

China and Middle East Security Issues: Challenges, Perceptions and Positions

by Jin Liangxiang

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East and Gulf region face three drivers of tension and instability: those caused by the US's erratic and unilateral policies, those tied to economic underdevelopment and those linked to growing competition among regional actors. China is and will be facing economic challenges stemming from the Middle East and will face growing calls to assume more active roles in the region, roles which however often go beyond its capabilities or interests. China's approach to regional security can be categorised as promoting political solutions to disputes, contributing to economic development and providing security resources within the UN framework. China backs regional efforts to achieve peace and security via dialogue, also including extra-regional actors involved in the Middle East. China is sympathetic to Russia's vision for regional security cooperation, and would support the convening of an international conference on Middle East security issues that includes specific roles for regional and external actors.

China's foreign policy | Middle East | Gulf countries

keywords

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Introduction

A worsening security environment has for many years been the defining feature of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Most recently, the Gulf region has represented the crux of regional instability. These developments have presented China with challenges in the region, particularly in light of Beijing's growing economic interests, which have led to calls on China to play more direct and proactive roles in the Middle East and in the Gulf, including in the security domain.

As the world's second largest economy, China mainly regards the Middle East as a source of energy supplies, a market for Chinese products and investments and an important arena for infrastructure connectivity and construction. China sees peace and stability in the Middle East as a necessary condition for Beijing to reap the expected benefits of engagement, particularly in economic terms. As seen from China, the region's security deficit can be attributed to a variety of factors, but a primary reason relates to the increasingly erratic, unilateral and irresponsible policies conducted by the US and particularly the Donald Trump administration. Growing rivalry and competition for geopolitical influence among regional powers represents another source of regional instability.

Beijing believes that any regional security framework should be constructed and supported by regional players, with major external actors playing mediating and supportive roles. By embracing the principle of non-interference, China has long supported political approaches to regional disputes and provided a large amount of security resources by means of UN-mandated peace-keeping and anti-piracy missions. China also believes that its economic cooperation with the region is conducive to maintaining social and political stability, since a functioning economy represents the foundation of stability and prosperity.

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1. The Middle East's worsening security environment

There have always been expectations for a better Middle East security environment, but the outlook for the region remains bleak. Three main drivers of tension can be highlighted across the region, each of which enhances the others, contributing to dangerous escalations and competition among regional and extra-regional actors that have further accentuated pre-existing regional criticalities. These instability drivers can be summarised with reference to a) the role of extra-regional actors, and primarily the United States, b) the existence of deep economic vulnerabilities in multiple locations of the region and c) the prevalence of zero-sum rivalry and competition among regional actors.

This poor security environment has greatly restricted China's efforts to increase its economic relations with the region. Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and re-adoption of "secondary" sanctions with extra-territorial reach on Iran is one specific example, as these policies have seriously undermined China's strategy to diversify its energy supply, hampering legitimate economic relations with Iran. More broadly, social and political instability in the MENA region is understood in China as being closely related to economic vulnerabilities, and this has long been a factor discouraging China's business community from further engagement.

Finally, rising hostilities among major regional actors and their extra-regional backers have increased pressure to back one or another side in these disputes, an eventuality which is certainly not appealing to China and ultimately runs counter to its interests and traditional approaches in the region.

1.1 Tensions caused by external actors

The first category of instability drivers should be framed as tensions caused by the policies of external actors in the region, first and foremost the United States. Washington's Middle East policy, particularly under the Trump administration, has contributed to the abysmal state of regional affairs. US policy towards Palestine and Iran, in particular, highlights these as two important arenas where Washington's embrace of unilateralist moves has caused much concern across the Middle East, as well as in Europe and even China.

On Palestine and Arab-Israeli tensions, critical issues for regional stability, the US has long promoted a biased, pro-Israel policy. The Trump administration, however, has brought this policy to the extreme, embracing Israel in a far more uncritical manner than his predecessors while coordinating closely with the government of Benjamin Netanyahu in the development of Trump's so-called "deal of the

century”, ultimately released to the public in early January 2020.¹ In the last three years since taking office, Trump has issued further unilateral measures, including the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in late 2017, the moving of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in March 2018 and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights in March 2019.

Finally, following the unveiling of the so-called Trump deal, the US and Israel have set up a joint committee to map out areas of Palestinian land in the West Bank to be annexed to Israel, thus effectively green-lighting Israel’s expansionist tendencies.

