

China's Strategic Option: Approach the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian Hinterland

ZHANG Xiaodong^①

(Institute of West Asian & African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social
Sciences)

***Abstract:** To eliminate the long-term threat to the northern and northwestern territories imposed by Huns in 138 B.C., Liu Che, the Emperor of the Han Dynasty, sent Zhang Qian to go to Xiyu (the wild-west region) and tried to ally with Great Yüeh-chin, Huns' sworn enemy, so as to attack Huns from both east and west sides. As long as 13 years of his reign, Zhang Qian was captured and detained by the Huns twice, but he escaped successfully each time. He reached the regions known today as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and north of Afghanistan and some other places with thousands of miles journey. In 126 B.C., Zhang Qian came back to Chang-An, the capital of the Han Dynasty. Unfortunately, only one person Tang Yifu out of over 100 members in the diplomatic team survived and returned with him. Of course, the diplomatic mission of allying Great Yüeh-chin was not fulfilled. However, Zhang Qian's expedition to the West Regions was still of great importance. It is based on his geographic, cultural and social knowledge about the West Region that the continuous military actions initiated by the Emperor Liu Che of the Han Dynasty succeeded finally. What's*

^① Dr. ZHANG Xiaodong, Professor of Institute of West Asian & African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; Vice President and Secretary General of Chinese Association for Middle Eastern Studies.

more, Zhang Qian's Expedition to the West Regions accelerated the cultural and economic exchanges between the East and the West, which influenced the development process of world history of civilization directly and continually (Fan, 1964: 86-89). Today, there is no immediate military threat to China's northwest and north, while it is convenient for China to connect quickly with other countries and regions by the development of transport and communication technologies. Particularly, the acceleration of the globalization and innovation of the internet technology has even linked the most remote areas of China with the world. However, the geo-political factors in the hinterlands of the Eurasian continent still significantly exert impact on China's security and development. Therefore, it is very necessary for China to make another and even more significant and extensive "Expedition to the West Regions" – to strategically approach the Greater Middle East through the hinterland.

Key Words: China; Eurasian Continent; Greater Middle East; Hinterland;

I. Meaning of Approach to the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian Hinterland

Central Asia and Sub-Caucasia have been historically linked with the Middle East: some parts were originally the territories of the Ottoman Empire or the Persian Empire; some others were closely interactive with the major Middle East nations in ethnic attributions, religion, language and culture. After disintegration of the Soviet Union, linkage between central Asia and Sub-Caucasia and the Middle East were resumed quickly, the newly independent countries in Central Asia and Sub-Caucasia expected to completely separate themselves from Russia (or perhaps we can say de-Russianization) and obtained new channels to join the international community by

seeking their own roots of religion, nationality and culture on the one hand; on the other hand, the leading nations in the Middle East such as Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia tried to get strategic benefits in Central Asia and Sub-Caucasia by using their respective advantages. As a result, a region we may call the Great Middle East spreading from Turkey in the west end to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east end and from the Kazakhstan Prairie in the north end to the Iranian Plateau and Arabian Peninsula in the south end has gradually emerged in the world politics in the almost 20 years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Although this newly emerged region lacks organic linkage in geography, no dynamics as allies in economy and politics, and although we even don't have a unanimously accepted term for it, we still can draw an outline for it through analyzing the history and the reality. First, Islam is followed widely by the residents in this region, and Islam influences nation building, social integrating and national identity to a very large extent; second, the majority of the residents in this region are Arabian, Persian and Turkic, and these three nations played a very important role in the history of Islamic society in different ages; third, the whole region is the crossroad for communication and exchange between Europe and Asia, which is regarded as the only way for both land and ocean silk roads and also the passage for national migration and imperial crusade in history. Currently, the Greater Middle East is the intersection for global transportation and communication; fourth, it is not only the major source of energy supply in the world, but also the major channel and strategic hub for energy transit (including maritime, railway and pipeline transits).

