China in the Middle East

By

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First of all, I am very glad to participate in “The Fourth Dialogue on U.S.–China Relations in Global Context.” According to the program, I am supposed to discuss two topics: China’s policies towards and interests in the Middle East and potential areas for U.S.–China cooperation in the Middle East. I believe that these topics are both very interesting and very important. Anyhow, before I start my presentation, as always, I would like to start by making it very clear that what I am going to say is a Chinese scholar’s personal view.

China has always attached great importance to its relations with Middle Eastern countries. Together with the rapidly changing international situation, both China and the Middle Eastern countries have changed a great deal. The focus and content of China’s Middle East policy has also changed significantly. In the 1950’s and 60’s, China’s policy towards this region was mainly to support the Arab countries in winning and preserving their independence in the struggle against imperialism and colonialism. In the 1970’s, China regarded Arab countries as the main force to contain the expansion of Soviet influence in the region. After the end of the Cold War, China fundamentally altered its internal and external strategies: internally Beijing’s focus shifted to economic and social development, and externally the government focused on maintaining world peace and promoting global development and cooperation. During his visit to the Headquarters of the Arab League in early 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao issued four principles as the guidelines for developing a new type of partnership between China and the Arab countries in the new century. Those principles are: China and the Arab countries will, based on mutual respect and with the aim of joint development, strengthen political relations; reach for closer economic and trade relations; expand cultural exchanges to learn from each other; and enhance co-operation and coordination in international affairs, especially on the major issues for both sides.

In the past decade or so, China’s relationships with Arab countries developed very quickly and, with frequent exchanges of high level visits, relations have entered a new stage. At the same time, China has shown a new willingness to be increasingly active and engaged in Middle Eastern affairs. China, for the first time, appointed a special envoy to travel to regional capitals and promote the Middle East peace process, and also dispatched a thousand troops as part of the UN peace-keeping force in southern Lebanon. In 2004, at the initiative of the Arab League, China and the Arab countries established the China–Arab Cooperative Forum, which has provided an important platform for both sides to regularly exchange views on international, regional, and bilateral issues. China’s more active approach and peaceful foreign policies (making friends not enemies) has given a great push to its relations with the region, especially with the Arab countries in all aspects. At present, China and the Arab countries enjoy the best times in history.

The reasons behind closer relations between China and the Arab countries are very complicated. In past few years, Arab countries have diversified their foreign policies by shifting their focus from the West to the East as a response to changing international and regional situations. This is partly a means to neutralize American pressure, and partly because Asian economies, particularly China and India, have developed rapidly. The
Arab countries believe that the successful Asian economies have provided them with an alternative development model.

Certainly, closer ties with Arab countries have served China’s interests in the region. With high speed economic and social development, the Middle East has become more and more important to China’s national interests. Generally speaking, China has three strategic interests in the region.

The first is China’s interest in development, which includes the increasing demand for energy, the expansion of markets, and other economic or trade interests. Since reform and opening up, China’s consumption of energy, especially oil, has increased rapidly. China is now the second or third biggest consumer of oil in the world after the U.S. and Japan. Domestic oil production can no longer keep pace with China’s high rate of economic and social development and has been required to import oil. The Middle East has become China’s largest oil provider, providing more than half of all imported oil. To some extent, China has become more and more dependent on Middle Eastern oil. In addition to oil, economic cooperation and trade ties between China and the Middle East have also grown rapidly. According the China Ministry of Commerce, the region has already become China’s largest foreign market and 8th largest trading partner. The total amount of trade between China and the Middle East almost reached 200 billion U.S. Dollars last year.

The second is China’s security interests, specifically security in the regions along China’s western border. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a second wave of Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Middle East in general, and in Central Asia in particular, which stimulated the rise of what we call the “three ugly forces”: religious extremism, national separatism, and terrorism. Since then, the three ugly forces have been the major threat to stability and security in the region. For quite some time, the Middle East had been the source of religious extremism and has served as a hiding place for the three ugly forces. Therefore, the Middle East has been regarded as the front line in fighting the three ugly forces with the aim of preserving the security and stability of the region around China’s western borders.

The third interest is political. One of the fundamental principles of China’s peaceful foreign policy is to develop and strengthen friendly and cooperative relations with developing countries, including the Arab countries. Both China and the Middle East share the same or similar views on major international and regional issues, and both have promoted the common aspirations of development and safeguarding national sovereignty and interests. Therefore, China needs the support of Arab countries in the international arena on issues like the “One China policy” and human rights.

The major regional issues are:
1. Promoting the Middle East peace process
2. Keeping Iraq stable
3. Resolving the Iranian nuclear issue peacefully
The extraordinary achievements made in China’s reform process and its peaceful foreign policy have given China credibility and a good reputation, and Arab countries are increasingly hopeful that China will become a more active participant in Middle Eastern affairs. China, in turn, due to its increasing dependence on oil imports and broadening interests in the region, would like to have closer ties with the Arab world.

As for Sino-U.S. cooperation in the Middle East, I have noticed that there are different views in the U.S. with regards to this issue. Quite a few people have a negative outlook towards China’s increasing presence and influence in the Middle East. They hold that China “has capitalized on the United States’ weakness” to enhance its influence and promote its interests. These individuals also say that China, by developing relations with those countries hostile to America and supporting radical Islamic forces, has undermined U.S. efforts in the war against these countries. Some even went so far as to say that China’s steadily increasing demand for oil and the scramble for oil between China and the U.S. could eventually lead the two countries into direct confrontation. They suggest that the United States should take measures to check the growth of Chinese influence in the region.

However, some people have taken a more positive view. They believe that if the United States could coordinate and cooperate with China, then China’s increasing presence in the region and close ties with the countries of the Middle East could help the United States to stabilize the regional situation. They have strongly recommended that the U.S. work with China instead of containing it in the region. The idea that China and the United States should work together in the Middle East has been well received in China, since we regard the China–U.S. relationship as one of the most important of China’s foreign relationships. Since the beginning of the new century, Sino–American relations have entered a new stage where both sides regard one another as “share holders.” China coordinating and cooperating with the United States in the Middle East would create another area of cooperation that would be helpful in strengthening our two countries’ relationship.

At present, whether we like it or not, the United States is the most dominant outside power in the region and it has broad regional interests in the Middle East. We have made it clear to the United States that China’s policy of strengthening its relationships within the region is neither aimed at undermining U.S. regional interests nor aimed at challenging the U.S.’s dominant position. We have also made it clear that Chinese cooperation with the United States should not run contrary to its three guiding principles of its relationship with the Middle East, which are to helpfully promote the peace and stability of the region, to facilitate the development of the regional countries, and to maintain the fundamental interests of the peoples of the region. In this regard, developing friendly and cooperative relations with the Arab countries will remain our priority.

Frankly speaking, both China and the United States have their own interests in the region, but despite the divergence of interests, China and the United States still share a wide range of common interests in the region. These include promoting the peace process in the Middle East, bringing to an end the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, stabilizing the Iraqi
situation, preventing nuclear proliferation in the Gulf region, and having a free flow of oil from the region and others. Under the framework of the “strategic dialogue” between China and the United States, senior officials from both sides have already conducted several discussions about the situation in the region.

I strongly believe that the basic requirements for good and long cooperation and coordination not only include the sincerity of China and the United States, but also adherence to the principle of mutual respect for convergent interests and open and fair competition where interests diverge.