



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies



Engaging the Houthis in Yemen: A Repeat of China's Afghanistan Mediation Strategy?

Barbara Kelemen

February, 2020

Special Report



Engaging the Houthis in Yemen: A Repeat of China's Afghanistan Mediation Strategy?

Special Report

Table of Contents

Historical Overview of China-Yemen Relations	5
China's Mediation Strategy in Yemen	6
Sino-Saudi Alignment and its Impact on Yemen	8
A Comparison: Chinese Engagement with the Taliban	9
Conclusion	11

China's response to the Yemen war since 2015 has followed its traditional strategy of balancing in the Middle East, which attempts to accommodate (and placate) all parties while refraining from direct interference. In that context, it has developed relations with the Houthis and has sought to play a limited mediational role in the conflict. However, as Saudi Arabia has become increasingly important for China, the current position of Beijing seems to be much more aligned with the Saudi position in Yemen. This report seeks to provide an overview of China's engagement with the Houthis and the complexities involved. It will also compare China's evolving relationship with the Houthis with that of another armed nonstate actor: the Taliban. However, while China has approached the Houthis in a similar manner, its relationship with the Taliban has been built on its direct security concerns rather than just an interest in regional stability. It has also lasted much longer, which makes the Chinese position as a mediator in Afghanistan stronger than its position in Yemen, at least for the time being.

Historical Overview of China-Yemen Relations

China's relationship with Yemen has historically been a good one. It was one of the first countries that recognized the newly established Yemen Republic in 1990. The friendly relationship had been built on the back of mutual cooperation combined with China's economic and military assistance during the years leading up to the unification.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and North Yemen in 1956, China has carried out a number of development and investment projects in the country, such as the 1958 construction of the Sana'a-Hodeida highway. In South Yemen, China has also managed to acquire a position of influence by providing the country with various types of economic support. The embassy there was opened in July 1969, after which the Chinese begun to direct their aid toward several projects, including a textile mill outside Aden and a 315-mile-long road from Aden to Mukalla. By 1980, development aid provided to South Yemen had reached approximately \$84 million US dollars, making it the largest Chinese aid program in either the Middle East or anywhere in the third world.⁽¹⁾ For years China had tried to maintain a

(1) Fred Halliday, "Aspects of South Yemen's Foreign Policy 1967–1982," doctoral thesis, London School of Economics, Department of International History (April 1985), p. 285.

balanced policy between North and South Yemen, which eventually led it to support the policy of unity and explains the smooth transition of its good relations after the Yemeni unification.

Already before 1990 China had also participated heavily in the exploration of Yemeni oil sector.⁽²⁾ The Chinese state-owned companies Sinopec and Sinochem Corporation both produced oil in the country, with the daily output reaching almost 8 percent of the country's total daily production.⁽³⁾ Another company, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), provided various geophysical services through two seismic groups that it had stationed in the country.⁽⁴⁾ In addition, Huawei's first major foreign sale was to Yemen, in 1999.⁽⁵⁾ Besides investment projects, Yemen has also received Chinese support and aid assistance at various points in time, indicating that China has used its economic activity as a way to cultivate and maintain friendly ties with the local government.⁽⁶⁾

China's Mediation Strategy in Yemen

When thinking about the Chinese approach toward Yemen, it is important to keep in mind that historically, China has tried to remain a neutral actor in the Middle East. This has prompted some analysts to see the Chinese calculus in Yemen as adopting the well-known strategy of balancing between both Saudi and Iranian interests.⁽⁷⁾ Such an approach puts a heavy emphasis on China's noninterference principle and its pursuit of stability through consensus. While it is difficult to claim that China is completely impartial, its mediation efforts can be perceived as an approach of consensus-building involving two opposing parties.

(2) Bo Kong, *China's International Petroleum Policy* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009), p. 84.

(3) "China Warns Oil Firm against Growing Risk in Yemen," *Reuters*, October 21, 2011, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/china-yemen-oil/china-warns-oil-firms-against-growing-risk-in-yemen-idUKL3E7LK2GH20111021>.

(4) For more information, see BGP Inc., China National Petroleum Corporation, "Onshore," 2016, http://www.bgp.com.cn/bgpen/Onshore/first_common.shtml.

(5) Eric Thun and Timothy Sturgeon, "When Global Technology Meets Local Standards," in Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawski (eds.), *Policy, Regulation and Innovation in China's Electricity and Telecom Industries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 191.

(6) Yahya Alawd, Muhammad Fuad bin Othman, and Norafidah Binti Ismail, "The Political Relations between Yemen and the People's Republic of China during Ali Abdullahs Saleh's Administration from 1990 to 2012," *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, 3, no. 1 (March 2017): 16–44.