These blatant recognitions openly violate broadly accepted international rules and norms, including successive UN Security Council resolutions and international parameters for a two-state solution, which China has long supported. As a result, US policy has seriously undermined the legal rights and legitimate demands of Palestinians and Syrians, causing significant tensions across the region. Overall, such measures will produce long-term obstacles to stabilisation, also hampering the minimal normalisation process underway between Israel and certain Arab states, particularly in the Gulf.

Trump’s Iran policy is another source of concern for China and has resulted in a significant increase in regional tensions. Washington’s May 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, followed by the reissuing of sanctions and a series of other unilateral measures, including the designation of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation, has put Iran in a difficult situation, leading it to retaliate. China, which participated in the JCPOA negotiations together with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany and the European Union (EU), and has remained supportive of the agreement since the US withdrawal, reacted with concern to the US’s escalating policy and rhetoric towards Iran.

Between 2019 and early 2020, US–Iran tensions skyrocketed. In June 2019, Iran shot down a US drone in the Strait of Hormuz, while repeated attacks and seizures of oil tankers in the Gulf signalled the volatility of regional developments. The targeted killing in early January 2020 of Qasem Soleimani, major general of the IRGC and a highly respected individual among Iranians, sent further shockwaves throughout the international community, again pushing the region to the brink of conflict.

Notwithstanding increased concern and dissatisfaction from international actors vis-à-vis the Trump administration’s policies towards the Middle East, it does not seem likely that Washington will change its approach to the region, thus adding further uncertainty as to the future evolution of regional developments and tensions.

¹ Ian Black, “This ‘Deal of the Century’ for the Middle East Will Be Just Another Bleak Milestone”, in *The Guardian*, 30 January 2020, <https://gu.com/p/d75vd>.

1.2 Instability due to economic factors

A second set of risks and instability drivers relate to the socio-economic sphere, ranging from underdevelopment to weak economic outlook and serious unemployment and corruption concerns. These drivers also have security dimensions, demonstrating the overlapping and complementary nature of recent developments in the region, which taken together have contributed to the present dire condition affecting the Middle Eastern region.

Middle Eastern countries face different challenges regarding economic development. Countries like Egypt failed to effectively develop an industrial base due to weak financial resources, while oil-producing countries in the Gulf were rich enough but have failed to develop industrial capacity beyond the hydrocarbons sector, while increasingly relying on the United States for outside military support and defence. Countries like Iran have struggled to build productive industries due to US sanctions and containment policies, while Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen have all been marred by conflict and civil wars for at least a decade now.²

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic could create even more serious challenges to the socio-economic environment in the MENA. The region has been particularly hard hit due to the almost simultaneous impact of COVID-19 and the collapse of oil prices, adding to the already volatile economic environment. According to estimates published by the International Monetary Fund in April 2020, the GDP of the Middle East and Central Asia as a whole will stand at -2.8 per cent in 2020, decreasing from 1.2 per cent growth in 2019. Iran's GDP is expected to contract by -6 per cent in 2020, further compounding the -7.6 per cent GDP growth registered in 2019, while Saudi Arabia's GDP is expected to shrink by 2.3 per cent in 2020 (compared to a positive growth of 0.3 per cent in 2019).³ These were statistics published in April 2020, and judging by the seriousness of the pandemic, the actual prospects are far more severe.⁴

Unemployment due to poor economic performance has always been a serious problem in the Middle East. If young people are not employed, lacking opportunities for individual and collective improvement, they will either go to the streets demanding bread and jobs or be attracted to extremist, even violent ideologies, potentially joining jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and al-

² Jin Liangxiang, "Why Has the Middle East Become the Sources of International Terrorism" [in Chinese], in *Arab World Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 5 (September 2016), p. 66-68, <http://en.mideast.shisu.edu.cn/7c/bc/c5650a97468/page.psp>.

³ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia*, April 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/04/15/regional-economic-outlook-middle-east-central-asia-report>.

⁴ See IMF, *Regional Economic Outlook Update: Middle East and Central Asia*, July 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/MECA/Issues/2020/07/13/regional-economic-outlook-update-menap-cca>.

Sham (ISIS). In both of these instances, links between socio-economic challenges and potential security concerns are clear.

The rise of ISIS can be attributed to a large variety of drivers, including the domestic turmoil caused by the Arab Spring. Yet, again, the economy and socio-economic opportunities also played a role. According a report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the unrest that followed the Arab Spring protests, mixed with declining oil prices in 2014, cost the region's economies an estimated 614 billion US dollars in growth between 2011 and 2015, a figure that is roughly equivalent to 6 per cent of the region's GDP.⁵ It was amidst this worsened economic situation that significant numbers of individuals from a variety of states in the MENA and beyond moved to join ISIS's ranks.

