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## Aspects of the Evolution of China's Middle East Policy

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**Abstract.** An attempt is made to analyze changes in the strategic balance of PRC policy in Asia in response to the Chinese leadership's initiatives to create land- and sea-based "Silk Road economic belts of the 21st century." A key element shaping this strategy is the policy of "promoting China in West Asia," aimed at elevating the country's global status, stabilizing the situation in the Middle East, and establishing relations of strategic partnership with all countries in the region.

**Keywords:** *China, Silk Road economic belt, Middle East, West Asia, strategic concept, "Moving Westward," Sino-American relations in the Middle East.*

In 2013, the Middle East was one of the main concerns of China's foreign policy, which was at that time going through an important stage of structural changes and the emergence of new priorities. The objective reason for this shift was the recent gradual development of PRC commercial and economic relations with the countries in the region, particularly in the field of energy, and Chinese diplomacy's active involvement in managing the situation in Syria and other crisis points in the Arab world, resolving the Iranian nuclear issue, normalizing the status of Afghanistan, settling the conflict in Sudan, and so on. China's expanding interests and opportunities in West Asia and North Africa played an important role in strengthening the Sino-American dialogue on the Middle East.

At the same time, judging from a number of publications, China's Middle East policy was subjected to some critical review in the light of the major changes in the situation in the region, along with the country's rapidly growing developmental needs. The ongoing shakeups in the Arab world thus demonstrate that the concept of relations proposed by the Chinese leadership in 2006 for the countries in the region under the slogan "A Harmonic Middle East" is now largely out of date, and further policy along these lines will need new approaches that

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seriously consider PRC security and developmental interests in the new era. It should be noted that the violent upheavals in the Middle East between 2010 and 2013, the many billions of dollars' worth of damage done to Chinese companies in the Arab countries, the military actions of the NATO countries, and other accompanying events directly affected the development of Beijing's new strategic approaches toward international affairs in general. As was noted by Western experts, the experience China gained in the Middle East was an important factor determining the reform of the country's foreign and internal policies.<sup>1</sup> This led in particular to changes in the style and methods of managing crisis situations, helped bring about new approaches to organizing efforts in the Arab world, led to further mistrust toward the policies of the West, and so on. As a result, the efforts made in February and March 2011 to extend the destabilizing effects of the "Jasmine Revolution" to China brought a strong and immediate reaction on the part of the Chinese authorities. Abroad, China embarked on a mass evacuation unprecedented in terms of scale and speed: around 36,000 Chinese citizens were airlifted out of Libya with the help of the PRC armed forces. Large-scale cautionary measures to maintain stability were simultaneously taken inside China by the country's security forces. These steps turned out to be a landmark in the development of China's security strategy.<sup>2</sup> Foreign commentators noted China's retreat from the restraint it had shown over the previous twenty years and a turn toward a more aggressive policy backed by force. It seems clear that the events in the Middle East hastened the evolution of a foreign policy oriented toward the "combat-readiness" and "assertiveness" of PRC diplomacy. Relevant to this was a statement by Yan Xuetong, one of China's most influential political scientists, that appeared in *The New York Times* at the height of the events in Libya. Yan pointed out that "in seeking to restore its historical status in the role of a great power, China should act like a great power." Further, "It appears that the idea of a more assertive policy is gaining influence inside China."<sup>3</sup>

At this stage, the large-scale integration of Middle East policy and the general foreign policy strategy proposed in 2013 by the Chinese leadership headed by PRC Chairman Xi Jinping, calling for the creation of a "Great Silk Road economic belt" leading to Europe and Africa through continental West Asia<sup>4</sup> and a "21st century maritime Silk Road" encompassing the continent of Asia, has been a key influence in the further development of Chinese diplomacy in the region. The rapid introduction of the so-called "policy of Westernization,"<sup>5</sup> designed to guarantee the integration of Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East and in Central and South Asia, conforms to the idea of creating a new 21st century Silk Road. Noting the Middle East's central role in carrying out the Chinese leadership's "two initiatives," PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated during his December visit to the Arab countries that Beijing considers the region to be where both strategic projects intersect.<sup>6</sup>