China is linked with the Greater Middle East by rivers and mountains with the total boundary line around 4,000km. These countries are bordered on China from north to south as Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Hence, when we

talk about approaching the Greater Middle East strategically, our basic suggestion is that China should make the best of its geographical advantages that is neighboring with many of these Middle Eastern entities. Specifically, we need to enhance construction of transportation and communication networks between China and the Greater Middle East countries so as to shorten the distance in time and space between the two regions. Presently, land communication between China and the Greater Middle East depends on passes through mountains such as Altai, Tianshan and Pamir. However, transport infrastructures to the mountain passing are not developed well because of a bad natural environment, underdeveloped social economy, sparse human population and the long-time border closing. China has increased input in improving infrastructure in Xinjiang since the early 1990s. Nevertheless, there is only one railway to Kazakhstan through the Alataw Pass; the length of highway in Xinjiang is no more than 1,000 km, while the highway to go abroad is not available yet.

Therefore, besides continuing to strengthen infrastructure in Xinjiang, China must also promote construction of railways, roads, and ports in the Greater Middle East via bilateral and multilateral channels so as to form a transport and communication network system in the whole region with access to Europe in the west, links with Iran and the Persian Gulf area in the southwest, and connects Pakistan with India and the Indian Ocean in the south. What needs to be stressed is that China should make efforts to stipulate common regulations on customs, finance, personnel exchange and transportation management with the related countries in the area. This is more important than hardware of the infrastructure construction. The second land bridge connected with East Asia and Europe via the Alataw Pass was opened in the early 1990s, but now it has not been fully used for the fundamental reasons such as different taxation, payment and administration systems adopted by the countries along the bridge, plus the short-sighted and unstable economic and trade

policies taken by these countries (Xue & Xing, 1999: 163-164).

In addition to making the best of China's geographical advantages, enhancing economic development and cooperation between China and the Greater Middle East is another important task of approaching these countries through the Eurasian hinterland. Traditionally, trading ports played an important role in economic exchange and communication between China and the Greater Middle East countries. According to statistics, there are two international airports (Urumqi Airport and Kashi Airport) and 13 land trading ports leading to Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Xinjiang approved by the Chinese government. Whereas, only 9 land trading ports are entirely opened for use, among which, Khunjerab Port to Pakistan and Aheitubaike Port to Kazakhstan are seasonally opened (Alashankou Service), trading ports are major places for border and barter trade between China and the neighboring countries of the Greater Middle East. What is more, they are also important channels for commodity and personnel exchange between the two sides. Thus, it is a significant policy option to continue to strengthen infrastructure construction in the trading ports, to improve their service function and to expand the economic area covered by them. Nevertheless, as the scale and amount of the economic exchange and trade increase between China and the Greater Middle East countries, new modes for cooperation will definitely be explored and innovated by the two sides. In retrospect of the experiences of economic exchanges and the features of developmental strategies in the past decades, some extremely mutual complementarities in both sides could be found: China's economy keeps growing rapidly, which has formed a steady demand market for energy and raw materials, in contrast, driving national economy takeoff by the way of exploiting energy and developing related fields has become a strategic option for most Greater Middle East countries; China is very strong in infrastructure construction such as transportation, communication,

transport, electric power facilities, oil and gas pipelines, while the Greater Middle East countries have huge demands in these fields; China has abundant foreign exchange reserve and Chinese businesses have just started to invest overseas, while these countries expect to bring in foreign investment and technological cooperation to boost the economy to develop rapidly. Therefore, China should position its economic cooperation with the Greater Middle East on the strategic level. Particularly, a continuous and interference-free energy cooperation strategy should be taken as the top priority in economic cooperation for both sides.

