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## China and the Arab Awakening\*

China's active involvement in the MENA region is a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, perhaps it is the speed at which China has emerged as an important external actor in the region from a relatively peripheral position that explains at least some of the concern about what this might mean for existing powers. That China is not only competing with others (including major western powers) economically in the region, but also takes a (relatively) firm stance on non-infringement of sovereignty probably explains the rest of the concern. Within the region itself, however, China's emergence has been largely welcomed. Lacking the historical baggage of previous colonial powers and not promoting a preferred normative basis for international relations and/or domestic economic and political governance, China's presence in the region seems to have been largely welcomed – not least as a counterweight to American power and an antidote to a militarily backed superpower presence. China has even managed to develop extensive ties with Israel, particularly in the latter's provision of military hardware and equipment to the former, without losing its image as being essentially pro-Palestinian.

The Arab Awakening might not have derailed Chinese policy, but it has resulted in some important changes in both thinking and strategy. Immediately, and most clearly, this was more to do with domestic Chinese politics than politics within the region itself, and concerns about potential spillovers of discontent into China. Over the longer term, crises within the region have highlighted potential tensions between the underlying principles that supposedly inform Chinese diplomatic positions and a more pragmatic approach that takes into account Chinese commercial interests overseas. It also perhaps suggests that while China clearly has interests in the region and is a regional actor, it seems primarily focused for the time being on its own Asian regional concerns than on extra-regional and/or global leadership.

### China, the Arab awakening and the historical context

Although originally a (rhetorical) supporter of anti-colonial movements in the post-WWII era, as China drifted away from the Soviet Union in the late 1950s it took a more passive role towards the

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### Abstract

China's veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council means that it is a key actor when it comes to considering external powers' responses to the Arab Awakening. Add to this significant and growing economic interests – most notably, but not only, as an oil importer – and China's desire to play a role in the region becomes clearer.

China's initial response was driven by concerns about a potential spill-over into unrest in China. But as this immediate challenge dissipated, the region became an arena where Chinese principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states not only came into conflict with the priorities of some Western powers, but were also mediated by more pragmatic material considerations from China itself.

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region. The main policy goal was to convince the number of regional states that retained diplomatic relations with Taiwan to change sides<sup>1</sup>, as well as developing (rather limited) economic ties.

The Middle East in particular began to develop a higher profile in Chinese foreign policy as the success of the economic reform process after 1978 gave economic considerations a new dimension. In retrospect what were rather modest oil imports from the region began in 1983, and since China became a net importer of oil in 1993 (and petroleum in 1996) energy relations have been an important driver of China's strategy towards the region. At that point, only Oman and Yemen were the key partners, accounting with Indonesia and Angola for about 70% of China's oil imports. By the time the China-Gulf Co-operation Council Forum was established in 2003, not only had the overall importance of the region increased, but the relative importance of regional states for China had shifted dramatically. Three quarters of China's oil imports coming from just six states – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Oman and Yemen from MENA plus Sudan (which is sometimes counted as part of the region but usually not) and Angola (which while not being part of MENA shows the importance of the broader region for China). Despite trying to diversify supplies since then, and the rise of Russia as a key supplier, the region alone (including Sudan) still accounted for around 55% of all imports in 2010.

There is, however, more to the relationship than just oil. The MENA has emerged as an important market for Chinese goods, and Chinese companies have become increasingly commonplace across the region. For example, when the situation deteriorated in Libya, over 30,000 Chinese citizens were evacuated (an issue we shall return to shortly). Through the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank, China has become a major provider of low interest development loans across the world, and MENA states have been important beneficiaries. These loans typically entail repayment via resources, or are built around Chinese companies undertaking the projects using Chinese sources materials where possible. But in addition to the financial benefits of accepting Chinese money (as opposed even to money from global institutions), Chinese financial aid come with no demand to implement good governance programmes or implement economic and/or political liberalisation (given that none of the region's states recognise Taiwan).

