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China's Expanding Influence in the Middle East

KAS AND ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE HOLD CONFERENCE ON BEIJING'S INTERESTS, STRATEGIES AND AIMS IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

The last decade has seen an increasing economic and political involvement of the People's Republic of China in the Middle East. China's push to the west has become most visible through its "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, in which the Middle East plays a pivotal role and that aims to connect the economies of Asia, Europe and Africa. On the political front, China's participation in the P5+1 talks on the Iranian nuclear program as well as Beijing's frequent use of its veto in the UN Security Council on the Syrian conflict have signified that China has assumed its position within the concert of external powers in the region. In some instances, China has even abandoned its traditional foreign policy principle of non-intervention. On 28 September, the KAS Syria/Iraq office and the Issam Fares Institute (IFI) held a conference in Beirut titled "China's Expanding Influence in the Middle East – Trade, Energy, Security and Multipolarity" to discuss China's long-term interests, aims and strategies in the region. It brought together experts from China, the Middle East, Europe and the U.S.

After welcoming words by Tarek Mitri, Director of the IFI, and Nils Wörmer, Head of the KAS Syria/Iraq office, the first panel addressed the composition of OBOR, the interests China pursues through the initiative and the role the Middle East plays in it. The panel was chaired by Michael Winzer, Head of the KAS office in Beijing, and included Nadine Godehardt from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Christina Lin from the University of California and Bing Bing Wu from Peking University.

The three experts highlighted that OBOR constitutes a Chinese instrument to connect Asia, Europe and Africa through six land and maritime routes, currently comprises of 65 participating states and foresees cooperation in the areas of (1) policy cooperation, (2) infrastructure cooperation, (3) trade facilitation, (4) economic and financial integration and (5) cultural exchange. According to the researchers, the focus is placed on the establishment of bilateral relationships and projects, forming a regional network with China at the center, but intentionally neglecting the establishment of an institutionalized regional organization such as the European Union.

The experts argued that OBOR serves as an important tool to safeguard China's economic and security interests abroad. Economically, OBOR is designed to bolster China's economic growth, in the short run by offsetting higher domestic production costs and internationalizing China's currency through increasing exports, and in the long run through securing China's access to resources. By guaranteeing a future expansion of the Chinese economy, OBOR is thereby directly connected to domestic Chinese politics. As China's Communist Party (CCP) has experienced a legitimacy crisis ever since the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, the CCP uses the warranty of high living standards through economic growth as a strategy to secure its own survival.

Moreover, OBOR aims to create strong states in order to prevent security vacuums that could be exploited by terrorist groups. Terrorism is a threat both within China as well as for its investment and trade routes abroad. Particularly the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which fights for the rights of the

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Chinese Uyghur minority and the independence of China's western Xinjiang province, is active in China and entertains close relations to Islamist terrorist groups abroad.

OBOR and the Middle East

The three experts stressed that due to its geostrategic position, its resources, its conflicts and political significance, the Middle East plays a pivotal role in OBOR and Chinese foreign policy. First of all, the region serves as a major hub between Asia, Europe and Africa, with several OBOR routes directly going through it. Secondly, 60 percent of China's crude petroleum imports come from the Middle East, making its inclusion into OBOR an inevitable part of China's long-term economic growth.

Thirdly, the conflicts in the region provide a safe haven for terrorist groups, posing a direct security threat for China. TIP fighters have fought alongside the Islamic State (IS) and the al-Nusra front in Syria and Iraq and could further destabilize Xinjiang province after their return. Fourth, Beijing views the Middle East as a theater of great power cooperation and confrontation, giving the region an increased political relevance in decreasing Western influence and in challenging the Western dominated world order.

The second panel addressed China's involvement in the Middle East in more detail, examining Chinese policies in Pakistan/Afghanistan, the Gulf and Syria. The panel was chaired by Rayan El-Amine from IFI and included Alessandra Cappelletti from the Research Center on Contemporary China in Milan, Moritz Pieper from the University of Salford and Imad Mansour from Qatar University.

Chinas Policies in Pakistan/Afghanistan

Speaking on Pakistan/Afghanistan, Cappelletti argued that Pakistan constitutes a crucial transit route for Chinese energy imports, serves as a partner to balance the U.S.-India alliance and is together with Afghanistan of key importance in terms of security due to its proximity to the Xinjiang province. Cappelletti detailed the efforts to

create the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which will allow China to avoid the U.S. controlled Strait of Malacca as a trade route, making it less dependent on Washington's regional interests and influence. According to the Italian expert, Chinese investment in Pakistan and Afghanistan also serves to strengthen the local economies in an effort not only to stabilize the two countries, but also the bordering Xinjiang province, as parts of the local Uyghur population entertain close connections to radical Sunni groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Peking's role in the Gulf

Pieper argued that while Beijing continues to view its relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq through the prism of energy and trade interests, it increasingly follows political and security related goals in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia constitutes China's main source of oil, with 15 percent of its imported crude petroleum coming from the country. Moreover, the kingdom is considered as a major trade hub to connect West Asia and East Africa. China has in recent years tried to rival U.S. influence in Saudi Arabia by establishing itself as a reliable partner without interfering into internal Saudi affairs.

According to Pieper, while China remains officially neutral between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it increasingly relies on the latter as its main political ally in the region. As a country with the self-declared aim of rolling-back U.S. influence, Iran and China share largely compatible interests in the Middle East. Moreover, Iran's role for OBOR is pivotal, as major land routes to the Middle East and Europe pass through the country. Today, Chinese relations with Iran are therefore multifaceted and reach from active cooperation in the fields of energy and economy to political and military ties.

While Iraq is one of the main oil suppliers to China, Beijing has recently elevated its relationship to Baghdad to a strategic partnership, particularly reflecting growing Chinese security interests in the country due to IS recruitment among Uyghurs.

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China and the Syrian conflict

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Chinese involvement in the Middle East has become most active and politically visible in Syria. According to Mansour, China's policies towards Syria are heavily influenced by security and political considerations. From the outset, China has aimed to prevent a western induced regime change in Syria to repel the perceived threat of terrorism, contain U.S. influence and simultaneously gain a favorable position for the reconstruction of Syria. According to different statistics, up to 5,000 Uyghur fighters are believed to have fought alongside al-Nusra and the IS in Syria.

Beijing considers the Assad regime as the only legitimate government of Syria and has shown flexibility with regard to its traditional foreign policy paradigm of non-intervention by more actively supporting Assad politically and militarily. Since 2011, China has used its veto in the UN Security Council six times to block resolutions against the Assad regime, as compared to only five times in the 40 years before. Beijing has also tried to mediate between the regime and the armed opposition. Moreover, China has started to support the Syrian army with weapons and training in its fight against terrorist groups.