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Persian Gulf Security: A Chinese perspective

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There is no doubt that ‘regime security’¹ is deemed as one of the prominent common concerns for the eight Persian Gulf states² along with other Gordian knots like the threats of nuclear proliferation, massive armed conflicts and so on. For the countries outside of the region, however, the ‘Gulf security’ means different things. In the case of China, this concept is closely linked to its economic security and political security. The former involves Chinese security concern regarding its energy imports, foreign trade, direct investment, bidding contracts, and other commercial activities in the region; while the latter deals with Chinese security anxiety over the Islamic fundamentalist and separatist movement in the Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region.

¹ For the detailed analysis of importance of ‘regime security’ for the GCC members, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ‘Internal and External Security in the Arab Gulf States’, *Middle East Policy*, Vol.16, No.2, summer 2009.

² They are Iran, Iraq and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

China's Energy Security

According to the latest figures from the General Administration of Customs, China's crude oil imports have reached a new record high of 203.79 million tonnes in 2009, which is believed to surpass the local oil output that measured at 190 million tonnes in 2008. It implies that for the first time since it became a net oil importer in 1993, China's oil dependence on the overseas market had crossed the limit of 50 per cent, a globally recognized energy security alert level.³ The risk of China's oil security is bound to increase year by year, and its economy would be very susceptible to oil price fluctuation. In 2008, China paid US\$129.334996 billion to buy 178.88 million tonnes at an average of US\$99 per barrel, while in 2009 due to the global financial crisis and sharp recession in major Western economies, the oil imports merely cost China US\$89.255587 billion at a mean value of US\$60 per barrel.

Among China's three largest oil suppliers two of them lie at the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia continues to occupy the first place in 2008 with an export of 36.368 million tonnes and this accounted for about 20 per cent of China's total oil imports. Iran, China's third largest oil provider, has exported 20.22 million tonnes in the first 10 months of 2009 compared to 32.78 million tonnes from Saudi Arabia. The total trade volume between China and the eight Gulf States reached US\$122.525 billion in 2008 and this was US\$15.683 billion more than the trade between China and the 53 African states as a whole. The Persian Gulf has played and will continue to play an indispensable role in China's fast economic growth.

Thus, it is not hard to understand China's firm position towards the maintenance of peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. It joined with regional Arab states to oppose any selection of military assaults against the Iranian nuclear facilities, irrespective of such assaults were to be launched by the United States, Israel or other country. Any small conflict or possible military attack in the Gulf region would certainly accelerate the oil price, thereby forcing China to spend additional resources for oil purchase. These in turn would decelerate China's GDP growth rate, which is of vital importance to its internal social stability. Similarly, China deprecated further substantive sanctions to be taken by the UN Security Council against Iran, because such move would inevitably imperil China's trade with Iran that aggregated US\$27.643 billion in 2008 and US\$17.13 billion within the first 10 months of 2009.

China's Homeland Security

After the riots instigated by overseas Uigur separatists befell Urumchi on 5 July 2009, China's Muslim and minority policies were widely queried and even severely criticized by some Islamic Countries. Following the 'genocide' accusation made by Turkish

³ Wang Qian, 'Oil imports hit alarming level in China: Study', *China Daily*, 14 January 2010

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 10,⁴ several Iranian high-ranking Shiite clerics spoke out against China's actions. On 15 July Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani said: 'Defending the oppressed is an Islamic and humanitarian duty.'⁵ The London-based Saudi Arabic daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* even carried an article depicting Xinjiang as contemporary China's Palestine.⁶ China perceived an unprecedented urgency to gain the understanding and sympathy of the Islamic countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, who remain a powerful influence on Chinese Muslims for more than a millennium. It has been proved that China's homeland security in the densely Muslims inhabited North Western area is partly rooted in the hearts of Islamic birthplace.

China promptly initiated its conciliation campaign toward those countries by dispatching high level diplomats. On 2 August 2009 Ambassador Wu Sike, China's special envoy to the Middle East, headed for Tehran to meet Iranian acting Foreign Minister Hossein Sheikh al-Islam to explain China's religious and ethnic policies.⁷ During the meeting, Hossein Sheikh al-Islam called on China to respect Muslims' rights in Xinjiang and to create favourable conditions for holding religious rituals.⁸ Two weeks earlier, China's ambassador to Saudi Arabia Yang Honglin met Talal, the Director General for Islamic social affairs of Organization of Islamic Conference. On 22 August he also appeared in the 'dialogue' program of Saudi Television News Channel to answer questions about China's Muslims and Xinjiang affairs.⁹

China is much eager to build stable, long-term and strategic friendly relations with all the Gulf States, in particular with Saudi Arabia and Iran, although such states frequently face the Western criticisms over 'lack of democracy' or 'violation of human rights.' China neither shows any interest in the idea of 'regime change' nor takes any practical steps to support internal anti-governmental movements. Taking the example of Iran, there was no official comment ever issued towards the *Ashura* day riots, though Chinese young people ardently debated possible prospects of Iran's future on the internet. Chinese government also restrained uttering any remarks over the recent Saudi military involvement in the Yemeni civil war. For the Chinese government, a conservative, effective and stable political system in the Persian Gulf region is much obliging and cooperative to assist China in curbing the radical and extreme Uigur separatist movement.

