Wading in Troubled Waters: China's Middle East Diplomacy in the New Era^{*}

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The current Middle East situation is characterized by accelerating multi-polarity, the intertwining sectarian politics and geopolitics, the impending crisis of US alliance system, the escalation of arms race, and the deterioration of terrorism and separatism. Syria, Iran, Yemen and Palestine-Israel peace process will remain the flashpoints. Within such a changed situation, China's Middle East policy is evolving from passiveness to aggressiveness. First, participation in the Middle East governance and protection of its practical interests are the two major pillars of China's diplomacy in the Middle East; second, bilateral and multilateral mechanisms are the major platforms; third, partnership instead of alliance is the unique China-styled coalition policy, and finally the "Belt and Road Initiative" is an important tool of Chinese Middle East diplomacy.

Keywords: China and the Middle East, Middle East diplomacy, Peace Process, conflict resolution

Introduction

In 2015, the situation in the Middle East has revealed the characteristics of "stable in general, but turmoil at local". In that year, factions in Libya reached a draft peace agreement, Iran and six powers signed the nuclear agreement, the Security Council unanimously adopted No. 2254 resolution on Syria (Stea, December 23, 2015), Yemen once achieved a temporary ceasefire, and the so-called Islamic State's territory shrank by 40% from its maximum expansion in Iraq, and by 20% in Syria in 2015 (Reuters, 2016). Even the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was under control in general. In January 2016, however, Saudi Arabia executed the Shiite Sheikh Nimr al Nimr, which caused the termination of diplomatic relations of several Arab countries with Iran. The tendency of Kurdish separation in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq was deteriorating. Disagreements between Turkey and the United States increased after the failed coup in July 2015. The Middle East refugee crisis had not been solved yet. The Israeli-Palestinian issue and the Syrian crisis were still in stalemate. The situation in the Middle East in 2016 continues to show the coexistence of transition and turbulence.

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The New Features of the Middle East Situation

First, multipolarity of the Middle East powers becomes more obvious. It has been six years since the outbreak of the Arab upheaval. The pattern of the Middle East is transforming from a unipolar pattern led by the United States, into a multipolar pattern. Among all the foreign powers, the United States, France, Britain, Russia, and China have formed the first layer of strategic balance, and Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt have forged the second layer of strategic balance. After Obama assumed presidency, the US shifted its strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region. In the Middle East, it closed military bases in Iraq and withdrew major combat forces from Afghanistan, pursuing a disengagement policy in the Middle East. In December 2015, accompanied by Afghan Defense Minister Mohammad Massom Stanekzai, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited American military base in Fenty, Afghanistan, and declared that US would deploy 9,800 troops in 2016 and 5,500 troops in 2017 in Afghanistan (Pellerin, 2015). Washington was unwilling to get involved in the wars after the outbreak of the crisis of Syria chemical weapons; it was unwilling to send ground troops to Iraq in the fight against "Islamic State" as well. European countries such as Britain, France and Germany focus on their respective domestic economic issues, and are wary of penetration of the "Islamic State", and the influx of the Middle East refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the top three nationalities of the over one million migrants between January 2015 and March 2016 were Syrian (46.7%), Afghan (20.9%) and Iraqi (9.4%) (UNHCR, 31 March 2016). European governments have lost enthusiasm in the so-called promotion of democratic governance in the Greater Middle East. Russia takes the opportunity to expand its military presence in Syria, including the deployment of S-300 air defense system, and increases its diplomatic involvement with Iran, Iraq and Egypt, trying to return to the Middle East and shift the attention of the international community on the crisis in Ukraine. Through high-level visits, economic and trade cooperation and participation in the Middle East governance, the influence of China is also gradually increased. In addition, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Egypt and other Middle East countries have also formed a set of strategic balance in the Middle East pattern.

Influenced by the multi-polarization in the region, the Middle East alliance politics has experienced disintegration and reintegration. In a long time after the end of the cold war, the United States, European countries, GCC, Turkey and Israel had formed the so-called "coalition of moderation", in contrast to Iran, Syria, Hezbollah of Lebanon and the Palestinian Hamas that have formed the so-called "coalition of resistance". Since the outbreak of the Arab upheaval, great changes have taken place in the Middle Eastern alliance politics. First, the United States is trying to maintain a strategic balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran; second, the conflicts between Turkey and Russia as well as Turkey and Iraq become more intense; third, there is a reshuffle among the Arab countries: among the GCC member states, Qatar and Oman did not follow Saudi Arabia; however, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Bahrain and the UAE declared their allegiance to Saudi Arabia and broke diplomatic relations with Iran (Sun, 2016). The spillover effect of Saudi-Iran rivalry became obvious. In the future, Russia, Iran, Syria and Iraq may have closer relationship; Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Sudan may hold their hands together; the United States, Europe, Egypt and Israel are standing on the sidelines, keeping a certain detached policy. However, the US and Russian influence on the agenda-setting of the Middle East is still overwhelming: US special forces provided support to SDF/PYD, i. e. Syrian Kurds very actively and Washington

is part of Syrian negotiations. Russia provided both S-300 and S-400 air defense systems for Syrian Assad regime to allow marching of Firat Shield operation in Syria.

