

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

LIU Zhongmin®

(Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University)

Abstract: *From crisis management to the overall planning, China's response to the unrest in the Middle East has achieved great success. Today China must understand the influence of the unrest in the Middle East by taking the overall international and domestic situations into consideration, namely, understanding its influence as "tests in the external environment" and the changes it causes to the international setting of China; China must review its experiences of coping with the unrest in the Middle East and correct any flaws in its present policies; China must work out scientific, mid- and long-term strategies for the Middle East and corresponding measures. In particular, she should better its understanding of the strategic position of the Middle East and enhance her participation in the Middle Eastern affairs while adhering to its traditional diplomatic principles.*

Key Words: *Unrest in the Middle East; Influence; Review of Past Experiences; Chinese Middle East Strategy*

In 2011, China's response to the unrest in the Middle East has shifted from crisis management to the overall planning. During this

^① Dr. LIU Zhongmin, Director and Professor of Middle East Studies Institute, Shanghai International Studies University. This research is the product of the Chinese Educational Ministry program "Islamic Elements in Contemporary Middle East International Relations" (08JJDGJW256) and "Islamic Middle East Region and the Transition of International System" (08JZD0039), and it is also supported by the Shanghai International Studies University "211" program (Stage III) and Key Discipline of Shanghai (B702).

process, China successfully coped with the impact of the unrest in the Middle East on its social stability and completed the historic mission of evacuating Chinese expatriates from Libya; meanwhile, China completed such diplomatic tasks as coping with the Libyan crisis, coordinating relations with the Great Powers, consolidating and adjusting its relations with Arab countries smoothly. Although there has been some domestic criticism against the strategy, tactics, measures or methods that China adopted to deal with the unrest in the Middle East, it is undeniable that China's response to the unrest in the Middle East is one of the largest diplomatic victories in China's crisis management since the beginning of the 21st century. Besides, China has gained many valuable experiences in this process.

At present, the ongoing unrest in the Middle East and the numerous uncertain factors suggest that China should respond with more active diplomatic efforts. However, it is apparent that China's understandings of the unrest in the Middle East and strategic adjustment should go beyond this region. Instead, China should analyze the influence of the unrest in the Middle East; its strategy toward the Middle East should focus on the environment changes at the height of mid-term and long-term international strategies, regional environment changes in the Middle East and so on. Both the purpose and goals of China's diplomacy in the Middle East should be reexamined with a greater perspective.

I. Understanding the Influence of the Unrest in the Middle East from the Overall International and Domestic Situations

To understand correctly the influence of the unrest in the Middle East on China is essential for China to formulate its diplomatic strategies and policies toward the Middle East in the new era. In doing so, China must go beyond the narrow-minded thinking which only concerns short dated or partial interests or the over-simplified thought which is either too pessimistic or optimistic. China should pay close attention to the mid-term or long-term changes of the international

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

and domestic environment and analyze the complicated influence of the unrest in the Middle East on China by taking into consideration the overall international and domestic situations.

A) Taking the impact of the unrest in the Middle East as "tests in the external environment"

In his keynote speech on July 1, 2011, President Hu Jintao pointed out that the Communist Party of China must be keenly aware of the long-term, complicated and severe tests "in governing the country, in implementing reform and opening-up and in developing the market economy, as well as tests in the external environment". The recent unrest in the Middle East is "one important test in the external environment" facing China. The suddenness, complexity, scale, far-reaching influence of the unrest sets a series of urgent challenges both in theory and practice. As a "test in the external environment", its main influence on China lies in the fact that it once exerted some negative impact on social stability. Additionally, it has aroused rethinking and discussion of "the China model". The media in the West stirred up trouble, hoping for a Chinese version of an "Arab Spring" which may undermine China's social stability and slow down its rise .

Lately, there has been some kind of pessimistic opinions, which simply compare the economic and social problems that caused the unrest in the Middle East to social problems that China faces in its transition and then criticized the Chinese model and its developmental road, saying, in some cases, they have lost confidence in China's future development. Therefore, it is urgent for China, especially the ideological and academic circles, to carry out research on the complexity of the unrest in the Middle East and make a systematic review of China's developmental road so as to eliminate ideological confusion. Apart from improving theoretical studies and strategic communication, China should be more confident in the correctness of its development road and its successful experiences; at the same time, China should be keenly aware of the pressure and challenges it faces in coping with the unrest in the Middle East.

