

**Statement before the U.S.-China Economic and Security
Review Commission**

“CHINA IN THE MIDDLE EAST”

A Statement by

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June 6, 2013

608 Dirksen Senate Office Building

TESTIMONY FOR THE U.S.-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION

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China has an energy problem. Over the two decades since it became a net oil importer, it has grown increasingly reliant on energy supplies from the Middle East, a part of the world which is both prone to instability and in which it has little influence. Making matters worse, Chinese strategic thinking remains focused on the possibility of a confrontation with the United States, which has far more influence in the Middle East than China does. China, therefore, is doubly vulnerable. Its economic growth—and the domestic political stability that growth helps provide—is dependent on energy that China cannot secure alone, and it relies on the good will of a country it often sees to be its principal potential foe to help provide that security.

For China, there is no simple way out of its paradox. It has pursued fuels other than oil and gas—such as coal and nuclear power—but its needs are growing so rapidly, including to fuel its growing fleet of automobiles, that increasing reliance on oil and gas seems to be a certainty in the coming decades. China has also sought to diversify its sources of oil, looking to invest especially in Africa, to avoid reliance on the Middle East. However, the Middle East is where the oil is, and whether it is tapping into growing Iraqi production or increasing supplies from Saudi Arabia, China finds much of the available increments of additional oil in the Middle East, regardless of their long-held desire to diversify away from it.

Making the matter more complex, the United States is increasing its military presence in China's immediate neighborhood, and many in the Middle East believe the shift will be at their expense. The U.S. ability to affect China's maritime ties with the Middle East will surely increase, while Middle Eastern states may seek a greater Chinese maritime role. At the same time, the United States will be far more energy-independent than it has been for decades, creating a stark contrast with a China whose dependence on Middle Eastern energy is likely to grow.

China can neither withdraw from the Middle East nor avoid devising a strategy toward the region. It needs to navigate its way through what seems certain to be a sustained confrontation between Iran and the rest of the world, and it needs to craft an approach to the roiling politics that are reshaping the Middle East today, some of which threaten to tip the region into even more turmoil.

Some in China want a new role, and they see opportunities in the Middle East for China to establish itself as a responsible global actor. Many current and aspiring Chinese allies in the Middle East also want China to have a new role, in some cases to supplement strong relationships with the United States, and in some cases to balance against U.S. power. There is little unity in China or elsewhere on what a new Chinese role should look like or what its priorities should be. Still, it is all but certain that China will have a larger role in the Middle East in the coming decades, even if it takes on such a role more slowly and cautiously than many in China and the Middle East would prefer.

China's approach to the Middle East

China's interest in the Middle East did not begin with oil, but oil transformed it. Trade with the region dates back to antiquity and continued through the centuries of the Silk Road. In modern times, each grappled with crumbling empires and the European colonialism that capitalized on their internal weaknesses. As wars broke out, and revolutions occurred in both places, each was too absorbed in its own turmoil to take much notice of the other.

China's revolutionary fervor made the country a cheerleader for change in the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century, but China's impact was mostly symbolic, and it provided only token assistance to revolutionary forces. China's hostility to Western hegemony in the Cold War made recognition of China an appealing way for revolutionary movements to signal their departure from the status quo: in 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser's recognition of Communist China alienated the Eisenhower Administration and helped set in train the Suez Canal Crisis; after Algerians won their bloody war of independence against France, they turned de Gaulle's old villa into the Chinese embassy. Few U.S. allies recognized Communist China, and most U.S. foes did.

But China had an overwhelmingly internal focus in this period, wholly occupied first with recovering from World War II and consolidating the revolution and later with the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. China did not really turn to the Middle East until the 1980s, when a more market-oriented government sought markets for low-cost weapons to support a domestic arms industry. It was not until China became a net importer of oil in 1993 that the Middle East took on a strategic cast for the Chinese leadership.

Chinese diplomacy since the 1970s has focused on strategic objectives related to easing China's way in the world. Trumpeting a policy of non-intervention in others' internal politics and seeking positive relations with a wide variety of states, China generally has been content to play a modest role in global affairs. Simply put, China has been content to be a "market taker," seeking to maximize the benefit it derives from conditions it finds around the world. In the past, China pursued a policy characterized as "accomplishing something to some extent." It participated in international dialogues, insisted on non-interference in domestic affairs, and consistently opposed the use of force.¹ Sometimes these relations have been seemingly contradictory, as when it has pursued close ties with antagonists such as Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. China has taken the attitude that it cannot affect the strategic decisions of any of these states. Where an international consensus has existed, China would often join it, but it is hard to recall circumstances in which it took the lead in shaping one.

