International Competition for Discourse Power in the Middle East Upheaval and Implications for China

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Abstract: *The fundamental motivation leading to the Middle East Upheaval is an urgent need for the internal political and social transformation in Middle East countries. International public opinion, particularly the Western discourse that occupies a stronger position has had a profound impact on the development of the whole situation. With China's continued rise, there is an increase in its competitions and frictions with the United States and other Western powers in global political, economic and other areas. The West uses its advantages in controlling international public opinion, and continues to manufacture discourse and set agendas and even slander regarding Chinese policies. This is not only to guide the situation, but more to maintain its dominant position in international affairs and to contain China's rising influence. In recent years, China has taken a more aggressive Middle East policy. However, its ability to construct discourse and set agendas is relatively lacking. Therefore, China often remains passive and reactive when responding to the traps set in the Western discourse and agendas. This article focuses on the international competition for discourse power in the Middle East*

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The Middle East upheaval has been ongoing for more than two years. Although the outlook remains unclear, there has been a turning point compared to the initial stage of the upheaval when there were frenetic momentum as well as the fever in a number of countries. In fact, the Middle East upheaval has its own law of development, although it is also under the pressure of the contemporary era of change. However, the dominant discourse and substantive involvement of the West to a large extent led this revolutionary movement to deviate from the correct direction from the beginning. Also the West used discourse and agenda-setting to discredit China's Middle East policy and international image, which did not only mislead international public opinion and undermine the relationship between China and the Arab countries, but also confused a part of Chinese people and scholars. From another perspective, although the fundamental reason for China's policy stance being questioned was the distortion and misleading from the West, this also exposed China's inability to construct a discourse and to set an agenda. Hu's report at the 18th Party Congress has already clarified that China will "get more actively involved in international affairs, play its due role as a major, responsible country." (Hu, 2012: 44). Therefore, how to build China's international discourse system and how to seize the power of discourse to express ourselves and dominate our international image are particularly worthy of our consideration.

I. The Arab Spring: A Manipulated "Revolution"

Since the occurrence of the Middle East upheaval, there have been numerous discussions in academia on the influence and role of the West in the upheaval. There have also been debates. For instance, some emphasized that the intervention of the West, particularly the US had a significant impact on the situation in the Middle East, while some may be against the conspiracy theory and put more emphasis on the endogenous and spontaneous side of incident. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence today that shows the interference and influence of external forces throughout the upheaval.

Often Western intervention starts by leading discourse, and the "Arab Spring" is a strong Western value-oriented discourse coined by the West. Wikipedia, Interactive Encyclopedia, Baidu Encyclopedia and other sites all use such the interpretation of the term "Arab Spring", "What Western media call a revolution in some countries of the Arab world" and "a series of anti-government social movement themed 'democracy' and 'economy' in Arab countries in North Africa and West Asia and countries in other regions." "Western media optimistically think 'a new Middle East will soon be born.'. They also believe that the 'Arab Spring' belongs to the younger generation who are familiar with the Internet and require enjoying the basic democratic rights like most of the rest of the world."[1] Now this definition clearly cannot show the reality of the nature and development of the Middle East upheaval. However, the West took advantage of its dominant role in international discourse and labeled the incident as "historical" in an early stage. The author noticed that even today, when the "spring" is long gone and the international

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[1] See
http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%98%BF%E6%8B%89%E4%BC%AF%E4%B9%8B%E6%98%A5.

community has clearly recognized the obvious cognitive biases and prejudices the West has had on the facts, many people are still using this label when addressing the Middle East upheaval, consciously ormechanically, which shows the tremendous influence of the Western discourse.

