and the new economic and political geography of Eurasia. While cultural and strategic factors have limited the growth of Saudi-Sino ties since the start of the Arab Spring, they are likely to be the factors that allow for the two sides to realize the potential of their bilateral relationship in the future—even while retaining their close current alliances with other great powers.

## Keywords

Arab Spring – China – Liu Mingfu – oil – Saudi Arabia – Zheng He

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“Seek knowledge even if it takes you to China.”

—The Prophet Muhammad

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## Introduction

On November 24, 2014 Saudi Telecom Company (STC) released a commercial for its high-speed internet service featuring Hisham Fageeh, a globally-known Saudi comedian, and two of his colleagues from the Saudi media and YouTube video production company Telfaz11 (Saudi Telecom Company 2014).

Entitled “the greatest Saudi fan,” the commercial is set in the living room of a middle-class Saudi home and shows Fageeh as a sick old man in a wheelchair. His repeated pleas for help are dismissed by his grandson, Muhammad.

Muhammad is more interested in helping his friend win a championship football match played on a Microsoft Xbox video game system utilizing STC’s high-speed internet service. The two men are determined to defeat their opponent, a young Chinese man who is also at home with his grandfather.

But the Saudi grandfather is transformed after Muhammad responds positively to what appears to be his off-hand remark: “If only Saudi Arabia was playing China.” He begins by reminiscing about Saudi Arabia’s victory in the championship game of the AFC Asian Cup in 1984 against China, one of the greatest sporting triumphs in the Kingdom’s history. We see pictures of the game and hear the songs sung by Saudis celebrating their country’s victory.

These memories further revive the grandfather, who moments earlier could not walk or talk in complete sentences. He steps out of his wheelchair, joins the young men, and watches the game with them. Although Muhammad objects to his grandfather joining them, his friend approves. He tells the grandfather: “Go ahead and root for your team.”

He does. The grandfather screams when a goal is scored, dances, plays a drum, lifts his wheelchair, and even eats a McDonald’s Big Mac hamburger. But the grandfather grows too excited as the Saudi team takes a 9–0 lead. He slides across the floor screaming for joy but towards the power cable, an action that knocks out the power to the Xbox and allows the Chinese to win by default. The Chinese player and his grandfather celebrate, while one of the disappointed young Saudi players asks the grandfather “have you no mercy?”

The commercial ends with the two young men dejected on the couch with the message that STC guarantees high-quality internet service but cannot “guarantee the excitement of your grandfather.” Reinforcing this message is the next scene, where the grandfather is shown clapping wildly on the couch by himself.

The STC commercial provides critical insight into the role of culture in China’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, one of the most important bilateral relationships in the twenty-first-century world.

For much of the last decade, this relationship has been understood in commercial and in strategic terms, with most scholars focusing on the growth of

bilateral trade. They have emphasized the key role of petroleum, suggesting Chinese-Saudi ties have little cultural or historical depth or reason to exist were it not for oil. One recent study argued that the relationship is not a new strategic axis but a marriage of convenience, a relationship that both sides see as a tool to gain leverage with other global powers (Al-Tamimi 2013: 3).

Based on research in Asia and Saudi Arabia from 2011 to 2015, this paper recognizes the importance of trade and oil but contends that there are other factors that should be considered in evaluating Chinese-Saudi ties. The STC commercial featuring Fageeh in particular illustrates the cultural factors linking Saudis and Chinese. We see young Chinese and Saudis reliving a thirty-year-old international football match over an international entertainment network owned by a major U.S. corporation. In his influential text, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-America Era*, Liu Mingfu, a leading People's Liberation Army theorist, highlights the role of American corporations and culture around the world, stating that they are a foundation of national power. "Nations with influential value systems [and culture]," he observes, "are the only nations that can lead the world" (Liu 2015: 78).

While some of these cultural and strategic factors have limited Saudi-Sino bilateral ties since the start of the Arab Spring and the War in Yemen, they had, ironically, allowed the two countries to develop a close partnership during the first decade of the twenty-first century. And it is likely that these factors, in the long term, will provide the common ground for the countries to remain true to their strategic relationships but also not be fully bound by them. In the words of the leading Chinese academic and public scholar, Ji Xianlin, it is possible to transform the structures of global affairs while still retaining the best of today's relationships, for "to 'replace' does not mean eliminate" (Liu 2015: 83). If Beijing and Riyadh were able to cooperate as closely as they did before 2010 while maintaining the strategic alliances they have depended on during the Arab Spring, they would transform the politics of the Middle East and the wider world.