(7) Samuel Ramani, "China's Role in the Yemen Crisis," *The Diplomat*, August 11, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/chinas-role-in-the-yemen-crisis/>.

Initially after the Arab Spring in 2011, China played a peripheral role when it came to international diplomatic efforts concerning the Yemen. At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China supported UN Resolution 2014 for the transition of power, which called for all sides to engage in peaceful political dialogue in order to defuse the crisis. It also welcomed the mediation role attempted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Yemen, as China itself had very limited contacts with the Houthis.⁽⁸⁾

The situation began to change after the Houthis' takeover of Sanaa in 2015. During that time, China supported UN Resolution 2201, which “deplored” the Houthi actions.⁽⁹⁾ In addition, it remained silent concerning the GCC's military intervention there, indicating the growing importance of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, in Beijing's strategic calculus.

China then began to establish channels of communication with the Houthis while its former ambassador to Yemen, Tian Qi (田琦, b. 1966), took part in the two rounds of the UN-backed Yemen peace talks.⁽¹⁰⁾ Together with the efforts of the Chinese special envoy to the Middle East, Gong Xiaosheng (宫小生, b. 1953), mediation has become the main policy through which China has tried to pursue stability in Yemen and simultaneously maintain good relations with all parties.

While the September 2016 efforts by Tian Qi to arrange a meeting between Ahmed Saleh and the Houthis were futile, in December of that year, a Houthi delegation headed by Mohammad Abdulsalam arrived in Beijing for talks with Chinese officials.⁽¹¹⁾ The delegation reportedly met with Deng Li (邓励, b. 1965), director-general of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Department for West Asian and North African Affairs. They discussed the ongoing situation in Yemen only few days after the Houthis had unilaterally formed a new government.⁽¹²⁾ Nonetheless,

(8) United Nations Security Council, S/RES/2014 (2011), October 21, 2011, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/YEMEN%20S%20RES%202014.pdf>.

(9) United Nations Security Council, S/RES/2201 (2015), February 15, 2015, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2201.pdf.

(10) Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Niv Horesh, *How China's Rise Is Changing the Middle East* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge: 2019).

(11) I-wei Jennifer Chang, “China and Yemen's Forgotten War” United States Institute of Peace, January 2018, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/pb241-china-and-yemens-forgotten-war.pdf>.

(12) “Yemen's Houthis Form Surprise New Government,” *CNN*, November 29, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/29/middleeast/yemen-houthis-new-government/index.html>.

even after these discussions in Beijing, a spokesperson for China's MFA commented on the Houthis' move to form a government by saying that the Chinese "do not approve of any unilateral moves by any side in Yemen" as they would not be "beneficial to a political resolution."⁽¹³⁾

Sino-Saudi Alignment and its Impact on Yemen

China's indirect opposition to the Houthis' move to form a new government only finalized what some had already perceived as China tilting toward Saudi Arabia's position on the Yemeni issue. In January 2016, Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia, during which the two countries announced the establishment of a China–Saudi Arabia "comprehensive strategic partnership." In addition, both countries stressed support for the legitimate government of Yemen, pointing to the growing Sino-Saudi alignment over the Yemeni issue.⁽¹⁴⁾ In 2017, after the failure of the Houthi delegation to alter China's position, Beijing had begun to deliver humanitarian aid to the Yemeni government based in Aden, which was led by president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁽¹⁵⁾ Furthermore, Tian Qi reaffirmed Beijing's support for the government and condemned the coup by the Houthi-Saleh alliance.⁽¹⁶⁾

While continuing to talk to all parties, China seems to have chosen aid assistance combined with the mediation efforts as its main strategy for achieving stability in Yemen. Most recently, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Zhang Jun (张军, b. 1960), called on the international community to provide specific forms of assistance to Yemen during the November 2019 UN Security Council briefing.⁽¹⁷⁾ Zhang Jun expressed China's support for the Riyadh agreement and stressed China's bilateral channels as a way by which to successfully provide assistance. This rhetoric implies China's belief that partial stability can be achieved through economic stabilization and reconstruction, in which it could play a role.

(13) Robert Cusack, "China 'Does Not Approve' of New Houthi Government," *The New Arab*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/12/4/china-does-not-approve-of-new-houthi-government>.

(14) "China Offers Support for Yemen Government as Xi Visits Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-china-yemen/china-offers-support-for-yemen-government-as-xi-visits-saudi-arabia-idUSKCN0UY0C1>.

(15) Xinhua, "1st Batch of China's Humanitarian Aid Arrives in Yemen," *China.org.cn*, July 14, 2017, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-07/14/content_41214147.htm.