The region is also seen as ideationally important to China. It is one where officials believe that China can foster its identity as a «responsible but dissatisfied developing great power». Although China is not happy with the global distribution of power, nor some of the norms that underpin the current global order, it does not want to overthrow them through radical action (which could damage its own material interests), but instead seeks to reform them in its favour through reform from within the existing system that doesn't destabilise it<sup>2</sup>. It is also a region which is ideologically not tied to the western liberal ideologies and preferences. It's fair to say that religion and China do not always sit very comfortably together, and the transnational nature of Islam creates some nervousness given ongoing tensions between ethnic Chinese and Muslim minorities in China's northwest. Nevertheless, it is notable that most regional states often share with China a desire to do things their own way rather than simply confirming to (Western) democratic expectations.

The one major exception to this story of the largely peaceful evolution of relationships has been China's role in Sudan. As noted above, whether Sudan actually forms part of the sometimes rather vaguely defined MENA region or not is open to question. But irrespective of these definitions, China's support for the Sudanese regime, including in the arms trade, increasingly ran counter to the official African Union position in the second half of the 2000s and raised some concerns about China's global role in the region (however defined). But even here, concern about China in Sudan

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<sup>1</sup> Though only Saudi Arabia voted against the PRC taking the China seat from the nationalist regime on Taiwan at the UN in 1971. Even Israel which only recognized Beijing in 1992 abstained from the 1971 vote. The last regional state to switch recognition was Eritrea in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> S. BRESLIN, *China's Emerging Global Role: Dissatisfied Responsible Great Power*, in «Politics», vol. 30, suppl. 1, 2010, pp. 52-62.

in the African Union seems to have been offset by the tangible economic benefits that dealing with China can bring – including a brand new African Union headquarters building in Addis Ababa built for and paid by the Chinese government.

### China, the Arab awakening and the domestic political context

For some students of global politics, the question seems not so much to be *if* China will attain the status of global superpower, but *when*. Recent trends and trajectories are projected into the future to create a line that eventually crosses a declining line emanating from the US to leave China as the world's dominant power. Of course, not everybody takes the unavoidable decline of the US and China's inevitable rise for granted. And some of the most sceptical voices come from within China itself. In terms of linear economic growth, there is a rather widely held belief that the way in which growth has been achieved in the past is simply not sustainable (neither economically nor environmentally), and slower rates based more on domestic household consumption than investment and exports are the way forward in the long term.

Nor do China's leaders take their grip on political power for granted. Indeed, the party has produced some very alarmist analyses of the fragility of CCP rule. A report on the party's ruling capacity (*zhizheng nengli* 执政能力) in 2004 found that it was rather weak. It concluded that «constructing a clean and honest administration and fighting corruption are a matter of life and death for the party»<sup>3</sup>. Three years later, a major report that has become known in English as *Storming the Fortress*, the Central Party School called for “comprehensive political system reform plan” to be undertaken by 2020 to ensure that simmering societal tensions did not bubble over into anti-system political action.

These understandings were largely drawn from China's own experiences. Mass demonstrations have become a rather common phenomenon in China, as people often feel they have no other way of being heard by the system other than taking to the streets. These demonstrations remain overwhelmingly issue driven events (against the seizure of land, the corrupt and illicit actions of local officials and so on) rather than being against the system *per se*. They are examples of dots of disaffection, and the party knows it needs to ensure that the dots don't become joined up to turn local crisis into a systemic crisis. Nevertheless, there have been times when a wider loss of faith in the party's ability to govern have become questioned – perhaps most notably over the failure to effectively deal with the SARS outbreak in 2002.

But while primarily domestically driven, the political reform agenda – an agenda perhaps to date more spoken about than delivered – is also informed by what happens elsewhere. The 2004 report, for example, was partly inspired by Chinese studies of why ruling communist parties in other parts of the world had failed to hold on to power, and called for the party to «draw deep lessons from the experience of ruling parties across the world». And analysts of the party's legitimacy and standing were also aware of the way that demonstrations and revolutions in one place often inspired others to do the same elsewhere. This was not only the case in 1989 in Eastern Europe (perhaps in some way inspired by what had happened in China itself), but in the colour revolutions in the former Soviet Union in 2003-05.

