

China's Participation in Middle East Security Affairs in the New Era: Propositions and Practices

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Despite their differences in political system, ideology and economic size, China and Middle East countries have sympathized with and supported each other in the international community. After the founding of New China, China's participation in Middle East security affairs can be broadly divided into three phases. During the first phase, from 1949 to 1979, China, proceeding from the ideological struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and great-power chauvinism, gave firm support to the national liberation movement in the Middle East as well as the Palestinian people's just cause. During the second phase, from 1979 to 2012, on hotspot issues like the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Darfur issue, China, in light of the principle of "participating with caution and within one's capabilities," participated in Middle East security affairs on a selective basis. The third phase started from the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012. China's participation in Middle East security affairs has since shifted from "making a difference" to "actively making contributions," with the building of a community with a shared future for mankind as its goal, the provision of security public goods as its means, and comprehensive security governance as its path. By doing so, China's diplomatic influence in Middle East security affairs has been on the rise. In the new era, China's participation in Middle East security affairs may advance even farther. Thus, it is necessary to examine relevant propositions

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that China has put forward lately concerning the resolution of Middle East security issues and reflect on the practical experience of China's participation in Middle East security governance. It is without a doubt also of significance in exploring and practicing the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind in the Middle East.

China's Propositions on Middle East Security Issues

The Middle East is a region suffering from the largest security deficit in the world. Apart from interwoven traditional and non-traditional hotspot issues such as terrorism, separatism, extremism, civil wars, territorial disputes, sectarian conflicts, international conflicts, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, geopolitical rivalry, refugee crises and epidemics, the Middle East has also been heavily influenced by external interference or even armed intervention. Because of all this, a lot of security issues have remained unresolved to this day. As a responsible major country and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has formulated a series of distinctive propositions during its participation in Middle East security affairs. Based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, these propositions also reflect distinct features of the era. Arguably, they are the embodiment of the major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics and China's concept of global security governance.

Advocating common security

In the Middle East today, there are two competing security concepts. Advocates of the traditional security concept, represented by Western powers, believe in the law of the jungle and seek absolute security for themselves. They contain their "enemies" by arms expansion or by establishing exclusive military alliances, that is, by promoting security by force and safeguarding security through military alliances.¹ Advocates of the latter, represented by

1 Sun Degang and Zhang Dan, "Peace through Development: Conceptual Innovation and Approaches of China's Participation in Middle East Security Affairs," *Global Review*, No.5, 2019, pp.113-114.

China, propose abandoning the Cold War mindset and zero-sum mentality while fostering common security, suggesting that only by hammering swords into plowshares and building a collective security architecture can sustainable security be achieved. China's Arab policy paper in 2016 made it clear that in the new era "China calls for a concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in the Middle East, and supports Arab and regional countries in their efforts to build an inclusive and shared regional collective cooperation security mechanism, so as to realize long-term peace, prosperity and development in the Middle East."² This document is the epitome of the concept of common security. In his speech at the Arab League headquarters in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: "Instead of looking for a proxy in the Middle East, we promote peace talks; instead of seeking any sphere of influence, we call on all parties to join the circle of friends for the Belt and Road Initiative; instead of attempting to fill the 'vacuum', we build a cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes."³ It is an important demonstration of how the Chinese government goes beyond traditional security concepts in pursuit of common security. In fact, the new concept enjoys extensive popularity among regional countries.

Common security is a more inclusive security concept, which avoids miscalculation and minimizes the risk of military conflicts by establishing strategic mutual trust. Although China adheres to a policy of non-alignment in the Middle East, it keeps close communication with the conflicting parties and is fully aware of their security concerns, making itself a natural messenger and mediator, who advocates forging security ties to facilitate the building of a community with a shared future. In July 2018, President Xi pointed out at the opening ceremony of the 8th ministerial conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum: "Non-regional countries, for their part, must do more to facilitate dialogue for peace and contribute

2 *China's Arab Policy Paper*, January 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml.

3 Xi Jinping, "Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations: Speech at the Arab League Headquarters," January 21, 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1335484.shtml.

to the peace and development of the region. We must reject the idea of absolute security at the cost of others and the zero-sum or supremacist mentality.”⁴ One important reason that the Middle East security issues drag on is that some countries tend to safeguard their own security at the expense of the security of others. China urges countries in the Middle East and relevant external parties to go beyond traditional security and, with the new concept of common security in mind, to coexist peacefully, work together to cope with common challenges like COVID-19 and realize shared security. Regional countries should not form cliques for private gains, establish exclusive military groups, or seek to be the “winner-take-all.” If they continued to follow the old path of traditional security, the regional conflicts will only become international, multilateral, and more intense. Consequently, it would be difficult for any party to gain real security.

Upholding fairness and justice

Fairness and justice, according to China, is a shared value of mankind as well as an important principle in the resolution of Middle East security issues. China formulates policy based on the merits of Middle East security affairs rather than on the closeness between the conflicting parties and China. In the spirit of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, China works to offer compromise solutions which conform to the long-term interests of all parties. Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong pointed out at the Middle East Security Forum: “The realization of security in the Middle East must be based on fairness and justice. The fairness and justice enshrined in international legal documents like the UN Charter and other types of international consensus is the soul of all security solutions.”⁵ China calls on other major countries to focus on the overall situation and the future of peace and security in the Middle East and show sympathy for, and to

4 Xi Jinping, “Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era: Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum,” <http://www.chinaarabcf.org/ara/lthyjwx/bzjhy/dbjbjzjhy/P020180723583993140475.pdf>.

