

The Upheaval in West Asia and North Africa: A Constructed New Viewpoint of World Security

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Abstract: *The Arab political transformations originally occurring in early 2011 are posing negative impact over China's overseas interests in the Middle East region, including those related to its trade with the Arab world, the China-Middle East bilateral investments, its contracted projects, and the safety of its nationals living in the Middle East, whether these influences are direct or indirect, overt or covert. Three aspects are strongly impacted by these negative influences: 1) Libya; 2) Northern and southern Sudan; 3) Energy supply. The dramatic changes of the Arab world have brought alerting signals to China over its national interests in the Middle East, so China shall undertake a meticulous review of its overseas activities and draw the correct lessons from its experiences there so that practical responses can be worked out. In consideration of the loss that Chinese corporations have suffered from the Arab political changeovers, China should establish its own grand strategy for its foreign relations so as to protect its growing overseas interests.*

Key Words: *Dramatic Political Changeovers in West Asia and North Africa; China; Overseas Interests; New Viewpoint of Security*

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The stormy turmoil and changes in West Asia and North Africa, which has lasted for over two years, have fundamentally altered the political ecology of this region. Regime changes happened in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, while Syria has been entrapped in a stalemate of civil war. Common Arab civilians fall into abyss of chaos and disasters, and the consequent waves of refugees have brought heavy pressures to the neighboring countries. Many other countries of this region are also faced with various pressures of turbulences, and have to respond to these pressures with great cautions. The new regimes have to engage in dramatic adjustments of their domestic political systems. However, as different political forces are regrouping and restructuring themselves, many new and old disputes and conflicts have caused chaos, while the social and political reforms have to be pushed forward with great difficulties. Under such circumstances, a deeper understanding has been gradually established over the arduousness and complexity of political changeovers of this region. Therefore, it is predicted that the Middle East region will inevitably go through a long period of transformation that will be full of twists and turns. At the same time, the burning issues in this region have intensified. Now Syria has become the focus of various contradictions and conflicts, and various issues in this region are increasingly characterized by their mutual connections and interactions, their ever-changing complexities, and their frequent shocks from stalemates. The trends of Middle East political changeovers are closely related to the profound adjustments of international strategic pattern. The big powers and regional powers are fiercely competing against each other for status and influence. In the debates over the Middle Eastern issues that were held in the UN assembly in September 2012, different parties involved in the Middle East issues were quarreling ferociously and persistently, like a real fight with arms and gunpowder, and the UN tower was like a battleground without smokes of gunpowder. The quarrels in the UN assembly

reflected the current situation in Middle East.

Relatively free from the continuous unrests in West Asia and North Africa and the macro political changeovers of the Arab world, the Gulf area becomes an "island of safety" that enjoys unique and stable affluences. Currently the Gulf area is playing an important role for stabilizing the regional situations, which cannot be replaced by any other areas. Therefore, the status of Gulf countries in the regional affairs of politics, diplomacy, security, and economy has been greatly uplifted. Since the outbreak of political upheavals in West Asia and North Africa, the Gulf Cooperation Council has been playing an active role of coordination and cooperation, paying close attention to the regional hot issues that have vital influences over the national interest of its own member states. So the GCC has done a lot of positive and effective work to stabilize the situations around the Gulf and the whole Middle East region, and to upgrade the status of its member states. Confronted with the political changeovers, the GCC has actively organized close cooperation for security affairs among Gulf countries so that they can jointly respond to the newly emerging challenges, and provide a guarantee of security to its member states. In the meantime, urged its members to strengthen economic cooperation and foster economic integration of the Gulf area. This is a point that deserves special attention. At the same time, the Gulf countries are playing an increasingly important role in regional affairs. The coordinated voices of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been heard regarding the "Arab Spring" that has spread from the dramatic upheavals of Tunisia and Egypt, to the changeovers in Libya and Syria, and then to the conflicts between Israel and Iran, on the one hand, and Palestine and Israel, on the other hand. Currently, the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia are playing an even greater role in such regional affairs as the Syria crisis and the Iranian nuclear issue. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are transforming themselves from

traditional regional economic powers to regional powers with both economic capacities and political capabilities. Furthermore, the GCC has emerged as a newly established powerful alliance that enjoys integrated economies, unified foreign policies, and a solidified defense system.

