

MERIA

CHINA'S STRATEGIC SHIFT TOWARD THE REGION OF THE FOUR SEAS: THE MIDDLE KINGDOM ARRIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By Christina Lin*

Since the Arab Spring, China has been quietly asserting its influence and fortifying its foothold in the Middle East, while the United States pivots to the Asia Pacific after a decade of war. It is aligning with states that have problematic relations with the West and are also geo-strategically placed on the littoral of the "Four Seas"--the Caspian Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Arabian Sea/Persian Gulf. Paradoxically, the U.S. eastward pivot is matched by the resurgent Middle Kingdom's westward pivot across its new Silk Road, and threatens to outflank the citadel of American geo-strategies in the region.

INTRODUCTION: CHINA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Energy Security

China's interest in the Middle East is first and foremost energy-driven.¹ In 1993, when it became a net oil importer for the first time, Beijing embarked on a "go out" (*zhouchuqu*) policy to procure energy assets abroad to feed its growing economy. The legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rests on continued economic growth and delivering a rising standard of living for the Chinese population. As a corollary, China is also concerned about security of energy supply lines and Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCS). Because the United States is considered its main opponent in the international system, China is wary of U.S. naval dominance and the risk of choking China's energy supply through the Malacca Straits should hostilities break out over Taiwan. This is referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma," where 80 percent of China's oil imports traverse this chokepoint that is vulnerable to piracy and U.S. blockade. Indeed, given increasing tension in the three flash points of the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Straits, this

concern is even more pressing for the Chinese leadership.

Market Access

The Middle East is also a strategic logistics and trade hub for China's exports and market access in Europe and Africa. China understands the importance of having strong economic foundations for military power and sees that continued market access for their exports to fuel China's economy would build up their war chest to further underwrite military modernization.² The EU is currently China's largest trading partner ahead of the United States.³ Moreover, China also has vast interests on the African continent--both via infrastructure projects and long-term energy supply contracts. More than 1 million Chinese are in Africa (up from about 100,000 in the early 2000s), with trade at \$120 billion in 2011.⁴ In 2009, China overtook the United States to become Africa's number one trading partner.⁵ As such, the Middle East is a strategic region that connects Europe, Africa, and Asia markets.

Thus, given the Middle East's location as a trade hub linking the three continents, a vital region for market access, and site of vast energy reserves to fuel China's continued economic growth, the CCP deems the Middle East as a high priority on its foreign policy

agenda. As the United States “pivots” towards Asia, China will naturally seek strategic depth in areas that were once dominated by the United States and its Western allies. This is even more so in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Strategic Foothold Post Arab Spring

The Arab Spring caught China by surprise, and Beijing has not fared well in its aftermath. Director General of Chinese Foreign Ministry's African Affairs Department Lu Shaye expressed China's fear that Western military intervention in crucial energy markets could eventually restrict Beijing's access to oil and gas.⁶ In a 2011 interview regarding Libya, he expressed concerns that European-led [NATO] intervention in Libya was a thinly veiled gambit to restore waning western influence in Africa.⁷ China had to evacuate over 36,000 Chinese nationals from Libya and lost over \$20 billion in investments when the Qadhafi regime was ousted.

As such, there is an uptick of writing in the Chinese press arguing for change in the traditional non-interference stance in China's foreign policy.⁸ China is now more proactive in its Middle East diplomacy and wants to ensure its previous contracts are protected in the post-Arab Spring regimes as well as obtain a foothold for Chinese firms while Western firms evacuate from these regions or are reticent to invest due to uncertainty. China, with its state-owned companies backed by its \$3.3 trillion war chest, is adept at filling in the vacuum in these “minefields” in order to sustain economic growth, since Western businesses have virtually monopolized relatively “safe” regions elsewhere.

CHINA'S NEW SILK ROAD STRATEGY

In order to procure energy assets and ensure security of energy supply, China has adopted a two-pronged strategy. First, it has embarked on a “New Silk Road” of infrastructure projects. China is turning historical trading routes of the ancient Silk Roads into a modern grid of overland

pipelines, roads, and railways for its energy supplies--called the New Silk Road. This is to circumvent naval chokepoints and hedge against risks of naval blockades or embargoes. Second, it has increased military power projection to protect overseas interests. China has also embarked on military (especially naval) modernization to protect overseas interests and adjusted its strategy from “coastal defense” to “far seas defense” for the PLA Navy (PLAN). China uses a combination of economic, political, and military tools to further this two-pronged strategy.

Economic Tool

China is building various infrastructure projects in the Middle East and Africa. These are usually bilateral agreements with the government to bypass market forces of tender and competition. One such example is the 2012 Sino-Israeli agreement for Chinese companies to build a cargo rail line linking the Mediterranean port of Ashdod with Eilat in the Red Sea, dubbed the “Med-Red rail,” and the “steel canal” to bypass an increasingly unstable Suez Canal under the Muslim Brotherhood's control. The bilateral government agreement enables Israel to bypass its Tender Law in awarding the franchise and allow it to contract with Chinese companies to help finance the project.⁹ Likewise in Egypt, China recently penned bilateral government agreements with President Muhammad Mursi to build railways, telecommunications, and other infrastructure projects backed by Chinese concessional loans, providing funding with advantageous conditions that few other countries are willing to provide.¹⁰

In addition to bilateral agreements, China also provides competitive package deals that may include military aid in addition to concessional loans, as well as loans for oil, loans for strategic minerals, and/or loans for infrastructure projects. Western companies cannot compete, because Chinese state-owned companies are backed by China's \$3.3 trillion war chest. For example, in Afghanistan in 2007, China's Metallurgical Group (M.C.C.)

outbid the second runner up by 70 percent, offering \$3.5 billion for the Aynak copper mine estimated to go for \$2 billion.¹¹ M.C.C. offered \$1 billion more than any of its competitors from Canada, Europe, Russia, the United States, and Kazakhstan. The entire package included a one-stop shop to build railways, a 400-megawatt generating plant to power the copper mine and Kabul, coal mines to feed the plant's generators, as well as schools, roads, and even mosques for the Afghans.¹²

As such, the Chinese have raised the bar and taken the bid beyond the scope of just an extractive operation. Even if the projects take five or ten years due to ongoing instability, at least they have a beachhead and sustaining influence. These types of development aid packages underscore how Chinese leaders--flush with cash and in control of both the government and major industries--meld strategy, business, and statecraft into a seamless whole.