Last but not least, security cooperation through bilateral or multilateral mechanism to enhance regional security should also be incorporated into the strategic approach to the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian hinterland. The Greater Middle East is a region where there are many complicated religious and national conflicts. It is also where various external powers are gaming and converging. Furthermore, these countries are faced with different complex political, economic and social systems. Therefore, stability of the domestic political situation and regional international relations has always been a huge challenge for these countries and other related countries. At present, there are many multilateral organizations and various forms of multilateral initiatives or forums in the Greater Middle East such as the League of Arab States (LAS), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Forum for Security and Cooperation in Central Asia, and the Issyk Forum. Positively speaking, these regional organizations or forums will help to maintain regional security and stability to some extent.

But the reality is that almost none of the regional institutions can effectively play a role due to different standpoints, interest conflicts and interference of external powers. Therefore, apart from making contributions to the regional stability via multilateral mechanism continuously, China should also stress security cooperation in bilateral

relations so as to solve the challenges faced by the regional in non-traditional security fields such as terrorism, religious extremism, national separatism, proliferation of WMD and drug transportationking. In addition, as an important member of the international community, China should play an active role in settling the critical and hot issues in the region as well, for example, the Middle East peace issue, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Iraq issue, the Afghanistan issue and the Kashmir issue. Of course, it is not proper for China to anticipate that the progress will be made in the Greater Middle East primarily for China's role in tense issues. In fact, it is nearly impossible for China to take an important role in solving these regional issues because of China's limited capability. However, sometimes the process of settling the disputes is even more important than the results in international politics.

In summary, for China's diplomacy, it is a completely new subject to approach the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian hinterland. The core of this strategy is to make full use of China's geographical advantages to build effective relations between China and the Greater Middle East in politics, economy and culture via strengthening construction of land transport facilities and communication network between them, and to boost the social and economic development with mutual benefits for both sides. Meanwhile, China and these Middle Eastern countries should jointly respond to the regional security challenges by bilateral and multilateral mechanism so as to make the Eurasian hinterland the real bridge between the East and the West.

II. Strategic Intention of Approach to the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian Hinterland

Objectively speaking, over the past decade, China has developed relationships with the Greater Middle East countries in all the above

fields in various degrees and even explored bilateral strategic cooperation with some countries. Nonetheless, there are also obvious problems. On the one hand, China has not sorted out the inherent trends of this region on the strategic level, let alone forming a comprehensive concept of the region. Therefore, the old system has been followed continuously not only in departmental setups, but also unavoidably separated by sectors in studying, formulating and implementing policies. On the other hand, the remote Eurasian hinterland is in an important position in China's macro opening-up pattern and general design of its foreign strategy. Even under the circumstance when the geo-political situation changed dramatically in the Greater Middle East since the 9/ 11 attacks, Chinese leaders have not given a deep insight into what a strategic value the Greater Middle East has imposed on China. In my view, the strategic significance of China's approach to this region through the Eurasian hinterland displays the following three aspects at least.

First, it is helpful to form a more balanced strategy of opening-up. China's reform and opening-up policy has existed for 30 years from 1978 to today. Generally speaking, the so-called reform means transiting from a highly planned economy to a market economy, while the opening-up refers to opening the door to the Western economic entities. While they had advantages in capital, technology, market, management and other aspects, nonetheless, China's challenges were mainly the issue of "taking something in" (namely demand for money, technology, and industrial facilities) in the early days of the opening-up policy. Therefore, it is an unavoidable choice for China to give priority to develop its political, economic and diplomatic relations with the Western countries. In order to open the door to the West, China has decisively chosen sea and ocean as the way-out: the connection of Eastern Southeastern Asia with the Western economies, the convenience of maritime transportation, the historical experiences of its rising sea power in modern times, and the advantage of the Pacific Ocean connecting China with the US have made it an

inevitable option for China to take the opening-up road of going from the shallow sea to deep sea, from light blue to dark blue. Facts have proven that it is just this strategic option that brought up China's present developmental achievements and international position.

