

The Middle Eastern Security Dilemma and Its Impact on China's Belt and Road Initiative



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ABSTRACT

World peace cannot be attained without ensuring Middle Eastern security. This being so, the present article focuses on current security issues in this region, with special attention to the following questions: What is the current security situation in the Middle East? What are the causes of the security dilemma in the Middle East? What kind of negative impact may the Middle East security have on China's Belt and Road Initiative? And what does China propose to resolve the security dilemma in the Middle East?

THE MIDDLE EAST IS A REGION ENDOWED with a strategic geographical location, rich natural resources, areas of fertile land, and a vibrant civilizational legacy. However, since the early 20th century, this region has been center stage for political violence and military confrontation. The severity of Middle Eastern insecurity is perhaps incomparable to any other region on the planet. One thing is certain: world peace cannot be attained without ensuring Middle Eastern security. However, Middle Eastern peace requires not only the active engagement of local populations, but also the concerted efforts and wisdom of the international community.

On November 27–28, 2019, the Middle East Security Forum, hosted by the China Institute of International Studies, opened in Beijing for two days with the theme “Security in the Middle East under the New Situation: Challenges and Prospects”. Nearly two hundred influential Chinese and foreign officials and scholars attended this conference to discuss solutions to hotspot issues, negotiate over security cooperation plans, and seek for strategies of stable development. This was the first time that China had held a high-level forum on Middle Eastern affairs with “security” at the forefront. This demonstrates how China's interest in Middle Eastern security issues has recently widened, evolving from a merely economic perspective to a more comprehensive one that equally values economic and security-driven issues (Boyi, 2020).

Given the relevance of the Middle East for world peace, this article focuses on current security issues in this region, with special attention to the following questions: What is the current security situation in the Middle East? What are the causes of the security dilemma in the Middle East? What kind of negative impact may the Middle East security have on China's Belt and Road Initiative? And what does China propose to resolve the security dilemma in the Middle East?

The Current Security Situation in the Middle East

Middle Eastern politics were turbulent in the final days of 2019. On December 27, China, Russia, and Iran held a joint military exercise in the Gulf of Oman. This was an unusual development: it marked the first time in the 40 years since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 that these countries had engaged in a joint military exercise. This event, especially in the context of tightening U.S. sanctions on Iran, was clearly intended to support Iran (Chenjing, 2019). On December 29, the U.S. military conducted a large-scale air attack on the 35th and 36th Brigade bases of Iraq's pro-Iran Popular Mobilisation Force, killing more than 20 Iraqi militiamen and triggering a popular demonstration in front of the U.S. Embassy in Iraq (Hui, 2020). In the early morning of January 3, 2020, Major General Qasem Suleimani, commander



Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with foreign guests attending the Middle East Security Forum in Beijing, capital of China, Nov. 27, 2019. (Xinhua/Li Xiang)

of the Quds Brigade, affiliated with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards, was assassinated by U.S. drones, which led to the escalation of the conflict between the United States and Iran (Shi-chun, 2020).

These events signalled the beginning of a new round of large-scale anti-Americanism in the Middle East. After its defeat in Syria, it seems that the United States is likely to lose in Iraq again. Although the above-mentioned incidents have exacerbated the conflict between the United States and Iran, if the timeline is extended, the security situation in the Middle East has changed significantly since the Arab Spring in 2011.

Indeed, the security situation in the Middle East is generally cooling down and is now controllable to a certain extent; resolving conflicts through political means has become a trend. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, China has proposed not to fight, but to solve issues politically; but no one has paid attention to China's

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voice. Even many Arab countries complained and criticized China, arguing that China chose to continue to support the Assad government. Eight years have passed now. Although the wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen are still ongoing, they cannot be regarded as purely civil conflicts: they have evolved into proxy wars, which have also negatively affected the internal political and economic security of these countries. At present, all parties are growing weary of these confrontations and are willing to seek to de-escalate the situation.

