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CHINA'S RISING INTEREST IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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China continues to expand its economic presence in regions of the world that are traditionally under Western influence. This is the case in North Africa and the Middle East, where China's presence is a phenomenon growing by the day. For Beijing, the Middle East plays an important role in its foreign policy since the early 1990s, during which time China strengthened its relations with oil producing countries to support its economic development. Chinese influence in the region has grown even more since the beginning of the new millennium, as China considers the Middle East a crucial springboard for attainment of world power status. Conversely, for Arab countries, the Asian giant is a viable alternative to the development model promoted by the United States and European powers in the area.

Relying on an already strong trade and economic cooperation – in 2011 foreign trade between China and Middle East states amounted to \$195.9 billion, a 34.7% increase over 2010 – Sino-Arab relations are currently experiencing a new phase characterized by more intense political contacts. The real breakthrough first came in 2004 with the establishment of the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum (SACF), which has since then

facilitated the growth of political, economic, energy, infrastructural and cultural cooperation between China and individual Arab states. The SACF aims to create a political and strategic dialogue on major regional and international issues.

The signing of a strategic and commercial agreement by Beijing and Cairo on September 21, 2012 is significant in this regard. The accord provides for the construction of an industrial six-square kilometers area near the Suez Canal, a commercial port linking Asia, Africa and Europe. The project, which follows approximately 200 earlier projects that in the past employed thousands of Egyptian workers in hundreds of Chinese companies located in the area, will be built by Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area (TEDA) in the next 10 years at the cost of approximately one billion euro. This influx of investment will contribute to Egypt's economic recovery. With a tenfold foreign trade increase in the last 10 years, which now stands at \$11.2 billion, China is now Egypt's second largest trading partner.

Already in January of this year the Chinese strategy had made important inroads in the Middle East with the important mission of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, who visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Saudi Arabia is already the largest supplier of oil to China (45.5 million tons in 2011, a 13% increase as compared to 2010), while bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to \$58.5 million in 2011.

Qatar, however, is China's largest supplier of natural gas (1.8 million tons in 2011, a 76% increase compared to 2010). For its part, the UAE is China's second largest trading partner of China. It is a major hub for the distribution of Chinese products in the Gulf region and beyond. Approximately 70% of Chinese exports to the UAE are re-exported to other Gulf countries, Africa and Europe. China's need to ensure energy supply, combined with the necessity to export its products as smoothly as possible, is making the Gulf region an essential piece of the Chinese plan known as the "String of Pearls," which refers to the Chinese sea

lines of communication which run through several major “choke points” such as the Strait of Mandeb, the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Hormuz and the Lombok Strait near the islands of Bali. China now intends to build up a network of political and business relationships thanks to infrastructure projects in support of its current policy direction

Even the forty-year economic and military cooperation partnership between China and Iran is part of this strategic policy framework. In fact, despite the package of sanctions imposed by the UN against the Islamic Republic for its alleged clandestine nuclear bomb program, China remains its leading economic partner (trade between the two countries reached \$45 billion in 2011, of which about 80% consist of imports of oil and its derivatives to China). International sanctions against Iran only benefit Beijing as the isolation of Teheran from the international community represents an opportunity for Beijing to develop privileged ties with Iran and boost its investments in many sectors that former trading partners have vacated.

The strengthening of Sino-Israeli bilateral relations is also high on China's agenda. Since 1992, the two countries have witnessed a tremendous increase of the volume of bilateral trade, leaping from \$50 million to the \$8 billion in 2011. Also, Beijing shares in the construction of a high-speed railway linking Eilat to Tel Aviv scheduled to be operational in 2017. Such a link

has the potential to serve as a means of transporting goods to Europe without having to pass through the Suez Canal, since cargo unloaded in Eilat would then be sent by rail to Israeli ports, and from there to Europe. Israel had an interest in creating an alternative route between Asia and Europe to the Suez Canal, and that could serve as an added “insurance policy.”

Finally, China's rising interest in the Middle East is also determined by the perceived need to contain Islamic terrorism in Central Asia, especially in the north-western provinces of China where there are many Muslim communities and national security is a constant preoccupation for Beijing. For this reason, in parallel to the penetration of the Middle East, China is pursuing a similar strategy in Central Asia. The establishment in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – which now includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, plus four observer countries (India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia) – aims to facilitate trade, energy cooperation and to contain regional threats, including Islamic terrorism.

Considering these general trends, it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese presence in the Middle East is likely to grow further, particularly in the new context of the gradual U.S. military rollback from the region, a policy change that greatly accounts for the increasing American presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

AHMADINEJAD, HITLER, SADDAM AND THE APPEASEMENT ANALOGY – A KNOCKOUT ARGUMENT

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Politicians like to draw analogies between those who sought to placate Hitler and Saddam in the 1930s and 2000s and those who seem to give in to Iran's Ahmadinejad.