Since the mid and late 1990s, new challenges have gradually emerged in the view of Chinese people. First of all, as the industrial pattern in the Asia-Pacific region changes and China's productivity increases continually, the trade imbalance between China and its key partners such as the US, Japan and Europe is getting bigger and bigger. As a result, the trade deficit against China has frequently turned into critical political issues for these countries. Second, with China's economic scale increasing constantly, China's demand for international energy and raw materials is larger and larger. Especially in the energy field, China's imports rise each year. Therefore, the topic of "Whatever China buys, its price will rise" has become a subject discussed by various financial and economic media in China and internationally. Third, the amount of capital and funds controlled by the Chinese public and private sectors is growing rapidly; the number of cases of Chinese investment, mergers and acquisitions in other countries and regions has increased gradually. Clearly, the implications of China's opening-up strategy have been changing over the more than three decades' effort. No doubt, "taking-in" still holds an important position, but what is "taken in" is enriched. Meanwhile, "going global" is getting more and more important in China's foreign strategy. Simultaneously, the international pattern is also changing dramatically. Disintegration of the Soviet Union made the Eurasian hinterland return to its normal historical state as it had been: a number of independent countries' co-existence; the region is surrounded by a few external powers; and there is no dominant power which can set up the agenda of the regional development trend. In the west end of Eurasia, rapid expansion and internal integration of the European Union are very impressive. Perhaps it takes much time for the EU to

realize its political unification and adopt common defenses and foreign policies, but the economic integration of Europe has already been sufficient for changing the pattern of the whole world.

Apparently, simply opening the door to the Western countries through the sea cannot cope with the above changes. Plus, the existence and development of Chinese civilization has always been closely related to the Eurasian hinterlands. Hence, China should prudently consider implementing the opening-up strategy which attaches equal importance to sea, air and the Eurasian continent, that is to strengthen the economic and political relations between China and the Greater Middle East countries to form a pattern, under which China can access to Europe in the west, Russia in the north, the Iranian Plateau and the Gulf region in the southwest via the Eurasian hinterland channel, and lead to India and the Indian Ocean in the south through Pakistan. Such an opening-up pattern not only enables China to have more direct relations at more levels with the EU, the largest combined economy in the world, but also helps China to achieve new dynamics to cooperate with India and Russia, two of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). It is needless to say, China can also get more supplies of petroleum, natural gas and other raw materials by accessing the Gulf Area, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

Second, it serves to implement the strategy of developing Western China. In January 2000, China's State Council set up a leading team for the development of Western China, with Premier Zhu Rongji as the team leader and Vice Premier Wen Jiabao. Establishment of the team indicated the formal initiation of the strategy of developing Western China. According to some documents, development of Western China is intended to build this the underdeveloped region into a beautiful, prosperous, advanced and wealthy one where different ethnic groups live harmoniously together by mid 21st century after the endeavor of several generations (The Grand Western Development Program). But as I understand it, the primary objectives of the strategy of developing

Western China are to tackle the strategic challenges facing the region for a long time from the following three aspects. The first one is to gradually narrow the development gap between the East and the West of China, and to realize the balanced development of the economy and society among different regions; the second one is to improve the economy and living conditions of the ethnic minorities, and to enhance their national identity and maintain the security and stability of the border areas; the third one is to recover the fragile eco-balance of the West of China to keep the eco system stable across the country and to realize sustainable development of China's economy and society.

Development of Western China is a national development strategy which may last decades and even longer. Besides the central government's policy support and fiscal input, a good external cooperative environment ought to be created as well. Without doubt, among the external cooperation factors, development of relations with the Greater Middle East countries will definitely exert the most direct influence on the implementation effect of the strategy of developing Western China.