Indeed, instability and lack of jobs are mutually reinforcing trends, feeding a vicious circle in many states of the region. More instability adds uncertainties and challenges to economic development, which in turn leads to more unemployment and thereby more potential for instability. During 2019–2020, the Middle East has witnessed episodes of serious domestic violence, as the conflicts in Libya, Yemen and Syria demonstrate, as well as renewed waves of popular demonstrations in such locations as Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and Algeria.

1.3 Tensions due to regional competition

Geopolitical competition among regional powers has added further trends of instability to an already volatile regional environment. The US's declining resolve in the region has left a vacuum, which regional and certain extra-regional powers have filled.⁶ Some regional powers like Iran see the US's relative retrenchment from the region as an opportunity to expand their geopolitical influence, while others like Saudi Arabia feel pressed to protect themselves by building an alliance among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Arab Sunni countries and even Sunni countries beyond the region in an effort to counter and contain Iran.

The competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has become one of the primary features of regional power struggle, which is visible across the whole region from Yemen to Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.⁷ Meanwhile, a further trend of regional competition is manifested in the growing competition between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt on the other. This rivalry has deepened as Turkey was able to establish a foothold in Qatar

⁵ Lisa Barrington, "Arab Spring Has Cost Region 6 Percent of GDP: U.N. Agency", in *Reuters*, 10 November 2016, <http://reut.rs/2eFIDjt>.

⁶ Vali Nasr, "Trump's Big Test in the Middle East", in *The Atlantic*, 25 November 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/trump-isis-iran-russia-syria-middle-east/508553>.

⁷ W. Andrew Terrill, *The Saudi-Iranian Rivalry and the Future Middle East Security*, Carlisle, US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, December 2011, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=694332>; and Ribale Sleiman Haidar (ed.), "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Beyond Conflict and Coexistence", in *LSE Middle East Centre Reports*, August 2018, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89829>.

in 2017, following the outbreak of the intra-GCC crisis when Qatar's neighbours blockaded the small Gulf kingdom due to divergences over Iran and Doha's support for Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Turkey has expanded its security cooperation with Qatar, increasing the number of Turkish personnel stationed at Turkey's military base there, thus recreating a military presence in the Arabian Peninsula close to 100 years after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Ankara has also consolidated its influence in Kurdish-dominated regions beyond its border, particularly in Syria, but also to an extent in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸ Meanwhile, adding a further dimension of instability and uncertainty to the regional environment, Israel, which backs Saudi Arabia and the Emirates⁹ in their competition with Iran, has considerably expanded its use of military tools to target Iranian-backed targets in Syria, Lebanon and even in Iraq with frequent bombing raids coordinated with the United States.

This resurgence of regional competition and rivalry has considerably complicated the task of de-escalation, adding new tensions to old rivalries, which together are likely to create long-term challenges for the region.

Ultimately, while many have hoped that the region could be placed on a more stable and peaceful path through forms of increased cooperation, the prevalence of deep regional and international fragmentation and zero-sum rivalries have unfortunately made the situation worse. As things stand today, it seems unlikely that trends will improve for the better in the near future.

As Washington's international primacy becomes more contested than before and the US comes to terms with its gradual decline both internationally and in the Middle East, US policy could become more unilateral and unreasonable, possibly spelling further trouble for the Middle East. Few signs indicate that the region will be stepping on the path of economic development and integration. Regional actors have not realised the limits of their power outreach, and will continue their competition for geopolitical influence. All of this will thereby continue to undermine the security environment in the region, leading to some challenges and reticence on the side of China to expand its engagement or more direct involvement in regional affairs.

⁸ About Turkey's role in the region, see W. Robert Pearson et al., "Turkey's Emerging Role in the Middle East", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer 2018), p. 5-26, <https://mepc.org/node/5033>.

⁹ Jonathan H. Ferziger and Gawdat Bahgat, "Israel's Growing Ties with the Gulf Arab States", in *Atlantic Council Issue Briefs*, July 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=274201>.

2. Challenges to China

Instability in the Middle East represents a serious challenge for all states due to the region's global importance for energy geopolitics and geostrategic location between East and West. China, as one of the major economic partners of the region, has been seriously affected by turbulence there. Aside from economic losses, China is presently facing another important challenge: mounting requests originating from both within and outside the region for China to play a bigger role in regional developments, including in the security domain.