5 Chen Xiaodong, “Security Challenges in the Middle East and the Chinese Solution,” *International Studies*, No.1, 2020, p.9.

support, the weak against the powerful so as to uphold fairness and justice instead of being “self-serving elites.”

The Palestine issue is a root cause that hinders peace in the Middle East. Without peace between Palestine and Israel, there would be no guarantee for the security of Israel and other countries and there would be no lasting peace in the region either. President Xi pointed out that the Chinese people have always had the sense of justice and compassion. He hopes that all parties concerned could abide by international consensus and handle Palestine-related issues in an impartial way. In addition, China is in favor of holding a new international conference on the Palestine issue and exploring an innovative mechanism to promote peace in the Middle East. China believes that it is imperative to build on the two-state solution and the Arab Peace Initiative, and bring the Palestine-Israel peace talks out of its impasse as soon as possible.⁶ Once again, in November 2019, President Xi pointed out in his congratulatory message to the United Nations’ observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People that it is in the interest of the international community to find a comprehensive and just resolution for the Palestinian issue, and to help Palestine and Israel achieve peaceful coexistence and common development.⁷ China has been on friendly terms with both Israel and Palestine. The China-initiated China-Palestine-Israel trilateral dialogue mechanism, which adheres to fairness and justice, has been commended by all parties. Since the US-launched new Middle East peace plan in February 2020 has been widely cold-shouldered, the four-point proposal for the settlement of the Palestinian question presented by China⁸ is

6 Xi Jinping, “Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era: Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.”

7 “Xi Jinping Sends a Congratulatory Message to the Observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People,” November 28, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1720642.shtml.

8 The four-point proposal, raised during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s talks with visiting Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on May 6, 2013, is as follows: first, the right direction to follow should be an independent Palestinian State and peaceful co-existence of Palestine and Israel; second, negotiation should be taken as the only way to peace between Palestine and Israel; third, principles such as “land for peace” should be firmly upheld; fourth, the international community should provide important guarantee for progress in the peace process.

obviously much fairer and more just.

Safeguarding multilateralism

The conflicts in the Middle East have been of a great concern for geopolitics between major powers. Some countries have been pursuing unilateralism on Middle East security, which did not guarantee the security of these nations and even aggravated the regional turmoil. For instance, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal regardless of the concerns of the international community. In a similar vein, the US launched the new Middle East peace plan without communication with Palestine in advance. Such arbitrary practices of breaking promises, withdrawing from collaborative efforts, and imposing one's own will on others have not only damaged the United States' international reputation, but also caused collective anxiety among the Middle East countries. Holding on to multilateralism, China advocates that Middle East security issues should be discussed under the UN framework while regional organizations like the Arab League, the African Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council should also play a positive role.⁹ China stresses that external powers and Middle East countries should not regard the conflict-ridden countries as objects to be governed. Instead, they should work together with those countries and discuss security problems under the multilateral framework. As President Xi put it, "The many intractable issues in the Middle East must be addressed by all stakeholders together. They should not and cannot be decided by one party alone."¹⁰ That's a typical example which embodies China's adherence to multilateralism in terms of Middle East security affairs. The construction of security in the Middle East must be based on multilateral platforms. Only by upholding multilateralism, firmly fighting against unilateralism, fully building consensus, taking care of

9 Zhong Sheng, "Middle East Security Governance Calls for Multilateralism," *People's Daily*, December 2, 2019, p.3.

10 Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era; Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum."

each other's concerns, and promoting inclusiveness and reconciliation can we get back on track, fix our mistakes, turn crises into opportunities, and seek sustainable development.¹¹

Guided by the concept of multilateralism, China has advocated and participated in the meeting of the BRICS special envoys on the Middle East for dialogue and communication on resolving Middle East issues.¹² Multilateralism is also embodied in China's participation in the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna, the Libya Conference in Berlin, the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan, etc. The resolution of the Libya, Syria and Yemen issues, according to China, is impossible without the UN-led multilateral negotiation framework. Yang Jiechi, Director of the Office of China's Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, also stressed the importance of the multilateral approach to the resolution of hotspot issues in the Middle East: "As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a responsible country, the Chinese side has always been supporting and promoting the process leading to a political solution of the Libyan issue. China firmly supports multilateralism and is committed to addressing regional and international issues through strengthened cooperation."¹³

Promoting comprehensive governance

China believes that comprehensive measures must be taken when dealing with regional conflicts in the Middle East, which have rather complex internal and external, subjective and objective, causes such as structural geopolitical contradictions, insufficient and imbalanced economic and social development, and the proliferation of extremism and separatism. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the US has enacted regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, attempting to promote peace and development

11 Chen Xiaodong, "Security Challenges in the Middle East and the Chinese Solution," p.10.

12 "Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong Attends Consultation at Vice-Foreign Ministerial Level on the Middle East Affairs among the BRICS Countries," July 6, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1679616.shtml

13 "Yang Jiechi Holds a Briefing for Media on the Libya Conference in Berlin," January 20, 2020, <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zgyw/t1734940.htm>.

by a top-down style of “exporting democracy.” However, such transplanted political systems ultimately found themselves having a rough time adjusting to regional circumstances. In contrast, China advocates safeguarding the stability of all parties concerned and that of the region through a bottom-up style of comprehensive governance featuring a combination of political reconciliation, economic development, social advancement, and basic education.