Second, sectarian politics and geopolitics intertwines with each other. Iran and Saudi Arabia are the Islamic giants standing on the two sides of the Gulf, and both play a decisive role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation which has 57 member states. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran have important geopolitical interests, forming a strategic balance. Saudi Arabia has two holy cities: Mecca and Medina, the source of religious attraction. It has provided aid to the impoverished Islamic countries with sufficient petro dollars, and thus wins support and respect in the Islamic world; Iran has a large population and it has an independent military defense system. Through religious and geopolitical ties, it remains an important geopolitical player in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain and in other regions. Although both Saudi Arabia and Iran advocate on the principle of non-interference in other's internal affairs, the two countries have different understanding of the non-interference principle. Saudi Arabia believes that it has a special mission to guide the Arab world by offering public goods, while Iran believes that it has the right and the obligation to protect the rights and interests of Shiites. Saudi Arabia blames Iran of interfering in Arab internal affairs with the pretext of protecting Shiite Muslims, and the hidden objective is to control five Arab capitals—Sana'a of Yemen, Damascus of Syria, Beirut of Lebanon, Baghdad of Iraq and Manama of Bahrain. Iran also set up a special relationship with Hamas on West Bank since Israel launched the Gaza War in 2009. However, Iran accused Saudi Arabia's air strikes in Syria and Yemen of an act of aggression and hegemonism while Saudi Arabia accused Iran of meddling in the Arab internal affairs.

The intervention of external power has intensified sectarian conflict in the Middle East. After the Gulf War, the United States supported the GCC led by Saudi Arabia, in order to contain Iran, and thus divided Islamic countries in the Middle East into pro-American moderates and anti-American radicals. The former includes the GCC countries represented by Saudi Arabia, as well as Jordan and Morocco; and the latter consists of Iran, Iraqi Shiite militias, Syria and Hezbollah, the representatives of the Shiite power. The United States exaggerated the so-called radical "Shiite Crescent" and its impact on moderate Sunni countries, which intensified the sectarian conflicts and exacerbated the security game between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In 2003, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, encouraged by the United States, Iraqis practised democratic elections. The politics of Iraq in post-war period was overwhelmed by Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish, based on different sectarians. It not only failed to establish a mature model of democracy, but also turned Iraq into another "Lebanon"—sectarian identity was even beyond the national identity. This became an important driving force for Saudi Arabia and Iran to involve in internal affairs of Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries.

Third, the US alliance system in the Middle East is in potential crisis. In 2016, the so-called three traditional pillars of peace, stability and prosperity of the United States—Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel—were all in a crisis, evolving from an arc of stability into the new epi-center of turbulence. After the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2015, substantial improvement in US relations with Iran was achieved. This made the United States' allies in the Middle East, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, feel nervous and upset. They all expressed dissatisfaction with the United States "overtopping diplomacy". The United States no longer supported Saudi Arabia without any doubt, but instead, preferred to maintain a strategic balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which was regarded as the "overtopping diplomacy" by Saudi Arabia. Without the strategic support from the US, the Saudi royal family and the regime had a strong sense of insecurity. Coupled with the sharp fall of oil price in

2015, the fiscal deficit of Saudi Arabia amounted to \$135 billion dollars (Armstrong, 2015); domestic economic and social contradictions, and public calls for reform were rising. Meanwhile, the Royal infighting intensified; the Saudi Arabia prince Mohammed Naif, and Foreign Minister Adel Juhir both pursued a hardline diplomacy—they formed the Sunni Islamic state coalition against terrorism, carried out the “northern thunder” military exercises with more than 20 countries, which aggregated rivalry with Iran and other Shiite forces in the Middle East. In February 2016, with the excuse of responding to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the European Union announced the resolution on the arms embargo towards Saudi Arabia. In addition, after the attempted coup of Turkey in July 2016, the challenge of Syrian civil war, the flooding refugees, the Kurdish separatist movement and the Gülen movement all escalated, and Ankara is facing great pressure and discomfort at home and with neighboring countries. The domestic economic recession and terrorist attacks also intensified in Turkey. The upgrade of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, the rise of anti-Israel forces such as Iran and Hezbollah and chaos in Syria also deteriorated security environment of Israel, another ally of the United States.

