

**The Waking Giant and the Arab Spring: China's Middle East strategy in the
wake of the Arab revolutions**

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to study the impact of the Arab Spring on China's strategic position in the Middle East, and to analyze how this movement will shape Chinese policy in the Middle East in the future. The paper employs a qualitative analysis of the subject based on three cases that present different aspects of the Arab Spring and China's interactions with it: the revolutions in Libya and Syria, and the manifestations (and lack thereof) of the Arab Spring in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates). This paper found that the Arab Spring exposed two main weaknesses of Chinese policy in the Middle East: its lack of capacity for power projection, and its lack of concrete alliances. However, the relative stability of the Gulf and the potential for a weaker American presence in the Middle East present China with opportunities to expand its role in the region in ways that will facilitate its economic interests, while China's early reactions to the Arab Spring suggest that it may be attempting to take advantage of these opportunities. These findings hold significance not only regarding China's future in the Middle East, but also regarding Chinese foreign policy in general, as they represent a shift from China's traditionally economically focused, non-interventionist strategy to a more active presence on the international stage.

The events of the Arab Spring have had and will continue to have a significant impact not only on the Arab World and the Middle East, but on the geopolitical stage as well. Much has been made of the United States' role in the Arab Spring and how these events will shape the future of the US in the region. But another power has also played an important role in the Arab Spring and its political fallout, and has felt their effects on its position in the Middle East: China.

With a significant stake in the countries of the Arab Spring, China had much to lose, but also much to gain. The Arab Spring revealed some critical weaknesses in China's foreign policy in the Middle East, but also offered some opportunities for expanded Chinese influence in the region. However, protecting its position in the region and taking advantage of its opportunities there will require a major reorientation of China's foreign policy.

In this paper, I will examine how the events of the Arab Spring—specifically, the revolution in Libya, the crisis in Syria, and the relative stability of the Gulf—have impacted China's strategic position in the Middle East. I will look at the direct effects of the Arab Spring as well as China's reactions to it in order to analyze the overall impact of the revolutions on Chinese foreign policy in the region, as well as to make predictions regarding China's future role there.

Literature Review

In order to understand and anticipate China's actions in the Middle East, it is essential to first understand the historical and ideological basis of Chinese foreign

policy. One of the most widely used models for understanding Chinese foreign policy is the “five principles of peaceful coexistence.” First enumerated in 1954 as part of a treaty agreement between China and India, they set forth the following values and guidelines for international relations: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.¹

William Tow writes that “China anticipates the emergence of a ‘new world order’” based on these principles,² and indeed, Chinese foreign policy has often reflected these values. Reflecting the first and third principles, China has consistently opposed potential international interventions brought to the UN, such as in Kosovo, Rwanda, Iraq, North Korea, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar, on the grounds of respect for national sovereignty.³ In addition to representing two of China's major principles of foreign policy, China's concern for national sovereignty is based on a fear of allowing a precedent that could be used against itself in the future.⁴ China has often faced international criticism for human rights violations and for the treatment of its own minority populations, and it worries that an international order that permits interference in states' domestic affairs based on these complaints could one day set its sights on China.

¹ Andrew J. Nathan, "Principles of China's Foreign Policy," (Columbia University).

² William T. Tow, "China and the International Strategic System," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, 115-157 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132.

³ Christopher J. Holland, "Chinese Attitudes to International Law: China, the Security Council, Sovereignty, and Intervention," *Journal of International Law and Politics*, July 2012.

⁴ Peter Ferdinand, "Economic and Diplomatic Interactions between the EU and China," in *Richard L. Grant*, 26-41 (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1995), 35.

Another important theme in Chinese foreign policy, one which echoes the fourth principle of “mutual benefit,” is its singular economic focus. Aire Kork asserts that, “[s]ince the 1980s, the underlying goal of China’s foreign policy has been to bolster its economic growth, economic integration, and economic cooperation.”⁵ George Friedman identifies international trade as one of China’s three main strategic interests.⁶ To this end, China can be seen to have focused on foreign investment and development, spending billions of dollars in FDI and development projects in the developing world, with a particular focus on Africa.⁷

Like its promotion of non-intervention internationally, China’s preoccupation with its economic interests abroad has roots in its domestic needs. Of particular economic concern for China is its dependence on imported oil. With Chinese demand for oil growing at about 10% per year, and domestic supply currently meeting half of that and growing at roughly one tenth of that rate, China is becoming increasingly dependent on imported oil to fuel its growing population and economy.⁸ As Willy Lam notes, “economic concerns, and in particular the search for reliable supplies of petroleum and other resources deemed indispensable to China’s economic takeoff, have assumed more and more significance in Beijing’s world

⁵ Aire Kork “Aire Kork, “China’s energy security: the impact on China’s foreign policy and the international order,” (National Chengchi University) July 2009.5

⁶ George Friedman, “George Friedman, “The State of the World: Assessing China’s Strategy,” *Stratfor Global Intelligence: Geopolitical Weekly*, March 6, 2012.

⁷ Thomas Lum, Hannah Fischer, Julissa Gomez-Granger and Anne Leland, “China’s Foreign Aid Activities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia,” *Congressional Research Service*, February 2009, 10.

⁸ People’s Daily, “China’s oil production ranks 4th in world, only meets half domestic demand,” February 9, 2010.”

outlook.”⁹ To this end, much of China’s investment and development is focused on building infrastructure in oil-producing countries such as Angola, Ethiopia, and Sudan, which in turn sell much of their oil to China.¹⁰ China also uses its development programs in Africa to secure access to minerals such as copper, zinc, and aluminum to supplement its abundant but low-grade domestic supply.¹¹ In addition, China, as a manufacturing powerhouse, relies on foreign markets to sell its goods.¹² Thus, its development interests in the third world also benefit China’s economy by opening new markets for Chinese exports.¹³

Steven Mosher also notes the importance Chinese foreign policy places on international trade, but depicts it as a desire by the regime to amass wealth in order to further its own domestic interests. Deng Xiaoping once said, “to get rich is glorious”; Mosher appends, “to strengthen the state is divine,” noting the importance Mao’s China placed on building wealth through trade in order to strengthen the state and increase its capability for domestic control.¹⁴ In addition, the domestic employment maintained by the steady production of goods for export is important to the stability of China’s internal economy, thus furthering the importance of

⁹ Willy Lam, "Beijing's New "balanced" Foreign Policy: An Assessment," *Jamestown Foundation* 4, no. 4 (February 2004).

¹⁰ Lum, 10

¹¹ John C. K. Daly, "Feeding the Dragon: China's Quest for African Minerals," *Jamestown Foundation* 8, no. 3 (February 2008).

¹² Friedman

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stephen W. Mosher, *Hegemon: China's Plan to Dominate Asia and the World* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), 65.

international trade in maintaining domestic security.¹⁵ For China, international economic relations play a vital role in domestic security.

The value China places on economic benefit in its international relationships goes hand in hand with the principles of “mutual non-aggression” and “peaceful coexistence.” Stephen Hadley describes one major school of Chinese foreign policy thought, which he depicts as focused primarily on China’s economic growth.¹⁶ The same school, he says, seeks to avoid international conflict that could distract from economic growth, and views the US and China not as “competing rivals in a zero-sum game” but as potentially mutually beneficial partners.¹⁷ In the same vein, Lam notes Deng Xiaoping’s advice that China should “keep a low profile and never take the lead” in global affairs.¹⁸

Kork also notes the link between economic interests and keeping a low international profile, describing how China, after opening up economically to the rest of the world, actively cooperated with international and regional economic institutions but remained less engaged in international security issues, which would have required “compromise on the issues of sovereignty or non-intervention.”¹⁹ China’s desire for economically beneficial relationships abroad seems to be a primary driver of its distaste for international confrontation.

