

# The Middle East's Year of the Dragonbear: The 2020 emergence of a Sino-Russian strategic architecture bridging Iran and its Arab Gulf Rivals

As the United States increasingly relinquishes its role as the primary security guarantor in the Middle East, China and Russia are pursuing a unique opportunity to reorient both Iran and its regional rivals into an emerging Sino-Russian Eurasian architecture. Outreach to the Middle East by the Sino-Russian partnership, a systemic coordination dubbed by strategic analyst Velina Tchakarova as the "Dragonbear,"<sup>1</sup> has been hitherto hampered by the region's main geopolitical fault-line formed by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. During the course of 2019, China and Russia made significant strides in bridging this divide by upgrading the strategic nature of their respective relationships with Saudi Arabia as well as with its close Persian Gulf ally the United Arab Emirates. Building on these advances, Beijing and Moscow will embark in 2020 on actively promoting the creation of new multilateral architecture for the Middle East whose organizing framework will be the Sino-Russian Dragonbear partnership.

China and Russia will usher in 2020 by conducting a four-week, naval exercise with Iran in the Arabian Sea region that is scheduled to commence on 22 December 2019.<sup>2</sup> The dates of the Sino-Russian-Iranian trilateral drill were announced in Tehran at the beginning of December 2019 by Iranian Navy Chief Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi during his meeting with Deputy Joint Chief of China's armed forces, Major General Shao Yuanming.<sup>3</sup> Symbolic of Beijing's increasing emphasis on balancing its respective military relationships with Tehran and Riyadh, the announcement coincided with the conclusion of the three-week Blue Sword 2019 joint exercise between the Saudi Royal Navy's Western Fleet and China's People's Liberation Army Navy.<sup>4</sup>

Further illustrative of the Dragonbear's attempt to bridge the strategic divide in

the Persian Gulf was Russian President Vladimir Putin's mid-October 2019 visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), commencing on the same day as the United States' precipitous and seemingly haphazard withdrawal from northern Syria. As U.S. policy in Syria appeared amateurishly erratic, Putin, who masterminded Russia's successful intervention in the Syrian civil war, arrived triumphantly in Saudi Arabia on October 14, 2019 to a Czar's welcome. The timing may be coincidental, but the optics of the juxtaposition signaled something much larger. Riyadh and Moscow's shift away from their traditional antagonism and toward a systematic deepening of bilateral cooperation<sup>5</sup> clears the way for the wholesale incorporation of the entire Middle East into a new geo-economic framework created by the partnership of China and Russia.

The Middle East's integration into the China-Russia Eurasian architecture is as complicated as it is consequential for economic and security relations across the Eurasian landmass. While Russia stills maintains an edge over China in terms of the superiority of its military technology and as a security provider, the sheer size of China's population combined with its vastly superior economy means that the Dragonbear relationship is inherently tilted in Beijing's favor. The way the Middle East will be incorporated into a Sino-Russian framework of economic and security relations will contribute significantly to the shaping of the future strategic balance between China and Russia.

Despite the competition within the Dragonbear relationship, the Chinese and Russian militaries have been enhancing their interoperability for over a decade. Increasing the compatibility of their logistics, communications, and weapons systems, regular joint training over the course of this period has led to a greater conver-

gence of tactics and warfighting doctrines between their armed forces. The depth of the Dragonbear relationship was strikingly illustrated by President Putin's October 3, 2019 announcement that Russia is helping China build an anti-missile early warning system.<sup>6</sup> While cautioning that "Beijing and Moscow do not always walk in lockstep," Russian military affairs analyst Dmitri Trenin recently highlighted the depth of mutual understanding between Beijing and Moscow as an indicator of the durability of Sino-Russian strategic cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Trenin astutely observed, "the strength of their cooperation is clear, not only in areas where their interests align but even more crucially in areas where they don't."

In the Middle East, the respective programs for a new multilateral architecture broadly align. Russia has articulated its new "security concept" for the Persian Gulf region that envisions a multi-lateral collective security mechanism involving Russia and China that brings together Iran and its Arab Gulf rivals, along with other regional and international stakeholders.<sup>8</sup> Moscow's effort to rehabilitate the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad among Arab leaders has been motivated by this grand vision and has come at the expense of Iran's regional strategic objectives. In November 2019, China hosted its inaugural Middle East Security Forum in Beijing to promote a vision similar to Moscow's Persian Gulf security concept. The Middle East Security Forum is the manifestation of Chinese President Xi Jinping's "new idea" to extend the dialogue of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum to encompass the region's security.<sup>9</sup> Similar in form to Moscow's Persian Gulf Security Concept, Beijing's new idea also emphasizes development as the means to promote dialogue and stability across geopolitical divides.

