중국의 대중동 외교정책: 목적과 도전

김일수1) 마나르 모하이센2)
1) 충북대학교 정치외교학과 교수
2) 한국기술교육대학교 교수, 충북대학교 정치외교학과 박사과정학생
muilsukim@chungbuk.ac.kr

I. Introduction
II. China–Middle East Relations
III. Chinese Foreign Policy Goals Toward the Middle East
IV. Conclusion
중국의 대중동 외교정책: 목적과 도전

김일수 3)·마나르 모하이센 4)

1) 충북대학교 정치외교학과 교수
2) 한국기술교육대학교 교수, 충북대학교 정치외교학과 박사과정학생
   muilsukim@chungbuk.ac.kr

역사적으로 중동지역은 미국이나 중국에게 중요한 지역으로 남아있다. 2차 세계대전이 끝난 후 미국은 중동지역에서 영향력을 유지하는 정책을 추진해 왔다. 중국은 중동지역에 대해 주로 ‘정치적인 비관여’와 ‘중립’적인 외교노선을 추구해왔다. 이러한 것이 중국이 점차 G2 국가로 부상하면서 중동지역에서 점차로 자신의 군사·경제·정치적 이익을 확대하고 있다.

이 논문은 중국의 대중동정책의 변화를 살펴보는데 있다. 이 논문을 통해 중국의 대중동정책의 목적이 어디에 있는지, 구체적으로 중동지역에서 중국이 추구하는 군사적·경제적·정치적 이익이 무엇인지를 분석하고 있다. 끝으로 미국이 추진하고 있는 테러와의 전쟁과 중동의 민주화 움직임에 대해 중국이 향후 어떠한 입장을 취할 것인지를 대해서도 분석하고 있다.

결론적으로 중국은 정치적으로 어떤 형태의 정권이라도 자신의 경제적이고 전략적인 이익과 상반되지 않을 경우 중립적이고 비정치적인 접근을 취할 것으로 보인다. 자신의 경제발전을 위해 중동으로부터 석유에 의존해야 하는 중국으로서는 중동의 안정과 평화가 필요하다. 당분간 중국은 중동에서의 큰 변화 보다는 현재의 상황이 지속되는 것을 선호할 것으로 예상된다. 또한 중국의 국제적인 영향력 상승과 맞물려 중동지역에서 미국과 협력을 모색해 나갈 것으로 예상된다.

핵심용어 : 중국의 대 중동정책, 군사적 이익, 경제적 이익, 정치적 이익, 현실주의 외교정책, 테러와의 전쟁

1) 충북대학교 정치외교학과 교수
2) 한국기술교육대학교 교수, 충북대학교 정치외교학과 박사과정학생
China’s Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East: Trends and Challenges

Ilsu Kim1), Manar Mohaisen2)
1) Professor, Chungbuk National University
2) Assistant Professor, Korea Tech and Ph.D. Candidate, Chungbuk National University
muilsukim@chungbuk.ac.kr

In this paper, we address the following issues that shape the Chinese foreign policy in the middle east: 1) Military interests, where we track the military interests of China in the region and the main motives behind it and the position of China on the global war on terrorism, 2) Political aspects with a focus on the long lasting Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, and 3) Economic aspects with emphasis on the importance of the Middle East as an energy import partner, necessary for the Chinese economic development, besides the arm sales to a region witnessing several military conflicts. We conclude that the Chinese relations with the middle east has witnessed a shift from ideology-characterized foreign policy into a more realist foreign policy putting the Chinese national interests at the core. We also conclude that China will continue to pursue its economic interests in the region without direct military involvement, as opposed to the U.S. foreign policy in the region. The military presence might be enforced in to protect the future new silk road, which connects Asia and Europe.

Key words: Chinese foreign policy, Middle East, War on terrorism, Arms sales, Arab Spring
I. Introduction

Historically, the Middle East was of great importance to the U.S. and China. For the U.S. the region is of great importance due to strategic and economic reasons (Brown 2014). While the U.S. was perceived as an enemy by the majority of the Middle East states, especially Arab states, China was never treated as an enemy. China has been an observer country in the Non-Aligned Movement lead by Nasser, the then president of Egypt.