China's so-called "two initiatives" involving the creation of a "Silk Road economic belt" in West Asia and a "21st century maritime Silk Road" set the

basic parameters for the new generation of Chinese leaders' foreign policy strategy. First among the main objectives of this shift in policy are the centralization of all lines of China's international efforts under the aegis of a unified leadership, more consistent obedience to their orders for the balanced development of the country, and establishing the priority of cooperating with surrounding countries. The steps being taken are largely of a managerial nature, and an important aim at the present stage is generally improving the system of foreign policy management and its more dependable "intersection" with domestic policy. China's foreign policy establishment is clearly faced with the problem not only of adapting to a changing international situation but of securing new interests associated with growing PRC needs, the commodities required for the development of western China, and the mobilization of political resources in the international arena to achieve these ends. It is being stressed that China is not just a Pacific power but an Asian one as well, its interests span the entire continent, and the transition to bringing about a political system in West Asia and coordinating it more closely with the politics of East Asia corresponds to the outlines of PRC global strategy. These also involve a wide range of issues in Sino-American relations. Striking a balance between PRC priorities in the Asia-Pacific Region and Beijing's policy in continental Asia in light of the Chinese strategic interests that are likely to develop in the Middle East in the coming years is consistent with this new approach.

Although the strategy itself is at this stage far from perfect and an entire set of conceptual tenets is available, the guiding principle behind China's international efforts is to strengthen relations with its neighboring countries, i.e., to make Asian policy a top priority. Corresponding issues were discussed at a conference on diplomatic affairs held in Beijing on October 24-25, 2013, where strengthening relations with the rest of the world and cooperation with neighboring countries were found to be the main goals of foreign policy. Taking part in the conference were PRC Chairman Xi Jinping and all other members of the Chinese leadership. This demonstration of unity on issues of foreign policy strategy could indicate that the road to developing the new approach was not an easy one.

The new provisions of China's foreign policy were later reinforced by the decisions of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CC CPC, held in November 2013. The results from the plenum, particularly the resolution calling for the creation of the PRC Council of State Security to more effectively coordinate security issues both inside the country and abroad stressed the direct link between the processes of China's development and the international situation. It was also decided to tighten coordination between different lines of foreign policy, including the efforts to balance PRC policies between East and West on the Asian continent. It is noteworthy that in response to the new international conditions, the countries of West Asia, including those of the Middle East, are now considered as neighbors of China that fall inside its geostrategic zone, and are consequently top-priority PRC partners. Since, as was noted in an editorial in the newspaper *Remin ribao*, "the economic belt of the Great Silk Road and the 21st century

maritime Silk Road are the main features of China's diplomacy in the new era,"<sup>7</sup> and Beijing's Middle Eastern policy has been officially endorsed as a priority in PRC foreign policy.

In speaking at a seminar held in Beijing on international relations, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi referred to relations with the Arab countries as being one of China's foreign policy priorities in 2014, and said in particular that China was "developing new measures for cooperation with the Arab countries."<sup>8</sup> This gives grounds for believing that at this stage, the idea that China's vital interests depend greatly on PRC policy in the Middle East has taken root, and the need to devise a strategic line oriented toward the west has arrived. Expressing this position, Yang Guang, Director of the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute for West Asian and African Studies, stated that "bringing about China's great rebirth depends largely on the region of West Asia and Africa. China's interests abroad are constantly growing. Out of the world's great powers, China is transforming itself into a mighty global power. In the future, the region of West Asia and Africa will be even more important as a necessary partner in China's development."<sup>9</sup>

### **Sources of and Concept behind China's New Middle East Policy**

The initiatives made by PRC leaders opened the way for large-scale implementation of long-due changes in foreign policy that will help solve new problems in the country's development. It is no accident that the set of corresponding issues on improving the coordination and centralization of all lines of foreign and domestic policy were subsequently raised first at the October conference on diplomatic affairs, and then in November at the CC CPC Third Plenary Session after having adopted a resolution on stepping up reform in China. In terms of Middle East affairs, guaranteeing supplies of energy from the Arab countries and bringing about more quickly a policy of openness and creating an "outlet abroad" with respect to western China take precedence.

