

# Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt

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**Abstract:** *The change in Egypt is a result of three factors: the autocratic rule of the Mubarak regime being challenged by globalization; the imbalance between economic growth and social development which created severe unemployment and poverty problems, worsened by imported inflation resulting from the global financial crisis; and, the pro-US and pro-Israel foreign policy pursued by the Mubarak regime which caused resentment among the Egyptian people and stimulated protests. To realize the socioeconomic development, establish a comprehensive development model, and create a stable and sustainable political structure will be formidable tasks for Egyptians in the post-Mubarak era. Thus, change will be a long-run process. Egypt would implement a more independent and neutral foreign policy, and will form with some other countries like Turkey a third group, i.e. a group in the middle. A new strategic structure in the Middle East would emerge through the change, with pro-US group, anti-US group, and a group in the middle as three main groups, based on competition between the Iranian model and the Turkish model, and US hegemonic power in the region would be weakened correspondingly.*

**Key Words:** *Middle East Change; North Africa; US Middle East Policy; Strategic Pattern*

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Among the major five Middle East countries, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Israel, Egypt is the sole regime in the Middle East which experienced change. The impact of Egyptian change on the Middle East and elsewhere has turned it as the core of change in the Middle East. The author attempts to observe the change in the Middle East with Egypt as a starting point, and explores the trends of the change in the region and the changing trends of Middle Eastern strategic pattern. The change in Egypt is a result of three factors: the autocratic rule of the Mubarak regime was challenged by globalization; the imbalance between economic growth and social development created severe unemployment and poverty problems, which were worsened by the imported inflation resulting from the global financial crisis; and the pro-US and pro-Israel foreign policy implemented by the Mubarak regime causes resentment among the Egyptian people and stimulated the protests.

### **I. Authoritarian Rule and the Challenges of Globalization**

In the Mubarak era, Egyptian political system, based on authoritarian rule, consisted of a civilian president with military background, a junta as the core, and armed forces as the base. Since the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak were Presidents who came from the military. They became civilians after they took the presidency, and Egypt was not under the direct control of the Army. The successive governments and Presidents relied on the stability, power and control capability provided by military forces, while they offered the military forces and senior officers' interests and privileges (Harb, 2003: 289). On January 29, 2011, in response to street protests, Hosni Mubarak appointed a former military officer and Director General of the Egyptian intelligence, Omar Suleiman as Vice-President. This demonstrated the military junta's central role in Egyptian politics.

The core power is in the hands of military junta, and the ruling National Democratic Party, did not form an effective constraining

*Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

force for the military junta. With the success of 1952 Revolution led by Free Officers, the Revolutionary Command Committee consisted of officers who controlled state power; military forces played a broader role in political life. Nasser created the Liberation Rally, National Union and the Arab Socialist Union, successively, those were the main body organizing and mobilizing the masses. President Sadat announced the introduction of a multiparty system in 1974; National Democratic Party was founded in 1978. This party was in fact a tool for Sadat to achieve his personal will. In the Mubarak era, Egypt was under long-term emergency status: the Egyptian government's control of society relied on intelligence and security systems to maintain order; the power of the ruling party was limited. Years of serious security conditions had further strengthened the army's important role in the political life.

Egypt experienced three Middle East Wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973. After the signing of a peace treaty with Israel, Egypt faced security threats domestically more than from outside the country. With Sadat's assassination in 1981, and the serious terrorist attacks in 1990s, the role of the Armed Forces in political life had been maintained and strengthened. Under Mubarak, the army had more independence in the economy and finance which strengthened its strong position in the political system.

Since the Sadat era, the ruling group's ideology had increasingly been blurred. But in the Nasser era, the mainstream ideology was Arab nationalism and Arab socialism. Article One of the 1971 Egyptian Constitution proclaims that: "The Arab Republic of Egypt is a democratic, socialist State based on the alliance of the working forces of the people". In both the Sadat and Hosni Mubarak eras, governance had become pro-Western, pro-Israel with increasing integration into the Western market economies, but Article One of the Constitution was retained until 2007 when it was amended, stating: "The Arab Republic of Egypt is a democratic state based on citizenship." The long-term departure from political practice to Constitution led to the confusion of the ruling party's ideology, which severely limited the

Egyptian National Democratic Party's political mobilization capacity.

