

The Transformation of the International System and China's Positive Diplomacy in the Middle East

Weijian Li¹

Abstract: *The international system is at a historical moment of renewal. As the unipolar order declines, various forces are rising, among which China has already become an important force in constructing a new world order. Quiet but revolutionary changes have occurred in China's diplomatic philosophy and practices as the country becomes more deeply ingrained into the international system. Under the background of great changes, the political situation in the Middle East has also quietly changed.. With the weakening of the impact of external forces, many new energies in this region are coming to life. The future development of relations between European and United States powers, and their policy changes will bring a far-reaching impact on the political situation in the Middle East. China's diplomacy in the Middle East will become more active and aggressive. Meanwhile, China will concentrate more on the multi-lateral cooperation and its co-ordination with Europe and United States.*

Key words: *Chinese Diplomacy in the Middle East; Political Changes in the Middle East; Restructuring of the International System;*

I. The Changing International Order and China's Fitting into the World

As profound and rapid changes are taking place in the world today, the international system has come to a historical moment of renewal. What characteristics will the international system take on under this background, then? Richard Haass, President of the US Council on Foreign Relations, published an article, "The Age of Nonpolarity," in May 2008 in *Foreign Affairs*, a bimonthly US journal. He challenges the general belief that the international order will turn to a multi-polar one. According to him, the appearance of a firm world order today, however, is nothing but a "deceptive image". An important feature of the international order in 21st century is non-polar. "The world is no longer dominated by a couple of countries. Instead, it is controlled by dozens of countries in possession of various forces. Globalization promotes a non-polar order, bringing a

¹ Dr. Weijian Li, Professor and Dean of the Department of West Asian and African Studies at Shanghai Institute for International Studies.

basically negative impact on the United States and many other countries.² Adam Roberts, Professor of International Relations at Oxford University also has expressed a similar point of view, saying that a “non-polar” world order or a new system of international relations is in the making.³ It is unlike the order during the Cold War, which relied on two or three great powers, or the America dream of leading the world on its own at the end of the Cold War and through George W. Bush’s presidency. “When crises happen in different regions around the world, the world is bound to be a non-polar one led by different countries or leagues,” he argued. However, some Japanese scholars believe that the international order of the 21st century is neither unipolar, multi-polar nor non-polar but “an upcoming group polar age,” namely, a new world mechanism with “the United States as the center and a number of small or medium-sized 'polars' around, grouping together the strength of every polar”.⁴

What kind of world order will be generated in the process of restructuring the international system? Are today’s international relations multi-polar or non-polar or even “group polar”? These issues are not what this article mainly concerns. I refer to the above in order to point out that, although there are many different viewpoints towards the change of today’s international order, we can still find their common ground. First, in today’s world, the unipolar order is weakening while various new energies are rising. Secondly, China has become an important force in the construction of the new world order. As early as several recent years ago, there were notions of the BRICs and “new five nations”. The call for the expansion of G8 was heard now and then before and after the G8 summit, which was held in Hokkaido of Japan in July, 2008. Then there appeared quite different notions, “G9”, “G12”, “G13”, to name a few. China was a must in any of them. Fred Bergsten, Director of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, recently even offered an astonishing proposition of “G2”, suggesting that the US and China “build a two-nation group and lead the process of global management”.⁵

This phenomenon of tying China and the changes of the world order together has a dual character: on the one hand, the international community has acknowledged and anticipated China’s great economic achievements and potential in the past 30 years of reform and opening-up. The community expects China to play a more active role in international affairs; on the other hand, it reflects the worries of some western countries that the rise of China will not only affect their

² Richard Haass, “The Age of Nonpolarity,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

³ Adam Roberts, “Who Rules the Nonpolar World,” *International Politics*, July/August 2008.

⁴ Tsuyoshi Sunohara, “An Age of Group Polars—American Diplomacy in 21st Century and the Trend of the G8 Summit,” *Gaiko Forum*, July 2008.

⁵ Fred Bergsten, “Equal Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2008.

economy but also change the power structure of the world and even challenge their values, politics and cultures. As a result, they hope to contain and regulate China's international behaviors through the multilateral international system. In this regard, China has a clear understanding. China believes that both the ending of the old order and the establishment of a new order will take a long evolutionary period. In this process, humankind will face many new opportunities as well as challenges. For China, more active participation in the multilateral mechanism within the framework of the United Nations and other forms of global governance through various channels at all levels will "play a more balanced, more diverse, more flexible and more formal role at the international or global levels and between developed and developing countries, which can not be achieved by other diplomatic form."⁶ In participating in this process and through the interaction and cooperation with various international mechanisms and organizations, China can accelerate its learning and understanding of global governance and enhance its will and capacity of participating in the global governance. Besides, China will have an opportunity to create and realize favorable international arrangements for other developing countries as well as itself.