The significance of developing relations with the Greater Middle East countries lies in these respects: first, when the infrastructures like transportation, transport, communication, petroleum and gas pipelines in the Greater Middle East countries can be well developed to make the region a transportation hub radiating to surrounding regions, the hinterland of Eurasia will become the bridge and terminal connecting Europe and Asia again, as the well-known commercial cities and cultural centers formed along the ancient silk road did earlier in history. Under that circumstance, the Greater Middle East countries' economies and societies will receive new development energy. Xinjiang is the bridgehead for Central and West China to access the Greater Middle East, and the region itself is also an integral part of the Eurasian hinterland. It can be said affirmatively that only

by building close relations with the region in aspects such as roads, railways, oil and gas pipelines and air transport, can the Western region of China, including Xinjiang, find their most beneficial position in China's national economy. Second, with the background of globalization, the opening-up degree of a region directly determines its development process. According to statistics in 2004, there is a huge gap of foreign trade income per capita between the East and West of China: in East China, Shanghai enjoys the highest foreign trade income per capita which is US \$9,785, and Shandong Province has the lowest which is US \$668; in West China, the foreign trade income per capita is highest in Xinjiang and lowest in Guizhou Province, and the specific values in these two regions are US\$287 and US \$38 respectively; the difference between the highest foreign trade income per capita in East China and West China is as large as US \$8,898, while the lower one of West China only accounts for 3.12% of East China; the difference between the lowest foreign trade income per capita in East China and West China is US \$630, the lower one of West China being 5.68% of East China (Li, 2006). Such differences attribute to various complicated factors. But differences in history, culture and geography definitely exert important impacts on people's communicative actions. In other words, if favorable strategies and policies are made for West China to open up to the Greater Middle East, an unexpected positive effect may be produced so as to inject new power for the development of West China, because of complicated links between West China and the Greater Middle East in terms of history, religion, culture and geology. Accordingly, new energy will be fueled into development of West China. Last but not least, enhancing China's relations with the Greater Middle East countries is good for maintaining the security and stability in Northwest China. In West China, the challenges to social stability and border security are mainly about two interactive issues. The first is that the ethnic and religious issues tangle with backwardness and poverty issues; another one is that cross-border religious extremist and separatist forces disturb regional stability. In

recent years, religion and ethnic issues have become even more complicated, as a result of the anti-terrorism war launched by the US in the Greater Middle East and the “color revolutions” that happened one after another in the Eurasian continent. To meet these challenges, China has strengthened its cooperation with Russia and the central Asian countries within the frame of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). China also needs to strengthen bilateral cooperation and adopt active preventive diplomacy to remove or eliminate support for Chinese domestic religious extremism and separatism from foreign forces.

Third, it contributes to solving the predicament of geo-politics faced by China's development. China is next to the sea on its east and south regions, and blocked by deserts and high mountains in its north and west regions. In quite a long period, such closed geographical environment had produced a civilization dominated by Chinese culture in the east end of the Eurasian continent. Chinese culture and civilization were content with its dominating position in the relatively separated and remote geographical system, and rarely had the desire to expand outside by breaking through the geographical restriction; meanwhile, it was very difficult for external forces to cross the natural barriers from West China and Northwest China to impede Chinese culture for a long time, and those occasional invaders from the north blended into the Chinese culture after one or several generations. However, high mountains, deserts and seas have no longer been able to stop foreign enemies' invasions since modern times. Today, when globalization and the course of China's integration into the world have both accelerated, the geographical framework which was once favorable for Chinese culture to develop and sustain itself has become a “siege” that is difficult but critical to break through..

To sum up, causes resulting in China's geopolitical predicament indicate the following aspects. In the first place, China's geopolitical dilemma is related to its development speed and economic scale. From

