

China and the Middle East

The Quest for Influence

Edited by
P R Kumaraswamy



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Introduction

P R Kumaraswamy

To the question, 'What shall we do if a large and well organised army marches against us?' the answer is: 'seize whatever the enemy prizes most and he will do what you wish him to do.'

Sun Zi in *The Art of War*, fifth century BC¹

For long the Middle East was not an important strategic arena for the People's Republic of China. Distance and limited historical ties were not the only factors that contributed to the lack of Chinese interest and involvement. Its pressing problems of national reorganisation were compounded by frequent bouts of internal violence and social upheavals. Some of its immediate neighbours were confronted with tensions, civil war and volatility. The crises in the Korean peninsula and the protracted and violent Vietnam War brought the great powers into its immediate vicinity. For some time China managed to play one super power against another but since the early sixties it was trying to fend off both the super powers from undermining its interests. Against this background, the Middle East was a distant and far off place for China.

The Middle East was also not favourably disposed towards Beijing. The vast segment of the Islamic world viewed communism with deep suspicion and distrust. The atheistic ideology was seen as foreign and non-Islamic. Even the emergence of socialist regimes did not improve China's fortunes in the Middle East. Although they did not tolerate the growth of communism in their own countries, these regimes perceived geographically closer, relatively stronger and financially more generous Moscow as their ally. Its identification with radical regimes and elements in the region and its occasional attempts to interfere in domestic and inter-Arab affairs only made matters worse for Beijing.²

For long therefore, China's primary interest in the Middle East revolved around its desire for political legitimacy. Like other parts of the world, Beijing wanted the countries of the region to recognise it as a legitimate player in the international arena. It wanted them to accept the PRC as the real China and to withdraw their recognition and terminate relations with Taiwan. It also sought their support to secure

¹ Sun Zi, *The Art of War* and Sun Bin, *The Art of War* (trs Lin Wusun) (Beijing: People's China Publishing House, 1995), p. 55.

² For a detailed discussion of the Sino-Arab relations see, Hashim S.H. Behbehani, *China's Foreign Policy in the Arab World, 1955-75: Three Case Studies* (London: Kegan Paul, 1981).

its legitimate place in the United Nations. China sought to achieve this objective by offering political, economic, ideological and even military support to the region.

Its prolonged political and ideological support for the Palestinians and Arabs in their conflict with Israel was part of this strategy. As the first non-Arab country to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), China was one of the few countries to provide military training and supplies to the Palestinian guerrillas who were fighting Israel. It sought to entice and influence countries such as Yemen through economic aid and assistance. If ideology brought Beijing closer to Baghdad ruled by the *Ba'athists*, political realism compelled China to ignore the proximity of the Shah of Iran with the west and seek close ties with Tehran. It won over countries such as Pakistan, partly by its ability and willingness to offer military hardware at nominal or *friendly* prices.

In spite of its ingenious and sustained endeavours, it took Beijing more than four decades to establish its legitimacy in the Middle East and establish formal diplomatic relations with all the countries of this important region. Even its eventual admission into the UN in October 1971 did not convince many oil rich countries to accept the PRC. Saudi Arabia, for instance, waited until July 1990 to terminate its official ties with Taipei.

However, its admission to the UN and permanent membership of the Security Council significantly altered its interests in the region. Recognition by the remaining Middle Eastern countries became less important. The termination of relations between Taiwan and a number of countries of the region became an important but manageable agenda. It was only a matter of time before these countries accepted and recognised the PRC's position in the international arena. Even though this process took almost two decades, China began to pursue other political and economic interests in the region. Its Middle East policy became an integral part of its larger desire for a regional and global rule and predominance. A host of domestic, regional and international developments and realignments have been conducive for China's quest for influence.