At this stage, however, these initiatives have yet to acquire the character of a honed strategy that would at least clarify the order in which designated tasks must be carried out, or (for example) the chronological or geographical framework for doing so. In their current form, they prescribe only a vague outline of the new foreign policy strategy and offer some very general reference points. Considering certain traditions in building political strategies in China, we cannot exclude the possibility that the theoretical apparatus of Beijing's new policy will in the future remain on the level of a set of general ideas, and might be implemented by introducing specific measures as they are needed. Such an approach would, it seems, largely suit the interests of practical diplomacy, leaving it with the possibility of having some flexibility, independently developing pragmatic policy, and gradually solving strategic problems. In addition, it corresponds fully to the familiar teachings of Deng Xiaoping in the area of foreign policy, which

recommend “stay in the shadows and do nothing to reveal yourself, but meanwhile accomplish something of value” (*taoguang yanghui you suozuowei*).<sup>10</sup>

In addition, we cannot exclude the possibility that the implementation of the new policy will have a somewhat contradictory nature. Considering the scales of the adopted initiatives, and the lively and sometimes tense debates over them, we may assume that realization of the above strategy could at the stage of practical implementation be accompanied by major disputes between representatives of the interested parties in business, professional, and political circles. We must also consider the specifics of the region, the existence there of many great contradictions and sharp international conflicts that create significant obstacles and risks along the road to such a policy, plus unavoidable high costs and the making of difficult decisions.

We, therefore, cannot help but conclude that the very policy of implementing the Chinese leadership’s strategic initiatives must be further developed, and a major role in accomplishing this belongs to China’s scientific research complex. In light of this, it is worth noting that for a number of years now, there has been an active debate in Chinese expert circles over the looming problems of restructuring PRC strategy with respect to the Middle East, and there were until recently major differences in the assessments of and approaches to certain important problems. For example, as we can see from materials on the debates held in a number of academic institutions over the last year, many respected experts in Chinese diplomatic and academic circles were inclined to view not cooperation with the Asian nations surrounding China as the main problem, but developing Sino-American relations in accordance with the provisions of the 18th CPC Congress.<sup>11</sup>

A number of factors also indicate that the speeches by supporters of the “concept of a Silk Road” in West Asia and stepping up China’s international efforts in the Middle East have for several years now encountered opposition not only from academic colleagues but on the official level as well. This aspect is worthy of attention, since it could also influence the Chinese government’s practical policy in the future, despite the obvious narrowing of the field for disagreement after resolutions are adopted at the CC CPC plenary sessions. As Professor Zhang Xiaodong of the PRC Academy of Social Sciences, one of the figures behind the strategic concept of China having a continental outlet to the Middle East, once wrote on the subject, “The greatest problem could come from inside China, considering its high cost and the difficulty of it having any immediate effect. This means it will be difficult to reach decisions on the appropriate levels, and to arrive at any consistent understanding of the problem. There is, therefore, an urgent need for coordinated efforts by different agencies and the development of a sustainable and farsighted strategy for China with respect to the Greater Middle East.”<sup>12</sup>

An analysis of the changes now under way shows that the main ideas behind the unfolding strategy were publicly advanced by Chinese experts long before the

current generation of PRC leaders arrived on the scene. In a January 1998 report printed in the Chinese journal *Strategy and Management*, Prof. Zhang wrote in particular that China, which became a “net importer of oil” in 1996, ought to reexamine its position on the Middle East and move from reacting to problems that arise in the region to an assertive policy of initiatives that would include promoting new vital interests associated with the needs of China’s global security and development. In the opinion of Western experts, this was the first time in history that anyone had raised the matter of needing to spread China’s influence beyond the limits of its traditional sphere of foreign policy, which they considered to have been restricted until that time to Southeast Asia and Indochina.<sup>13</sup>