1978 to 2007, China's economic aggregate jumped from the 10th to 4th place in the world ranking list with an average annual growth of 9.88%. China's foreign trade volume has increased from US \$20.64 billion to US \$2.17 trillion, jumping from the 22nd to 3rd place in the world (Liu, 2008: May 5). Rapid economic growth and enlarging its economic scale make China increasingly depend on overseas resources and markets, while there are only a few narrow straits like Malacca for China to connect with the outside world. Second, China's geopolitical dilemma is connected with its ambition of being a leading nation. Seen from its territory, population, economic scale and culture, China has the natural endowment of being a great power in the world. China's rising not only alarms some small neighboring countries but also makes leading countries like the US and Japan to become cautious. Therefore, almost out of instinct, the US has adopted strategies to contain China's development, for instance, strengthening Japan-US alliance, intervening Taiwan Strait situation, making a military cooperative network with ASEAN and Australia, while encouraging India to confront China. All these measures make China feel like it is being surrounded. The strategic precaution and containment by the US and Japan makes China's security in the sea even more fragile. Third, China's geopolitical dilemma attributes to its historical legacy and weak comprehensive strength. Since modern times, China's sea right has been deprived for a long period due to its weak strength. A series of islands and sea channels have been taken away by other countries. Over the past three decades, China's sea forces and air forces have been developed, but compared with the US, Japan, and even India, there is still a significant gap. Its increasing strategic demand is in sharp contrast with its limited comprehensive strength, which makes China's geopolitical situation even tougher.

To relieve the geopolitical pressure which China bears, it might be a valuable choice for China to approach the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian hinterland. Let us predict the visible effect. If access to Europe, West Asia and South Asia is built on land, China's

excessive dependence on south and east sea channels will be reduced. What is more, there will be alternative accesses for China to connect with the outside world in an emergency. Additionally, since the Greater Middle East has been regarded by US as an important strategic hub, the US will continue to input huge resources to maintain its dominating position in the region in the foreseeable future. Therefore, strengthening relations between China and Greater Middle East countries will curb the US strategically. The Greater Middle East has always been a place where great powers maneuver. To improve China's ability to develop instruments of participating in the affairs in this region is not only helpful to maintain peace and stability in the region, but also is helpful for China to build a responsible regional and global image.

III. Feasibility and Difficulty in Strategically Approaching the Greater Middle East

Strategically approaching the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian hinterland is a critical subject for China to think carefully in its rising process. Perhaps to a large extent, it is a strategic choice that China has to make. Nevertheless, no matter whether seen from the nature of the state cultural tradition or long-term interest, these are not enough for China to make decisions solely based on them. Whether or not it is feasible to approach the Greater Middle East, it depends on whether or not it can meet the strategic demands of the countries in the region.

In my opinion, although the Greater Middle East countries and regions have different systems and levels of economic and social development, and have different strategic demands, they can reach consensus with China in the following aspects. First, extensive area and very tough natural environment have made infrastructure construction in the Greater Middle East dramatically lag behind,

particularly for those inland countries and regions with undeveloped transportation and communication constraints hindering their economic and social development. It is in such a context that construction of infrastructures such as transportation, communication and energy facilities has already become a primary task in bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region. The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) was initiated in 1997, driven by the Asian Development Bank. Eight countries including China, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Mongolia have begun to promote construction of trans-regional communication network. According to the latest report, CAREC will input over US \$18 billion in the coming 10 years to build 6 trans-regional channels including railways and roads to connect South Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Xinjiang in China (Kucera, 2008: January 14). In addition, a mechanism coordinating regional road construction and management has also been set up within the framework of SCO. The member countries have agreed to build three road networks to connect China and Europe in the north and the central and south area with the purpose of promoting regional economic development. Second, developing the economy and improving people's living standard are a challenge for China and the Greater Middle East countries in the long term. Therefore, to make up one another's economical and technological deficiencies and to learn from one another in policy and management will definitely make both sides' cooperation more effective. The Greater Middle East, located between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, is endowed with abundant natural resources. As the infrastructures are improved and the managerial level in banks, customs, taxation and trans-regional transport is enhanced in the region, the geographical advantages and resources advantages of the Greater Middle East will be thoroughly developed. In contrast, China is a country with the fastest economic growth in the world. It has sufficient capital, stable market demand and high industrial productivity, strongly complementing the Great

