

FEATURE

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China's Xi promotes Mideast security and energy ties at Saudi summits

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- *Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman shakes hands with Chinese leader Xi Jinping during the China-Arab Summit in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Friday. | SPA / VIA AFP-JIJI*
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RIYADH – Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday touted close security and energy ties with Gulf nations during summits in Saudi Arabia that have highlighted tensions with Washington.

On the third and final day of his visit, Xi attended a gathering of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council and a broader China-Arab leaders' meeting.

It was only Xi's third journey outside China since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Friday's talks followed bilateral sit-downs on Thursday with Saudi royals that yielded a joint statement stressing "the

importance of stability" in oil markets — a point of friction with the United States, which has urged the Saudis to raise production.

"China will continue to firmly support the GCC countries in maintaining their own security ... and build a collective security framework for the Gulf," Xi said on Friday at the start of the China-GCC summit.

"China will continue to import large quantities of crude oil from GCC countries on an ongoing basis," he said, also vowing to expand other areas of energy cooperation including liquefied natural gas imports.

Additionally, Xi said China would make full use of a Shanghai-based platform “to carry out RMB (yuan) settlement of oil and gas trade” — a move that, if Gulf countries participate, could weaken the global dominance of the U.S. dollar.

Asked at a news conference, as the summits came to close Friday evening, if Riyadh would agree to such a plan, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said he had “nothing to add.”

Oil from Saudi Arabia alone accounted for 17% of China’s imports last year, and last month Qatar announced a 27-year natural gas deal with China.

Xi’s visit comes amid persistent rancor between Saudi Arabia and the U.S., its longtime partner and security guarantor, over oil production, human rights issues and regional security.

It follows U.S. President Joe Biden’s trip to Jeddah in July, before midterm elections, when he failed to persuade the Saudis to pump more oil to reduce prices.

Xi’s arrival in the kingdom on Wednesday earned a rebuke from the White House, which warned of “the influence that China is trying to grow around the world.”

Washington called Beijing’s objectives “not conducive to preserving the international rules-based order.”

Saudi officials have repeatedly stressed that they value deep ties with Washington but will not hesitate to explore relationships elsewhere.

“We are very much focused on cooperation with all parties, and I think competition is a good thing,” Prince Faisal said on Friday, adding that Riyadh will also continue to have strong relations with the U.S. “across the board.”

“We will continue to work with all of our partners, and we don’t see it as a zero-sum game by any means,” he added.

“We don’t believe in polarity.”

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia’s 37-year-old de facto ruler, addressed both summits on Friday, promising “continuing Arab-Chinese cooperation to serve our common goals and aspirations of our peoples.”

The Gulf countries, strategic partners of Washington, are bolstering ties with China as part of an eastward turn that involves diversifying their fossil fuel-reliant economies.

At the same time China, hit hard by its COVID-19 lockdowns, is trying to revive its economy and widen its sphere of influence, notably through its Belt and Road initiative which provides funding for infrastructure projects around the world.

One area of focus for the China-GCC summit was a free trade agreement under discussion for nearly two decades.

Drawing those negotiations to a close would be “a matter of prestige for Beijing,” said Robert Moglenicki of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

“It’s not as simple for the GCC states, which seem to be more invested in advancing bilateral ties and are engaged in varying degrees of regional economic competition with their neighbouring member states.”

No breakthrough was announced on Friday.