With independent economic power and few political constraints, the military junta became the undisputed center of power in Egypt; with the long-term peaceful environment and the lack of ideology, the power control became the main objective of the military junta. It is in this context that the Mubarak family ruling group continued to strengthen its own autocratic rule.

Mubarak decreed the state of emergency in Egypt for an indefinite period, trampled the fundamental rights of citizens in the name of national security, and strongly suppressed Egypt's political opposition, including the liberals (e.g., New Wafd Party), left-wing groups (National Progressive Unionist Party), and the moderate Islamic political forces (Muslim Brotherhood). Mubarak regime's suppression of the opposition was evident in the parliamentary elections. In the five parliamentary elections from 1984 to 2005, the ruling party won more than 86% of the seats, except in 1987; in 1995 it was 94%. In the 2005 parliamentary election, the opposition won 95 seats out of 454 in the parliament, which accounted for 21%; but in the 2010 election, the opposition only obtained 15 seats, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which had garnered 88 seats in 2005, won none this time.

Egypt's political pressure was challenged strongly by globalization, mainly the Arab satellite television channels, such as al-Jazeera television, and modern communication technology, such as the Internet and mobile phones. In December 1990, satellite TV channels entered the Middle East. In 1996, al-Jazeera television began broadcasting, and its high degree of openness and freedom strongly affected the Arab countries' governments as well as the Arab public. With its report of 9/11 incident, the Iraq War and other Arab hot spots, al-Jazeera had more and more impact in the Middle East continuously. Al-Jazeera and similar Arab satellite television channels continue creating the political change atmosphere in the Arab world. At the same time, the internet and mobile phones were spreading rapidly in Egypt. Of the total population, internet users increased from

### *Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

12.9% in 2008 to 28% in 2010, a total of 23 million internet users; the number of people using mobile phones accounted for 40% of the total population. Internet and mobile phones provided new tools and platform for the political opposition in Egypt. In 2008, the "April 6 Youth Movement" with network as its main mobilization instrument emerged on the scene; in 2010, the anti-government *Facebook* group, "We are all Khaled Said," appeared. These network groups and al-Jazeera played a crucial role in the current Egyptian revolution. On January 25, 2011, after the outbreak of large-scale protests, the Egyptian government tried to close al-Jazeera office in Egypt and to cut off Internet.

Within the context of globalization, the rapid development of communications technology gave birth to the network political space and means; in dealing with emerging political opposition forces' request for social and political change through internet space activities, the Egyptian government did not find an effective response. At the same time, the Egyptian government's long-term suppression of the traditional opposition groups led to the development of a space for internet opposition groups. Globalization opened up cracks in the long-term authoritarian rule and the political pressure in Egypt, a group of middle-class youth network activists emerged and developed into a new opposition.

## **II. The Out of Touch between Economic and Social Development while Challenging the Financial Crisis**

Faced with economic difficulties in late 1980s, Egypt initiated economic reforms in 1991, whose main goals were: "reducing the role of the state in the economy (including liberalization and privatization), adopting market-based economic principles, increasing the global integration of the Egyptian economy by opening it to the outside competition, encouraging exports, and increasing the economy's dependence on domestic revenue." (Alissa, 2007:4). The Luxor terrorist attacks in 1997, the East Asian financial crisis and the simultaneous

drop in international oil prices, shocked Egypt's economic reform process, and slowed its reform. In 2004, Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif speeded the Egyptian privatization and the promotion of reform again; privatization and the financial sector were the focus of the reforms. Egypt's economic reforms promoted economic growth, its GDP growth was 6.8%, 7.1% and 7.2% in 2007, 2008 and 2009 respectively; its per capita GDP increased from \$1,089 in 2004 to \$ 2,265 in 2009.