**Iran and the Dragonbear: Eurasian Asset, Middle East Liability**

Iran's integration is the keystone for both Beijing and Moscow to advance their respective strategic objectives as the China-Russia partnership operates within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework. Iran's strategic position at the heart of Eurasia's southern rim makes it the natural geographic hub in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>10</sup> Tehran provides the only connecting link for an entirely overland China-Europe rail that does not traverse Russian territory. China's current non-Russian option, the Trans-Caspian Corridor,<sup>11</sup> requires ferrying cargo across the Caspian Sea from Central Asia to Azerbaijan. An Iranian rail link would offer a contiguous and more cost-effective solution.

With its newly constructed deep-sea port at Chabahar<sup>12</sup> and rail links extending into Central Asia, Iran is also poised to become the hub of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC), an Indian Ocean-to-Europe commercial route that would provide an alternative to Beijing's BRI architecture. Russia and India have engaged Iran as partners in the INSTC project. For its part, Moscow this year secured Iran's membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) that also includes Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus. Like Iran's EaEU membership, the INSTC contributes to Moscow's strategic imperative to preserve its influence over the South Caucasus and Caspian Sea basin through cooperation with Iran.

Beijing too seeks to incorporate Iran's commercial transit infrastructure into the BRI architecture. Iran's disappointment with India's adherence to U.S. sanctions prompted Iran to suggest Chabahar could be linked to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor centered on the Chinese-run Gwadar port, 72 km eastward on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast.<sup>13</sup> Utilizing Iran's north-south rail links, China could create a vital vertical axis connecting Beijing's main East-West corridor to the Middle East and the Arabian Sea. Robust Sino-Iranian cooperation would secure China's growing

economic domination in Central Asia, and further extend Chinese influence to the Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean. Against this geopolitical backdrop, Chinese President Xi Jinping's landmark January 2016 visit to Tehran held out the possibility of a reconfiguration of strategic relations across the Eurasian landmass.<sup>14</sup> This first state visit to Iran by a Chinese President since 2002 was prompted by the suspension of international sanctions against Iran as a result of the then recently signed Iran nuclear deal, formally Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Inking 17 agreements with Iran, China agreed to deepen its strategic relationship with the Islamic Republic over the course of 10 years, including raising the level of China-Iran bilateral trade to a massive US\$ 600 billion.

Despite Iran's geo-economic significance for Eurasian commercial connectivity, China has been hesitant to embrace Iran, as indicated by Beijing's continued lack of enthusiasm for Iran's full SCO membership. China's full embrace of Iran would undermine Beijing's hitherto carefully balanced strategic position in the Middle East that enabled Beijing to make important inroads into Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, Iran's principal Arab rivals.

Iran's highly troubled relations with its regional neighbors form a liability for the Dragonbear's wider strategic agenda in the Middle East. While Beijing and Moscow cooperate in supporting Tehran, their larger shared interests in southwest Asia also define the limits of that support as Beijing and Moscow work to expand their influence across the Middle East to promote a Sino-Russian sponsored multilateral framework for the region.

**Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates Embrace the Dragonbear: Arab Gulf States Seek Security through Diversifying Strategic Partnerships**

Saudi Arabia is China's largest Middle Eastern trading partner and is second only to Russia as China's largest oil supplier. In 2017, Xi Jinping and Saudi Arabia's King Salman signed a \$65 billion package of economic and trade agreements<sup>15</sup>

followed by the February 2019 signing of another package of economic agreements during Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Beijing visit.<sup>16</sup> From 2017 to 2019, China's relationship with Saudi Arabia has evolved from transactional cooperation to a "comprehensive strategic partnership,"<sup>17</sup> with the alignment of Saudi Arabia's interests in China's effort to create its self-declared 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The MSR is a maritime China-to-Europe transportation corridor consisting of a series of Chinese-built port installations extending westward across the Indian Ocean and then via the Red Sea and Suez Canal to the now Chinese-owned port of Piraeus, on Greece's coast. After heavy Chinese investment, Piraeus is one of Europe's major seaports and a hub for Chinese goods to enter European markets.