Among them, Iran is facing severe economic difficulties due to extreme pressure from the United States, and domestic protests have repeat-

edly erupted. Saudi Arabia has caused strategic overdrafts through its involvement in regional warfare, and the Jamal Khashoggi incident has negatively impacted on its international image. Israel has fallen into persistent political rigidity because of repeated domestic elections and failures to form a cabinet. Turkey has been playing a strong role and taking a tough stance on many issues such as oil and gas drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Syrian civil war, the Libyan civil war, and the Qatar Crisis; but domestic political and economic challenges have put tremendous pressure on the Erdogan government. Meanwhile, the United States has no intention of going to war with Iran; rather, it hopes to reap the benefits of intensifying the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, all parties are willing to ease the situation.

Second, the United States still dominates the Middle East; it is still the most prominent factor affecting the development of the situation there. Those studying the current characteristics of the power game in the Middle East have commented that the United States is reducing its strategic investment in the area, while Russia has increased its influence on the Syria issue and deepened its cooperation with regional powers. This opinion can be summarized as “the United States withdraws and Russia moves forward”, which evokes the beginning of a “post-American era” (Long, 2020).

The relative decline of global U.S. influence is a fact (Gürçan, 2019; Gürçan, 2019/2020), but it should not be regarded too simplistically, especially in the Middle East. Frankly, the current US-Russian power competition in the Middle East can be summed up as “U.S. retreating but not weak, Russia advancing but not strong”. Although the U.S. is making a strategic withdrawal

from the Middle East, it is still the most powerful external power in Middle Eastern affairs: the withdrawal will be a long historical process. Russia will continue to return to the Middle East, but mainly at the tactical level; it does not fully dominate the Middle East at the strategic level due to its weak economy. For the foreseeable future, “America is strong and Russia is weak” is still the basic scenario in the Middle East (Zhongmin, 2020).

Third, the status of regional powers in the Middle East continues to rise; they will become important pieces on the Middle Eastern chessboard. Before the Arab Spring, the countries of the region could not be fully independent, but with the withdrawal of U.S. power, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel have begun to challenge U.S. hegemony, although Egypt has been left behind due to the coup d'état and economic decline. The first four regional powers have played a greater role in the hot issues in the Middle East, even more so than the big global powers. They have begun to fill the power vacuum and compete for the dominance of the regional order.

The eye of the Middle Eastern storm is Iran. Since the Iraq war in 2003 and the Arab Spring that began in 2010, Iran's strength has increased prominently. The rise of Iran will inevitably lead to confrontation with other countries in the region, especially Saudi Arabia. The problem is, there is no single power that can unite all the countries in the Middle East. In the past, there were traditional Arab-nationalist powers like Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. But Iraq has now been brought down by war, Syria has been divided since 2011, and Egypt has been severely hit since the 2011 revolution. Therefore, only Saudi Arabia can engage in blocs (Shaoxian, 2020). The Middle East has returned to the chaos of a century ago.



Protesters try to set fire to the outside fence of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, Iraq on Dec. 31, 2019. (Xinhua/Khalil Dawood)

Fourth, non-traditional security issues such as terrorism, refugees, energy, and cyber-attacks have become more prominent. To deal with each of these issues in turn: the Middle East is not only a victim of terrorism, but also a breeding ground. Although the Islamic State has been severely weakened in recent years, the roots of the thoughts leading to terrorism have not been eradicated, and returning jihadists remain a potential threat to all countries. The millions of refugees caused by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Syrian war, the Libyan war, and the Yemen crisis have not only brought a severe political and economic crisis to the Middle East, but also put significant pressure on Europe and the world. As for energy security and cyberattacks, the latest incidents have happened in Sau-

di Arabia. A drone attack on Saudi oilfields in September 2019 caused a 50% reduction in oil production, which further affected the world oil market and energy security. We should attach great importance to this new trend.