Professor Zhang’s recommendation that China ought to take advantage of its opportunities in the Middle East, particularly in cooperating with Iran to pressure the United States into curtailing its active support for Taiwan (which at that time was stepping up its campaign for independence from Mainland China), attracted special attention in the West. As was noted in expert circles, the proposed approach was adopted in Chinese diplomacy, successfully reinforcing U.S. and Israeli interest in cooperating with China in the Middle East and working together to solve practical problems. As an example, the doors were opened to establishing Chinese-Israeli military and technical ties.<sup>14</sup>

From Zhang’s later works, it is obvious that the concept of a new strategy for China in the Middle East had acquired a comparatively refined character by 2009. Despite his great authority, however, and his international recognition and prominent status in PRC academic circles (he was Vice President of the Chinese Society of Middle East Studies), Zhang did not at that time receive the political support he needed to bring his ideas to life. It should be noted that his proposals to make appropriate changes in foreign policy strategy contained some harsh criticism of the errors that, in his view, had been made in assessing U.S. actions in the Middle East. He, therefore, wrote about the need to learn three lessons from the situation in the Middle East:

The Chinese leadership did not react promptly to the changes in the role of the Middle East and its importance to China. There was no recognition of the strategic value of the Middle East to China.

No one considered the changes that took place in the region after September 11, 2001, i.e., the West’s military intervention and its potential consequences.

The processes of strategic destabilization that began in the Middle East had been grossly underestimated.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the above, Zhang’s works have considerably influenced the current Chinese leadership’s approach to the Silk Road concept and apparently helped to shape it substantially. It is remarkable that as early as the start of 2013, even before the Third CC CPC Plenary Session adoption of the well-publicized resolutions, it was noted at meetings of experts that “China’s Moving Westward is a process that has already begun and is an inevitable factor of our country’s development and policy of openness.”<sup>16</sup>

Since Zhang's ideas directly echo the Chinese leadership's current foreign policy initiatives, they remain highly relevant and deserve attention from researchers. His main idea is that the vital interests of China's development naturally demand that Beijing establish a presence in the countries of West Asia, exercise leadership, and help solve problems in the development of the region. In the interests of security and continuous cooperation with the countries of the region (particularly in the sphere of energy supply), Zhang considers it vitally important to conduct a continental policy, i.e., to guarantee overland access to the Middle East and build the corresponding infrastructure in West Asia. As grounds for his recommendations, Zhang insists that moving westward is natural for the development of the Chinese nation and cites historic chronicles that show the initial expansion of China's sphere of influence occurred not in the Asia Pacific Region but westward during the West Han Empire. He has presented writings in particular that describe the diplomatic mission of the Han nobleman Zhang Qian and the conquests of Emperor Wu Di in 134 BC. Zhang considers the mission of Zhang Qian to be a brilliant example of both diplomacy and intelligence gathering, but refers to it as historically incomplete. In one of his articles, published under the pen name of Dong Fanxiao ("The East Dawns"), the Professor insisted that although there is no immediate military threat to northwestern China, the adjoining regions are still of great importance to Beijing, and the "geopolitical factor now taking shape in Eurasia is strongly affecting PRC development and security." It is, therefore, "extremely important that China embark on a new, broader mission in order to once again 'build a road to the west,' i.e., use the land mass as a strategic outlet to the Greater Middle East."<sup>17</sup>

Assessing the situation in West Asia, Zhang wrote that the main characteristics of the region were political and economic instability, a leadership vacuum, and trends toward solidarity. In Zhang's opinion, large-scale development of trade and economic cooperation, based on creating under the aegis of China a transportation and communications infrastructure that would allow westward movement into Europe, the Persian Gulf region, Pakistan, and India, could become a key element of PRC policy in this area. In considering matters of diplomacy, Zhang noted the ineffectiveness of such international organizations as the Arab League, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Forum for Security Cooperation in Central Asia, the Issyk Kul Forum on Central Asia and South Caucasus, and so on. He, therefore, recommended that China rely on bilateral agreements with the countries in the region and not on multilateral cooperation.