And it's this context of domestic uncertainty that provided the impulse behind the immediate Chinese response to the Arab awakening. Despite domestic frailties, China's successful manoeuvring through the fallout of the financial crises in the west had generated increasing attention on the idea

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<sup>3</sup> Central Committee, 中共中央关于加强党的执政能力建设的决定 *Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Jiaqiang Dangde Zhizheng Nengli Jianshe de Jueding* (The Party Central Committee Decision on Strengthening Governing Capacity Construction), 2004, available at <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/2004/Sep/668376.htm>. As far as I am aware, this communiqué is not available in full form in English.

of a “China Model”<sup>4</sup>. Typically not clearly and coherently defined, this “model” was often simply a shorthand way of referring to a form of authoritarian state led economic development that might provide a better way of providing stability and growth than following the western “Washington consensus”. Whilst the idea of a China Model or a Beijing Consensus had been perhaps more popular outside of China than within it, the financial crisis helped to increase its popularity in China as well. But as one observer in Beijing told me, any confidence in the political side of the model (if not the economic one) was severely dented by what happened in the Arab world in the winter of 2010-11.

Much attention is rightly placed on the way that the CCP tries to maintain legitimacy through performance (providing material advances via economic growth) and ideology (the defenders of Chinese interests in an often hostile international order). A third perhaps less obvious source of legitimacy is discourses of stability – or more correctly, of instability. Providing stability might not sound like the most ambitious goal for a government – it really should be the bottom line of any government. But in the Chinese case, memories of periods of chaos and disorder in the twentieth century remain alive today (not least from the Cultural Revolution). Moreover, the potential for disorder is *kept* alive through a carefully constructed and disseminated official discourse of instability, with the party established as having the unique ability to prevent the slide into chaos:

The CPC’s leadership and rule is needed for making the statepower stable. China is a vast country with a large population. There are great disparities in terms of development between urban and rural areas, and between different regions. It is of unusual significance for China to have a stable state power. Only then can China concentrate on construction and development, and only then can the country’s development strategy and goal of modernization be pursued for a long time and through to the end<sup>5</sup>.

In keeping with this idea, the initial response to the Arab Spring was to point to the chaos and disorder that the uprisings were generating across the region. Not just political but also economic life was being disrupted by the wave of protests – not to mention loss of life on a huge scale. Reflecting on the uprisings two years on, a “cost-benefit analysis” in the People’s Daily questioned whether the “freedom” won was worth the “heavy casualties, economic losses, and humanitarian crisis” that accompanied the regime change (and implicitly questioned whether they really were freedoms by putting “自由” for freedom in inverted commas). The conclusion, not surprisingly, was that stability and change were essentially intertwined, with stability the basic starting point for reform; reform which would itself strengthen stability<sup>6</sup>.

The official media explicitly addressed the potential link between turmoil in the Middle East and protests in China by arguing forcefully that China was not the Middle East. The government in China was seen as the solution to problems rather than the fundamental cause of them, and actively implementing political and economic reforms to deal with dislocations that had arisen from an overwhelmingly successful period of state guided economic transformation. This included surviving a global financial crisis relatively intact. Linking the Arab spring to potential disorder in China was something that was being stirred up by people inside and outside China with “ulterior motives” (别有用心)<sup>7</sup>. To this end, they were aided by an article in «Time» that also pointed to Chinese gov-

<sup>4</sup> See S. BRESLIN, *The ‘China Model’ and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?*, in «International Affairs», vol. 87, no. 6, 2011, pp. 1323-1343.

<sup>5</sup> State Council, *White Paper: Building of Political Democracy in China*, (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council), 2005.

<sup>6</sup> 田文林 TIAN WENLIN, “阿拉伯之春”使民众付出巨大代价年 (*The Masses Pay a Massive Price for the Arab Spring*), in 人民日报海外版 People’s Daily Overseas Edition, 5 July 2012.

