

Belt and Road program offers possibility of stability for complex region

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Chinese President Xi Jinping will pay state visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran from Tuesday to Saturday at the invitation of heads of the three countries. This is Xi's first foreign visit in 2016 and also his first trip to Middle East countries as president.

He intends to promote the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in these countries and connect it with development strategies with countries in the region to strive for new progress in the Middle East.

During his trip, Xi will hold talks with leaders of the three countries, chart blueprints for bilateral relations and sign agreements in a variety of fields including trade, energy, technology and finance.

The first leg of the tour is Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil producer and exporter and also China's largest trading partner in the Middle East. Since China and Saudi Arabia established diplomatic ties in 1990, their trade and economic ties have grown rapidly and enjoyed high complementarity. China mainly exports machinery, electronics, and mechanical products, and imports fossil fuels, organic chemicals and chemical raw materials. In 2014, the bilateral trade volume reached \$69.1 billion with trade deficit of \$27.9 billion. Saudi Arabia is also the largest oil exporter to China, with its import making up 16.11 percent of China's total in 2014.

Given the complicated situation in the Middle East, Xi's trip carries considerable significance. The region has witnessed a deterioration in security with the Islamic State, Syria civil war, the strife between the US, Turkey and Russia and bitter dispute between Saudi and Iran. This has posed direct threat to China's interests in the Middle East.

In terms of security, China has overtaken the US as the largest oil importer in the world, mostly from Middle East countries. Xi's trip to the region can hence help maintain China's stable and friendly ties with major oil exporters there and is significant in ensuring China's energy security.

The three countries that Xi will visit are influential in the region and lead the Sunnis and Shiites. As China has the due responsibilities of a major power, Xi can prompt parties in the Middle East to form consensus that benefits all and promote regional peace and stability.

Moreover, nations in the region are important partners of China both politically and economically, and the Middle East is a key outpost in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. With the visit, the trust and economic cooperation between China and countries in the region can be elevated to a new level.

Despite the closer ties between China and the Middle East, they also face multiple challenges in their relations. For instance, the turbulence in the region and the drastic comeback of Islamic extremists threaten China's peripheral security and overseas interests in these countries.

The spread of some Middle Eastern forces in the name of Islam has been propped up by some Muslims in China. This undermines the stability in China's border areas and also the country's sovereign security, and significantly hampers the implementation of the Belt and Road initiative.

The initiative fits with the pressing needs for peaceful and stable environment and restoring economic development in the Middle East. It also provides useful conceptual and political support to address the challenges facing China and Middle Eastern countries. Washington's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific has disappointed its allies in the Middle East and meanwhile created a good opportunity for China to play a key role in regional affairs as a mediator and shoulder its responsibilities as a major power.

Xi's upcoming trip shows China's pro-active approach to getting involved in Middle East affairs and promoting regional peace. It is also strategically significant for China to step up its consensus with Middle East nations on safeguarding peace, explore development path and enhance cooperation in all fields.

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