China's Role in the Middle East:

Current Debates
and Future Trends

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Abstract: There are two prevailing arguments among international observers about China's role in the Middle East. One is that China has been a "security free-rider;" the other is that China is fundamentally a business-seeker. Yet neither of the two is well-grounded. If viewed comprehensively rather than in terms of military engagement alone, China's contribution to stability and security of the region is enormous, and its role in the Middle East can be described as a combination of a major economic partner, a low-profile mediator and a modest but important provider of security public goods. As China has proposed various new concepts and initiatives as guidelines of its foreign policy, its future policy toward the Middle East can be best understood through its increasing efforts to promote the "Belt and Road" initiative, to develop a new-type major-power relationship, and to uphold justice and pursue shared interests with all related countries. With ever more Chinese engagement in the region, China's Middle East policy is expected to be delivered in a

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more comprehensive way. However, China is not likely to seek dominant presence in the region in the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Chinese diplomacy; Middle east; regional security; major-power relations.

Recent years have witnessed intensive debates in international media and academia about China's role in the Middle East. The expectations for China to play a bigger role are reasonable since China has become the second largest economy in the world and is deeply engaged with the Middle East for its energy, economic and social security. The United States and the West at large tend to view China's Middle East policy from the perspective of regional security strategy and engagement, which puts much emphasis on military intervention, while regional countries judge China's role largely based on their own expectations. Such a difference explains, at least in part, the misunderstandings and biases about China's role in the Middle East.

However, an objective observation of China's role cannot be made only from a military or materialist perspective. In fact, China did contribute a lot to peace and stability of the Middle East — but in ways different from the West. Furthermore, China's Middle East policy should also be understood within its broad foreign policy framework. In this regard, fostering a new type of major-power relations and promoting the concept of “shared interests compatible to justice” are two major components of its Middle East policy.

Undoubtedly, the Middle East is a region of much national, cultural and religious diversity. But for analytical convenience, this article will focus on China's policy toward the Arab countries, as the Arab world constitutes the main part of the Middle East. In addition, some major issues concerning China-Iran relations will be addressed.

Current Debates on China's Role in the Middle East

In general, there are two most popular views about China's role in the Middle East held by Western and Middle Eastern countries respectively: the former sees China as a free-rider reluctant to take on its due responsibilities

in promoting regional security; the latter suggests that China is only seeking economic interests from the region and caring about nothing else. While both views seem to have many believers, neither is based on solid evidence or serious analysis.

The accusation of China being a free-rider has become increasingly popular since the winter of 2013 when some Western scholars, public media and even ranking government officials began to blame China for not sharing security responsibilities with the West. For example, Paul Haenle, Director of the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, wrote in *The Financial Times* on October 8, 2013 that "China's rise to global leadership means rhetoric and vetoes are no longer enough".¹ What he meant was that China should take actual military action on the ground like the United States, or, to put it frankly, China should join in the U.S.-led military intervention in the Middle East rather than seek to do business with regional countries. An article entitled "Middle East Oil Fuels Fresh China-U.S. Tensions" in *The Wall Street Journal* two days later also claimed that China and other oil-consuming nations had benefited as Washington spent billions of dollars a year to police chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and other volatile parts of the Middle East to ensure oil flow around the globe.²

In a similar tone, U.S. President Barack Obama asserted on August 8, 2014 in an interview with *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman that China had been a free-rider for thirty years, and that no one expected China to play any role.³ He also voiced complaint about China's unwillingness to contribute military resources while benefiting from the military intervention conducted by the United States.

Though this view has some traction among the Western academic community and public media, it is actually derived from a series of false assumptions on the roles of China and the United States. In other words,

¹Paul Haenle, "China Misses a Golden Opportunity in Syria," *The Financial Times*, October 8, 2013.

²Brian Spegele and Matt Bradley, "Middle East Oil Fuels Fresh U.S.-China Tensions," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2013.