In fact, the unrest in the Middle East proved the correctness and

advancement of CPC's governing theory, which should increase China's confidence in its developmental road. Firstly, China always takes development as the primary task of the Party's governing and rejuvenating the country. After three decades of reform and opening-up, China has successfully established a developmental model for the government-led market economy and an independent development road that suits her national conditions. So far China has achieved tremendous accomplishments. The root cause of the unrest in the Middle East is a crisis of development, namely, a crisis of the development model. Secondly, China keeps pace with the times and enhances the construction of the legitimacy of the Party's rule, strengthening and expanding the party's ruling basis. In contrast, those countries in turbulence in the Middle East have gradually lost their political legitimacy due to their rigid political regime. Thirdly, China properly balances the relationship between opening-up and stability or social order. While sticking to the reform and opening up policy, China adjusts and safeguards social stability by adopting some flexible policies from time to time. As a result, "China is under much less internal political pressure than the Middle Eastern regimes" because China has done a relatively better job when dealing with "the implicit tension between openness and order" (Bremmer, I.). Lastly, China has properly balanced the relationship between independent diplomacy and participation in the international system, achieved a positive interaction between China and the international system and won international strategic opportunities for its development. Some regimes in the Middle East, however, have lost their independence in diplomacy due to the fact that they have been allies of the United States for long and some have been confronting the West and challenging the current international system or oscillate between the two extremes. As a result, those Western allies have lost the support of their people while those challenging the international system have lost the development opportunity rendered by globalization (Liu, 2011: June 22).

Of course, it is of great significance for China to assimilate the lessons behind the unrest in the Middle East. Firstly, China still has a

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

long way to go in an independent and creative development road. At present, China remains at the low end of the global economic chain. The quality and added value of products are relatively low, and enterprise innovation and scientific and technological innovation abilities are relatively weak as a whole. Besides, there are also such problems like the high consumption of the energy and resource in China's GDP, the imbalance of regional economic development and the rural-urban development, the relatively backward social welfare and the widening wealth polarization, to name a few. The ruling party needs to solve the above-mentioned difficulties through development and innovation. Secondly, the modernization of social management has become an important task for the ruling party. President Hu Jintao put forward this significant task of improving social management upon the outbreak of unrest in the Middle East. With the rise of social contradictions, it will be a long-term historic task for China to realize and strengthen the modernization of its social management. Thirdly, "Internet politics" and "Internet diplomacy" has posed a severe challenge to China. Nowadays, the Internet has become a major channel for the US to export its democracy and implement political infiltration. How to cope with "Internet diplomacy" will be a routine political and social task confronting China from now on (Liu, 2011: June 22).

B) Understand objectively the influence of the unrest in the Middle East on the changes of China's international environment

In order to understand the influence of the unrest in the Middle East on the changes of China's international environment, close attention must be paid to the following issues:

First, the unrest in the Middle East has not changed US resolve of shifting its center of strategy eastward. At present, there is such unrealistic optimism in Chinese media which exaggerates how much the unrest in the Middle East can restrain the US from moving its center of strategy eastward, believing it is time for China to advance into another period of strategic opportunities after 9/11. However, what has happened over the past year shows that the turbulence in the Middle East did not slow down the pace of the US moving its center of

strategy eastward. On the contrary, the US has strengthened its engagement and interference with the issue of South China Sea. US interference with the unrest in the Middle East shows the use of its "new engagement" and "smart power". The Obama administration has not changed its strategic contraction in the Middle East and improving relations with the Islamic world so as to pave the way for moving its center of strategy to the Asia-Pacific region. In view of this situation, China has no reason to be unrealistically optimistic. To expect the US to be stuck in the unrest in the Middle East is, undoubtedly, only a kind of wishful thinking of someone short of an awareness of grand strategies, which can never help us to understand the complicated international environment that China faces today.

