

The New Development of China-Middle East Relations since the Arab Upheaval

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Abstract: *Since the upheaval, the Middle East region has been suffering from persisting conflicts and rising tension. China is facing a changing situation in the Middle East, along with increasingly mutual strategic reliance between China and the Middle East countries: on the one hand, the presence of Chinese interests in the Middle East is continuing to expand; on the other hand, since the 9/11, Middle Eastern countries have been generally in discord with the United States. As a result, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other countries are becoming increasingly willing to enhance relations with China, and significantly level up their expectation towards China accordingly. Within this context, China has actively promoted relations with Middle Eastern countries, with an image of a responsible, positive, and fair-minded actor in Middle East affairs. Accordingly, China's interaction with the Middle East countries has stepped into a new stage.*

Key Words: *China and the Middle East; "One Belt One Road";*

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Syrian Crisis; Iranian Nuclear Issue

Since the upheaval in the Middle East at the end of 2010, complicated conflicts and tensions have continued to deepen in this region, which resulted in a variety of effects. Consequently, the major countries in the Middle East have to re-examine the environment and adjust the internal and external policies. In this context, China is facing a changing situation in the Middle East, and has achieved new progress in terms of developing relations with Middle Eastern countries.

I. Mutual Strategic Needs between China and Middle Eastern Countries Have Increased

China and the Middle East have a long history of friendly exchanges. Zhang Qian in Han Dynasty was dispatched to the West, and arrived in West Asia after the discovery of the "Silk Road". Since the 20th century, China's relations with the Middle East countries have been featured as equal, friendly, cooperative, mutual support and mutual assistive relations. Examples include the "from the strangers to the acquaintances" in 1950s and "from the ups and downs to a standstill" in 1960s, as well as the "from recovery to development" in 1970s and "all-round diplomacy" since the reform and opening up policy. Formal diplomatic relations between China and most countries in the Middle East were established in the 1970s. Since the 1990s, China and the Middle East have increased their political, economic, military and cultural exchanges. In 1992, China established formal diplomatic relations with Israel, which provides

favorable conditions for China to promote balanced relations with Arab countries and Israel in the Middle East. In the 21st century, especially since the start of “China-Arab States Cooperation Forum” and related working mechanism in 2004, the political, economic, security, cultural and social exchanges and cooperation between China and the Middle East have expanded. This has laid a sound foundation for China and Middle Eastern countries to further strengthen their cooperation.

In recent years, there is a growing internal demand for China to strengthen mutual relations with Middle Eastern countries. On the one hand, the presence of Chinese interests in the Middle East is continuing to expand. These interests involve various aspects in politics, economy, energy, security, etc. From a strategic perspective, the importance of energy interests and geopolitical interests is on the rise. On energy, China has become a net oil importer since 1993. In 2012, China’s dependence on foreign oil reached 56.7%, and it further grew to 58% by the end of 2013. China’s oil consumption in 2013 was 510 million tons, an increase of 3.8% compared to the previous year, accounting for 12.1% of world oil sales. China has become the world’s second largest oil consumer, second only to the United States (Jiang, Y., 2014: November 20). The International Energy Agency (IEA) even estimates that by 2020, China will become the world’s largest oil-importer, and its dependence on foreign oil will reach 75% to 80%. According to data from the US Heritage Foundation, China’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil was 53.6% and 56.2% in 2000 and 2001, respectively, and 45.2% and 44.6% in 2006 and 2007, respectively. In 2011, the figure was 51.5% (The Heritage Foundation). According to data released by the Chinese Ministry of Land and Resources, in 2012,

China's oil imports from the Middle East accounted for about 60% of China's total oil imports (data from 2008 to 2013 as shown below). With China's rapid development in the future, either as the world's major oil-producing region, or an important international energy channel, the Middle East will have an increasing impact on China's energy security and even the entire national economy. Based on this, China is looking forward to a more peaceful, stable and prosperous Middle East.