Political Tool

UN Security Council Vote

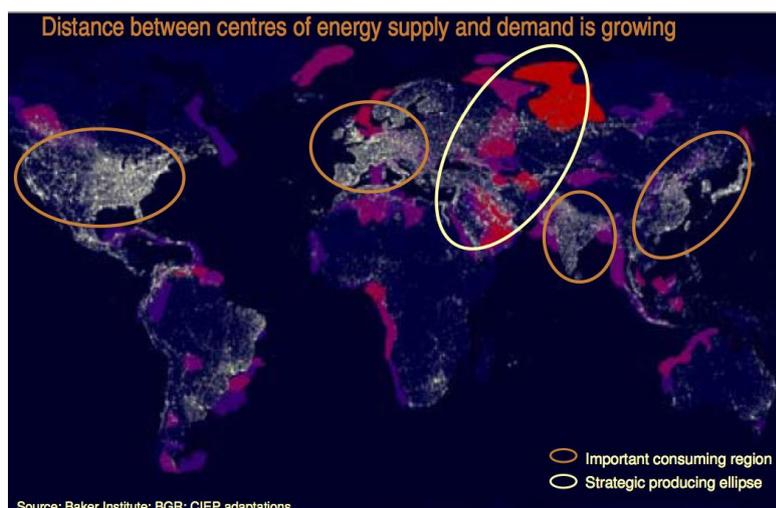
China also uses its influence as a UNSC member for preferential treatment and to further cement its ties with host countries. In the past, China has used its veto power to shield, or water down, sanctions on countries accused of human rights violations and illicit nuclear programs such as Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Burma. As such, this makes China an attractive political partner for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and Africa. In fact, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad visited Beijing in 2004 to seek economic cooperation based on the Chinese model of development--maintaining authoritarian control while experiencing economic growth. This is referred to as the Beijing Consensus, which challenges the Washington Consensus stipulating that only political liberalization will lead to economic growth.

Strengthening Coalitions of Non-Western Countries

China also tries to further its influence via coalitions of non-Western countries, such as BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) or the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement), which convened a summit in Tehran in August 2012, ending Iran's isolation. Participants at the level of minister or higher from 80 countries attended, and 50 countries sent their heads of government.¹³ UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon also attended, as well as China--an observer of NAM since 1992--and Russia was invited as Iran's special guest.¹⁴ With 120 member countries and two-thirds of UN states dual-hatted as full NAM members, China naturally used the NAM summit platform to push for enhancing the UN's role and to promote cooperation within NAM countries.¹⁵ Egypt's Mursi handed the NAM chairmanship to Iran for the following three years. China will thus use NAM and its close ally Iran to further its agenda to counter-balance the U.S. and Western influence. In fact, China has already enjoyed great success since the early 2000s in using the Shanghai-Cooperation Organization (SCO) for its power projection and to counter U.S. and NATO influences in Central Eurasia.

Aligning with Key Littoral States of the Four Seas Region

Moreover, China is aligning with key countries that have problematic relations with the United States and the West--Iran, Syria, and Turkey--that are also of geostrategic significance and lie on the littoral of the four seas: the Caspian, Black, Mediterranean, and Arabian/Persian Gulf. This energy-rich "Region of the Four Seas" lies in the "strategic energy ellipse," which has over 70 percent of the world's proven energy reserves.¹⁶

Map 1: Strategic Energy Ellipse

Source: *Clingendael International Energy Programme, May 3-4, 2010*

Syria's Bashar al-Asad first promoted the concept of a "Four Seas Strategy" to transform his country into a trade hub. The Ankara-Damascus-Tehran triangle would become the nucleus of an approach that aimed to include Iraq and the Caucasus in a geographical continuum linking the Four Seas. Asad peddled the idea to Turkey's President Abdullah Gul in 2009. It was approved by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i the same year.¹⁷ He underscored, "Once the economic space between Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran [becomes] integrated, we would link the Mediterranean, Caspian, Black Sea, and the [Persian] Gulf.... We aren't just important in the Middle East.... Once we link these four seas, we become the compulsory intersection of the whole world in investment, transport and more."¹⁸ During a December 2009 speech before the Syrian parliament, Foreign Minister Walid Mu'alim also stated, "These strategic ties [between Syria and Turkey] are to be a nucleus that will soon be augmented by Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq."¹⁹ Syria could then act as an access point for EU countries seeking to enter markets in the Arab world and Western Asia.

The Four Seas concept seems to be taken from the European Commission's strategy of enlargement via the EU 4 Seas project, of integrating regions in the Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, and Caspian

Sea.²⁰ However, given Turkey's impasse in joining the EU, and Syria's delay in its Association Agreement, it appears they both looked east and replaced the Baltic/Northern European focus with a shift to Iran's Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea. Although at the time of writing there is division within the Ankara-Damascus-Tehran nucleus over the Syrian crisis, China has nonetheless maintained strong diplomatic ties with all three. Beijing has wielded its UNSC power to shield Iran's nuclear program, water down sanctions, protect Syria's Asad regime, and upgrade military ties/strategic partnership with NATO member Turkey.²¹

While the United States and EU may not value these three countries, China sees them as strategic assets to project China's influence and counterbalance the United States. China has traditionally been a strong ally of Iran, due to its geostrategic location in the Persian Gulf and anti-American sentiments. The Chinese view that the United States currently controls the west bank of oil rich Persian Gulf via its pro-American proxies (e.g., Saudi Arabia and smaller Gulf states), rendering the Gulf an "internal sea" for the United States. However, if China and Russia expand relations with Iran, they could maintain a "minimum balance" to thwart possible U.S. naval embargoes against other countries. If the United States and China should ever have a

military clash over Taiwan, Washington would not shut off China's Gulf oil supplies since China, Russia, and Iran control the Gulf's "east bank."²²

Likewise, China values Syria as the traditional terminus node of the ancient Silk Road by virtue of its geographic location, which China calls *ning jiu li* (cohesive force).²³ Prior to the civil war in Syria, China was already using the country as a trans-shipment hub into Iraq, Lebanon, and the wider region via China City--an area in the Adra Free Zone industrial park northeast of Damascus and located on the Damascus-Baghdad highway.²⁴ Moreover, China holds large equities in Syria's oil industry, with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) holding minority stakes in two of Syria's largest petroleum companies, and having signed multi-billion dollar deals to assist in the exploration and development of Syria's oil producing regions.²⁵ After suffering its great loss in Libya, it is no wonder China would be more assertive in protecting its economic interests and contracts with the Asad regime in Syria.