China disapproves of the partial governance thinking of “treating the symptoms but not the disease.” Instead, China believes that the resolution of Middle East security issues, such as the Palestine-Israel issue, is a systematic project which requires the initiative of relevant countries, regional organizations, social groups and the international community, and the combined force of military trust, political dialogue, economic development, social reform, and counter-extremism efforts. In 2016, President Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech delivered at the Arab League headquarters, “Turmoil in the Middle East stems from the lack of development, and the ultimate solution will depend on development ... Only when young people are able to live a fulfilled life with dignity through development can hope prevail in their hearts. Only then will they voluntarily reject violence, extremist ideologies and terrorism.”¹⁴ It means that the resolution of Middle East security problems relies on comprehensive measures involving international peacekeeping, political development, economic growth, education, humanitarian aid, and efforts to eliminate extremism, to name a few. To address the Middle East conflicts, the Chinese government believes that efforts must be made to address both the symptoms and the root causes through an integrated series of measures, including national reconciliation, non-proliferation, coping with cross-border refugees, counter-terrorism, humanitarian aid, and public health governance.

Different ways of thinking lead to different actions by major powers. As far as counter-terrorism is concerned, in 2019, the United States declared

14 Xi Jinping, “Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations: Speech at the Arab League Headquarters.”

the death of the leader of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and multiple important figures of ISIS, hailing it a remarkable victory in terms of counter-terrorism in the Middle East.¹⁵ However, since the outburst of COVID-19, ISIS has been itching for action again in those chaotic areas. As mentioned above, China proposes taking comprehensive measures against terrorism, calling on all parties, including the international community, to work together under the coordination of the UN in their fight against terrorism, provide education and employment opportunities to young people in the Middle East through international development aid, enhance cybersecurity, crack down on cyberterrorism and carry out counter-extremism work according to local circumstances. Indeed, if we only answer violence with violence rather than eradicate the economic, social and spiritual soil of terrorism, terrorism will come back sooner or later.¹⁶

Seeking common ground while putting aside differences

In seeking solutions to the conflicts in the Middle East, China upholds the principle of seeking common ground while putting aside differences. Seeking common ground means expanding common interests and building closer ties between conflicting parties. Putting aside differences means reducing or containing the expansion of disputes, weakening the disconnecting force. Seeking common ground and putting aside differences are an integrated whole. The increase of common ground can weaken the strain of differences while the reduction of differences is able to increase the attractiveness of common ground. Thus, the two aspects collectively constitute the effective structure of reconciliation.

First, the Chinese government holds that, despite their differences of positions and views, relevant countries do have common interests in Middle East security, which means all parties should seek the greatest common

15 Jeanine Santucci, "Donald Trump Announced an ISIS Leader Was Killed in a US Raid. Who Was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?" *USA Today*, October 27, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/10/27/abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-dead-trump-announced-who-isis-leader/2478204001>.

16 Du Jie, "Three Realms of the Diplomatic Thoughts of the Communist Party of China," *Mao Zedong Thought Study*, No.3, 2013, p.142.

ground. Just as President Xi said, “As long as cooperation stays a priority for all regional countries, you can pool development efforts for greater win-win results. This is a sure way to tap into your complementarity and deliver prosperity to all.”¹⁷ Counter-terrorism is the greatest common concern of all stakeholders in their cooperation on Middle East security affairs. Although they may hold rather competing positions, they share common goals such as calling for ceasefire, negotiating truces, and promoting counter-terrorism. Only by holding on to equal negotiations and seeking common ground while putting aside differences can they expand the basis of cooperation and build consensus. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, some Middle East countries have gone beyond their political divergence and shared experience on combating COVID-19 with each other, which is certainly conducive to their further mutual cooperation.

Second, China believes that all parties of the Middle East conflict should try to heal the rift between them, or put aside the smallest differences. Given the fact that it's impossible for any party to compromise easily on matters of principle, it would be best to tackle the easiest problems first, for instance, stop the violence, disengage, exchange prisoners of war, dispatch UN peacekeepers, hold political talks, and enhance humanitarian relief. Observing the principle of seeking common ground while putting aside differences, China made an important contribution to the reconciliation of divergences between the US and Iran and later the signing of the Iran nuclear deal. The year 2018 witnessed efforts by China to promote talks between the Houthis in Yemen and the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, contribute to the withdrawal of the Houthis from Hodeida and guarantee the arrival of UN relief materials in Yemen,¹⁸ which alleviated the crisis and promoted consensus in terms of humanitarian aid.

Finally, China calls for the UN Security Council to seek the greatest

17 Xi Jinping, “Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era: Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.”

18 Guy Burton, “Chinese Conflict Management in Libya, Syria and Yemen after the Arab Uprisings,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol.13, No.1, 2019, p.30

common denominator for cooperation in its review and decision-making. As most hotspot issues in the Middle East have a bearing on the geopolitical interests of major powers as well as regional countries, the Security Council, in its review and decision-making, often finds itself divided into two opposing camps, namely, the US-UK-France-led camp and a Russia-led camp. Regarding the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, China makes its policy based on the merits of the conflicts in question. Therefore, China's policies and positions are rather different from those of Western powers and somewhat different from those of Russia as well. China calls for managing disputes under the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences to prevent further development of the crises.¹⁹

China's Participation in Middle East Security Affairs

The propositions that China put forward in its participation in Middle East security affairs originated from the rich practice of China's diplomacy with the Middle East. In the new era, the Middle East is encountering unprecedented upheaval after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire about a century ago. The security landscape is undergoing tremendous changes. The inherent security problems in regional countries are intertwined with geopolitical rivalry between major powers. Hotspot issues remain unresolved, and geopolitical competition has made a dramatic return. The outbreak of COVID-19 has exacerbated the situation, but there have been hardly any impressive security initiatives. Under such a background, the international community expects China to be more active in the governance of Middle East security affairs and provide public security goods while engaging in the regional economic governance in an all-round way. China, together with the international community, will continue to explore new approaches for the soft landing of Middle East conflicts.

