China’s Middle East Policy and the Competition With the United States

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Abstract. This paper focuses on China’s policy in the Middle East and the rivalry with the U.S. The question is what are the main factors on China’s Middle East policy and its competition with the U.S? The hypothesis regards to three effective factors: “China’s energy dependency” on the Middle East, “economy” and support for “stability” in the Middle East. What is important in China’s competition with the U.S. regarding to its Middle East policy is the substantial difference in ways of treating the countries of the region; China is committed to Westphalia model based on non-interference in internal affairs of the countries and respect the sovereignty of the governments. However, after 9/11, the U.S. is seeking a balance between stability and change through intervention in the international affairs and in some cases is looking for a regime change. From the other hand, China, due to its dependency on the region’s energy welcomes America’s military presence in the region for providing stability. The authors by using a descriptive analytical method try to explain the situation of rivalry between China and the United States in Middle East. China is an “emerging power” with high economic growth and in demand of more energy supply. The problem is that a rising power in the region is often a source of concern for hegemony.

Introduction

Studying China’s foreign policy in the Middle East has special attractions, particularly, since recent years that China has become a model for developing countries. During the recent years China has had a great progress in economics; accordingly is trying to play a greater role in politics. The country is trying to achieve the same position with US generally around the world and especially in the Middle East and Asia. This attempt will not stop until China can have a main role and involve in global events. For half a century the Chinese have been nuclear power, however, until recently they have not been a world power. While its interests in the Middle East are growing rapidly, especially economic profit, China tries to expand influence in this area [1].

What is important in this competition is the way of dealing with countries in the region; China is committed to the Westphalia model based on non-interference in internal affairs and respect for the sovereignty of states, while the U.S. after September 11 is seeking stability balance and changes through intervention in the internal affairs of states and in some places is looking for regime change. From the other hand, due to its dependency on region’s energy, China accepts the U.S. military presence in the region only to maintain stability and security and not more than that. All these points will be explained as follows:

China’s Competition With the United States in the Middle East

The U.S has three main objectives in the Middle East: 1) Controlling over oil resources and its transport arteries; 2) Maintaining Israel’s security and military superiority over its neighbors and 3) Easy accessing to US goods and services in the regional market. Although Americans presume that by granting particular privileges to China they can gain their support regarding to their policies in the Middle East including recent crises in Iraq and Syria, it seems that Chinese are pursuing their
own strategic plans. China tacit cooperation with Russia, France and Germany in opposition to the U.S plans for attacking Iraq is one of those plans. The Chinese tend to slowly consolidate their relations with the Gulf countries and improve their strategic relations in this area [2].

Although China and the U.S avoid obvious competition in the Middle East, it is not far-fetched. China and America are not only dependent on the Middle East energy resources, but also their relations with regional countries follow different models. In the meantime, China’s model is more popular in the region. America’s model is engaging in human rights issues, preventive actions and regime change; in this regard Middle East has a high priority.

Still, China pursues traditional model of international and Westphalian relations with emphasizing on non-interference and respect to national sovereignty and territorial integrity [3]. Anti-terrorism policies followed by the Unites States after 9/11 attacks and the development of democracy in the Middle East, led regimes of the region such as Saudi Arabia, which has traditional and long-standing relations with America to deepen their relations with Beijing and reduce their relations with Washington. Another source of tension between these two countries is China’s relations with countries such as Iran, Libya and Syria, as well as acquiring the proliferation of ballistic missile technology and weapons by these countries [4].

China and the US are also competing in the Middle East. In order to import oil from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca China relies on the US. To reduce this dependency, Beijing strives to obtain oil and gas resources from other areas and transfer them through pipeline. On the other hand, China’s investment activities and construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan with the slogan “peaceful commercial interests” has begun in recent years [5].

Gwadar port is located in southwestern Pakistan and coast of Gwadar Gulf in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf Coast; it has valuable commercial potential. China’s constructions of the port in this area are some examples of goals that can be outlined: connecting western regions of China to world markets, creating economic commercial center in the Gulf region and the military operation. Chinese investments in the construction of Gwadar port in Pakistan have sparked Americans’ concerns [6].