³Thomas Friedman, "Exclusive Interview: Obama on the World," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2014.

China's image as a "free-rider" in the Middle East is by and large a result of poor communication and misunderstanding.

Above all, the accusation is based on the assumption that the United States itself has been a provider of security public goods for the region. To many people, the U.S.' role in the Middle East during the 1990s was crucial — not only did it lead a war to push Saddam Hussein's troops back to Iraq in 1991 and thus restored regional order, but it also substantially — and almost single-handedly — pushed forward the Middle East peace process. Besides, the United States is widely acknowledged for having contained both Iraq and Iran to maintain regional stability.

Yet unfortunately, it is also widely believed that the United States should be responsible for the chaos of the Middle East in the 21st century, for it made a huge mistake by launching the Iraq War in 2003, which created fertile soil for the growth of terrorism, and by shattering the political order in some Arab countries through the promotion of democracy, which engendered agonizing political fragmentation of the region and the rise of many radical militant groups like the "Islamic State of Iraq and al Shams (ISIS)".

Next, the accusation points to China as a beneficiary of the regional order maintained primarily by the United States. But actually, China is a victim of regional instability as a result of the U.S.' reckless military actions and presence. To cite only one example, China has been a major importer of Middle East oil since the late 1990s, but oil prices had soared for almost a decade due to the turmoil in the region, which could be attributed at least in part to the U.S.' blunder in launching the Iraq War. That is why the Chinese government has been reiterating the importance of maintaining regional stability by peaceful means.

Finally, the accusation is that China has been a mere consumer of security public goods mainly provided by the United States and other Western countries. However, China has also contributed significantly to regional security through ever more enhanced political and economic engagement with regional countries.⁴ Even in military terms, China has

⁴For more details, see Jin Liangxiang, "Is China Really a Free Rider in the Middle East?," *China-U.S. Focus*, August 22, 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/is-china-really-a-free-rider-in-the-middle-east/>.

provided a growing number of troops for various peace-keeping missions under the United Nations (UN) framework.

Rather than being a security free-rider or mere business-seeker, China has contributed much to peace and stability of the Middle East.

By contrast, those who see China as merely a business-seeker in the Middle East argue that China's core interests in the region lie in its "access to energy resources and overseas markets and investment opportunities," and that China tends to adopt an "offend-no-one" and "attach-no-strings" strategy.⁵ This argument, though not necessarily put forward by Middle Eastern scholars, echoes well in the region. It also suggests that as a beneficiary of the regional

order, China has been reluctant to get involved in regional affairs, either militarily or politically. But it is different from the "free-rider" notion mentioned above in that the "free-rider" notion mainly reflects the Western grievances about China's unwillingness to join in their security efforts, particularly those involving military commitment.

Some Middle Eastern countries like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members do expect China to join in the U.S.-led military actions to overthrow such "belligerent" regimes as Libya's Qaddafi or Syria's Bashar Assad. Yet at the same time, they are also dissatisfied with China's unwillingness to play a counter-weighting role against the U.S.' dominant presence in the region. This perspective was most evident during the G. W. Bush presidency, when it was widely believed that the neo-conservatives within the U.S. government had an ambitious plan to topple Middle Eastern regimes one after another, including even those of the U.S. allies.

Unsurprisingly, Gulf Arab countries and Iran hold different views about China's role in the region. While the former expects China to minimize economic exchanges with Iran and help contain Iran's expansionist stance in the Middle East, the latter is discontented with China's voting for various United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions targeted at some of its nuclear activities. With regard to the different, sometimes

⁵Michael Clarke, "Can China Afford to Be Aloof in the Middle East?," *The National Interest*, December 22, 2015.

conflicting, interests and expectations of Middle Eastern countries, it would be imprudent to judge China's regional role from a certain perspective while ignoring the others. It is certainly true that China is seeking economic and political interests in the region, but it is also following the enduring principles, such as non-intervention and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territory, in its increasing endeavor to help maintain stability and facilitate reconciliation in the region — albeit in ways different from the United States and many other Western countries.