Second, the US has never lost its dominance over Middle Eastern affairs. Apart from the financial trouble at home, the US also gets entangled in Afghanistan and Iraq; due to civil disturbance, the regimes of some US allies have collapsed or lost confidence in the US; some enemies of the US in this region, like Iran, are becoming apparently strong. All these have somehow weakened US dominance in the Middle East. Therefore, some critics argue that a "power vacuum" has come into being upon the decline of US power in the Middle East and suggest that China should fill it. As a matter of fact, US position as "the only superpower" will not change within a short period (Wang, 2011: August 2), neither will its dominance over the Middle Eastern affairs. In fact, the US is already keeping an eye on China's ambition of dominance over Middle Eastern affairs. If the Chinese media and academic circles have simply interpreted the unrest in the Middle East from the perspective of gaming between China and the US, the US will surely raise suspicions about China's strategy, which is not helpful either for the Sino-US relationship or China's diplomacy in the Middle East.

Third, the unrest in the Middle East has not resulted in the confrontation between the West and rising powers. Judging by the abstention of the "BRICS countries" on the UN Security Council Resolution 1973 vote, which was once interpreted by the media the result of the collective decision of these rising powers, the BRICS

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

Countries Summit held in May, 2011 in China and the IMF chief change, some scholars asserted that confrontation between the West and the rising powers played an important part in the trend of international structure during the first half of 2011 and that the center of international power had moved. In my opinion, this conclusion is premature. The abstention of the "BRICS countries", basically coincidental, suggested that they have similar values and diplomatic choices at this time. Their abstention was far from a deliberate "collective decision", which can be proved by the changing policies of Russia on Libya. Later on, the "BRICS countries" did not work collectively regarding the IMF chief change. The consolidation of strategic cooperation between rising powers like India and the US, the complicated contradictions between China and India proved that the relations between rising powers and the West, the internal relations between the rising powers are both complicated relations featuring competition and cooperation as well.

II. A Review of Experiences and Limits in Coping with the Unrest in the Middle East

How to cope with the unrest in the Middle East is a severe challenge for China's domestic politics and diplomacy since the beginning of the 21st century. With the tremendous interests of China in this region, the rapidity of information transmission in the globalization era and the pluralism of public opinions, the unrest has heavy impact on both China's domestic politics and diplomacy although the political pressure it imposes on China is much smaller than that of the huge changes in the Soviet and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. As a whole, China's policy dealing with the impact of the unrest in the Middle East has been successful. However, although China has accumulated many precious experiences on crisis management, there are still some shortcomings which should be improved.

A) Major experiences China has learned in dealing with the unrest in the Middle East

First, the key factor for China to maintain the diplomatic initiative

is sticking to its diplomatic principles, such as non-interference in others' internal affairs. Following the principle of non-interference in others' internal affairs unswervingly is the basis for the long-term friendly cooperation between China and Arab countries. In terms of the unrest in the Middle East, especially the Libyan crisis, the root cause that China did not get into the awkward predicament lies in its insistence on such diplomatic principles as non-interference in others' internal affairs. Mr. Yang Jiechi, Chinese Foreign Minister, summed up these principles on his visit to the Middle East as follows: Firstly, China insists on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, that is, China respects and supports regional countries handling their internal affairs independently and believes that those countries and their people have the capacity and means to find development paths and governance methods suited to their domestic conditions. Secondly, China opposes the use of force and calls on all parties to solve disputes through political means in a peaceful manner. Finally, China urges the international community to support the efforts by the regional countries to restore political stability, develop economy, solve hotspot issues, in particular, push forward the peace process in the Middle East, and create a favorable external environment for peace, stability and sustainable development of this region (*China reiterates non-interference principle in Middle East and North Africa*).