China began to evolve a complex Middle East policy whereby its relations with individual countries of the region are an integral part of its great power aspirations. While it enjoys considerable economic, political or military advantages in a number of important countries in the region, it also has tensions and differences with many of these countries. It uses the former to consolidate its ties with one country and the latter to strengthen its position vis-à-vis a third party. It avoided establishing bilateral relations with the countries of the Middle East hostage to any particular power or issue. In short, China has effectively integrated its separate holds and strains with its partners to weave a complex Middle East strategy.

China's belated decision to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with Israel amplifies the complexities of its Middle East policy. After some initial interests in the early fifties, Beijing effectively played the 'Israel card' to strengthen and consolidate its ties with the Arabs. When it decided to reverse its policy and move closer to Israel in 1992, none of the important players in the region including the Palestinian

leader Yasser Arafat registered their disapproval. Even the Islamic Republic of Iran which otherwise criticises such moves did not respond.³ Likewise, China's prolonged military contacts with Israel though reported by the Arab media did not evoke any criticism or condemnation from countries hostile to Israel. If past ideological and military support silenced the Palestinians, countries such as Iran and Pakistan which otherwise criticised Israel, benefited from generous Chinese arms supplies in the eighties. Regular leaks and speculations in the Chinese, Israeli and western media further prepared the ground for normalisation.

By timing its decision with the inauguration of multilateral negotiations between Israel and the Arab countries in Moscow in late January 1992, China secured a place in the Middle East peace process. China's ability to participate and influence the peace process has become conditional upon its close ties with Israel. Furthermore, China sees normalisation of relations with Israel as an important component of consolidating Beijing's ties with Washington. Both Chinese and Israeli commentators have suggested that China's pro-Jewish position would strengthen the pro-Chinese forces in the US. China's military cooperation with Israel has significantly enhanced its position in the Middle East. Israeli help and cooperation are contributing to its growing military capabilities and potentials. Furthermore, in the post-Cold War period China's ability to pursue arms exports depends primarily upon its ability to supply technologically advanced weapons and systems than in the past.⁴

At another level, China's newly found relations with Israel have not inhibited it from pursuing its traditional friends and allies in the region. Its desire to be involved in the Middle East peace process has prevented it from reverting to harsh criticisms of Israel. It has been more guarded in expressing its disapproval of some of the Israeli actions which it perceives as being detrimental to the on-going peace process. It has not abandoned its support for the Palestinian rights and their aspirations for statehood and high profiled visits by Israeli leaders are preceded or followed by similar visits by senior Palestinian officials including Arafat. Notwithstanding the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians, China managed to evolve a policy that enjoys the understanding and support of both sides.

The non-ideological political pragmatism ushered in following the death of Mao significantly improved China's fortunes and interests in the region. China not only profited from the eight-year Iran-Iraq War but was also partly responsible for the prolongation of the conflict. Both Iran and Iraq were abandoned by their erstwhile patrons. If the US was weary of the pronouncedly anti-American Islamic revolution

³ However, a few days later when India took a similar decision, some of the regional players expressed their displeasure if not disapproval. Responding to their stand the then Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit went on to question Arab support for India. *The Week* (Kottayam), 9 February 1992, p. 37.

⁴ Nazir Kamal, 'China's Arms Export Policy and Response to Multilateral Restraints', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 14, No. 2, September 1992, p. 124; Richard A. Bitzinger, 'Arms to Go: Chinese Arms Sales to the Third World', *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Fall 1992, p. 95. There are indications that China has been indirectly transferring Israeli technology and expertise to some of its clients in the Middle East.

in Tehran, the Soviet Union was equally unenthusiastic about strengthening Saddam Hussein's quest for the domination of the Persian Gulf. Since both the countries were dependent upon their respective benefactors for supplies, arms embargo meant an acute shortage of military supplies. This embargo coincided with the Chinese desire to commercialise its arms exports and the oil rich Persian Gulf region became its important customer.

