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China and the Middle East: Adjusting to Life after the Arab Spring

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Historically the Middle East has been peripheral to China. The end of the Sino-Soviet rivalry and China's drive for energy security brought about certain nuanced changes in its policy towards the region, especially to the energy-rich Persian Gulf region.

Despite periodic focus on people-to-people contacts, China's policy has remained state-centric and supporter of the status quo. This approach suited for much of the Middle East, especially in many Arab countries where the real and meaningful opposition were to be found only in jails or in graves. The Arab Spring thus posed a number of challenges to China's approach towards the region.

At one level, popular protests underscored the vulnerability of the once powerful regimes around which China evolved its Middle East policy. The disruption of the erstwhile stability of various Arab regime meant that China could no longer pursue its political interactions and interests in the Middle East primarily through its contacts with the increasingly unpopular and weakening Arab regimes.

Growing unpopularity prevented Beijing from rallying behind Arab regimes that faced popular discontent and protests. Such a course would have alienated China, especially when the survival of these Arab regimes is not vital for China. This is contrast to Russia whose re-entry into the Middle East is closely linked to survival of the Assad regime in Syria.

At the same time, China's ability to empathize with the demands of the Arab protesters had serious domestic repercussions. Demands for political reforms, good governance, transparency

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and economic discontent galvanized the Arab youth to protest against the respective governments. The Chinese leadership could not support, even tacitly, these demands without worrying about the internal ramifications. Beijing could not be pro-reform externally without being more open internally.

The Arab Spring also went against the Confucian order ingrained in the Chinese society. Over centuries internal chaos and anarchy have brought down many Chinese empires and paved the way for external intervention and domination. More than two years after Mohammed Bouazizi accidentally sparked off massive popular protests, the region has not seen any tangible progress. Any lingering Chinese doubts were settled when none of the Arab countries were able to present a clear leadership let alone a road map. Indeed, the Arab Spring has plunged countries like Libya, Syria and Yemen into a civil war and there were signs of that in Egypt after Mohammed Morsi was deposed by the army.

Far more importantly, China has to consider the ascendance of the Islamists in many Arab countries. Indeed, the Islamists, especially the extremist versions, have become the most tangible beneficiaries of the Arab Spring. Contrary to initial expectations, the Turkish model of moderate Islamists has yet to make their mark in the Arab Middle East. Indeed, for long, China has been confronted with the extremists among the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang who were accused of various violence and terror acts. There are media reports of extremist elements crossing over into Xinjiang. Under these circumstances, China could ill-afford to support any struggle that ends in the militant Islamists coming to power. Jihadi elements playing a crucial role in the civil war also prevents China from getting closer to the American position on Syria.

Hence, China has settled for a more nuanced but internationally popular stand which has three distinct strands. At one level, China is opposed to any external intervention in the internal affairs of the Arab countries that face domestic turmoil. Such a stand not only revolves around the inviolability of the state sovereignty but also precludes any external say in domestic issues facing China.

Second, China is opposed to any military settlement to the problem. Its abstention during the UN Security Council vote on Libya for a no-fly zone was largely due to the unanimous demands by the Arab League and African Union. Led by the US, the west has used Resolution 1973 to engineer a regime change in Libya. Learning from this experience, China began opposing any vaguely worded UNSC resolutions vis-à-vis Syria.

Three, China recognizes that the stalemate in many Arab countries regarding the future course of action. Even where the unpopular leaders were removed, the political process remains uncertain and in some cases, more violent. Expressing an explicit preference for any of the contesting groups, thus, is not an option for China. Therefore, its leaders have been advocating a political

settlement based on an inclusive dialogue among all parties to the dispute. This approach is more vividly demonstrated in the case of Syria. Less vocal than Russia in support of the Assad regime, China has been demanding an inclusive political process as the best means of resolving the crisis.

In the past, much of China's foreign policy calculations have been governed by its core interest of maintaining strong relations with the US. Despite disagreements over the controversy surrounding Iranian nuclear programme, Beijing has been accommodative of the US and supported various sanctions against Iran. Similar approach however has been absent over Syria.

Though following Russia in the UNSC, China's concerns are different. The Syrian situation highlights some of China's principal concerns vis-à-vis Arab Spring, namely, political instability, Islamist resurgence and potential disintegration of that country. There are other issues as well. The wobbling American policy regarding the Arab Spring, especially the Syrian crisis, raises doubts about the wisdom of China reaching an understanding with the Obama administration. Having declared the use of chemical weapons as his redline, Obama ended up settling for a face-saving exit strategy.

Furthermore, unlike Russia, China is more concerned about state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and their possible ramifications for issues such as Tibet, Taiwan Strait or Xinjiang. It is in this wider context, one has to read China's largely passive response to the Arab Spring. Moreover, its principal interests in region, namely energy security, revolves around the Persian Gulf and so long as countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, its principal Arab suppliers manage to weather the storm, China could afford to play a second fiddle to Russia regarding Syria.

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