But economic growth did not bring a corresponding social development; Egypt continued to be seriously troubled by poverty and unemployment. In 1991, Egyptians below the poverty line accounted for 24.3% of the total population, and the number was reduced to 16.7% in 2000, and rose to 20% in 2008 (UNFPA, 2010). Serious poverty problems overlapped with high unemployment rates. Egypt's unemployment rate reached 11.8% in 2000; it remained high at 10.3%, 9.1% and 8.4%, respectively, in the economic rapid growth years in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Egypt's illiteracy rate reached 40.8% of the total population, one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world. There was a wider gap between economic growth and social development; the Egyptian government was confronted with a rapid population growth, but did not fully develop labor-intensive manufacturing or improve food self-sufficiency. Egypt's population has grown rapidly, from 56 million in 1990 to 83 million in 2010, an annual increase of about 700,000 to 800,000. In 2009, children below 15 years old accounted for 32% of the total population.

Egyptian population structure determined that, developing labor-intensive manufacturing is the key factor to transform economic growth into a social development. In the current Egyptian economic structure, industry's and tertiary proportions of GDP represented 37.6% and 48.7% respectively, and absorbed about 20% and 50% of all labor. Oil and gas are the main sectors of industry, but they do not create much employment. In the services, tourism employs most labor; but tourism is closely linked with the international economic situation, and was thus seriously affected by the 2008 international financial crisis. The manufacturing sector which can absorb large

### *Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

numbers of workers and provide stable employment opportunities gained no attention. From 1997 to 2005, Egypt had created 4.3 million jobs, of which the manufacturing sector only created 8.5 million. Although agriculture absorbed 30% of the workforce, it accounted for only 13.7% of GDP (Rivlin, 2011). Egypt's food has been insufficient for many years and remains so until today. Egypt is also the world's largest importer of wheat; it imports 60% of the wheat the country needs to feed itself. In 2008, the world food prices increased, which pushed up inflation rate to 9.5%; the figure was 18.3% and 11.9% in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Egypt's high inflation "was caused by monetary expansion of the major developed economies under the crisis context, such as the Fed's quantitative easing monetary policy. The credit expansion of developed countries resulting in global inflation; and because of this global inflation, the developing countries with weak economic foundation bearing the cost of the crisis shifted by developed countries" (Wang, 2011).

Inappropriate industrial policy led to high unemployment, weak agricultural base led to food insufficiency, and a large number of food imports in the context of the global financial crisis led to imported inflation. The mixing of high unemployment rate and imported inflation worsened poverty even more. Instead, high-speed economic growth intensified poverty; Egyptians were dissatisfied.

### **III. Imbalanced Diplomacy and the Protest Movement**

Since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in 1979, the Sadat and Mubarak regimes had been adhering to a pro-US line. Because of its peace making with Israel, Egypt was isolated in the Arab world in the 1980s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, military strikes and sanctions against Iraq, the United States began to establish a dominant position in the Middle East in 1990s. In this context, there was a breakthrough in the Middle East peace process. With the introduction of "dual containment" strategy towards Iraq and Iran, the pro-US camp consisted of Egypt

and Saudi Arabia as the core, joined by Jordan and the GCC countries, while the US gradually established a dominant position in the Middle East. .

After the Iraq War in 2003, with the heating of the Iranian nuclear issue and the rise of Iran, on the one hand, the anti-American camp led by Iran, including Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, comes into being; on the other hand, the Shiite Crescent stretching from Iran, southern Iraq, Syria to Lebanon emerged. The confrontation between the pro-US camp led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the anti-American camp led by Iran was given a meaning of religious sectors conflicts. The stagnation of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and the intensified antagonism between Israel and Iran prompted the Mubarak regime to take a firmer pro-American and pro-Israeli position. This position completely ignored the ethnic and religious feelings of Egyptians as Arabs and Muslims, and led to popular discontent. The dissatisfaction of US suppression of the Islamic world and Israeli suppression of Palestinians eventually translated into the dissatisfaction with the Egyptian government's foreign policy. The combination of these dissatisfaction and the Egyptian domestic political pressure and livelihood issues became the trigger for the large-scale protest movement. "In 1990s, the boring of Egyptian politics and the suppression of kinds of political forces by Egyptian authorities, promoted political campaigns protest domestic issues in the use of external factors at the later stage" (al-Shobaki, 2011:199).