The November 2011 report presented by the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukia Amano, left little doubt about the true nature of the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, another report released by the IAEA in Mid-August indicated that during the summer Iran had doubled the number of uranium enrichment centrifuges. These reports have rekindled the debate on the policy adopted by the West and Israel towards Iran's nuclear program. As the capacity of Iran to develop a nuclear bomb increases and has reached, it is believed in some quarters, the point of no return, policymakers and analysts are pondering the military alternatives for

stopping Iran's quest to, seemingly, acquire the status of a nuclear state. Trying to appease the Iranian regime, some argue, will not achieve the desired goal, and there is plenty of historical evidence to support such a view, they add. Apocalyptic scenarios about what will happen when Iran is in possession of the bomb are being drawn.

But as the smell of war over Iran's uranium enrichment program is spreading throughout the Persian Gulf, the rhetoric of appeasement has returned (see Anne Bayefsky, September 11, 2012, FoxNews.com). A Google search of the word returns no less than 3,560,000 hits. A cursory read however indicates that this is a unilaterally misunderstood and overused analogy.

For many illustrious western politicians, if not historians, the legacy of appeasement remains one of the most unshakable of the so-called “lessons” of history: You cannot negotiate with a dictator. It is clear

that pre-emptive resistance against Nazi Germany would have prevented the Second World War, they think. Appeasement, pacification, negotiation, noble as those tactics are, they do not work – or so history tells us. Therefore, reference to the democracies' failed, if valiant, efforts in the 1930s fuels a powerful argument for war against Iran, or at least targeted air strikes. In sum, for hardliners, war is hell, but appeasement is worse.

The decades since the Second World War are littered, on both sides of the Atlantic, with an intimidating number of instances in which politicians have justified their decisions with reference to appeasement and diplomatic negotiations.

Given the current international situation, American examples come most easily to mind. In 1950, President Harry Truman argued that the North Korean attack against South Korea represented “the same kind of challenge Hitler flaunted in the face of the rest of the world when he crossed the borders of Austria and Czechoslovakia.” Defending his rationale for pursuing the Vietnam War, president Lyndon Johnson said, “We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression.” And again, in the war-drumming prior to the first Gulf War of 1990 to 1991, then-president George H. Bush declared: “Appeasement does not work. As was seen in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors.”

President George W. Bush used the same appeasement analogy when addressing the United Nations on Sept. 12, 2002. “Had Saddam Hussein been appeased instead of stopped [in 1991], he would have endangered the peace and stability of the world. Yet this aggression was stopped,” President Bush stated. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice appeared on NBC's Meet the Press on February 16, 2003 and said: “We need to remind everybody that tyrants don't respond to any kind of appeasement... Tyrants respond to toughness. And that was true in the 1930s and 1940s when we failed to respond to tyranny, and it is true today.”

The recourse to the appeasement analogy retains a respectable parentage in Britain, as well as in continental Europe. Initially a synonym for what diplomacy is all about, the term was used after the First World War in the 1920s to designate the strategy of pacifying Germany and achieving a broader European settlement.

But the experience of the later 1930s changed that perception. By the time of the Suez crisis in 1956, a clear line of argument emerged. The “lesson of appeasement,” wrote then-prime minister Anthony Eden, was that the policy only fed the appetite of the aggressor. It is important to reduce the stature of a

dictator at an early stage.” When she was writing in defense of the Falkland Islands War of 1982, then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher argued that “aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail.”

These sentiments surfaced again after Sept. 11, 2001. A few days later, Jack Straw, the then-Foreign Secretary, warned members of the House of Commons “to draw lessons from the experience of the 1930s. We all know the consequences of what followed.” Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted, “All our history, especially British history, points to the lesson that if international demands are not backed up with force, the result is greater insecurity.”

For decision-makers, the lessons of the 1930s appear self-evident. At first, historians agreed. After 1945, Winston Churchill argued that the Second World War was “the Unnecessary War.” Historians generally saw Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his team as “guilty men” – guilty of myopia toward Hitler's ambitions and of not responding earlier to his threats. They wrote of how the Chamberlain cabinet underestimated the poison of Nazism, refused to educate the public about Hitler's expansionist plans, and failed to rearm adequately, thus contributing to the outbreak of the war.

In the 1960s, new documents led to a period of revisionist debate. Many historians began to contend that prewar British policy was determined by limitations due to a divided public opinion, the effects of the Great Depression and extensive imperial obligations. Appeasement was, in fact, the logical response. By 1989, John Charmley, a controversial British historian, was trumpeting that Chamberlain's reputation stood at an all-time high.

Why does there remain such a chasm between decision-makers, convinced that appeasement is doomed to failure, and historians, who seem to abhor consensus? Is it because of ignorance – that politicians have little time to read history and so use it badly? Or do historians only talk to each other, engaging in a dialogue without end? The value of ivory-tower debate, ideally, should be to enlighten current political action. If so, there needs to be a bridge between what historians write and what politicians do.

By contrast, no such reluctance can be seen in the area of public decision-making, where the politicians always believe that history teaches lessons, especially convenient ones. One reason is that the appeasement analogy is a knockout argument. It provides convenient shorthand to rationalize decisions which have already been taken and enables public opinion to be quickly mobilized. Its brilliance is that the familiarity of the analogy supersedes its questionable validity.