Second, China carried out "accomplishing something to some extent" while maintaining flexibility in specific foreign policies. China's insistence on non-interference in other's internal affairs and opposition to the use of force never means doing nothing. In fact, China keeps close communication and coordination with other countries through the UN, relevant Great Powers, regional organizations and major regional countries and, at the same time, maintains somewhat flexibility in specific policies while not going beyond these diplomatic principles. For instance, China voted for the UN Security Council resolution of imposing sanctions on Libya but abstained from the voting on resolution 1973, which means China not only insists on the principles of respecting the sovereignty of other

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

states and non-interference in their internal affairs, but also takes into consideration of the objective of protecting civilians and the stand of the Arab League and the African Union (Wu, 2011: May 30). At the critical moment of the unrest in the Middle East both Chinese Foreign Minister and China's special envoy on the Middle Eastern affairs paid a visit to countries in the Middle East, China received Saudi King's special envoy, Sudanese President and special envoy of Libyan opposition. On May 2, 2011, the People's Republic of China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) held the second round of strategic dialogue in Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). All these reflected China's diplomatic courage for "accomplishing something to some extent." Besides, the fact that China sent diplomatic officials to Benghazi to meet with the "national transitional council" before recognizing it as Libya's sole legal government also showed the flexibility of Chinese diplomacy. In other words, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a responsible Great Power, China is willing to play a constructive role in promoting peace, stability and development of this region (*China reiterates non-interference principle in Middle East and North Africa*).

Third, all parties joined hands to withdraw Chinese nationals out of Libya successfully. After the outbreak of the Libyan Crisis, China opened an emergency mechanism and successfully evacuated 35,860 Chinese nationals out of conflict-torn Libya by sea, air and land. During this unprecedented departure, many countries in this region offered their helpful hands, which is an indispensable factor for the successful operation and also a display of the accomplishments in China's diplomacy (Wu, 2011: May 30). It is the first time for China to dispatch a naval warship to run a non-combatant evacuation. In particular, Chinese naval warship Xuzhou crossed the Suez Canal and entered the Mediterranean to assist in the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya; this action showed the international position of China as a rising power. Some analysts pointed out that the Chinese navy or the air force had never run a large-scale, joint, non-combatant mission overseas before the Libyan crisis, this operation would open an important page in Chinese military history as an important event

simply because of the calming effect the high-flying national flag on the warship Xuzhou had on those Chinese nationals threatened by the conflict (Ye, H.).

B) Some shortcomings in China's response to the unrest in the Middle East

First, there is some room for China to improve its diplomatic responses to the unrest in the Middle East. The major problem in China's handling of the unrest in the Middle East was, as a whole, a lack of initiative. To begin with, it seems China's response to the political unrest was somewhat lagging behind. For instance, officials in western countries paid frequent visits to relevant countries at the very start of the political unrest in the Middle East, while China's diplomatic visits began only in March, 2011. Furthermore, China's contacts and communication with the political opposition in the Middle Eastern countries were not active enough. For a long time China has been accustomed to official exchanges. Due to a lack of channels for contact with non-government forces and relevant personnel and the lack of non-governmental forces, China's contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the National Transitional Council of Libya was apparently lagging behind that of other Great Powers.

Second, there are many defects in China's media and public opinions responding to the unrest in the Middle East. Upon the start of the political unrest in the Middle East, China's media administration authority once required the media to water down their reports on the unrest. In this era of globalization featuring highly-developed network, this strategy is not helpful to get an objective understanding of the political unrest; instead, it may lead to ideological confusion. In the beginning, relevant reports mainly appeared in newspapers, especially local ones. The mainstream television media did not make comprehensive reports until the start of the Libyan crisis, which is not the best policy to make. The absence of reports from the official mainstream media often arouses suspicions of the masses toward the stand of the government. When the media got the green light for comprehensive reports, many of them followed the

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

western media blindly, referring to the unrests as "Jasmine Revolution", "Arab Spring" or "Democracy Revolution", which reveals a lack of discourse system in the Chinese media. Therefore, looking back on reports and commentary of the Chinese news media, the shift from government control to the chaotic condition indicates that the level of Chinese media administration and the level of Chinese media professionalism are not high and that China's Middle Eastern studies, especially that of specific countries, is still lagging behind.