China's Contribution to Peace and Stability in the Middle East

As argued above, it is unreasonable to criticize China as a security free-rider or mere business-seeker by defining public goods only in military terms. Military presence and humanitarian intervention, if truly serving to maintain regional order and security, are widely acknowledged as security public goods. But they do not render other security contributions insignificant or useless. Political mediation and economic engagement, which can help mitigate tensions within and among regional countries, should definitely be regarded as security public goods as well. From this perspective, China's contribution to peace and stability of the Middle East is quite obvious, and its role can be categorized into three types: economic contributor, political mediator, and provider of security public goods under the UN framework.

Major economic contributor

The United States and developed European countries have significantly decreased their economic engagement with Arab countries over the past decade, in large part due to their own economic problems since the 2008 global financial crisis. Because of the financial crisis and the political turmoil afterwards, the economies of most Arab countries have also encountered serious challenges, and their economic exchange with other parts of the world, especially developed countries, has been slowing down. Today, Western enterprises are all the more cautious of the high risks and safety costs in doing business with the region.

In order to press for Iran's concession on the nuclear issue, Western countries have maintained only very modest economic engagement with Iran, which fell to its lowest level between 2012 and 2016 due to their

participation in sanctions on Iran's financial and oil sectors. While the West hopes that economic sanctions will bring about Iran's compliance, China believes that economic stability of Iran serves to maintain stability in the region since Iran is a major political, economic and military power in the Middle East.

Based on such belief, Chinese economic ties with the region — except with Iran, for China also voted for UN sanctions — have been strengthening steadily. According to Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech in Cairo in January 2016, China has become the second-largest trading partner for Arab countries.⁶ Besides, China's oil imports from the region totaled 171.7 million tons in 2014, almost doubling that of the United States, marking a 45 percent increase over just four years.⁷ As it turned out, China's stable import of oil greatly contributed to the Gulf countries' financial stability. If not for the oil export revenues to China, it would be hard to imagine how Gulf oil producers could have sustained social and political stability during the worst time of the global financial crisis and economic slowdown.

China's economic exchange with the Arab world, which helps maintain and improve the livelihoods of the regional population, has served to prevent the regional political and security situation from getting worse. A power plant built by Shanghai Electric in Iraq is a case in point. The project, situated south of Baghdad, started in 2009 and was in operation with almost full capacity in 2013. Since then, it has been providing 70 percent of the electricity that Baghdad needs. Despite tough security challenges in the region, both Chinese managers and workers have remained at their posts, even when facing severe safety risks, thus securing supply of electricity for the capital city of Iraq. This showcases Chinese enterprises' strong sense of responsibility in regional countries. Had they withdrawn, life in Baghdad could have become much worse.

The telecommunications giant Huawei's efforts in Arab countries serve as another example. For safety reasons, China evacuated about 30,000 Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011, most of whom were ordinary workers. But Huawei offices remained open and many technicians stayed,

⁶President Xi's Speech at the Arab League Headquarters, Cairo, January 21, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/22/content_23191229.htm.

⁷The U.S.' oil import from the Middle East was 86 million tons in 2014. See British Petroleum, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2011*, p. 18, and *Statistical Review of World Energy 2015*, p. 18.

continuing to provide necessary telecommunication services at the minimal level for the country in turmoil.