In practice, China has been holding on to the new security concept

19 Sun Degang, "China's Participation in Addressing Middle East Conflicts at the Security Council: Principles, Approaches and Practices," *World Politics Studies*, No.2, 2019, pp.3-4.

featuring mutual trust, mutual benefits, equality, and coordination, and making intellectual contributions to the resolution of Middle East security issues. China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, continuously strengthens its top-level design in its participation in Middle East security affairs. Its mechanisms of coordination between major countries, such as deploying special envoys, engaging in peacekeeping, escorting ships, and humanitarian aid, have witnessed continuous improvement. Moreover, China has established a network of close partnerships with other major powers, Middle East countries and international organizations over the resolution of regional hotspot issues, peace through development projects, collective security, counter-terrorism, refugees, sea lane security, nuclear weapon-free zones, and public health, to name a few. Relevant approaches are as follows:

Promoting political dialogues

Following the concept of common security, China actively promotes political dialogues in addressing Middle East security affairs. Just as President Xi put it, it is important for Middle East countries to take dialogue as the golden rule and be good neighbors with each other. The key to addressing differences is to enhance dialogue. Use of force offers no solution to problems, neither will zero-sum mentality bring enduring peace. The process of dialogue could be protracted, and may even suffer setbacks, but it entails minimal adverse after-effects and produces the most sustainable outcomes. Parties to the conflict should begin dialogue, identify their greatest common denominator, and focus on advancing the process of political settlement.²⁰ Various conflicts in the Middle East, from the war in Afghanistan to the Iraq War, from the Syria crisis to the Yemen conflict, and from the Somali civil war to the Libya War, have shown that addressing security issues in the Middle East by force entails higher costs and greater risks, but poor effects or even severe humanitarian crises. On the contrary, resolving conflicts through

20 Xi Jinping, “Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations: Speech at the Arab League Headquarters.”

political dialogue, despite its slow pace and incumbent difficulties, brings lower risks and smaller side-effects.

Regarding the attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf region in 2019, China called for all parties to solve the crisis by political dialogue. Talking with Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates in July 2019, President Xi called on all sides concerned to stay calm and exercise restraint, refrain from opening a “Pandora’s box,” and resolve disputes and conflicts through dialogue and consultation on the basis of mutual respect. Xi expressed China’s willingness to work with the UAE as well as the international community to contribute to safeguarding peace and stability in the Gulf region.²¹ In September of the same year, after the drone attack on the Saudi petroleum company Aramco, President Xi reiterated that the current situation in the Middle East and Gulf region is complicated and sensitive, calling on all parties concerned to keep calm, exercise restraint and solve differences and disputes through dialogue, negotiation and other peaceful means on the basis of mutual respect to jointly safeguard regional peace and stability.²² Due to the joint efforts of China and the international community, the crisis in the Gulf region is showing signs of mitigation.

In early January 2020, Iran attacked US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the US targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani, Commander of Iran’s Quds force, an external wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). As a result, the situation in the Gulf region suddenly became tense and the structural contradiction between the US and Iran intensified again. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out that amid the frequent hotspot issues and escalating tensions, China will remain a builder of peace, a promoter of stability and a contributor to development in the Middle East.²³

21 “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE),” July 22, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1682685.shtml.

22 “Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi of Iraq,” September 23, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1701312.shtml.

23 “FM Voices China’s Support to Peace, Stability, Development of Middle East,” January 9, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/09/c_138688936.htm.

China, together with the international community, called on the US and Iran to stay calm and exercise restraint, hold political dialogues and refrain from answering violence with violence, which facilitated the de-escalation of conflicts in the Gulf region.

In recent years, with significant external support, constant conflicts broke out between Libya's Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army, putting the situation in danger of running out of control. In January 2020, when attending a briefing for media at the Libya Conference in Berlin, Yang Jiechi reiterated the Chinese position that the Libyan issue can only be properly solved by political means while military approaches will lead nowhere. Yang said that efforts to address the Libyan issue should focus on the fundamental interests of the Libyan people and the future of the North African country. All parties concerned should cease fire immediately and restart dialogue and reconciliation as soon as possible.²⁴ China has repeatedly stressed concerning the resolution of Middle East hotspot issues in multilateral fora that political dialogue is a key factor for defusing Middle East conflicts as well as a proven way to peace and security in the region.

Conducting diplomatic mediation

In addressing Middle East conflicts, China upholds fairness and justice, laying a solid foundation for effective diplomatic mediation. China's policies or positions on hotspot issues in the Middle East are based on facts instead of being directed at individuals. Even if China makes some well-intentioned criticism of the offensive behavior of a certain country, such criticism, as a rule, is not directed against its government or its people. Neither will such criticism affect the overall cooperation between China and the country in question. Not surprisingly, China keeps friendly and cooperative relationships with Iran and Palestine as well as Saudi Arabia and Israel, whether they are Sunni or Shiite states, whether their regimes are monarchies or republics, and whether they belong to the pro-Western "moderate alliance"

24 "Yang Jiechi Holds a Briefing for Media on the Libya Conference in Berlin."

or the anti-Western “resistance alliance.” Most countries in the region also welcome China to play a more active role in addressing Middle East security issues and carry out diplomatic mediation there. In view of the situation in West Asia and North Africa, China dispatched a Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue, a Special Representative on African Affairs, a Special Envoy on Afghanistan Affairs, and a Special Envoy on the Syrian Issue in 2002, 2007, 2014 and 2016 respectively. The special envoy mechanism with Chinese characteristics has become increasingly mature and important for China to carry out diplomatic mediation.

The Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue was the first special envoy that China established in response to hotspot issues in developing areas. In the new era, China’s Middle East Special Envoy has stepped up mediation between Palestine and Israel, so far convening multiple Palestinian-Israeli Peace Symposiums and tripartite dialogues between China, Palestine, and Israel. Apart from visiting the Middle East and major countries, the Special Envoy also actively participates in multilateral meetings on Middle East issues so as to elaborate China’s positions on these issues. In October 2019, not long after his appointment, China’s Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue, Zhai Jun, met with Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmed About Gheit, paid visits to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and then attended the Tehran Dialogue Forum, taking advantage of each opportunity to carry out diplomatic mediation.

The Special Representative on African Affairs has made positive contributions to promoting reconciliation between Sudan and South Sudan and bringing peace to Darfur. When Sudan was in chaos in 2019, Special Representative Xu Jinghu paid several visits to Sudan and carried out diplomatic mediation between the different factions of Sudan and relevant parties in the international community.²⁵ Xu also attended the signing ceremony of the Constitutional Declaration of Sudan’s transitional period by invitation and coordinated positions with international and regional

25 “Special Representative of the Chinese Government on African Affairs Xu Jinghu Visits Sudan,” May 9, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1662775.shtml.

organizations like the UN, the African Union, the Arab League and the European Union.²⁶

In 2016, in light of the situation in the Middle East, the Chinese government decided to appoint a special envoy on the Syrian issue, which was an important sign of China's willingness to keep up with the times in the new era and actively participate in Middle East security affairs. In recent years, the Chinese Special Envoy Xie Xiaoyan has paid several visits to the US, Europe and Russia, promoted the establishment of the coordination mechanism among BRICS special envoys for Syria, participated in the UN-backed Geneva Conference on Syria, the Astana peace process and the Sochi peace process, and attended the Brussels Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region co-chaired by the European Union and the United Nations,²⁷ enhancing China's discourse power over hotspot issues.

Carrying out coordination between major countries

Carrying out coordination between major countries is the epitome of China's adherence to multilateralism in addressing Middle East security affairs. As a matter of fact, successive Chinese special envoys have kept communication with major powers and groups of major countries. China carries out strategic and policy coordination at both the level of major world powers and at the level of major countries in the Middle East, suggesting that major countries should abandon the traditional view of power competition and establish a new view of responsibility and contribution, that is, major countries, with their special mission in terms of Middle East security affairs, should make the greatest contribution.

First, China has been active in carrying out strategic coordination with major powers like the US, Russia, the European Union, and the UK.

26 "Special Representative of the Chinese Government on African Affairs Xu Jinghu Attends Signing Ceremony of the Constitutional Declaration of Sudan's Transitional Period," August 19, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjwb_673085/zzjg_673183/xybfs_673327/xwlb_20673329/t1689923.shtml.

27 "Special envoy of the Chinese government for Syria Xie Xiaoyan attends the Brussels Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region'," available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjwb_673085/zzjg_673183/xybfs_673327/xwlb_673329/t1645818.shtml, (accessed 10 March, 2020).

So far, China has established dialogue and coordination mechanisms on the Middle East issue with all other major countries. On December 4, 2018, then Director-General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs of the Foreign Ministry, Deng Li, held consultations on Middle East affairs at the departmental level with Managing Director for the Middle East and North Africa of the European External Action Service, Fernando Gentilini. Later that month, Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong held vice-ministerial consultation on Middle East affairs with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov. In May 2019, Director-General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs, Wang Di, held working-group consultation on the Middle East with Director of the Middle East and North Africa Department at Russia's Foreign Ministry, Alexandre Kinchtchakak. In November 2019, China's Special Envoy on the Middle East Issue, Zhai Jun, paid a visit to the US, during which both sides exchanged in-depth views on the situation in the Middle East and regional hotspot issues.²⁸ In January 2020, Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong held phone talks with David Quarrey, the UK Prime Minister's International Affairs Advisor and Deputy National Security Advisor, suggesting the Chinese side is willing to work with all sides concerned, including the UK, to cool off tensions as soon as possible.²⁹ China's bilateral and multilateral coordination effectively enhances the strategic mutual trust between major countries.

Second, China actively promotes policy coordination with major countries in the Middle East, laying a solid foundation for China to strengthen dialogues in the field of Middle East security. In January 2016, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, President Xi said that China is ready to strengthen communication and coordination with Saudi Arabia in multilateral mechanisms like the UN and the G20. In June 2019, when meeting with President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, President Xi said that

28 "Special Envoy of the Chinese Government on the Middle East Issue Zhai Jun Visit the United States (US)," November 14, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1716594.shtml.

29 "Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodong Holds Telephone Talks at Request with David Quarrey, the United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister's International Affairs Advisor and Deputy National Security Adviser," January 6, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1730215.shtml.