III. China Must Work out Scientific Mid-term and Long-term Strategies for the Middle East

At present, the deep political changes in the Middle East, the restructuring of the regional system and the strategy adjustment of the US, Europe and other Great Powers all lead to many new problems and challenges to China's diplomacy in the Middle East. The upward trend of position the Middle East takes up in China's international strategy and foreign relations suggests that it is urgent for China to work out mid-term and long-term diplomatic strategy toward the Middle East and corresponding mechanism and measures.

A) Further understanding of the strategic position of the Middle East

In recent years, the publication of China's African Policy (January 2006) and China's Latin American and Caribbean Policy (November, 2008) marked the formation of China's diplomatic strategy toward Africa and Latin America. However, China has not issued any government document on China's policy toward the Middle East up to date. Although this does not mean that China has no diplomatic strategy toward the Middle East, it nevertheless shows that it is rather difficult to make comprehensive diplomatic strategy and policy toward the Middle East considering the complicated situation in this region. Nevertheless, it is urgent for China to work out its mid- and long-term strategy toward the Middle East given the deep changes taking place there, the increasing ties between China and the Middle

East since reform and opening-up, and the need for the international community to understand China's diplomacy in the Middle East.

The contents of China's diplomatic strategy toward the Middle East should include the strategic position of the Middle East in China's diplomacy, history and current situation of the relation between China and the Middle East, China's national interests in the Middle East, the principles and mechanism of China's diplomacy in the Middle East, China's stand and policies on the hotspot issues in the Middle East, and so on. Over the past years, China has adjusted the strategic position of the Middle East, namely, from an extended area of the peripheral strategy of China to an important part in China's Great Peripheral Strategy, a proof of the rise of the strategic significance of the Middle East in China's diplomacy (Fang, 2011: May 21). However, in practice, China continues to understand its interests in the Middle East from the perspectives of strategic reliance in politics, barrier against the "three evil forces" (terrorism, extremism, secessionism) in security, natural resource guarantee in economics and trade interests. This thinking is not wrong, but it is rather narrow-minded and utilitarian. On the basis of a clear understanding of the above important strategic interests, China's strategy toward the Middle East should take the following two points into account:

For one thing, the strategic importance of the Middle East should be judged at the height of global governance. The security and development issues in the Middle East have become an important part of global governance and an unavoidable problem in China's implementation of international responsibilities. In particular, China's foreign policies on many issues such as energy, trade, finance and global climate changes need the support from Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, it is obvious that defining the relations between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East simply as an extension of the peripheral strategy of China or a part of China's Great Peripheral Strategy overlooks the significance of the relationship between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East (Zhu, 2010).

For another, the importance of the Middle East should be understood from the height of the geopolitical strategy of the "Greater

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

Middle East''. In regard to the territorial security of China, the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia constitute the so-called "Heartland" in geopolitics, which bears directly on the security environment of Northwest China. In regard to maritime security, the Middle East is directly related to the security of China's energy channel and China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. At present, the geopolitical trend of integration of "Greater Middle East", including the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, is becoming more visible. The US tries to come back to East Asia by implementing a retrenchment strategy in the Middle East and moving its center of strategy eastward. As a result, China feels increasing pressure in both Northwest China and South China Sea. In sum, the importance of the Middle East for China's security is far beyond fighting against the "three evil forces".

B) More participation in Middle Eastern affairs while holding on to the traditional diplomatic principles

After the outbreak of the unrest in the Middle East, the media in China and overseas both called on China to increase involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. In the international community, the West and even the Arab world put forward the theory of "China's responsibilities", urging China, a great power with increasing strength, to take on more international responsibilities for the transformation of Middle Eastern countries. Henry Kissinger, an American political scientist, argued that one area where China, as the world's largest creditor, could play a critical role is in helping to stabilize the Middle East and North Africa through economic aid (*US media urges China to make a Chinese Marshall plan for the Middle Eastern and African countries*). The people and governments of Arab countries also have similar expectations. Apart from more aid from China, they also hope China can uphold justice, balance or even resist the pressure imposed on them by the West. In the Chinese media, there's also calling for more participation in Middle Eastern affairs, saying that "China should dare to engage in the internal affairs of the Middle East" (Zhao, K.), "China should take part in mediation in Libya" (Gu, D.), China should "cultivate and support pro-Chinese political forces" in the Middle East (Lv & Zhen), so as to better protect China's interests overseas,

increase China's influence on the Middle Eastern affairs and establish China's image as a responsible Great Power.