The country's interests are outgrowing that approach, however. As China's global footprint rises, China increasingly finds itself thrust into the position of "market maker." Its demands are too large not to affect the global environment, and its external vulnerabilities are too large to rely on others to defend them. While China has played an outsized role in Asian affairs for centuries, its words and actions suggest a growing consensus inside China that the country must act more and more like a global power. The result is a somewhat awkward diplomacy in which China visibly struggles to define and carry out a new strategy.

Seen another way, Chinese diplomacy is being forced out of passively managing risk. As the stakes grow, an increasing number of Chinese analysts complain that such a conservative

¹Liu Zhongmin, "On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2012), p. 8.

approach not only fails to protect Chinese interests, but it also elicits growing disappointment from Chinese partners who believe that China's growing power and their growing trade relationships with China should yield greater diplomatic benefits.

The Middle East has several characteristics that make it especially delicate for China. First, the region is unavoidable in a way that other regions are not. China need not have a strong position in Europe, and its ties to both Africa and Latin America are discretionary. China's swiftly growing energy needs, however, draw China ever-deeper into Middle Eastern affairs.

Second, the U.S. posture in the Middle East, and the strategic relations it has with virtually all regional governments, makes China feel vulnerable. China is relatively poor and militarily weak, and the United States has an ability to sustain tens of thousands of forces in the region for years on end in a way that China cannot emulate for decades. The United States' diplomatic and military strength in the Middle East influences all of China's relations in the region. The Saudi ambassador to China observed recently, "In order to understand China's relations with the Gulf states, one must understand Sino-American relations."²

Third, the region's swirling politics create a problem. As a status-quo power, China's instinct to support sitting governments has put it on the wrong side of victorious revolutionary movements in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Broader change could make China more isolated in the region as it seeks to establish itself. Further, Chinese analysts are wary of delving too deeply into the region's internal developments, out of fear that their analysis of failing Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes will be taken as veiled critique of China's own leadership.

China's early efforts to explore a larger Middle Eastern role were somewhat awkward. After 2001, however, China acted quietly but effectively in the shadow of U.S. conflict with the region. China managed not to get drawn into U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it reaped benefits from what critics of the United States saw as a "war against Islam." As the United States waged a high-profile "Global War on Terror," Chinese companies moved in and won energy and infrastructure contracts. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Chinese economy boomed, fueled in significant measure by imported Middle Eastern oil.

There is something else drawing China into the Middle East—the Middle Eastern powers themselves. Many of them, and especially several oil producers in the Gulf, are eager for a greater Chinese role. In part, the interest in China stems from insecurity about U.S. intentions, especially with visible U.S. fatigue at the posture it has maintained in the Gulf for decades. Taken at face value, the language the United States and China have used to describe the region was pointedly different: the United States called for "energy independence" and "ending addiction" to Middle Eastern oil; Beijing advocated "energy interdependence," "energy security," and "strategic partnerships."³ The United States' language makes Gulf leaders uneasy, while China's language makes them feel more secure.

The attraction of China is more than merely language, though. Some powers seem to feel that having a competitor to the United States in the region would improve their bargaining position. This is true not only of Iran, which seeks leverage against the United States, but even countries such as Saudi Arabia, which have long and strategic ties to the United States. China's historic

² Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, "China's Strategic Posture in the Gulf, 1980-2010," Ph.D. Dissertation, Girton College, Cambridge University, 2011, p. 114.

³ Al-Rodhan, p. 250.

disinterest in domestic affairs, its willingness to sell weapons without Congressional meddling, and its ability to move swiftly gives these countries what they want quicker. It also spurs the United States to remove roadblocks to acquiring desired U.S. goods.

Finally, many petroleum producers see China as the future, a rising power that will be consuming their oil for decades more. China's eagerness for economic growth makes them a necessarily less fickle power, and one with a reliance on the Middle East that the United States does not share in the same way. Some see the U.S. relationship as something that can only diminish, while the relationship with China is something that will likely grow.