Both Iran and Iraq looked toward China as a possible solution and very soon Chinese inventories were in action on either side of the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The war and the need for weapons enabled China not only to consolidate its close ties with Iraq but also to mend its relations with the Islamic republic of Iran. Like many countries, China was not initially enthusiastic about the Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran. Neither the intensity of the conflict nor the virulent rhetoric influenced Iran or Iraq to cast aspersions on the Chinese intentions let alone reject its military supplies. In spite of large scale death and destruction, both had satisfactory and beneficial ties with Beijing. As Mohan Malik remarked: 'it was Chinese technical and material assistance which enabled both the combatants, in their protracted war, to fire...missiles with extended range and heavy payload.'⁵

Chinese military sales to the Islamic republic led to unexpected financial as well as diplomatic dividends. When Saudi Arabia became apprehensive of Iran's growing military power, China found a new customer and sold CSS-2 IRBMs to Riyadh. These missiles were originally designed to carry nuclear warheads and because of western concerns over non-proliferation they were modified to carry conventional warheads. When these missiles were transferred neither China nor Saudi Arabia were signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The deal estimated between \$2.4–3.6 billion was concluded when Saudi Arabia maintained diplomatic relations with Taipei.⁶ Even though these missiles were not used during the *Operation Desert Storm* in 1991, they played an important role in Sino–Saudi normalisation that took place a few months earlier. It may be suggested that the missile deal was primarily a Saudi incentive to dissuade China from supplying offensive weapons to Iran.

Pakistan is another major Chinese ally in the region. On occasions China has exploited the political and diplomatic advantages of Pakistan to further its interest in the Middle East. For instance, the normalisation of relations between China and the Shah of Iran in 1971 was largely facilitated by Pakistani mediation. Pakistan, however, occupies a prime place in China's policy towards South Asia and as a counterweight to India. Driven by its political rivalry and the boundary disputes with India, China looked toward Pakistan as its principle ally and partner in South Asia. Islamabad's adversarial relations with India presented a favourable environment for Sino–Pakistan friendship.

⁵ Mohan Malik, 'Missile Proliferation: China's Role', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, Vol. 67, No. 3, August 1990, p. 6.

⁶ For a detailed discussion see, Yitzhak Shichor, *East Wind over Arabia: Origins and Implications of the Sino–Saudi Missile Deal*, *China Research Monograph Series no. 35* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1989).

Strategic cooperation in the form of arms supplies emerged an important pillar of this relationship. Since the sixties Pakistan has been a valuable partner in China's arms diplomacy and during 1971–90 Pakistan was one of the top three recipients of Chinese weapons.⁷ Even though they were less sophisticated than those supplied by the west, most of the arms were sold to Pakistan at nominal or friendly prices. In the words of a Pakistani analyst,

...China was viewed (by Pakistan) not only as a counterpoise to India but also as a much more reliable partner than the West, especially the USA. By 1982, China not only provided Pakistan with about 75 per cent of its tanks and about 65 per cent of its aircraft but also substantially assisted Pakistan in the development and strengthening of military industries including a heavy foundry, a mechanical complex and equipment for an overhaul factory at Taxila, Pakistani Ordinance Factories at Wah and (Pakistan Aeronautical Complex) at Kamra.⁸

In other words, China compensated the technological backwardness of its arms with reliability and price. Since the eighties China has emerged the most important partner in Pakistan's strategic aspirations vis-à-vis India and the recent Pakistani advancements including the nuclear and missile tests in 1998 were the direct result of this strategic partnership.⁹ In endorsing Pakistani position concerning a regional arms control arrangement, China endeavours to contain India's leadership aspirations.

International diplomacy is another arena that reflects the new Chinese approach towards the Middle East. Due to its prolonged exclusion and isolation, Beijing has been weary of international fora and multilateral mediation. This scepticism was more apparent in its policy towards the UN. Angered and disappointed by its exclusion, China portrayed the world body as a 'tool of imperialism and domination'. Following its admission and especially after the death of Mao, China opted for a friendlier approach towards the UN and viewed it as an important platform for championing the cause of other developing countries. As a result since the mid-eighties, China began to perceive itself an important international player in seeking the resolution of the vexed Arab–Israeli conflict.¹⁰ Some of the initial contacts with Israel prior to normalisation took place at the UN headquarters. China used its permanent membership in the Security Council to explain and justify political and diplomatic contacts with a country that it refused to recognise.

