

FEATURE

China's Xi to visit Saudi Arabia to 'bolster ties'

Initial agreements worth \$29bn will be signed during a Saudi Arabian-Chinese summit this week, according to the kingdom's official news agency.

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Relations between China and Saudi Arabia have deepened in recent years [File: Lintao Zhang/EPA]

Chinese President Xi Jinping will make a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia this week, meeting the king and de facto ruler of the world's biggest oil exporter.

The Chinese leader will arrive on Wednesday for only his third trip abroad since the coronavirus pandemic began and his first to Saudi Arabia since 2016.

The visit followed an invitation from Saudi Arabia's King Salman "to bolster historic ties and strategic partnership between the two countries", the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said on Tuesday.

Initial agreements worth \$29.26bn will be signed during the bilateral summit, SPA said.

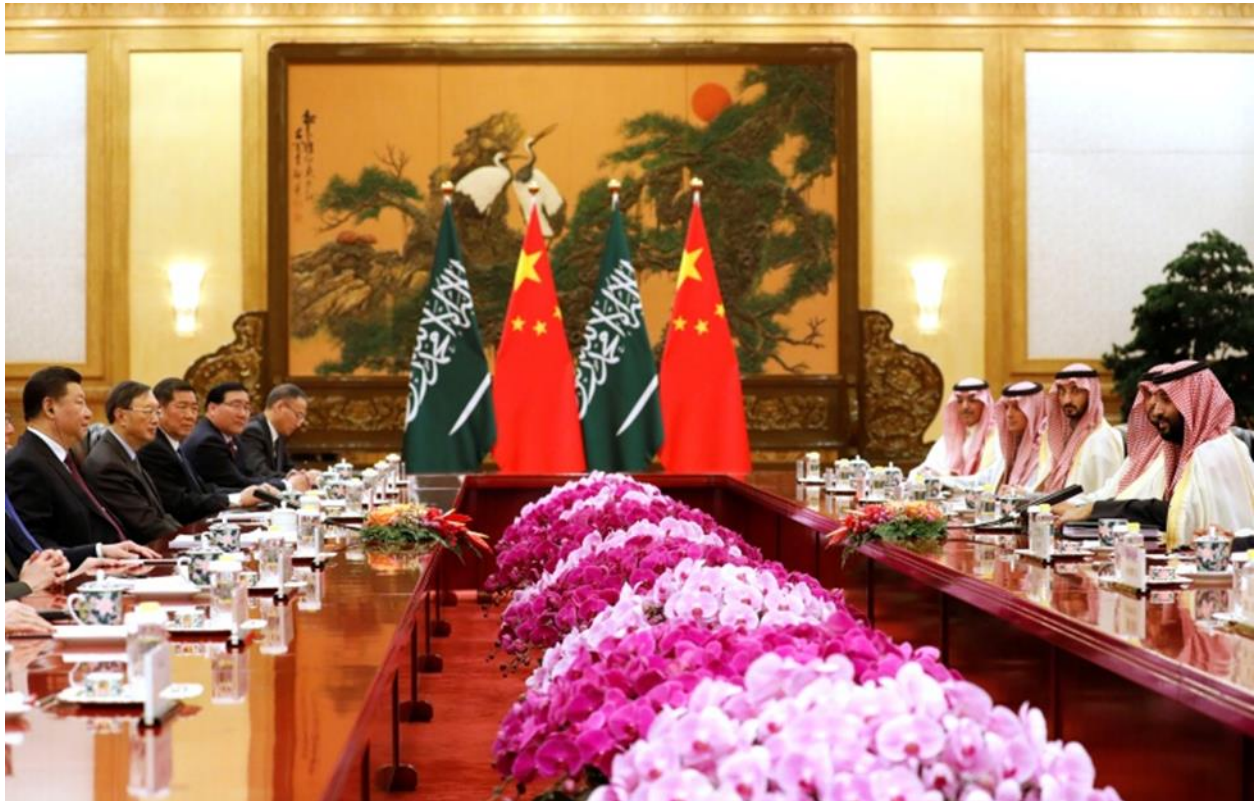
China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the visit in a brief statement on

Wednesday morning. Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said Xi would make a state visit to Saudi Arabia and attend the first China-Arab States Summit and the China-GCC Summit in Riyadh.

