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China's Gulf Politics amid tensions: proactive diplomacy for stability

On January 19-23, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. This journey synthesizes aims and tools of the new China's Middle Eastern politics. As usual, stability lies at the top of Beijing's hierarchy of priorities, with an eye to energy and economics. However, in such a violent landscape China seems ready to invest more diplomatic resources than before, in order to decrease escalating intra-regional tensions. This tactical shift sheds light on a season of proactive diplomacy, even though non-interference in domestic affairs remains the guiding-star of Chinese foreign policy.

The Gulf is the pivot of China's Middle Eastern politics. It is not by chance that vice foreign affairs minister Zhang Ming fled to Riyadh and Teheran in January 2015, after the execution of Saudi Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr, to ask for immediate de-escalation. Syria and Yemen are the hottest file for Beijing too, since Saudi Arabia and Iran, both Chinese partners, are deeply involved in these crisis. On Syria, the Chinese government invited members of the Assad's regime and opponents for peace talks under the United Nations' banner. With regard to Yemen, Beijing sustains the legitimacy of Saudi-backed interim institutions; nevertheless, it pragmatically started Huthis' outreach after Shia militias' coup in January 2015

(the Houthis, who seized Sana'a, are Zaydi Shia insurgents proceeding from the north and supported by Iran).

Saudi Arabia seeks for Asian powers (China and India) to differentiate its set of international alliances in an age of rising United States' disengagement from Middle Eastern security: the Saudis would like to upgrade economic and energy ties into security arrangements *vis-à-vis* Iran. On the other hand, China simply doesn't want to choose between Riyadh and Teheran, since it aspires to develop two parallel interactions aimed to maximize net gains: the pattern is the same of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), where Saudis and Iranians both take part to the board.

China is deeply concerned about rising threats coming from the Aden regional security complex, a microcosm of instability at the crossroads between Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa. The Aden region lies in the middle of the "New Silk Road" envisaged by Xi Jinping in 2013 to boost commercial ties with Africa, the Middle East and the West: navigational freedom is here the key-word. This geopolitical project aims to counterbalance United States' "pivot to Asia" and, recently, the signature of the TransPacific Partnership (TTP), a trade agreement which excludes China.

Since 2008, Beijing is committed to Gulf of Aden and Somalian coasts' security through an anti-piracy mission, the first one to be deployed in the "far sea". In November 2015, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has held unprecedented joint anti-piracy drills with NATO, who is engaged with "Ocean Shield" in the same troubled waters (as EUNAVFOR-Atalanta, Combined Task Force 151 and other national missions).

Because of the Bab-el-Mandeb energy choke-point, plus enhancing Chinese economic interests in Middle East and Africa, Beijing will establish soon an "overseas outpost" (a military base) in Gibuti, so plastically marking an unmatched "engagement for stability" season in Gulf's neighbourhood.

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