As for Turkey, a geographic bridge between Europe and Asia and an emerging regional power, China sees it as an important node on its New Silk Road and more

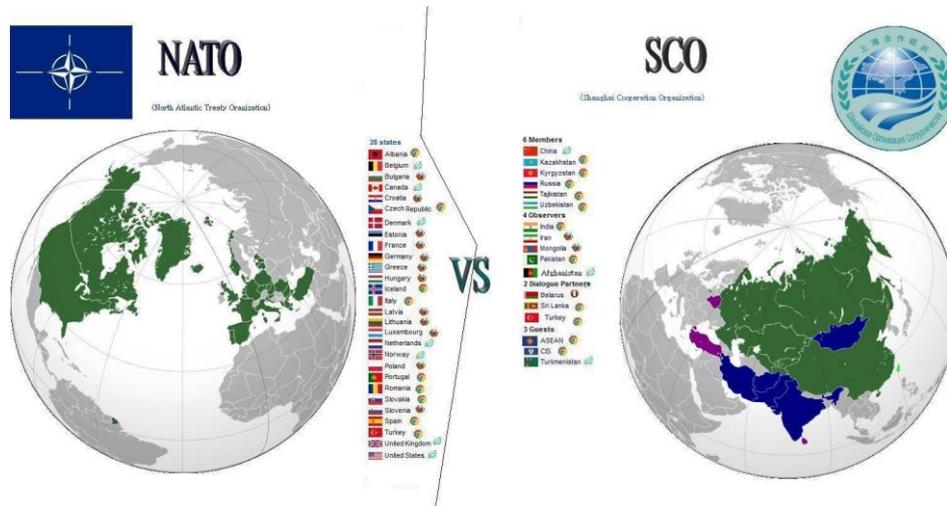
importantly, a potential source of advanced NATO technologies. In October 2010, China and Turkey elevated their relationship to one of strategic partnership and signed agreements to build a silk railway, increase bilateral trade, and upgrade military relations.²⁶ Turkey replaced Israel with China in its annual Anatolian Eagle air combat exercise, cooperating with Iran and Pakistan to provide airspace and refueling for Chinese warplanes.²⁷ With EU membership stalling, Turkey is looking east to China and sees it can play a mediating role between China's SCO and NATO.²⁸ In fact, in July Erdogan asked for Turkey's admittance as a full SCO member, having already joined as a Dialogue Partner in 2011.²⁹ If Turkey becomes a full member of a Sino-Russian-led security organization with anti-Western sentiments, without giving up its NATO credentials, this could result in a conflict of interest in compromising NATO's solidarity and effectiveness. In fact, when Turkey considered buying Chinese and Russian air defense systems that would compromise NATO intelligence systems, NATO officials swiftly warned that if this occurred, Ankara would operate them without NATO intelligence on incoming missiles.³⁰

Map 2: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)



Source: Wikipedia

Map 3: NATO and SCO



Source: Wikipedia

Military Tool

Military Rail Transport

China has also embarked on rapid military modernization and enhancing its long-range power projection capabilities. It is building railway networks connecting Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Beijing is particularly interested in a high-speed rail that plays a key military transport and logistics role in China's efforts to project power across Eurasia. The military has already used the Shanghai-Nanjing express railway to transport troops at speeds of up to 350 km per hour, touting the practice of employing these dual-use (both commercial and military applications) strategic railways as an ideal way to project personnel and light equipment in "military operations other than war" (MOOTW) to protect its interests abroad.³¹ The People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s

General Logistics Department (GLD) is actively participating in the design and planning of China's high-speed railway, with military requirements becoming part of the development process. Indeed, the GLD is looking to implement rapid mobilization and deployment of troops via high-speed rails once they are completed across Eurasia.³²

Dubbed the "Iron Silk Road", in November 2010, China signed agreements with Iran to connect railways through Central Asia, as well as onto Turkey and Europe.³³ It recently inked deals to build Israel's high-speed railway linking the ports of Ashdod and Eilat, with eventual connections to Jordan's Aqaba Port.³⁴ In its recent meeting with Egypt's Mursi, China also inked deals to build a high-speed railway linking Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, and Hurghada,³⁵ with a longer-term view to eventually connect Africa with the Middle East via Egypt.

Map 4: Railway from China to the Middle East

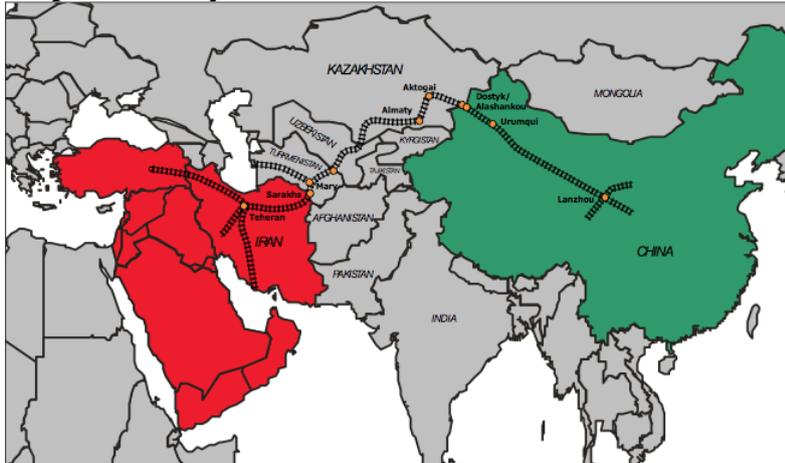


Figure 9-10: Middle East connections to NW China

Source: “The Railways of the Middle East, Visions 2025,” UIC strategy, February 2008, International Union of Railways.