Middle East countries in their economy. To the Greater Middle East countries, China is not just a trusty partner in economic cooperation and trade. It also can provide them, especially the inland countries in central Asia, with a platform and channel to communicate with the Pacific region. Third, for various reasons, the Greater Middle East countries are faced with common challenges such as religious extremism, separatism, terrorism, organized trans-national crime and drug dealing. Since they are complicatedly linked with one another in religion, culture or nationality, none of the Greater Middle East countries is lucky enough not to be affected by these cross-border crimes, and none of them can successfully tackle with these challenges. Hence, the maintenance of political and social stability, eliminating security risk in non-traditional fields and common interests provide China and the Greater Middle East countries with a solid political foundation for them to cooperate. Fourth, China has always maintained an independent foreign policy of peace, respect for other countries' choices of different political systems and economic development patterns, and advocates mutual benefits and win-win situations in regional economic and political cooperation. Also, China does not have any historical resentment with the Greater Middle East countries. Therefore, the Greater Middle East countries generally regard China as a positive force in maintaining peace and stability in the region. They do not reject China's involvement in the Greater Middle East issues. I have visited many countries in the Greater Middle East, and have exchanged opinions with scholars from these countries on various international occasions. My general impression is that the Greater Middle East countries expect China to play an even more constructive role in solving the Greater Middle East issues.

However, there are also many difficulties in approaching the region strategically. First of all, these countries are on different levels of economic and social development, and their political regimes and ideologies are also different. Hence, arguments and conflicts often

occur concerning regional development issues. At the same time, some regional big countries try to display their own will and safeguard their own interest in regional issues by dominating the overall agenda and subjects of regional cooperation. Viewed from an actual operational level, the input and outcome of each cooperation program are not absolutely even. All these factors may bring serious trouble for economic and political cooperation and infrastructure construction in the region. Next, problems such as unstable political situations, nontransparent decision-making processes and inconsistent policy implementations have occurred frequently in some Greater Middle East countries. As many know, no matter whether it is about railway, road or aviation network building, or oil and gas pipeline construction, consistent and sustainable policies and management systems are required in the related countries. If the countries involved set up their own different policies and change them frequently concerning taxation, charges and labels, then all regional cooperation will come to nothing. Third, a new round of geopolitical competition may arise when China strengthens its relations with the Greater Middle East countries. The Greater Middle East has always been a place where great powers meet and compete. Various geopolitical competitions have occurred in this region since modern times, for example, the long time combat between the UK and Russia in Afghanistan and Iranian frontiers, the competition among Germany, the UK and France in building the Baghdad railway, the fight between the US and the former Soviet Union over the Middle East and South Asia during the Cold War. It is possible for international competition to avoid the zero-sum trap in the background of globalization, but impossible to realize a win-win situation in all occasions. Simultaneously, the reason why China approaches the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian hinterland is to free itself from the geopolitical predicament and break through the containment from US. Therefore, power struggles among great powers seem to be inevitable. Nonetheless, the biggest difficulty comes from within China. Since there is no extremely urgent crisis,

plus accessing the Eurasian hinterland may have a very high cost but has no immediate effect, it is difficult for the decision-making level to reach unanimous agreement and coordinate various institutions to make a sustainable, foresighted strategy concerning the Greater Middle East.

References

- Alashankou Service. Retrieved January 13, 2010, from <http://www.alashankou.com.cn/VB/alsk/alskka.htm>.
- Fan, W. (1964). *The concise edition of general history of China*, (Revised Edition Book 2). Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Kucera, J. Central Asia: A vision for a regional transport network takes shape. Retrieved January 14, 2008, from http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/in_sight/articles/eav011407.shtml.
- Li, H. (2006). Extreme low incomes for Westerners' call for reform, *West Forum*, No.9.
- Liu, Z. (2008, May 5). Chinese way of relieving poverty and accelerating modernization- Vice Director of National Development and Reform Commission Du Ying talking about Chinese achievements of 30 years' reform and opening-up, Retrieved May 5, 2008, from http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2008-05/05/content_8111031.htm.
- The grand Western development program. Retrieved January 13, 2010, from <http://baike.baidu.com/view/13834.htm>.
- Xu J. & Xing, G. (1999). *China and Central Asia*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.