In 2011, China accounted for half of the growth in oil consumption worldwide, and the Energy Information Administration estimates that China alone will account for 64 percent of the growth in global consumption in 2011-13.⁴ China now imports more oil than the United States,⁵ and BP estimates that China will consume more oil than the United States by 2029.⁶ With an increasing amount of U.S. imports coming directly from Canada and Mexico, China is a huge buyer from the rest of the world's producers.

China's strategy toward Iran and its neighbors

China's most difficult relationship in the Middle East is with Iran. On the surface, this seems unlikely. After all, China and Iran have a robust trading relationship, and they share a skepticism of U.S. intentions. Their common history dates back more than a millennium, and each former empire sees itself as much a civilization as a country. With a common view that the international order intends to constrain their actions unfairly,⁷ each seeks a new order that allows it to achieve its rightful place in the world. A deeper investigation, however, reveals a deep Chinese unease with Iran, and a growing Iranian reliance on China that is not reciprocated.

There are many reasons for China's caution toward Iran. First, Iran's estrangement from many countries—most pointedly the United States—brings great scrutiny to the Chinese-Iranian relationship and imposes costs on China that it would rather avoid. The Vice President of the China Institute of International Studies told an Arab researcher, "We never hear the U.S. complaining about China's relationship with Saudi Arabia. But we hear them complain about Iran."⁸ An Iranian scholar points out the problem from a Chinese perspective aptly: Chinese trade with Iran is a seemingly impressive \$22 billion, but is less than one-fortieth of China's trade with its three largest trading partners: the United States, the European Union and Japan.⁹ It is with these countries that China has a strategic imperative to manage its relations. At the extreme, the Chinese goal is to persuade the United States and its allies that it is a responsible

⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, China Country Brief, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=CH>

⁵ Robin M. Mills, "Who's Winning the Great Energy Rat Race?" *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/08/whos_winning_the_great_energy_rat_race_china_oil_importer.

⁶ BP Energy Outlook 2030, p. 33.

⁷ One author points out that while both countries are "revisionist" powers with regard to the international system, they are at odds because Iran is a revolutionary revisionist power intent on bringing down the existing international order while China is a reformist revisionist power that seeks to enhance China's position in that order. Mohsen Shariantnia, "Iran-China Relations: An overview of critical factors," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Winter 2011), p. 64.

⁸ Al-Rodhan, p. 115.

⁹ Mohsen Shariantnia, "Iran-China Relations: An overview of critical factors," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Winter 2011), p. 75.

global power and not a strategic rival; at minimum, the imperative is not to engage in a direct confrontation with the United States.¹⁰ Sino-American relations remain at the center of Chinese strategic thinking, and whatever U.S. intentions, the Chinese government appears skeptical that China can win a confrontation with the United States in the near term.¹¹

China is especially vulnerable when it comes to Middle Eastern energy. The United States has a unique ability to control the sea-lanes between China and Middle Eastern oil producers (in terms both of protecting Chinese supplies and being able to threaten them in case of conflict), and land-based pipelines are far from able to meet China's needs. In addition, Chinese scholars frequently note that the United States is the predominant external power in the Middle East, and while its absolute position may decline somewhat in the face of a re-emphasis on Asia and a retrenchment following the political upheavals of 2011, its position relative to any other outside power is overwhelming and likely to remain so for some time. If, as one Chinese scholar notes, "A peaceful geopolitical environment of the Middle East and North Africa is a requirement for China's energy security,"¹² there is little appetite for a confrontation with the United States, because, as the scholar admits frankly, "China lacks the capability of dealing with international energy politics and risks."¹³

Second, while China is concerned with reliable access to oil, Iran is not the preferred partner. Saudi Arabia is a far greater producer of petroleum products than Iran, and in the last decade it has gone from supplying slightly more oil than Iran to China to supplying more than twice as much. Interestingly, Iran's share of China's oil imports has held relatively steady for the last decade, ranging between 9 and 14 percent and more recently trending at the lower end of that range. But because Iranian exports have been declining overall, Iran's China trade has rocketed from 5 percent to 25 percent of its oil exports.¹⁴ From the Chinese perspective, the strategic relationship is with Saudi Arabia, which now accounts for more than 20 percent of all Chinese oil imports.¹⁵