The Causes of the Security Dilemma in the Middle East

Countries in the Middle East have few independent political, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and military resources to compete with the United States; neither have they established an effective collective security structure. Therefore, since World War II, the United States has been the largest provider of security public goods for the world generally and the Middle East particularly. Countries in the Middle East rely on security

protection provided by the United States (Weijian, 2019). The U.S. has established many military bases in many countries in the Middle East; has signed a large number of defense peace treaties; and has conducted military personnel exchanges and joint training, military intelligence sharing, and military equipment provision in accordance with these peace treaties. This has allowed a greater degree of penetration of U.S. military force into the countries of the Middle East. Especially in the Gulf region, the United States has built a “Pax Americana” under the auspices of its strength.

The United States also provides protection for the political systems of many states in the Middle East. For example, the Gulf countries are oil producers, but at the same time the last remaining absolute monarchies in the world. Although the United States has always prided itself on being a defender of democracy, freedom, and human rights, and has always been keen on launching “democracy transformation” plans in the Middle East, it has never challenged or criticized the monarchic systems in the Gulf region. Instead, it has acted as their protector, thanks to the U.S. interest in benefiting from these countries’ large energy resources. Besides, these absolute monarchies are much easier to control than other authoritarian countries because they are eager to maintain their systems and in dire need of a great power guarantee. Meanwhile, countries that are anti-American or fight for regional hegemony can easily become the targets of U.S. containment and crackdown. This can be seen clearly when looking at the history of U.S. Gulf policy.

U.S. Gulf policy prior to the Trump presidency can be divided into five phases. In the first phase, from 1969 to 1979, the U.S. implemented the Twin Pillar strategy. Its main strategic goals were to curb Soviet influence in the Middle East and ensure the supply of oil. Therefore, Saudi

Arabia and Iran were established as “the police in the Gulf region”. This period ended with the outbreak of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (Xinli and Xiaomin, 2001). In the second stage, from 1981 to 1990, the U.S. implemented the Strategic Balancing strategy, aiming to curb Iran while weakening Iraqi forces during wars. In the third stage, from 1991 to 2000, the United States implemented the Dual Containment strategy, containing Iran and Iraq by imposing sanctions. In the fourth stage, from 2001 to 2009, the U.S. implemented an anti-terrorism strategy to counter terrorism through a democratic transformation plan in the Middle East; thus it launched the Iraq war while maintaining sanctions on Iran.



Iraqi people in Baghdad protesting the United States’ the Middle East peace plan on January 31, 2020 (Xinhua / Khalil Dawood)

As a result, Iran and Iraq became the key targets for the United States. However, during the Obama administration (2009–2016), the previous containment policy was replaced by seeking change through contact rather than isolation. Guided by this policy, the U.S. reached a nuclear agreement with Iran and sought to withdraw from Iraq, showing that the U.S. was no longer concerned about those issues not vital for its own interests. One reason for this was the U.S. shale gas revolution, which reduced demand for

Middle Eastern oil, so that the US's energy interests in the Middle East began to decline (Jikang, 2019). Another reason was that the United States was trapped in the quagmire of the Iraq war for more than a decade; it urgently needed to withdraw, and then to seek strategic rebalancing to curb its rivals in Asia, particularly China.

After Donald Trump took office, he revised Obama's Middle East policy. First, he gave full support to Israel, for example by announcing the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, declaring the Golan Heights as Israeli territory, launching the "Peace to Prosperity" plan, and reducing the Palestinian-Israeli question to an economic issue; all these moves have been widely criticized in Palestine and the Arab world (Jin, 2019). Second, he set out to unite allies but with an "America first" philosophy, so that allies had to bear the cost of combating security issues such as terrorism and extremism. Third, Iran became the main target. Thanks to Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement, resumption of the containment strategy, and treatment of Iran as the United States' biggest enemy in the Middle East, the previously ameliorating Middle East security situation has become sharply worse.