(16) "China Confirms Support for Yemen," *Al-Sahwah*, March 27, 2017, <https://alsahwa-yemen.net/en/p-5371>.

(17) United Nations Security Council, S/PV.8672, November 22, 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_PV.8672.pdf.

In addition, China's ambassador to Yemen, Kang Yong (康勇, b. 1962), has been meeting regularly with various representatives of the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council of Yemen, a movement, that advocates for the separation of southern Yemen from the rest of the country. He continues to reiterate China's support for the Riyadh agreement, despite the recent difficulties in its implementation.⁽¹⁸⁾ Kang Yong has also communicated with the Houthis, most recently sending a letter to Muhammad Ali al-Houthi in December 2019 in which he expressed China's desire to continue promoting peace in Yemen.⁽¹⁹⁾ However, a close examination of the letter's contents suggests it is actually part of a larger public relations campaign by Beijing to counteract Western accusations that it is violating human rights in Xinjiang. Furthermore, the timing of the letter coincided with other Xinjiang-related activities undertaken by the Chinese embassy in Yemen, including a symposium on the Xinjiang issue organized for the Yemeni media and Yemeni officials residing in Riyadh.⁽²⁰⁾

A Comparison:

Chinese Engagement with the Taliban

The most striking aspect of China's approach to the conflict in Yemen is its ability to shift from a peripheral player in 2011 to a quasi-mediator. China was able to cultivate bilateral channels of engagement with both parties, some of which are now used for delivering assistance. Both the 2015 phone call between Xi Jinping and Saudi Arabia's King Salman during which Xi urged efforts for Yemen resolution and the 2016 visit by the Houthi delegation are examples of how China managed to increase its leverage and move away from relying on international multilateral efforts and toward substantial bilateral approaches.

Such an approach, however, becomes less surprising when examining China's mediation efforts elsewhere. As an example, China has been increasingly active in the ongoing peace talks in Afghanistan. It has not only substantially increased its economic engagement with

(18) 中华人民共和国驻也门共和国大使馆, 使馆动, <http://ye.chineseembassy.org/chn/sgdt/>.

(19) Ansarollah Official Website, محمد علي الحوثي يتلقى رسالة من السفير الصيني لدى اليمن, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/303706>.

(20) 中华人民共和国驻也门共和国大使馆, 康勇大使就新疆问题举行媒体座谈会 (1月7日2019年), <http://ye.chineseembassy.org/chn/sgdt/t1729849.htm>.

the country but has also managed to build a pragmatic relationship with the country's largest insurgent group, the Taliban.

In contrast to its relationship with the Houthis, however, China initiated its contacts with the Taliban in the 1990s as it began to face unrest and secessionist violence in Xinjiang. Motivated by its own security interests, such as the smuggling of Afghan heroin into the country and the migration of Chinese militants to training camps in the Afghan region, China attempted to make contact with the Taliban. These efforts eventually led to a 2000 meeting between Mullah Omar and Lu Shulin (陆树林, b.????), China's then ambassador to Pakistan.⁽²¹⁾ In addition, China has also begun to increase its economic engagement with Afghanistan, while becoming its third biggest export country.⁽²²⁾ As with Yemen, China seems to believe that economic stabilization is one of the key ingredients needed for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan.

Currently, China is one of the key players contributing to the Afghan peace efforts. It has hosted the Taliban delegation on a number of different occasions in order to discuss the ongoing peace talks and has continued to push for an internal Afghan dialogue. This has prompted many analysts to see China as a peace maker, especially in light of its recent announcement that a future meeting between the Taliban and representatives of the Afghan government will be hosted in Beijing.⁽²³⁾

By comparison, the engagement between the Chinese and the Houthis began only recently, a reality that substantially constricts the relationship's depth. In contrast with its view of Afghanistan, Beijing sees no immediate security implications in the conflict in Yemen. While China cares about regional stability and its access to energy, the consequences of the conflict have only an indirect impact on its interests.⁽²⁴⁾ This was different than its view

(21) Barbara Kelemen, "China and the Taliban: Pragmatic Relationship," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, June 26, 2019, <https://ceias.eu/sk/china-the-taliban-pragmatic-relationship-2/>.

(22) International Monetary Fund, data retrieved from <https://data.imf.org/regular.aspx?key=61726508>.

(23) Shadi Khan Saif, "Afghanistan Looks to China as Peacemaker", Anadolu Agency, November 5, 2019.