Of course, the "Arab Spring" is much more than just a label. The purpose of the West in constructing this discourse is to lead the Middle East upheaval onto the so-called democratization track, which it has long plotted, from the very beginning. Not long ago, the French intelligence research center published a new book called "The Hidden Face of the Arab Revolutions". In this up to 500-page monograph, informative material is used to expose how the United States put a lot of manpower and material resources, the personnel of many years of training and the use of the Internet and other forms to cause the "Arab revolutions" and how the international mainstream media then romanticized the "spontaneity and enthusiasm" of this so-called "revolutions".   Lead people of the book, French Intelligence Research Center Director Eric Denethor said recently in an interview with the "Global Times" reporter, the book is coauthored by 23 pundits from eight countries. These authors from different areas have different cultural backgrounds and ideas. They have nothing to do with partisan politics, nor are they conspiracy theorists. Instead, through field investigation, they "analyzed the related events one by one to reveal the decisive role of the external forces from behind the scene", and finally came to the same conclusion: the so-called "Arab Spring" is actually a "media revolution". International public opinion was influenced by too many one-sided reports and even serious misrepresentations by CNN and Al Jazeera. "The people participating in the protests were manipulated." (Shi, X., 2012: December 21).

One of the authors of the book, Tunisian scholar Ahmed Bensaâda who now lives in Canada also said in an interview with the French newspaper that at the outbreak of the "Arab Spring", the Western mainstream media were trying to control the discourse and portray it as a "spontaneous revolution" of the masses, and that scholars that dared to express a different opinion would be charged with spreading "conspiracy theory". Under the guidance of the Western media, anti-government people were regarded as "heroes", and the government was seen as "the executioner". This shows that the Western media play a role in fueling the whole movement (Yao, L., 2013: January 10).

Bensaâda pointed out that his research results show that it was through some non-governmental organizations and foundations specializing in "exporting democracy" that the United States got deeply involved in this street "revolutions" that shook the Arab countries. The prominent US-related agencies include the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Freedom House (FH) and the Open Society Institute (OSI). Bensaâda pointed out that it was also the manipulation of these institutions that contributed to the "color revolutions" of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union countries. He explained that the involvement of the United States can be divided into two fields, through cyberspace and field guidance. For cyberspace, it mainly focuses on training the Arab internet masters, usually called the "Internet Arab League". The field guidance is to train masters of nonviolent street struggles according to the theory of nonviolence advocated by American philosopher Gene Sharp. The method was designed and implemented by the Center for Applied Non-Violent

Actions and Strategies (CANVAS), and the leader of the center is a former Serbian dissident in "color revolution." (Yao, L., 2013: January 10).

In fact, not only do the media, but also some high-ranking American officials and scholars continue to comment on the Middle East upheaval and suggest taking practical action to implement the concept of democracy and freedom of the West. In November 2011, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in an interview with the US *Time* magazine that the US is trying to influence the direction, with full recognition that it does not have ownership or control. "And there's a lot that's going to happen that is unpredictable. But we want to lead by our values and our interests in ways that, regardless of the trajectory over the next decade, people will know the United States was on the side of democracy, on the side of the rule of law ... And that will, I hope, be a strong antidote to the voices of either fatalism or extremism." (Calabresi, 2011: November 7). While acknowledging that the Middle East upheaval is eventually a country's domestic affairs and the United States can not have a decisive impact on it, some media still believe that "the United States will not shed the responsibility of advancing its own political values and leading the revolutionary upheaval towards true liberty as much as possible." (*Wall Street Journal*, February 19).

Under the influence of the powerful Western discourse, the originally meaningful Middle East upheaval is simply understood as a showdown between "democracy and dictatorship" by many people. At the beginning of the Middle East upheaval, many were cheering over the fact that the so-called authoritarian governments were overthrown one after the other, and predicted that the "Arab Spring" was approaching. But the fact is that the Arab elite and people were

brought to the stage of history with a lack of preparation of the major historical action. As a result, after the so-called "Arab Spring" briefly fulfilled the transition from spring to summer in 2011, it soon went down from autumn to winter. Today, not only is the Middle East filled with pessimism, the once enthusiastic Western world is also looking at the worsening of the situation of the region in a "tense and uneasy" mood.