### The Dream of New Old Friends

When King Abdullah formally ascended to the throne of Saudi Arabia in 2005, he presided over an important shift in Saudi foreign policy, the "look east" foreign policy that recognized a new economic reality. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Saudi trade with Asia had soared, especially with China. Chinese-Saudi trade rose from \$1.8 billion in 1999 to \$70.2 billion in 2012 (International Monetary Fund 2013). Other Asian states registered similar

increases in trade with Saudi Arabia: Japanese trade with Saudi Arabia grew from \$10.2 billion in 1999 to \$58.8 billion in 2012, while Saudi-Korean trade grew from \$6 billion in 1999 to \$46 billion in 2012 (International Monetary Fund 2013).

This was a significant reversal of circumstances from earlier eras when much of Saudi Arabia's oil exports went to Western Europe and to the United States (Al-Tamimi 2013: 112–113). For Saudi elites, these changes offered a chance to align Saudi foreign policy closer to Asian powers and to lessen their traditional dependence on Western Europe and the United States. China was especially interested in improving relations with Saudi Arabia as part of its broader policy of opening Middle East markets to its goods and channeling the region's resources into its domestic development program (Alterman, Garver 2008: 32–36 & 58–60).

The contrast with Washington could not have been clearer. Beijing's stated positions on the Arab-Israeli conflict was closer to Riyadh's than Washington's and were not subject to the domestic lobbies that had long frustrated Saudi policy makers in their dealings with American leaders (Yiyi 2015). In fact, Chinese officials had long viewed the Palestinians as "their little brothers" (Yiyi 2015b). While Beijing upheld the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in others' domestic affairs, Washington issued regular reports that criticized the human rights practices in Saudi Arabia and other nations. Saudi officials had grown tired of U.S. politicians attacking the Kingdom to gain favor with voters. It had not gone unnoticed in Saudi Arabia that then Senator John Kerry, who barely lost the 2004 Presidential Elections to President George W. Bush, had identified the Saudi royal family by name and negatively in his acceptance speech during the Democratic Party National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts in July 2004. In the speech, Kerry had proclaimed to thunderous applause that he wanted "an America that relies on its ingenuity and innovation, not the Saudi royal family" (Blum 2004).

One of the states Kerry and other American politicians often held out as a model for ingenuity and integration was Singapore. The city-state along with other smaller states in Asia had also seen increases in trade with Saudi Arabia. For instance, Singapore had \$17 billion in bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia in 2012, a number far larger than that of France or Germany (International Monetary Fund 2013). By comparison, bilateral Saudi-Singapore trade was just \$3 billion in 1999 (International Monetary Fund 2013).

Singapore has also become critical to Saudi Arabia and China for another reason: geography. The city state sits in the (a) center of one of the largest regions of Muslims in the world and (b) heart of the Straits of Malacca, the 805 kilometer (500 mile) waterway that is the principal link between the Indian

Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Over the last decade, the waterway has become almost as important to Saudi Arabia as the Straits of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, since there is no practical way yet to ship petroleum by pipeline from the Middle East to Asia and other sea routes are impractical. In 2013, the U.S. Energy Information Administration estimated that a third of all global seaborne oil trade in 2011 was transported on ships using the Straits of Malacca (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2013).

For China, the waterway is equally critical to its economy, for it offers the only viable way to transport its goods to its largest trading partner, the European Union, and to emerging markets in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. By the middle of the 2000s, as much as 80 percent of all Chinese oil imports (Erickson, Goldstein: 52) crossed the Straits, which remains open to maritime traffic thanks to the power of the U.S. Navy and its allies' unfettered access to naval facilities in Singapore. Indeed, a website for the U.S. Navy refers to Singapore as "the U.S. Navy's gateway to Southeast Asia" (CNIC, N.D.).

The linkage between energy, Chinese trade, the Straits, and U.S. power deeply troubles some Chinese naval analysts. In their eyes, the Straits are now "China's lifeline of economic development" and the challenge of keeping them and other waterways secure from blockade by the United States is called China's "Malacca Dilemma." Indeed, a Chinese naval analyst observed, "Whoever controls the Straits of Malacca...can threaten China's energy security at any time" (Erickson, Goldstein: 52).

That dilemma has in part driven Chinese President Xi Jinping, who entered office in late 2012, to improve ties with Southeast Asian nations, to develop his country's naval power, and to build overland links to Europe (Escobar 2014). The president has also made many references in meetings with leaders of African and Asian nations to Zheng He (1371–1435) (Page 2013), a fifteenth-century Chinese Muslim admiral who led seven major expeditions in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Among the regions Zheng He's expeditions visited were the Straits of Malacca, the Straits of Hormuz, Yemen, and the Hijaz in what is today Saudi Arabia (Sen 2009: 250). Today, Zheng He is an important figure for Chinese nationalists, including Liu Mingfu, who discusses him in *The China Dream* (Liu 2015: 94–95). During his visit to Malaysia in 2013, President Xi referred to the Chinese admiral in a major public address: "600-plus years ago the Chinese navigator Zheng He visited Malacca [in Malaysia] five times during his seven naval expeditions. It has become a much-told story in the history of friendly exchanges between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2013).