Alternatively, Chinese foreign policy has also been depicted as more confrontational and expansionist. Hadley describes a second school in Chinese

¹⁵ Friedman

¹⁶ Stephen J. Hadley, “China, the US and the Rise of Asia,” *Global Asia*, June 2012.

¹⁷ Hadley

¹⁸ Lam

¹⁹ Kork, 5

political thought that emphasizes China's growing strength and importance on the international stage and believes that now is the time for China to assert its international interests more confidently.²⁰ Mosher portrays China, particularly under Mao, as aggressively expansive, pointing to numerous land grabs and border disputes, such as the annexation of Tibet and the Sino-Indian War.²¹ Friedman describes the importance of maintaining control over "buffer states" such as Tibet and Xinjiang to Chinese security policy.²² Recent examples of this trend can be seen in China's increasingly territorial stance towards the South China Sea,²³ as well as the projection of naval power into the Indian Ocean aimed at containing India, China's greatest regional rival.²⁴

These instances of a more expansionist policy have a regional focus. China has shown much interest in expanding its sphere of influence in Asia and in developing itself as a regional hegemon, often for the purpose of buffering itself against other threats. It has not, however, displayed global hegemonic ambitions, or a desire to exert hard power far beyond its own backyard. Chinese expansion of power and influence has so far been regional in scope.

Overall, four basic themes emerge about Chinese foreign policy: China values state sovereignty and opposes international interventionism; economic interests are primary; China does not view international relations as a zero-sum game and hence

²⁰ Hadley

²¹ Mosher, 58

²² Friedman

²³ Joshua Kurlantzick, "China lacks focus in the Arab world, missing a mutual opportunity," *The National*, April 1, 2011.

²⁴ Harsh V. Pant, "China's Naval Expansion in the Indian Ocean and India-China Rivalry," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, no. 17 (May 2012).

does not desire confrontation with the US; and China's hegemonic ambitions are predominantly regional. These themes will help to understand the motives behind China's actions in the Middle East since the Arab Spring.

Though existing scholarship on the geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring, particularly regarding China, is relatively limited, some common themes have emerged in this field. Many writers, such as Ambassador Chas Freeman, have predicted that the Arab Spring will bring about a "major reduction in the ability of outsiders—notably, the United States—to shape trends and events" in the Middle East.²⁵ Allen Keiswetter writes that "the Arab Spring has shown the limits of American power" in the region.²⁶ Lee Smith depicts the Arab Spring as a catalyst for an American decline that has been building since the 9/11 attacks, arguing that President Obama's response to the uprisings yielded power to anti-American elements within the Middle East.²⁷

With this notion of American decline, many scholars also touch on the idea that China, because of its economic power, is poised to supplant the US as the dominant foreign power in the Middle East. F. Michael Maloof asserts that China has been quietly attempting to expand its influence in the Middle East, and the Arab Spring has provided it opportunities to do so.²⁸ Keiswetter predicts that China will have "a larger role" in the Middle East after the Arab Spring as the US no longer

²⁵ Chas Freeman, "The Arab Reawakening and Its Strategic Implications," *Middle East Policy Council*, March 2011.

²⁶ Allen L. Keiswetter, "The Arab Spring: Implications for US Policy and Interests," *Middle East Institute*, January 2012.

²⁷ Lee Smith, "Weakening Washington's Middle East Influence: Middle Eastern Upheavals," *The Middle East Quarterly* XVIII, no. 3 (Summer 2011).

²⁸ F. Michael Maloof, "China, Egypt pursuing Middle East influence," *World Net Daily*, September 8, 2012.

dominates Mideast politics, though China's role will be limited by its hesitation to take on a military role in the region.²⁹ He also depicts Chinese regional influence as mainly based in its economic power,³⁰ a reflection of the common theme that China's economic growth will fuel its ascendance as a superpower. On this note, Arvind Subramanian has called China an "inevitable superpower,"³¹ and argues that China will one day dominate the world stage because of its economic strength.³²

Some scholars portray this predicted shift of power from the US to China as potentially confrontational. Maloof asserts that China's attempt to increase its influence in the Middle East is a failsafe policy, meant to "cultivate these countries for more energy resources and allies should its relations with the U.S. sour."³³ Richard Javad Heydarian describes China as "the main challenger to the superpower status of the United States," and characterizes its forging of stronger ties in the Middle East as a means of "challenging US-Israel regional dominance."³⁴ For Heydarian, China's budding Middle East relations are intended to undermine US influence. Stephen Walt holds that "[i]f China is like all previous great powers—including the United States—its definition of 'vital' interests will grow as its power increases—and it will try to use its growing muscle to protect an expanding sphere

²⁹ Keiswetter

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Arvind Subramanian, "The Inevitable Superpower: Why China's Dominance Is a Sure Thing," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2012.

³² Arvind Subramanian, "Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance," *Foreign Affairs*, March 2012.

³³ Maloof

³⁴ Richard Javad Heydarian, "China, US jostle in Middle East," *Asia Times*, May 2012.

of influence,” bringing it into confrontation with the US.³⁵ Unlike Heydarian, Walt recognizes that China may not be actively seeking confrontation, but argues that it will be drawn into it in order to protect its interests.

There is some disconnect between what is known about the principles of Chinese foreign policy and predictions that China will confront the US in a challenge for influence in the Middle East. While it is true that China’s expanding economic interests in the Middle East will likely draw it into a more involved role in the region, China’s hegemonic ambitions are limited to its own region, while its opposition to intervention and its view of international relations as a positive-sum game should lead it to avoid confrontation with the United States. China is not necessarily, as Stephen Walt suggests, “like all previous great powers.”³⁶ Chinese influence in the Middle East will likely expand, but will take on a unique Chinese character, rather than mirroring, or challenging the US role in the region.

Existing scholarship on China’s post-Arab Spring role in the Middle East analyzes China’s actions and motives through a realist model that is not customized for China’s particular strategic character, assuming that China desires the same role in the Middle East that the US holds. In addition, scholarship in this field is limited by the novelty of the topic, and few research projects have been undertaken which examine the impact of the Arab Spring on China’s position across the Middle East. This paper will analyze China’s role in three major areas of the Arab Spring (Libya,

³⁵ Stephen Walt, "The End of the American Era," *The National Interest*, October 26, 2011.

³⁶ Ibid.

Syria, and the Gulf) based on the principles and trends of Chinese foreign policy in general in order to assess China's future role in the region.

China in the Middle East prior to the Arab Spring

China's most prominent ties to the Middle East are economic. China has a substantial amount of trade with countries throughout the Middle East, and many of its diplomatic relationships are based on trade ties. The value of Chinese imports from the Middle East/North Africa region reached \$98,674.41 million in 2012, accounting for 7.1% of China's total imports.³⁷ The states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates) exported \$56,363.72 million worth of goods, or 4% of China's total imports, while imports from Iran amounted to less than a third of those from the GCC.³⁸ In the same year, Chinese exports to the Middle East and North Africa valued at \$75,999.09 million, almost 5% of China's total exports, and exports to the GCC accounted for almost half of those to the entire MENA region.³⁹ Again, exports to Iran amounted to less than a third of those to the Arab gulf. Though not as important as an export market as it is as a source of imports, the Middle East accounts for a significant amount of Chinese international trade. Within the Middle East, the states of the GCC clearly dominate trade with China.