The Saudi leadership is quite focused on what it sees as an existential threat from Iran, which includes but is not limited to Iran's proliferation activities. Saudi behavior in global markets has been to reassure customers while increasing production to meet demand. Iranian behavior, by contrast, has been to threaten the stability of supply in order to deter attack, while meanwhile presiding over a decline in actual production. Seen from the perspective of a consumer, which China assuredly is, Saudi Arabia's behavior tends to support China's economic needs, while

¹⁰ One scholar wrote in 2011 that Chinese-Iranian political relations have not increased apace with their trade relations "due to the constraining impact of the ever-expanding complex relations between Beijing and Washington on the one hand and the simultaneous perpetuation of tension between Tehran and Washington on the other." Shariantnia, p. 82.

¹¹ One author writes, "The U.S. position as 'the only superpower' will not change within a short period, neither will its dominance over Middle Eastern affairs." Liu Zhongmin, "On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2012), p. 6.

¹² Wu Lei, "The Oil Politics and Geopolitical Risks with China 'Going Out' Strategy toward the Greater Middle East," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 3 (September 2012), p. 63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴ United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "China-Iran: A Limited Partnership," (Arlington, VA: CENTRA Technology, 2012), p. 19.

¹⁵ One author points out that neither President Hu Jintao nor Premier Wen Jiabao visited Iran or Syria since October 2007, but Hu, Wen and then-Vice President Xi Jinping all visited Saudi Arabia. Bo Zhiyue, "China's Middle East Policy: Strategic Concerns and Economic Interests," *MEI Insight*, no. 61 (19 April 2012), Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, p. 2.

Iran's undermines them. Saudi Arabia is not blind to the security implications of such a shift. According to one scholar, "China is increasingly focusing its attention on the Kingdom as a reliable energy partner, while Saudi Arabia sees China as an enormous potential market and strategic partner."¹⁶

Seen broadly, China has become increasingly strategic to Iran without the reverse being true. Instead, Saudi Arabia China's strategic bet in the Middle East seems to be on ties with Saudi Arabia. Yet Saudi reservations about China's ties to Iran do not trump China's other interests in Iran.

An energy relationship with Iran has two principal benefits to China. The first is economic. When global sanctions depress the demand for Iranian oil, China can obtain that oil at a discount. China is large enough to feel it is unlikely to be sanctioned by the United States, and it feels little obligation to sacrifice its own interests for U.S. strategy. China takes a dim view of sanctions overall, so subverting them—especially when they are not imposed by the United Nations—seems the natural approach.

Iran's other benefit to China is as a strategic hedge against U.S. influence. That is to say, in the event of conflict between the United States and China, it behooves China to have energy relationships that the United States cannot turn on and off. Chinese strategists continue to worry out loud about the potential of Sino-American conflict over Taiwan, even as the Chinese-Taiwanese relationship grows increasingly close, and they fear that one of the first U.S. steps in such an event would be to cut China's access to oil. China has taken many steps to ensure its energy supplies, from pursuing pipelines across the Asian steppes to developing port facilities in Burma that would allow some Chinese oil shipments to bypass the Straits of Malacca, which the U.S. Navy could conceivably control. One author urges, "Central Asia is a source of energy supply that demands no protection from any ocean navy. As China is still unable in the near future to build up an ocean navy strong enough to protect its oil shipping lines, this nearby energy source coming by land is obviously of great strategic significance for China's energy security."¹⁷ A senior Chinese scholar of the Middle East put the Chinese balancing act well: He told an Arab researcher, "'It would be the end of the world' if China had to choose between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran."¹⁸

The Chinese government appears concerned but not alarmed over the Iranian nuclear program. Chinese interlocutors consistently assess that more time remains, oppose military action, and encourage the Iranians to negotiate with their adversaries. One possibility is that China is merely seeking to maximize its own bargaining position with both sides by finding a posture that is minimally acceptable to each and then playing one off against the other. It is possible, too, that Chinese diplomats do judge that a resolution is possible on these terms.

What is clearer is that China derives benefits from the current state of affairs. Many Chinese strategists seem delighted at the prospect of the United States being tangled up in enduring

¹⁶ Naser al-Tamimi, "China-Saudi Arabia Relations: Economic Partnership or Strategic Alliance?" Discussion paper, Durham University, HH Sheikh Naser Al-Sabah Programme, Durham, UK, p. 1.