An important aspect of Zhang's concept is the degree to which the great powers influence China's policy in the region. In his assessment, "under the conditions of globalization, rivalry in the Middle East could lead China into the trap of a zero-sum game, or it could turn out to be mutually beneficial." He has also expressed confidence that "rivalry with the great powers will be inevitable," since "the continental strategy of China's outlet to the Middle East will in

essence help to overcome a number of geopolitical problems and the U.S. penetration of China's periphery."<sup>18</sup>

Wang Jixin, head of Beijing University's Center for International and Strategic Studies and one of the most prominent disciples of Zhang Xiaodong, associates the need for a new "road to the west" primarily with the political changes in the U.S. strategic balance. In his opinion, the current situation makes it easier for China to balance its strategy in Asia as well, by strengthening its westward policy. At the same time, he believes it is natural that having taken advantage of the economic potential of its neighbors in Southeast Asia at the initial stage of reforms and created a modern, economically developed region on its Pacific coast, China ought now to expand the range of its strategy of openness, build a road leading to the west of the Asian land mass, and mobilize the resources contained there. Professor Wang believes that such an approach requires the development of a foreign policy strategy corresponding to the goals of the Twelve-Year Plan oriented toward the development of western China. In Wang's opinion, the construction of a modern Silk Road that would open up new economic possibilities for China all the way to the eastern shores of the Atlantic could be done quickly. Like Zhang Xiaodong, he includes all of the countries of South, Central, and West Asia in the Asian part of the "westward strategy," along with the Caspian region and the Caucasus. Stressing the strategic importance of this policy, Wang believes that it will help "equalize relations with the United States and make it easier to build mutual trust," since America is interested in strengthening China's role in the region. One of Wang's main conclusions is that having embarked on a westward policy, China "will be in a relatively favorable position in its geopolitical and geoeconomic relations," since it will encounter no resistance or rivalry from the United States, as it does in the Asia-Pacific Region.<sup>19</sup>

### **New Priorities of China's Middle East Policy**

The character of the current transformation of China's Middle East policy is clearly visible not only in the noted structural changes in Beijing's Asian strategy but in the rise of its assertive, globalistic trends as well. It is obvious at this stage that as part of a revamped domestic policy, the Middle East serves as one of the main springboards for China to further assert its role as a great power seeing after global interests. Writing in China's academic press on the new views of the Chinese leadership on issues of international security, Wu Sike, PRC Special Envoy to the Middle East, noted that at this stage, China is moving toward a "more active, innovative policy" in the region. He went on to explain that China is entering the Middle East as "a developing nation of high status in global politics, one that believes in justice, rule of law, the effectiveness of global management, and joint prosperity." In stressing the dynamic of this approach and the upcoming further changes in China's international role, Wu emphasized that in

the future, PRC interests abroad will inevitably grow and, on the basis of this trend, China will play an even greater role in international affairs and be able to develop “cooperation of a new type of strategic partnership” with the Arab world.<sup>20</sup> In analyzing the content of the new strategic concept, Ma Xiaolin, a senior research associate at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), stated “How will China rise to the level of a global power? We need a springboard, we need direction – i.e., we need a ‘way to the west.’” Moving westward is vital to the plan for strengthening China’s international position, elevating its role, and effectively responding to the theories of a “Chinese threat” and China’s “responsibilities.”<sup>21</sup>

The active promotion in recent months of the thesis of China’s political role and international responsibilities in the unfolding situation in the Middle East is a reflection of the changes now under way as the priority of political problems takes center stage. Typical of this were the recent statements issued by the Xinhua Press Agency: “Some people continue to believe that based on its own economic interests, China is ramping up its activities in the Middle East. However, such a view is exceedingly narrow.... China’s increased efforts in the Middle East over the last year were aimed at fulfilling its responsibilities as a major world power.”<sup>22</sup>