Nevertheless, the real test for Chinese UN diplomacy came in August 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Primarily the invasion severely undermined Chinese interest in the Persian Gulf and in the larger Middle East. Not only had Iraq run over a

⁷ Michael Brzoska and Thomas Ohlson, *Arms Transfer to the Third World, 1971–1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 84; *SIPRI Yearbook, 1991*, pp. 208–11.

⁸ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, 'Arms Procurement in Pakistan: Balancing the Needs for Quality, Self-reliance and Diversity of Supply', in Eric Arnett (Ed.), *Military Capacity and the Risk of War: China, India, Pakistan and Iran* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 158.

⁹ Frank J. Gaffney, 'China Arms the Rouges', *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, September 1997, pp. 35–36.

¹⁰ Yitzhak Shichor, 'China and the Role of the United Nations in the Middle East: Revised Policy', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 31, No. 3, March 1991, pp. 255–69.

neighbouring Arab country, but it had also formally annexed Kuwait. Saudi Arabia that had established diplomatic relations with China only a few weeks earlier felt threatened by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Before long, the Persian Gulf witnessed the largest military build-up since the end of the Second World War. China shared the international community's desire to restore the status quo ante in Kuwait.

At the same time, China was not eager to abandon Iraq. Not only was Iraq an important ally in the Middle East, but it also presented a huge economic opportunity for China. If the Iran–Iraq ceasefire reduced Chinese arms exports to the region, the post-war reconstruction presented new opportunities for Chinese exports and labour contracts. The public opinion in the Arab and Islamic world was more sympathetic towards the Iraqi leader and an unequivocal endorsement of the American plans looked ominous for Chinese interests in the region. China opted to abstain during the crucial UN Security Council vote authorising the use of military action to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait. While a veto would have placed it at odds with the prevailing international position, voting in favour of Resolution 678 would have alienated it from Iraq. In other words, its abstention sought to endorse the liberation of Kuwait without unduly damaging its ties with Baghdad.

China has continued this dual strategy since the end of the *Operation Desert Storm*. Its new attitude towards non-proliferation compels it to demand complete Iraqi compliance with the demands of the UN weapons inspectors and the dismantling of its non-conventional weapons, capabilities and infrastructure. At the same time, China has been reluctant about an indefinite inspection regime that undermines Iraq's position and stability. Without appearing to endorse Iraq's aspirations for weapons of mass destruction, China has been underscoring the human dimension of the problem. Not eager to endorse continued US domination of the Gulf, China seeks an Iraqi compliance accompanied by a time-bound withdrawal of international sanctions against Baghdad. Even though this dual policy does not please everyone in the region, it has enabled China to minimise the damages to its interests in the region. By adopting a friendlier posture towards Baghdad, Beijing has also ensured its future interest in Iraq following the eventual lifting of the UN economic sanctions. While other Third World countries including India have also adopted a similar position, they do not have the veto power in the UN Security Council to determine the fate of the sanctions.

Arms trade is another area where China's Middle East policy attracts widespread attention and even concern. For long, Chinese arms transfers were largely 'gifts' rather than 'sales'. The prime recipients of Chinese arms, therefore, were predominantly national liberation movements, ideological states or countries such as like North Korea and Pakistan where it sought to further its strategic interests. Since the early eighties, however, Chinese arms transfer policies have been governed more by economic rather than political considerations. In spite of this shift, China is not a major player in the international arms bazaar and compared to other leading exporters, its share in the international arms trade is not substantial. Even at the height of the Iran–Iraq War, its share was less than 10 per cent of the global arms trade.