With the rise of China as a great power, the Middle East became of great importance for strategic and economic agenda of the Chinese foreign policy makers. It is more likely the case that China will aim to counter the U.S. dominance in the region and pursue its own national interests.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze China–Middle East relations. In doing so, we address 1) the military interests of China in the region and the main motives behind them and the position of China on the global war on terrorism, 2) political aspects with a focus on the long lasting Israeli–Palestinian conflict and several recent developments, 3) economic aspects with emphasis on the importance of the Middle East as an energy import partner.

II. China–Middle East Relations

The Second World War (WWII) has shaped the world geography, politics, and nature of rivalry. In the wake of the WWII, empires collapsed, states were born or reborn and ideological wars remarked the world politics. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in October 1949. After the power retake of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over China mainland in 1949 and Kuomintang (KMT) being pulled out of China mainland to Taiwan, the West has supported Taiwan as the representative of whole China. The enmity between the PRC and the West was therefore inevitable (Dillon 2012).

After WWII, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union have pursued realist foreign policies in the Middle East. China was not part of the Soviet front against the West pole but rather formed its own front independent of the Soviets. This is due
to the ideological disagreements between the Soviet and Chinese communist parties regarding to the Marxist ideology. The Chinese party adopted radical Marxist ideology, while Soviets were portrayed as ‘revisionist traitors’ (Blank 2014). The foreign relations of China under Mao Zedong were influenced by his communist ideology which by default characterized the capitalist world and its allies as enemies.

The split between the Soviet Union and China became public in early 1960s, which widely opened the door for the reconciliation between China and the United States. The ideological split turned into military conflict on borders between the two states in 1969, which encouraged the U.S. to pursue a Containment policy towards China (Ryabushkin 2007).

The goal of the U.S. was to take China out of the Soviet pole and hence weaken its main rivalry. Despite the split between China and the Soviet Union, the Chinese foreign policy was mainly ideological even after the death of the founder Mao Zedong in 1976. The visit of Henry Kissinger, the then Secretary of State, to China in 1971 and the Shanghai Communiqué signed in 1972 by President Nixon and Mao Zedong was a manifestation of the split within the Chinese leadership about the pursued ideological foreign policy (Do 2014).

The U.N. resolution 2758 recognized The Republic of China as the legitimate representative of China and expelled Taiwan from the U.N. General Assembly. Hua Guofeng succeeded Mao Zedong and adopted similar ideological foreign policy. With regard to ME, China objects the U.S. power dominance and close relations with Israel.

When Israel was supported by the West, Mao Zedong, then leader of the PRC, supported the Palestinian militant groups including the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). PRC held that Israel should be eradicated and a Palestinian Arab state should replace it.

The PRC also promoted the full right of return of the Palestinian refugees displaced by the Jewish paramilitary groups that formed the Israeli army after the establishment of Israel in 1948. An embassy of the PLO was opened in China in 1974.

During the 1960s-1980s break-out with the Soviet Union, China has started to have closer relations with the West and consequently with Israel (Tiezzi 2014). Early private talks between China and Israel started in the 1970s. With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China has even more enforced its rapprochement with the West and had plans to move to the free-market economy.
The PRC supported the Peace talks between Egypt and Israel in the late 1970s while the Palestinian militant groups have opposed to it. The Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat opposed to the Soviet Union policies in the region and hence was welcomed by China as an enemy-of-the-enemy friend. This was a turning point in the Chinese foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Despite these disagreements and Chinese openness towards the West and Israel, China recognized the Palestinian State declared by Yasser Arafat in Algeria in November 15, 1988. In the wake of the end of the first Palestinian Intifada and the peace talks held in Madrid between Israel and several Arab countries, including the PLO, China officially established relations with Israel in January 1992 (Shai 2014).

China opposed to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, hence lined with the West and Israel, while the PLO, led by Yasser Arafat, lined with Saddam Hussein, the then President of Iraq. This added salt to the injuries in the relationship between the PRC and the PLO.

China got rid of its ideological foreign policy; the official position of China became more and more neutral. Currently, China officially supports the two-state solution of the conflict with a Palestinian state on the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967. China, for reasons of public diplomacy and interests with the Arab/Islamic World, supported the bid for the recognition of a Palestinian state in the U.N.

This coldness in the relationship between China and Palestine is accompanied by more friendly relationship between China and Israel. Even before the official establishment of the diplomatic relations between China and Israel in 1992, there was a close military cooperation between the two states. Israel is the second supplier of arms to China after Russia. The U.S. worries about the transfer of the U.S. technology to the Chinese by Israel (Ramachandran 2004).

