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## China is Changing the Middle East's Geo-political Dynamics

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Nowhere has the Obama administration done more damage to the US position than in the Middle East, leaving a big void to be filled largely by China, the silent player, and Russia, the military stalwart holding the US at bay. Could this be the end of US' unchallenged hegemony it has been enjoying since the end of the Second World War? While Russia has quite effectively sidelined the US in military terms, China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) which is to stretch deep inside the Middle East and extend into Europe, is emerging as a factor that will transform the Middle East's current geo-political landscape. Nowhere is this impact more apparent than in the emergence of Israel as China's most important partner. With Israel acquiring a pivotal position in China's mid-eastern calculus, other countries' relations, particularly those trying to tap into

China's economic projects, with Israel are also likely to undergo a very meaningful transformation.

With China's emergence as the main driver of geo-economics, the question of political rivalry is likely to be replaced by the question of the necessity of economic partnership. This is already happening and leaving its impact. A very apparent instance is the emphasis being put on the necessity of two-state solution of the Palestine issue. Regardless of the fact that Israel's relations with a number of regional states remain rather hostile, within China's calculus, Israel is politically and economically the most stable place and needs to be integrated in the economic belt.

Hence, China's own involvement in the regional conflicts and conflict-resolution. In recent years, China has endeavored to enter itself into the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, brokering peace talks and commenting on incremental shifts in the standoff without much enthusiasm from either side. 'China welcomes and supports all efforts conducive to easing tensions between Israel and Palestine and to an early realization of the two-state solution', China's Foreign minister Wang Yi said during the Middle East peace initiative ministerial conference, held in last year in Paris.

Similarly, while Iran holds the key geographical position for China's OBOR to extend into the West Asia, the Chinese would have, to reap maximum benefit, to make Ashdod and Eilat, the two strategically placed ports in Israel, part of the plan as well. If China is eyeing tapping into the Red Sea for its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), then Eilat Port, Israel's only port located on the Red Sea, might have to enter the fray with a bang. This being the case, the question is: would China be able to smoothly operate OBOR without effectively neutralizing Israel-Iran rivalry?

There is potentially no other way that China can implement to make its plan operational and ensure that it stays away from regional conflicts. What can and in most likely to enable China to achieve this objective is nothing else but the money it is pouring in the countries.

The recently conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean by China and Egypt do provide a fresh insight into how China is going to transform regional dynamics. What is likely to come is further strengthening of the military ties between China and Egypt. And, don't forget the US\$45 billion worth of Chinese investment in Egypt. It's for the new capital Egypt has envisaged recently.

China has plans for Iran as well. The US\$600 billion trade deal between China and Iran is something to look forward to. It is interesting to see how China is integrating all countries, on individual basis, into its OBOR, marking the first step towards regional partnership amongst the erstwhile rivals.

In this context, the question of whether Palestine can continue to afford to not extend recognition to Israel has become important. While Israel does exit and would continue to exit without getting recognition from Palestine, Palestine might itself find being left out of the economic boom China is likely to bring to the region if it continues to maintain its traditional stance towards Israel. Israel, for its own sake, will not be bothered by such concerns because it is not only a better

placed, much more developed and stable but is also regional industrial and resource hub. In other words, it has enough attraction for China and has already received enough attention.

The 'China factor', undoubtedly, has the capacity to push the states, out of their own necessity, to look for amicable solutions. China has the ability to bind the region together. It would not want, or even allow, Iran to engage in any misadventure against Israel. Also, it would make sure to prevent any aggression towards Iran by Israel. Motivated by its own economic interests, China is trying to make sure that the southern trade route of OBOR, which is linked with these regional powers, gets operational and becomes the center of attraction for all the erstwhile rivals.

While it may look a bit idealistic to expect all rivalries to wash away overnight, the fact can hardly be gainsaid that China is gearing itself up for a longer engagement with the region. This engagement cannot turn profitable for any country unless regional conflicts are resolved. It will be interesting to see what measures China comes up with regards to conflict resolution in the Middle East. Resolution of the conflicts and mitigation of rivalries is as important for the success of OBOR as OBOR plan itself.