In September 2000, the second Palestinian Intifada broke out, which sparked Egyptian demonstrations supporting Palestinians. The Iraqi War in 2003 once again raised protests in Egypt. In the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, the Mubarak regime blamed Hezbollah, while Egyptian popular opinion supported Hezbollah. On one hand, the demonstration aiming at an external problem broke the government's political pressure, and Egyptians came to understand how the demonstrations can be a means of the expression of will; on the other hand, demonstrations' goals gradually turned against the Egyptian government and focused on domestic issues. In this



### *Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

circumstance, on December 7, 2006, El-Mahallah textile workers strike broke out. This strike was a consequential turning point.. From December 7, 2006 to September 23, 2007, there were more than 650 demonstrations in Egypt (Bassiouny & Said, 2008). On September 23, 2007, the second El-Mahallah textile workers strike broke out (Bassiouny & Said, 2008). Demonstrations gradually shifted the targets from against foreign government to Egyptian government, and get rid of the relationship with the traditional opposition due to its high degree of spontaneous feature. All these issues resulted in the common public finding an important means of breaking the Egyptian government's political pressure.

The lower people's economic and social demands cannot find agents in the existing political forces in the Egyptian society. In the 1970s, with the changes of Egyptian governance concepts, left-wing groups turned into right-wing officers groups, and the left-wing political forces were suppressed; In the 1990s, with the upheavals in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Egyptian left-wing political forces shrank further. At the same time, the dictatorship was strengthened by the ruling right-wing officers groups with US support, and liberal opposition forces had been suppressed. The lower classes could not find a strong agent either in the left or in the right ring political forces. The rebellious political youth network opposition forces looked on the lower classes as natural allies against authoritarian rule. In the El-Mahallah strike, the economic and social aspirations of the workers and urban poor began to combine with network youth movements, and finally became a major force in the overthrowing of the Mubarak regime.

#### **IV. The Evolving Trend of the Situation in Egypt**

Because of long-term imbalance in economic and social developments, Egypt accumulated serious economic and social problems; to solve these problems will take a long time, and the exploration of comprehensive economic and social development

model is a more formidable challenge. Controlling the population growth, developing labor-intensive manufacturing industries to increase employment, and greatly increasing food self-sufficiency rate to fight inflation, these all need a long time. These policies are also involved in traditional cultural values and changes in national economic development strategy will not happen overnight. Any new political system, if it cannot effectively alleviate the economic and social problems, will not last for a long time. The occurrence of current upheavals demonstrates that Egyptians have lost patience totally, and demonstration becomes an effective means of expressing dissatisfaction. In view of the inability of any government to effectively solve economic and social problems in a short time, Egyptian political situations will face continued political unrest, while the unrest itself becomes an obstacle to economic and social development. Improving people's livelihood is key, but the improvement of people's livelihood requires a stable political system and a stable social situation.

Establishing a sustainable and long-term stable political system is another challenge. Re-enacting amendments to the Constitution and the organizing elections, do not in itself give birth to such a political system naturally. The Egyptian political configuration mainly contains four kinds of forces: the army, the Muslim Brotherhood, the secular political parties and emerging political forces represented by the youth and the labor movement. Secular political parties are very weak due to Mubarak regime's long-term repression, they can not lead Egyptian politics in the short term; the emerging political powers have not yet formed their own political views, nor political parties. The army and Muslim Brotherhood become the two major political forces in current Egyptian politics, and the relationship between them will lead Egyptian political configuration in a long period of time. In Middle Eastern countries, the relationship between the army and religious forces has been a core element in determining the political configuration. In Iran, the alliance of religious forces represented by the Supreme Leader and the military forces represented by the

*Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

Revolutionary Guards is vital to Iran's political stability. But in Egypt, the relationship between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood still has many uncertainties, which determines the political configuration with many variables.

Severe economic and social issues and the complex political power configuration determine the long-term feature of changes. It is the beginning of Middle East countries exploring a new stage of comprehensive national development model now, the change of Middle East will last for a long period. If the change can promote a more realistic expression of public opinion in Egypt, then Islam and political Islamic organizations will play a greater role in domestic politics; in the field of foreign affairs, Egypt will implement a more independent foreign policy.