I. New Driving Forces shall be Added to the Development of the Relations between China and the Members of the Gulf Cooperation Council

In December 2012, the author was invited to Bahrain to participate in the Manama Dialogue that was jointly sponsored by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London (IISS) and the Bahrain government. The central issue of this dialogue was regional security, which attracted a multitude of politicians, experts, and scholars from dozens of countries. This gathering indicated the enormous attention of the world towards Middle East and even world security. During the meeting of dialogue, a scholar from the host country presented his article that emphasized the very close connections between the security of the Gulf area and the security of the world. In his opinion, the security of the Gulf area should be regarded as the basis for the world security. He argued that currently the Arab countries in the Gulf area have enough cards in their hands to respond to any party from the international community who attempts to put the Gulf's security jeopardy, because any threat to Gulf's security will pose same threats to the security and economy of the whole world. This scholar also argues that the external interventions in the Gulf area, which might come from powers such as Iran or the US, will pose real threats to the security of the Arab countries around the Gulf. From his point of view, the so-called values of these external powers actually serve their own interests because

they make decisions in accordance with their own interests.

This dialogue shows the various parties' great attention towards the security and the status of the Gulf region. Other two international conferences show even more clearly the uplifting of the influences of Gulf countries. The first one is the 18th conference of the contracting parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 8th conference of the contracting parties of Kyoto Protocol, held in Doha, the capital of Qatar. On this series of conferences, a package of resolutions, including the amendments to the Kyoto Protocol, was passed, and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" was asserted. Also on this series of conferences, the second period of commitments for protocol was determined so that the fundamental framework of the convention and the protocol was maintained. In this way, the Bali Action Plan was completed. The rights of development of the developing countries were protected when developed and developing countries were struggling against each other fiercely on these conferences. Particularly, the role played by Qatar, the host country of these conferences, drew much attention. Another conference was the international telecommunication conference held in Dubai of the UAE in December of 2012. As the sponsor of this conference, the UAE came up with a proposal requesting that each country shall "enjoy equal rights" in the management of the internet, and submitted this point to the International Convention of Telecommunication. This new International Telecommunication Regulation (ITR), which grants ITU member states equal rights to handle international telecommunication business, was signed by delegates from 89 countries. Delegates of 25 ITU member states, including US and some European countries, refused to endorse this set of new regulations, but they felt isolated at this conference and became irritated by the UAE's proposal.

Faced with tremendous turbulences and unrests that has lasted

for the past two years, and supported by their strong economic capacities and stable internal conditions, the Gulf countries have begun to change their relatively low-profile foreign policies of the past and make an effort to upgrade their status in the League of Arab States and in their region, taking advantage of the relative weakening of such regional powers as Egypt due to their internal instability. They actively participate in those political and military actions to destroy their long-term enemy: Qaddafi's regime, and make an all-out effort to support Syrian rebel troops so as to overthrow Bashar's regime and finally weaken Iran. In this way, they hope to maintain their security. In brief, one of their strategies is to push out of their own region those religious extremists and other factors that might pose potential threats to their security. There might be vastly different opinions or viewpoints over the Gulf countries' policies in the regional affairs, but there is a consensus that their roles have been strengthened. Of course, the grand changeovers of Arab countries have had some impact on these Gulf countries, so they begin to realize that they might also need some reforms. But they emphasize that reforms and modernizations shall fit the unique domestic conditions of the Gulf region and insist on the principle of gradual change.

China has always upheld the general principle of respect for other countries' sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs. Starting out from this principle, China actively safeguards the fundamental interests of peoples of different countries and takes an effort to maintain the stability of different regions. The political report passed by the 18th National Congress of Chinese Communist Party declares that strengthening China's relations with developing countries shall be regarded as one of the priorities in the overall concerns of China's policy makers, and reiterates that: "China advocates peaceful resolutions to international disputes and hot issues, and opposes easy use of force or menace by force in handling disputed

issues; furthermore, China opposes any attempt to overthrow legitimate regime of foreign countries, or any form of terrorism.” (Hu, J., 2012). China’s diplomatic activities can be viewed as typical embodiments of the spirit of the report of the CCP’s 18th National Congress. China has attached great importance to its relations with the GCC and its member states due to its outstanding position in the regional geopolitics and global energy distribution. In early 2012, China’s premier Wen Jiabao paid a successful visit to Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar. During his visit, he upgraded the China-Saudi Arabia strategic partnership, and declared China’s new strategic partnership with the UAE. He also declared that bilateral contacts between Chinese and Qatari leaders shall be strengthened so as to consolidate the mutual strategic trust. Through this visit, the mechanism of dialogue and cooperation between China and the GCC was also consolidated. In this way, China’s strategic cooperative relations with Gulf countries have greatly elevated.