¹⁷ Guang Pan, "China's Energy Strategy and Primary Role of the Middle East in This Strategy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 2 no. 2 (2008), p. 67.

¹⁸ Al-Rodhan, p. 115.

tensions with Iran, which draws U.S. attention and resources¹⁹ and allows others to portray the United States as a global hegemon.²⁰ Looking broadly at the region, one analyst wrote recently that

the basic orientation of China's Middle East strategy should strive to maintain peace and stability in the Middle East. On the other hand, the Middle East upheaval to a certain extent, contributed to the dispersion of the U.S. effort and contained the strategic eastward shift of the U.S. Therefore, there is no need for China to get the United States out of trouble.²¹

Overall, however, the Chinese position appears to flow from an assessment that China cannot much affect Iranian decision-making, and that the United States could manage the fallout of Iranian proliferation if it came to that. A senior think tank scholar close to the Foreign Ministry observed, "When we set our objectives, we know our means...[and] we have very limited means to influence the Gulf."²²

Some argue that the Chinese position is not quite as strategic as it is often made out to be. John Garver makes the intriguing point that the apparent contradictions in Chinese policy toward Iran are a consequence of bureaucratic politics within China. One foreign researcher quotes an anonymous Chinese scholar of the Middle East to say that the Foreign Ministry's U.S. focus prompts many Chinese experts to refer to it as "the Ministry of American Affairs,"²³ so strong is its push for comity with the United States. Some argue that the People's Liberation Army emphasizes U.S. hostility and a desire to undermine U.S. global influence, and the Chinese oil companies seek commercial advantage not only by buying current supplies at below-market prices, but also by using Iran's relative weakness on the international stage to secure a unique and advantageous place in Iran's energy sector.²⁴

China's strategy toward Egypt and the post-revolutionary Arab states

China's policy toward Iran has evolved over several decades and always in the shadow of U.S. policy. By contrast, China's policy toward the evolving revolutions in the Middle East required a more sudden shift in Chinese strategy and deft diplomacy. Overwhelmingly, the Chinese attitude toward political changes in the Middle East has been to view them with alarm. Further, its diplomatic approach has found limited success.

China's attitude toward political change in the Middle East is especially difficult because it is an avowedly revolutionary power that has developed its interests with governments that represent the status quo. While China's rhetoric supports popular empowerment, its actions have sought to

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, "The Iran Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing" Asia Briefing No. 100, 17 February 2010, p. 4.

²⁰ On Chinese schadenfreude over Iraq, see Xiong Guangqing, "The Iraq War's Weakening of U.S. Soft Power," *Academic Expression*, pp. 14-17, quoted in Michael Chase, "China's Assessment of the War in Iraq: America's 'Deepest Quagmire' and the Implications for Chinese National Security," *China Brief*, vol. 7 issue 17 (September 19, 2007).

²¹ Yao Kuwangyi, "The Upheaval in the Middle East and China's Middle East Policy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 3, (September 2012), p. 21.

²² Al-Rodhan, p. 113.

²³ Al-Rodhan, p. 243.

²⁴ Prepared Statement of John W. Garver, delivered to U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 13, 2011.

develop ties with governments and to shun political movements. When those governments fell, sometimes despite official Chinese support, China found itself trying to build a position of influence on shaky foundations.

China's first challenge in the Middle East has been to understand it in a more sophisticated way than it has had to heretofore. Chinese policy has traditionally relied on a strict policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, leading to a Chinese sense of disorientation when new political forces gained power in the Middle East. Chinese policy toward unrest in Asia articulated the "three evil forces"—terrorism, separatism and religious extremism—but that construction has little guidance to offer a government trying to navigate the uncertain terrain of post-uprising Middle East. Where, for example, does the Muslim Brotherhood fit into this schema, and what of the sectarian opposition party in Bahrain, al-Wifaq? Is al-Nahda in Tunisia a potential partner or a likely foe? In fact, China is not in a position to judge any of them, in part because it does not know the parties themselves, but also because it has not paid close attention to the societies from which they have sprung. According to an Arab researcher, some Arabic-speakers in Beijing refer to the Middle East section of the Foreign Ministry as *majmu'at al-nahū wal-ṣarf*, or "the syntax and morphology group," because its officials' Arabic is so refined that they sound like grammar teachers. And yet, they obtained their expertise almost entirely at the University of International Languages in Beijing, leading to "major mistakes that reflected badly on China regionally and internationally. Many of [their] actions reflected China's lack of expertise and true understanding of regional complexities."²⁵