<sup>7</sup> 江上雨 JIANG SHANGYU, 中国不是中东 (*China is Not the Middle East*), in 人民日报海外版 People’s Daily Overseas Edition, 10 March 2011.

ernment performance as a key reason why revolution was unlikely in China<sup>8</sup> – though in citing this paper to give external credence and validation to the argument<sup>9</sup>, Chinese commentaries not surprisingly ignored the part of the «Time» article that referred to «the fact that Beijing has built one of the world's most comprehensive security apparatuses».

Within China itself, Internet based calls for organised protests resulted in demonstrations on 20 February in a number of cities. In Beijing at least, though, the largish crowds that gathered on 20 February seemed to be made up more of the security services, journalists and interested locals than it was of actual protestors. In an attempt to ensure that no cause was given for the security services to intervene, protestors were subsequently encouraged simply to gather in the same place and walk in silence. The Chinese authorities also instigated a crackdown on lawyers and activists along with controlling internet searches on sensitive terms to ensure that a Chinese “Jasmine Revolution” did not emerge as an echo of what was happening further west.

It is fair to say that popular protests in China did not end in the Spring of 2011. In the following September, the inhabitants of Wukan effectively overthrew the local leadership in a protest over the way that land was seized and sold without adequate compensation – a frequent source of protest in China. However, these subsequent protests look more like extreme examples of the type of issue based grievances noted above than concerted efforts to change the political system more fundamentally.

### **China, the Arab awakening and the geopolitical context**

Beyond the immediate response aimed primarily at dealing with domestic issues, China's response to the Arab Spring was not wholly negative by any stretch of the imagination. The key here is the way the Arab Spring feeds into wider concerns and discussions in China over the nature of global order, and the Liberal West's perceived aims to maintain its dominance over this order. Despite the above mentioned lack of total enthusiasm for Islamic regimes in China, that the Arab Spring has not simply seen the importation of Western forms of liberal democracy into the Middle East has been rather welcomed in China. Indeed, the very term, “Arab Spring” is seen as stemming from a rather arrogant Western assumption that just like in Eastern Europe, western style liberal democracy was the only viable alternative once the existing orders had been overthrown.

It is notable, for example, that the first international trip that Mohamed Morsi made outside the MENA region was to China in August 2012, rather than the US or Europe. As well as being highly politically symbolic, given the Egyptian opposition's arguments that Mubarek had been too close to the United States, the visit also reaffirmed China's continued role as a major economic actor in the Middle East.

But in geopolitical terms, arguably the most important issue for China is the way in which the right to protect has been utilised as a justification for external intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Building on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence associated with Zhou Enlai, sovereignty is often considered to be the bottom line in Chinese foreign policy – or a red line that Chinese policy makers won't cross. This includes allowing each country to develop its own political and economic systems and norms independently rather than have them imposed by external powers and actors. Here there is resonance with the idea of China as a different type of global actor that has been referred to throughout this paper – an actor that does not impose political conditionalities on aid or other economic relations with any country.

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<sup>8</sup> H. BEECH, *The China Syndrome*, in «Time», 7 March 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The People's Daily article was widely re-blogged and reported in other newspapers and websites – indeed a search on the title resulted in over a million hits. See <http://tinyurl.com/zgbzd>. There is also a separate English translation officially titled *China is Definitely Not Middle East*.

In reality, the absolute defence of sovereignty is much clearer in Chinese rhetoric than in reality. There is a lively and active debate over the nature of sovereignty (within academic circles at least) with much of it taking place under the banner of debating the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). This debate is closely linked to wider considerations of the role that China should play in global politics outlined above, with the idea that an increasingly powerful China should play a role in global politics commensurate with its power. Crucially, Chinese discussions over R2P all take place under the basic assumption that it is the UN and the UN alone that should have the authority to decide when and how the theoretical right to protect should be put into action. “Coalitions of the willing” or unilateral action by organisations like NATO simply have no legitimacy as far as China is concerned.