China and the member states of the GCC are both burdened with the dual responsibilities of maintaining their own sustainable developments and promoting the economic recoveries of the whole world. Therefore, they enjoy solid foundations and broad prospects for bilateral cooperation that may effectively push their domestic sustainable developments and establish a win-win pattern of mutual benefits. Attaching great importance to its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council, Chinese foreign minister meets the Gulf Cooperation Council’s representative annually during the meeting of UN assembly. In this way, a strategic dialogue mechanism has been established between China and the GCC. During his visit to the three countries in the Gulf area in early 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao signed a series of documents that would enormously upgrade China’s relations with these countries. After the 7/5 Incident of 2009, the Gulf countries clearly supported the stand of the Chinese government,

expressing their understanding over the actions taken by Chinese government to maintain social stability. Moreover, China and the Gulf countries share broad prospects for cooperation in the fields of cultural exchanges, energy cooperation, and environmental protection. In recent years, both parties have been continuously extending their profound exchanges over regional hot issues and the issues related to sustainable developments. In this way, a series of new ideas, new methods, and new mechanisms have been created for the deepening of their bilateral cooperation. So, the member states of the GCC have been strengthening their trade and economic connections with China, and the two sides have become important trade partners. Mutually complementary in many fields, they share new prospects for joint research and development in the fields of new energy sources and new technologies, which might contain great potential for pushing their respective economies.

The latest report issued by the Gulf Investment Organization predicted that the average growth rate of member states of the GCC in 2012 would reach 5.8%, which means their overall GDP would add up to nearly \$1.6 trillion dollars calculated on current price levels (China's Ministry of Commerce). The sovereign wealth funds of Arab countries have become a considerable force in the global economy that cannot be ignored or underestimated. Morgan Stanley's research reveals that the sum total of the sovereign wealth funds established by the GCC states adds up to \$2.5 trillion dollars. An annual report issued by the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority indicates that the capital flow from member states of the GCC to US and Europe accounts for 35% to 50% of their total capital outflow, their capital outflow to Asian developed countries account for 10% to 20% of the total, and their capital outflow to the emerging economies accounts for only 15% to 20% (Zhang, Y., 2012: July 24). Under such circumstances, both traditional developed countries and newly emerging developing countries are now trying to

establish free trade areas with member states of the GCC, so as to attract investments and financing sources from the GCC, and to strengthen their trade and economic cooperation with it. Heavily impacted by the American financial crisis and European debt crisis, the financial markets of developed countries find a very gloomy future ahead of them. So the member states of GCC are now adjusting their investment strategies and shifting their interests to the emerging markets, of which China is a typical case. By the end of 2011, the mutual investments between emerging markets such as China and the member states of Gulf Cooperation Council reached \$4.1 billion dollars, breaking historic record (Wang, J., 2012: March 22). In the meantime, China's trade relations with other countries in West Asia and North Africa have also expanded at a great pace. In 2012, the total volume of trade between China and Arab countries from January to September reached \$165 billion dollars, increased by 15.6% from the previous period (Wu, S., 2012).