Seen broadly, the Chinese approach has been to see the Arab uprisings principally in material terms. Uneven economic growth and high unemployment throughout the Arab world²⁶ combined with a global economic slowdown to upset a delicate internal balance.²⁷ While a diminution of U.S. global power and the communications revolution played a role, Chinese scholars have generally seen events in the Arab world as being a consequence of factors that, in a domestic context, the Chinese government is actively managing. One scholar judged that it was Egypt's privatization policy starting in 1991 that tipped the country to revolt, since as a result, "most middle class members have been laid off, restructured, marginalized, and finally added to the already large underclass."²⁸ Another echoed the overall assessment, saying, "The root cause of the unrest in the Middle East is a crisis of development, namely, a crisis of the development model."²⁹ In fact, however, what changed in Egypt was not the immiseration of the middle classes, but rather the spectacular enrichment of the upper classes, a phenomenon that has affected China as well.

China has tried to reach out to the new Arab governments tentatively. President Morsi of Egypt made his first trip outside of the Middle East to China, where he won the National Bank of Egypt a \$200 million line of credit from the China Development Bank, as well as agreements for future cooperation in a number of areas. But for all of the excitement over the rising relations between

²⁵ Al-Rodhan, pp. 110-11.

²⁶ See, for example, Wu Bingbing, "Change in the Middle East: The case of Egypt," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2012), p. 24.

²⁷ An Huihou, "The Reasons and Consequences of Political and Social Unrest in Arab Countries," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2012), p. 3.

²⁸ Dai Xiaoqi, "Political Changes and the Middle Class in Egypt," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2012), p. 72.

²⁹ Liu Zhongmin, "On Political Unrest in the Middle East and China's Diplomacy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2012), p. 4.

Egypt and China, deep disagreements remained. Reportedly, Chinese officials were unable to get appointments with Egyptian counterparts for months after Mubarak fell, because of China's support for Mubarak through the period of street protests that brought him down. Further, Morsi sought to sway his Chinese hosts to change their non-intervention policy in Syria, which Egypt sees as threatening to security in the entire region. Taken as a whole, China's regional diplomacy has been more cautious than it has been deft, and its close ties to fallen regimes have damaged China's reputation.

For some Chinese analysts, the difficulties with new Arab governments in Tunisia and Egypt are a sign that Chinese diplomacy can no longer afford to be as reactive as it has been in the past. One author notes that "China's contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the National Transitional Council of Libya was apparently lagging behind that of other Great Powers,"³⁰ and urged "more efforts...to diversify China's diplomatic actors and channels in the Middle East, [and] in particular, increase China's contact with political oppositions in Middle Eastern countries."³¹

Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia happened so quickly that it was hard for China to respond. Conflict in Libya and Syria, by contrast, dragged on for months and months, allowing China to consider (and sometimes reconsider) its policies. In Libya, China supported sanctions imposed in UNSC Resolution 1970 and abstained from UNSC Resolution 1973, which had the effect of allowing NATO troops to support rebels fighting against Muammar el-Qaddafi. China was unable to reap much benefit from its actions, however, for several reasons. First, it almost immediately tried to hedge on its support for isolating Libya, perhaps to protect more than \$8 billion in contracts it had in the country. The rebels who eventually came to power noted months of Chinese statements expressing "regret" over NATO airstrikes and emphasizing respect for Libya's sovereignty. They saw the Chinese effort at neutrality as de facto support for Qaddafi.

Second, documentary evidence emerged of Chinese offers of support to Qaddafi in July 2011, five months after the rebellion started and after the imposition of a UN weapons embargo made such assistance illegal.³² China seems to have been looking to bet on both sides, supporting the status quo while opening a door to Qaddafi's foes.³³ It did not work out so well in practice. China's efforts to split the difference between support for and opposition to Qaddafi received a blow when a spokesman for the Libyan oil company AGOCO said in August 2011, "We don't have a problem with western countries like Italians, French and UK companies. But we may have some political issues with Russia, China and Brazil."³⁴ China's instinct to support the regional status quo once again ran aground on the rocks of a changing Middle East.