China's crude oil imports from the Middle Eastern countries (unit: ten thousand tons) (Tian, C., 2012: 29-41)

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Saudi Arabia	3636.84	4195.31	4463.00	5027.77	5390.06	5389.90
Iran	2132.24	2314.72	2131.95	2775.66	2200.96	2144.12
Iraq	186.01	716.30	1123.83	1377.36	1568.47	2351.38
Kuwait	589.63	707.58	983.39	954.15	1049.19	934.69
Oman	1458.46	1163.84	1586.83	1815.32	1957.38	2548.18
UAE	457.59	330.67	528.51	673.52	874.37	1027.58
Yemen	413.22	256.21	402.11	309.81	358.45	245.25
Qatar	87.78	61.48	56.02	70.70	99.55	13.08
Sudan	1049.92	1219.14	1259.87	1298.93	250.59	246.12
Libya	318.96	634.45	737.33	259.17	730.70	239.45
Algeria	89.76	160.50	175.40	217.23	257.19	183.52

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Total	<u>10420.71</u>	<u>11760.21</u>	<u>13448.23</u>	14779.6	<u>16748.91</u>	<u>17336.27</u>
				2		
Total	<u>17889.30</u>	<u>20378.89</u>	<u>23931.14</u>	25377.9	<u>27109.12</u>	<u>28214.40</u>
Annual				5		

With respect to geopolitical strategy, the Middle East is located in the junction of Asia, Africa, Europe and serves as the connection of the three continents. It is in guardian of the transport hub between eastern and western hemispheres. The Middle East has occupied an important position in the world geopolitics for long, and is an area that cannot be ignored for any country with certain global interests. In recent years, China’s economic power is growing, and its international influence has further enhanced. China’s overseas interests have extended to West Asia and North Africa. For China, the strategic importance of the Middle East is gradually rising. Thus the interaction between the two parties has increased. In particular, as the Obama administration shifted the strategic focus of foreign policy to the Asia-Pacific region and implemented the “rebalancing” strategy in Asia-Pacific area which came along with an increase of US military power projection in Asia-Pacific region. Coupled with Obama’s mid-term election defeat, domestic partisanship conflicts which has an impact on US foreign strategy, the Middle East is becoming increasingly important in the implementation of China’s neighboring strategy, as well as China’s relations with major powers, especially new Sino-US relations. Promoting relations with Middle Eastern countries is an important part that can create a surrounding environment beneficial for the national development of China. In particular, with the current and future issues of the Korean Peninsula and the Diaoyu Islands in place,

if China can incorporate relations with Middle Eastern countries as well as relations with Asia-Pacific countries into a wider range of strategic logistics, and make it a positive interaction of mutual support, China may be able to create positive and favorable surroundings, and then grasp the initiative to produce special and important influence in the evolution of international pattern around the entire Asian continent, the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Region.

On the other hand, after the 9/11 incident, the Middle East has been in constant discord with the United States. In particular, since the upheaval in the Middle East by the end of 2010 and in early 2011, US Middle East policy has shifted from the “overall shape and lead” since the 1990s into today’s limited intervention and integration. The US influence on the Middle East upheaval has lowered, and both the willingness and ability to manipulate situations in the region have decreased at the same time. In particular, on the Syrian crisis, the Obama administration decided to shift from military strikes to peaceful resolution, from actively seeking to overthrow Bashar regime into a long-term plan of mildly supporting the opponents and against the radical forces. In addition, the US seeks to improve relations with Iran and reached a preliminary agreement on the nuclear issue on November 24, 2013. After continued negotiations throughout the year in 2014, US decided to postpone the negotiations until the end of June 2015. Moreover, with respect to ISIS and other radical forces, the US insisted on limited air strikes, and was unwilling to send out ground troops. All these practices show the US commitment to its involvement in the Middle East affairs has been weakened. As a result, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other countries are increasingly emphasizing on independence and its own internal and external strategy. Their

contradiction and friction with the United States have expanded significantly and they start to turn to other strategic powers such as Russia. Their motivation and willingness to continue to promote relations with China has enhanced. Accordingly, they also leveled up their expectation toward China. The Arab countries generally welcome the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and the construction of “Silk Road economic belt” China proposed in 2013, as well as cooperation with countries along the Silk Road in 2014. They look forward to expanding cooperation with China based on these projects. On June 5, 2014, the Arab League Secretary in General Arabi said in a joint press conference after the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum, carrying out “along the way” cooperation with China would definitely benefit all Arab countries. He said, this kind of relationship was mutually beneficial, and was willing to establish a strategic partnership with China (P.R.C. Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

II. The Development of Relations between China and the Middle East

In this context, after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, a new round of strategic planning and practice of international relations gradually started, China has significantly raised its attention on Middle East affairs, gradually increasing its diplomatic efforts and more active diplomatic activities. Since 2013, around the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the Syrian crisis, the Iranian nuclear issue and the fight against ISIS and other terrorist forces – the four current major focuses around the Middle East issues, China

clearly put forward ideas and suggestions to solve these problems.