The Chinese president's rhetoric and the Malacca dilemma put in focus the challenges of Saudi Arabia's attempts to transition away from its alliance with

the United States and to forge a new partnership with China, a nation with the potential to become a primary strategic partner and one with a long history of cultural ties to Saudi Arabia. It is worth noting that Saudis were familiar with China from the Prophet Muhammad, who used China as a tool to illustrate the importance for Muslims of seeking knowledge. Muslims settled in China during the lifetime of the Prophet, and Muslims thereafter became an integral part of Chinese society. At the start of the twentieth century Liang Qichao and other reformers sought to revive the memory of Zheng He, or “the light of Chinese history,” as part of a vision of a modern and reformed China capable of exercising power on the world stage (Qizhi: 101–102). Decades later, the Communist leader Deng Xiaoping, utilized the Admiral as an historical frame for his program of opening China to the world. Often referring to himself as the “Second Zheng He,” the Chinese premier stressed that China’s decision to close its economy in the fifteenth century following the Admiral’s death had been a catastrophic mistake that had led to the country’s decline (Ide 2014).

Initially, Saudi Arabia played only a peripheral role in fulfilling Deng’s vision for China. But economic and political ties grew rapidly after China became an oil importing nation in 1993, and Deng’s successor, President Jiang Zemin, visited Riyadh in 1999 (Sutter 2012: 306). During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Saudi-owned Saudi Basic Industries Corporation and Saudi Arabia’s Saudi Aramco Overseas Company made massive investments in China’s petroleum and petrochemical industries, while Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority and Saudi Arabian Airlines established substantial presences in China (Kemp 2010: 81–83). For their part, the Chinese constructed the Mecca railway, other major port and other infrastructure projects, and made substantial private investments in Saudi Arabia (Al-Tamimi 2013: 226). Hundreds of Saudi students traveled to China, where they were easy to find in elite universities in the capital when the author visited Beijing in July and November of 2011.

Many of those students were in China as part of the King Abdullah National Scholarship program, which, like the “Look East Policy,” was launched in 2005 after King Abdullah ascended to the throne (Kemp 2010: 131). The program has sent tens of thousands of Saudi university students to study abroad and was tied to the Interfaith Dialogue, which sought to create opportunities for Saudis to interact with peoples of a variety of faiths, including Buddhism, with historical ties to China. King Abdullah provided key political support to these initiatives by attending Interfaith Dialogue meetings and in 2006 becoming the first Saudi head of state to visit China (Al-Maena 2006).

King Abdullah’s visit to China initiated a period of regular consultations between Beijing and Riyadh and two state visits under President Hu. The first was in 2006, months after King Abdullah’s trip to China, and saw the Chinese

leader become the second foreign leader to address the Majlis al-Shura, Saudi Arabia's consultative assembly (Alterman, Garver, 2008: 1). During Hu's second trip, in 2009, he presided over the opening of a cement plant, and, hours before departing, he joined dozens of officials and students in laying the foundation for a Saudi-Chinese friendship park in a residential neighborhood in Riyadh (Khan 2009). Significantly, the new public space resembled public gardens Beijing had built over the years in Australia, Pakistan, and other nations that are central to Chinese economic and security policy.

A year later, in November 2010, Chinese and Saudi officials unveiled an even more ambitious plan to improve bilateral ties: the first of three Chinese malls in Saudi Arabia. Called The China Mart, the \$80 million, 100,000-square-meter (1,076,391-square-foot) mall was situated in a busy intersection of a rapidly developing neighborhood adjacent to Exit 5 of the Northern Ring Road. When the mall opened, it featured a large Chinese restaurant and 250 shops, which sold Chinese-made products from a variety of manufacturing sectors. The mall appeared to be the symbol of a new age of Western decline and Chinese ascendancy. In fact, a reader of the *Saudi Gazette's* story about the opening of The China Mart summed up the public mood in the Kingdom when he wrote online on November 1, 2010, that China "is silently conquering the world through its economic clout; goodbye to the former economic powers USA & Japan" (Khan 2010).

For Saudis, who had grown tired of their relationship with the United States, China appeared to be the alternative they had been seeking for years. In less than a decade, the Asian nation had emerged as one of Saudi Arabia's primary trading partners. And it had (a) the potential to be the Kingdom's new strategic partner, and (b) a long history of cultural ties to the Arab and Muslim worlds, including Saudi Arabia.