(24) Despite the ongoing conflict, Yemen has continued to occasionally export oil to China, with a report in 2015 commenting on a 2 million barrel carrier bound for Qingdao that departed from Yemen despite escalating violence. However, before the civil war, Chinese imports had barely reached 1 percent of the country's total imports, making it possible to substitute Yemeni imports with West African crude. What has proved to be more problematic are the Houthi attacks on oil tankers passing through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait, which led to a temporary halt on shipments, causing oil prices to spike. Although the situation in Yemen has the potential to endanger global oil shipments, the question of the control of oil and the related security concerns has so far been too important on everyone's agenda, thus preventing any major damage to the oil shipments.

of the Taliban, as in that case China was motivated by a desire to reach an understanding that Afghanistan would not be used as a base for attacks by Uyghur militants. As a result, the Taliban had leverage with which to push China toward a quasi-normalization of their diplomatic relations in the late 1990s and in increasing economic support.⁽²⁵⁾ In fact, under Taliban rule, Chinese businesses such as ZTE and Huawei saw the opportunity to move into the country's underdeveloped information and communications technology (ICT) sector in Kabul and Kandahar.⁽²⁶⁾ It was also during this period that a direct flight route between Urumqi and Kabul was opened.⁽²⁷⁾

Nonetheless, China's positioning in both cases resonates strongly with the 2019 speech delivered by foreign minister Wang Yi (王毅, b. 1953) at the 2019 Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations, in which he called on China to "play a constructive role in the political settlement of regional flashpoints,"⁽²⁸⁾ He not only cited China's shuttle diplomacy in Afghanistan but also referred to the newly established Middle East Security Forum, which was held for the first time in December 2019 in Beijing. All this suggests that China is signaling its desire to assume a larger role in the Middle East.

Conclusion

Despite Beijing's lack of enthusiasm to intervene in these two conflicts, China has slowly increased its role in both. In each case, China now holds the position of potential mediator as it possesses enough economic power to remain at the table as a relevant party. Although attempting to balance rival actors has been a long-term Chinese strategy in the Middle East, cultivating ties with armed nonstate actors in order to serve as a mediator is a relatively new phenomenon. Still, China's role remains unclear and hidden in the secrecy of closed-door

(25) Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (Haryana, India: Random House Publishers India Pvt., 2015), pp. 163–164.

(26) Mohan Malik, *Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses Post-September 11* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), p. 8.

(27) Ge Jieru, "Direct Flight between Urumqi and Afghanistan Reopens," *China Daily*, December 22, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/xinjiang/urumqi_toutunhe/2016-12/22/content_27746901.htm.

(28) Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Sultanate of Oman, "Wang Yi Talks about 2019 China's Diplomacy: Step Up to Its Responsibility as a Major Country, Play a Constructive Role in the Political Settlement of Regional Flashpoints," December 13, 2019, <http://om.chineseembassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1724309.htm>.

meetings. What is clear is that China increasingly finds itself in a position that allows it to talk to both parties and maintain a certain degree of influence over the negotiations.

In the case of Yemen, China has used diplomatic exchanges in order to try to achieve stability in a country that has both economic and strategic significance. In comparison with its relationship with the Taliban, China's engagement with the Houthis has been relatively short, which limits its depth and strategic significance. It was also formed on the back of China's indirect security concerns rather than due to a direct threat to its core national interests, such as a threat to the territorial integrity of the state.

However, rather than blindly pursuing its goals, China has chosen to back its increasingly important regional partner, Saudi Arabia. The shift from China's quasi-neutral position at the beginning of the conflict was caused by the high value Beijing places on stability and its hope that Saudi Arabia has the potential to deliver it. In this sense, China's efforts for mediation are still conditioned by a number of principles that it sees as indispensable for achieving regional stability.



King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS)

The KFCRIS is an independent non-governmental institution based in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Center was founded in 1403/1983 by the King Faisal Foundation (KFF) to preserve the legacy of the late King Faisal and to continue his mission of transmitting knowledge between the Kingdom and the world. The Center serves as a platform for research and Islamic Studies, bringing together researchers and research institutions from the Kingdom and across the world through conferences, workshops, and lectures, and through the production and publication of scholarly works, as well as the preservation of Islamic manuscripts.

The Center's Research Department is home to a group of established and promising researchers who endeavor to produce in-depth analyses in various fields, ranging from Security Studies, Political Economy, African Studies and Asian Studies. The Center also hosts the Library which preserves invaluable Islamic manuscripts, the Al-Faisal Museum for Arab Islamic Art, the Al-Faisal Institute for Human Resources Development, the Darat Al-Faisal, and the Al-Faisal Cultural Press, which issues the Al-Faisal magazine and other key intellectual periodicals. For more information, please visit the Center's website: www.kfcris.com/en



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

P.O. Box 51049 Riyadh 11543 **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Tel: (+966 11) 4652255 Ext: 6892 Fax: (+966 11) 4659993

E-mail: research@kfcris.com