As China’s overseas interests expand in tandem with China’s rise in power, the Middle Kingdom will become more assertive in using

its military to protect its burgeoning assets abroad.

Figure 1: Chinese guards at the Ahdab oil field, Iraq



Source: Thaier al-Sudan/Reuters; “Red Star over Iraq,” *Business Week*, January 21, 2010

Naval Power Projection in “Far Sea Defense”

The Chinese military has also changed its strategy from “coastal defense” to “far sea defense,” seeking to project naval power well beyond its coast, from the oil ports of the

Middle East to the shipping lanes of the Pacific. Admiral Liu Huaqing, who modernized China’s navy as its commander from 1982-1988, defined the Sino-centric concept of the Near Sea, as well as the Middle and Far Seas as depicted in the Map 5 below.³⁶

Map 5: Concept of “Far Seas”

“Near Seas” vs. “Far Seas”



Source: Andrew Erickson and Gabe Collins, *China Sign Post*, No. 55, March 6, 2012

In an interview with *Xinhua* in 2010, Rear Adm. Zhang Huachen, deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet, said, “With our naval strategy changing now, we are going from coastal defense to far sea defense.” He added, “With the expansion of the country’s economic interests, the navy wants to better protect the country’s transportation routes and the safety of our major sea lanes.”³⁷ Yin Zhuo, a retired PLAN rear admiral, stated in an interview with *People’s Daily Online* that the PLAN was tasked with two primary missions: the preservation of China’s maritime security (including territorial integrity) and the protection of China’s burgeoning and far-flung maritime economic interests.³⁸

Indeed, Chinese naval vessels have embarked on active diplomacy in the far seas. It conducts regular port calls and “shows of

flags” in the Gulf of Aden--where it conducts anti-piracy missions--as well as in the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea--where China has acquired various seaports in the littorals by helping to bail out the Eurozone. In July and August of 2012, Chinese warships passed through the Suez Canal and entered the Mediterranean Sea at the same time Russia dispatched its naval flotilla to Tartus in Syria. A website called *Turkish Navy* tracked all three ships--the *Qingdao* destroyer, *Yantai* frigate, and the *Weishan Hu* supply ship. However, *Weishan Hu* disappeared for a couple of days--with some speculating it was possibly replenishing Russian warships in support of the Asad regime.³⁹ *Weishan Hu* can carry 10,500 tons of fuel, 250 tons of water, and 680 tons of ammunition.⁴⁰

Figure 2: Chinese warships in the Mediterranean and Black Sea

	Qingdao	Yantai	Weishan Hu
23 July	Suez	Suez	Suez
29 July	Dardanelles	Dardanelles	- ? -
30 July	Bosphorus	Bosphorus	- ? -
31 July	Sevastopol, Ukraine	Constanta, Romania	- ? -
4 August	Underway	Underway	Dardanelles
5 August	Istanbul, Turkey	Varna, Bulgaria	Istanbul, Turkey
16 August	Haifa, Israel	Haifa, Israel	Haifa, Israel

Source: Turkish Navy, August 6, 2012; Atlantic Council, "Chinese warships dock in Israel for first time," August 20, 2012

Naval vessels can be at sea and resupply one another undetected. Knowing Russian ships were also active in the Gulf of Aden, some posit that there is a possibility China and Russia were conducting seaborne supply swaps there, with Russia later transporting supplies to Tartus, Syria.⁴¹ This would not be the first time China has claimed neutrality while covertly helping a dictator with whom it has lucrative contracts. In September 2011, it was revealed that China's state-controlled arms manufacturers offered to sell \$200 million of arms to Qadhafi via Algeria and South Africa. This included rocket launchers, anti-tank missiles, and QW-18--a surface-to-air missile similar to a U.S. Stinger and capable of bringing down NATO aircrafts. This was in violation of the UN arms embargo, which China supported.⁴²

Yet others observe the significance of the Chinese navy's "show of flags" as deterrence against Western military intervention in Syria. Writing in *The Diplomat*, J. Michael Cole argued that "for the first time since China's re-emergence as a power to be reckoned with, Western powers are being confronted with scenarios involving the risks of clashes with Chinese military forces outside the Asian giant's backyard."⁴³ He further argued that there may be a possibility whereby the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) may not directly take part in hostilities, but PLAN or Russian ships could attempt to create a line at sea to prevent Western ships from approaching Syria to launch military

operations against it, or to prevent an embargo.

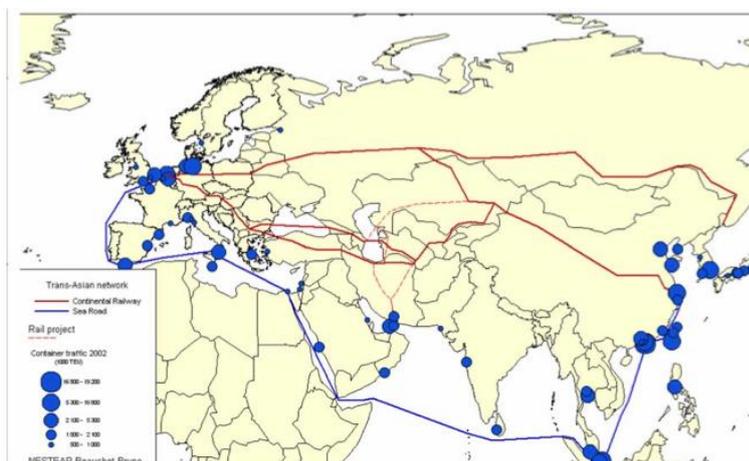
In the Chinese Communist controlled mouthpiece the *Global Times*, an August 2012 article asserted that the Mediterranean needed to become accustomed to China's naval presence.⁴⁴ By showing its flag west of the Suez, China is signaling its interest as a trading nation in accessing sea-lanes, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bosphorus, and Gibraltar.⁴⁵ In another paper from the National University of Singapore, Geoff Wade argued that China's maritime strategy was not about establishing military bases and territorial control on foreign soil, but rather using maritime dominance and gunboat diplomacy to establish economic and political control over ports and shipping lanes.⁴⁶ That is, by using a maritime power's dominant presence to control economic lifelines of nodal points, networks, ports, and trade routes, China can thus control trade and wield great power. Wade coins this "proto-maritime colonialism," whereby a dominant maritime power takes control of main port polities along major East-West maritime trade networks as well as the seas in between, thus gaining economic and political benefits. This is less costly than establishing forward operating bases for the military, which smacks of occupation and colonialism in some host countries. As such, China has steadily acquired controlling stakes or equities in the main seaports of container traffic along the rimland of the Eurasia

continent, which has come to be known as China's "string of pearls" naval strategy.