Holding forth on the prospects of Beijing’s policy, PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that “China’s political role in the Middle East will only grow. There is no way back.” “In the Middle East, particularly in the Arab countries, China is active not only in the economic sphere; we are ready to improve cooperation in the political and military fields, and in the area of security.” Wang also stressed that “the fundamental importance of economic ties” nevertheless remains, since they will “help solve the key problems of raising the population’s standard of living and development, all in the interests of China and its Arab partners.” He explained that from Beijing’s point of view, better political relations should offer an “opportunity for continuous improvement” of commercial cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

Wang’s statements show that at this stage, Beijing has accepted the idea that the economic factor is insufficient to effectively influence the development of events in the Middle East and it must expand its present foreign policy arsenal, and that there must be greater coordination between its economic and political – and, when necessary, military – instruments. Such an approach could be viewed as a direct consequence of the “lessons from the Arab Spring” and the recent debates in expert circles over the need to expand the role of military force in foreign policy. Meanwhile, the air of conflict resulting from the territorial disputes in the South China Sea is increasingly influencing the positions of Chinese Middle East experts. Judging from the statements of a number of respected Chinese scholars, they associate the mere call for devising a new strategy in the Middle East with the prospect of making foreign policy even more assertive and the need to strengthen its military component. Noteworthy in this respect was the March

2013 exchange of opinions between leading specialists on the Middle East, held under the aegis of the PRC Academy of Sciences' Institute on West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS). In the opinion of Institute Deputy Director Yang Guang, since the American "swing toward the East" involves the redeployment of armed forces and interference in East Asian affairs, neither can China's "Moving Westward" be limited to developing trade ties; it must carry the appropriate weight and project power. However, in the words of Wang Jinglie, one of the Institute's leading research associates, regardless of which particular foreign policy strategy or concept is adopted, it must correspond to the principles of peace and friendship and "not be in complete conflict with these." This applies to one foreign policy in particular: In Wang's words, "We must not allow a course of 'Westward orientation' to be our foreign policy." Wang Nan, Chairman of the Society for the Study of Qahar, notes that "the reorientation of American policy toward the East puts pressure on China's security. We are, therefore, in dire need of security measures to counter this policy." Insisting on the need to conduct a new strategy, Wang noted that "Sino-American relations of a new type" should be viewed in a global context and develop on a global basis. The question is, however, if we have the intellectual resources and the resolve to conduct a meaningful dialogue with the United States head-to-head on a number of regional and global problems, based on our deep understanding and knowledge of these problems, and to 'force' them to rethink their policy so that they bring less harm to others and look after their own affairs only."<sup>24</sup>

Regional efforts in the Middle East while maintaining the separate importance of China's security and development needs are thus becoming increasingly intertwined with shaping the role of a great power capable of flexing its muscles beyond the limits of the region. The logic of China's new approach to its role in the regional and international arenas naturally demands that it refine the format of its relations with the United States in the Middle East. China's position on this matter is in a state of flux and is characterized by a number of different trends. As was noted at an academic seminar held in Beijing by the group responsible for developing the innovative theme China's Strategy in the Middle East in Relation to the Great Powers based on the legacy of 2012, "China's ascent demands that we develop a Mideast strategy. In doing so, we must consider the following five factors:

- (1) The U.S. strategy has proven to be a failure.
- (2) The mass of the people in the Middle East have lost their enthusiasm for American support and building democracy.
- (3) The peoples hope to find a suitable path of political development under the conditions of economic collapse.
- (4) The large nations of the Middle East are reducing their dependence on the United States; there is a growing trend for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to orient themselves toward China.

- (5) The pace is quickening in the development of Chinese-Arab ties, political trust continues to grow, and pragmatic cooperation is yielding rich results.”

Relations with the United States remain one of the most important elements of China’s Mideast policy, play a major role in the Sino-American strategic dialogue, and are an essential part of the general policy of “relations of a new type” announced by Beijing in May 2013. Some signs indicate that Chinese diplomacy had by mid-2013 somewhat adjusted its assessment of the U.S.A.’s role in the region. Along with works on how the reduced American presence in the Middle East could create a political vacuum there, Chinese representatives now say pervasively that they recognize the dominant role of the United States in the Middle East. This position has been confirmed both by official representatives and by respected Chinese experts.