We see that most of those post-revolutionary countries plunged into subsequent development dilemma of "pursuing stability in chaos and chaos born in stability". On the one hand, the reconstruction of the country needs the undone to be recovered. However, it is difficult to bring back the economy wrecked by the turbulence in the short term and the West pays only lip service to the aid commitments. Those young people who took to the streets and fought tooth and nails in the revolution overthrew the old system for their livelihoods are still in distress. They are currently still dissatisfied with the new regime. On the other hand, the competitions for dominance of ideology and tribal interests between religious and secular forces, between different sects as well as between the different tribes and political forces in these countries are still fierce. Tunisia was the earliest to accomplish the success of the "revolution", the Constituent Assembly of which has so far failed to make progress in drafting a new constitution and electoral laws. The entire process has been hampered because of the differences between the Islamists and Secularists within the interim parliament. There are similar problems in Libya as well. The armed forces in the disarray simply ignore the presence of the central government, and are frequently fighting with each other, which almost set the entire country in a state of anarchy. The protests against Morsi and the draft constitution in Egypt that

have lasted many months increased risk of a "second revolution". The most worrying is that Syria is still in brutal bloody conflicts, with tens of thousands of Syrians losing their lives for the so-called dispute between democracy and dictatorship.

II. The Syrian Crisis and the Western Discourse Trap

The Syrian crisis is the extension to the mass unrest of the Arab world beginning in Tunisia. The reason why the Syrian crisis has reached the point today has something to do with the Syrian government's underestimating the situation and failing to propose practical reform plan to meet the political demands of the opposition as well as to resolve the contradiction between the people and the government. However, with the continued involvement and intervention of external forces, more and more geopolitical interest competitions, sectarian confrontations and power politics, the situation has become increasingly complex.

In the early stage, an article from the United Arab Emirates Gulf News pointed out explicitly in the analysis the reason for multiple parties to intervene in the Syrian crisis: "This has nothing to do with freedom, but about Iran." The article said, Turkey, the Arab League and the Sunni countries are behind the Syrian opposition, while Iran, Hezbollah and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki support the current regime of Syria. Syria's regional and international enemies try to seize the opportunity to change the regional balance of power and suppress Syria to isolate and besiege Tehran. An article from the Al-Jazeera website also said that, the race around Syria is a regional hegemony battle (Li, Y., 2011: November 28).

In addition to the region's geopolitical factors, the tendentious

and provocative opinion guidance and the direct support of the opposition from the United States and the West in the entire Arab upheaval have obviously exacerbated the deterioration of the situation in Syria. Syria has long been depicted by the United States as one of the "rogue states", regarded as part of the "axis of evil" like Iran. Therefore, "Syria is the inevitable object for the United States to implement a 'regime change' in the Middle East." (Dong, 2012: 84). After the outbreak of violent conflict in Syria, the United States and other Western countries have stepped up the efforts to put pressure on the Government of Syria, but then turned a blind eye to the fact that some countries encouraged and supported Syria's anti-government forces to foment violent incidents in Syria. This apparent "taking-sides" approach apparently contributed to the upgrading violent conflicts in Syria.

The United States and the West also repeatedly tried to forcefully guide the development of the international public opinion and the situation in Syria through the UN Security Council resolution, but suffered vetoes from China and Russia three times in a row. In this regard, after each vote, Western public opinion reacted strongly and accusations even insults against China and Russia were overwhelming. Some senior officials in the United States and the West even used inappropriate words to express their anger, regardless of diplomatic etiquette. Some countries under the long-term impact of the United States and the West, as well as the countries that have their own gains on the Syrian issue, also followed the Western media to criticize China. It is worth mentioning that, under the influence of Western public opinion, the public at home and abroad also questioned whether it is worthwhile to take this policy.

In our opinion, voting itself is a manifestation of the democratic

decision-making. China, as a member of the Security Council has the right to make its own choice according to its own judgment of the situation and the principle of helping to solve the conflict. The United States and other countries were furious only because China has expressed different views on the resolution, which can be attributed to their alertness and restlessness that China may not only challenge the dominance and discourse power of the US in the economic field, but also in the field of international politics. Over the years, the United States has been used to vetoing others - it vetoed no less than 60 times on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process alone. Now it is rare that other countries voted against it and the opponents are China and Russia which the United States regards as its biggest competitors. This uncomfortable feeling is probably one of the factors that make the United States so angry. As for its other followers, in addition to the countries that have their own interests in Syria, some people originally identify with the Western values to a large extent. These people would take the Western stance not only on the Syria issue, but also on any international issues involving China. More people are influenced by the discourse of the "Arab Spring" that they think the upheaval in the Arab world, including Syria, is just the struggle between "democracy and dictatorship". These two types of people actually know very little about the situation in Syria and the Middle East as a whole. Most of them are simply stepping into a discourse trap set by the United States and West under the guidance of Western public opinion, consciously orinstinctively .