China's economic interests and involvement in the Middle East cover a large variety of sectors.¹⁰ As the second largest economy in the world, China has also become the largest importer of oil, surpassing the US in terms of energy purchases from the Middle East by a large margin.¹¹ Hence, Beijing has become particularly sensitive to the stability of energy supplies at reasonable prices as well as issues related to freedom of navigation in strategic passageways such as the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. In general terms, Chinese companies, like those of other countries, tend to approach the Middle East as major commodity market or as an important destination for investment and business opportunities, including in the realm of infrastructure construction. Yet, turmoil and conflict in the region have significantly impacted these Chinese interests.

Stability and prosperity in the region have always been regarded as being in China's best interest. Unfortunately, both aspects have been in short supply in the region and China has watched with concern as the policies of regional and international actors continued to undermine the prospects for a stable Middle East. The US's unilateral imposition of sanctions on Iran, and in particular on Iran's ability to export energy, are of particular concern to China, as they have undermined Beijing's efforts to diversify supplies and promote its energy security.

In 2011, China's crude oil imports from Iran stood at about 600,000 barrels per day, but the number had dropped to 400,000 by mid-2013, as international sanctions were imposed on Iran in the context of the efforts to pressure Tehran to negotiate with world powers on its nuclear programme.¹² China's participation in the negotiations that ultimately led to the signing of the JCPOA agreement in 2015 demonstrated China's interest in stabilisation. Following the signing of the agreement, China imported about 15.46 billion US dollar worth of goods, mainly crude oil, from Iran during the first 10 months of 2017, 29 per cent more than the

¹⁰ About China's economic interests, see Jon B. Alterman, "The Other Side of the World: China, the United States and the Struggle for the Middle East Security", in *CSIS Reports*, March 2017, p. 6-8, <https://www.csis.org/node/40290>.

¹¹ See BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2019*, June 2019, p. 28, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>.

¹² "China Imports 390,000bpd of Iranian Oil in June", in *Gulf Oil and Gas*, 15 July 2013, <https://www.gulfoilandgas.com/webpro1/MAIN/Mainnews.asp?id=29295>.

previous year's 12 billion US dollars.¹³ After Trump restored sanctions on Iran, Washington provided waivers for a number of countries to continue importing oil from Iran, including China. Once the US refused to extend these waivers in May 2019, Chinese imports declined significantly, although no official number is available for more recent exchanges.¹⁴

US unilateral sanctions on Iran's financial system have weakened China-Iran trade relations, making Chinese investment in Iran extremely difficult since only small and medium size enterprises that have no business relations with the US can risk investing in Iran due to the extra-territorial reach of US secondary sanctions.¹⁵ This has greatly limited China's normal investment relations with Iran.

Domestic turmoil, and especially civil wars, have severely disrupted China's business relations with relevant countries. Due to these tensions, China evacuated tens of thousands of its nationals from Libya in 2011, and many others from Yemen in 2015. As a result, some of the projects were left unfinished, and the facilities and equipment went to waste. To a lesser extent, Chinese business dealings have also been harmed in Syria, Iraq and other conflict-affected countries.

Given circumstances in the region, China is also encountering difficulties in pushing its flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forward in the region. The BRI is basically about infrastructure and trade connections among regional partners and with China, which requires only minimal coordination and cooperation but a high level of trust. Given the general lack of both coordination and trust in the region, China is forced to handle some of the projects at a bilateral level, increasing costs and extending original timeframes. As a result, tensions in the region not only have caused direct loss of business profits, but have also disrupted China's business interests, even restricting the potential of further economic cooperation.

Turning to the second central challenge, calls for China to play a greater role in the Middle East in the more sensitive political and security domains have indeed increased in recent years. As a matter of fact, these demands are somewhat unreasonable given that China has already been playing important and responsible roles in the region, as demonstrated for instance by its participation in negotiations with Iran over the JCPOA. Independently from this reality, different parties, both within the region and beyond, are calling on China to assume greater responsibilities,¹⁶ creating some pressure on Beijing to react.

¹³ "Iran-China Trade Up 22 Per Cent in Jan.-Oct.," in *Tehran Times*, 30 November 2017, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/418903>.

¹⁴ "Have Iranian Oil Exports Really Fallen under 10,000 bpd?" in *Tehran Times*, 4 August 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/438909>.

¹⁵ Mohsen Shariatnia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 120 (2019), p. 984-994.

¹⁶ Jin Liangxiang, "China's Role in the Middle East: Current Debates and Future Trends", in *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3., No. 1 (2017), p. 40-44, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500014>.