According to Niu Xinchu, Director of the China Institute for Modern International Relations’ Center for Middle Eastern Studies, “No country is either capable of or trying to replace the United States in the Middle East. Washington remains the most powerful player in the region.”<sup>25</sup> In the words of PRC Special Envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike, China and the United States have many more common interests in the region than points of conflict. What is important is that both China and the United States are interested in preserving peace and stability and ensuring the opportunity for Chinese and American companies to operate there. “As its international influence grows, China is becoming ever more important to the Middle East. It is not, however, our intention to assume anyone else’s role and steal their piece of the pie.”<sup>26</sup>

This position matches the conclusion that despite Washington’s continuing intent to achieve a strategic “rebalancing” between the Middle East and the Asia Pacific Region, America will not relinquish control over the Mideast node of world politics and finance for objective reasons. The United States maintains the necessary military and political presence, despite the gradual decline in its demand for supplies of oil.

In light of this, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s tenth visit to the Middle East and Wang Yi’s virtually coinciding visits to Israel, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia on the eve of 2014 were perceived to be parallel, if not synchronized, actions. Wang Yi’s subsequent visit on January 8, 2014 to Djibouti, home of Camp Lemonnier, the main U.S. base in Africa, and his talks with the government of that country, demonstrated the possibility of further developing China’s naval activity in zones traditionally the responsibility of the United States in the Middle East. The unusually intense high-level Chinese diplomacy unfolding in the region at the juncture of 2013-2014 was in fact preparation for the next round of PRC-U.S. consultations on the Middle East begun by the two countries in 2011 as part of the Sino-American strategic dialogue.

Chinese diplomats’ public assessments of the situations in Syria and Iran have undergone certain changes. Statements by official Chinese representatives,

speeches by experts, and items in the PRC press with regard to Syria were quite skeptical throughout the summer and autumn of 2013. It was emphasized that Syria's agreeing to destroy its chemical weapons was a positive step; however, the Russian initiative and the accord between Russia and the United States were not a solution to the main problem: the Americans' refusal to militarily intervene in Syrian affairs. The progress in "chemical disarmament" and – most important – China's noninvolvement in the process did, however, allow Beijing to later its approach to this issue. The favorable new developments in settling the Iranian nuclear issue with the active participation of China also helped in this regard. As was noted in an article by Special Envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike, "The international community ... has jointly initiated a successful policy of settling such crises by political means."<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, as prominent American experts believe, such assessments most likely reflect not only Beijing's recognition of the need to build long-term relations with the United States in the Middle East but also a certain caution with respect to maintaining American military forces in the region.

The Chinese leadership's appeal for the development of a continental strategy in West Asia is also being judged in this light. As was noted in an early 2014 memorandum by a group of former intelligence and State Department figures of the Obama administration, the Chinese leaders' desire to ensure a reliable alternative of shipping oil overland from the Middle East can be better understood if we consider that the possibility of putting pressure on China so long as the U.S. Navy controls the sea lanes is always being stressed in American political circles. They insist on the need to "find a way to exercise influence through the United States' role as the naval guarantor of the flow of energy sources on which China and other countries in the region depend." In the opinion of these experts, this situation could seriously affect the conditions under which the current dispute in the South China Sea is resolved.<sup>28</sup>

Even though such a position is of an ambiguous nature, it does reflect an important trend: Both China and the United States view their positions in the Middle East as a potential lever for influencing each other's vital interests. The lingering contradictions and definite conflict of interests continue to have a restraining effect to the possibilities for improving constructive bilateral American-Chinese cooperation in the region, e.g., on the Afghan issue. In the meantime, we may conclude that China's promotion of its new strategy in West Asia implies strengthening the mutual interest of both countries in maintaining balanced relations and expanding cooperation.

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