³⁷ International Monetary Fund, "Direction of Trade Statistics: China, PR: Mainland," *IMF e-Library Data*, 2011, <http://elibrary-data.imf.org.proxyau.wrlc.org/FindDataReports.aspx?d=33060&e=161868>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Energy is the cornerstone of Sino-Middle Eastern economic relations. Saudi Arabia is China's largest crude oil provider, supplying 5.7 million barrels in 2010, or 20.5% of China's total crude imports.⁴⁰ Over 46% of China's crude oil imports come from the Middle East, with 11.4% coming from Iran, China's third largest crude oil supplier in 2010.⁴¹ As a percentage of total oil imports, China relies more on the Middle East for crude oil than does the US, whose top three Mideast oil suppliers amount to only 18.2% of its total oil imports.⁴²

Of China's top eleven oil sources, six were Arab countries; seven were in the Middle East.⁴³ China makes up 19% of the export market for oil-exporting Middle East countries and 7% of the market for oil-exporting North African countries.⁴⁴ Middle Eastern countries, especially those of the Arab World, dominate the Chinese oil trade. Furthermore, Chinese oil consumption grew an average of 7% per year from 2005 to 2010, outpacing domestic oil production, which grew at only 2.5% per year over the same period.⁴⁵ As China's economy continues to grow, so will its

⁴⁰ Daniel Workman, "China's Top Suppliers of Imported Crude Oil by Country," *World Trade Imports and Exports*, March 4, 2011, <http://suite101.com/article/chinas-top-suppliers-of-imported-crude-oil-by-country-in-2010-a355760>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ FACTS Global Energy, "China's oil imports in 2010, by source country (in 1,000 barrels per day)," *Statista*, 2012, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/221765/chinese-oil-imports-by-country/>.

⁴⁴ Panorama 2012, *The oil and gas producing countries of North Africa and the Middle East*, (IFP Energies Nouvelles, 2012).

⁴⁵ United States Energy Information Administration, *China Crude Oil Consumption by Year*, 2010, <http://www.indexmundi.com/energy.aspx?country=cn&product=oil&graph=consumption>.

demand for fuel, and China will become increasingly dependent on foreign oil, particularly from the Middle East.

But Sino-Middle Eastern trade goes beyond oil. China also receives a variety of manufactured products from the Middle East, including chemical products such as fertilizers and plastics.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, China exported over \$33 billion in light industrial, technological, and consumer goods to the region in 2006,⁴⁷ and Chinese exports, such as building materials, clothing, and electronics,⁴⁸ constitute 37% of total imports into Dubai, which serves as a major trading hub between China and the Middle East.⁴⁹ While oil dominates Sino-Middle Eastern trade relationships, other kinds of trade have become increasingly important.

In addition, China is a major source of foreign direct investment in the Middle East, with accumulated investment in the Arab World totaling \$15 billion in 2010.⁵⁰ Chinese investment focuses heavily on infrastructure projects. China has won contracts to build a broadband network and an expansion of the subway system in Iran, and a series of cement plants in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.⁵¹ The Middle East is also one of the fastest-growing sources of FDI in China. Saudi Aramco has

⁴⁶ Dr. J. Peter Pham, "China's Interests in the Middle East and North Africa in the Light of Recent Developments in those Regions," Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on "China's Current and Emerging Foreign Policy Priorities," (Atlantic Council), April 2011, 4

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ United Business Media, "The largest Greater China-products exhibition in the Middle East -- the China Sourcing Fair in Dubai -- grows 18%," *PR Newswire*, June 8, 2010.

⁴⁹ Pham, 5

⁵⁰ Wang Hui, "Cementing Ties with the Arab World," *China Daily*, January 14, 2012.

⁵¹ Borzou Daraghi, "China Goes Beyond Oil in Forging Ties to Persian Gulf," *New York Times*, January 13, 2005.

invested significantly in developing Chinese oil refining capability, building and expanding refineries within China.⁵²

China's diplomatic ties with the Middle East are heavily entwined with its economic interests. In furtherance of its economic interests in the Middle East, China has developed generally positive ties throughout the region. Particularly in the GCC states, its diplomacy is often characterized by initiatives to expand bilateral trade, such as an energy cooperation deal signed in 2006 with Saudi Arabia that led to increased Sino-Saudi cooperation on oil refining,⁵³ a pledge in 2008 between the Chinese Vice Premier and the Kuwaiti Prime Minister to expand economic cooperation, particularly in the fields of energy, infrastructure, and technology,⁵⁴ an agreement in 2010 to strengthen energy and financial cooperation with Qatar,⁵⁵ as well as similar agreements in Oman,⁵⁶ Bahrain,⁵⁷ and the United Arab Emirates.⁵⁸ However, the increasing unity of the GCC has forced China to begin to address the Gulf states as an organization. In 2010, the trading partners launched the first GCC-

⁵² Henry Meyer, "China and Saudi Arabia Form Stronger Trade Ties," *New York Times*, April 20, 2010.

⁵³ Summer Said, "Saudi Arabia, China Sign Nuclear Cooperation Pact," *Wall Street Journal*, January 16, 2012.

⁵⁴ *Xinhua News*, "China, Kuwait pledge to step up economic, energy cooperation," December 30, 2008.

⁵⁵ *China Daily*, "China, Qatar ink MoU on energy, financial co-op," May 13, 2010.

⁵⁶ An Lu, *China, Oman to sign MOUs on investment, human resources*, November 6, 2010, http://www.gov.cn/misc/2010-11/06/content_1739535.htm.

⁵⁷ Chris Zambelis, "China builds up role in Gulf," *Asia Times*, September 29, 2010.

⁵⁸ Anil Bhoyrul, "UAE, China to ink defence pact," *Arabian Business*, April 1, 2008.

China Business Forum⁵⁹ and held their first strategic dialogue to discuss energy cooperation and other issues of mutual interest.⁶⁰

In addition to its productive relationships in the Gulf, China also boasts relatively close ties with Iran. China has consistently opposed international efforts to sanction Iran over its nuclear program,⁶¹ and has strengthened its energy and infrastructure cooperation with Iran. China also maintains positive ties with Israel, from whom it buys advanced military technologies,⁶² despite repeatedly condemning Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories, recognizing Hamas as a legitimate government and meeting with its officials, and recognizing the Palestinian territories as the "State of Palestine."⁶³

One interesting characteristic of Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East is its unique ability to maintain positive relations across blocs, claiming positive ties with both the Iran-Syria bloc and rival Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as with both Israel and Hamas. China's Middle East policy is also characterized by its emphasis on breadth rather than depth. Though China maintains positive relations throughout the Middle East, it has few deep alliances. China has no basing agreements with countries in the Arab world, and China and its Middle East partners have conducted no joint military exercises, nor have they

⁵⁹ Zambelis, "China builds up role"

⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Press Communiqué of the First Ministerial Meeting of the Strategic Dialogue Between the People's Republic of China and The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf*, June 4, 2010.