China is willing to step up coordination with Iran within such multilateral frameworks as the UN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).³⁰ In July 2019, when meeting with visiting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Xi said the two sides should jointly forge a new type of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation, keep in contact and coordinate in regional affairs, and jointly advance political settlements for hotspot issues, to contribute to regional peace, stability and development.³¹

The report of the 19th CPC National Congress points out that, “China has actively developed global partnerships and expanded the convergence of interests with other countries. China will promote coordination and cooperation with other major countries and work to build a framework for major-country relations featuring overall stability and balanced development.”³² Along with the above-mentioned coordination between major countries, China has established a global network of partnerships during its participation in Middle East security affairs. Through the consultation and coordination on the Iran nuclear issue, the Palestine-Israel issue, and other issues regarding Yemen, Syria, Libya, Somalia, counter-terrorism, refugees, anti-narcotics, and public health, the foundation for cooperation between major countries has been consolidated and the strategic dialogue mechanisms between China and the US, Russia and the UK have continued to improve. Moreover, China has also stepped up policy dialogues with major countries in the Middle East, established coordination mechanisms for the Middle East issue under BRICS and SCO frameworks, and set up mechanisms of joint exercises and convoys with major Asian countries like India, Japan and South Korea during its escorting missions in the Gulf of Aden.

30 “Xi Jinping Meets with President Hassan Rouhani of Iran,” June 14, 2019, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1673196.htm>.

31 “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” July 2, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zjzg_663340/xybfs_663590/xwlb_663592/t1678399.shtml.

32 Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, People’s Publishing House, 2017, pp.57-60.

Providing public security goods

On Middle East security affairs, China suggests all stakeholders use comprehensive means, including peacekeeping, mediation, political dialogues and security aid, and actively provide public security goods for the region. Since Donald Trump took office, the willingness of the US to provide the Middle East with public goods has been on the decline. What's worse, new hotspot issues have been springing up in the Middle East. Consequently, a deficit of public goods began to appear in the region. Unlike Western powers, which establish military bases, foster proxies and fight for greater sphere of influence, China's limited military presence in the Middle East does not target any country. With no intention to engage in any geopolitical game, China seeks to provide public security goods, which facilitates the international community in safeguarding security in the Middle East. When the security situation in Yemen deteriorated in March 2015, a Chinese naval escort task group sailed to the Gulf of Aden, berthed for the first time directly in an engagement area, and evacuated 621 Chinese citizens and 279 foreign citizens from 15 countries including Pakistan, Ethiopia, Singapore, Italy, Poland, Germany, Canada, the UK, India and Japan.³³ So far, China has provided important public security goods to the international community.

In the new era, China is taking part in UN peacekeeping operations and providing public security goods in a more active way. In 2015, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the UN, China announced the establishment of a 10-year, US\$1 billion China-UN peace and development fund, and joined the UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System.³⁴ Over the years, China has been actively participating

33 *China's National Defense in the New Era*, July 24, 2019, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html.

34 Xi Jinping, "Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind: Statement at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 28, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1305051.shtml.

in UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East, dispatching more than 1,000 peacekeeping personnel. The mission areas of the Chinese peacekeepers include the UN Truce Supervision Organization in Jerusalem, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in the south Lebanese village of Hinnieh, the UN Mission in South Sudan, the UN-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur, and the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. Moreover, China also provides other forms of security services for UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East. For instance, in 2014, in accordance with UN arrangement, the Chinese navy provided escorting support for the destruction of chemical weapons in Syria. In 2017, the Chinese People's Liberation Army put into operation its first overseas logistics base in Djibouti, enhancing China's capability of fighting pirates, safeguarding international seaways in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea, and providing escort services for commercial ships.

Offering humanitarian aid

To provide humanitarian aid is also the embodiment of China's principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences in the Middle East. China calls for major countries within and outside the region, particularly well-off major powers, to take the initiative to undertake their responsibility and offer humanitarian aid as a breakthrough in terms of establishing strategic mutual trust and carrying out security cooperation.

In the new era, working closely with the World Health Organization, the UN Refugee Agency and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, China has been taking an active part in offering humanitarian aid to refugees and to war-torn countries in the Middle East. In 2016, President Xi declared: "To improve the Palestinian people's well-being, the Chinese government will provide 50 million RMB yuan of grants to the Palestinian side and support the solar power station project in Palestine ... The Chinese side will provide 230 million RMB yuan of additional humanitarian assistance to the people of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen." Moreover, China provided US\$300 million of

assistance to support such projects as law enforcement cooperation and police training to help regional countries enhance their capacity in maintaining law and order.³⁵ In 2018, China announced that it would provide an additional 600 million yuan of assistance to the people of Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Lebanon to meet their humanitarian and reconstruction needs. China would also discuss with regional countries the implementation of programs totaling one billion yuan to help interested countries build capacity for maintaining stability.³⁶ By referring to its actual practice as an example, China persuaded conflicting parties in countries like Syria and Yemen to increase their economic aid to refugees and civilians, and seek common ground while putting aside differences in the process to gradually resolve their disparities.

Apart from offering aid, China also urges the international community to meet halfway and expand cooperation by focusing on humanitarian aid, so as to pave the way for the resolution of conflicts. In November 2018, when attending an international conference in Italy on Libya, Special Representative on African Affairs Xu Jinghu said that the international community should aim at realizing lasting peace and stability as well as long-term development in Libya to help Libya carry out reconstruction and improve people's livelihood. Xu reiterated that the Chinese side will, together with the international community, support the Libyan side's efforts in regaining national security and stability and propelling development, and make contributions to promoting Libya to embark on a track of normal development at an early date.³⁷ China maintains that, although the conflicting parties, whether in Syria, Yemen or Libya, may have different political stances, it is not difficult for them to reach consensus on humanitarian aid, which often facilitates security cooperation in other fields.