China's business relations with Middle Eastern countries also help increase employment for some regional countries. The China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone is one of the most notable cases. By the end of 2013, the Zone had attracted 58 companies and created 2,000 jobs for Egypt.⁸ According to President Xi's address to the League of Arab States (LAS) in January 2016, the second phase of the zone will bring to Egypt over 100 companies in sectors like textiles, garments, oil equipment, motorcycles and solar energy, and create over 10,000 job opportunities.⁹

Low-profile mediator

China is also an important mediator among parties of major Middle Eastern conflicts, but its role is not as conspicuous as those of other actors. The reasons are numerous: above all, it lies in the unassuming tradition of the Chinese. Difficult for many Westerners to understand, keeping a low profile in international affairs has always been a part of the Chinese political culture, which was canonized by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s as "*tao guang yang hui*," or "hiding one's light under a bushel and keeping a low-profile". Keeping a low profile is also a necessary choice for China, as it does not want its actions to be misinterpreted as a challenge to the U.S. predominance in the region. Thus, China has set its Middle East policy within the context of fostering a new type of major-power relations that principally features non-confrontation with other major powers like the United States.¹⁰

China's economic engagement in the Middle East helps maintain regional stability by enhancing ordinary people's livelihoods.

⁸Yu Jiefei, "The Vision of China-Egypt Suez Zone in the 'Belt and Road' Initiative [中埃苏伊士经贸合作区实践'一带一路'构想]," *Guangming Daily*, November 24, 2014, http://news.gmw.cn/2014-11/24/content_13942936.htm.

⁹President Xi's Speech at the Arab League Headquarters, January 21, 2016.

¹⁰Cheng Li, "Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism: The 'New Type of Great Power Relations,'" *China-U.S. Focus*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinese-enthusiasm-and-american-cynicism-over-the-new-type-of-great-power-relations/>

However, keeping a low profile does not mean that China has remained a passive participant of regional affairs. On the contrary, China has been playing an active and constructive role in helping to maintain stability and enhance security in the Middle East.

In 2002, China appointed Ambassador Wang Shijie, a veteran diplomat, as its first special envoy for Middle Eastern affairs. By May 2016 China had already sent four special envoys¹¹ to encourage and facilitate peaceful talks among hostile parties in the region. These envoys were mainly engaged in Palestine-Israel issues initially, but later on began to play a mediating role in nearly all hotspot issues in the Middle East.

In 2014, China appointed Sun Yuxi, former Chinese ambassador to Afghanistan, as a special envoy for Afghanistan issues. On March 29, 2016, China appointed Xie Xiaoyan, former Chinese Ambassador to Iran, as a special envoy for the Syrian issue. In addition, an important part of the duty of China's special envoys for African issues is focused on matters concerning Sudan, which are closely related to the security situation in the Middle East.

Inconspicuous as their efforts are, all these envoys have been shuttling across the region to mediate between the conflicting parties of Sudan, Israel and Palestine, the Afghanistan government and the Taliban, the Syrian government and the opposition, and so on. Their endeavors have, to varying degrees, pushed forward dialogues between those conflicting parties, producing many tangible outcomes in Sudan issues and the Iran nuclear issue, and serving to reduce tensions and enhance mutual confidence between hostile parties in other cases — the only exception in which results have been less forthcoming is with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts.

China's ranking government officials have also been working for resolutions to major crises or conflicts in the region. Their participation in the Iran nuclear issue serves as the best example.¹² On one hand, China has offered much political support for resolving the issue by diplomatic means. In fact, since the very beginning of the Iran nuclear issue, spokespeople of China's Foreign Ministry have reiterated the necessity of diplomatic

¹¹The four special envoys are Wang Shijie, Sun Bigan, Wu Sike and Gong Xiaosheng.

¹²John Garver, "China and Iran: An Emerging Partnership Post-Sanctions," Middle East Institute Policy Focus 2016-3, February 2016.

solutions. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi also pushed forward the negotiation on different occasions. Not only had he initiated four-point proposals shortly before related parties reached a framework agreement on April 3, 2015, but he also gave another push to the negotiation on July 13, 2015, when it appeared to reach a deadlock. He pointed out that

The Chinese side holds that no agreement can be perfect, and basic conditions are already in place for us to reach a good comprehensive agreement. The objective for the six foreign ministers gathering again in Vienna is to end the negotiation. There cannot and should not be a further delay of the negotiation on the Iranian nuclear issue.¹³