Indeed, although the term sovereignty (主权 *zhuquan*) is oft repeated, in reality it seems that it is regime change (政权更迭 *zhengquan gengdie*) that is the real bottom line. Or put another way, China is increasingly prepared to accept that there are grounds for infringing the sovereignty of other states or bending understandings of what sovereignty covers. But it is absolutely not prepared to support infringements of sovereignty that directly lead to regime change. Indeed, China abstained from UN resolution 1973 that established a no-fly zone over Libya. In many ways more astonishing, but less debated (to the point that people interviewed in Beijing didn't seem to know about it at all) China actually voted in favour of resolution 1970 which referred «the outrageous violence perpetrated by Muammar Gaddafi on the Libyan people» to the international criminal court. This was the first time that China had voted in favour of a resolution referring an issue to a court that it is not a member of and has been critical of in the past for overriding not just state sovereignty but the authority of global bodies like the UN<sup>10</sup>. Yet in February 2012, China did exercise its veto (along with Russia) to block a draft resolution calling for an end to violence in Syria and the implementation of an Arab League peace plan. We might think of five reasons that explain these two different positions. First, interviewees in Beijing typically referred to the nature of the conflicts, and repeated the concern that Syria could easily spin out of control and spillover into wider regional conflict that could bring in other states. In the worst case scenario, international intervention could bring Iran and Israel into a wider regional conflict. Thus, no matter how horrifying the events in Syria, it was simply too dangerous to try and respond with military escalation.

Second, a recurring theme in any attempt to discover the locus of foreign policy making in China is the institutional weakness of the Foreign Ministry. China's senior diplomat and formally leading foreign policy maker, Dai Bingguo, is not a member of the Politburo, which places him outside the top twenty five in the rank order of Chinese leaders. Even people close to the Foreign Ministry itself accept that it has limited influence with a sense of resignation rather than indignation. In the case of the Syria resolution, it appears that the inclination of the official foreign policy bureaucracy as manifest by the Chinese delegation in New York was not to veto the vote – but this was overridden by top leaders in Beijing. So it's important to consider the nature of Chinese interests in any specific case. For example, the suggestion that Chinese policy on Sudan was influenced by the major oil companies and their economic interests and policy, and the 30,000 plus Chinese nationals operating in Libya and significant economic interests played at least some role in shaping Chinese policy, was not contradicted. By contrast, China's economic interests in Syria were much less developed, allowing decisions to be made on what one scholar called “purely political” grounds of principle, rather than vested interest ones.

A related key question here is what happens to Chinese interests – either economic or diplomatic – if China ends up supporting the “wrong side”; defending authoritarian status-quo elites that are then replaced by new political orders. In the Libyan case, for example, the National Transitional Council

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<sup>10</sup> The official Foreign Ministry position can be found at FMPRC, “China and the International Criminal Court”, 2003 available at <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/tyfls/tyfl/2626/2627/t15473.htm>.

had originally suggested that it would not look favourably on countries that had supported the Gaddafi regime, before finally being recognised by Beijing in early September 2011 (the last of the P5 to do so). It is notable that despite its position on Syria at the UN, China invited a delegation of the opposition National Coordination Body for Democratic Change to a meeting in Beijing in September 2012 where it explained that it was not opposed to change in Syria *per se*, but only to change that was brought about by “outside forces”<sup>11</sup>.

Third, we should not forget that it is not just China that has vetoed resolutions against Syria. Russia not only has strong historic ties with Syria, but also has a naval port at Tartu that provides direct access to the Mediterranean. China's position on Syria, then, is also informed by relations with Russia, which is in turn influenced by a broader range of issues (such as Russian support, or otherwise, for Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea).

But the fourth and apparently most important is the consequences of what happened in Libya. Chinese decision makers might have been prepared to vote for what was essentially an infringement on Libyan sovereignty. They might also have been aware that this might lead to the overthrow of Gaddafi. But they were not voting for direct foreign intervention to bring about that regime change. There was thus a strong feeling that the West (and in particular France and Britain) had abused China's position to go further than the resolution actually mandated. As such, even though there was some support for once again abstaining over the Syria vote, it was a position that the top Chinese leadership and indeed many ordinary Chinese were not prepared to countenance.