35 Xi Jinping, "Work Together for a Bright Future of China-Arab Relations: Speech at the Arab League Headquarters."

36 Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era: Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum."

37 "Special Representative of the Chinese Government on African Affairs Xu Jinghu Attends the International Conference on Libya," November 16, 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1614663.shtml.

Thoughts on Further Participation in Middle East Security Affairs

The new era faces ever increasing geopolitical competition between major countries in the Middle East, deep-rooted hotspot issues, emerging non-traditional security challenges like public health security against the background of COVID-19, and the decline of both the capability and willingness of traditional powers to provide public security goods. Aiming to build a community with a shared future for mankind, China does not hesitate to shoulder its responsibility as a major country, with even greater enthusiasm to participate in Middle East security affairs. Looking to the future, though, China should continue to enhance its decision-making and overall coordination, bring forth innovative conflict resolutions and increase its ability to propose joint security initiatives.

Strengthening centralized leadership while promoting coordination between various departments

Indeed, China's participation in Middle East security affairs involves more than one department. Oftentimes these departments, without much coordination between each other, simply administer in their own ways, which more or less impinges on the effectiveness of China's participation in Middle East security affairs. Ever since the establishment of the Central National Security Commission and the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, the CPC central leadership, in accordance with the overall planning of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, has been enhancing the centralized leadership of foreign affairs. In this context, China's decision-making mechanism for participating in Middle East security affairs continues to improve. The establishment of China International Development Cooperation Agency in 2018 enhanced the coordination between different departments. However, it is desirable to conduct coordination between the special envoy mechanism in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the peacekeeping

mechanism in the Ministry of National Defense, and the cross-departmental aid mechanism. In addition, during its participation in Middle East security affairs, it is also necessary to promote the coordination between central government departments, between the central government and local governments, and between domestic and overseas agencies to advance “grand diplomacy” and “grand foreign affairs” by integrating all available resources.

It is still necessary for China to further enhance relevant strategic planning and coordination. The proper use of the diplomatic toolkit during its participation in the resolution of Middle East hotspot issues can both safeguard the development and cooperation interests of China in the Middle East and promote peace and development of the region. For a long time, China’s economic and trade cooperation in the Middle East has been basically separated from its participation in regional security affairs. Therefore, it is necessary to establish issue linkage and enrich the content of strategic cooperation between China and Middle East countries, in particular integrating the issues of economic cooperation and Middle East security and being able to “walk with two legs” through comprehensive measures. While deepening economic and trade cooperation, China should step up its participation in UN peacekeeping in the Middle East, enhance the security capacity building of target countries, conduct humanitarian rescue operations, and strengthen its consular protection in the region. It should also promote its discourse in addressing regional security affairs, reduce the strategic mutual suspicion between regional countries, and remove the effects of the so-called “China threat” rhetoric in Belt and Road construction.

Seizing the momentum while planning proactively

Although China has been a steadfast defender of the post-war international order and the UN-centered multilateralism, its participation in Middle East security affairs has been a type of risk-averse practice which mainly involves multilateral crisis management. In the past, China basically “seized the momentum” and worked under the UN framework in its participation in UN peacekeeping operations, provision of humanitarian aid to refugees in

the Middle East, and involvement in multilateral talks on Iran's nuclear issue. With the increase of its overall national strength, China should also actively put forward security initiatives of its own or together with other parties and enhance its capability of "proactive planning" in resolving Middle East conflicts while adhering to the UN-centered multilateralism. In 2018, China invited special envoys for Syria from the UK and France, and representatives of the UN and other countries to an international symposium on the Syrian issue. The Middle East Security Forum held in November 2019 was also an important event held by China to take the initiative and lead the efforts to seek a resolution to conflicts in the Middle East.³⁸ The Chinese solutions to Middle East security issues, including the new security concept, the notions of "partnerships rather than alliances," comprehensive governance, peace through development, and seeking common ground while putting aside differences, have been commended by all parties. However, how to turn these ideas into specific and workable plans and formulate a feasible roadmap for peace in the Middle East remains a test for China's capability of proactive planning.

Respecting the sovereignty of other countries while increasing constructive involvement

Respecting the sovereignty of Middle East countries is an important premise for China's participation in Middle East security affairs. Since the late 1990s, the Western world has been preaching the notion of "human rights above sovereignty." Under the banner of "responsibility to protect," Western powers have intensified their military and political interference in the Middle East, which only led to more bloody conflicts instead of peace there. In July 2018, at the 8th ministerial conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, President Xi said: "We need to uphold the principle of sovereignty and oppose division and fragmentation."³⁹ In

38 "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Introduces the Middle East Security Forum," *PLA Daily*, November 26, 2019, p.4.

39 Xi Jinping, "Joining Hands to Advance Sino-Arab Strategic Partnership in the New Era; Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum."

January 2020, at the Libya Conference in Berlin, Yang Jiechi pointed out that China always respects the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Libya, and China supports a Libyan-led and Libyan-owned political process under the aegis of the UN.⁴⁰ China maintains that the Middle East countries most concerned should have the greatest say in terms of regional security affairs, and that the sovereignty of these countries must be respected. External powers, therefore, should not hold a condescending attitude, and certainly not overreach in making choices for the regional countries.