Over the past several years, China has been active in adjusting into the international system. China's weight in international institutions is increasing and so is its importance in the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Meanwhile, China shows more and more awareness of its global and regional responsibilities. In taking part in building international security, political and economic orders in the interest of all countries, China cooperates with other countries and deals with the challenges of cross-border issues. At present, China has involved itself in almost all of the important constructive activities held by international organizations and regional mechanisms. China plays a more and more important role in the international non-proliferation, arms control, global environmental governance, global trade and investment, anti-terrorism and other international multilateral mechanisms through its participation in global multilateral dialogues and negotiations.

In the face of the complex, manifold and interrelated situation in the international political, economic and security fields, a soundless revolution is happening in China's diplomatic theory and practices. The new situation puts forward higher requirements for China's foreign strategy and policies, calling for China to go beyond its own limitations and the limitations of time and space, taking the overall situation of the world, a strategic goal of participating the

⁶ Jiemian Yang (Ed), *The Transformation of the International System and the Development of Multilateral Organizations – China's Response and Decision* (Beijing: Current Affairs Publishing House, 2007), p.32.

construction of an international order through peaceful and diplomatic means. At the same time, China should infuse the idea of a harmonious world into the more realistic and operational diplomatic practices of modern times. As is well known, China's diplomacy has become more active, more comprehensive and more dynamic over the past several years. Based on mutual respect, mutual benefit and non-interference, our diplomatic thoughts now require us to play a more active role in reducing contradictions and increasing common ground by consolidating cooperation so as to achieve a win-win situation. It is not hard to notice that China is attaching significance to detailed contributions while it had basically only principles in the past. In recent years, whenever Chinese leaders have talked about their views and the positions of China towards important international affairs, hot spots and external relations, they would often introduce many highly concrete and constructive plans or cooperation proposals. This change has been receiving more and more acclaim from the international community and countries concerned.

II. Transformation of the International System and the Political Evolution in the Middle East

Under the background of profound changes, the political pattern in the Middle East has also witnessed significant modifications. The weakening of external influences fostered the rise and flourishing of many local forces. The rapid increase of the influences of Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia is especially important.

Due to the steady rise of oil price on the international market and the ease of the overall situation in recent years, the economic growth in the Middle East kept a 5% annual growth in 5 successive years. In 2007, The World Bank indicated that the GDP of the Middle East countries amounted to 1.5 trillion, half of which came from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. According to the data of Deutsche Bank, the sovereign funds of GCC had reached 3.2 trillion by the end of 2007. Not long ago, the Gulf sovereign funds were still held in the West. Along with the ease of the credit crisis of U.S, U.S. Treasury Secretary Paulson went to the Gulf region in early June, 2008 to lobby the sovereignty funds of the Gulf to invest in the US. In early July, 2008, the French government led several conferences in Paris, calling for the return of the sovereignty funds. The latest example of the economic growth of the Gulf countries was that the UAE's Abu Dhabi government spent 800 million US dollars recently for 90% of the ownership of the Chrysler Building, a landmark of New York City.

With the sharply increasing oil revenues earlier in 2008, the Gulf countries became increasingly active in regional affairs, a new player with expanding

influence on the political pattern of the Middle East. As the largest economy in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is on its way to the leadership of the region. Since last year, Saudi Arabia has actively involved itself in the coordination of the conflict in Lebanon and the Palestinian internal conflict between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. It also took the initiative to invite Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to visit Riyadh and the two sides discussed a series of issues of common concern with rather positive results, relieving the tension between the two sides to some extent. At the same time, Saudi Arabia appeared more frequently on international arena. By the end of May, 2008, the Saudi government had donated \$500 million to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to help ease the global food crisis. At the emergent oil summit hosted by the Saudi government on June 19, 2008, the Saudi government volunteered to increase its oil production, joining the other countries in search of a solution to tackle the price rise of oil. During July 16-18th, 2008, Saudi Arabia also sponsored the World Interfaith Conference in Spain. Various religious scholars, including Jewish legalists, were invited to attend the conference. By doing so Saudi Arabia transmitted a message to the world that it seeks better understanding in religious dialogues and the assumption of its religious policy and argued that the claims of its religious extremism is untrue.