The Israeli-Palestinian Issue. In May 2013, China invited the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to pay a visit to China. During their visit, Xi Jinping, China's President, put forward four proposals on resolving the Palestine issue: first, there should be an independent state of Palestine, and the Palestinian-Israeli peaceful coexistence should be a goal; second, negotiations should be the only way to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace; third, all parties should adhere to the principle of "land for peace"; fourth, the international community should provide important guarantee to promote the peace process. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited five countries in the Middle East in December of the same year. His core mission was to promote the implementation of the four-point proposal to further promote "peaceful talks on Israeli-Palestinian issue". After Israel launched the "Operation Protective Edge" towards the Gaza Strip in July 2014, during a visit to Egypt in August of the same year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, China was willing to work with the international community to make contributions to ending the Israel-Palestine conflict. He raised a five-point peace proposal on settling the Israel-Palestine conflict. First, "both Israel and Palestine, on the basis of maintaining people's safety and regional peace, should immediately and completely cease fire. Air strikes, ground military operations, rocket projectile launch and others must be stopped. Any behavior of abusing forces that cause civilian casualties is unacceptable. Any actions of countering violence with violence must be abandoned". Second, "China supports the ceasefire initiatives proposed by Egypt and other countries. Both Israel and Palestine

should give up pursuing the unilateral appeal by force, and should find out a plan for common security through responsible negotiations and build a necessary guarantee mechanism for it. During the process, Israel should lift its blockade of Gaza and release Palestinian detainees. Meanwhile, the legitimate security concerns of Israel should also be taken seriously"; Third, "the root of the Israel-Palestine conflict is that the Palestinian issue cannot be fairly and legitimately solved for a long time. China always supports the valid claims and legitimate rights of the Palestinian people to establish an independent state. Relevant parties of Israel and Palestine should consider peace talks as an unshakable strategic choice, treat each other with good will, and resume peace talks at an early date. The talks should meet each other half way rather than against each other, and particularly the tension upgrade and confrontation aggravation caused by breakdown of the talks should be avoided". Fourth, "the Israel-Palestine conflict impacts international peace and security. The United Nations Security Council should take necessary responsibility, reach agreements in this regard at an early date and play its due role in solving the Israel-Palestine conflict. The international community should coordinate with each other and form joint forces to promote the Israel-Palestine peace". Fifth, "the humanitarian situation in Palestine, especially in Gaza, should be paid high attention to and alleviated effectively. The international community should provide timely and necessary aids and support. China will grant \$1.5 million in emergency humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza, and the Red Cross Society of China has also provided humanitarian support for the people of Gaza" (Xinhua Net, 2014: September 25).

With regard to the Syrian issue, in October 2013, Foreign Minister

Wang Yi stressed that, “a political solution is the only realistic way to address the Syrian issue. Efforts are needed nationally, regionally and internationally in three levels, pushing Syria to hold a second meeting in Geneva as soon as possible and having a comprehensive implementation of the Geneva communiqué. The political process to address Syrian issue and the destruction of chemical weapons should be advanced in parallel. China will continue to play an active and constructive role in it.” (Xinhua Net, 2013: October 31). In January 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi raised a five-point proposal on a political solution to the Syrian issue, namely, the “five principles for a political settlement of the Syrian issue”: “First, the issue of Syria must be resolved through political means; second, the future of Syria must be decided by its own people; third, an inclusive political transition process must be promoted; fourth, national reconciliation and unity must be achieved in Syria; fifth, humanitarian assistance must be delivered in Syria and its neighboring countries.” (Xiong, Z., 2014: January 21).