Fourth, the arms race of the Middle East will remain a flashpoint. The Middle East is an area with the lowest level of integration in the world, due to the lack of regional organizations that can cover the entire region. Moreover, the GCC, the Arab League, the Maghreb Union, the Mediterranean Union and other regional organizations were almost trapped in a standstill in recent years, thus regional organizations could hardly play an effective role. Since the deteriorated relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, geopolitical competition and zero sum game among regional powers have become the “new normal”; populism, religious extremism and ethnic separatism in the Middle East have made the main countries fall into the trap of Thucydides and unable to get themselves out. In the strong sense of insecurity, the Middle East countries feel anxious, and they will continue to be the main buyers of global arms. The weapons from the United States, Britain and France and other Western countries will continue to enter the GCC countries, Israel and Turkey. In September 2015, US and Israel signed a landmark agreement to provide the latter with \$38 billion in military assistance over the next decade, the largest such aid package in US history (US, Israel Sign Landmark \$38 Billion Military Aid Package, 2016). Russian weapons will enter the arms market of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Egypt. An arms race in the Middle East and the proliferation of small and light arms will become more prominent, one of the sources of conflicts.

Fifth, terrorism and separatism in the Middle East will continue to be the spoilers. There are two main reasons for the rise of terrorism in the Middle East in recent years. One is the overthrow of the original powerful and authoritarian governments in the Middle East sovereign countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, and Somalia; the new governments have low national governance capacity, providing an opportunity for extremism and radical forces. The other one is that the United States, Europe, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have different interests in the fight against “Islamic state” and the Al Qaeda. Therefore, anti-terrorism has become a “tool”, and these countries pursue double-standard policy in counter-terrorism campaigns, suppressing their political enemies in anti-terrorism activities and even colluding with terrorist organizations so that they can rely on terrorist forces to counterbalance their strategic rivals (Mabon & Royle, 2016). The current fight against terrorist groups in the Middle East has three mechanisms, namely the international anti-terror coalition initiated by United States, the anti-terrorist coalition initiated by Russia, and the Islamic coalition against terrorism started by Saudi Arabia. The latter is composed by 34 Islamic countries (however, Iran is excluded from this coalition). Although the area controlled by the “Islamic State” is shrinking, it will be dealing with the big powers and

looking for suitable living space and even take more efforts to revenge in other places such as Turkey. At the same time, the calls for Kurdish autonomy in Syria, Iraq and Turkey are growing. The Kurdish People's Protection Units/YPG is supported by the United States and Western countries, and has taken control of the northern part of Syria; in Turkey, the PKK is becoming more active. Following the "Arab Spring", a "Kurdish Spring" is brewing; Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon are in the process of "fragmentation".

The New Stages of Flashpoints in the Middle East

First, the Syrian crisis will stay in a stalemate. In 2016, the solutions to hot issues in the Middle East will become more complex. After the signing of Iran nuclear agreement of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the international community had once hoped to resolve the crisis in Syria through the Iran model, and held two meetings in Geneva, the two Vienna Conventions and a meeting in New York. The UN Security Council thereafter adopted Resolution 2,254 on Syria issue. However, behind the crisis in Syria, there are contradictions between the Bashar regime and the oppositionists, and the contradiction between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and even the conflicts among Russia and Turkey and the United States plus other NATO allies. Sour relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have made the soft landing of Syria problem particularly difficult. Although the United States and Russia reached a ceasefire agreement on Syria in February 2016, and Syria also temporarily restored peace, hostility escalated in Aleppo again since mid 2016. Whether the establishment of the transitional government in June can be realized and whether a new constitution can be adopted in June 2017, and whether Bashar himself will stay are still uncertain (Sun, 2015). Under the circumstance that Turkey and Saudi Arabia are actively planning to launch a ground offensive against Syria, the internal and external factors of unrest in Syria are still remaining. The so-called "Plan B" by Russia and the United States to divide and rule Syria is daunting. That is, the Bashar regime, supported by Russia and Iran, rules the Mediterranean coast of Syria; the Sunni population, backed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, takes control of eastern and central Syria; the Kurdish People's Protection Units, supported by United States, controls the northern region of Syria. As of October 2016, the US had helped Iraqi government and Kurdish forces to encircle Mosul, while Russia intensified its military support to Syrian Assad regime to fight a crucial war in Aleppo. The "Islamic State" territory is consistently shrinking.