On the other hand, China's constructive role lies in proposing feasible initiatives for settling the issue of the Arak reactor, one of the most difficult technical obstacles. While the Iranian side stressed that Iran would not dismantle any of the facilities, the United States insisted that Iran must remove the Arak reactor. It was China that proposed a redesign to the reactor so as to keep its capacity at a secure level. The China Atomic Energy Authority (CAEA) was the primary liaison on behalf of a Working Group for communications and coordination with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to implement the project.¹⁴

In short, China's role as a low-profile mediator has been indispensable for the settlement of many hotspot issues in the Middle East. Unfortunately, while the effectiveness of China's mediating efforts is acknowledged by related governments, its political support for peaceful solutions to various conflicts like the Syrian crisis has been largely neglected by international media.

China's political support for peaceful settlement of regional crises has been largely ignored by international media.

¹³"Chinese FM: Conditions are Ripe for Good Deal," *Xinhua News*, July 14, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-07/14/c_134409358.htm.

¹⁴"Iran, China and U.S. Issue Joint Statement on Modernizing Arak Reactor," *Tehran Times*, October 21, 2015.

Provider of security public goods

Admittedly, the U.S.' Iraq War and its enduring military presence in the Middle East lack legitimacy for they were not based on UN resolutions. To many observers of the world, the U.S. military presence serves primarily its own geopolitical interests, while Chinese military engagement in the region, limited as it is, falls under clear UN mandates.

China is a major contributor of troops for UN peace-keeping missions, and it has provided peace-keeping troops in Lebanon, Sudan and Mali.¹⁵ Since China started to participate in UN peace-keeping operations in Lebanon in 2006, Chinese peacekeepers have cleared more than 2,000 landmines and more than 1,500 unexploded shells with no casualties in the past decade.¹⁶ By April 2016, China had dispatched 22 taskforces to implement naval escort missions in the Gulf of Arden and the waters off the Somali coast. These taskforces have provided escort for 6,139 Chinese and foreign merchant ships in 922 batches; they have also conducted various missions beyond escort including evacuation of Chinese nationals and nationals of other countries from Libya and Yemen, escorting Syrian chemical weapons to be destroyed in the Mediterranean and offering emergency water supply for Maldives.¹⁷

All these efforts have helped consolidate regional stability and contain tensions among hostile parties, which are valuable security public goods for the region. With President Xi's commitment to provide more peace-keeping troops announced at the UN General Assembly in September 2015, it is expected that China will play an even more active role in maintaining peace and stability the Middle East.

¹⁵Colleen Wong, "China Embraces Peacekeeping Missions," *The Diplomat*, August 9, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/china-embraces-peacekeeping-missions/>.

¹⁶"Chinese Peacekeepers to Lebanon Clear More Than 2000 Mines in 10 Years," Ministry of National Defense of China, June 12, 2016, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2016-06/12/content_4673872.htm.

¹⁷"23rd Chinese Naval Escort Taskforce Leaves for Mission," Ministry of National Defense of China, April 8, 2016, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2016-04/08/content_4648804.htm.

China's Future Middle East Policy

Looking into the future, China is very likely to continue with its current Middle East policy, which is to contribute to regional economic development, to mediate among conflicting parties in a low-profile manner, and to offer more security public goods. In the meantime, there may be incremental adjustments to the current policy.

“Upholding justice and pursuing shared interests”

Shortly after the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), President Xi proposed the concept of “upholding justice and pursuing shared interests with all related countries.”¹⁸ Since then, this concept has become a key guiding principle for China's policy, in particular toward developing countries and neighboring countries, certainly including those in the Middle East.

First of all, the concept indicates that China will continue seeking win-win economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. Unlike some other major countries, China has never sought to maximize its own economic interests at the expense of others. In view of its growing economic power, China will do even more to meet the interests of its economic partners in the Middle East.