Besides Saudi Arabia, some small countries in the Gulf region are also eager to get involved in regional affairs. In Qatar for example, the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad Jassim of Qatar has traveled to several Arabian countries in recent years, including Morocco, then Libya and then Yemen and Palestine, mediating disputes with his charm, skills and solid capital support. In May this year, Qatar invited the government of Lebanon and the representatives of Hezbollah to Doha for negotiations. Under Qatar's mediation, the two sides reached an agreement and thus ended the embarrassment that Lebanon had been unable to select a president since 2007. According to *Times*, a German weekly, the active diplomacy of Gulf countries represented a new policy of the Middle East, that is, "to mediate in any place where dialogue is unimaginable".⁷

At present, the overall situation in the Middle East tends to be stable and hot spots are somewhat cooling down. Peace signs to ease the regional deadlocks have emerged. The relationship between Israel and related countries has become less tense. A cease-fire agreement in Gaza was signed between Israel and Hamas and two sides of the internal conflict in Palestinian have also developed on better terms. The "Arab Peace Initiative", submitted by Saudi Arabia at the 2002 Arab Summit and signed by every Arabian state head present, is regaining its value. Now, in addition to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Syria and

⁷ *Times (Germany)*, June 19, 2008.

even organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas are quietly adjusting policies to suit any changes that have already happened or could possibly happen in the Middle East.

The modifications of the power balance may make it easier for all parties to go beyond different factions, face reality, defuse hostility and compromise for their own interests. Compromise of this kind will contribute to the stability in the region. In the long run, it will facilitate the establishment of a stable and balanced security system in the Middle East. Nevertheless, we must notice that the foundation of the evolution of the current political forces in the Middle East is still rather fragile. This is not only because almost all the issues that caused the long-term instability in the Middle East remain unsolved but also because the differences of views and interests of all parties the current problems are much larger than the determined wishes for reconciliation and consensus. In addition, there is not a regional mechanism powerful and effective enough to integrate all the forces in the Middle East. These regional energies, old or new, are not yet strong enough to control the situation alone or determine the direction and the nature of peace and stability of this region. However, the major forces in the Middle East have been trying to raise their own voice and influence in the political process of the Middle East.. This means that the future political pattern in the Middle East still remains volatile and the establishment of a stable security mechanism between the powers in the Middle East is still a long-term goal. In other words, the international community and the international mechanism as well as other multi-lateral endeavors will continue to play an important role in the Middle East affairs for a long period.. We should note that the interventions of international forces, their way of interference, to what extent they will interfere and the relationship between international forces and regional influences will not only affect the stability of the regional situation but will also have a deep effect on the political process of the Middle East and the construction of its future political patterns.

As for the international force, although the image of the US in the Middle East, as the Pew poll shows recently in 2007, was "very bad" and its influence in the Middle East obviously quite limited, Andrew Kohut, President of the Pew Research Center, and Richard Wike, Director of the Pew Global Attitudes Project believed that "as long as the United States remains a dominant leader of the world there will always be some anxiety about the American intention and action."⁸ "The image of the US was undermined over the past years mainly because the US made some mistakes when dealing with some big events and deciding significant policies. Therefore it's necessary for the US to mend its image by adjusting its policies and improving its performance in case of big events. To some countries the

⁸ Andrew Kohut, Richard Wike, "All the world's a Stage," *The National Interest*, May 6, 2007.

upcoming American presidential election in 2008 was obviously a big event, which, however, despite the election of Barack Obama, may not be the complete end to the Bush Age. Since the theme of this election was reform and change, many Middle East countries may hold new understanding or expectations to the new government and its Middle East policies. In any case, the US will continue to be an external influential heavyweight in the Middle East.

Although the relations between Europe and the United States have been warming up recently, Europe's belief that it should play an independent role in the Middle East is deep-rooted. The Europe Union has been sullen about being only a "philanthropist" in this region for many years. Foreign ministers of France, Portugal and Spain jointly wrote an article in June, 2008, saying that Europeans should take their due responsibilities when it comes to guard the international security and stability. They believe that the Treaty of Lisbon will provide the EU with new decision-making choices and will allow the EU a suitable function which meets with its ambition and the challenges it faces. In regard to the Middle East affairs, the EU could not allow the permanent existence of serious conflicts in the neighborhood. "Europe should no longer play a marginal role in the resolution of these conflicts. Since the United States has admitted being unable to solve these conflicts on its own, it's high time the U.S accepted a helping hand from EU."⁹ "As we all know, France, which served as the recent rotating EU presidency, has already made an ambitious plan. Apart from a strategic objective that a "Mediterranean Union" should be established within a medium term and the focus should be shifted from the Balkans to the western part of the Mediterranean, French President Sarkozy even wanted to "be an arbiter of the peace process in the Middle East".¹⁰ On June 23, 2008, Sarkozy delivered a speech in the Knesset on his visit to Israel. Later Sarkozy invited Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to the celebration of the July, 2008 French National Day, In addition, it is reported that France and Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement of Palestine, have also had several secret meetings.