⁶¹ Alan Cowell, "China Renews Opposition to Iran Sanctions," *New York Times*, February 4, 2010.

⁶² Bruce W. Nelan, "Israel's Secret Weapon," *Time Magazine*, July 21, 2008.

⁶³ *The Jamestown Foundation*, "China's Palestine Policy," March 4, 2009.

signed any cooperative security agreements or significant treaties.⁶⁴ And despite its strong economic ties in the region, China has signed no bilateral free trade agreements in the Middle East.⁶⁵ China's growing interests and investments in the Middle East have not been accompanied by deep diplomatic ties.

Overall, China's main interest in the Middle East is the maintenance of beneficial trade ties. Most of its diplomatic efforts are directed towards this objective, many focusing on energy. Concerned mainly with economics, China has so far not demonstrated a desire for a significant security presence or political role in the Middle East. However, China's dependence on the Middle East for trade, and more specifically for oil, also makes it dependent on the Middle East's shipping lanes. The need to keep the Middle East's volatile shipping lanes, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden, secure gives China a major interest in regional security and political developments. Thus, China's economic interests in the region will draw it into political and security issues, whether it wants to be involved in them or not.

Case Studies

I will examine the interaction between Chinese foreign policy and the Arab Spring in three key countries or areas: Libya, Syria, and the GCC states. I have chosen these three cases because they all reveal different aspects of China's policy

⁶⁴ The Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, *Bilateral Treaties and Agreements*, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/tyfls/tyfl/2631/>.

⁶⁵ World Trade Organization, *Bilateral and Regional Trade Agreements Notified to the WTO*, 2011, <http://www.worldtradelaw.net/fta/ftadatabase/ftas.asp>.

and position in the region, and because they all present different challenges and opportunities for China's future role in the Middle East. The revolution in Libya had a significant economic impact on China and showed a critical weakness in China's position in the region. In Syria, China has had substantial influence on the course of the revolution itself, and, in turn, the revolution may have far-reaching consequences for China in the Middle East. And the Gulf, whose relative stability stands in contrast to the countries of the Arab Spring, offers China new opportunities for its projecting influence in the Middle East.

Libya

Prior to the Libyan revolution, Libya was a significant trade partner of China's, though not one of its largest trade partners in the region. Bilateral trade between the two nations totaled \$6.6 billion bilateral trade in 2010, the majority of which consisted of Libyan exports to China.⁶⁶ Libya was also a significant recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment, and in 2010, Chinese non-financial investment in Libya reached \$59 billion, much of which was invested in developing oil resources.⁶⁷ In 2010, Libya exported 11% of its oil to China, making China its second-largest buyer after France.⁶⁸ Libyan oil accounted for only 3.1% of China's total oil imports.⁶⁹ However, this was up 98% from the previous year; had it not

⁶⁶ International Monetary Fund

⁶⁷ *China counting financial losses in Libya*, March 4, 2011, http://www.china.org.cn/business/2011-03/04/content_22051058.htm.

⁶⁸ David Anderson, "The Fight for Libya's Oil," *Politics Inspires*, September 15, 2011.

⁶⁹ Workman

been for the Libyan revolution, Libya might have continued to grow substantially as an oil source for China.⁷⁰

In addition to imports and exports, at the time of the Libyan revolution, a number of Chinese firms operated in Libya. As of 2010, Chinese firms, some of them state-owned, held contracts in Libya worth more than \$18 billion, including many in the oil sector.⁷¹ Overall, roughly 75 Chinese companies were operating in Libya in 2010, employing roughly 35,000 Chinese nationals.⁷²

Because of their trade relationship and China's investments in Libya, China maintained diplomatic ties with the Gaddafi government and cooperated on development projects.⁷³ However, despite their mutually beneficial economic ties, diplomatic relations were sometimes strained. During the 2009 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Libya's foreign minister lambasted China's dealings with Africa, accusing it of undermining African countries' role in the forum by refusing to recognize the African Union as a representative of African nations.⁷⁴ He also accused China of betraying African interests on the international stage by not pushing for an African seat in the United Nations Security Council.⁷⁵ The foreign minister called for greater political engagement on China's part, arguing that "cooperation must include politics" and cannot be limited to economic

⁷⁰ Workman

⁷¹ Anderson

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, *Economic and Trade Cooperation*, 2004, <http://www.focac.org/eng/zfgx/jmhz/t619559.htm>.

⁷⁴ Yitzhak Shichor, "Libya Cautions China: Economics Is No Substitute to Politics," *The Jamestown Foundation*, December 2009.

⁷⁵ Shichor

engagement.⁷⁶ As with much of the Middle East, China's primary ties to Libya were economic, while the two countries' political relations were underdeveloped and rocky.

With the beginning of unrest in Libya, Chinese investments in the country came under attack. In February 2011, Libyan protestors attacked a Chinese construction site outside Tripoli, injuring several Chinese workers and forcing thousands to flee the area.⁷⁷ Days later, the China National Petroleum Corporation reported that its facilities in Libya had been attacked and that its employees were being evacuated.⁷⁸ In early March 2011, in response to these threats, China undertook a massive evacuation of more than 35,000 of its citizens in Libya.⁷⁹ Some were evacuated overland into Sudan, but most were evacuated by sea, with China diverting its Xuzhou missile frigate from its anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden to facilitate the operation.⁸⁰ Because of the unrest in Libya, dozens of China's firms in Libya were forced to abandon contracted ventures valued at billions of dollars, with no timeline for their return to the country.⁸¹

While China was evacuating its citizens from Libya, the international community was debating what measures to take regarding the revolution and Gaddafi's harsh crackdown. China originally opposed the proposed no-fly zone in

⁷⁶ Shichor

⁷⁷ *New American Media*, "Chinese Workers Attacked, Stranded in Libya," February 23, 2011.

⁷⁸ *Sulekha*, "China oil company says Libyan facilities attacked," February 22, 2011.

⁷⁹ *Xinhua News*, "35,860 Chinese evacuated from unrest-torn Libya," March 3, 2011.

⁸⁰ Adam Rawnsley, "Chinese Missile Ship Races to Libya," *Wired*, February 25, 2011.

⁸¹ Zhang Yixuan, "Official: No timetable for Chinese firms' return to Libya," *People's Daily*, February 20, 2011.

Libya, calling instead for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis⁸² and insisting that Libya's sovereignty must be respected.⁸³ In addition to reflecting China's traditional opposition to international intervention in internal conflicts, this stance also reflected China's desire to prevent further destabilization in Libya, where it still held considerable assets. However, China's opposition to international intervention earned it no good will with the Libyan rebels.

On March 14, 2011, days before the UN Security Council vote on the no-fly zone, Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) chairman Mustafa Abdel Jalil warned, "countries that fail to support the uprising they will be denied access to Libya's vast oil riches if the regime is deposed."⁸⁴ This threat left China in a difficult conundrum: it could not support a measure that could further destabilize a country in which it held significant investments, but it also could not risk retaliation from the rebels against China's economic interests if they succeeded. On March 17th, China abstained from the vote on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized a no-fly zone over Libya.⁸⁵

China's abstention failed to appease Libya's revolutionary leaders; in August 2011, an official at a Libyan rebel-run oil firm again warned that China would lose its oil contracts in Libya if it failed to back the rebellion.⁸⁶ However, beyond participating in UN votes on the issue, China was by that time limited in what

⁸² *Mail & Guardian*, "China voices misgivings about Libya 'no-fly' zone plan," March 1, 2011.