In terms of the Iranian nuclear issue, China advocates clearly that Iran should not have nuclear weapons, however, its legitimate security and economic interests and demands should be taken into account, and its right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy should be guaranteed. China is in opposition to a military solution to resolve the problem. On November 19, 2013, Iranian President Rohani and Chinese President Xi Jinping had an exchange of views on this over the phone, and Xi made China’s proposal. Earlier in several rounds of negotiations on the issue, China also played an active role in communication and coordination, including making recommendations on the issues and proposing solutions to bridge differences between the parties. China also held

bilateral meetings with the United States, Russia, the European Union and Iran separately to discuss topics such as how to advance negotiations. All these efforts played a catalytic role in political breakthroughs towards a diplomatic solution for the Iranian nuclear issue. In particular, after the 2014 comprehensive agreement negotiation process concerning the Iranian nuclear issue, China raised a “five-point proposal” in February in order to resolve the problem comprehensively and reach an agreement as soon as possible. The first is “sticking to the path of talks and negotiations”. China believes that “the first stage agreement negotiations on Iranian nuclear issue have proved to be successful practice. It indicates: dialogue and negotiation are the right path to solve the Iranian nuclear issue. The six-party dialogue with Iran is an effective mechanism for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. There will not be a smooth sailing on this road, and will encounter various difficulties. All parties should target on maintaining peace and stability in the Middle, adhere to dialogue and negotiations, allow the six states-Iran dialogue mechanism to play a role, and adhere to the common participation, equal consultation, and peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear issue. The second point is seeking a comprehensive, fair and reasonable long-term solution”. China pointed out that, “The comprehensive agreement on Iranian nuclear issue would be a historic agreement, so it must stand the test of history. To achieve this goal, the key is to balance and handle concerns of all parties. Iran should fully address the concerns of the international community in Iran’s nuclear program, and fulfill their obligations assigned by the ‘NPT’. At the same time, the Iranian people’s needs and national development rights should be safeguarded. The six nations should fully respect Iran’s right of peaceful use of nuclear

energy, and gradually release all unilateral and multilateral sanctions towards Iran, and cooperate with Iraq in various areas." The third point is "following a step-by-step approach and upholding the principle of reciprocity". China suggested, "The next step of negotiations will touch the Iranian nuclear program and the lifting of sanctions related to the core issues. These are related to the vital interests of all parties and are more complex and sensitive. China expects Iran to show more flexibility and to take more effective measures to control the nuclear program. The six countries should also launch towards the same direction with Iran, for example, lifting sanctions against Iran as a reward, gradually accumulating political mutual trust and creating conditions for the final breakthrough." The fourth point is "creating a favorable atmosphere for talks and negotiations". China believes that "the current positive momentum is not a windfall. It is also fragile. Future negotiations will face a variety of difficulties and obstacles. All parties should show the goodwill and sincerity, have confidence in each other, be patient, and strive to maintain an atmosphere of dialogue. China is opposed to actions that may damage the atmosphere of the talks." The fifth point is "treating both symptoms and root causes and taking a wholistic approach". China pointed out, "The root cause of the issue is that political trust is in lack among all parties, and they failed to get rid of outdated security concerns. The six nations seek to reach a comprehensive agreement with Iran, not only to focus on resolving the Iranian nuclear issue itself, but also to uphold a new security concept of trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination, and commit to the development of more constructive bilateral relations, conduct cooperation in various areas and seek win-win situation in international and regional affairs." (Li, B.,

2014: February 19). These claims and diplomatic efforts associated with these claims have played a positive role in promoting negotiations.

On the fight against the ISIS and other extremist and terrorist forces, China believes that terrorist organizations such as ISIS and the Jabhat al-Nosra have posed a serious threat to the Middle East and the world peace and security. China supports the United Nations Security Council resolution 2170 which was adopted unanimously on August 15, 2014, calling on the international community to intensify its efforts to take practical measures to cut off sources of funding and personnel of extremist and terrorist organizations. It expects the international community to attach great importance to the issue that terrorist organizations might get personnel, weapons and funds from the Internet and social media, and makes the appropriate sanctions. It asks for strengthened cooperation in combating cyber-terrorism to curb the spread of terrorism. In September 2014, Wang Yi pointed out at the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Summit that China believed “all actions must follow the law and norms governing international relations”, and proposed “coherence”, “multiple measures”, and “uniform standards” to increase information gathering and sharing on counter-terrorism, strengthen the network against terrorism, cut off the flow of terrorist funds and personnel, pushed the de-extremism. China also announced that “China firmly supports the efforts of countries in the region to fight against terrorism, supports the counter-terrorism capacity building of Iraq, and is willing in strengthening cooperation with all parties in intelligence exchange and personnel training. China will provide Iraq (including the Kurdish region) with 60 million yuan of emergency humanitarian assistance.” (Wang, L. & Ni, H., 2014: August 15).