China cannot comfortably tolerate Iran's proxy war against Saudi Arabia in Yemen as it endangers the maritime security domain in a critical segment of the MSR, namely the Gulf of Aden-Red Sea corridor. In January 2016, counter-balancing its opening to Tehran, Beijing declared its support for Yemen's efforts to defeat the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. In April 2016, China began construction of its own overseas base in Djibouti, across from Yemen between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Djibouti severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in January 2016 and signed a security cooperation agreement with Riyadh, which established its own base<sup>18</sup> in the country after China did. Beijing has also worked to enhance Riyadh's aerial capabilities through the sale of ballistic missiles and, more recently, allegedly assisting the kingdom with its own ballistic missile development program.<sup>19</sup> Concordantly, China is currently in negotiations with Saudi Arabia for the sale of autonomous weaponized drones.<sup>20</sup> Beijing also sells its Wing Loong unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to the UAE, which deploys the drones in Libya in support General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army.<sup>21</sup>

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with its own base on Eritrea's Red Sea Coast, maintain a deep and active partnership with Egypt in the protection of the Red Sea. China,

also concerned about commercial transit through the Suez Canal, has similarly invested billions of dollars in Egypt since Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi assumed Egypt's presidency in 2014, becoming the largest investor in Egypt's Suez Canal Economic Zone mega-project.<sup>22</sup> Russia, which signed a 2018 comprehensive strategic partnership treaty with Egypt,<sup>23</sup> arguably enjoys an even closer relation with the Sisi government,<sup>24</sup> engaging in a deep military partnership with Egypt in addition to significant economic investments.<sup>25</sup> Moscow has likewise been strengthening its economic ties with Riyadh<sup>26</sup> and cultivating a strategic relationship with the UAE.<sup>27</sup>

The expanding scope of Russia's relationships with the Arab Gulf powers<sup>28</sup> were put on grand display during Putin's mid-October visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In his first visit to Riyadh in twelve years, Russia's president signed a \$2.5 billion package of investment agreements that included landmark investments in the kingdom's petroleum industry and far-sighted cooperation in strategic sectors such as space and artificial intelligence.<sup>29</sup>

Putin's next day visit to Abu Dhabi was a celebration of the already close strategic cooperation between Russia and the UAE that ranges from support for Haftar's forces in Libya to putting an Emirati astronaut into space. Heralding the "quantum leap" in Emirati-Russian strategic relations, UAE Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed referred to Moscow as his "second home."<sup>30</sup> Emblematic of that leap was the announcement a month later that Moscow had agreed to the UAE acquiring a 50 percent share in VR Technologies, a subsidiary of Russian Helicopters, that develops cutting-edge helicopters and UAVs.<sup>31</sup>

Occurring exactly one month after the September 14, 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq oil processing plant that was widely attributed to Iran, these visits reinforced Russia and China's message that the Dragonbear partners are the conciliators in the Middle East that can bridge the region's geopolitical divides to mutual benefit.

### **A Defining Moment: 2020 and the Sino-Russian effort to reorient strategic relations in the Middle East**

At the close of 2019, relations between the Gulf nations and the Sino-Russian partnership have reached an inflection point. On September 21, 2019, a week after the Abqaiq attack, Iran announced that it will be conducting naval exercises with China and Russia.<sup>32</sup> In the context of Beijing and Moscow's extensive outreach to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the trilateral drill cannot be interpreted as Sino-Russian alignment with Iran in opposition to the Arab Gulf powers. Indeed, it may be precisely because of the Dragonbear's deepening strategic relationship with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that China and Russia feel that they can conduct joint exercises with Iran.

The January 2020 trilateral drill will occur in the northern Arabian Sea concurrently with the new U.S.-led International Maritime Security Construct, formally Operation Sentinel, that seeks to protect commerce traversing the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and the Gulf of Aden. Headquartered in Bahrain where the U.S. Fifth Fleet is based, the U.S.-led force is a narrow coalition of the Arab Gulf States of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with the United Kingdom, Australia and Albania.<sup>33</sup> On November 24, France announced the formation of a European-led coalition that would be stationed at France's naval base in Abu Dhabi, although the exact composition of the force remains unclear.

China and Russia will likely present their trilateral naval cooperation with Iran as part of a new multilateral security framework for the protection of maritime commerce and encourage the Arab Gulf powers to engage the Dragonbear's auspices for brokering new security arrangements with Iran. The fracturing of the Atlantic Alliance's Persian Gulf intervention into two coalitions may accelerate the process if the French-led European coalition seeks to place itself in a mediating position. Without strong coordination between the United States (still the principal Saudi and Emirati security guarantor) and Europe to provide Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Cairo with

comprehensive security partnerships, the Arab Gulf states and Egypt could turn even more towards the Sino-Russian partnership for solutions.

China and Russia, through their outreach to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have succeeded in bridging the strategic divide in the Persian Gulf. As Riyadh and Abu Dhabi continue to pursue their security objectives through diversifying their strategic relationships, China and Russia will have increasing opportunity to further reorient Iran and its Arab rivals towards the Sino-Russian Eurasian framework. As a pivotal year of transition in the Middle East, 2020 may prove to be the Middle East's year of the Dragonbear.

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