⁸³ *Reuters*, "China cool to Libya no-fly zone proposal," March 8, 2011.

⁸⁴ Andy Rowell, "Libyan Rebels Threaten to Deny Oil to Dithering Nations," *Oil Change International*, March 14, 2011.

⁸⁵ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, March 17, 2011.

⁸⁶ Michael Martina and Chris Buckley, "China urges Libya to protect investments," *Reuters*, August 23, 2011.

support it could actually offer the rebels. Unlike the rebellion's western backers, China could not offer military or air support; China had demonstrated its lack of military capacity in the region months prior, when it was forced to divert its only available ship in the area to assist in the evacuation of its citizens. Even if China had been inclined to join NATO in supporting the Libyan revolution, it would have lacked the capability to contribute significantly.

The Libyan revolution has led to a significant drop in Chinese economic ties with Libya. Bilateral trade between the two nations dropped by more than 50% from 2010 to 2011, after growing by over 40% from 2009 to 2010.⁸⁷ Though the NTC eventually affirmed that it would uphold the previous government's agreements and legal contracts, there is still no timetable for the return of Chinese firms, due to instability and unresolved issues of compensation for damages.⁸⁸

Overall, Libya is representative of a broader weakness in China's foreign policy in the Middle East. Throughout the Middle East, China has significant trade relationships and a considerable amount of investment and contracts; yet, this growing economic presence has not been accompanied by a corresponding military or political presence in the region. China has a lot invested in the region, but it lacks the capacity to protect these investments in the event of regional unrest. Nor does China possess the political clout to back up its calls for "diplomatic solutions" in such situations. When revolution erupted in Libya, China found itself helpless to prevent escalation of the conflict or to work the situation to its political advantage, instead scrambling to evacuate its citizens and failing to appease the rebels. The

⁸⁷ International Monetary Fund

⁸⁸ Yixuan

example of Libya shows that China's growing economic presence in the Middle East will be unsustainable in the face of regional unrest unless China builds a greater capacity for power projection, either hard or soft, in the region. China can no longer afford to invest so much in a region where it influences so little. It is possible that China's strategy is to simply invest so broadly that unrest in one country, such as Libya, does not drastically disrupt its economy. However, there are other areas of the Middle East, such as the Persian Gulf, in which China is invested enough that unrest there would disrupt a significant amount of its foreign trade and endanger its access to resources. China does have interests in the Middle East that are worth protecting, and it must develop the capacity to do so.

Syria

Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Syria was not a significant trading partner or ally of China. In fact, Syria's political importance to China has been declining since weapons sales, its original tie to Syria,⁸⁹ have become a less significant part of China's growing economy, while Syria's economic importance is dwarfed by China's other Middle East trading partners.

Syria is not a significant economic partner of China's. In 2010, the volume of bilateral trade between the two nations was only \$2.48 billion,⁹⁰ compared to over

⁸⁹ Chris Zambelis, "China tests its mettle in Syria," *Asia Times*, November 6, 2008.

⁹⁰ International Monetary Fund

\$40 billion between China and Saudi Arabia⁹¹ and over \$90 billion with the entire GCC in the same year.⁹² China does not have significant economic ties with Syria compared to its other Middle East trading partners.

However, trade between the two countries is extremely asymmetrical: while Syria does not rank among China's top trade partners, China was Syria's second biggest import partner in 2010, making Sino-Syrian trade significantly more important to Syria than to China.⁹³ Additionally, Syrian exports to China, consisting mostly of communications and electronic equipment and heavy machinery,⁹⁴ account for very little of bilateral trade; 98% of Sino-Syrian trade is made up of Chinese exports to Syria,⁹⁵ and China has been accused of dumping cheap goods such as textiles on Syrian markets, to the detriment of the Syrian economy.⁹⁶ The trade relationship between Syria and China is largely one-sided, and is potentially exploitative on China's part. Additionally, Syria does not rank among China's top thirty oil suppliers,⁹⁷ nor is China a major buyer of Syrian oil, over 90% of which was sold to European countries in 2010.⁹⁸ Both in oil and in non-oil sectors, trade

⁹¹ *Saudi Gazette*, "Saudi Arabia, China to boost trade volume 50% in 5 years," January 12, 2010.

⁹² International Monetary Fund

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Joel Wuthnow, "Why China Would Intervene in Syria," *The National Interest*, July 16, 2012.

⁹⁵ International Monetary Fund

⁹⁶ *Al Jazeera*, "To: Translate Human Translation The consequences of the financial crisis on Syria," March 30, 2009.

⁹⁷ Workman

⁹⁸ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Over 90% of Syrian crude oil exports go to European countries*, September 16, 2011, <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=3110>.

with Syria represents a small percentage of China's trade with the Middle East, particularly when compared with the Gulf.

Yet, despite Syria's lack of economic significance to China, China has played a key role in the Syrian crisis. Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, China, along with Russia, has stymied international attempts to intervene in the situation, vetoing a UN resolution that would have threatened Syria with sanctions in October 2011,⁹⁹ blocking a resolution backing an Arab plan to pressure Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down in February 2012,¹⁰⁰ and vetoing another resolution that would have imposed sanctions in July 2012.¹⁰¹ China has consistently opposed international intervention in the crisis that could lead to the ouster of al-Assad, calling instead for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis. In November of 2012, China unveiled its own peace plan for Syria, which called for a process in which the UN would mediate between the warring parties and provide humanitarian assistance, but the continuity of the existing government system would be maintained.¹⁰² The plan was vague on the role that al-Assad would play, but did not call for him to step down.¹⁰³

The reasons for China's support for the Assad regime are not obvious. Syria is worth less to China as an economic ally than many other states in the region, and the two do not have a significantly closer diplomatic relationship than China does with

⁹⁹ *Al Jazeera*, "China and Russia veto UN sanctions on Syria," October 15, 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Chris Buckley, "China defends Syria veto, doubts West's intentions," *Reuters*, February 6, 2012.

¹⁰¹ Rick Gladstone, "Friction at the U.N. as Russia and China Veto Another Resolution on Syria Sanctions," *New York Times*, July 12, 2012.

¹⁰² Priyanka Boghani, "Syria peace plans: China vs. United Nations," *Global Post*, November 1, 2012.

¹⁰³ Boghani

other Arab states. China does not have the same strategic stake in Syria as Russia, whose naval base at Tartus in Syria is its only one on the Mediterranean or outside of the former Soviet Union.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, looking forward, Syria is not an obvious choice for Chinese basing or power projection, as China has stronger allies in the Gulf and has been focusing its naval projection in the Indian Ocean¹⁰⁵ and the Gulf of Aden.¹⁰⁶

Because Syria itself is not critically important to China, the veto must be about something larger. It is possible that China opposes intervention in Syria because of the potential for it to escalate regional tensions and cause regional instability. However, if China's interest were merely in preventing international intervention, it could have abstained from the votes and allowed Russia to block the resolutions by itself. The fact that China vetoed the Syria resolutions when it did not need to, and when doing so earned it sharp criticism from the international community and its other Arab partners, suggests that the act of vetoing meant as much as, or more than, its practical outcome. China's veto was a message.