Besides the United States and Europe, Russia is another traditional external influence on the Middle East. As a major party of the 4-party "road map" for the Middle East peace process and the 6-party Mechanism for the Iranian nuclear issue, Russia has always been playing an indispensable role in the Middle East Affairs. Considering its competitive and co-operational relation with the US and Europe, Russia plays a unique balancing role. In recent years, as rifts emerged in the relations between Russia and United States and other western countries; the relations between Russia and the west as a whole sharply cooled down especially

⁹ *Le Monde*, June 14, 2008.

¹⁰ *Liberation*, June 23, 2008.

after the Russian-Georgian conflict. The influence of the rifts, although far from being enough to break the power balance between Russia and the other major countries, will definitely appear in some regional affairs including those in the Middle East.

To sum up, 2009 has not only witnessed the election of a new US president, Barack Obama, but also a changed European Union and a more independent Russia. How will the relationship between them become, then? How will the development of their relations be reflected in their Middle East policies? What impact and consequences will develop for the political patterns in the Middle East? All these are the prime concerns of the public.

III. China's Middle East Diplomacy during the Transformation of the International System

As I mentioned earlier, revolutionary changes also have taken place in China's diplomatic ideas and practice under the background of the great changes of the recent times. China's diplomacy, as a whole, has become more vigorous in recent years and China's participation in Middle East Affairs has been expanding as well. China's diplomacy will surely come to a breakthrough in this region, which mainly refers to the changes of thinking and the construction of China's promotion of increased mutual developments. Its earlier unwillingness to get very much involved in the Middle East affairs will be replaced, step by step, by a more initiative attitude and actions so as to achieve the objective of keeping regional stability and safeguarding China's national interests and overall diplomatic situation.

China has no intention of becoming the leader in the resolution to the Middle East affairs. However, with the continuous growth of the overall national strength and international influence of China, the international call for China to take on more responsibilities is also getting louder and louder. At the same time, with the overseas expansion of China's national interests, China is bound to participate in the shaping of those regions where its interests lie and become a constructive partner that promotes regional stability. Now that there are more calls for China to make more efforts in the Middle East, China has chosen to become one of the stable regional forces, which suits both China's reality and the wishes of the Middle East as well to safeguard the interests of China.

For many years, China has maintained an all-round diplomacy in the Middle East with good relations with all the countries in the Middle East and the conflicting parties. This has become a distinctive feature of China's diplomacy. Unlike previous years, China's diplomacy in the Middle East, now with a strong

sense of aggressiveness, has become more active and initiative in recent years. China's active mediation and constructive role in the Sudan's Darfur issue, Iranian nuclear issue and Middle East issue has impressed the world so much that some overseas media proclaim that significant changes have taken place in China's diplomatic policy, evolving from a bystander to a pioneering mediator. In 2007 alone, China's envoy made 4 visits to the Middle East and worked rather well with relative parties by giving full play to its unique advantages. In the same year China also invited the Iraqi President, the Prime Minister of Israel and a high-level delegation of Iran to China, another showcase of China's all-round, balanced and fair diplomacy.

With the development of the international situation, multilateral contacts have become more important occasions to deal with international affairs and make international rules. China is also attaching greater importance to multilateral diplomacy, which is well embodied in China's diplomatic practice in the Middle East. In recent years, hot spots keep emerging in the Middle East. China's policy is to encourage and actively participate in the establishment of a multilateral mechanism with a balance of power. So far, China has been involved in the Iranian nuclear issue, Sudan's Darfur issue, and other multilateral coordination mechanisms. Also, China has also attended many international conferences on Iraq-related issues. In regard to the Middle East issues, although China has not formally joined the Quartet Mechanism for the peace of the Middle East, Chinese Foreign Minister Jiechi Yang was invited to the November 2008 Annapolis Conference for the peace of the Middle East. Additionally, China is also panning to participate in possible new multilateral mechanisms. China's endeavor to promote the peaceful solution of the Middle East issue demonstrates a seriously positive image of a large and responsible country. China and other big powers such as the European countries and America are in a complicated relationship, being both competitors and co-operative partners. In the Middle East affairs, China, the European countries and the United States have the same interests to compete for in which they disagree with each other in many cases.

The summary is that China has been proposing harmonious co-existence in both its diplomatic theory and practice and calling for giving priority to dialogues and coordination on the multilateral stage of the Middle East. China has demonstrated to the world that it takes the coordination with other major powers seriously and is willing to work together with the international community as a unique force in promoting stability in the Middle East.