Specifically, first, in the domestic political sphere, Egypt will have to explore the content of "Islamic democracy". In a country with the Muslim population as the majority, it is impossible for Islam not to play any role in politics. In Iran, democracy represented by the elections and Islam represented by the religious scholars constitute the dual legitimacy of the regime. Egypt's new political system must give an answer to the relationship between Islam and democracy in theory and practice. In the Middle Eastern Islamic countries, the political system is not sustainable without a solution to this problem.

Second, in the field of foreign affairs, Egypt can no longer employ the holistic pro-American, pro-Israel policy as in Hosni Mubarak era. In his book *Egypt and Egyptians in Mubarak Era*, Professor of American University in Cairo Jalal Amin pointed out that the results of Egypt's pro-US diplomacy in the past 30 years are "the decline of Egypt's political position, international position and position in Arab countries; the meet of Israeli interests at the expense of Arab interests; the significant deterioration of Egyptian economic situation" (Amin, 2011: 250). Based on the requirements of Egyptian citizen and national interests, Egypt must implement a more independent foreign policy.

In fact, there have been changes in the cues of Egyptian foreign policy. In February 2011, the Egyptian transitional government

allowed Iran warships go through the Suez Canal. On April 27, 2011, Fatah and Hamas reached peace agreement in Cairo with Egypt's mediation. On May 28, 2011, Egypt announced the permanent opening of the Rafah port adjacent to the Gaza Strip. There was also news about the improvement of Egyptian-Iranian relation; on August 8, 2011, special envoy of the Iranian Parliament al-Burujirdi visited Egypt.

## **V. The Adjustment of the Middle Eastern Strategic Configuration**

Before the Middle East upheaval, the strategic configuration in the Middle East was "the United States seeking hegemony, with two camps opposing it." After the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Russia withdrew from the competition for dominance in the Middle East, and the United States established its dominant position there through the "containment of Iran and Iraq in the east, promoting peace talks in the west" policy. By containing anti-American countries such as Iran and Iraq, and supporting pro-American countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the United States sought to isolate and neutralize anti-American forces in the Middle East, to encourage Middle Eastern Islamic countries to accept a pro-American way. The Arab-Israeli conflict has been the obstacle to its development of relations with Middle Eastern Islamic countries, so the United States promoted the Middle East peace process further in the early 1990s. In this context, the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference started in 1991; Palestine and Israel reached the Oslo agreement in 1993; Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994. Through the "containing Iran and Iraq in the east, promoting peace talks in the west" policy, the United States sought to establish a pro-American camp containing Middle Eastern Islamic countries made up of as many of pro-American and pro-Israeli countries.

After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration proposed in 2002 the notion of "axis of evil" and "preemptive strike", and launched the

*Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

Iraq War in 2003; the US sought to strengthen its hegemony in the Middle East through the offensive strategy overthrowing the anti-American Saddam Hussein regime. However, the process itself also contained factors undermining US hegemony. Due to Saddam Hussein regime's collapse, the Iraqi situation was in continued turmoil, such as significant domestic sector conflicts. As the Iraq Sunni population's minority position, they had to seek the support from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab countries, which promoted Iraq's Shiite move to the Iranian side. The fall of Saddam's regime and the Iraqi weak position, eliminated Iran's largest security threat in the Middle East, and broke the balance between Iran and Iraq, which benefited the rise of Iran. The rising Iran is the common threat to Israel and the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia, so two opposing camps on this basis come into being. The pro-US Arab camp led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, including Jordan, the other GCC member states and Israel; Iran has led the anti-American camp, including Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas; Turkey stood between the two camps, and has gradually moved closer to the latter camp under the administration of the Justice and Development Party government. The vacuum yielded from Iraq's weakness is actually filled by the United States. US "containing Iran and Iraq in the east" strategy contains inherently the mutual contains and balance factors of Iran and Iraq, and these factors was broken by the Iraq War. The conflicting configuration of two opposing camps, not only consumes a lot of US resources, but also reduces the flexibility space of the US Middle East strategy. In this configuration, the US-Iran contradiction is at the core; the US can only fight or reconcile with Iran, the middle zone is increasingly narrow. After the fall of the Saddam regime, there no Arab country could be Israel's credible opponent. Israeli internal security challenge since the Palestinian intifada in 2000 has been linking with US war on counter-terrorism after 9/11. Israel with such favorable strategic position and absolute strong status in the Arab-Israeli peace process refused to make substantial concessions resulting in the stagnation of the peace process.