Secondly, the concept suggests that China will adhere to the principles of upholding justice and enhancing friendship in its engagement in Middle Eastern affairs. For instance, China will keep its commitment to support the legitimacy of the Palestinian nationhood. As President Xi said in his address to the League of Arab States, while China would uphold justice on the Palestinian issue, other countries should do the same, for it is the “shared responsibility of the international community.” Besides, China will adhere to the principle of non-intervention, as the “use of force offers no solution to problems.” In all, China will value its traditional friendship with Middle Eastern countries since “Chinese and Arab peoples have been sincere with

¹⁸“Xi Eyes More Enabling Int'l Environment for China's Peaceful Development,” *Xinhua News*, November 30, 2014, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/bilingual/2014-11/30/c.133823225.htm>.

each other, forging friendship along the ancient Silk Road...such trust is unbreakable and cannot be bought with money.”¹⁹

Thirdly, the concept means that China will strive to keep a balance between justice and legitimate interests. Especially on its policy toward certain specific issues, China will take both justice and interests into consideration, and when interests conflict with justice, it will prioritize the latter, for it cherishes principles and friendship with Middle Eastern countries more than short-term benefits.

President Xi's visit to the Middle East in January 2016 can be viewed as a milestone in China's relations with Middle Eastern countries. In particular, his address to the League of Arab States did not merely explain China's policy toward the region, but was also a comprehensive response to the questions frequently asked by the international community. The visit in many ways reflected the overarching framework of China's future Middle East policy.

Beyond economic and geopolitical considerations

There is common perception that China aims to strengthen its relationship with Middle Eastern countries mostly for economic benefits (especially given its demand for energy) or geopolitical concerns. In the last fifteen years, energy demand has been almost the single most important dimension from which analysts and observers have considered China's Middle East policy. But such an observation is quite lopsided. Whilst it is true that China has — and will continue to have — great demand of oil from the Middle East, there are many more items on their cooperation list.

After President Xi's visit in January 2016, China-Arab cooperation is expected to progress more rapidly with the establishment of the “1 + 2 + 3” cooperative blueprint: “1” refers to energy cooperation as the principal axis; “2” refers to the two “wings” of infrastructure building and the facilitation of trade and investment; and “3” refers to the three key high-tech fields of nuclear power, space satellites and new energy as potential breakthroughs in their cooperation. Additionally, China can help with the economic transformation of Middle Eastern countries with such a blueprint. For example, China can increase investment in non-oil producers in the region so as to facilitate their industrialization and create more job opportunities.

¹⁹President Xi's Speech at the Arab League Headquarters, January 21, 2016.

Or, it can cooperate with major Gulf oil producers in the service sectors, especially financial services, in order to ease their overdependence on oil export.

China's relations with Middle Eastern countries have long featured mutual political support, which is often overlooked by international observers. China was a strong supporter for the independence movements of Middle Eastern countries decades ago, and the latter have also assisted China on many political issues under the UN framework. The future will witness even more strengthened political relations between them — perhaps with different features. For instance, Middle Eastern countries may support China's endeavor to become a responsible and peaceful leader in certain global affairs, while China will make more effort to help with the political pursuits of the Arab world such as the realization of legitimate rights of Palestinians. What deserves particular attention is that Arab countries have demonstrated strong support for China's position on the South China Sea issues. In the *Doha Declaration* issued on the 7th ministerial meeting of China-Arab Cooperation Forum on May 12, 2016, Arab countries supported China's efforts to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as its stance on peaceful resolution of South China Sea issues.²⁰ This support has been very valuable for China's global public-diplomacy efforts during the critical moments of the Philippines' international arbitration case against China.²¹

As mentioned above, China also hopes to invest more security efforts to promote peace and stability in the region. Apart from providing more peace-keeping troops, China will support the joint efforts of the international community to develop new mechanisms for enhancing peace in the Middle East. Furthermore, according to President Xi's address to the League of Arab States, China will offer more aid to refugees of the region, not only for humanitarian concerns, but also in sincere attempts to help ease the pressures on regional countries and thereby foster a favorable environment for peaceful resolution of regional crises.

