Xi’s visit highlights China’s new Middle East role

The five-day Middle East visit of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Chinese president, produced a broad consensus and a slew of cooperation agreements to deepen constructive engagement with the region-bound region.

It adds depth to Xi’s global footprint and more links in China’s westward opening strategy and desire for partners in the Middle East.

Upgrade relations

Saudi Arabia became the first Arab country Xi visited in his presidential capacity. It was also the first visit by a Chinese head of state in seven years. In honor of the occasion, Saudi Arabia sent four fighter jets to escort the presidential plane when it entered the country’s airspace. Xi and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud agreed to elevate bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership, with the establishment of a high-level committee to guide and coordinate bilateral cooperation.

The visit to Egypt was the first by a Chinese head of state in 12 years. The two sides are celebrating the 60th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic ties in 2016.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi sent eight fighter jets to escort Xi’s plane when it entered the Arab country’s airspace. The president himself was also at the airport to receive Xi. The two sides agreed to sign a five-year outline agreement on all fronts and carrying forward a comprehensive strategic partnership, boosting cooperation under the framework of the initiative.

Xi and the leaders of the three nations agreed to align their national development blueprints and pursue mutually beneficial cooperation under the framework of the initiative.

China and Saudi Arabia signed a memorandum of understanding on industrial capacity cooperation, as well as a slew of cooperation deals covering sectors such as energy, communications, environment, culture, aerospace, and science and technology.

When meeting with the head of the GCC, Xi said China was willing to carry out energy cooperation with the GCC countries and be a long-term, stable and reliable energy market for the six-member bloc. The two sides also plan to conclude a comprehensive free trade agreement (FTA) within 2016. In Egypt, Xi proposed that the two countries work together to build the Arab nation into a pivot of the Belt and Road. He suggested China and Egypt align their development strategies and visions and focus on cooperation on infrastructure construction and industrial capacity.

The two countries will also strengthen their cooperation in security, science and technology, culture, environmental protection, agriculture, energy management, and law-enforcement domains as well as geographical locations and rich historical connections with China are central partners for carrying out the initiative.

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Top leaders pay New Year visit to Chongqing and Shanxi

Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Chinese president, and Premier Li Keqiang have paid their first inspection visits in 2016 to Chongqing Municipality from January 4-6 and Shanxi Province from January 4-5 respectively. New Year inspection tours by senior leaders are routine in China, usually setting the tone for the rest of the year.

Chongqing is a fast-developing municipality directly overseen by the central government, whereas Shanxi ranks among areas with the slowest GDP growth rate. The leaders’ visits indicate a governmental emphasis in 2016 on nurturing important economic growth points while pushing forward overall national economic upgrading.

In Chongqing, President Xi urged local government to build the city into an international logistics hub in the hinterland and a leading inland open economy, taking advantage of its roles as the start point of the developing transcontinental railway to Europe.

He also urged Chongqing to protect the Three Gorges Reservoir and the Yangtze River that runs through the city, saying both are crucial to the long-term development of Chongqing as well as the whole nation.

In Shanxi, Premier Li encouraged Shanxi to reduce its dependence on natural resources and switch to human capital. “China should make unyielding efforts for restructuring by eliminating outdated capacity and forbidding the construction of any new capacity,” he said.

Besides economic development, improving people’s livelihood is also a top priority for state leaders.

In Chongqing, President Xi stressed the fruits of the country’s reform and development should be shared by everyone, and urged “precision” in poverty relief, with measures tailored to different local situations and groups.

In Shanxi, Premier Li went to a shantytown that will be renovated into affordable apartment buildings this year. He urged local governments to lessen people’s waiting times before moving into the new buildings.
China’s economy expanded by 6.9 percent in 2015, down from the 7.3 percent in 2014 and recording the lowest annual growth in 25 years, according to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on Jan. 19. Growth in the fourth quarter stood at 6.8 percent year-on-year, the lowest quarterly rate since the global financial crisis in 2008.

However, the NBS believes that the economy still “ran within a reasonable range” in 2015, with its structure further optimized, upgrading accelerated, new growth drivers strengthened and people’s lives improved. The government had previously set the official growth target at 7 percent for the year.