This leaves several possibilities for the audience of China's veto message. The veto could be a show of solidarity with Russia, who has much more obvious interests in Syria, at a time when many see China and Russia growing¹⁰⁷ closer.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Christopher Harmer, "Backgrounder: Russian Naval Base Tartus," *Institute for the Study of War*, July 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Farhan Bokhari and Kathrin Hille, "Pakistan turns to China for naval base," *Financial Times*, May 22, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Greg Torode and Minnie Chan, "P.L.A. navy keen to do more in Mideast," *South China Morning Post*, November 5, 2011.

¹⁰⁷ *CBC News*, "Russia-China military links growing closer," June 6, 2012.

¹⁰⁸ *Xinhua News*, "Experts expect closer China-Russia ties as Putin regains presidency," May 7, 2012.

Alternatively, the audience could be the international community, with China's veto an example of China's traditional anti-interventionist principles, an explanation that fits with China's history in the Security Council. There is also the possibility that this message of non-interventionism was directed not only at the international community, but at China's own citizens, who took to the streets in a series of protests called the "Jasmine Revolution" in early 2011.¹⁰⁹ Taking a strong stand against international intervention in Syria, China sent a message not only to the world, but also to its own people, that it would not tolerate foreign meddling on behalf of anti-government protestors.

Time will tell if China's insistent vetoing is a wise choice. Though this decision may allow it to curry Russian favor, and send an important message of non-intervention both domestically and abroad, it may also cost it diplomatic capital with Arab allies. China's vetoes of the Syria resolutions have faced sharp criticism from Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, who called China's actions in the Security Council "absolutely regrettable," and warned, "[n]o matter how powerful, countries cannot rule the whole world."¹¹⁰ Though China's Syria decision is unlikely to impact its trade ties in the region, as the GCC states are growing more resolute¹¹¹ in their support for the Syrian revolution,¹¹² Syria may drive a rift between China and the Arab Gulf, hurting its chances of establishing deeper political alliances there in the

¹⁰⁹ James Fallows, "Arab Spring, Chinese Winter," *The Atlantic*, September 2011.

¹¹⁰ Rick Gladstone, "In Rare, Blunt Speech, Saudi King Criticizes Syria Vetoes," *New York Times*, February 10, 2012.

¹¹¹ *Gulf News*, "GCC recognises new Syria opposition bloc," November 12, 2012.

¹¹² *Reuters*, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar funding Syrian rebels," June 23, 2012.

future. China's support for the Syrian regime may ultimately make enhancing its political relations in other, more important, areas of the Middle East more difficult.

The Gulf Cooperation Council

The Gulf Cooperation Council is a political and economic union of the Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates). Its members are all oil-producing monarchies bordering the Persian Gulf, similarities which give them common economic, political, and security objectives. In recent years, these states have come to play a significant role in China's foreign trade, and these economic ties have been accompanied by increasingly developed diplomatic relations between China and the states of the GCC.

In 2010, China's trade with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council reached over \$92 billion, 3 percent of China's total trade.¹¹³ The Gulf is more important to China as a source of imports than as a market for goods, accounting for four percent of China's imports but only two percent of its exports.¹¹⁴ Trade with Saudi Arabia accounted for almost half of China's total Gulf trade in 2010 at roughly \$42 billion, and the kingdom was China's eighth largest import partner.¹¹⁵ Trade with Saudi Arabia was followed by the United Arab Emirates at over \$25 billion, then Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.¹¹⁶ Overall, the Gulf is an important region for Chinese trade, with Saudi Arabia its largest trading partner in the region.

¹¹³ International Monetary Fund

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Much of Sino-GCC trade is made up of oil exports to China. Saudi Arabia is China's largest crude oil provider, supplying 884,353 barrels per day in 2010,¹¹⁷ putting it at 20.5% of China's total crude imports.¹¹⁸ In the same year, Kuwait supplied China with roughly 201,000 barrels per day, which surged in 2011 to 302,000,¹¹⁹ while the UAE upped its oil supply to China to 200,000 barrels per day in 2011.¹²⁰ In comparison, Iran supplied China with roughly 540,000 barrels per day in 2011, making it a larger source than most Arab Gulf countries individually, but less than half as significant as the entire GCC combined.¹²¹ The Gulf is a crucial source of oil for China, giving China an interest in political and security issues in the region, particularly in the security of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

Luckily for China, the states of the GCC, some of its most important economic partners and oil sources in the Middle East and the world, remained relatively untouched by the Arab Spring. Overall, the Gulf has been able to spend its way out of any unrest, though in some cases Gulf governments have also harshly quelled political dissent. Saudi Arabia saw limited protests, particularly by women and its Shiite minority. However, protests in the Shiite province of Qatif were quickly

¹¹⁷ The 13th China International Petroleum & Petrochemical Technology & Equipment Exhibition, *Saudi's Oil Exports to China Soar*, December 26, 2011, <http://www.cippe.com.cn/2013/en/News/IndustrialNews/113.html>.

¹¹⁸ Workman

¹¹⁹ Daniel Canty, "Kuwait's oil exports to China surge 50.2 percent," *Arabian Oil and Gas*, November 24, 2011.

¹²⁰ April Yee, "Abu Dhabi agrees to supply China with 200,000 barrels of oil a day," *The National*, July 15, 2011.

¹²¹ Aizhu Chen and Judy Hua, "Iran-China oil trade runs smoothly - Beijing sources," *Reuters*, July 25, 2011.

repressed,¹²² while the government staved off further unrest with limited reforms on women's issues¹²³ and a \$130 billion economic stimulus plan.¹²⁴

The United Arab Emirates was insulated from the Arab Spring by its wealth and its large non-citizen population (less than 20% of the country's population are citizens),¹²⁵ and did not experience any unrest during the Arab Spring. Like much of the Arab World, the Emirates saw web activists calling for protests, but the most prominent of these activists, called the "UAE 5," were promptly arrested and imprisoned, and their efforts did not garner enough popular support to spark a movement in the country.¹²⁶ Wealth also shielded the government of Qatar, whose citizens are the richest in the world and pay no taxes, from any unrest,¹²⁷ while fellow oil-rich rentier state Oman quickly appeased its protestors with a spending package similar to the one introduced in Saudi Arabia that included salary increases, job creation, and unemployment benefits.¹²⁸

Kuwait and Bahrain have experienced more unrest than their Gulf neighbors, but it has been slower building than the uprisings of other Arab Spring countries and the two governments remain stable. Both countries have experienced ongoing protests over both economic issues and lack of political representation. However,

¹²² *BBC World*, "Saudi Arabia accused of repression after Arab Spring," December 1, 2011.

¹²³ Jeffrey Fleishman, "Saudi Arabia to allow women to vote," *LA Times*, September 25, 2011.

¹²⁴ Donna Abu-Nasr, "Saudis Skip Arab Spring as Nation Pours Money Into Jobs," *Bloomberg*, April 2, 2012.

¹²⁵ "The World Factbook: United Arab Emirates," The Central Intelligence Agency (2012).

¹²⁶ Abu-Nasr

¹²⁷ *CBS News*, "Qatar: A tiny country asserts powerful influence," July 1, 2012.

