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Increasing economic interests in the Middle East are changing China's approach to the region's security affairs. *Degang Sun* on the transition from 'free-rider' to 'third force'

From bystander to stakeholder?

China's participation in Middle East security affairs



Iran nuclear deal talks on 14 July 2015 in Vienna, Austria. From left to right: Foreign ministers/secretaries of state Wang Yi (China), Laurent Fabius (France), Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Germany), Federica Mogherini (EU), Mohammad Javad Zarif (Iran), Philip Hammond (UK) and John Kerry (USA). Photograph by Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äusseres

In the first three decades since its founding, the People's Republic of China (PRC), demonised as a 'troublemaker', was excluded from the international community; first it was a target of sanctions and containment by the West and then later by the Soviet bloc. During this period China perceived the Middle East as a battlefield between the capitalist hegemon (the US) and the socialist hegemon (the Soviet Union). Interference in the internal affairs of weak countries was interpreted as a way to control the fate of the developing world. But for China the Middle East was regarded as a graveyard for hegemony,

and as such outside powers' imperialistic ambitions were doomed to fail.

Since its reform and opening-up policy was initiated in late 1970s, China shifted its diplomatic focus from exporting the 'Communist revolution' to enhancing its economic development, but remained somewhat neutral in Middle East conflicts. In 1979, the PRC established diplomatic relations with the US – while Iran broke off diplomatic relations with the latter. China sought a balanced policy between Iran and the US on the one hand, and between Iran and Iraq on the other hand. In the UN Security Council Resolution vote condemning

Iran's kidnapping of US hostages, China abstained to avoid offending both 'revolutionary' Iran and 'hegemonic' America. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s seeking commercial benefits while shelving political entanglement was a cornerstone of China's Middle East policy.

By contrast, in the 21st century, particularly since Xi Jinping became President in 2013, China has established a prominent economic presence in areas ranging from infrastructure to energy investments. As of 2017, China was the largest trading partner of Iran and ten Arab countries, the second largest trading partner of the League of Arab Nations as a whole, and the third largest trading partner of Israel and Turkey respectively. Over 50 per cent of China's imported oil is from the Middle East.

Since President Xi put forward the 'Belt and Road Initiative', China has been

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looking and marching westward, and the Middle East is regarded as the converging point of the 'Belt' and the 'Road'. At the call of the 'Initiative', approximately one million Chinese businessmen and students have flooded into the Middle East. Dubai hosts about 300,000 Chinese expatriates, and Chinese tourists have more than tripled recently. With the increase of its commercial interests and political pride, it's impossible for Beijing to stick to its traditional 'free-riding' policy; nor can she shy away from participating in Middle East security affairs.

To promote its industrial cooperation with Middle East countries, and to protect its overseas investments and nationals, China has intensified its security cooperation with the UN, the great powers, and partners in the Middle East through inter-agency coordination. First, the Chinese Foreign Ministry has intensified its mediation diplomacy in recent years, involving itself in discussions about Sudan, South Sudan, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Syria. China was the predominant peace broker between Sudan and South Sudan, and between the Sudanese government and the rebel groups, represented by the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). China was active within the '6+1' framework on the Iranian nuclear issue, and contributed to the conclusion of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015. In late 2017, China launched a tripartite dialogue mechanism with Palestine and Israel based in Beijing to give impetus to the peace process. In the face of the Syrian crisis, China has refrained from military involvement, but in March 2016 China nominated Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan as a special envoy who carried out shuttle diplomacy for the Syrian conflict and de-escalation through multilateral mechanisms like Geneva Talk and the Astana Conference.

Second, China's Ministry of Defence attempts to play an active role in Middle East security affairs as well. This can be classified into two categories: long-term and *ad hoc* military involvement. The former seeks relatively stable and long-term objectives, such as the counter-piracy patrols in Somali waters that began in 2008; the building of China's first overseas logistics base in Djibouti in 2017; and various UN peacekeeping operations

With the increase of China's economic presence in the Middle East, China's ability and willingness to participate in regional security governance will continue to grow

in the Middle East. In addition, China has pursued *ad hoc* security policies in the Middle East to pursue relatively short-term and dynamic goals. These include military-training programmes; the deployment of security contractors for key Chinese investment projects; joint military rehearsals with the US, the EU, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia; and the dispatch of military vessels for the evacuation of overseas Chinese from the war-torn countries of Libya, Egypt, Syria and Yemen. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy convoy fleets held two joint anti-piracy drills with the US in 2012 and 2013, and one with EU in 2014. Chinese warships participated in a joint military drill with Russian warships in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015 as well. In 2013, a PLA Navy missile frigate joined Danish, Norwegian and Russian frigates to escort chemical weapons from the Syrian port of Latakia to Italy for destruction, a UN mission.

China's participation in Middle East security affairs aims to protect Beijing's economic practical interests on the one hand, and to acquire her great power status on the other hand. China and the Middle East are interdependent in their development strategies, such as China's 'Belt and Road Initiative', Egypt's 'Economic Revitalization Plan', Saudi's 'Vision 2030', Turkey's 'Vision 2023', Iran's '6th Five-Year Plan', and Israel's 'Red-Med Railway', etc. In the foreseeable future, China, India, Japan, South Korea and

other Asian countries will be the major importers of Middle East oil, and arguably the Middle East is even more important to Asia than to the West from an economic point of view.

So far, China has been cautious in case it might be perceived as a geopolitical challenger to the established powers. It therefore adheres to a 'zero-enemy', 'soft military presence' and 'nonalignment' policy, maintaining a subtle balance between Russia and the West, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, between Israel and Palestine, and between moderate and radical Middle East blocs.

As a newcomer to the Middle East, China will inevitably encounter 'growing pains' similar to those encountered by the US after the end of WWII. It is unrealistic to reap economic benefits while turning a deaf ear to Middle East conflicts. With the increase of China's economic presence in the Middle East, China's ability and willingness to participate in regional security governance will continue to grow, albeit in a prudent manner. China is so far discreet in using military might for anti-terror missions or engaging in agent wars in the Middle East, but she will eventually become the 'third force' after Russia and the West in the volatile and multi-polar Middle East.



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