²⁰The Declaration is available at <http://www.casf.org/chn/wjk/bzjhywj/dqjbzjhy/t1374608.htm>.

²¹For more details, see "Spotlight: Many Arab Nations Back China's Stance on South China Sea," *Xinhua News*, May 14, 2016, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/14/c.135359002.htm>.

Besides economic, political and security engagement, China has demonstrated its willingness to share its experience and lessons with Arab countries regarding models of development. As President Xi said, "the development path of a country can only be determined by its people, on the basis of its own historical inheritance, cultural traditions and the level of economic and social development;" and he promised to establish a research center on China-Arab reform and development.²² To promote understanding and exchange between the Chinese and Arab civilizations, President Xi proposed that China and the Arab world "should conduct dialogue among civilizations and advocate inclusiveness and mutual learning," and that as a first step, China would carry out the program of "Hundred, Thousand, and Ten Thousand Talents."²³

China's "Belt and Road" initiative is aimed at enhancing win-win cooperation with regional countries instead of seeking geopolitical dominance.

It must be noted that China's growing engagement in the Middle East in general goes beyond geopolitical considerations. Some international observers have expressed concerns about whether China, with its ever growing comprehensive strengths, will seek a "sphere of influence" or even geopolitical dominance in Asia, particularly after China put forward the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013, in which the Middle East constitutes a crucial region. For example, Jeffrey Payne of the U.S. National Defense University's Near

East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) believed that the initiative "spreads Chinese influence throughout Asia without having to exert much political manipulation."²⁴ Indeed, any economic initiative would generate certain political and even security effects, but no evidence indicates that China is seeking, or will seek, regional dominance to any direction.

²²President Xi's Speech at the Arab League Headquarters, January 21, 2016.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Jeffrey Payne, "The G.C.C. and China's One Belt, One Road: Risk or Opportunity?," Middle East Institute, August 11, 2016, <http://www.mideasti.org/content/gcc-and-china-s-one-belt-one-road-risk-or-opportunity>.

President Xi offered a straight answer to such doubts. During his visit to the Middle East in January 2016, he maintained that instead of looking for a proxy in the region, China promotes peace talks; instead of seeking any sphere of influence, China calls on all countries to join the circle of friends for the construction of the “Belt and Road”; instead of attempting to fill the “geopolitical vacuum,” China aims to build a cooperative partnership network for mutual benefits and win-win results.²⁵ It is clear that Chinese leaders consider geopolitical competition among major global or regional powers detrimental not only to the stability and development of the region, but also to every related power in the end.

Conclusion

Misperception of China’s role in the Middle East — either as a “security free-rider” or a business-seeker — mostly arises from skewed perspectives of observation. In fact, China’s engagement in the region should be viewed more comprehensively rather than merely in military terms. With regard to its role in supporting regional peace and stability, China has been an important economic contributor, a low-profile mediator and a major provider of security public goods. By attaching great importance to economic cooperation and political approaches, China has not only enhanced the long-term peace and stability of the region, but it has also managed to avoid serious competition and conflicts with other major powers, especially the United States.

With the changing regional situation, China’s future policy toward the Middle East is expected to undergo some minor adjustments but remain consistent on the whole. To be more specific, China’s economic and cultural exchanges with the region will expand further, but in ways that are different from some other major powers; China has no intention to seek security alliances or proxy relations with Middle Eastern countries.

Throughout history, China and Middle Eastern countries have enjoyed quite friendly relations, despite some misunderstandings as a result of both deficiency of knowledge about each other and lopsided views and reports from third parties. In the future, China and Middle Eastern countries are

²⁵President Xi’s Speech at the Arab League Headquarters, January 21, 2016.

expected to enhance their economic relations as various joint projects go forward under the “Belt and Road” initiative. Besides, they will very likely work more closely in the political and cultural arenas, so as to strengthen their mutual understanding and support for each other’s legitimate rights and interests on the global stage.