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# CHINA STEPS INTO THE MIDDLE EAST

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The *Rise of China* has been a subject of much debate, discussion and deliberation in the recent times. A “peaceful” rise (和平崛起) is what the country seeks to project to its viewers across the world. However much beyond the portrayal of its image as a tranquil civilization, its foreign policy activities and strategic decision making capabilities depict it as a modern nation state that is committed to building upon its military, economic and political successes of the previous decades. The objective being to establish itself as a major global power in the forthcoming decades.

Amidst such an endeavour, China (中国) has stepped into a new era of diplomacy. As an end result to a host of transnational ties of the country with external powers, characterised by disparate, and to some extent contradictory policies, its position in world politics is fluid. Influenced by these considerations, it seeks to secure its footprint across the globe, especially in the areas of strategic importance. The recent release of China’s first White Paper on its Arab Policy must be viewed in this context.

The document is a “blueprint” of the principles that would supposedly guide the Sino-Arab bilateral relations in the present and in the future. It must be remembered that in 2010 this relationship was elevated to one of strategic cooperative relationship. With the White Paper in place, the bilateral trajectory which was previously predominated by energy security has now become multifaceted. China has laid down the “1+2+3” pattern of cooperation with the Arab states as well as welcomed their interest to accomplish its projects of the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” and “Silk Road Economic Belt”. The “1+2+3” structure refers to the cooperation pattern that would guide this relationship, with energy cooperation at the core, trade and investment facilitation and infrastructure construction as the “two wings”, and the third tier consisting of “new tech fields” of space satellite, nuclear energy and new energy.<sup>1</sup>

The questions that then arise are: Why has China released a White Paper on its Arab policy now? Is China’s act guided by its principle of



morality to revive a region in turmoil or it is a mere trail of its pursuit of national interest? The fact is that although China's relations with the Arab nations in the Middle East date back two thousand years, yet it has realised the necessity to appreciate this bilateral bonhomie now more than ever before.

Over time the Arab countries as a whole have emerged as the largest supplier of crude oil to China and evolved as its 7<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner.<sup>2</sup> In this context, a few facts and figures deserve mention. The past decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in China's presence in the global energy markets. From 2003 to 2013, there has been a global growth in the demand for energy by 60 percent. Further China's demand for oil has witnessed an increase by an average of 450,000 barrels a day in each year. In the year 2014, China consumed 10.4 million barrels per day, in comparison to 6.4 million barrels per day in the year 2004.<sup>3</sup>

In view of the above data and the fact that China has since 1993 become a net importer of oil, the importance of the Arab countries to China is apparent. Although China has attempted to diversify its sources of import of oil, yet it depends to a considerable extent on the Middle East for the same. To add to it, in line with China's rapid economic growth in the recent years it has emerged as the largest global buyer of oil. This stands in contrast to the United States of America which is gradually sliding down the

list of top importers. Thus, clearly China desires to seize this opportunity to secure a firm footprint on the Arab leadership.

China at present seeks to gain international recognition as a major global power, spread its political clout across the globe and proliferate the model of Beijing Consensus especially amongst the developing countries. With reference to these objectives, one may draw a parallel between China's approach towards Africa and that towards the Arab states. In both cases China has issued White Papers to promote a so-called "win-win" partnership. However when one delves deep into these documents one finds that it is the element of national interest rather than the principle of morality that has driven China to this end. Like Africa, not only are the Arab nations a rich source of crude oil but also numerically large in terms of the constituent states. As China had once been benefitted in 1971 to seek its lawful seat in the United Nations Security Council due to the support of the African states and to some extent the Arab nations, China is conscious that apart from energy security, amicable relations with these countries would yield beneficial results at other international forums in the future as well.

Having discussed that energy security is still the mainstay of China's Arab policy, the question of morality too must be addressed. The role of morality in the study of foreign policy in general and China's foreign policy in particular is

both an old and a new issue.<sup>4</sup>The present case of China's White Paper on its Arab Policy is clearly not a case of morality. Rather it is one of morality vs national interest. China does not want to indulge in the practice of "learning from each other" or producing "win-win" results. However it has seized this opportunity to accomplish itself as a responsible stakeholder in the international arena by engaging with a strife torn region of the world. It is under this camouflage of projecting a 'win-win' partnership and acting as a responsible stakeholder, that the dragon seeks to quench its thirst for oil. The energy sector plays an important role in the Chinese economy, therefore energy security is critical to China's domestic as well as foreign policy agenda.

To conclude, one must consider that China has released its White Papers on issues or areas of strategic importance such as its energy policy, judicial reform, human rights, foreign aid, peaceful development, "One Country Two Systems" policy, its policy towards African sub-continent, Diaoyu Dao islands, Xinjiang region and the progress and development of Tibet. With its Arab policy being enlisted in this series, it may well be presumed that in the near future China may reckon the Middle East as an area of its "core interest".

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "China's first Arab Policy Paper sets out development strategies", *China Daily*, January 14, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> White Paper on China's Arab Policy Paper, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c\\_135006619.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm), accessed on January 16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> ZhaDaojiong and Michal Meidan, "China and the Middle East in a New Energy Landscape", *Chatham House*, October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Carlson and Ren Xiao, *New Frontiers in China's Foreign Relations* (Lexington Books: Lanham, 2011).