Around the Mediterranean, China is acquiring stakes in shipping and logistics companies and is expanding ports in Greece (Piraeus Port), France (Port of Marseille Fosx 4XL container terminal), Spain (El Prat pier in the Barcelona Port), as well as rail, air terminals, and fiber optic networks in Portugal (Huawei and Portugal Telecom) and Italy (air terminal north of Rome). In the Eastern Mediterranean, the China Harbor Engineering Company is expanding Lebanon's Tripoli port. In Israel, it is cooperating with Ashdod port authorities and building a light rail from Tel Aviv to Eilat. It is also connecting the

Eilat port to the Ashdod and Haifa ports in Israel. In Egypt, China's shipping company COSCO has a 20 percent share in the Danish Maersk container port in Port Said. At the same time, China is attempting to recoup and renegotiate infrastructure contracts elsewhere in North Africa following the Arab Spring. Across the Suez Canal in the Red Sea, China is already enlarging Port Sudan, which gives China the ability to deliver maritime shipments (whether civilian or military) to Sudan, East Africa, and the Horn of Africa region. Near the Persian Gulf in February 2013, China took operational control of Pakistan's Gwadar Port from Singapore's PSA International, which it also built.⁴⁷

Map 6: Main Maritime Ports of Container Traffic



Source: NESTEAR, reproduced from "Policy Actions for Developing Efficient Inland Transport Links between Asia and Europe," paper presented by Alain Rathery, Deputy General Secretary, International Transport Forum, 1st Black Sea & 4th Silk Road Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, May 14-16, 2007.

However, China still faces obstacles in challenging the U.S. military and realizing its goal as a dominant maritime power. The Mediterranean is still dominated by NATO and the U.S. 6th Fleet, and the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf by U.S. 5th Fleet. In the near-term, China's navy will show its presence as a new kid on the block in the far seas, but will be unable to challenge U.S. naval pre-eminence. However, over the longer term, as the United States and NATO cut back on their defense budgets due to economic woes while

China continues to increase its spending and military modernization, the U.S. naval position may begin to erode as China becomes a formidable competitor for influence in power projection in this region.

CHINA'S NEW PROACTIVE DIPLOMACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

On August 14, 2012, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun

launched the inaugural round of the U.S.-China Middle East Dialogue in Beijing. The initiative was driven by China's increasing activities and assertiveness in the Middle East.⁴⁸ China's shift in policy away from its traditional "non-intervention" stance toward this region is driven by a combination of domestic, regional, and international factors.

Domestic Driver: Shift in China's Perception of the Middle East

As stated earlier, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime survival is tied to continual economic growth and delivering improving living standards to the Chinese people. Its "go out" strategy to acquire energy assets abroad since 1993 has driven China to have a more assertive and interventionist stance in its approach to the Middle East. As its overseas interests continue to expand with China's rise, the Chinese government has found that it can no longer strictly adhere to its "non-intervention" stance, but needs to be more proactive diplomatically, politically, and militarily in order to protect its interests.

Since the 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, China has become more active in pursuing a "counter-encirclement strategy" against perceived U.S. hegemony in the Middle East.⁴⁹ Beijing fears that Washington's Middle East strategy entails advancing the encirclement of China and creating a norm of regime change against undemocratic states, which would implicitly challenge CCP legitimacy at home.⁵⁰ In 2004, then Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen blasted U.S. foreign policy in an article published in *China Daily*. He wrote that the United States has "put forward its 'Big Middle East' reform program... [The] U.S. case in Iraq has caused the Muslim world and Arab countries to believe that the super power already regards them as targets for its ambitious 'democratic reform program.'"⁵¹ According to a 2004 interview with Ambassador Wu Jianmin, a rising star in China's diplomatic circle, Chinese foreign policy was transforming from "Responsive diplomacy" (*Fanying shi waijiao*) to "Proactive diplomacy" (*Zhudong*

shi waijiao).⁵² In 2005, Jin Liangxiang, research fellow at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, argued that China was experiencing a new activism and that "the age of Chinese passivity in the Middle East is over."⁵³ He declared, "If U.S. strategic calculations in the Middle East do not take Chinese interests into account, then they will not reflect reality."⁵⁴ That same year, President Hu Jintao delivered a message to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on the "New Historic Missions" strategy, which underscores the PLA's role in safeguarding national interest overseas.⁵⁵

There is also a rising tide of domestic nationalism, with China's own historic narrative as a victim in the past "century of humiliation" and that the time has come to reassert the Middle Kingdom's proper place in the world.⁵⁶ This plays well in enhancing the CCP's standing for domestic consumption, especially in view of the upcoming leadership change in the 18th Party Congress in October 2012, which set the course for China for the next eight years until 2020. Xi Jinping, the next president to replace Hu Jintao, is a princeling and a Maoist, placing strong focus on the PLA's role in foreign policy. Hu, on the other hand, was a Dengist who was more focused on economic development. As such, with Xi Jinping at the helm of China's leadership, he will likely steer China's foreign policy onto a more active course.

Regional Drivers: United States' Asia Pivot and China's Fear of Encirclement

Chinese leaders and strategists have often lambasted U.S. strategy of encircling and containing a rising China.⁵⁷ China views that its eastern flank is already surrounded by anti-Chinese alliances forged by the U.S. defense treaties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, in addition to defense cooperation with Taiwan, Singapore, and Indonesia. With the post September 11 War on Terrorism and subsequent stationing of U.S./NATO troops in Central Asia and Afghanistan, China is now encircled by a U.S. military presence to contain its freedom of

action. Air Force colonel Dai Xu, a renowned military strategist, wrote in an article, "China is in a crescent-shaped ring of encirclement. The ring begins in Japan, stretches through nations in the South China Sea to India, and

ends in Afghanistan. Washington's deployment of anti-missile systems around China's periphery forms a crescent shaped encirclement" (See Map 7).