When proposing solutions around key issues in Middle East, China is actively promoting the implementation of the relevant ideas and suggestions with diplomatic efforts. During December 17-26, 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Palestine, Israel, Algeria, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. He traveled across North Africa and West Asia. He pointed out that "China has always regarded and developed its relations with Arab countries from a strategic and long-term perspective"; "China supports the Arab countries to steadfastly pursue their choice of development path", "China supports the Arab countries to solve hot issues through political means, resolving disagreements through dialogue and settling disputes through negotiations"; "China supports the Arab countries to enhance cooperation with it and seek common development"; "China supports the Arab countries to safeguard their legitimate rights." Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said, "China believes the Arab countries need development, stability and unity. Development is the basis of and key to solving any problems. Stability is a precondition for realizing development, while unity can bring strength to the Arab countries to better safeguard their core and long-term interests. In their course toward development, stability and unity, China will stand alongside the Arabic nations." (Xinhua Net, 2013: December 12). In July 2014, the Chinese special envoy of Middle East Affairs Ambassador Gong Xiaosheng visited Iraq, Palestine, Israel and other countries, and exchanged ideas on security situations in Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other issues, encouraging all parties to make efforts to achieve peace and stability in the region. In June 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping said on the Sixth Ministerial Conference of China - Arab States Cooperation Forum, "the next 10 years are a critical period for the development of both China and the Arab states.

To fulfill the common mission and deal with challenge of national rejuvenation, we should promote the Silk Road spirit, boost the mutual learning between civilizations, respect each other's development path, stick to win-win cooperation and advocate dialogue and peace" in order to build the Silk Road economic belt and the 21st century maritime Silk Road for the new opportunities in the new starting point. The two parties should deepen comprehensive cooperation and development of China-Arab strategic partnership. To achieve this, the President Xi Jinping put forward, the two sides should adhere to the principle of discussion, co-construction and sharing, and build a community of common interests and a community of common destiny", "Build the '1 + 2 + 3' cooperation pattern", namely, "to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as new breakthroughs". In the next 10 years, China will strive to increase the bilateral trade volume from last year's \$240 billion to \$600 billion, increase China's non-financial investment stock to the Arab states from last year's \$10 billion to over \$60 billion, accelerate negotiations on and promote the establishment of the free trade area between China and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, and push forward the Arab states' participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to get an early harvest. China and the Arab states have decided to designate 2014 and 2015 the Years of China-Arab Friendship and to hold a series of friendly exchange events. In the next three years, China will train another 6,000 talents of various types for the Arab states. In the coming 10 years, China will organize mutual visits and exchanges by 10,000 Chinese and Arab artists, and promote

and support cooperation between 200 Chinese and Arab cultural institutions (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

III. Conclusion

With further development of its economy, China will continue to expand its interests outwards. The scope of China's neighboring geopolitical strategy will also be extended to West Asia and North Africa. Therefore the Middle East is becoming increasingly important in China's international strategy. China and the Middle East are having closer interactions. In particular, as the Obama administration implemented the "rebalancing" strategy in Asia-Pacific area, reduce resources in the Middle East, and increase US military power in Asia-Pacific region in order to better respond to "the rise of China", the Middle East is becoming increasingly important in the implementation of China's neighboring strategy, as well as China's relations with the US. Promoting relations with Middle Eastern countries is an important part that can create a surrounding environment beneficial for the national development of China. China has actively promoted relations with Middle Eastern countries, and builds an image of a responsible, positive, and fair-minded actor in Middle East affairs. Accordingly, China's interaction with the Middle East countries has stepped into a new stage. The Middle East and the Asia-Pacific can form a positive interaction of mutual support together, which may create positive and favorable surroundings for China, and produce special and important influence in the evolution of international pattern around the entire Asian continent, the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific Region.

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