Second, the difficulty to resolve the crisis in Yemen is increasing. On the surface, Yemen crisis is the contradiction between the Sunni and Shiite militias; in essence, there is a shadow of geopolitical game between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, led 10 countries and launched air strikes named "Decisive Storm" against Yemeni Houthi armed force, but so far has achieved little. The Saudi Arabia Chief Military Commander, Brigadier General Sukhiani and Senior Commander of the United Arab Emirates Colonel Katabi died in Yemeni battle. In view of the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Shiite Houthi armed force launched a local counterstrike. Considering that the armed forces supported by former Yemeni President Saleh involved in the Yemen crisis, it is difficult to realize peace in Yemen in the short term.

Third, the implementation of JCPOA is still facing hurdles. After the six great powers reached the nuclear agreement with Iran in July 2015, the international public opinion was optimistic that the Iran nuclear issue would be completely resolved. The United States will open the gates of Iran like it opened the door of the People's Republic of China in 1971. And Iran's relations with the West will be comprehensively improved. In January 2016, US and Iran reached an agreement that Iran would release five Americans, including Washington Post

reporter, Jason Rezaian, and US clemency offered to seven Iranians charged for sanctions violations (Secret Iran-US negotiations bear result, landmark agreement signed, 2016).

However, after the JCPOA nuclear agreement was reached between the United States and Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Turkey and other US allies in the Middle East felt ignored, and they have expressed dissatisfaction with the United States. They were trying their best to undermine the nuclear agreement, attempting to tie the United States back to their chariots. Turkey shot down the Russian aircraft, Israel launched several rounds of air strikes against the Lebanon's Hezbollah, and the Saudi Arabia took the lead to cut down diplomatic ties with Iran following the JCPOA agreement. All these have sent a signal to the United States, forcing the United States to reiterate security commitments to its allies. Under external pressure, in December 2015, the Obama administration decided that Iran conducted ballistic missile test in October 2015 and November 2015, respectively, in violation of the relevant United Nations resolution on forbidding Iran from engaging in ballistic missile test. Therefore, the United States will take a new round of sanctions against companies and individuals involved in the ballistic missile program. After JCPOA was formally implemented on January 2016, Iranian President Rouhani visited Europe to alienate the United States and Europe. Following that, the moderate Conservative forces won the parliamentary election as well as the election for Iran Expert Committee. However, "Rome was not built in a day". It remained uncertain whether Iran's détente with the West still faces hurdles, especially the crisis in Syria, and the obstacles by Saudi Arabia and Israel, etc.

Finally, the Palestine-Israel issue will move from the edge to the center. Since the Arab upheaval erupted, the chaos in the Arab world, the outbreak of civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria, and the rise of the "Islamic State", together with the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran, all have made Palestine and Israel the "outsiders" and "bystanders". Moreover, in term of the containment of Iran and Lebanon Hezbollah and the fight against the Bashar regime of Syria, Israel and Saudi Arabia share some common interests. Foreign media, such as *Times of London*, even exposed that, Saudi Arabia once reached a tacit agreement with Israel to provide air corridor for the Israeli defense forces' air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, which was denied by Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf saying Saudi Arabia practiced standing down its anti-aircraft systems to allow an Israeli bomb run (Haaretz Service, 2010). In 2015, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict escalated, the Israeli forces fought against Hezbollah in Lebanon and Israelis launched air strikes in Syria's airspace, which means that it is hard for Israel to be a bystander in the chaos in the Middle East in the future. With respect to the issue of Jewish settlements, the establishment of Palestinian State, the EU's ban on commodities from Jewish settlements into the EU market and the US election, the Palestine-Israel issue will arouse more attention in the international community, particularly since Israel and Turkey normalized their relations in 2016.

China's Middle East Diplomacy in the New Era

To begin with, peace and development are the two major goals of China's diplomacy in the Middle East. China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In political area, it promotes Middle East peace talks which serve its interests; in economic area, it promotes mutual benefit and win-win cooperation because China is the largest trading partner of the Arab League and Iran, and major trading partner of Turkey and Iran. The *China's Arab Policy* Paper released in 2016 is a comprehensive exposition of the Sino-Arab relations (Xinhua, 2016).