Sino-Israel relation is primordial to both sides; China seeks the technology, Israel seeks the money and the political support. In agriculture and water technology, Israel signed a deal worth $300 million dollars with China. Common research projects are signed by institutions in both countries and the exchange of academic visits is promoted.

The economic exchange between Israel and China jumped from a few million U.S. dollars in 1992 to about $8 billion in 2013. While under Mao Zedong and the ideologically likes, the religion factor was not an issue in deciding the Chinese foreign policy and forming the public opinion (Rubin 1999).

Under President Xi Jinping, China still was following the non-interference policy. In April 2015, President Xi Jinping cancelled an official visit to Saudi Arabia
and Egypt, fearing that it might be understood, especially by Iran, as an agreement with the two states on international issues (Goldenberg 2015).

In the Yemeni Crisis, China has played a role of a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran, seen that the Yemeni conflict is a proxy war between the two states, holding that this conflict should be solved using political means and alerting both sides that the escalation would lead to the instability of the region (Mordechai 2015).

The non-interference policy position of China is mainly motivated by economic agenda. China expects that non-interference in ME would guarantee the establishment of the new Silk road that link China, Russia, the Baltic, and Gulf countries which will reduce the cost of transport for China (Brugier 2014).

III. Chinese Foreign Policy Goals Toward the Middle East

There are several factors that promote cooperation such as economic interdependence, China's increasing role in international scene, cooperating on common threats such as climate change and terrorism, etc. However the power and different world vision are still the most affecting factors on the U.S.–China relations (Friedberg 2012).

The US and China are waging a struggle for power in Asia and the Globe that is becoming acute as China accumulates power. The rivalry is not due to misperception errors but is rather driven by power politics and different visions of the world.

Also, the competition on new markets, U.S. debts held by China, and the currency manipulation create tensions instead of avoiding them. While the U.S. was busy waging wars in the Middle East, wars that drained the U.S. budget, China advanced both economically and militarily. The gap between the two states shrank and will continue to narrow in the years to come (Friedberg 2005). In the following, we address these goals in light of the Chinese foreign policy toward the middle east.
1. Military Interests

China is the fourth biggest arms exporter in the world. The issue with China is that it does not impose serious constraints, if any, on the use of these arms. As Amnesty International puts it: “Recipient countries over the past decade have tended to be developing countries with poor human rights records including Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, DRC, Guinea, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Zimbabwe.” (Amnesty 2012).

Middle East and Africa, where long lasting authoritarian regimes continue to exist, accumulates about 30% of the total world imports. The case of Sudan, a report states that “China sold $3 million in small arms to Khartoum in 2003; that number reached more than $55 million by 2006.” (Amnesty 2012). The problem is that China was not held accountable for any of its exports to these countries, where arms are more likely to be used in violating the basic human rights.

China’s long term goal in the region is to maintain the status quo in order to achieve stability which is a pre-requisite for its economical development. On the other hand, while several recent reports and pieces of analysis have suggested a possible Chinese involvement in the Syrian crisis in support of the Russian forces on the ground, this involvement, if it happens at all, will be rather symbolic. Also, the engagement in this conflict would be in line with the U.S. foreign policy which implicitly supports the Chinese waged war against ISIS, which in turn is seen by the Syrian opposition as a war against them and a support to the Assad regime.

Based on this discussion and in light of the recent aggravation of the conflicts in the Middle East, we believe that the military presence of China in the region will continue to be minimal. In case the new silk road, which will go through several Middle East countries, is constructed, the military presence of China might be enforced in order to protect the Chinese economic interests.

2. Economic Interests

The economic reform in China started as early as in 1978 and with the access of Deng Xiaoping to power in 1981, the main focus of China is to achieve domestic and international stability in order to promote economical development, which is a primordial goal of the Chinese foreign policy.

The economic reforms went through three stages: The first stage (1978–84) concerned the rural areas where communes were disbanded and state owned land
was distributed on farmers, and state-owned companies were reformed; the second stage (1985–92) concerned the urban economy and continued the reform of state-owned companies; in the third stage, which is being adopted by the current government, the private sector was accepted and even promoted which turned the Chinese economy into a mixed economy rather than being fully centralized (Ding 2009).

These reforms revolutionized the Chinese economy: the percentage of population living on less than $1.25 a day has decreased from more than 80% in 1981 to 13% in 2008, the GDP per capita has jumped 1,200 times in 1980–2010, and China’s world market share has increased from below 1% in 1980 to more than 9% in 2010 (Ettore 2013).