Even when understandable, such requests need to be carefully assessed in terms of Chinese capabilities in certain contexts. Calls by Palestinians, and those Arab countries sympathising with the Palestinian cause, for China to play a balancing role against the United States is one example. This request might be reasonable, but is not realistic. In a way, it is more an expression of frustration about the US-biased policy rather than real expectations of China assuming such a role. Indeed, China does not possess enough political and strategic resources to change the course laid down by the US on Palestine–Israel issues, notwithstanding Beijing’s support for the two-state framework and UN parameters on the conflict.

China has also been faced with opposing requests from conflicting parties surrounding the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.¹⁷ Both Saudi Arabia and Iran want China to import more oil from them, but China’s consumption capacity, however large, still has its limits. More import from Iran could mean less from Saudi Arabia. While Iran hopes that China can deliver more support for its position on the nuclear issue, Saudi Arabia is not satisfied with China’s stance. These requests pose serious dilemma for China. China believes that it can be a friend of both sides, and would be willing to promote reconciliation between the conflicting parties instead of getting involved in the conflict or choosing one side over the other.

The US has asked China to play amplified roles in the region, but such calls have proven to be little more than a tactical ploy to then place increased blame on China. On the one hand, the US has long blamed China for not sufficiently contributing to regional security. Not only US scholars¹⁸ but also politicians have spread this twisted argument. US scholars argue that Chinese companies are profiting in the Middle East while US troops are being killed in various regional conflict zones. Indeed, in 2014 former president Barack Obama called China a free-rider in the Middle East.¹⁹ On the other hand, however, when China has acted in the security domain, the US has reacted with concern, citing China’s expanding geopolitical influence in the region as a competitor to the US.

Significantly, it was following requests by the international community, including US and European countries and with the authorisation of the UN Security Council, that China’s navy dispatched vessels to patrol the Gulf of Aden for anti-piracy operations, later establishing a logistical support base in Djibouti in 2017. Despite

¹⁷ For China’s challenge in this regard, see Jon B. Alterman, “China’s Balancing Act in the Gulf”, in *Gulf Analysis Papers*, August 2013, <https://www.csis.org/node/24378>; and Shannon Tiezzi, “China’s Stake in the Saudi Arabia-Iran Clash”, in *The Diplomat*, 8 January 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-stake-in-the-saudi-arabia-iran-clash>.

¹⁸ Paul Haenle, “China Misses a Golden Opportunity in Syria”, in *Carnegie Articles*, 8 October 2013, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/53241>; and Brian Spegele and Matt Bradley, “Middle East Oil Fuels Fresh China-U.S. Tensions”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 October 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324755104579073283948517714>.

¹⁹ Thomas Friedman, “Exclusive Interview: Obama on the World”, in *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003048414/obama-on-the-world.html>.

the full legitimacy of these operations, questions were raised, particularly in the West, about China's growing geopolitical weight in the region. This demonstrates the tactical nature of these calls on China to assume increased roles while explaining Beijing's hesitance to get further involved in the political and/or military domain in the Middle East.

All in all, requests for China to play a greater role in the region have become a game that everybody can play, but such calls are either unrealistic as they are beyond China's capability or principles, or have turned out to be an instrument to tarnish China's image in the region, pressuring China to deliver explanations.

3. China's role in regional security

Contrary to widespread belief, China has greatly contributed to regional security over the last decades. China's contribution should be understood in comprehensive terms as security issues should be assessed through a wide prism, covering a variety of sectors, each of which has a bearing on security and insecurity drivers in the region.

In the first instance, China has greatly contributed to economic development in the region. China–Middle East economic relations have increased considerably despite the challenging security situation, which is a natural extension of China's domestic economic growth and Chinese efforts to promote development internationally.

China's increasing economic involvement within the BRI framework is especially worth mentioning. Chinese companies have won bids to construct ports in a number of Middle East countries including Qatar, the UAE and Israel, both independently and via joint ventures. China has also made progress in cooperation with Egypt, the UAE, Oman and Morocco in the construction of industrial zones. Chinese companies in the Suez Canal Zone have already created tens of thousands of job opportunities for Egyptians.²⁰ Chinese banks have established branches in Dubai and Doha for clearance in Chinese currency transactions so as to enhance economic cooperation between China and the region.²¹

Chinese companies have also shown responsibility by maintaining cooperation during difficult circumstances. The Chinese company Huawei stayed in Libya, Yemen and Iraq to maintain communication facilities even when other companies

²⁰ Ma Xia and Song Caicen, "China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone: New Oasis on 'The Belt and Road'" [in Chinese], in *West Asia and Africa*, No. 2 (2016), p. 109-126, https://en.cnki.com.cn/Article_en/CJFDTotat-XYFZ201602009.htm.