The Libya lesson that Chinese decisionmakers seem to have applied to Syria, however, is that they were insufficiently opposed to international action. China has vetoed three UN Security

³⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

³¹ Ibid., p. 16.

³² Graeme Smith, "China offered Gadhafi huge stockpiles of arms: Libyan memos," *Toronto Globe and Mail*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/china-offered-gadhafi-huge-stockpiles-of-arms-libyan-memos/article1363316/>.

³³ China's foreign minister hosted both Qaddafi's foreign minister and the head of the Transitional National Council in Beijing in June 2011. See, for example, "Libya: China welcomes opposition figure Mahmud Jibril," *BBC*, June 21, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13853210>.

³⁴ Svetlana Kovalyova and Emma Farge, "ENI leads Libya oil race, rebels warn Russia, China," *Reuters*, August 22, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/22/ozatp-libya-oil-idAFJJOE77L0DN20110822>.

Council Resolutions on Syria, and its calls for dialogue are consistent, regardless of the framework for such dialogue or the situation on the ground. China's Syria posture is likely guided by the geostrategic logic of supporting Russia and Iran against Western-led opposition. That support means that Bashar al-Assad is not as isolated as Qaddafi was and that Chinese policy opposing intervention in Syria is not isolated, either.

But while China remains adamant in its opposition to international military action, it has reached out to the Syrian opposition much more effectively than it did in Libya. In fact, 24 hours after China cast a UNSC veto, a Syrian opposition delegation visited Beijing at the government's invitation for consultations.³⁵ In China's careful fashion, one can note simultaneously that the group only met a mid-level official and did not represent a diplomatic affront to the government of Syria, and also that China has reached out actively to the potential future rulers of the country.

Overall assessment

In a perfect world, China would seem to prefer not to have a Middle East policy. Closer to home, in Asia, it knows the landscape well, it has a long history, and it occupies a dominant position. Strength in Asia propels China to the global stage, and it seems delighted at the prospect of being regarded as a near-peer of the United States. While China still feels vulnerable to American might now, China also feels that power is shifting in its direction. If China could limit itself to worrying principally about Asia and the United States, it would have plenty of challenges on its hands, but it would also see the prospect of considerable reward.

And yet, it is continually drawn westward, toward more treacherous ground. For China, the Middle East is complicated, it is conflictual, it brings tremendous scrutiny, and the United States seems to have something of a home-court advantage. Chinese reliance on the Middle East highlights China's continued vulnerability to U.S. power, especially when it comes to safeguarding global trade. China's instinct is to tread lightly. As one scholar noted, "Many Chinese felt the Gulf was a 'graveyard of great powers' and they wanted to avoid getting involved. Many also understood the limits of Beijing's power and were reluctant to be involved in a region over which they had little influence."³⁶ And yet, China's energy consumption patterns make the region hard to avoid.

Some in China seek to equivocate, while some advocate embracing the challenge head on and adopting a can-do attitude to further Chinese interests. One of the latter is Wang Jisi, a leading Chinese academic and the dean of the School of International Studies at Beijing University. He wrote an article in October 2012 that seemed to argue for a different Chinese strategy for what the United States calls the Middle East and what Asian diplomats often call West Asia. It calls for China to turn to the Middle East with a more proactive strategy that seeks cooperation with the Western powers over shared concerns. Departing from the traditional Chinese approach, he urged "creative intervention" to further Chinese interests. His article contains an explicit call for broad investment in understanding the societies and cultures of the region and an implicit

³⁵ Yun Sun, "Syria: What China Has Learned From its Libya Experience," *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, no. 152 (February 27, 2012), http://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb152_1.pdf, p. 2.

³⁶ Al-Rodhan, p. 241.

recognition that China will be reliant on the region for decades to come, while Western powers will not go away.³⁷

China's hesitancy toward the Middle East is mirrored in the actions of most other powers, which see peril and uncertainty in the unfolding politics of a changing region. China, however, cannot lean away from the region's volatility; it must somehow endure it. In addition, China's growing influence in the region means that its actions—and inaction—will shape the Middle East to an unprecedented degree. China has not yet concluded what tools it has at its disposal, nor how it wishes to use them. China must make that decision soon.

³⁷ Wang Jisi, "March West: China's Geopolitical Strategy of Rebalancing," Wang Jisi, *Global Times*, October 17, 2012, http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-10/3193760.html.