### The Arab Spring

Only weeks after the mall opened in Riyadh, events in North Africa altered the calculations of the Saudi and Chinese governments. After the video of a young and desperate Tunisian, Muhammad Bouazizi, setting himself alight spread via social media, peaceful protests erupted across the Arab World. Although China and Saudi Arabia found common ground in Egypt and elsewhere (often in opposition to the United States), the two governments adopted diametrically opposed positions on Syria, the most intractable dispute to emerge out of the Arab Spring.

While Bashar al-Assad's government had some contracts with Chinese companies, they paled in importance to the survival of his government for Iran and

Russia, China's two closest allies in the wider Middle East. Moscow and Tehran viewed a rebel victory in the Syrian civil war as an existential threat necessitating a robust package of assistance, including the deployment of military forces. For China, the Syrian civil war was also an internal matter and military intervention in the country against its existing government threatened state sovereignty, a key principle of Chinese diplomacy. This viewpoint only grew stronger after Western governments in 2011 utilized a United Nations-sanctioned humanitarian intervention in Libya to topple the country's government. In addition, Beijing worried that the conflict in Syria could radicalize its Muslim citizens—just as wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya had radicalized earlier generations of Chinese Muslims (Sun 2012: 152; Page, Peker 2015).

By contrast, there are over a million Syrian citizens in Saudi Arabia and deep cultural, religious, and tribal ties between Saudis and Syrians (Naffee 2014c). Many Saudis also saw the conflict there through the prism of sectarianism and their regional competition with Iran. Sheikh Muhammad al-Arefe, a charismatic and popular Saudi preacher with millions of followers on Twitter, gave an influential sermon in 2011 that attacked President Assad and called on Muslims to unite and overthrow his government (Al-Arefe 2011). In a widely-seen poem and YouTube video, the Saudi poet Hayid Waleed al-Shammari reminded King Abdullah that his mother and two of his wives are from the Shammari, a tribe in northern Saudi Arabia which has thousands of members in Syria, many of whom had joined the opposition to Syria's government (Al-Sham 2011). In response, Saudi funds poured into the Syrian opposition and Saudis traveled to the country. There Saudis competed and cooperated with Qatar and other states that sought to sway the Syrian opposition.

One of those states should have been the United States, which also backed Syria's opposition, at least rhetorically. But the Obama Administration sought to balance the goal of toppling Syria's government with an even larger one: reaching a viable agreement with Syria's ally, Iran, on its use of nuclear power. Obama had expressly campaigned for president in 2007 (and won a year later) with a pledge to negotiate directly with the leaders of governments seen by many in Washington as "rogue" states, including Iran (Smith, Elder 2013).

Upon entering office in 2009, the Obama Administration began negotiations with Iran on a nuclear agreement along with China and several other international partners. In public, Chinese officials voiced positions on the negotiations nearly identical to those of President Obama. In 2013, Washington forged an interim agreement with Tehran, news that brought a sense of resignation in Saudi Arabia (Klapper, Lee, Pace 2013). In January 2014, a Shi'a Saudi pointedly asked the author: "Why are you Americans



forcing us to kiss the ass of the Iranians again like we did in the days of the Shah?"

The sudden rise in 2014 of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (Dā'ish or ISIS), an enemy of both Iran and the United States, reinforced the Obama Administration's desire to reach a permanent accord with Iran. But it also provided an opportunity for the Kingdom to reassert its own special relationship with Washington and to signal Tehran that a nuclear deal and improved U.S.-Iranian ties could not compete with Washington's half-century alliance with Riyadh (Entous, Barnes 2014). While American and Saudi officials developed plans for joint military operations against ISIS, U.S. officials made clear that Washington was not considering a military alliance with Tehran (Peritz, Alikhan 2014).

In addition, the rise of ISIS permitted Beijing and Riyadh to pursue common diplomatic goals in Syria for the first time since 2011. Both states shared Washington's concerns about the possibility of ISIS disrupting neighboring states and recruiting their citizens to fight in Iraq and Syria. While over 2,000 Saudi citizens fight in Syria for ISIS and other organizations (Hashim 2014), the *Wall Street Journal* reported in January 2015 that 300 Chinese nationals were fighting with ISIS (Page, Peker 2015). Nor have disagreements over Syria prevented new financial partnerships. In early 2015, Saudi Arabia became a founding member of the Beijing-backed Asian Investment Development Bank (Okoshi 2015).

### A Record High

Although these types of partnerships continue to make headlines, the close relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States is likely to endure. While the two governments see their national interests in increasingly different perspectives, their cultural ties have grown far stronger over the last decade. Americans now learn Arabic in unprecedented numbers and have adopted Arabic words and cultural practices, such as smoking the hookah (Tozzi 2014). Close to 100,000 Saudis now study English and are earning college degrees in the United States, far more than study in any other country (Naffee 2014b).