Take, for example, the Saudi oilfield attack. On September 14, 2019, several drones attacked two of the Saudi Arabian National Petroleum Corporation's oil facilities. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia announced that it would cut its oil production by half, reducing its output by 5.7 million barrels per day, causing an increase in world oil prices. The Yemeni Houthi armed forces have claimed responsibility for this incident. The United States believes that Iran was responsible for the attack, but Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait,

and other countries have not publicly named the attackers, and have not rashly accused Iran of being behind the scenes. This shows that Saudi Arabia hopes to reduce the internal and external shocks caused by this event (Huanyu, 2019).

However, there are doubts over the incident. Although the Houthi armed forces have repeatedly launched drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, this time the technology involved was more advanced than ever before, causing all parties to wonder whether the Houthis have such weaponry. In addition, the United States is responsible for the Saudi air defense system, so how could unmanned aerial vehicles penetrate these defenses and launch attacks without any warning? One can imagine how big the Saudis' air defense loophole must be.

The incident further exacerbated Saudi concerns over Iran's military power. An important part of Iran's military policy is the development of the Rocket Army. Iran has achieved medium-range missile capability, albeit at the expense of developing its Air Force. If Iran's missile technology continues to develop, its regional influence and threat will continue to increase, which will pose a security risk to Israel and Saudi Arabia. By then, the important military targets of both countries will be within the range of Iranian missiles. Considering this, Saudi Arabia is bound to become more reliant on U.S. security protection.

Therefore, the current security situation is causing a dilemma for Middle Eastern states. In the past, they could rely on the United States, but that is no longer the case. At the same time, no new alternative force can replace the U.S. in providing a security structure, and Arab countries cannot establish a collective security mechanism for three reasons. First, there are multiple layers of overlapping competitive relationships in the Mid-

dle East: between large foreign countries (mainly the United States and Russia), Arab countries and non-Arab countries in the region, the Arab/Islamic world and Israel, Islamic Sunnis and Shiites, inter-Arab conflicts, and so on. Second, there are many alliances. For example, there is the U.S.-led “Middle East Strategic Alliance” against Iran. In the Syrian civil war, Russia and Iran support government forces while the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia support the opposition; in the political process of resolving the Syria crisis, a confrontational pattern formed between the two camps of Russia, Turkey, and Syria on one side, and the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on the other. Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Qatar was isolated by the other members; in the Eastern Mediterranean oil and gas project, Turkey and Libya are on one side, while Southern Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt are on the other. The third and most fundamental reason is that the century-old structure of the Middle East is collapsing, and the original geopolitical balance is being destroyed; Arab states such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen are weakening, but non-Arab countries are becoming stronger and more nationalist. This makes it more difficult to establish a security structure that can be agreed upon by all parties. It can be said that if Iran and Saudi Arabia are not reconciled, peace in the Middle East will be difficult to achieve.

The Impact of Middle East Security Issues on China's Belt and Road Initiative

In the past, due to geographical distance and the complexity of the situation in the region, China did not pay enough attention to this area and the Middle East was not so important for China's foreign policy. However, in the new millennium, and especially since the beginning of the Belt and Road Initiative (Chen, 2019/2020; Gökçay,

2019/2020; Koray, 2019/2020; Tutan, 2019/2020; Yi, 2019/2020), the political, economic, cultural, and diplomatic relations between the Middle East and China have become increasingly close. If the Middle East is unstable, unsafe, and unsustainable for a long period of time, it will also be difficult to advance the Belt and Road Initiative smoothly.

The Belt and Road Initiative cannot bypass the Middle East, which is full of security challenges and risks. First, terrorism is the public enemy of humankind, and is extremely serious in the Middle East; therefore, to combat terrorism and obtain the moral high ground, China must clearly demonstrate its attitude.

The security situation in the Middle East will have an impact on China's various interests. First, energy security. More than 50% of China's oil is imported from the Middle East. After the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, it put maximum pressure on the country. One goal was to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero; this has caused huge damage to the interests of China, Europe, India, Japan, and other countries (Hongda, 2019). The safety of the passage of the Strait of Hormuz also has a significant impact on China's energy security, and is also an important consideration for the joint military exercises between China, Russia, and Iran. In addition, the attack on the Saudi oilfield caused oil production to be abruptly cut by more than half, producing fluctuations in the global oil market and setting off alarm bells for China's energy reserves.