The discourse trap set by the United States and the West is mainly manifested in two aspects. Firstly, it shifted the focus of attention of the international community on Syria. The original goal of the meeting of the Security Council was to discuss how to stop the Syrian domestic

violence from upgrading, which was substituted for "democracy or dictatorship." In fact, prior to the meeting of the Security Council, the West had done much to prepare the public opinion. Through a lot of reports (of which there are many reports proved to be inconsistent with the facts) and publicity, media were constantly shaping the dictator image of Bashar Assad and publicizing the brutal crackdown on the popular uprising. Meanwhile, some senior government officials and influential scholars spread words on different occasions that there will be no dialogue with the Syrian government and Bashar must leave. At the vote of the Security Council, the West has created a powerful international context to promote the Syrian regime change. For a time, "standing on the side of the people or the side of the dictator" became the core discourse when talking about Syria.

Secondly, when the United States and some Western countries knew there were still serious differences between the parties on the draft resolution, and there was still time to continue the consultation, they forcefully pushed voting and refused to respond to the appeal of China and some other members, as well as Special Envoy Kofi Annan to continue negotiations to reach a text acceptable to all parties. The aim is on the one hand to show the world that they are the leader of the Syrian issue, on the other hand is to try to create public opinion to blame China and Russia for the escalated humanitarian crisis in Syria. The logic of the Western discourse is that Bashar's regime is the source of violence, and therefore must be overthrown. If China and Russia vote against it, they are trying to protect an evil regime and must be responsible for the continuing violence in Syria. However, the fact is that the fundamental purpose of the meeting of the Security Council was to stop the bloody conflicts in Syria. China and Russia believe that the most effective way is that both parties in the conflict immediately

cease all acts of violence, and then conduct inclusive dialogues to solve the crisis in a political way. The reason why China and Russia oppose the proposal of the West, is partly that to use external forces to promote the regime change of a country does not comply with the relevant principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and partly that the Syrian government is still holding the absolute military superiority, hence to encourage the armed opposition to fight with the government through violence will not only fail to solve the problem, but will also cause more serious humanitarian crisis.

If treated objectively, it would have been just a disagreement of the two sides on how to effectively stop the violent conflict in Syria. But in the hegemonic discourse of the United States and the West, it became a competition between "the forces supporting democracy" and "the forces shielding the dictatorship". This conversion seriously deviated from the essence and priority of the Syrian issue, and also became the main reason for the loss of focus of Security Council discussion. Despite the fact that China made clear explanation of its policy stance after the meeting, there are still many people listening to the West and questioning China. And there are a lot of countries groundlessly criticizing China for the sake of their own interests. Although such remarks are not innovative, there is still a market for them. For a long time, as long as China's views on the Middle East issue is inconsistent with the West, it will be blamed for doing it for oil or other interests, which seems to have become the mindset of some people, which in fact, is the result of the long-term Western domination of the international discourse.

The following background may help us learn more about the truth. As we all know, last year was the election year for the world's major powers. World leaders were beginning to focus on domestic

politics, and the political will of the United States and the West to get involved in the Middle East upheaval was greatly weakened. Shortly after the Security Council vote, when the author went to the Carnegie Middle East Center, the Doha Campus of Georgetown University and other American academic and research institutions in the Middle East to communicate with American scholars, they made it clear that even if China and Russia did not vote against on the Syrian issue, the situation would not have changed, because after the Libyan War, the United States and the West had no intention (to some extent no ability) to invest more resources in the Middle East, let alone direct military intervention in Syria. And out of the needs for election, the United States has had to shift more attention from overseas to the homeland. This also validates the above-mentioned view of the author, that the United States will still push the vote even if it knows that the proposal of the West will be subject to China and Russia's veto. To some extent the US was just taking advantage of its powerful agenda-setting capacity to set a discourse trap: the reason why the Syrian crisis remains unresolved is because of the obstruction from China and Russia. In this way, the United States has made their own opportunity to divert the public attention, to lead the focus onto China and Russia, to make their own withdrawal quietly, to harm the image of China and to weaken China's international influence.