Despite official rhetoric about the Kingdom looking east, the only foreign language taught in Saudi public schools remains English. When Dr. Haya Bint Abdul Aziz al-Awad, an undersecretary in the Saudi Ministry of Education, was interviewed on 5 November 2013, she made clear that (a) English is the only foreign language taught in Saudi secondary schools, (b) there are no plans to add additional foreign languages, and (c) the Kingdom's secondary

and post-secondary schools depend on lesson plans designed by American and European education companies. In IKEA and other home furnishing stores in the Kingdom, most of the large cityscape pictures for homes are from New York City. One would be hard pressed to find one from Asia and the few from Europe are from either London or Paris.

U.S. companies and products are ubiquitous, driven by market demand. One sees similar influence in everyday conversation, where English words with well-known Arabic equivalents are used in Saudi Arabic. Many professionals or university professors simply don't know how to speak at length on some modern topics without using or even speaking entirely in English.

Given the scale of the cultural investment Saudis have willingly made both as individuals and as a society in the United States, attempting to switch to another worldview or secondary language other than English would be too expensive to even contemplate and unlikely to be accepted by a public that believes that it is well served by English and American modernity. For Saudis, modernity is still understood through a U.S. and an English-language prism. While one could talk of a colonial or post-colonial relationship between the two nations, the reality is more complicated, since Saudis have freely chosen to continue to work with American (and by extension Western) culture, products, and technology and have shown little interest in adopting competing visions of modernity, such as that of China.

One does not have to go far in Riyadh to see the impact of the choices that Saudis have made and are likely to continue to make in the future. The older malls that carry local products, Riyadh Gallery and the mega malls that feature U.S. and European brands and the large box stores such as IKEA are regularly filled. Riyadh Catering Company, the second-largest McDonald's franchise in the world, is located in Saudi Arabia.

Saudis, however, continue to show great resistance to buying Chinese-branded products or culture. The massive Chinese mall that opened in 2010 was largely deserted by summer 2013 with the exception of the French hypermarket chain Carrefour and a government benefits office. In January 2014, the English-language Saudi daily newspaper, *The Arab News*, featured an article with a headline familiar to the owners of the Chinese mall: "Made in China discourages Saudis" (Naffee 2014a). Nor is commerce the only area where Chinese ties with Saudis have yet to take hold. The lawns of the Saudi-Chinese friendship park in Riyadh were littered with cigarette butts when the author visited in May 2013 and the multilingual letters of the sign identifying the park had already begun to fade.

Many Chinese officials understand that a key factor limiting the progress of their country in Saudi Arabia is the same one that plagues Chinese policy elsewhere in the world, namely the imbalance in American and Chinese cultural

power. In *The China Dream*, Liu Mingfu observes that national cultural power is real and a challenge for China, remarking that China imports tens of thousands of more books more than it exports. “No amount of material trade,” he concludes “can make up for that type of cultural gap” (Liu 2015: 82). Books are equally illustrative of U.S. cultural power in Riyadh, for China Mart’s one bookstore, when it was open, carried no books in Mandarin Chinese, and a single book (in American English) for learning Mandarin Chinese. By contrast, the bookstore carried dozens of books in Arabic and English, mostly from the United States.

These cultural linkages reflect still deep U.S.-Saudi strategic ties, which Saudi officials readily acknowledge in public. When asked in an international academic conference in Bahrain in October 2015 about the absence of U.S. aircraft carriers in the Gulf, the U.S.-educated Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, stated that American support of the Gulf is at an “all-time high” (Naar 2015). He went on to say that “the American presence in the region has in fact increased” and there were more U.S. troops in the region than ever before (Naar 2015).

### **The Iron Brothers**

The strength of the US-Saudi alliance is hardly a crisis in the short term for China, which has alternative partners to the Kingdom that are far better suited to serve the country’s short-term strategic needs. In fact, it is worthwhile pausing for a moment to explore the changing dynamics of Central Asia to understand why a Saudi partnership with China is unlikely to materialize in the short or medium term, even if the Saudis desire it. In reality, Chinese strategic interests in the short term are better aligned with Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

For instance, Russia, which began accepting payments for its oil in Chinese Renminbi (RMB) in August 2014, has assumed the top position in Chinese oil markets that had long been held by Saudi Arabia, which only accepts U.S. dollars as payment for its oil (Holodny 2015) because they are fully convertible in a way RMB is not. Russia’s decision to accept RMB as payment for its oil represented a “breakthrough in the Sino-Russian energy relationship – in Beijing’s favor” (Cunningham 2015), for Chinese buyers prefer to pay for oil in RMB, a form of payment that is far less attractive than U.S. dollars, since it is not fully convertible. The Russian decision to accept RMB as payment also reflected Moscow’s desire to (a) find new markets for its oil after Western Sanctions and the crisis in Ukraine closed ones in Europe; and (b) play a greater role in China’s “The One Belt, One Road” Initiative.