The position of the Chinese government regarding to America’s intervention in Iraq and its vote on Security Council resolutions against Iran show that this country does not openly confront the US in the Middle East. However, the interests of China and the United States in the Middle East are not compatible. They have different views or even contradictory views on some issues in the global community. While China emphasizing on international organizations to solve the different issues, Americans seeks to change the international system and rejecting international conventions (such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Convention of ABM) or international norms (such as preventive actions, or recognizing India as a nuclear power. China is seeking stability in the international system, even at the cost of supporting unpopular regimes to the US like Myanmar, Iran, Nepal, North Korea, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe [7].

**China’s Competition With the U.S. Over Iran on Various Topics**

The relations between Iran and China are influenced by several factors. One of the most important factors which has a comprehensive and sustainable impact on the relations between the two countries is the United States; in fact it should be mentioned that relations between Iran and China is not bilateral but rather it is trilateral, with the presence of the US. Therefore, Iran and China’s relationship can be analyzed in the form of Iran-China-the US triangle [8]. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran has gradually been planning to develop its relations with countries and powers to create a balance of power against the growing pressures of the United States, and China was one of the powers [9].

From this period until the end of the Cold War, relations between the two countries, especially with the travel of senior Iranian officials to China has been growing and exchanges in the military field (as Iran was faced with West arms embargo), was a high priority. As a matter of fact, during the Iran-Iraq war, China sold weapons to both countries with the estimated value about $5 billion. Expansion of relations between Iran and China was faced with United States’ sensitivity, therefore
during Reagan presidency; the country canceled its security cooperation and arms sales to China due to the sale of its Silkworm missiles to Iran [10].

It should be noted that the international activities of Chinese oil companies after Sudan began in Iran as the second country and they could earn an international reputation for themselves. During the sanctions on Iran, China was one of the major obstacles to the West for more sanctions and pressure on Tehran. Some observers believed that China opposed sanctions on Iran merely because of the needs of that country’s oil. These observers believe that China has been importing hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil a day from Iran; hence during sanctions, or even now, pressure on Iran may jeopardize China’s energy supply. On the other hand, this category of observers believed that China besides importing oil from Iran has had an active and serious presence in Iranian market [11] and oil contracts with open-door market to China are among those attractions that Beijing government simply does not want to miss [12].

However, some other observers look beyond this issue by raising geopolitical issue to explain the reasons for China’s opposition to sanctions and more isolation of Iran during that time. These observers assume that China disapproved tough sanctions against Iran not only because of immediate economic reasons but also because of the fear of growing influence of the U.S. in Southeast Asia and supervising the area which is a major source of world energy supplies.

They assert that China is concern about undisputed domination of Washington over Southwest Asia. If the current situation of China’s relation with the US be considered, it is possible to agree with the latter’s view; since Americans use issues like selling weapons to Taiwan, supporting the Dalai Lama and opposing human rights abuses in China as leverage against Beijing’s, it is acceptable that the Chinese government uses leverages to confront such policies; therefore lack of full cooperation with Iran’s isolation during the sanctions is one of the levers that Beijing’s officials are trying to use it in these conditions to benefit from its future relations with Washington [13].

The other factor is a common view of Iran and China on the U.S.; that both consider the United States as a state seeking to dominate the world and to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. This perspective also provides other common issues. Tehran’s silent on the increasing role of China in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as economic cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran has wide geostrategic reflections. China and Russia were the main link between Iran and the outer world during the sanctions; moreover, still Iran is an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an organization that Americans consider it as a Chinese-Russian community constituted to curb Americans’ influence in the Central Asia [14].

The next factor is the view that Beijing had towards the U.S. of sanctions on Iran; they did not find sanctions as ineffective for controlling and restriction, rather they regarded it as strengthens the spirit of independence and resistance. History of Chinese treatment towards West may have an effective role in shaping this vision.