At regular intervals, China has faced difficulties over its growing military-related cooperation with a number of Middle Eastern countries. Due to its military ties with China, Israel has often come into conflict with the US and in recent years Israel has been accused of illegal and unauthorised transfer of American technology to China. Likewise, its suspected collaboration in the Iranian nuclear and missile programmes places China in conflict with the west. Although this involvement is believed to marginal compared to Russia's, Israel and Jewish groups have been weary of Chinese intentions and have regularly raised the issue during high level visits and meetings.

However, the Middle East policy of China faces a far more serious challenge from its newly found endorsement of the non-proliferation regime. Very often its arms export policy has come into conflict with its declarations and commitments to non-proliferation. Since the early nineties China has joined or adhered to a number of non-proliferation arrangements and regimes including the CTBT, the CWC, the MTCR and the NPT. This is a complete reversal of its earlier position concerning nuclear and missile proliferation. During its prolonged diplomatic isolation, China criticised non-proliferation and actively sought to promote the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and decried the NPT as 'monstrous fraud' perpetuated by the imperial powers.¹¹ It sought to promote its interest by undermining such arrangements which were conceived and promoted by the west and actively participated in the non-conventional programmes of its allies. Because of its help and assistance, countries such as North Korea have emerged as second-tier exporters of non-conventional weapons and technology. Having secured its legitimate place in the international arena, China sought to present itself a matured and responsible power and abandoned its erstwhile policies. Non-proliferation became a cornerstone of its foreign policy and its quest for global peace and stability.

As a result of its past policies and relations, the Middle East has become the testing ground for China's commitments to non-proliferation. At one time or another, it played a role in the non-proliferation ambitions of countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Syria.¹² While conventional arms sales earned substantial foreign exchange for China, the sale of non-conventional weapons and technology offered significant political advantages.¹³ Any desire on the part of China to adhere to its commitment to the non-proliferation regime would significantly

¹¹ For a detailed discussion see, D. Shyam Babu, *Nuclear Non-Proliferation: Towards a Universal NPT Regime* (New Delhi: Konark, 1992), pp. 119–31.

¹² Malik, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–11; Gaffney, *op. cit.*, pp. 33–39; Shirley A. Kan, *Chinese Missile and Nuclear Proliferation: Issues for Congress, CRS Issue Brief* (Washington, D.C., 5 May 1992); Timothy V. McCarthy, *A Chronology of PRC Missile Trade and Developments* (Monterey, CA: MIIS, 1992); Hua Di, 'China's Case: Ballistic Missile Proliferation', in William C. Potter and Harlan W. Jencks (Eds), *The International Missile Bazaar: The New Suppliers' Network* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994), pp. 163–80; and Martin Navias, *Ballistic Missile Proliferation in the Third World, Adelphi Papers 252* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1990). The author is grateful to Deborah Ozga for her valuable help in obtaining some of these materials.

¹³ For instance, during 1990–94, China was the sixth largest arms exporter in the world and sold arms worth nearly \$6 billion. *SIPRI Yearbook, 1995* (London: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 493.

affect its relations with countries in the Middle East with whom it seeks a strategic relationship. The wide ranging autonomy enjoyed by the military establishment in arms exports does raise questions about such assurances made by the Chinese foreign ministry. In other words, in most of the cases, 'Chinese foreign-ministry officials can speak with authority only for the ministry, not for Poly Technologies or New Era, and not for China as a whole.'¹⁴ Its desire and ability to provide such non-conventional technologies by using North Korea as a proxy adds another dimension to the enigma.

Similarly, there is a gradual shift in its economic policies towards the Middle East. For long Chinese exports to the oil rich Persian Gulf consisted of consumer goods used by the immigrant labourers. They were cheap, affordable and less complicated. Following the example of South Asia, China looked toward the region as a market for exporting unemployed surplus labourers. In between when it commercialised the process, arms became a major export item. Initially, Chinese companies entered into sub-contracting various ventures in the Gulf and they gradually moved to undertaking major projects in the region. The ongoing major railway project in Iran is an example of its growing confidence and involvement.