²¹ See China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), *Declaration of Action on China-Arab States Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative* [in Chinese], 10 July 2018, <http://www.chinaarabcf.org/chn/lthyjwx/bzjhy/dbjbzjhy/t1577010.htm>.

left due to security concerns. A Chinese power plant in Iraq, which provides 70 per cent of the electricity for Baghdad, remained in operation in the middle of 2014, when ISIS was approaching the Iraqi capital.

Through these economic relations, China secures its business interests, but it is also China's belief that such relations will improve the foundations for economy and welfare in the region, helping promote peace and security. Without economic foundations, security will remain fragile.

Secondly, China has also proven it can act as an important supporter of political solutions in major Middle East disputes. It is true that China is far from being a decisive player in the region since in many ways China will remain a mere economic power in the future, but Beijing's achievements should not be underestimated. China has appointed five special envoys on Middle East issues, and one special envoy on the Syrian file. These senior diplomats and ambassadors have travelled extensively in the region and are always available for high-level conferences on major Middle Eastern issues, where China has generally sought to promote *détente*. On the Arab-Israeli dispute, for instance, China has long voiced its clear support for a two-state solution and Palestinian nationhood.

China was party to the EU-led nuclear negotiations with Iran, and has long promoted diplomatic solutions to the dispute. In this context, China has actively proposed solutions on some key issues, for instance the modification of the Arak reactor. It was China that ultimately proposed a bridging solution on Arak – which the US wanted totally dismantled and the Iranians wanted to keep in place –, modifying the functionality of the reactor to minimise risks, a compromise that was ultimately accepted by the two parties. Partly due to this proposal, China was recognised by both Iran and the US, as well as Europe and Russia, as a key actor to actually carry out this modification of the reactor.²²

On Syria, China, together with Russia, has vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions from 2012 through 2019, which might have otherwise led to a military intervention by the US. As seen from China, such an eventuality would have furthered the conflict, including its regional and international spillovers, contributing to increased regional instability and volatility and thereby damaging Chinese interests.

These positions might not have been decisive, but have prevented the US, and sometimes certain European states, from doing more harm to regional stability. China's political support, together with Russia, France, Germany and the EU, for the JCPOA with Iran has greatly contributed to reducing the risk of war, and has served to prevent further escalation. China, together with the EU and Russia, is

²² China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi: *China Will Play Important Role in Modification of Heavy Water Reactor in Arak of Iran*, 15 July 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/xybfs_663590/xwlb_663592/t1282134.shtml.

committed to supporting Palestinian nationhood, opposing Israel's creeping annexation of the Palestinian territories. Most recently, as the new Israeli government announced plans to go ahead with annexation of certain territories, China has voiced its opposition to the move,²³ thus depriving Israel of a long-sought veneer of international legitimacy for the move.

China also plays a role in providing security resources to the region. Beijing began to provide peace-keeping troops to UN missions forty years ago, and has now become the largest contributor among the permanent members of the Security Council.²⁴ A significant number of such missions have been stationed across the MENA and adjacent areas, from Lebanon to South Sudan. The Middle East has also witnessed the evolution of the mission of Chinese blue helmets. China used to only send in non-combatant troops, but is now contributing combatant troops in South Sudan. China has established preparatory centres for the training of peace-keeping troops for the UN, and will be providing more troops for peace-keeping missions in the region.

It was in late 2008 that China began participating in efforts to safeguard freedom of navigation and conduct anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Since then, China has dispatched more than thirty rounds of patrol vessels for the mission. China also participated in the UN mission to escort the ships carrying Syrian chemical weapons to be demolished in the Mediterranean in the context of the joint UN–Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons mission in 2014.²⁵

China also attaches great importance to joint military cooperation with major regional actors for combatting piracy and maritime terrorism as well as conducting rescue operations. China's navy engaged in a three-week naval exercise named Blue Sword 2019 alongside Saudi Arabia's Royal Navy in November 2019 at the King Faisal Naval Base.²⁶ China also conducted a four-day naval drill with Russia and Iran in the northern part of the Indian Ocean between 27 and 30 December 2019. The drills included training and cooperation on search and rescue operations and anti-piracy operations as well as purely military exercises and live fire coordination.²⁷

Therefore, it is not right to describe China as a "free rider" on regional security issues in the Middle East. China, with the above-mentioned missions, has demonstrated

²³ "Chinese Envoy Warns Against Israeli Planned Annexation of Palestinian Territory", in *Xinhua*, 24 April 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/24/c_139004009.htm.