Map 7: Map of U.S. Strategic Encirclement of China in Eurasia

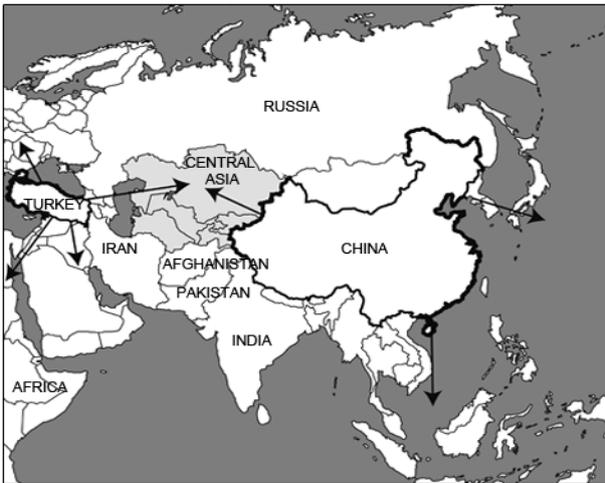


Source: Laura Canali, "How America Wants to Check China's Expansion," *Heartland: Eurasian Review of Politics*, April 2005

As the United States embarks on its pivot to Asia in order to contain China and it partners with Southeast Asian nations to counter China's territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea, Beijing is taking counter-encirclement steps. China is doing so by forging partnerships with key pivotal countries with anti-Western sentiments, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, followed by

Egypt. Turkey is especially important given: (1) The combination of its EU/NATO ties with having an Islamist government that is oriented toward the Islamic world; and (2) having one foot in NATO and another foot in the SCO. As such, it is an important partnering pole in the left flank of the Eurasia continent for China to project its influence on and counter-balance the United States and the West.

Map 8: Sino-Turkey Strategic Partnership and Power Projection



Source: "China and Turkey: A Partnership to Reshape the World?" *Risk Watch Dog*, October 25, 2010

The Chinese have always been wary of Western-sponsored revolutions spreading to Central Asia, because it feared that Xinjiang would follow suit and declare independence from China, just as the Central Asian Republics declared independence from the Soviet Union. Moreover, for many years, the Turkic Uyghurs in Xinjiang enjoyed the protection and sympathetic support of their separatist movement in Turkey. As such, China is seeking Turkey's cooperation and reciprocity in respecting Xinjiang as China's territory in exchange for supporting Turkey's stance on the Kurds in Turkey. The SCO is thus an effective vehicle through which both could cooperate and expand their influence in Central Asia.

International Changes: Arab Spring Surprise and Uncertainty in Middle East

The Arab Spring caught China by surprise, and it suffered great investment losses. These investment ties involved years of building influence and negotiations with previous regimes. The CCP values stability with authoritarian regimes for its infrastructure projects in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. It also fears the West will encourage pro-Western regime changes that are detrimental to Chinese interests. In

addition, by voting for UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) and supporting regime change due to human rights abuses, it opens the door for future Western interventions in China over its own human rights abuses (e.g., Tiananmen Square Massacre, Tibet, Xinjiang, etc.).

Libya

In the case of Libya, China perceived that by being complicit with the West via its abstention from UNSCR 1973, it directly contributed to the fall of Qadhafi with disappointing payoffs. Domestic nationalists criticized the government for "compromising its principles" and "acquiescing to Western demands," and in the international arena, neither the West nor the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) showed appreciation for China's abstention.⁵⁸ China lost more than \$20 billion worth of investments; had to evacuate 36,000 Chinese nationals from Libya; and when Beijing urged NTC to protect its oil interests, it was shocked and humiliated by the public announcement from the Libyan oil company AGOCO that they "don't have a problem with Western countries, but may have political issues with Russia and China."⁵⁹ China was unprepared to protect its interests in this scenario. Its

perception of gaining nothing while losing everything by acquiescing to the West thus significantly contributed to its subsequent decision to veto the Syrian resolution.

Syria

China perceived it was tricked by Westerners on UNSCR 1973, which NATO exploited to intervene militarily to oust Qadhafi under the fig leaf of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Beijing has thus taken a harsh stance in Syria via its UNSC veto. Professor Yin Gang, a Middle East expert with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said the veto was an effort to stop the UN from interfering in the domestic affairs of another country. Yin explained, "Beijing's concern is also of Syria becoming another Libya... if the UN can do this in Syria, it will do it again to another country in the future, and that is what Chinese leaders are worried about."⁶⁰ Moreover, Beijing wanted to side with Russia to counterbalance U.S. influence in the region. Professor Xiao Xian, a leading Middle East expert and vice president of the Chinese Association for Middle East Studies, said, "The only explanation for China's move is that Beijing is seeking closer collaboration with Moscow in order to check and balance the U.S.-led Western alliance's domination of global affairs."⁶¹

In Beijing's cost-benefit analysis, China's acquiescence to UNSCR 1973, which resulted in Western military intervention, was a complete loss. According to Yan Xuetong, a prominent Chinese strategist, the West and Arab states did not appreciate China's effort on Libya and chastised it for not participating in the military campaign. Yan argues, "Regardless of how China votes on Syria, the West will always see China as an undemocratic country with a poor human rights record and the Arab states will always side with the West."⁶² Thus China perceives its veto of the Syria resolution as something that does not fundamentally cost Beijing anything. However, it had much to gain by saving Moscow from international isolation--the joint veto was a powerful demonstration of

Sino-Russia diplomatic cooperation to maintain a power balance in the Middle East. More importantly, China fears denial of access to energy sources in regions where Western military interventions prop up pro-Western regimes.