III. China Should Enhance the Sense of Competition for Discourse Power

In recent years, China has taken a more aggressive Middle East policy and played a unique and important role in solving the hot issues in the Middle East. China's political influence has increased,

causing global concern. However, its international discourse power is not yet compatible with its international position (CCTV, 2012: March 6).

In Syria, for example, China has always adhered to the political settlement of the Syrian issue and the principled stance against external military intervention. As early as in March 2012, China proposed "six-point proposition" on a political solution to the Syria problem (China News Agency, 2012: March 8). Its core idea of promoting peace and facilitating talks was accepted by the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Annan, which became an important component of Annan's six suggestions. Since Annan's helpless resignation, based on his six-point plan, the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, the Geneva Communiqué of the Syrian Action Group and the latest developments, China came up with the four-point proposal themed "ceasefire to end violence, to start negotiations, to begin international mediation and to facilitate humanitarian assistance," (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China) which was welcomed by the United Nations and the international community. In addition, China has also maintained contact and communication with all concerned parties in Syria, including the Syrian opposition. Besides, China has done a lot of work to ease the situation in Syria and provided humanitarian assistance to the Syrian refugees. We can say that "China truly safeguards the fundamental interests of the Syrian people, firmly protects the peace and stability of the Middle East, and defends the United Nations Charter and norms in international relations." (Wu, 2013). However, as mentioned above, since the proposal of the United States and other Western countries failed to pass in the Security Council, China's policy stance has suffered a lot of misinterpretation, misunderstanding, questioning and

even blame. There have been many analyses in the academia with regard the reason for this. From the discourse power, there are generally the following main points:

First, although the rise of emerging countries, including China, has significantly changed the pattern of the world economy, and with the relative decline of the US hegemony, the eastward shift in power in the international politics has begun to appear. However, the basic pattern of China being weaker than the West's in the international discourse power has not changed. This is because, since the end of the Cold War, in addition to possession of the substantial advantage based on the economic and military power, the United States and the West has also dominated the international political discourse and agenda-setting power based on Western values of freedom, democracy, human rights and ideology, which provides the structural and institutional space in its hegemonic discourse. Recently, China itself has been faced with the transformation of the socioeconomic system, transformation of the view on the outside world and the consequent international discourse transformation. Prior to the completion of these transitions, it is difficult to build a "Chinese discourse" system with extensive influence yet different from the Western discourse (Zhang, 2012). At a deeper level, the rise of China not only posed challenges to the West in the political and economic fields, but it also made them feel the strong pressure of China's rising international influence to Western hegemony. In this case, the West is increasingly trying to maintain its dominant position in international discourse by strengthening its discourse hegemony. The aggressive performance of the United States and the West in the Middle East upheaval reflected this.

Second, although China has begun to focus on public diplomacy

and cultural diplomacy and has invested a lot of resources, but in the competition for international discourse, the proactive position of the West and the defensive position of China have not fundamentally changed. This trend can be clearly seen from how the government officials, the mainstream media, and scholars of the two sides looked at the Middle East upheaval. In the beginning of the outbreak of mass protests in Tunisia, the West was positively praising it and leading the trend, trying to link China with the chaos in the Middle. They believed that Twitter, Facebook, You Tube and other emerging media played an important role in the overthrow of the so-called "dictatorship" in the Middle East, and therefore called on the government to increase investment in the promotion of so-called Internet freedom to China. After the US State Department created its Arabic and Persian accounts on Twitter, it will soon create the Chinese account. In contrast, China's position was much more cautious. Initially most of the official media and mainstream scholars used such words as "Middle East turmoil", "chaos in the Middle East" to describe this revolutionary movement in the Arab world. Even at a later stage when they learned more about the nature of the matter, they were referring to the incident as "drastic changes in the Middle East" or the "Middle East upheaval" which had a rather neutral stance. In addition, in the face of the challenge of the West, in most cases the official was only to make an interpretative response. For example, we would repeatedly stress that we had no selfish interests in Syria, without knowing that questions like this were actually trap in agenda-setting by the West. While we were entangled in this, our core discourses "to promote a political solution and to oppose external interference" had been weakened. Some scholars believe that the proactive position of the West and the defensive position of China are fundamentally determined by the expanding