### **Challenges and opportunities for China in/with the MENA region**

Chinese foreign policy in the post-Mao era is often described as being built around Deng Xiaoping's 韬光养晦 taoguang yanghui principle. Literally meaning «hide brightness, nourish obscurity», taoguang yanghui has become shorthand for the idea that China should try and keep a low profile in global affairs and not to proactively seek for clearly defined global goals. Many in China think that the time is right to abandon this approach and to become a more proactive global power; not only playing a role where Chinese interests are directly affected, but as a truly global power. Others are concerned that this might lead to coalitions designed to block China gaining its objectives, and points to the costs involved in taking on the responsibilities of global leadership – particularly when there are so many domestic problems still to be overcome.

And yet the MENA region could emerge – indeed, already has emerged – as a key testing ground for future Chinese policy. It is a region where China clearly does have extensive economic interests that influence geostrategic and diplomatic initiatives. For example, China's reluctance to support further sanctions on Iran is not just driven by the direct oil and nuclear connections between the two and the fact that Iran is China's second biggest regional trade partner. If you simply look at a map, consider where China gets its oil from, add to this the fact that most of the Saudi oil comes through the Gulf, and it's easy to see why what might happen in the Strait of Hormuz has a real significance for China (and also explains why China is developing Saudi's Red Sea refinery and transportation capacity). And in Syria and Iran, it is a region where principles of non-interference collide with consideration of R2P.

It is also a region where the dominance of the liberal democratic model is challenged. Existing non and even anti-western regimes are being joined by states like Egypt that seems to be balancing away from over-reliance on relations with the West. When authoritarian regimes fell in Eastern

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<sup>11</sup> FMPRC, “Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Meets with Syrian Opposition Group Delegation”, 17 September 2012, available at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t971517.htm>.

Europe (and before that, Portugal, Spain and Greece), there was simply an automatic assumption that the alternative would be some form of liberal democracy. That is no longer the case.

To be sure, China might prefer secular regimes to religious ones. Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan all share borders with China, and ethnic and religious based tensions (and at times conflict) in Xinjiang is often linked with cross border activity. There is thus likely to be some tension in China's approach to the region between allying with those who are anti-western on one side, and being wary of the (domestic) consequences of a growing Islamic "bloc" on the other. Finally, it is also a region that looks to China to play a greater role. This is most clearly the case when it comes to issues like Iran and Syria where China's P5 position gives it a specific role (and responsibility). And notably, many in the region (including the Arab League) are keener on some form of UN intervention to resolve the Syria crisis than China. Being suspicious of western liberalism, then, does not necessarily mean agreeing with Chinese principles and policies.

It is simply not in China's interests for tensions and conflict in the MENA region to continue – let alone escalate. Given different levels of contacts and relationships, it is probably with Iran, rather than Syria, that we can expect China to play the most significant role as an (often behind the scenes) promoter of restraint. Quite apart from some bilateral tensions between Chinese and Iranian oil companies, relations with Iran risk creating problems with other key partners, and both the US and China seemed keen to avoid falling into a bilateral economic dispute over Chinese oil imports from Iran. Whilst lower, profile, and notwithstanding China's support for Palestinian statehood, maintaining good relations with Israel is an important component of China's military modernisation process (which seems to be stepping up again after a period when the US managed to persuade Israel to cut back on arms sales).

The MENA region is one that pulls Chinese policy makers in different directions. Ideologically – perhaps more correctly, instinctively ideologically – it provides an opportunity for both challenging the dominance of the western liberal order, and establishing China as a truly global rising power. It also highlights the different actors that are now involved in the actual business of promoting China's international (economic) interactions on the ground. The Chinese approach to dealing with problems in the region seems to still be built around encouraging political solutions from within crisis states, and preventing outside (military) forces from intervening to bring about regime change. An important distinction, though, must be made between rejecting externally promoted and supported regime change, and the acceptance of (hopefully peaceful) change that emerges from the will and action of the domestic polity in individual countries. Fundamentally, however, it seems that China is not prepared to take a leading role in the region just yet. Indeed, with China keen to assert its territorial claims and defend what it sees as its "core interests" in the South and East China Seas, China's focus for the time being seems to be on resolving regional issues in its favour, rather than getting involved in issues beyond its immediate sphere of influence.

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