China is also changing to a more nuanced and sophisticated strategy of hedging its interests with current regimes as well as the opposition. The bitter lesson from its belated and ongoing unstable relationship with the Libyan NTC prompted Beijing to be more proactive in building relations with the Syrian opposition, while simultaneously pursuing a mediation role inside and outside of Syria.⁶³ As such, in February 2012, China's Foreign Ministry conducted shuttle diplomacy and dispatched senior delegations to Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority for consultations. It has also become more assertive militarily, sending Chinese warships to the Mediterranean Sea in a "show of flags," along with Russian naval flotilla presence near Syria. With so many overseas interests at stake, China is no longer strictly adhering to its non-interference stance.

Egypt

Henry Kissinger said in the Middle East, there could be no war without Egypt and no peace without Syria. Well aware of this, China is thus courting Egypt, the cultural center of the Arab world and a geostrategic pivot state controlling the Suez Canal and in close proximity to the Horn of Africa, to further project its influence in the Middle East and Africa.

Sino-Egypt ties date back to the first meeting between Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during the 1955 inaugural NAM meeting in Bandung, Indonesia. China courted Egypt because it was the most populous Arab country, a center of gravity in the Arab world, and as such backed Egypt's aspirations to assume a role in representing Africa and the Middle East alongside the five UNSC members.⁶⁴ Egypt is also a leading advocate

of greater Sino-Arab cooperation under the auspices of the Arab League as well as enhancing ties between China and the Africa Union.⁶⁵ China also has vast investments in Egypt's hydrocarbon industry, as well as construction, telecommunications, and agriculture. Beijing has pursued agreements that enhance China's direct access to Egyptian port facilities along the Suez Canal through Hong Kong's Hutchison Whampoa, Ltd, a firm with close ties to the PLA. It has also taken advantage of other economic opportunities in the Suez Canal Zone, further consolidating its "proto-maritime colonialism" stance in controlling and securing influence around the strategic trade and communications choke points across the globe.⁶⁶

China and Egypt have also expanded military cooperation. Significantly, in June 2002, a PLAN fleet representing the North China Sea Fleet crossed the Suez Canal and docked in the port city of Alexandria during its first around-the-world voyage.⁶⁷ In 2005, China's PLA front company, National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation (CATIC), also partnered with Egypt's A.O.I. Aircraft to jointly produce K-8E flight trainers,⁶⁸ thus bringing both countries' defense industries and militaries into a closer relationship. According to a study by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, from 1989-2008, China sold more weapons to Egypt than Sudan and Zimbabwe (its traditional clients) combined, making Egypt China's biggest weapons market in Africa.⁶⁹ The study also observed that U.S. military assistance to Egypt freed up cash for Egypt's government to then purchase additional Chinese arms. Some analysts are worried that the increased Chinese presence in Egypt, coupled with a Mursi government less loyal to the United States, would give China access to American military technology.⁷⁰

By courting Egypt, China has enhanced its regional influence and has gained a better position to check U.S. power in a region of vital strategic significance. It is projecting into the part of the world that was a traditional U.S. sphere of influence, just as it perceives the United States as encroaching on its sphere

of influence and core interests in the Western Pacific and Central Asia. Likewise, Egypt is seeking to diversify away from its dependence on the United States for military and economic assistance. Mursi hedged his bets by making China its first visit outside of the Middle East, ahead of the United States. As Saed Lawendy, political expert with the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies said to Xinhua, "The president believes the economy is the fuel oil that moves the international political truck forward, for that reason he headed to China which is the second powerful economy in the world [*sic*]."⁷¹

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES IN NEAR FUTURE

As U.S. influence begins to wane in the Middle East and pivots, or "rebalances," toward the Asia Pacific, China is seizing a strategic window of opportunity to fill the growing vacuum and attempting to shape a post-Arab Spring region that is more hospitable for China's power projection capabilities. A rising power with expanding interests, China will become more proactive in the Middle East and North Africa. Beijing also needs continued market access both for extraction of strategic mineral resources as well as export markets to fuel its ever-expanding war chest. As such, the Chinese navy has now entered "NATO Lake" of the Mediterranean Sea to protect its interests. This is an example of an area outside of the Asia Pacific where there is a risk of a potential military clash between the United States and China. In fact, China's naval ambitions and aircraft carrier even fuelled fear in Great Britain; in the aftermath of Chinese naval vessels having sailed to the Mediterranean to help evacuate its 36,000 citizens in Libya, a *Daily Mail* article was entitled "After Beijing sends a frigate to the Med, a leading author poses a chilling question...how long until a Chinese aircraft carrier sails up the Thames?"⁷²

An Expanding Definition of China's Core Interests

Despite its economic rise, China is not liberalizing. As John Lee from the Hudson Institute argues, the West holds a seductive belief that authoritarian China will be increasingly integrated into a liberal order and will emerge as a defender of such order. However, China is moving in the opposite direction of what a “responsible stakeholder” in a liberal order ought to be doing.⁷³ Rather, it is wishing to supplant the U.S.-led post-war liberal world order of the “Washington Consensus” with its own “Beijing Consensus,” based on authoritarian rule for economic development.⁷⁴ Beijing has its own definition and rule of the international game. It also has its own historic narrative of payback time as it emerges from its “Century of Humiliation,” which dictates their current behavior. Already, the South China Sea is witnessing an emboldened China.

In July 2012, China's State Council approved the establishment of a new national prefecture on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands, which is disputed territory between Vietnam and China. China's Central Military Commission announced that it would deploy a garrison of soldiers to guard the Paracel Islands, announced a new policy of “regular combat-readiness patrols” in the South China Sea, and began offering oil exploration rights in locations recognized by the international community as within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.⁷⁵ Although China established a new military garrison and unilaterally annexed a disputed area, America's reaction has been muted. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, Senator James Webb (D-VA) observed that China's economic power and its assertive use of its navy and commercial vessels to project influence has changed the dynamics in East Asia. He criticized, “In truth,

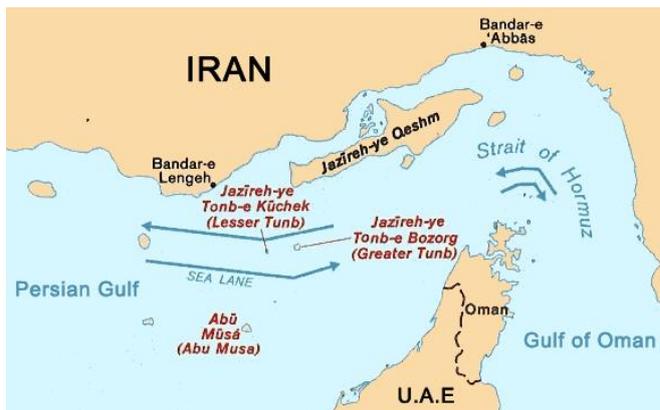
American vacillations have for years emboldened China.”⁷⁶ He added that East Asian allies were “waiting to see whether America will live up to its uncomfortable, but necessary, role as the true guarantor of stability in East Asia, or whether the region will again be dominated by belligerence and intimidation.”