Apart from respecting the sovereignty of countries concerned, China, in light of its advantages and strength, should involve itself on a larger scale in Middle East security affairs and formulate more creative propositions. Constructive involvement means that China and the international community should provide the positive energy of security aid rather than aggravate contradictions and conflicts for their own self-interest. For instance, China supports the notion of “responsible protection” put forward by some developing countries, suggesting a strict distinction between international intervention and regime change by use of force, and reinforcing supervision and inspection on any military operations by external forces in order to prevent any undue interference in the internal affairs of those countries.⁴¹ The notion, which goes beyond the Western concept of “responsibility to protect,” has been widely commended by Middle East countries and the international community.

China’s contact, after full communication with the governments of target countries as well as with the opposition forces in those countries, and diplomatic mediation between the government and the opposition, does not undermine the sovereignty of the target countries. On the contrary, such contact and mediation safeguards their sovereignty and prevents the countries from further disintegration. China has more than once invited Syrian opposition delegates to visit China and mediated between the Syrian government and the opposition forces. As for the Darfur issue,

40 “Yang Jiechi Holds a Briefing for Media on the Libya Conference in Berlin.”

41 Ruan Zongze, “Responsible Protection: Building a Safer World,” *International Studies*, No.3, 2012.

China carried out full communication with the Sudanese government and opposition groups and vigorously promoted peace talks. China urges the federal government of Iraq to hold direct talks with the Kurdistan Regional Government. China keeps in contact with various forces in Yemen and Lebanon and urges them to resolve their differences through political means. All these measures reflect China's respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Middle East countries, its evolving understanding of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and the strong vitality of its constructive involvement.

Taking part in both conflict resolution and peace building

China used to remain detached during the initial stage of a crisis, or the “first half” of conflict resolution, showing little initiative to pay visits to the countries concerned, carry out mediation or propose solutions for the crisis. Entering the new era, China has become a stakeholder in the Middle East. As the second largest trading partner and the largest oil importer of the Middle East, China plays an increasingly important role during the first stage of conflict resolution in the region. For instance, after the attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, President Xi Jinping held a telephone conversation with Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. President Xi condemned the attacks, noting such attacks would have an impact on the situation in the Gulf region and on the international energy market, and called for a comprehensive, objective and just investigation into the attacks.⁴² After the outburst of military conflicts between the US and Iran in 2020, China took the initiative to conduct mediation, promote peace talks and attend the Libya Conference in Berlin. Taking into account the above instances, it seems that China may increase its involvement in the “first half” of resolving conflicts in the Middle East.

During the “second half” of peace building, the exchanges on governance experience between China and post-conflict countries have

42 “Xi Jinping Holds Telephone Talks at Request with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia,” September 20, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1700393.shtml.

been on the rise. As a leading infrastructure magnate in the world, China will actively participate in the infrastructure construction of post-conflict countries during their rebuilding to promote peace through development. China's investment in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Egypt has boosted the employment in these countries and thereby helped them maintain stability. More attention should be paid to the content of exchanges on security governance in future communication between China and Middle East countries. After more than 70 years of development, China has acquired a much better understanding of the relationship between reform, development and stability, and has resolved border disputes with most of its neighboring countries. As for those outstanding issues, China and the countries concerned have established corresponding crisis management mechanisms, preventing the disparities from disturbing the overall cooperative situation. Therefore, the Chinese concepts of a holistic approach to national security, ensuring both development and security, internal and external security, homeland and public security, and traditional and non-traditional security offer important lessons to Middle East countries. Moreover, for those Middle East countries with many ethnic groups or religious sects, China's political institutions such as multiparty cooperation and political consultation under the CPC leadership, regional ethnic autonomy, and "one country two systems" are of much value for reference.

Participating in traditional security governance while paying attention to non-traditional security governance

For China's participation in Middle East security affairs, traditional security governance is its existing stock-in-trade while non-traditional security governance has become its increment. Historically, China's participation mainly focused on the resolution of traditional hotspot issues in the Middle East. By taking comprehensive means like dispatching UN peacekeepers, conducting military escorts, carrying out diplomatic mediation and providing development aid, China's involvement in Middle East traditional security governance has promoted the de-escalation of

traditional security issues and alleviated the tension in the region. Given that non-traditional security issues like terrorism and pandemics have been on the rise in recent years, China should actively offer its solutions, ideas and propositions.

As for counter-terrorism, although Middle East countries do not agree with each other on the concept of terrorism and the identification of terrorist organizations, both China and influential countries in the Middle East believe the following: all parties should advocate the doctrine of “dialogue between civilizations” rather than that of “clash of civilizations”; terrorism is an enemy of mankind; there should be no linking of terrorism with any specific ethnic group or religion; and there should be no double-standard in fighting terrorism. China and Middle East countries should promote communication on countering extremism, enhance joint counter-terrorism drills, exchange counter-terrorism intelligence, cut off the financial resources of terrorist organizations, and join hands to crack down on cyber terrorism, thus enhancing China’s capacity to participate in non-traditional security governance in the Middle East.

On public health security, China should also take the initiative in proposing cooperation with Middle East countries to improve the governance system of global public health security. In early 2020, many Middle East countries provided significant material and spiritual support to China’s fight against COVID-19. After the massive outbreak of COVID-19 in the Middle East, China sent medical teams to countries like Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Morocco, provided them with ventilators and masks, built COVID-19 testing centers there, gave away handbooks on epidemic control, held video conferences on prevention and treatment, and shared its experience in fighting COVID-19. All this has become an important practice of China’s enhancement of public health cooperation with Middle East countries and building a community with a shared future in the Middle East. 