Second, security against terrorism. The Belt and Road Initiative cannot bypass the Middle

East, which is full of security challenges and risks. First, terrorism is the public enemy of humankind, and is extremely serious in the Middle East; therefore, to combat terrorism and obtain the moral high ground, China must clearly demonstrate its attitude. Second, on the Syrian battlefield, there are various East Turkistan terrorist organizations that have posted videos calling for a small jihad against China. Once these jihadists and terrorists return to China, they will endanger the security of the western region and indeed the whole country. Third, China already has a lot of practice and experience in counterterrorism and anti-extremism, and urgently needs the support and affirmation of the Middle East countries.

Third, economic security. China has a large number of investments, enterprises and personnel in the Middle East. There are 200,000 Chinese in Dubai alone. China has invested in the Iraqi oil industry, built industrial parks in Egypt, and taken part in reconstruction in Syria. The deteriorating security situation may cause huge economic losses. For example, in 2011, withdrawing Chinese nationals from Libya caused tens of billions of yuans to China. From this, China has learned the lesson that only a stable Middle East can help protect its overseas interests.

Fourth, strategic security. Although in the past, the Middle East was not given sufficient weight in China's overall diplomatic strategic layout, the impact of geopolitical changes in the Middle East has global significance. For example, the Gulf crisis and Gulf War of 1990–91 prevented the United States from comprehensively containing China and eased strategic pressure on China after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dramatic changes in Eastern Europe. The 9/11 incident in 2001 again disrupted the U.S. siege of China, resolved the deterioration of the relationship caused by the China-US plane collision incident in April 2001, opened the Sino-US cooperative anti-terrorism mechanism,

and laid the foundation for China's accession to the WTO. For the next decade, China once again experienced a period of strategic opportunities. Since then, both the Obama and the Trump administrations have hoped to withdraw from the Middle East and deal with China, but the deterioration of the security situation will continue to plunge the United States into the Middle East; this will be beneficial for China's further development.

China's Approach to Solving Middle Eastern Security Issues

At the Middle East Security Forum, many Middle Eastern leaders and scholars called on China to strengthen its political, economic, and military presence in the Middle East. There are indeed many security problems in the Middle East, but China is also a newcomer to the region. China does not have the strength to maintain the stability of the entire Middle East. If the area falls into a vortex, China can only work with other countries to stop the appearance of larger-scale turmoil, crack down on radical religious forces, and maintain the stability of individual countries (Jisi, 2016).

China has been working hard to contribute to security and stability in the Middle East, in accordance with UN resolutions and the wishes of local countries.

However, since the Belt and Road Initiative began, China has increased its involvement in security issues in the Middle East. China has been working hard to contribute to security and stability in the Middle East, in accordance with UN resolutions and the wishes of local countries.

For example, China has sent 1,800 peacekeepers to the Middle East, spreading across all countries in the region. China has insisted on

escorting all ships in the Gulf of Aden for more than ten years. China has also held a Middle East Security Forum with Middle Eastern countries, proposing to get rid of the old Cold War mentality and explore the creation of a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable new security concept as an approach to solving Middle Eastern security issues (FMPRC, 2020).

Wang Yi has said that common security is to ensure the security of all countries; not to build the security of one country on the insecurity of others, let alone to seek unilateral absolute security. Comprehensive security means not only seeking military security, but also achieving political stability and social tranquility. Cooperative security is to achieve security through political dialogue and multilateral cooperation, not to impose it unilaterally through military intervention. Sustainable security is to attach equal importance to security and development, and provide support for security through development, so that security has an endogenous motivation and will not be a flash in the pan (FMPRC, 2019).

The original intention of the Arab Spring was to promote economic development through political change, but countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen descended into war. Not only did political change fail, but also economic development did not acquire a safe environment, which is a great irony.