Announced in late 2013, the initiative envisions linking China with countries in Asia and Western Europe through a network of new pipelines, ports, roads, and railways (Pitlo III 2015). The maps of “One Belt, One Road” that have been released to the public lack proposed stops in Saudi Arabia but have stops in two other states in the Middle East, Iran and Turkey (Dingli 2015). Both countries boast large markets for Chinese manufacturers, although their per capita incomes are below that of Saudi Arabia. While China and Turkey have had opposing positions in the Syrian civil war, their trade and military ties have increased, thanks to Turkey’s booming economy and Turkey’s geographic position and cultural assets. The country that is famously in Asia and Europe has close political ties to (a) the Turkish peoples whose states are critical to the land route of “One Belt, One Road” and to (b) the Uyghur people, a Muslim people in China’s Western Xinjiang region (Zan 2013). Tehran also boasts useful contacts with the peoples in Central Asia and Western China, including the Uyghurs. But Tehran’s greatest assets for China are its energy reserves and its geography, for Iran is the one oil-exporting country in the Middle East that has a land border with Pakistan, China’s neighbor, permitting Iranians to potentially ship their oil to China entirely by land (Olimat 2013: 86). In addition, Iran has accepted barter, and since 2012, Chinese RMB, as payment “for some of the crude oil it supplies to China” (Sender 2012).

Given Iran’s geography and willingness to accept RMB as payment, it should come as no surprise that Beijing insisted during the international negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program that Washington lift sanctions preventing Pakistan from building a gas pipeline directly to its energy-rich neighbor. Washington agreed, allowing Pakistan to start building a pipeline in 2015, which promised to address the country’s chronic energy shortages, an issue critical to many Pakistanis (Shah 2015). The new pipeline also will connect Iran’s gas fields to Gwadar, the Chinese-built port in Western Pakistan, and serve as the first stage of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a \$46 billion 3218 km (2000 mile) economic corridor of pipelines and roads that will connect the Iranian-Pakistani border to western China (Shah, Page 2015).

President Xi unveiled the CPEC during a state visit to Islamabad in April 2015. There he lionized the decades-long partnership between China and Pakistan, thanked the Pakistanis for helping China when it was weak, and expressed personal affection for the country which he called China’s “Iron Brother” (Yasin, Anis 2015). In response, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated that the “friendship with China is the cornerstone of Pakistani foreign policy.” He subsequently referred to China with the same words as Xi had used about Pakistan, “Iron brother” (Butt 2015, Manan 2015). Mushahid Hussain Sayed, a senior Pakistani politician, told the *Reuters* news agency that

“China treats us as a friend, an ally, a partner and above all an equal.” (Hourelid, Zahra-Malik 2015).

Those promises were primarily to China but were also effectively to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s nemesis in the Middle East, for Iranian energy was the reason why China was building pipelines, ports, and roadways in Pakistan. That energy would help power Pakistan but it was also critical to a chief objective of Chinese foreign policy: namely, finding a way to avoid the Malacca dilemma and the possibility of the U.S. Navy cutting off Chinese energy supplies. Consequently, Beijing and Islamabad have little choice but to pursue policies in the Middle East that reflect Tehran’s priorities or at least do not promote those of its enemies, including Riyadh.

### The Lessons of Yemen

The consequences of these tectonic shifts become clear in spring 2015 in Yemen. For Saudi Arabia, there are few countries with whom its relationship is more sensitive than its southern neighbor. Tens of thousands of people of Yemeni descent live in the Kingdom, and have contributed to the development of the country. The two states have a long border defined by mountains and the second largest desert in the world, the Rub al-Khali, or the “Empty Quarter.”

Nearly a fifth of the population of Saudi Arabia lives in the three southern Saudi provinces which border northern Yemen: ‘Asir, Jizan, and Najran. While in northern Saudi Arabia there are real distances between the international frontiers and populated areas, there are major Saudi cities both on the Yemeni border (Najran and Jizan) or a short drive from it (Abha and Khamis Mushait). In 2009, Saudi Arabia deployed thousands of soldiers to its south after Ansar Allah (or the Houthis), a Yemeni Shi’a group, shelled Saudi border villages. In 2011, Riyadh intervened diplomatically along with the international community to end the Yemeni Revolution, one of the rebellions of the Arab Spring. A year later Riyadh helped the political transition that saw Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi replace Ali Abdullah Saleh as Yemen’s president.