⁴ BBC News: 'Turkey attacks China 'genocide'', 10 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8145451.stm>

⁵ Abigail Hauslohner, 'In the Middle East, Little Outcry over China's Uighurs', *Time*, 17 July 2009.

⁶ 'سنكيانغ.. فلسطين الصين المعاصرة', الشرق الأوسط, 13 يوليو 2009, Iyad Abu-Sharqa, 'Shinjang: Falastin al-seen al-muasia', *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* ('Xinjiang: Contemporary Palestine of China', *The Middle East*), 13 July 2009.

⁷ 'China's Special Envoy to the Middle East Wu Sike Visits Iran and Meets with Iranian Acting Foreign Minister', 2 August 2009, see the website of China's foreign ministry:

<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/xybfs/gjlb/2818/2820/t576908.htm>

⁸ 'Iran demands to maintain Muslims' rights in Xinjiang', The voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Chinese Radio, 2 August 2009.

⁹ 'Ambassador Yang Honglin accepts interviews of Saudi Television News Channel' (Chinese), 23 August 2010, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/zwbdt/t580160.htm>

China's Role in the Persian Gulf security

It is obvious that the Persian Gulf region can be considered as a whole geographically, yet in fact for long the region has been divided into three different parts. A number of profound divergences and mutual distrust prevail among the GCC members, Iraq and Iran, which impede establishment of regional security mechanism. More than two and a half years ago, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani, a representative of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, offered a 10-point proposal for the security arrangements in the Gulf. The initiative was brushed aside by the GCC, who was then devising its own collective security framework.¹⁰ On the contrary, a collective security scheme backed by the U.S. is unlikely to be endorsed by Iran.

As 'a newcomer in the Persian Gulf'¹¹ China maintains correspondingly amicable relations with all the parties. Hence, there is no excuse for China to shy away from its responsibilities in view of its security needs and tremendous benefits in the region. Its contribution to the Gulf security can be summarized in the following three points:

Firstly, China can mediate between Iran and the United States especially on the nuclear issue notwithstanding the existent troubles in between themselves. In November 2009 US President Barack Obama paid his first state visit to China, three days after he left Beijing, China's assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun headed a delegation to Tehran from November 21 to 22.¹² Zhai held talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and Deputy Secretary of Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Baqeri, two important figures who are jointly acting as Iranian nuclear spokesperson.

Secondly, China can be a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia to alleviate the mutual non-confidence and dissatisfaction. When the Fourth Manama Dialogue was convened on 9 December 2007, China's Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun stressed that the concerned parties should 'enhance mutual trust through dialogue', 'bridge the differences and accommodate each other's concerns.'¹³ On his visit to celebrate 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi was given a warm welcome and met by both the King and the Foreign Minister on 14 January 2010. The two sides are committed to promoting world peace and development, and 'Saudi Arabia is willing to work together with China to promote bilateral strategic friendly relations forward.'¹⁴ A deep-set

¹⁰ Kaveh L Afrasiabi, 'Iran unveils a Persian Gulf security plan', *Asia Times*, 14 April 2007.

¹¹ Mahmoud Ghafouri, 'China's Policy in the Persian Gulf', *Middle East Policy*, Vol.16, No.2, summer 2009.

¹² 'Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun Heads Delegation to Visit Iran', 21 November 2009, see the website of China's Foreign Ministry: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zygy/gvhd/t628993.htm>

¹³ 'Remarks by Assistant Foreign Minister Zhai Jun at the Fourth Manama Dialogue', 9 December 2007, see the website of China's foreign ministry: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t393090.htm>

¹⁴ 'Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi held talks with Saudi Arabia', 15 January 2010, <http://www.sourcejuice.com/1295281/2010/01/14/Foreign-Minister-Yang-Jiechi-held-talks-Saudi-Arabia/>

bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia must promote China's capacity to communicate with Iran.

Thirdly, China can ease tension between Iran and Israel. Although the governments of Iran and Israel are full of hostilities, there is no grass root support for a confrontation or war. If Iranians and Israelis need to downgrade tense situation or even contact each other secretly, China would be a trustworthy broker and Beijing would be a safe place.

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