



By: TA | AP Insight

China seeks deeper influence across the Mideast



On the surface, Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Egypt this week is a run-of-the-mill opportunity for two countries to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties.

But there is deep subtext to the meeting between Xi and President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi: China, the United States' top global rival, is cultivating an **extensive relationship** with one of America's key allies in the Middle East as it moves to expand its **influence** in the rapidly changing region.

Xi aims to present China as a stabilizer in the region and contrast it with the United States, which for decades has been militarily entangled there — its six-month war with Iran being just the latest example.

"China continues to build up its soft power reserves while the United States self-sabotages its own stock," Amr Hamzawy, director of the Washington-based Carnegie Middle East Program, wrote in a paper earlier this year along with Kathryn Selfe, a former fellow at the program.

Xi arrived on Tuesday evening at Cairo airport, which was adorned with Chinese and Egyptian flags. El-Sissi and military guards greeted him on the tarmac with a red-carpet ceremony.

In wide-ranging talks Wednesday, Xi said Cairo and Beijing should jointly oppose what he called "unilateralism and acts of bullying," according to China's state-run Xinhua news agency.

The Chinese leader also called for the two countries to "work together for a more just and equitable global governance system," Xinhua reported.

Xi's first visit to the region since 2022

Xi, who visited the **Grand Egyptian Museum** near the pyramids of Giza, is on his first trip to Egypt in a decade, the first time he has been in the region since visiting Saudi Arabia in 2022.

El-Sissi has visited China multiple times in recent years.

The leaders marked 70 years of diplomatic ties by publishing friendly opinion pieces on Tuesday in Egypt's state-run newspapers.

Xi wrote that Beijing and Cairo should "expand the scope of pragmatic collaboration" through development. El-Sissi lauded China's investments in Egypt and reiterated **Cairo's support** of China's claim that Taiwan is part of its territory.

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In 2023, Egypt was invited to join the BRICS bloc of nations, a grouping of major emerging economies that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and is seen as a counterbalance to Western-led institutions such as the G7.

A year later, Egypt signed agreements with China to collaborate on its Belt and Road Initiative, a signature policy of Xi's that seeks to build power and transportation infrastructure around the world.

China has invested more than \$10 billion in Egypt, building a business hub east of the capital, Cairo, and an electric rail line for industry in the Nile Delta.

Annual trade between the two countries is estimated at \$20 billion, according to government figures.

Trade between the U.S. and Egypt was \$15.7 billion in 2025. Egypt is a crucial partner in U.S. **national security priorities** in the region, and the countries' leaders enjoy close ties.

China has been trying to build bridges between Mideast nations

In 2023, Beijing brokered a **deal** to reestablish diplomatic ties between Iran — its most important regional ally and oil supplier — and Saudi Arabia, a longtime U.S. ally.

The agreement showcased China's aspirations to **compete** with the United States for influence in the Mideast.

Since then, ties between Riyadh and Tehran have frayed. Iran attacked Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries as part of its retaliation against the U.S. and Israel, which launched the war on Feb. 28.

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China has cast itself as a regional mediator in other ways. It has long advocated a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is seen by the Arab world as a linchpin to regional stability.

Shortly before Hamas militants attacked Israel in 2023 and launched the war in Gaza, Xi had hosted Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and announced a “strategic partnership” with the Palestinian Authority.

Suez Canal is a vital alternative to the Strait of Hormuz

With oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz heavily disrupted by the Iran war, the **Suez Canal** — which is controlled by Egypt — has become an important alternative path for getting energy supplies out of the region.

“China has good reason to strengthen ties with the country that controls the route still open,” said Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, a Middle East expert with Jakarta's Center of Economic

and Law Studies.



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Xi views Egypt “as a base to reach the wider Arab and African world, at a time when the U.S. has less attention to spare there,” said Rakhmat.

In August, China and Egypt held a multiday air exercise at several bases across Egypt — the first-ever combat exercise for China's J-16 fighter jets and Egypt's French-made Rafale fighters.

Xi is visiting Cairo after attending a two-day conference of the 10-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a political and security group billed as a counterweight to U.S. global influence.

The leaders of Russia, India, Pakistan and Iran attended the conference in Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek.

The trip also comes on the heels of the Trump administration's “**economic onslaught**” on Iran's financial connections around the world.

The sanctions aim to isolate the Islamic Republic from its remaining economic partners, including China, which buys more than 80% of Iranian oil shipments, usually through indirect channels.

Beijing says its trade with Iran has always abided by international law.