To this end, first, China should continue to strengthen economic exchanges with the Middle East, promote economic development in the Middle East, and promote security through fast development. At present, the countries of the region, both non-oil-producing and oil-producing, are facing severe economic development issues. The original intention of the Arab Spring was to

promote economic development through political change, but countries such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen descended into war. Not only did political change fail, but also economic development did not acquire a safe environment, which is a great irony.

Among the oil-producing countries, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and others face sluggish oil prices and increasing fiscal deficits. Moreover, Iran is subject to sanctions, and its economic development has encountered great obstacles, which has led to constant domestic opposition and protests. All this shows that economic instability is an important cause of political insecurity. So, who can provide the driving force for economic development in the Middle East? Obviously, compared with western countries' emphasis on political and security interests, China's concept of attaching importance to economic development is more operable and attractive. In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative is a public product launched by China that can contribute to the economy and security of the Middle East.

Second, China should continue to increase its efforts to promote peace talks and contribute China's wisdom and strength to solving hotspot issues in the Middle East. China is developing good relations with all countries in the Middle East, without discriminating between Arab and non-Arab countries, Islamic and non-Islamic countries, or Sunni and Shiite countries. This has laid a solid foundation for China to provide proposals or even solutions accepted by all parties to resolve the hot issues in this region, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Syrian crisis, and the Iranian nuclear controversy. In the future, China's position on these issues will be clearer and firmer, insisting on solving these problems through political consultation rather than military means, and using multilateralist principles instead of unilateral action (Sheng, 2019).

Third, China should strengthen security cooperation in the Middle East. This includes two aspects, the first being deepening security

cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. Just as President Xi Jinping has put forward, China will follow the “Three Principles” of “No agent, no sphere of influence, and no attempt to fill the vacuum.”

This pledge has won unanimous and wide praise from Middle Eastern countries, and has become China’s most important political advantage and strategic asset in strengthening security cooperation with the Middle East. China has also put these principles into action. For example, in recent years, the Chinese Navy has participated in normalized escorts in the Gulf of Aden, and has conducted anti-terrorism security consultations with countries in many regions. When President Xi visited the region in 2016, he announced the provision of U.S.\$300 million in assistance for law enforcement cooperation, police training, and other projects, to help regional countries strengthen capacity building (CCTV, 2016). China has also established a permanent military base in Djibouti. This is, on the one hand, a natural process by which China’s influence is gradually increasing; on the other, it is a concrete manifestation of China’s increasing role in regional security affairs.

Another aspect includes security cooperation with other big powers. The adjustment of U.S. Middle East policy is the biggest variable affecting the development of the regional situation. Of late, the United States has continually accused China of piggybacking on U.S. security protection in the Middle East, and has started to assign more security responsibilities to China. Chaos in the Middle East may remain the norm. However, uncontrollable disorder in the Middle East is not beneficial to the interests of either the United States or China. Historically, for more than a century, the extent and attitude of major countries’ involvement in Middle Eastern affairs has affected the development of the Middle East, especially in the area of security. Although the intervention of major powers depends on their

respective national interests, there will always be points of interaction between the interests of major powers, which will form the basis for cooperation among them (Qi and Wenji, 2018). Therefore, the international community urgently needs to make a concerted effort to restructure the balance of power in the Middle East.

Fortunately, since the changes of 2011, compared with other big powers, China is the only country that has not made strategic mistakes in the Middle East. Even though the Middle East is full of dangers and faces many security issues, China still has to unswervingly promote the smooth progress of the Belt and Road Initiative. Of course, this is not to say that China has already exerted great influence in the Middle East. In fact, China’s role may not even be that of a small player, and increasing its influence in the Middle East will be a long and slow process. However, the elements of China’s Belt and Road Initiative are not separate from each other, but form a tightly integrated whole. It is a bond that links Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and is also a public good provided by China to the world. Since the Middle East is at the heart of the world, a peaceful, stable, and developing Middle East can contribute to the continuity and realization of the entire initiative, the connectivity of Eurasia, and to interaction and exchange between human civilizations.

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