²⁴ Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), "China's Role in UN Peacekeeping", in *ISDP Backgrounders*, March 2018, <https://isdp.eu/?p=31157>.

²⁵ *Xinhua*, "Chinese Frigate Starts Escort Mission for Chemical Weapons: FM", in *China Daily*, 8 January 2014, http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014-01/08/content_17221816.htm.

²⁶ "Saudi Arabia, China Conduct Drill to Improve Combat Readiness", in *Arab News*, 17 November 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1585431>.

²⁷ "China, Russia, Iran to Hold Joint Naval Exercise", in *Xinhua*, 26 December 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/26/c_138659848.htm; "China, Russia and Iran Begin Joint Naval Drills", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 December 2019, <https://aje.io/38dzg>.

its willingness to provide security resources. The difference is that China is largely willing to do so within the UN framework, as Beijing regards UN authorisation as the source of legitimacy of military missions in the region. Unfortunately, most of the missions in the region conducted by the US are not authorised by the UN.

4. Framework proposals for Gulf security: A Chinese view

Recent years have witnessed increased debates about Middle East security arrangements, particularly in the Gulf. As a major global power and stakeholder with increasing interests in the Middle East, China certainly has an interest in being part of these discussions and possibly to develop supportive actions as well.

Regional tensions have given rise to mounting concerns about the maritime security in the Gulf and the strategic passageway of the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for one-third of global seaborne oil transportation. A number of states and stakeholders have consequently proposed competing initiatives to foster new forms of security cooperation and de-escalation in the region.

The US, shortly after Iran downed its spy drone, proposed the launch of a global naval coalition to patrol the Gulf on 9 July 2019.²⁸ The EU, also a major stakeholder in energy geopolitics, later proposed a second naval mission, separate from the US one and led by France, which maintains a naval base in Abu Dhabi, to patrol the same waters.²⁹ Russia, meanwhile, advanced a proposal calling for the hosting of a conference on Gulf security, with participation open to both regional and international actors involved in the Gulf.³⁰

Regional players have also advanced certain proposals. These have come from Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, which have organised ad hoc military coalitions among likeminded states, both within the GCC and among other Arab and Muslim countries, with important support from the US and certain European states, mostly to combat terrorism and ISIS as well as to contain their regional rival Iran. Conversely, Iran has recently advanced a proposal for security cooperation in the Gulf, the Hormuz Peace Initiative (HOPE), unveiled by Iran during the UN General Assembly in September 2019.³¹

²⁸ Phil Stewart, "Exclusive: U.S. Gulf Maritime Proposal Not Military Coalition against Iran-Pentagon Official", in *Reuters*, 18 July 2019, <https://reut.rs/2Sp9xkV>.

²⁹ Sabahat Khan, "Europe to Operate Gulf Maritime Security Mission out of French Base in Abu Dhabi", in *The Arab Weekly*, 1 December 2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/node/46728>.

³⁰ Sabahat Khan, "China Backs Russian Proposal for Gulf Security", in *The Arab Weekly*, 3 August 2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/node/45042>.

³¹ See Hassan Rouhani's speech in UN General Assembly, *Official Records, 74th Session, 5th Plenary Meeting (A/74/PV.5)*, New York, 25 September 2019, p. 18, <https://undocs.org/en/A/74/PV.5>.

China cannot avoid having a position on the development of a security framework for the Gulf and in reaction to these above initiatives. Indeed, given expectations from regional and international actors for China to play a bigger role in regional security issues, these efforts to develop new security arrangements may add to the momentum of China's growing security engagement in the region. China's positions and eventual response, however, will be based on Beijing's perceptions of the root causes of the tensions and in line with its long-held principle of non-interference. China's State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi delivered remarks in this regard during the 2019 UN General Assembly³² and a Middle East security forum in Beijing in November 2019.³³

As Wang Yi stated, China stands for building common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in the region. Common security means ensuring the security of all countries, rather than building the security of one country on the turbulence of others, or seeking the absolute security of one side. Comprehensive security means not only seeking military security but also political as well as social stability. Cooperative security means pursuing security through political dialogue and multilateral cooperation instead of having blind faith in interfering with force or unilateral actions. Sustainable security requires an equal emphasis on security and development. All countries should support economic and social development to provide security with internal dynamism, increasing the chances that lasting security can take root.³⁴

These are general statements, but are also very clear positions about the roles of regional and external actors. China stands for non-interference in regional affairs, and maintains that security can only be achieved by regional actors through political dialogue. External actors can play a role in regional security issues, but this role should centre on helping regional actors achieve consensus via dialogue, promoting peace and political compromises to achieve results. In this context, the United Nations should play a pivotal role in fostering multilateral dialogue.