II. China Actively Promotes a Political Resolution to the Syrian Crisis

The issue of Syria has remained a focus since the earliest breakout of the unrests and upheavals in Middle East. On this issue, China's stand and attitude has been closely and extensively observed by the international community. Since the inception of the Syrian crisis, China has maintained its consistent policies, advocating a political resolution to the problems and supporting a possible fair plan or approach that shall satisfy the demands of Syria's various parties and shall be led by Syrians. China does not advocate interference in foreign countries' domestic affairs, but this does not mean that China will remain a passive spectator. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, China has been actively operating a series of diplomatic mediations so

as to end the violent conflicts inside Syria and work out a peaceful resolution that can be accepted by various parties. Starting out from this stand, China has done a lot of work. Chinese diplomats have raised a proposal of "six points" for a political solution to Syria's crisis (*Chinese Foreign Minister Describes Six Points during His Visit to Syria, and Syria Sends Positive Response*). Furthermore, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi came up with a further package of "four points" (*China Proposes Four Points on the Issue of Syria*) on foreign ministers' conference in Geneva for the acting group for Syrian issue. China has succeeded in keeping a balance between the Syrian government and opposition forces, sending special envoys to Syria many times and receiving representatives from both sides. China has contacted Syrian opposition organizations both inside and outside Syria, and pushes for a ceasefire. Moreover, China is actively calling for a tolerant political dialogue. In order to tackle the problems of Syria effectively, China keeps a close, open communication channels with various parties in the international community and exchanges frequently with Arab countries and the League of Arab States.

China is engaged in an effort to maintain the solidarity of the international community, constructively participating in the discussions over the Syrian issues on various multilateral occasions including the meetings of the UN security council, and offering its support to the special envoy jointly appointed by UN and League of Arab States and to the proposal of sending an inspection group to Syria. Chinese diplomats also attended the foreign ministers' conference in Geneva for the acting group on Syrian crisis, and made an effort at this conference for creating substantial achievements on this issue. In order to maintain fairness, China keeps its contacts with all the concerned parties of Syria's crisis, including a contact to Syrian opposition force. At the same time, China also maintains close connections and collaboration with the UN, the League of Arab States,

and other concerned parties, resolving Syria's issues. It seems that China's constructive effort has created positive outcomes. In pace with the evolving situation in Syria, the international community has been approaching a consensus that Syria's are vastly different from Libya in terms of its domestic conditions and regional status and influences, and that there is no necessity to replicate the "Libya Model" because the international community does not permit such action.

Any final resolution to Syria's crisis will be shaped and determined by the outcome of the games and discussions between various parties of this crisis. In the author's opinion, if an unprejudiced and impartial review is made over China's stance, it can be clearly concluded that: China is truly protecting the Syrian people's fundamental interests, firmly maintaining peace and stability of the Middle East, and sincerely safeguarding the UN charter and the principles of international relations. As a representative from China, I gave a speech at the plenary session of the Manama Dialogue, explaining China's stand and attitude. The participants indicated keen interests and made favorable remarks on the author's speech, and a member of the delegation of the Syrian opposition force also stepped onto stage and shook hands with me, praising China for its unselfishness and regarding China's arguments as "impartially just" and "full of wisdom" (*China's Special Envoy Appeals for Accelerating Political Resolutions to the Issue of Syria*).

III. China Respects the Wills and Choices of Peoples in West Asia and North Africa

West Asia and North Africa are experiencing the most profound transformations since World War II, which are characterized by their long terms, the complexities, and the high levels of internationalization. In this sense, China's foreign policies and its

diplomatic tasks in this new era are confronted with an important topic: how to handle this profound wave of changes and develop China's traditional friendly relations with the Arab world in pace with current evolving situations.

As a good friend of Arab peoples, China highly cherishes its traditional friendship with the Arab world and clearly declares its respect for the wills and choices of Arab peoples. China always maintains that the starting point of its policy towards the Middle East region is to keep peace and stability of that region, and to safeguard the long term and fundamental interests of Arab peoples. Since the beginning of the great upheavals in West Asia and North Africa, China has been announcing and demonstrating its opinions and stands towards the situational changes, which can be summarized below:

1. China respects the demands of the common peoples of this region for reforms and development, and supports local peoples' own paths of development in accordance with their domestic conditions. Therefore, China takes a positive and open attitude towards any choices made by local peoples through self-determination.
2. China appeals for a tolerant and peaceful political dialogue among all the concerned parties in the countries of this region and in the international community, so as to diminish the divergences or disagreements. China clearly and definitely opposes any use of force and calls for avoidance of violent conflicts so as to let people live peaceful lives as soon as possible.
3. China argues that the international community shall abide by the guidelines of the UN charter and respect the national sovereignties, independences, and territorial integrities of the countries in this region. China firmly opposes any external military intervention or any other activities that impose external will on local peoples. China holds this position not for a deliberate bias for or against any specific party, but for protecting

the national independences and dignities of all the developing countries, including China and the Arab countries. 4. China hopes that the international community shall handle the regional transformation of the Middle East through a comprehensive methodology, focusing on the Palestinian issue and pushing the Middle East peace process forward simultaneously with political and diplomatic efforts. China also advocates international aid for economic and social developments of in pace with the handling of hot issues, such as Syria and Iran, in order to assist the countries of this region to achieve smooth transformation.