Three years later when the Houthis seized much of Yemen and forced President Hadi into exile, the Saudi government intervened again, this time in a broad military alliance that included Egypt, France, Jordan, Morocco, Senegal, the United Kingdom, the United States, and all of the GCC states except Oman (Lambert 2015). Although U.S. forces did not directly participate in military operations, Washington provided Riyadh with extensive intelligence assistance, diplomatic, and logistical support for what was christened “Decisive Storm” (Al-Shibeeb 2015).

For their part, Hezbollah and Iran vigorously criticized “Decisive Storm,” while Chinese President Xi decided on April 1, 2015 to postpone a visit to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, citing the “Kingdom’s current preoccupations in Yemen” (Cairo Post 2015). For Beijing, postponing the trip to Saudi Arabia removed any possibility that it could be viewed as supporting “Operation Decisive Storm,” an operation that threatened a core principle of Chinese foreign policy, national sovereignty, and challenged the regional position of its ally Iran. If there was a choice between Iran and Saudi Arabia in a regional conflict in 2015, Beijing’s choice was now clear.

The importance of China’s decision to postpone President Xi’s trip became clear a week later when Pakistan’s parliament debated a draft resolution to provide aircraft, ships, and troops to aid Operation Decisive Storm. Riyadh was especially anxious to guarantee Pakistani ground troops to supplement coalition air operations that had failed to stop Houthi military advances and to shore up Saudi allies in Yemen. But members of the Pakistani parliament expressed unease with the war in Yemen, and stated their fear that military intervention would exacerbate already high tensions between Sunnis and Shi’a in Pakistan. An editorial in *The Express Tribune*, a leading English-language newspaper expressed a common sentiment, noting that “Pakistan is not Saudi Arabia’s handmaiden, doing its bidding at the flick of a wrist” (Shackle 2015).

After several days of heated debate, Pakistan’s parliament voted unanimously to support a resolution stating the country would remain neutral in the war in Yemen but would send assistance were the Kingdom’s two holy sites threatened. Sharif, who could have ignored the resolution, chose to accept it, not wishing to contradict public opinion or appear as if he was beholden to Riyadh. There was too much at stake for Islamabad to adopt a position that was at odds with Beijing and Tehran (Ahmed 2015).

As damaging as Pakistan’s alignment with China and Iran appeared to be for Saudi Arabia, it would have been far less significant had Egypt heeded the Kingdom’s request to deploy its ground forces in Yemen. Egypt had already deployed air and naval forces, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi had expressed his unease with Iran’s growing influence in the Arab world. Moreover, Riyadh had backed the 2013 coup that helped to bring Sisi to power, providing billions of dollars in financial aid afterwards and political support against criticism from Western governments. Few in the West doubted that Sisi was “Riyadh’s man” in Cairo (Ezzat 2015).

At the same time, Egyptians had not forgotten their intervention in Yemen in the 1960s, an experience so disastrous that Michael Oren has written that the “Vietnam War could have easily been dubbed America’s Yemen” (Oren 2010: 15). Nor could Egyptians overlook the fact that Pakistan had rejected the

Saudi request and that China, a major trading partner, had made its position in the conflict clear. While Sisi agreed in principle to the formation of a joint Arab force in the future funded by Saudi Arabia, he ultimately declined to send Egyptian troops to Yemen (King 2015: 1; Nader 2015). Ironically, the Saudi financial aid and close relationship between Cairo and Riyadh after 2013 meant that Sisi had to reject Riyadh's request, if only to demonstrate his personal strength as a national leader.

By late 2015, Saudi Arabia faced a military stalemate. Without Egyptian or Pakistani soldiers, Saudi Arabia lacked the sufficient ground forces to defeat the Houthis in Yemen or secure its southern border from either Yemeni or ISIS attack (McDowall 2015). There was no clear end in sight for the war—thanks in part to China and its allies' commitments to Iran, Saudi Arabia's sworn enemy.

### Conclusion

In January 2015, the Chinese national football team arrived at the Asian Football cup in Australia under considerable pressure to succeed. Despite drawing on a population of more than a billion people, the Chinese national team had failed to qualify for the FIFA World Cup in Brazil in 2014 and has not progressed beyond the group stage in the past two AFC Asian Cups. As the *Washington Post* noted, football is “the sport Chinese often care about most but also one that infuriates them most” (Wan 2015). Following the Chinese team's defeat in 2013 to a much lower-ranked team, Thailand, Chinese fans rioted and prevented the team's bus from leaving the stadium (Wan 2015).

