The Middle East:
The American Perspective

By

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The Middle East is a strategically important region to the United States. U.S. interest in the region began over a century ago but became far more intense and specific in the decades since World War II. Every American president since Roosevelt has been forced to respond to events in the Middle East—sometimes diplomatically and often militarily.

Why is this region so important to the United States? From the earliest years Americans associated the Middle East with their religious and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the region occupies a key geographic location on the major trade routes between Europe and Asia. In the decades following WWII however, U.S. focus was on two specific interests: oil and our regional allies, most particularly Israel. Following the events of 9/11, the U.S. has focused intensively on the violence and terror that comes out of this region.

The energy resources of the Middle East exceed those of any other region on the planet. Over two-thirds of the world’s proven oil reserves and one-third of the world’s proven natural gas reserves are located in countries with shorelines on the Gulf. Given the modern world’s need for oil and gas, a key U.S. objective is the free flow of Gulf oil to world markets. While the U.S. does not import significant quantities of Gulf oil, the globalization of the world energy market dictates that all energy importing countries be concerned with the availability of oil and gas from all supplying states and, importantly, from the Gulf region.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is a dominant and pervasive issue that has embroiled all the states in the region and all the great powers as well. Failure to find a resolution to this conflict impacts on virtually all other issues. The resulting instability and wars underscore the importance of an active pursuit of a fair and just solution. Continuation of the conflict jeopardizes the security of the State of Israel and other moderate governments in the region.

One manifestation of the region’s trauma is the rise of violence and terrorism, the consequences of which have been felt throughout the world. Militant figures and religiously driven zealots have brought terror not only to the U.S., Europe, and Latin American but also to Central and East Asia as well as western China.

U.S. concerns for regional stability focus on Iran, a country that, in our view, supports terrorist organizations, undermines efforts to find a ME peace, belligerently threatens Israel, and actively seeks a hegemonic position in the Gulf. Its nuclear program is of special concern as Iran defies efforts of the Security Council and the IAEA to ensure that the Iranian program is not aiming to develop a military weapons capability. At the same time Iran has succeeded in projecting its influence into other regional conflicts --- Palestine and Lebanon. Iranian statements recently regarding Bahrain’s sovereignty have inflamed concern in the Arab world about Iran’s regional intentions.

Iraq immediately comes to mind. Regardless of previous American actions in Iraq, there is a new situation as we look to the future. The U.S. supports Iraqi sovereignty and independence. We have said that Iraqis themselves must make the decisions for their
The U.S. has announced its intentions to draw down its forces in Iraq. The Government of Iraq and the U.S. signed a SOFA that clearly delineates American and Iraqi cooperation in the years ahead. Yet Iran continues playing a destabilizing role in Iraq --- seeking to undermine its enemies and influence events in order to sustain a dominate position in Iraq. Iranian activities are obvious to all. Even the Iraqi Government itself has publicly asked Iran to cease its “meddling” in Iraq’s domestic affairs.

On January 21, 2009, President Barack Obama became President of the United States and immediately addressed U.S. involvement in the Middle East with an ambitious agenda to tackle the myriad problems. Central to his approach is a dialogue with all parties and a desire to build a consensus that will support sincere efforts to resolve problems. In this regard China is an important participant and deep thought should be given to how we can work together.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

President Obama spoke to this crisis within hours of taking office. He declared his intention to actively pursue comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab countries. He recommitted the U.S. to the two-state solution --- two states Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace, security and prosperity. He appointed a well-respected American, Senator George Mitchell, as a Special Presidential envoy --- thus launching immediately a serious peace effort. The U.S. (and the world) faces significant obstacles to achieving this vital goal. Success requires intense concerted efforts and broad international support.

What are the possibilities of cooperation between China and the U.S. in achieving an Arab-Israeli peace? What role can China play both during the period of negotiations and in the longer term response to Palestinian needs to develop their economy and provide for the prosperity of its people?

Iraq

The U.S. remains committed to assisting Iraq in resuming its place once again as a stable and prosperous country in the region. With the U.S. decision to end all combat missions by August 31, 2010, and to withdraw all forces by December 31, 2011, the responsibility for security as well as economic development falls squarely on the Government of Iraq. The Iraqis understand well the many issues that they must address including political reconciliation, ethnic and religious understanding, security, and economic development. The Iraqi Government will need significant international support and assistance in dealing with these challenges. Governments in the region that have sought special interests need to cease their meddling and work constructively to assist the Iraqi Government.

What role can China play in this transition period? What economic assistance can China provide? What actions can China take in international forums to support the Iraqi
Government’s efforts to stabilize the country? Are there specific efforts that the U.S. and China might undertake collectively to assist Iraq?

Iran

President Obama took the initiative to reach out to Iran --- to its government and its people. The U.S. would like to explore seriously ways to improve our relationship with Iran. Clearly there are enormous obstacles to overcome including thirty years of hostility and distrust. There are issues of major import on both sides that require attention; but the President proceeds on the belief that there can by an improvement in the relationship that will benefit both countries (and the region at large). While the nuclear question looms as the most critical issue, Iranian support of terrorist groups and other activities that destabilize the region must be dealt with. Success in this endeavor is important to all countries with an interest in the stability of the Gulf region.

China, as a member of the Security Council, as a country with vested interest in Gulf stability, and as a country with cordial relations with Iran, can be an important influence on how the world engages Iran in a constructive and positive manner. How best can we work toward this common interest? What actions are best taken multilaterally or unilaterally?

Terrorism and Violence

Many, but not all, of the sources of violence in the world today stem from problems in the Middle East. The Obama Administration has sought to refocus U.S. policy away from a “war on terrorism” to a collective international effort to address the issues and conflicts that spawn violence. As violence touches more countries, the global interest in addressing the causes grows. One particular manifestation of the problem is piracy along the Somali coast. China has joined other countries in countering this piracy. The U.S. approach to this problem underscores the centrality of Obama’s desire to see the international community dealing with global issues collectively and in the interest of all countries. We need to explore how we can increase such international cooperation to deter violence and terrorism.