China explicitly welcomed Russia's proposal of building collective security in the Gulf, which also calls for a gradual mechanism to permit the withdrawal of the now permanent deployment of foreign troops in the region.³⁵ This not only is in accordance with the commitments of the two countries to construct a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era"³⁶ but also

³² China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi: The Chinese Side Puts forward Three Proposals on the Situation in the Middle East and the Gulf Region*, 28 September 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1704154.shtml.

³³ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Wang Yi Expounds on the Chinese Solutions to the Middle East Security*, 27 November 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1724790.shtml.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on July 25, 2019*, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1683397.shtml.

³⁶ "China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for New Era", in *Xinhua*, 6 June 2019, <http://www.>

because the concept is in tune with China's views on regional security frameworks. China believes regional countries should play the decisive role in any such mechanism, while external powers should assist countries in the region to do so.

With regard to the root causes of the present tensions in the region, China views the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and restoration of sanctions on Iran as directly responsible for the present escalation. If Iran's rights secured via the nuclear deal are not guaranteed, it will be difficult to ease tensions. Suffice it to point out that Iranians sit on the other side of the Strait of Hormuz and have watched as neighbouring states export oil through these waters while its own oil cannot be exported due to US sanctions. If there is anything to be learnt from developments over recent years, is that no security proposal can be considered sustainable without also accounting for Iran's legitimate rights and interests.

It was also in this context that Iranian authorities have advanced their own vision of Gulf security, the HOPE initiative. On the one hand, the initiative proposed that countries in the region should decide regional security issues via dialogue; but on the other hand, the initiative is rather vague about the role of external actors. While external powers like the US share much of the blame for current regional instability, it is not realistic to expect such actors to be completely excluded from any such security mechanism for the Gulf or the Middle East. External actors, not only China but also the EU, the US and Russia should also be part of the mechanism or arrangements.

Conclusion

Tensions in the Middle East as a whole and the Gulf region in particular are the result of complex developments, both regional and international. The primary reason, however, relates to the relative retrenchment of US influence in the region, what many have termed as the end of Pax Americana³⁷ in the Middle East and the collapse of the security order dominated by the US, which in some ways was accelerated by the unreasonable and erratic policy decisions taken by the Trump administration over the last four years.

In the long term, security-building will depend not only on the restoration of some form of balance of power within the region and among external actors, but also and perhaps fundamentally on economic development and welfare improvement. It is hard to say if these efforts to foster new forms of security cooperation will succeed in the coming years, but success or failure will primarily depend on

xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/06/c_138119879.htm.

³⁷ For America's declining role in the region, see Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, "The End of Pax Americana: Why Washington's Middle East Pullback Makes Sense", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 6 (November/December 2015), p. 2-10; Shadi Hamid and Peter Mandaville, "Bringing the United States Back into the Middle East", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Fall 2013), p. 95-105, <https://www.csis.org/node/24108>.

whether regional and external actors form a relatively stable power configuration in the region, accommodating their respective interests while balancing their threat perceptions.

Looking to the future, the US will remain the most important player, but it will be neither willing nor capable of investing strategic resources in the region. Russia might be willing to increase involvement, but its domestic economy is not sufficient to support this level of ambition. The EU sees the Middle East as its neighbourhood, but does not have sufficient resources to make changes in the region and is deeply divided internally on what course of action to pursue. China is concerned about its interests in the region, but will likely follow its own gradual and cautious pace of engagement.

Regional powers including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel will be major players in regional issues. Their competition for geopolitical influence has become the main source of regional tensions. Yet, none of them is powerful enough to dominate any security mechanism or arrangements, and each will thus require assistance from major external powers to maintain its standing in the region. Resulting from these dynamics, the future regional security order will have regional players at its core but with continued participation and influence by external actors.

China has been very clear that countries in the region will have to decide policies – including on security issues – for themselves through dialogue. External actors should mediate among regional actors and promote such dialogue, particularly through support for UN frameworks, but should avoid deepening the fragmentation or rivalry among these actors by picking sides or supporting one against the other.

As a major external actor with growing interests and influence over the region and regional players, China will continue working to bring parties together politically, promote economic development and provide security resources within the UN framework, as these broad principles are understood in Beijing as holding the best potential to provide increased security and stability across the MENA and thereby also help advance Chinese economic interests in the region and further afield.

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