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Middle East and North Africa: Forcing China to Revisit Long-standing Policies

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The fractious Middle East and North Africa is compelling China to rethink its long-standing principle of non-interventionism to protect its economic interests. It is also prompting it to articulate a Middle East policy that serves China's interests without putting it at loggerheads with the United States.

Commentary

A SCAN of white papers on multiple foreign policy issues published by the Chinese government is glaring for one thing: the absence of a formulated, conceptual approach towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This is a part of the world that is crucial not only to Chinese strategic and economic interests but also to how tensions in the restless Muslim province of Xinjiang will develop.

For much of the four decades of economic reform that has positioned China as one of the world's foremost players, the People's Republic could remain aloof to crises in the MENA region as Beijing single-mindedly pursued its resource and-export driven objectives. That is proving increasingly difficult as tortuous, bloody and violent conflicts threaten to redraw the post-colonial borders of a region that is crucial to a continued flow of oil and through which at least 60 percent of Chinese exports pass.

Taking off the horse blinders

The MENA region moreover has become home to hundreds of thousands of Chinese expatriates who repeatedly have had to be rescued from escalating violence in countries like Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen or who were taken hostage by insurgents or criminal gangs in places like Egypt's Sinai desert and Sudan. As a result, China has been forced to breach its policy of non-interventionism by establishing ties to opposition forces in countries like Libya, Syria and Afghanistan to hedge its bets in situations of political change.

The rise of Islamic State, the jihadist group that is expanding its control of swaths of Syria and Iraq and is attracting hundreds of Chinese Muslims as foreign fighters, is further forcing China to take the horse blinders off its approach towards the MENA region. China realises that it needs a new approach that would allow it to increasingly relax its long-standing insistence on non-interference in the

domestic affairs of others while assuring it is not seeking to become a global military power through the establishment of military bases in far-flung lands.

Beijing has to do so without officially surrendering those policies or challenging the United States, on whom it relies for the security of key regions like the Gulf. In groping for a cohesive policy, China has to compensate for limitations to its ability to project military and political power. It is having to accommodate a broadening spectrum of domestic players with vested interests in Chinese policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, including national oil companies and security authorities.

Compensating for limitations

“The deep political changes in the Middle East, the restructuring of the regional system and the strategy adjustment of the US, Europe and other Great Powers...suggest that it is urgent for China to work out mid-term and long-term diplomatic strategy toward the Middle East and corresponding mechanism and measures,” warned Middle East scholar Liu Zhongmin.

China’s limitations were evident in the failure of mediation efforts in the Sudan in 2011 and 2014 and a half-hearted Chinese attempt in 2013 to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal that went nowhere. The failures notwithstanding, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi signalled a recognition that non-interventionism was unlikely to be sustainable when he told the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 that China would play a “more proactive and constructive role” in the world’s hot spots and provide “public goods to the international community”.

In their search for a Middle East policy, Chinese officials are driven by their perception of misguided US support for political change in the region. They see a waning US influence, as shown in Washington’s reluctance to become further embroiled in the region’s conflicts, foremost in Syria, and its inability to nudge Israelis and Palestinians towards a resolution of their dispute. They also fear that the projection of Chinese power through military bases runs the risk of being further sucked into the Middle Eastern and North African vortex.

Building naval bases

Avoiding this is, however, proving to be easier said than done. Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh recently disclosed that China was negotiating to establish a naval base in the African state’s northern port of Obock. The base is an outcome of a military agreement concluded in 2014 between China and Djibouti, which hosts the US’ only permanent military facility in Africa - an agreement that was criticised by Washington.

The International Business Herald, a paper published by Xinhua News Agency, moreover reported that China was likely to establish over the next decade three strings of “overseas strategic support bases” totalling 18 facilities: a North Indian Ocean supply line with bases in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar; a Western Indian Ocean supply line with bases in Djibouti, Yemen, Oman, Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique; and a central-south Indian Ocean supply line with bases in Seychelles and Madagascar.

Concern about Xinjiang, home to a Turkic-speaking people that has long felt culturally more akin to the region’s Turkic trading partners than to the Han Chinese, is undermining China’s adherence to the principle of non-intervention and forces China to balance contradictory approaches. In Iraq, for instance, China supports the fight against Islamic State while in Syria it backs the government of Bashar al-Assad against rebels who confront both the Syrian regime and Islamic State.

Competing with IS for oil

The self-proclaimed Islamic State’s expansion in Iraq in 2014 moreover put the group in direct competition with China for access to Iraq’s energy resources in which Beijing is heavily invested. As a result, China has agreed to intelligence cooperation with the US-led coalition in Iraq while some analysts have called on the government to contribute financially and materially as well as with training.

Ironically, as China tries to come to grips with realities on the ground, it faces the same dilemma that

stymies US policy in the Middle East: the clash between lofty principles and a harsh reality that produces perceptions of a policy that is riddled with contradictions and fails to live up to the values it advocates. Non-alignment and non-intervention coupled with economic incentives have so far allowed China to paper over some of those dilemmas. Increasingly, that no longer is an option.

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