In 2012, two major events in the China-Arab relations deserve emphasis, which can be regarded as a test to China's above-mentioned policies. One event is the "5th Ministerial Conference for China-Arab Cooperation Forum" held in Tunisia in late May 2012. This is the first major conference of such large scale and high level since the breakout of Middle East unrests. On this conference, the China-Arab strategic cooperative partnership was reconfirmed and a blueprint for bilateral relations in the future was drafted. So this conference achieved complete success. The second event is the official visit made by Egypt's new president Mohamed Morsy to China. As a vital power in the Arabic world, Egypt has been evolving in a transitional process since the breakout of its popular revolution. The policy orientations of the newly elected President Morsy are being closely watched because of his link to the Muslim Brotherhood. Within two months since his inauguration, President Morsy decided to pay a visit to China, showing that he highly values Egypt's relations with China, so his visit has symbolic significance. China also attaches great importance to this visit and agreed on many issues with President Morsy over the prospects of China-Egypt bilateral strategic partnership, and a series of regional and international issues. Therefore, this visit indicates China's will to work together with Arab countries for an early

realization of peace, stability, and development in Middle East, through China-Arab joint efforts.

IV. China's Diplomatic Ideas will Make New Contributions to the World

Located astride Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Middle East is a strategic hub between the east and the west, so it has always been the focus of big power competitions and conflicts, and has always enjoyed a very important status in the global strategies of various big powers in this modern world. China's diplomacy in the Middle East is an integral part of China's overall diplomacy and an embodiment of its general foreign policies. As an important participant, constructor, and contributor in the international system, China insists on a stand of promoting conciliations and peace negotiations on the hot issues of West Asia and North Africa, playing a constructive role, pushing political resolutions and monitoring tensions in this region. China works together with various countries to jointly enjoy the opportunities of development and respond to challenges, so as to promote the common development of all countries. China advocates equality and democracy in international relations and seeks cooperation along the lines of a win-win pattern in the process of joint development. China aims at realizing justice and effectiveness in the global governance, to induce common progress in a multi-civilization system, and to pursue a universal security in a system of interdependence. China's political idea of mutual benefits, common development, and joint prosperity, provides new connotations in the world peace and development. Now, China is standing on a global highland as an emerging big power, and participating in global affairs in an innovative way with its more active and constructive international stand. In this sense, China is protecting its own domestic

interests and promoting world peace and development in a better and more efficient way.

In pace with the expanding multi-polarization of the world, the economic globalization is deepened, the cultures of the world is increasingly pluralized, the new technological revolution is making more and more breakthroughs, and the information's spreading is being accelerated. Under such circumstances, the exchanges between different civilizations are increasing, while the international community is more and more closely interconnected in a system of interdependency. This is an era of a flattened world, so it is not possible for any country to isolate itself from the outside world during its rise. Furthermore, international collaborations for common peaceful developments and mutual cooperation of a win-win pattern have become the common aspirations of common peoples and joint pursuits of the international community. Within the framework of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, the dialogues between the two great civilizations: China and the Arab world, have been progressing forward in a spectacular way, in pace with their cooperation in many fields, which are playing an important role for promoting the mutual understandings and cooperation. In the current ongoing process of historical transformations, China has played and will continue playing a positive and active role. In the future, China's international responsibilities and overseas interests will inevitably expand. On this trend, China as an important participant, constructor, and contributor will surely play a significant role for pushing the progress of human beings and constructing a harmonious world of sustained peace and common prosperity. Under such circumstances, China and the Arab world, the two major civilizations that have long-standing histories and magnificent ancient cultures, will develop a new type of strategic cooperative partnership through their joint efforts.

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