Indeed, allies in the Middle East are watching as well. The muted U.S. responses to China's clashes with Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines in the Western Pacific and U.S. inaction toward North Korea's sinking of South Korea's naval vessel *Cheonan* in 2010, have negative implications for the credibility of the U.S. security umbrella.

Israel and Gulf Allies Watching U.S. Strategy in East Asia, East Asian Allies Watching U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

In light of the 2010 North Korean menace in East Asia, Israel and the Gulf allies were watching the U.S. reaction to an ally under attack, as they faced their own Iranian menace in West Asia. Emile El-Hokayem, political editor of *The National* (UAE) and senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), stated at a July 2010 Wilson Center conference that the Gulf states had their own Taiwan issue. The UAE has disputes over three islands with Iran (see Map 9), and Hokayem said the Gulf States looked at Taiwan as a litmus test for a U.S. security guarantee.⁷⁷ He observed that the Gulf States saw that North Korea sank the *Cheonan* and the United States did nothing. He questioned whether the U.S. would protect its Gulf allies if they would get involved in a situation in which Iran sank a vessel. Hokayem said that how the United States treats its East Asian allies has direct relevance for the Gulf States.

Map 9: UAE-Iran Dispute over Three Islands



Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection

It is also relevant for Israel, as the Israeli press kept a close watch on events unfolding on the Korean Peninsula, since Iran emulates North Korea's playbook. "Why a brazen N. Korea is Israel's concern," "As Iran watches Korea," and "S. Korea, N. Korea, Israel and Iran" are samples of press titles at the time.⁷⁸ Now, Middle East and East Asian allies are once again watching the U.S. reaction to China's actions in the South China Sea, as well as Iran's belligerence against Israel and Gulf allies in the Middle East.

Credibility of U.S. Security Guarantee and Allied Reassurance

The credibility of the U.S. security guarantee is at a critical crossroads. The U.S. course of action will have long-lasting ramifications for regional security both in the Middle East and in East Asia. If United States fails to reassure its allies, there will be a loss of confidence in U.S. security umbrella. This in turn will lead to an arms race and increased nuclear proliferation that threatens to destabilize both regions.

Israel is a litmus test of U.S. credibility as a dependable ally, as allies from both Asia and the Middle East watch. U.S. behavior in the Arab Spring in helping to oust Mubarak is already viewed as a betrayal and abandonment of a steadfast ally. East Asian allies are also losing confidence in view of the muted U.S. responses to North Korea's menace as well as China's actions in the region. Both regions

are at a nuclear tipping point that will decide to abandon the U.S. security umbrella and embark on a cascade of nuclear proliferation, or retain confidence in the U.S. security guarantee and remain under its nuclear umbrella.

In a 2008 Congressional report entitled "Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East," the report concluded that if Iran became nuclear, Egypt, Turkey and especially Saudi Arabia would likely go nuclear.⁷⁹ Egypt until now had two means of deterrence from the nuclear weapons path: (1) the peace treaty with Israel; and (2) a security partnership with the United States. However, given the new Muslim Brotherhood leadership that threatens to dissolve the peace treaty and security partnership, Egypt may embark on this path. In 2006, members of the Brotherhood advocated a nuclear weapons program. Its spokesman Dr. Hamdi Hassan said that Egyptians "are ready to starve" to obtain a nuclear weapons.⁸⁰ Likewise, Turkey under the Islamist AKP leadership is considering Chinese bids to build nuclear reactors, due to its ability to secure financing without requiring guarantees from the Turkish government.⁸¹ As for Saudi Arabia, it lacks confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella. In the 1980s, it secretly procured 50 to 60 CSS-2 missiles from China that could fit nuclear warheads, in addition to financing Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Former U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Chas Freeman, disclosed that Saudi officials warned him if

Iran obtained nuclear weapons, the Saudis would be compelled to acquire their own deterrent stockpile.⁸²

In face of China's actions in the Western Pacific and the inability of the international community to prevent a nuclear North Korea, the risk for an East Asian regional crossover of the nuclear tipping point is much higher. Three U.S. allies have a prior history of clandestine nuclear weapons programs (e.g., Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). In a 2007 CSIS study, the strength of the security alliance was found to be the overriding factor in a state's choice to seek nuclear weapons.⁸³ In the case of Taiwan and South Korea, the perception of the decreasing U.S. security commitment has led to a corresponding pursuit of clandestine nuclear programs.⁸⁴ In the case of Japan, it considered and rejected the nuclear options four times due to confidence in the U.S. security guarantee: (1) the 1960s due to the 1964 Chinese nuclear test; (2) mid-1970s due to debate on ratifying the NPT; (3) mid-1990s debate on indefinite extension of NPT; and (4) North Korea nuclear crisis when it conducted nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009.⁸⁵

However, under the Obama administration, the credibility of the U.S. security guarantee has been eroding. The muted U.S. responses in face of Chinese actions, a nuclear North Korea's threats to East Asia allies, a nuclearizing Iran's threats towards Israel and Gulf allies, is no longer assuring U.S. allies. As war drums beat in the Middle East, both friends and foes alike are watching--China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, the Gulf, and East Asian allies. Whether the United States chooses to stand with Israel or to let Israel stand alone, will warn others of the credibility of the United States as a guarantor of security and its preponderant power. As Senator Webb penned in the *Wall Street Journal*, allies are watching to see if the United States will step up to the plate and defend its status as a security guarantor in face of aggression, or will it finally relinquish this title and cede it to the Middle Kingdom to confirm its Sino-centric place in the world.

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