The last but not least, was China’s political advantage from opposition to sanctions against Iran. Chinese companies are actively associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran not only trade in manufactured goods but also in exchange and investment for oil and gas, as well as growth in investments in Iran’s weak and underdeveloped energy sector. In order to advance its own foreign policy, Beijng has been taking advantages from both sides of Iran and the U.S. this benefit has had a direct impact on China’s economic interests. Furthermore, extensive diplomatic efforts by the U.S. and Europe to force China for cooperation strengthened China’s diplomatic power and showed China’s position as a stable and independent one [15].

Some researchers argue that China’s reactions to Iran’s nuclear program were the result of America’s support on Taiwan matter. However, it should be noted that Iranian possessing nuclear technology was against the Chinese wishes; either for providing the Persian Gulf’s security or for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Persian Gulf, because they regarded Iran’s possession of weapons of any kind as initiate of an arms race in the region [16].
Conclusion

China in order to reach its security purposes is pursuing four approaches: the first approach, collective security; the second approach, security through institutions such as international institutions; third approach, cooperation and finally, security through interdependence which is more related to economic interdependency.

Despite the fact that China through economic cooperation is trying to follow a cooperative approach in the region and the world, but the main concern of this country forever is preserving the integrity (restoring Taiwan and other areas) and opposition to the hegemonic presence of the US in the region. The Chinese believe that the main reason of Americans’ military presence in the Asia-Pacific is to containment China as a major player in region. This view of China is part of Beijing macro policies about international new order; China assets that a desirable international system is the multipolar system which is not only different from Americans’ will but also contradictory to it.

The Chinese experts believe that control and containment of China on East Asian security system is a part of the U.S strategy of unipolar system. In the same context, China’s Army generals assert that the U.S with the aim of changing the security environment in East Asia, is trying to control North Korea, prevent Russian power and establish regional security with its own ruling or participation with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Philippines and Taiwan. Certainly, the Chinese will be concerned about the process that is interpreted as stimulating the Persian Gulf security model in East Asia. The authorities in Beijing believe that Americans favor security system in different regions including the Middle East, due to disregard of the role, position and influence of China in regional and international arenas is not only unusual but it is also designed and defined against the interests of national security and territorial integrity of China.

The last thing is that China is in a difficult situation and must create a reasonable balance between demands of the US and its own interests in the long term. China’s strategy on Middle East is based on avoiding enemies with the United States. By adopting economic policies and creating interdependence, China seeks to strengthen its presence in the Middle East. Perhaps access to reliable sources of energy and the broad markets in the Middle East could be targets outlined by China in the Middle East. In recent decades China has increased its efforts to achieve geopolitical balance against the US.

In fact, China has indicated a more exploitative and environmentally responsible behavior in the region and it is also strongly urged by the United States. The emergence of China’s policy can be clearly seen in China’s behaviors in the Iranian nuclear issue. This country has represented a plausible image in the Middle East and it is slowly and gradually is taking over the U.S. position. Expansion in economic relations with countries in the region can be evidence of this claim.

According to what is happening in the region, the US also demands the presence of China as a responsible player; the U.S. has understood the rise of Chinese power in international community and by allowing China’s participation in global governance, calling for a more responsible behavior from this country in the world. The Middle East is an area where is considered as a strategic region both for the U.S. and for China. In recent decades China has made some efforts to obtain an acceptable position in the region.

Iran’s nuclear issue was one of the most important tests for the foreign policy of China. Islamic Republic of Iran, the Middle East, the major powers, particularly the U.S had a special sensitivity about this issue and China was aware of such sensitivities, so, tried to seek more benefit from both sides with applying proper management. The Chinese tried to maintain their position on Iran’s nuclear issue and simultaneously cooperated with West.

China is pursuing a secure energy in the region and Iran’s confrontation with the United States had provided a proper condition for active participation of China in this field. Generally, China’s action to achieve a proportional balance with the US in the Middle East can be evaluated positive and acceptable.
References


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