The Chinese economy—first policy also shaped the Chinese foreign policy toward the Middle East. China is the world largest importer of crude oil (Daojing 2015). The gap between Chinese oil production and consumption is increasing. More than half of the crude oil import of China comes from the Middle East (Liu 2014).

China has good relations with the two strongest oil producer rivals in the region, namely, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, which supplies one fifth of China oil consumption, is an ally of the U.S. while Iran is an “enemy” of the U.S. The policy of Iran towards Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Iraq in support of the Shia, is seen with much suspicion from the Gulf Arab countries. China keeps the same distance from the two states due to its interests with both states.

The fall in oil prices to a historic level of $60/barrel is another round of battle between Iran and Russia on one side and Saudi Arabia on the other. Recently, the oil prices are in a free fall with a historic price of $32/barrel. In OPEC, Saudi Arabia refused to decrease the production favored by Iran, note that Russia is not a member of OPEC. The Iranian president implicitly described the act of Saudi Arabia as a treachery.

Saudi Arabia is trying to punish Iran and Russia for their support to Assad regime in Syria. On the short term, Saudi Arabia can sustain the drop in the oil prices since it has a huge foreign exchange reserve (about $745 billion). However, this fall in oil prices severely affects Iranian economy which is already struggling due to sanctions. Russia, despite the fact that it has a respectively high foreign exchange reserve (about $419 billion), its budget is highly dependent on oil prices. China is a beneficiary from the oil price fall, so it happily does not interfere with the current fight as an internal issue within countries (Stephens 2014).

From 2005 to 2009, the export from China to the Middle East countries has reached unprecedented amount of $100 billion where the export from the Middle East
countries to China has increased by 25 percent. On the other hand, the trade between the U.S. and the Middle East countries has declined. China has generously invested in the region, where investment jumped from $1 billion in 2005 to $11 billion in 2009 (Chen 2011). All these investments were welcomed by the regional governments, both allies and enemies of the U.S. such as Iraq, Iran, and Sudan.

Chinese construction companies were hired by the Algerian government to build thousands of homes and highways. These investments, the soft power tool of China in the Middle East, are challenging the U.S. dominance and hence encouraging Israel to strengthen its economical and military ties with China, benefitting from this exponentially rising power (Morrison 2015).

China's development depends on the flow of crude oil from Middle East countries, especially from Saudi Arabia and Iran, and their open markets to the Chinese goods. As long as the Chinese foreign policy is economically-driven, the chinese dependence on the region will persist and the Chinese economic foreign policy in the region will therefore not change.

3. Political Interests

The increased economical interdependence between China and the Middle East requires political stability in the ME. China wants stable ‘status-quo’ of the Middle East: it opposed to the Arab Spring though it did not officially declare its position. China wants to deal with whomever who can guarantee their access to the natural resources and keep the markets of the region open for the Chinese products: two factors necessary for the Chinese economical development.

China has supported authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It considered them the most capable of keeping her interests in the region. China had a goal to increase the trade with the Arab World to $300 billion in 2014 from about $200 billion in 2012. The main focus of China is therefore economic and when money talks, all discussion about human rights are not part of the realist thought of how international affairs to be handled.

While the entire West posed sanctions on the Bashir regime of Sudan, Bashir was offered a red carpet treatment by President Hu Jintao in 2011. He was welcomed in Beijing even though the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for him in March 2009. The uprising people in the Middle East felt the direct support of the U.S. to the authoritarian regimes, while the Chinese support was almost hidden except in the case of Syria. Therefore, the people in the
Arab spring countries, except the case of Syria, did not consider China as a complicit (Morin 2014).

The Syrian uprising was the only uprising in which the Chinese government has publicly reacted to. At early stage of the Syrian uprising, several Western countries drafted a resolution to put an end to the bloody aggressions. China and Russia vetoed the resolution and later they vetoed two other draft U.N. resolutions. Mostafa Kamal, a member of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, "expressed admiration for China’s position and proposition on the Syrian issue" and said that Egypt is willing to “strengthen communications and coordination with China on the issue.”

This opened a door for China to initiate relations with Egypt, a key state in the region, which would threatens the U.S. dominance. Partially, China opposed to the Arab Spring fearing a Chinese uprising against the Communist government. However, the chances are less probable though some of the internal conditions of the Arab Spring countries and China are similar. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is strong, the army is disciplined, and the economy is taking huge jumps.