¹²⁸ Salman Aldossary, "How did the Sultanate escape the "Arab Spring"?," *Alsharq Alawsat*, July 11, 2011.

though anti-regime activity in Bahrain has recently become more violent, both regimes have maintained control.¹²⁹

China has taken advantage of the Gulf countries' relative stability to strengthen its trade ties with the region. At a time when Chinese trade with Arab Spring-wracked Libya and Syria declined, China has bolstered trade with the Arab Gulf with a series of meetings, both bilateral and with the GCC itself.¹³⁰ In October 2011, Kuwaiti and Chinese officials held talks in Beijing to discuss increasing bilateral trade.¹³¹ China held similar talks with Kuwait later that year,¹³² and met with Qatari officials to plan further cooperation in infrastructure, technology, and oil.¹³³ In September 2012, China and the Emirates launched the Sino-UAE Forum for Investment and Trade to promote bilateral economic cooperation in various sectors, and in October China participated in the first Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) forum with both Asian and Gulf countries, at which it discussed increasing economic ties with Gulf nations and endorsed Kuwait's \$2 billion development plan for Asia.¹³⁴ In the same year, with special dispensation from the Chinese government, Qatar became the largest foreign investor in Chinese capital markets,¹³⁵ and Saudi

¹²⁹ *Gulf News*, "Bahrain bombs mark escalation in tensions," November 6, 2012.

¹³⁰ International Monetary Fund

¹³¹ *Kuwait Times*, "Kuwait, China discuss boosting trade relations," October 18, 2011.

¹³² *Diyar Al Muharraq*, "KFH-Bahrain hosts key Chinese trade delegation," December 27, 2011.

¹³³ *Oman Tribune*, "Oman-China trade touches \$6b in first half of 2011," September 12, 2011.

¹³⁴ *Arab Times*, "Kuwait, China pledge more economic cooperation," October 9, 2012.

¹³⁵ Chris Zambelis, "China and Qatar Forge a New Era of Relations around High Finance," *The Jamestown Foundation* 12, no. 20 (October 2012).

Arabia and China signed a nuclear cooperation agreement that outlined Chinese assistance for a Saudi nuclear energy program.¹³⁶

Growing Sino-GCC economic cooperation has been accompanied by deepening political ties between China and the Arab Gulf. In 2011, the Chinese foreign minister and the foreign ministers of the GCC held a strategic dialogue on international and regional political issues,¹³⁷ and in January 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao delivered a speech in Sharjah praising Sino-Arab relations and calling for deeper political and cultural cooperation between China and the countries of the GCC.¹³⁸ 2012 saw several meetings between China's foreign minister and GCC leaders¹³⁹ and ambassadors,¹⁴⁰ as well as a visit by Wen Jiabao to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE to discuss the Arab Spring.¹⁴¹ In addition, Chinese warships made several goodwill visits to Oman in 2011, replenishing at Port Sultan Qaboos, where Chinese officials pledged to enhance cooperation between the two countries and their navies.¹⁴² China's relations with the Gulf now go beyond the purely economic, as China seeks greater political and security ties in the region.

¹³⁶ Said

¹³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China and the GCC Hold the Second Round of Strategic Dialogue*, May 3, 2011, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t819926.htm>.

¹³⁸ Wen Jiabao, "Towards a Bright Future of China-Arab Cooperation" (Sharjah, January 18, 2012).

¹³⁹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United States of America, *Yang Jiechi Meets with Delegates of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Member States*, September 26, 2012, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t975574.htm>.

¹⁴⁰ *Gulf Today*, "UAE, GCC ambassadors meet in China," October 20, 2012.

¹⁴¹ *Al Arabiya*, "China to discuss Arab Spring in a historic visit to three Gulf countries," January 11, 2012.

¹⁴² *People's Daily*, "Chinese warships visit Oman for goodwill visit," December 5, 2011.

The GCC's relative calm throughout the Arab Spring, and China's developing relations there, present a number of opportunities for the future of Chinese foreign policy in the region. During the Arab Spring, the Gulf countries have undertaken expensive development projects throughout the Middle East, including a \$5 billion aid program for Jordan and Morocco,¹⁴³ in order to help other Arab countries stave off unrest in much the same way as the Gulf has.¹⁴⁴ In addition, the GCC initiated the negotiated agreement in which Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down.¹⁴⁵ As protests and political change sweep the region, the GCC has tried to play a stabilizing role by preventing regime change and easing transitions, and the Gulf's interest in and ability to provide stability will make it a valuable regional ally for China. The countries of the GCC wield some influence over political events in the Middle East, exactly the kind of influence China needs to cultivate if it is to secure its growing investments in the region. While China currently lacks the ability to promote stability directly in Middle Eastern countries in which it is invested, as demonstrated by its role in Libya, greater cooperation with the countries of the GCC could allow it to make use of the Gulf's wealth and political standing to protect its own interests in the region.

The Gulf also offers China a chance to engage in more direct power projection in the Middle East. China has declared an interest in establishing basing capabilities

¹⁴³ *Reuters*, "Gulf states approve \$5 billion aid to Morocco, Jordan," December 20, 2011.

¹⁴⁴ *Knowledge @ Wharton Today*, "To Stave Off Arab Spring Revolts, Saudi Arabia and Fellow Gulf Countries Spend \$150 Billion," September 21, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Ali Bluwi and Abdul Hannantago, "GCC initiative can turn Yemen around," *Arab News*, May 25, 2012.

near the Gulf of Aden,¹⁴⁶ and its developing naval ties with Oman suggest the sultanate as a possible basing location for China, conveniently located near both the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. A base in Oman would allow China to project naval power in the Middle East, giving it a more direct ability to protect its interests when they are threatened, such as in Libya, but also giving it the ability to deter such threats to its investments.

However, there are some obstacles for China in taking advantage of these opportunities. One obstacle is China's own policy towards Syria, which has garnered criticism throughout the Middle East but particularly in the Gulf. China's multiple vetoes of foreign intervention in Syria have drawn sharp criticism from Saudi King Abdullah, and Kuwait¹⁴⁷ and Qatar have criticized more generally the Security Council's failure to act in Syria.¹⁴⁸ And, despite participating in talks with China on the issue of Syria, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister blamed the vetoes for allowing the Assad regime's "brutality" to continue.¹⁴⁹ China's stance on Syria has also soured public opinion towards China in the Arab Gulf, with various Saudi groups and newspapers calling for a boycott of Chinese goods and demonstrators burning Chinese flags at China's embassies in protest.¹⁵⁰ Despite China's strong trade ties in the region, its stance on Syria may alienate Gulf governments and make developing

¹⁴⁶ *Agence France Presse*, "China mulling naval base in Gulf of Aden: admiral," December 29, 2009.

¹⁴⁷ *Kuwait News Agency*, "Kuwait criticizes international community for ongoing bloodshed in Syria," September 17, 2012.

¹⁴⁸ *The Skanner*, "VIDEO: Hundreds Dead in Syria After Failed Ceasefire," October 30, 2012.

¹⁴⁹ *Al Ahram*, "GCC chief meets Chinese envoy on Syria," March 11, 2012.

¹⁵⁰ James M. Dorsey, "Arabs Boycott Adidas As Public Displeasure Shifts From The West To China – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, April 6, 2012.

deeper diplomatic or security ties more difficult. China may not be able to maintain its policy towards Syria while strengthening political ties with the Gulf.