Of course, China's diplomacy in the Middle East will not be controlled by the desire of the media. However, it has become a demanding task for China to increase its engagement in the Middle Eastern affairs while holding on to the diplomatic principles. Attention should be attached to the following issues if China wants to increase its engagement in Middle Eastern affairs:

First, the principle of non-interference in the other's internal affairs should be the cornerstone for China's engagement in the Middle Eastern affairs, because it is the fundamental guarantee for China to win the trust of Middle Eastern countries and maintain the initiative in its diplomacy. Therefore, China's identity when engaging in Middle Eastern affairs should be a righteous coordinator instead of a leader, playing a constructive role instead of a leading or even a dominant role. China should not act as a "diplomatic broker" of the West or seek to "cultivate and support pro-Chinese political forces" so as not to lose the initiative in its diplomacy in the Middle East or its characteristics of independent diplomacy.

Second, China should understand and use the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states with an innovative mind and enrich the connotation of the principle from time to time. With the rise of global governance, the new connotation of China's diplomatic principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states should include: first of all, China insists that the international community should respect the diversity of every nation in the era of globalization, the principle of democratic consultation and the right for all countries to choose a development road and model in conformity with their conditions and opposes Great Powers imposing their will and ways on others. Next, the limited interference of the international community should be based on the approvals of the majorities of UN member states and the resolutions of the UN Security Council, and respect the will and national condition of the related countries' government and people. Furthermore, international interference should be made in a peaceful and cooperative manner in

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

most cases (economic or trade sanctions may be necessary in some instances) and the threat or use of force must be minimized. Finally, these measures should be linked to the background of global peace and development, international changes and the trend of human progress, the overall strategy toward the positive interaction between China and the outside world, and so on (Wang, Y., 2008: 15).

Third, China should increase its economic aid and investment in the Middle Eastern countries so as to promote their economic and social development and in return increase China's influence in this region. China should further understand the political function and strategic significance of economic aid in the Middle East, and increase its economic aid and investment in the transitional Arab countries. Meanwhile, China should establish political, economic, and environmental evaluation mechanisms for foreign aid. Large-scale foreign aid project shall not be approved without relevant evaluations, such as the environmental evaluation, made by international institutions. As regard to investment, China should by no means pick an investment program featuring crude management.

Fourth, China should enhance diplomatic mediation ability in the Middle East. In this process, China should maintain its communication and consultation with international organizations, other Great Powers as well as regional organizations or countries. China should carry out active and preventive diplomacy within the framework of the UN Security Council together with the international community. China should increase its participation in resolving hotspot issues in the Middle East so as to play a constructive role of promoting peace and safeguarding security and stability in the Middle East. In diplomatic practice, China should "dare to propose to the related states more practical and specific resolutions in line with international morality" and "insist on the principle of never imposing one's will on others and keep the balance relationship between non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and constructive involvement" (Liu, 2010: 7).

Fifth, China should attach importance to both bilateral and multilateral relations and steadily push forward the development of

the relations between China and the Middle Eastern countries. The profound changes in the Middle East will highlight the imbalance and differences between different Arab countries. It will be even harder to balance the Sino-Arab relationship through China-Arab Cooperation Forum. Therefore, China should enhance its understanding of the difference between Arab countries and carry out an effective bilateral cooperation on the basis of a better mechanism for China-Arab Cooperation Forum. In light of the aggravating division in the Arab world, China should give priority to the construction of the China-GCC strategic dialogue mechanism, and enhance coordination with regional organizations, such as the Arab League and the African Union. China should adjust its relations with relevant countries in accordance with the changing situations in the Middle Eastern countries and put emphasis on the communication, coordination and cooperation with large regional countries, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. All in all, more efforts should be made to ensure steady transition of the relations between China and Middle Eastern countries.