Robust service shows landmark improvement in structure
China’s economic structure continued to improve last year.

The service sector, for the first time, contributed more than a half of total gross domestic product (GDP) growth (50.5 percent), suggesting deepened restructuring of the national growth model.

“Rising contributions from the service sector to GDP are a natural consequence of a country’s economic development after entering the late stage of industrialization,” said an NBS official, suggesting deepened restructuring of the still “ran within a reasonable range” in 2015, since the global financial crisis in 2008.

The structure of demand was also improved.

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“When you grow one mu (666 square meters) of grapes, you will shake off poverty. When you grow two mu (1,333.33 square meters) of grapes, you will lead an affluent life.” This is a popular saying in Zhongfang County, central China’s Hunan Province. Thanks to the policies made by the county committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), local people have achieved success in poverty reduction and economic development.

Zhang Xia, a member of the Dang ethnic group who was born in 1975, served as the county’s Party chief between 2012 and 2015. It was by her suggestion that local people engage in large-scale grape cultivation, and Zhang was nicknamed the “grape Party chief.”

Zhongfang County has a long history of growing grapes. However, before Zhang took office there, no one had thought of integrating the previous scattered farming business into a large-scale industry. When Zhang arrived in the county, she studied all the policies made by the previous Party committees and carried out a thorough investigation into the county’s conditions. After learning what the county needed and what it had, she proposed that the agricultural industry should be standardized, that modern methods should be used in grape cultivation and marketing, and that the development of secondary and tertiary industries should be based on grape cultivation.

Thanks to Zhang’s accurate analysis, Zhongfang County now has 45,000 mu (30 square kilometers) of grape gardens, which brought an additional income of 320 million yuan ($48.64 million) to some 20,000 local farmers. In 2015, the normal market price per 500 grams of grapes was 2 yuan (US$0.3). A farmer in the county could make at least 8,000 yuan (US$1,216) a year and growing grapes can rid them of poverty and help them live a prosperous life.

As Zhongfang County became increasingly famous nationwide for growing grapes, local people began to develop the wine industry as suggested by Zhang. They managed to produce a number of outstanding wines and attract large investments. In 2015, the county government signed a contract with Hualian Group to build a high-end winery. A grape research center was also established in the county.

The grape cultivation and wine production business also boosted the development of tourism. In June 2015, Zhongfang County’s grape valley became a national AAA level scenic spot and attracted more than 100,000 tourists a year. “I believed that as long as we choose the correct kind of leading industry, the people will find a way to get rich,” Zhang said. In June 2015, Zhang was honored as one of China’s best county-level Party chiefs. In September 2015, she became the vice mayor of Huaian City.

Before Zhang left Zhongfang County, she made another proposal concerning local development, advising the county to utilize its geographic advantage as it is located at the border region of five county committees. “When you grow one mu (666 square meters) of grapes, you will shake off poverty. When you grow two mu (1,333.33 square meters) of grapes, you will lead an affluent life.” This is a popular saying in Zhongfang County, central China’s Hunan Province. Thanks to the policies made by the county committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), local people have achieved success in poverty reduction and economic development.

Zhang XIA (28x384) and colleagues with local farmers in Zhongfang County of Huaian City, Hunan Province during an inspection tour in 2012.

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The ‘grape’ Party chief

Understanding the CPC through book series

“Understanding the CPC” series, published by the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, is a collection of books to be released in May 2016.

A series of five books, “The Good Fight, Exploring the Miracle, Serving the People, Exploring China, and China and the CPC” is published as the “Understanding the CPC” series, reflecting the CPC’s governance, how the CPC brought about China’s development “miracle”, its remarkable anti-corruption campaign, and challenges it faces in the future amidst increasing domestic complexity and international volatility. The published version is easy-to-understand, comprehensive, and simple language illustrated by typical cases, hot topics and diversified opinions and comments. It draws a vivid picture of real life, China and the CPC.

According to Kuhn, it may well be “a case study of what happens when a country with a one-Party political system seeks to construct a prosperous and democratic society.”