In terms of the Middle East peace, China is the only permanent member of the UN Security Council that has not fought against the “Islamic State” by military force. During January 4-10, 2016, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. He called on Saudi Arabia and Iran to maintain restraint and strengthen dialogue. Chinese official highlighted that only through dialogue and negotiation can we solve the problems; violence can only breed more bloodshed and conflicts. Therefore, unlike the United States, Europe, and Russia, China has always stressed seeking common ground while respecting differences, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The next phase for China to participate in the Middle East governance is to make use of special envoy mechanism, including the nomination of a special envoy for Syrian affairs, Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan.

With respect to the development of the Middle East, China believes that the contradictions in the Middle East should be digested and resolved through economic and social development. Governance on people's livelihood is more effective than democratic governance, and “traditional Chinese medicine” (livelihood governance) is more effective than “western medicine” (democratic governance) (Sun & Bao, 2016, p. 61). China is the second largest trade partner of the Arab League, as well as the largest trading partner of Iran, and is an important trading partner of Israel and Turkey as well. Through mutually beneficial and win-win economic and trade development vis-à-vis the zero-sum defence relations, through the aid and assistance to refugees of Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, China has promoted the stability and development in the Middle East, as Beijing claimed. The establishments of Beidou navigation satellite system in the Middle East and China's participation in the Middle East's port construction, high-speed railway projects, and nuclear power plants, etc. are important part of cooperation (Sun & Zhang, 2016, p. 32). China and the Arab world have unanimously agreed to create a China-Arab Beidou Forum in 2017.

Next, bilateral and multilateral mechanisms are the two largest platforms for China's diplomacy in the Middle East. In bilateral relations, China has actively attached great importance to all around cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria and other countries. At the same time, in recent years, the multilateral cooperation mechanism between China and Middle East countries began to increase, such as the International Conference on Iran's nuclear issue (P5+1) and the Syria issue, the Sino-Arab State Cooperation Forum, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Iran is an observer, and Turkey is a partner for dialogue), the CICA summit mechanism (Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Egypt, and Israel are members), the G20 (Turkey and Saudi Arabia are member states), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan are member states) and the Silk Road Fund as well as other informal mechanisms. China also promotes negotiations on free trade area with the GCC countries, and has made great headway in 2016. According to President Xi's proposal during his visit to Egypt, it is recommended to hold the Sino-Arab Civilization and De-Radicalization Roundtable in the near future, in which Chinese think tank on the Middle East issues can also be involved.

Furthermore, partnership without alliance is the unique concept of China's diplomacy in the Middle East. The Western strategic culture emphasizes “dividing”. Following that hidden logic, the Middle East has been divided into Sunni and Shiite, Arabs and non-Arabs, moderates and radicals, pro-American camp and anti-American camp. The United States, Europe and Russia have drawn a line between friends and foes in

accordance with the degree of being “friendly” or the so-called “degree of democratization”, a unique alliance strategy. Chinese strategic culture emphasizes “integration”, i.e. the Middle East is perceived as the unified market. In the Middle East, it does not choose sides or camp or alliance; it does not favor any party, and instead maintains friendly relations with all conflicting parties, pursuing nonalignment strategy. During his visit to Egypt, President Xi Jinping delivered a speech on China’s Middle East policy, i. e. “three Nos”: no agents, no sphere of influence, and not filling the power vacuum in the Middle East (Xi, 2016).

China has established a strategic partnership or strategic cooperation with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan, but not targets any third party. Different from the Western countries and Russia, China did not involve in the disputes between different religious sects in the Middle East. It does not utilize the sectarian conflict, but instead, it calls on open talks and negotiations between the conflicting parties, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as strengthening the unity among the Islamic countries. During the G20 summit in Hangzhou, Egyptian President Sisi was invited as an honored guest. He proposed China and Islamic powers to participate in the general assembly of global governance together, which is echoed by China as well.

Finally, the “Belt and Road Initiative” is an important task of Chinese Middle East diplomacy. At present, the Middle East has formed three networks, one is the “terrorist network” composed by the “Islamic State” and the Al Qaeda’s affiliates; the second is the network of “military bases” established by the United States, Britain, France and Russia and other European powers; the third is the “geopolitical network” created by Saudi Arabia and Iran through the establishment of agents. These three networks are exclusive and antagonistic. China proposes the “Belt and Road Initiative”, i.e. the fourth network, which is an “economic network” of mutual benefit and win-win, claimed by Beijing. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel will all become important fulcrums to build China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” in the Middle East. Through the practical actions of the “Belt and Road” construction, China contributes to peace as well as seeking common ground while putting aside differences for the Middle East countries. However, it’s by no means an easy task for China to wade in troubled waters of the Middle East in the new era, and it is still early for the international community to forecast what China can harvest in the years to come.

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