Sixth, more efforts should be made to diversify China's diplomatic actors and channels in the Middle East, in particular, increase China's contact with political oppositions in Middle Eastern countries. Judging by China's Middle East diplomacy in the past, the government was the most important diplomatic actor, the absence of non-governmental actors and the lack of diplomatic channels hampered the multi-dimensional development of relations between China and the Middle Eastern countries. As a result, China's contact with political oppositions or Islamic organizations in the Middle East is relatively insufficient, which is not helpful for China to make timely responses to changes in Middle Eastern countries. Due to the political unrest in the Middle East, China has to deal with the political oppositions in its diplomacy as the US and Europe have already made it a priority in their Middle East diplomacy to strengthen their ties with the mass of the Middle Eastern countries and encourage the building of civil society so as to influence the political transformation in Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, China should enhance the

On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy

establishment of multi-diplomatic actors by strengthening ties with different parties, non-governmental organizations, enterprises, academic institutions and individuals, and increase contact with political oppositions and other major social organizations through people-to-people exchanges, religious exchanges, cultural and educational exchanges and other channels. It should be a long-term task for China's diplomacy in the Middle East to lay a solid social foundation.

Seventh, more efforts should be made to enhance the team building and ability building in academic institutions dealing with Middle Eastern studies and African studies. Compared with the western countries, Middle Eastern and African studies in China have the following problems: there are not enough academic institutions or teams; the ability of many researchers is rather unsatisfactory; in particular, studies on middle or small countries have been lagging behind for long (Liu, 2011: April 11). The over-simplified or one-sided views in the domestic academic circles and media occurred after the outbreak of political unrest in the Middle East were directly related to the backwardness of China's Middle Eastern and African studies and the lack of relevant research personnel. To sum up, China should understand the importance of the Middle Eastern and African studies from strategy strategic perspective. Both the government and the society should increase relevant investment so as to build and cultivate a good number of academic establishments and experts in Middle Eastern and African studies. Continuous efforts should be made to enhance their internationalization and policy standard so that they may render better service to China's diplomacy toward the Middle East.

References

- Bremmer, I. The J-curve hits the Middle East. Retrieved June 27, 2011, from <http://www.chinaelections.org/NewsInfo.asp?NewsID=200198>.
- China reiterates non-interference principle in Middle East and North Africa. Retrieved August 21, 2011, from <http://military.china.com/important/64/2011>

Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012

0504/16519136.html.

- Fang, X. (2011: May 21). China opens to political oppositions in the Middle East---an interview of Wu Sike, China's Special envoy to the Middle East. *Dongfang Morning*.
- Gu, D. China should take part in mediation in Libya. Retrieved May 1, 2011, from <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-04/1655781.html>.
- Liu, Z. (2010). On measures to step up China's hotspot diplomacy. *Northeast Asia Forum*, No. 1.
- Liu, Z. (2011: April 11). Studies of small countries should be a strategy. *Global Times*.
- Liu, Z. (2011: June 22). Middle East unrest won't hit China under CPC rule. *Global Times*.
- Lv, G. & Zhen, Z. China should accomplish something out of political unrest in MENA. Retrieved May 2, 2011, from <http://www.chinathinktank.cn>ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=20993>.
- US media urges China to make a Chinese Marshall plan for the Middle East and African countries. Retrieved July 2, 2011, from <http://world.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-06/1788876.html>.
- Wang, J. (2011: August 2). US will remain the only super power within 20 years. *Global Times*.
- Wang, Y. (2008). Ten characteristics of China's diplomacy. *World Economy and Politics*, No. 5.
- Wu, S. (2011: May 30). Non-interference doesn't mean doing nothing. *People's Daily*.
- Ye, H. Political unrest in MENA and its influence on China's strategic opportunity. Retrieved September 2, 2011, from <http://wsdx.hehua.net/jianggao/qita/2011/402.html>.
- Zhao, K. China should dare to engage in the internal affairs of the Middle East. Retrieved May 2, 2011, from <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-02/1519413.html>.
- Zhu, W. (2010). On strategic relation between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East. *World Economy and Politics*, No. 9.