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## **China and the Middle East : Embarking on a Strategic Approach**

*By James M. Dorsey*

### **Synopsis**

*As the United States becomes embroiled in yet another military intervention in the Middle East, China is embarking on a long-term approach to the region that would secure its access to resources and trade, and enable cooperation with the US on Chinese terms. The approach takes as its starting point that with US influence in the region in decline, political and economic indicators suggest that it's just a matter of time before the pendulum swings in China's favour.*

### **Commentary**

CHINA HAS embarked on a Middle East strategy that is shaped as much by contemporary US predicaments in the Middle East as it is by a set of foreign policy principles that contrast starkly with those of the United States, with a determination not to repeat what China views as US mistakes. While there appears to be broad consensus on these points, China's policy community seems to be divided on a host of questions related to integrating them into a comprehensive policy towards the region. These questions range from the role of democratization to the degree to which China should assert its influence in the region.

The extent of the policy debate was evident during a recent government-endorsed two-day symposium between Chinese policy analysts and former ambassadors to the Middle East and several of their scholarly Western and Arab colleagues. A glimpse of those differences goes some way to explain the focus of the Chinese policy debate. The debate is framed by an emphasis on external rather than domestic drivers of crisis in the Middle East and the importance attached to the formal aspects of political processes such as Chinese official statements and outcomes of elections in the region irrespective of whether they were free and fair, for example Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's re-election in June, rather than political reality on the ground. Ironically, framing that alongside the principle of non-intervention in a country's domestic affairs effectively amounts to support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East, a policy for which the United States has paid dearly.

### **The end of US hegemony**

The contours of Chinese policy in the Middle East and the assumptions on which they are based have begun to emerge even as US credibility is undermined as a result of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars,

US support for political change in the region is perceived to be misled; US reluctance to become further embroiled in the region's conflicts foremost among which is Syria, and its inability to nudge Israelis and Palestinians towards a resolution of their dispute. "US backing off on the Syrian chemical weapons issue signalled the end of US hegemony," said An Huihou of Shanghai International Studies University's (SIS) Middle East Institute who served as Chinese ambassador in five Arab countries. An was referring to the Russian initiated negotiated resolution of the issue after US President Barack Obama last year shied away from acting militarily on what he had earlier described as a red line.

Like geopolitics, economics also mitigate in China's favour. The era of an economic focus of oil-rich Gulf states on the United States and Europe ended last year when China replaced the European Union as the region's foremost trading partner, pushing the US to second place and India moving Japan out of third place. "It's a shift from the old industrialized powers to the newly industrialized powers," said Tim Niblock, a renowned expert on Gulf-Asian relations.

Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined his country's policy framework towards the region when he called in June of last year for the revival of the Silk Road under the motto of One Belt, One Road. "The Silk Road is an important guide for China's Middle East diplomacy," said Wang Jian, director of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences' West Asia and North Africa Research Centre. "Arab countries are at the western intersection of one road, one belt," added SIS's Ye Qing.

### **Lofty principles; harsh reality**

Leaving aside the sheer audacity and scope of Xi Jinping's Silk Road project that focuses on integrating the enormous swathe of territories between China and the Middle East by concentrating on infrastructure, transportation, energy, telecommunications, technology and security, applying China's lofty principles is easier said than done and raises a host of unanswered questions. Its insistence on multi-polarity as opposed to US dominance in the Middle East implicitly means that the status of the US in the region would have to deteriorate further significantly before Washington, despite Obama's willingness to consult with others in contrast to his predecessor, George W. Bush, would be willing to entertain the Chinese approach.

In the absence of US acquiescence, that approach risks Chinese interests being threatened by the spiralling violence in the region, including the feared spill over of Islamic State-style jihadism in Xinjiang. Non-intervention coupled with unconditional aid could further threaten Chinese interests if and when political change occurs as happened in Libya after the overthrow of Col. Moammar Qaddafi. Qaddafi's immediate successors threatened to disadvantage China in the reconstruction of the country because of its ties with the Qaddafi regime to the bitter end. China and the US could find easier common ground on the principle of adherence to international legality, a principle Obama emphasised when he was first elected. However, that has so far been thwarted by the blocking of resolutions regarding Syria by China and Russia rendering the United Nations Security Council impotent.

China's policy approach to the Middle East is reinforced by its conclusion from the US predicament in the region that no one power can help the region restore stability and embark on a road of equitable and sustainable development. "Replacing the US is a trap China should not fall into," Wang Jian said. At the same time, he justified Chinese non-interference with the government's conviction that the chaos in the region meant that this was not the time to intervene – an approach that many in the Chinese policy community believe allows China to let the US stew in its own soup.

At the crux of the Chinese debate is the same dilemma that stymies US policy in the Middle East: the clash between lofty principles and harsh reality that produces perceptions of a policy that is riddled with contradictions and fails to live up to the values it enunciates. Non-intervention coupled with economic incentives has so far allowed China to paper over some of those dilemmas. That may be more difficult to maintain as the crisis in the Middle East escalates and potentially spills out of the region and closer to home and China's economic stake increases. To many in the Chinese policy community, dealing with this dilemma makes cooperation between the United States and China an imperative. The question however is: on whose terms?

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