The visit comes as China looks to deepen its relationships with countries in the Middle East amid growing strains in its ties with the United States and other Western nations.

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the kingdom's de facto ruler, comes after Xi was confirmed for an [unprecedented third term as president in October](#).

China is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner and MBS is expected to give Xi a lavish welcome when he lands in Riyadh on Wednesday, a marked contrast to the muted reception given to US President Joe Biden in July.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman travelled to Beijing in 2019 where he met Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing [File: How Hwee Young/Pool via Reuters]

In an editorial, China's Global Times, a state-run tabloid, described the China-Arab States summit as "a milestone in the history of China-Arab countries relations".

The paper said that after the "severe impact" of the Arab Spring, the region had a "common desire" to avoid political turmoil and achieve stable growth and was "keenly interested in China's experience".

'Deeper relations'

The summit with Saudi Arabia, chaired by King Salman and attended by Crown Prince

The visit reflects "much deeper relations developed in recent years" between the two countries, said Ali Shihabi, a Saudi Arabian analyst close to the government.

"As the largest importer of Saudi oil, China is a critically important partner and military relations have been developing strongly," he said, adding that he expected "a number of agreements to be signed".

MBS was in Beijing in 2019 when he held talks that focused on [energy deals and regional economic agreements](#) aligned with

Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's globe-spanning infrastructure project.

The trip also coincides with heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the US over issues ranging from energy policy to regional security and human rights.

The latest blow to that decades-old partnership came in October when the OPEC+ oil bloc agreed to [cut production](#) by two million barrels a day, a move the White House said amounted to "aligning with Russia" on the war in Ukraine.

On Sunday, OPEC+ decided to keep those cuts in place.

Shihabi said the timing was "a coincidence and not directed at the US".

In from the cold

China sees Saudi Arabia as its key ally in the Middle East due not only to its importance as an oil supplier but also a shared suspicion of Western countries, especially on issues such as human rights.

Saudi Arabia has remained silent on the situation in China's far western region of Xinjiang, where the United Nations has said the detention of Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities may amount to "[crimes against humanity](#)".

Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in October that Saudi Arabia was a "priority" in China's overall and regional diplomatic strategy.

China buys roughly a quarter of Saudi Arabian oil exports.

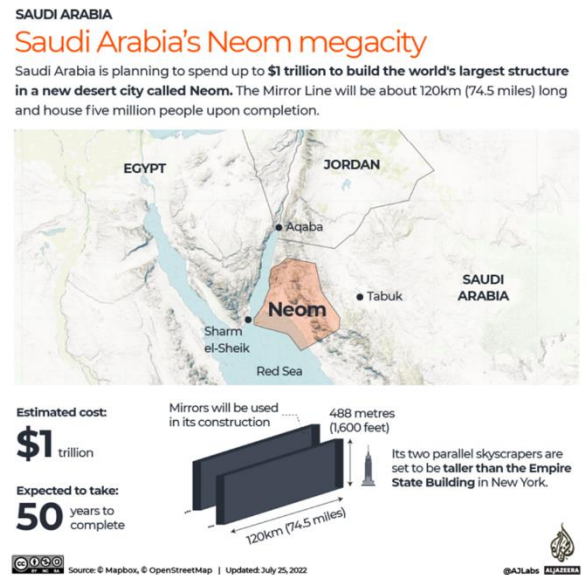
The oil market was thrown into turmoil with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February.

The G7 and European Union on Friday agreed on a [\\$60-per-barrel price cap](#) on Russian oil in an attempt to deny the Kremlin revenues to keep up the war, stoking further uncertainty.

"Oil will probably be higher up the agenda than it was when Biden visited," said

Torbjorn Soltvedt of the risk intelligence firm Verisk Maplecroft.

"These are the two most important players in the oil market – Saudi on the supply side and then China on the demand side."



(Al Jazeera)

Beyond energy, analysts have said leaders from the two countries are expected to discuss potential deals that could see Chinese firms become more deeply involved in mega-projects that are central to the crown prince's vision of diversifying Saudi Arabia's economy away from oil.

Those projects include a futuristic \$500bn megacity known as NEOM, a so-called "cognitive" city that will depend heavily on facial recognition and surveillance technology.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES