

Headlines:

- **Unrest in Kosovo**
- **Xi Jinping Visits Saudi Arabia**

Details:

Unrest in Kosovo

Tensions have flared up again in north Kosovo as hundreds of ethnic Serbs erected roadblocks using heavy machinery at two border crossings with Serbia, obstructing traffic. This comes on the back of recent tensions when Kosovo ordered drivers surrender their Serbian-issued license plates and replace them with Kosovo plates. This has now led to Serbs living in northern Kosovo erecting barricades leading to a confrontation with Kosovo residents. In the 1990s, there was a brutal civil war among different ethnic groups in the Balkans leading to ethnic cleansing and the death of over 100,000 Muslims. The Serbs locked to extend their territory and attempted to expand to Kosovo, which led to the US intervening and carrying out bombing raids in the Serb capital Belgrade. The eventual ceasefire and peace deal saw Kosovo gain independence and a deep mistrust of the US who orchestrated the agreement by the Serbs and Russia. For many Serbs, Kosovo is their territory and should never have been made independent. Whilst the current flare up is over vehicle number plates, in the Balkans, where WW1 began, this is no small matter.

Xi Jinping Visits Saudi Arabia

Chinese Premier Xi Jinping ended a three-day trip, beginning on the 8th of December to Saudi Arabia, to great pomp, a ceremony to kick off what he called “a new era” in Saudi-Chinese relations. Xi’s trip gained significant global media coverage with many believing China is the new power in the Middle East. Xi’s visit comes in the context of tensions with the US over Taiwan and with significant tensions also between Saudi Arabia’s de facto leader Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and President Joe Biden. However, beyond the rhetoric and narratives, Xi’s visit didn’t change the underlying strategic reality of China in the Middle East as its links with Saudi Arabia and the broader region remain relatively modest. Saudi Arabia and China showcased deepening ties with a series of deals. Both the Chinese and Saudi leaders signed a “comprehensive strategic partnership agreement” that included agreements on hydrogen energy and enhancing coordination between the Kingdom’s Vision 2030 and China’s Belt and Road Initiative. A deal was also struck over Huawei Technologies relating to cloud computing, data centres and building high-tech complexes. China’s most important reason for being present in the Middle East is energy. The Middle East will remain China’s largest source of oil imports and that is the strategic significance of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, China’s largest oil supplier. China’s economic involvement in the Middle East has grown over the last decade, its military and security involvement however remain marginal. China’s strategy towards the Middle East is best characterised as that of a wary dragon: eager to engage commercially with the region and remain on good terms with all states in the Middle East, but most reluctant to deepen its engagement, including strengthening its diplomatic and security activities beyond the minimum required to make money and ensure energy flows.