The Gulf also presents another challenge to China's foreign policy. Much of the GCC's stability, as well as its ability to promote stability elsewhere, comes from its strength and unity as an international organization, and the GCC has taken recent steps towards developing a closer union,¹⁵¹ including approving plans for a shared currency and customs,¹⁵² and pledging greater security cooperation.¹⁵³ China has traditionally displayed an aversion to working with multilateral organizations,¹⁵⁴ refusing to recognize the African Union as a representative for its member states and generally preferring to develop bilateral relations.¹⁵⁵ Even when China does engage the GCC, Chinese statements on these interactions emphasize bilateral relations rather than relations with the GCC framework.¹⁵⁶ As the GCC unifies further, China will be forced to work with it as an organization, rather than with its component states. This shift may also make developing deeper ties in the Gulf more difficult, as smaller states such as Oman that would welcome closer security cooperation with China may be dominated by the more US-aligned Saudi Arabia, which holds significantly more power within the GCC. Making full use of the opportunities presented by the Gulf will be a difficult task for China, and will require

¹⁵¹ *Al Jazeera*, "Gulf leaders to discuss 'GCC Union' ," May 14, 2012.

¹⁵² *Gulf Daily News*, "Unified currency plan is approved ," November 8, 2012.

¹⁵³ Maher Abbas, "GCC union sought for security, prosperity," *Saudi Gazette*, April 29, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Helen Lansdowne and Gouguang Wu, *China Turns to Multilateralism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. i.

¹⁵⁵ Shichor

¹⁵⁶ Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United States of America, *Yang Jiechi Meets with Delegates of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Member States*

some reevaluation of its established policy in the Middle East and its foreign policy principles more generally.

Analysis

Overall, China's experience during the Arab Spring has offered it several foreign policy lessons. First, the events of the Arab Spring, particularly in Libya, showed that the surge in Chinese economic cooperation and investment in the Middle East has not been accompanied by an increase in Chinese ability to influence political events in the region, as China still lacks any solid alliances in the Middle East and does not have the ability to project military power in the region. China has little capability to prevent unrest in countries in which it holds significant investments, leaving its economic interests in the region vulnerable in cases of unrest. This may prove to be a critical weakness, as much of China's foreign policy is based on its many foreign investments.

To some extent, China seems to have recognized this limitation, as it has been cultivating closer diplomatic ties in the relatively stable Gulf and seeking a greater naval presence in the Middle East. In addition to its growing naval footprint and possible future basing in the Gulf of Aden, where it conducts anti-piracy operations, it is also expanding its naval operations in the Indian Ocean, and in 2011 helped build a naval base at Pakistan's Port Gwadar that, while technically a Pakistani base, is operated by a Chinese firm¹⁵⁷ and allows Chinese warships permanent basing

¹⁵⁷ *The Nation*, "Pakistan in talks to hand Gwadar Port to China," September 1, 2011.

rights.¹⁵⁸ Basing in Pakistan serves as part of China's strategy of containing India, its regional rival, but also positions the Chinese navy close to the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. With a new foothold in the Middle East, and years of experience gained from its ongoing anti-piracy deployments in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, China is poised to expand its naval presence in the Middle East.

However, despite some signs that China is pursuing closer diplomatic ties with the Gulf, China still seems unwilling to break from its strategy of breadth, rather than depth, of relations. By trying to maintain its relations with Iran and its support for the Syrian regime, China may be undermining its attempts to forge deeper ties in the Arab Gulf. In addition to souring Arab public opinion on China, China's stances on Iran and Syria reveal that both its values and its interests in the region diverge sharply from those of the GCC. These differences on key issues make a future diplomatic or strategic partnership between China and the GCC unlikely.

Additionally, the current trajectory of the GCC will leave China less and less room for its diverse relations in the Middle East. As the GCC forms a more unified bloc, an effort spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, it will likely become dominated by the more geopolitically and economically powerful Saudi Arabia.¹⁵⁹ While smaller states such as Oman¹⁶⁰ and the Emirates still seem willing to maintain some ties with Iran, they are already being pressured by the Saudis to distance themselves from the GCC's regional rival, and in a closer Gulf union would be even less likely to "act out"

¹⁵⁸ Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "Naval base at Gwadar a potential game changer," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, May 23, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ David Roberts, "Gulf disunion," *Foreign Policy*, May 2, 2012.

¹⁶⁰ *Xinhua*, "Iran, Oman commanders meet on military cooperation," May 12, 2012.

by softening on Iran.¹⁶¹ If the Gulf Union materializes and smaller nations are forced to toe the line on Iran, the Iran and the GCC bloc will become further polarized, leaving China little room to maintain strong ties with both.

To ensure the security of its investments in the Middle East, China needs the ability not only for greater military power projection, but also for political influence in the region, and in order to gain this influence, China may eventually be forced to make a choice between blocs in the Middle East. Currently, the GCC seems a better choice for an ally. The Syrian regime is weakened, and even if it does not fall, its utility as an ally is limited—it is not a major economic partner or oil source for China, its use as a strategic basing location has already been claimed by Russia, and backing it only hurts China's image in the Arab world. While Iran is a more politically stable and economically important ally, its importance as a trading partner and as an oil supplier still pales in comparison to that of the GCC as a whole, and partnership with Iran also hurts China's image. The GCC, on the other hand, remains stable and an important economic partner for China, and enjoys considerable political influence throughout the Arab World. China may be preparing to distance itself from Iran as it draws closer to the GCC, having reduced its imports of Iranian crude oil by one fifth in 2012.¹⁶² This may be the first step in a more focused Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East.

China's experience in the Arab Spring also exposed vulnerability at home. Protests across the Arab world were paralleled by the "Jasmine Revolution" in China, a brief series of anti-government protests that were quickly quelled by

¹⁶¹ *Reuters*, "Dubai fueled by cheap Iran oil as U.S. ups pressure," October 18, 2012.

¹⁶² *Wall Street Journal*, "China's Iran Oil Imports Drop Further," November 21, 2012.

Chinese security forces.¹⁶³ These protests brought international attention to political dissent and minority unrest within China, which may have fueled China's steadfast opposition to international intervention in Syria by playing into China's fear of setting a precedent for intervention that could later be used against it. However, China's stance on Syria has proven detrimental to its image in the Arab world and may stymie its diplomacy in the region in the future. Additionally, China's preoccupation with nonintervention may be unwarranted, as China's immense wealth, ownership of US debt, and position on the Security Council make international intervention on behalf of China's own minority populations or political dissidents unlikely. The Arab Spring has shown that some of China's key foreign policy principles—its emphasis on breadth rather than depth, its opposition to intervention in all cases—may be damaging its position in the Middle East, and China may have to abandon or modify these principles in order to strengthen its diplomatic relations in the Middle East and protect its investments there.

The Future of Chinese Foreign Policy in the Middle East

China's interests in the Middle East suggest that it will need more of a presence in the region in the future, and China's recent activity in the Middle East suggests that it is realigning its policies towards this end. However, despite growing Chinese interest and presence in the Middle East, China will not replace the United States as the dominant foreign power in the Middle East; the history and principles

¹⁶³ Fallows

of its foreign policy suggest that this is not its goal. China will, instead, broaden its political and military presence in the Middle East to one of offshore balancing, in which it uses alliances with some states in the region (most likely the states of the GCC) to check the activities of others and maintains a naval capacity in the region but no ground presence. A Chinese strategy of offshore balancing, however, would likely be characterized by more of an economic focus, with China's regional allies using economic cooperation and soft power, rather than force, to manage events in the region. Such a strategy would afford China greater control over regional affairs without entangling it militarily in the region, facilitating the true goal of its foreign policy: trade.

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