The 2015 tournament looked daunting, for the Chinese team's first opponent was Saudi Arabia, a country whose citizens are as fanatical about soccer as China and had repeatedly crushed Chinese hopes in the past. Not only had the Saudis defeated the Chinese in the game celebrated in the 2014 STC ad starring Hisham Fageeh, but the Saudis had also built a record in international football far superior to China, winning the AFC cup again in 1988 and 2006 and securing the runner up position three other times. Between 1978 and 2014, China and Saudi Arabia had met 17 times, with the Saudis holding a 7–6 edge and four other games ending in draws (Monteverde 2015). In fact, the Saudi team had not lost to the Chinese since 1997, and its 2015 squad included talented Saudi forward Nasser al-Shamrani, the 2014 AFC player of the year (Monteverde 2015).

Nonetheless, in 2015, the Chinese team prevailed 1–0, a victory which helped the team win three straight games and advance beyond the group stage. Although the Chinese lost the semi-final game of the AFC cup against Australia, Chinese fans could breathe a sigh of relief, for their team had performed far

better than past years in a major global football tournament, and had finally defeated their rival Saudi Arabia. China's state-run news agency hailed the football team's "fairy-tale run" in Australia, while a blogger wrote that "he could die with no regrets" (Wan 2015).

The importance of the Saudi-Chinese football match in Australia illustrates the depth of the cultural ties between the Kingdom and China. These ties stretch far beyond oil and contemporary economic ties to the Prophet Muhammad and to Admiral Zheng He, a legendary figure who has come to define China's ambitions for global power. Between the late 1990s and 2010, these cultural ties buttressed a rise in commercial ties between China and Saudi Arabia that was so fast that many Saudis could envision Beijing replacing Washington as Riyadh's chief global strategic partner.

As the Chinese and Saudis chart their future bilateral ties, they would be well advised to look at the legacy of King Feisal, one of the most successful Saudi monarchs. In charting his foreign policy, Feisal said in 1975 that his aim was to put Saudi Arabia on "a stable basis regarding world politics, not leaning right or left, East or West" (Montgomery 1975: 10), a goal he largely achieved by finding mechanisms to find common cause with political leaders and nations, including those with whom he disagreed. Even more important, he reinvented his relationship with Egypt and other enemies and with his friends, such as the United States.

The thinking of Feisal and his advisors appears clearly in a discussion with a visiting U.S. journalist in 1974 about Aramco, the Arab American Oil Company. The journalist protested that a Saudi plan to purchase all of Aramco was nationalization—a term then associated in the West with decolonization, hostility to the West, and high oil prices. "If nationalization means divorce," Feisal's close friend, the capable oil minister, Ahmed Yamani, responded, "then this will not be nationalization" (Sheehan 1974: 58). Instead, Yamani explained, "it will be another form of marriage that we are attempting to define" (Sheehan 1974: 58). Six years later Yamani's approach proved to be a great success: Saudi Arabia was able to establish a 100 percent control of Aramco while keeping much of its American staff and linkages in place (Cordesman 2003: 472).

More than three decades later, the nationalization of Aramco and the way that Saudi officials conceived of it provides a model for Saudi officials to follow in their relations with China and other powers. Rather than "divorcing" Washington, Riyadh and China could seek to redefine their relationship, emphasizing areas of interest. This model builds on a key difference between Saudi society and those of the West. In Europe and America, modernity promises that uniformity will bring social harmony, but Saudis view it the other way around: harmony comes from the acceptance of diversity. The Saudi acceptance of diversity in part explains their success in football, a sport which requires



excellence in two contradictory forces, “teamwork and individual creativity” (Wan 2015). Within the Saudi view of the world, improvements can occur, but the tensions between oppositional forces cannot be humanly resolved. As is stated in the Quran, “Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation.”

This approach, ironically, lends itself well to Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. For example, Confucius’ teachings provide a clear warning against imposing a singular political and social vision across society. Instead, his lessons stress that harmony arises out of a society of many voices, an image that suggests a group of musical instruments playing together in harmony. Among the many inspired by these ideas is Ji Xianlin, who observed that it is possible to transform the current structures of global affairs while still retaining the best of today’s relationships. Indeed, “to ‘replace’ does not mean eliminate” (Liu 2015: 83).

Over the last decade, China has deepened bilateral economic and geo-strategic ties with Turkey, overcoming disagreements over the war in Syria and the place of the Uyghur community in Chinese society (Peker, Wong, 2015). China has also developed cordial ties with Israel and with Iran, a nation which many Israelis view as an existential military threat.

China’s flexibility is of course consistent with core Saudi traditions, including its recent diplomacy. In June 2015, Riyadh and Moscow, which are providing arms to opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, nonetheless reached a series of agreements on nuclear technology, oil equipment, and financial investments (Agnihotri 2015).

In a complex, changing world, those who remember the past but who are not bound to it fare best. Marriage is an ancient, venerable tradition, but the truly “creative” person may notice that some kinds of situations require, not an abandonment of marriage, but “another form that we are attempting to define.”

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