With the tensions and presumably the human right violations by the Chinese government against the Muslim minority, non-Muslim majority has stamped the Muslim minority with terrorism. During the recent aggressions against Gaza, Palestine, the Chinese population was divided more than ever where Muslims promoted a positive intervention in the Middle East issues to end the conflict and asked the Chinese government to support the Palestinian people. On the other hand, the non-Muslim majority lined with Israel and claimed an Israel’s right to self-defense. While this apparent public division might influence the Chinese future position on the conflict, the official position of China remained neutral based on a non-interference policy.

Another important issue to analyze is whether the rise of China would affect the role played by the international organizations in bring to an end the current conflict. The Chinese foreign policy tends to be more realist than liberal or neo-liberal. This implies that China would marginalize the role played by those organizations and promote bilateral negotiations and agreements.

As a result of the official policy towards the Muslim minority, the Chinese people became divided on international issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; Muslims support Palestinians and non-Muslims tend to counter the Muslims tendencies.

Recently, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) has threatened the occupation of Xinjiang by China. While the threat of occupying parts of China sounds absurd and hence should not be seriously considered, the threat of targeting
the Chinese economical presence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, sounds more accomplishable by the ISIS.

The direct involvement of China in the Middle East war on terrorism waged by the U.S. and its allies is debatable. While some scholars argue that China should be proactive and hence intervene in the Middle East affairs, certain scholars see little chance that China would be involved in this costly war. Zhu Weilie, director of the Middle East Studies Institute at Shanghai International Studies University, told that China will be more actively involved in war on terrorism, but “will never be as involved in Middle East affairs as the United States.” (Olesen 2014).

Most likely, China will be a free-rider in the major international issues, as described by the U.S. president Barack Obama. China will not actively engage in the war on ISIS because, First, China does not have enough capability and experience fighting “terror” organization as does the U.S.

Second, China does not trust the West and the U.S. China considers engaging her into the war on terrorism would divest her power and weakens its regional influence in South-East and East Asia.

Third, China does not need to pay for something that she can get for free. China is getting the “positive” results of the war on terror without any financial burden and without having enemies (McCafferty 2015).

IV. Conclusion

Middle east is an important region for great powers due to its strategic position and natural resources, among other reasons. With the rise of China as a regional or even world hegemony, the long lasting political and military dominance of the U.S. in the Middle East is challenged.

In this paper, we analyzed the Chinese foreign policy toward the Middle East in terms of its main military, economic, and political goals. Generally put, China has an economy-first-driven policy in the Middle East, where political regimes that promote stability are favored.

Military-wise, China did not expand in the region and we tend to believe that China will not engage in issues that require using hard power. In the Yemeni conflict, for instance, where the biggest oil suppliers to China wage a war, the Chinese position is unclear but goes inline with its policy of avoiding to enter in
conflict with any of the countries that might threaten its economical interests.

In other words, in analogy with the economic reforms performed in the late 1970s that partially freed the economy, the Chinese foreign policy shifted from the ideological approach to a more realist one, especially under President Deng Xiaoping and his succeeders. The present–day Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East is simply a continuity of Xiaoping thoughts.

Economically, China is gaining grounds while the U.S. is loosing influence in the Middle East. We expect this economic tendency to continue as long as China pursues a non-interference approach. China will always be seen as a potential partner by region’s governments and societies alike. It is unlikely that China challenges the U.S. military influence in the region for it might be very costly.

The Chinese arms, as long as lucrative for China, will continue to pour in the Middle East regardless of the nature of use of those arms. For China, human rights are an internal issue that China does not pay any effort to improve in her arms partner countries. China expects Islamic countries not to interfere with the Chinese “internal issues”.

In major issues, especially regarding to the war on terrorism, China will behave as a free–rider as long as the U.S. is determined to settle conflicts with hard power, where China’s main involvement would be symbolic. As China’s power increased, the U.S. asked China to behave as a great power and hence to assume responsibilities in the emerging international issues. However, the Chinese involvement in the region is mainly economic and a large–scale military presence would be necessary in case of the construction of the new silk road, where the goal of the military presence will be to protect the economic interests. In light of our analysis and the competitive nature of the relations between the U.S. and China, there will be low chances of cooperation in the region between the two great powers.

References