The Persian Gulf is gradually becoming a major source of energy resources for the rapidly growing Chinese economy. Instead of concentrating on importing oil, Beijing is seeking long-term arrangements such as oil pipelines and is participating in oil explorations in the Middle East. The region is also becoming an important source of foreign investments in China. In the case of Israel, foreign participation is not confined to investments alone. Various Israeli companies are establishing joint factories that manufacture a host of products ranging from consumer goods to fertilisers. Bilateral trade is merely a portion of the emerging economic relations between China and the Middle East. The economic relations between the region and Taiwan offer additional competition and incentive to China to seek alternative approaches.

China, however, is not immune to the conflicts and disputes that plague the Middle East and often finds itself caught between important players who are Chinese customers. Whether in the Iran-Iraq War, the Kuwait crisis or in the Arab-Israeli conflict, Beijing found itself in the unenviable position of having to choose between friends. Without completely identifying with either of the conflicting parties, China has managed to evolve a delicate policy that satisfies important regional players. Though many would have liked a more unambiguous policy, China has managed to pursue its vital interests without alienating the region.

China's international recognition and acceptance as a global power have enabled it to pursue a complex policy towards the Middle East. In a number of areas, its relations with the Middle Eastern countries reflect its global or non-regional interests. The demise of its erstwhile patron and later rival, the USSR, has brightened the prospects of Beijing eventually emerging as a competing non-western power centre.

¹⁴ John W. Lewis, Hua Di and Xue Litai, 'Beijing's Defence Establishment: Solving the Arms-Export Enigma', *International Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, Spring 1991, pp. 93-94. See also, Robert E. Mullins, 'The Dynamics of Chinese Missile Proliferation', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1995, p. 151.

The Chinese leadership has been apprehensive of following the Gorbachev model of political liberalism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union has only strengthened their preference for domestic political stability. The economic crisis facing Southeast Asia further underscores the need for political and economic stability in China.

At the same time, even while seeking closer relations with Washington, China is unlikely to accept the US pre-eminence in the Middle East. On a number of issues concerning the region, China is at odds with the US. Its close strategic relations with Iran and Pakistan often become touchstones for its role as a responsible global player. The region invariably becomes the laboratory for testing China's commitments to various international and multilateral non-proliferation regimes such as the NPT and the MTCR. Moreover, its ability to continue and sustain rapid economic growth is heavily dependent upon its success in seeking and securing a guaranteed supply of energy resources from the Persian Gulf.

Many countries in the Middle East view China as a global, not Asian, power. Its role as a permanent member of the Security Council and a nuclear power, broadened and consolidated the influence of China in the region. As in other parts of the world, these factors alone however, do not explain its status. This has been an arduous and laborious odyssey for Beijing and has been achieved through a careful mix of political support, military supplies and economic incentives. It has been pursuing, especially in the post-Mao era, a complex and delicate policy towards the Middle East without unduly alienating various conflicting parties. In their eagerness to ingratiate themselves to Beijing, the countries of the region have often been willing to side step, if not overlook, unfriendly actions, past or present.

In understanding and explaining this complex picture, this volume examines the bilateral relations of China with a number of important countries and players in the Middle East. Using bilateral relations as the framework, an array of international scholars present a detailed analysis of political, military or economic policies of China towards this region. This work therefore is the result and outcome of their knowledge and expertise. I am grateful to all the contributors for their cooperation and participation. Recognising the importance of the subject, they worked amidst extremely tight schedules and commitments. Some even managed to beat their deadlines amidst great personal inconvenience and in so doing, encouraged the endeavour. I remain grateful to Professor Stephen Cohen of Brookings Institution, Dr Ian Anthony of SIPRI and Professor William Hale of SOAS for their invaluable assistance in enlisting some of the contributors to this volume.

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