nature of the Western culture and the introversion of the Chinese culture. "The Western cultural hegemony is built on the generations' expansion of the Western culture" (Yang, 2012: March 20) and the Chinese culture in general advocates subtlety, low profile and humbleness, instead of aggressiveness and showing off. When observing the study and practice of public diplomacy in China these years, we can find that we seem to have emphasized and used the responsive function of public diplomacy, i.e., to enhance mutual trust, to reduce suspicion and to defuse hostility, while we clearly have not recognized the competitive and shaping features of public diplomacy enough, i.e., to initiatively set the agenda and to spread ideas and concepts. China also lacks self-confidence and initiative in this matter.

Third, although the West's intentional misinterpretation and the lack of understanding of China of the international community were one of the main reasons of China's position being questioned and image being damaged. However, this does not cover up China's own lack of capacity in international agenda-setting, international discourse power competition as well as self-expression in international affairs. In the past time, many people have always stressed that China's national strength was weak, and therefore need "keep a low profile" in international affairs. After China's national strength was improved, China's mainstream voice was still that the country should focus on domestic affairs and put economic construction in the first place, and to foreign countries we should still "keep a low profile". In recent years, more and more people are beginning to realize that China's soft power has been behind the development of hard power. On October 18, 2011, the sixth plenary session of the 17th session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party adopted the "CPC Central Committee's Decisions on Several Significant Issues of

Deepening Cultural Reform to Promote Socialist Cultural Development and Prosperity", which pointed out that, "At present, the world is at a time of large developments, large transformations and large adjustments. The world's multi-polarity and economic globalization are deepening, science and technology is improving and all sorts of thoughts and cultures are more frequently interacting, so the task of safeguarding national cultural security is increasingly tough and the requirements of strengthening national cultural soft power and China's international influence are increasingly pressing." (Xinhua News Agency, 2011: November 26). But the author believes that domestically, the current understanding of the importance of dominating the international discourse is still insufficient, the subjective awareness to participate in the competition is not strong, and there is yet a consensus on many issues. The first main reason lies in that although the "keeping a low profile" strategy was generally consistent with the reality of our country in the past, to some extent it has also limited our cultivation of the sense of participation and competition. The second reason is the narrow view of the interests developed in decades. Many people can "only see oil as well as economic and trade figures" (Liang & Zhang, 2011: April 26), without being interested in international affairs that has little to do with China's interests and do not want to speak about. The third reason is that many people lack confidence in the development of China. They think that with regard to soft power, China is unable to have something of its own to compete with the West. This lack of self-confidence can sometimes affect our judgment of major international events and their implications. Just imagine if we were able to see the nature of the upheaval in the Middle East was in fact a national transition, we could have calmly faced it and positively

considered the opportunities for China. Unfortunately, most people only saw the appearance of upheaval. Some people even listened to the misleading discourse of the West to connect the incident to China, which created unnecessary tensions. From this perspective, "to consolidate self-confidence in our road, our theory, and our institution" (Hu, 2012: November) emphasized President Hu Jintao in the Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China had a very profound meaning.

In summary, the international competition for discursive power in the Middle East upheaval has inspired China in many ways. We should further recognize that the current competition among nations is not limited to tangible areas of military and economic power. The competition in the international discourse, agenda-setting and institution-founding power will increasingly become the focus of the international game. China will become increasingly involved in international affairs. Its international responsibility and the expectations that outside world carry for China will correspondingly increase. China will also complete the conversion from a regional power to a global power in this process. Under this trend, in the interaction between China and the world, China will surely become more active in shaping and influencing the direction of the outside world, and China's public diplomacy also needs to show maturity and self-confidence. China's Middle East policy should also be adjusted to establish a proactive and initiative guiding ideology. Under the new situation, we should take the initiative to shape a new relationship with the Arab countries. Of course, we will also face more intense competition from the United States and the West. To this end, we need to make full theoretical preparation and promote timely conversion of the discourse system. At present, what we most urgently need to do is

to strengthen awareness and promote consensus.

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