With the conflicts between the two camps and the long-term stagnation of the Middle East peace process, the Egyptian government supported and cooperated with Israel fully, but this position was sharply in opposition to popular sentiments. With the strong support of the United States, the Mubarak regime completely ignored the people's aspirations in the field of domestic politics and livelihood, the coming results were: continued accumulation of social conflicts, increasing people's opposition against the government. This situation eventually led to the outbreak of popular discontent and the collapse of the Mubarak regime. In this sense, the change in Egypt can be seen as the inevitable result of US hegemony in the Middle East.

In the post-Mubarak era, Egypt cannot implement complete pro-American, pro-Israel foreign policy as Mubarak regime. Since Egyptian military forces' close relationship with the US as well as liberal secular political parties' and youth movements' contact with the US, the possibility for Egypt to implement anti-American policy like Iran is relatively small. The most likely result is that Egypt will implement a more neutral foreign policy towards Iran and the US, and achieve the maximum of its own national interests utilizing the antagonism between the two camps. This means that there may be a middle camp represented by Egypt besides the existing two opposing camps in the Middle East. Turkey's stance on Syria also shows this tendency. On one hand, Turkey cooperates with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries to provide a degree of support for Syria's opposition forces so as to squeeze Iran's strategic space; on the other hand, Turkey continues to maintain a distance with Israel so as to win public opinion in Islamic countries. After the change in Egypt, the pro-US camp led by Saudi Arabia has been weakened and has to face the uncertainty of the development of the situation in Bahrain; Iran occupies a more favorable position due to the change in Egypt and the evolution of Bahrain situation, but there is also uncertainty in Iran-led anti-US-Syrian camp because of the change in Syria. In this context, if Egypt and Turkey form a real middle camp, it will have a profound impact on the situation in the Middle East as well as global strategic

*Change in the Middle East: A Case of Egypt*

configuration. The middle camp will provide a new option for the Middle East countries' diplomacy without forcing to choose one side in the two camps, which provides wider spheres for the Middle East countries and outside countries' diplomacy in the Middle East. With the evolution of the situation in the Middle East, Middle Eastern Islamic countries, including Iraq, are more likely to join in the middle camp. An increasingly powerful middle camp will play the role of balancer so as to avoid intensifying some hot issues.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The core of the anti-US camp is the Iranian model, namely, the implementation of Islamic democracy in the political sphere with anti-American, anti-Israel diplomacy. In the middle camp, the existing mature one is the Turkish model, that is, moderate Islamic political forces expanding influence through elections and parliament within the framework of the Constitution; moderate neutral diplomacy; economic rapid growth through liberalization. Change in Egypt means that the old Egyptian model with the features of authoritarian rule and pro-American and pro-Israel policies has been difficult to sustain; a new Egyptian model will come into being in the long-term evolution. Currently, the Saudi model in the pro-US camp is difficult for other countries to copy. Therefore, the conflicts of camps in fact reflect the competition between the Iranian model and the Turkish model. The essence of the coexistence of three camps and two modes is the enhancement of Middle Eastern Islamic countries' independent trends and highlight of the development needs. A growing number of Middle Eastern Islamic countries are pursuing the independent development-oriented national strategy; this will promote the development of multi-polarization of the Middle East and weaken US hegemony in the region. The new strategic configuration promoted by the change in the Middle East may be "the existence of three camps side by side, the competition of two modes, and the weakness of US hegemony". In this new strategic configuration, China should respect

independence, seek common development, and promote its relations with the Middle East countries at different levels.

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