China and the Middle East: The Emerging Security Nexus

Tom Pember-Finn

The paper analyzes the emerging security concerns that China is facing in the Middle East. Three pertinent case-studies are focused upon: the PRC’s interest in piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the situation in Xinjiang province and its resonance in the Middle East, and finally the PRC’s role in the Iranian nuclear crisis. This analysis of specific case studies, as opposed to a reiteration of general comments on China’s thirst for Middle Eastern oil, is seen as an important step in pursuing the study of China’s relations, especially with the Middle East, to stimulating new lines of enquiry. The paper considers the implications of these case studies with special reference to China’s economic and political security and finds developing concerns for China within these two sectors.

China’s growing importance in the sphere of international relations needs no introduction. Rather, there is increasingly the need to move beyond introductions and generalizations and begin to focus more on the specific dynamics and nature of China’s relations with other regions of the world. This paper hopes to make a step in that direction by focusing exclusively on the emerging security nexus between China and the Middle East.

The paper is influenced by the theoretical underpinnings of the Copenhagen School – especially Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde’s work Security: A New Framework for Analysis. In practice, this first affects which topics are interpreted as being related to “security” and second how those topics are analysed. A Copenhagen reading of international relations divides the field of security into five major sectors: military, economic, political, social, and environmental.1 Furthermore, the School encourages an analysis that is firmly grounded in the real world and demands a close observation of the “speech acts” which serve to raise issues as security concerns. For the purposes of this study, the potential impact of the Middle East on China’s political and economic security will be analysed. In an attempt to achieve a more holistic view of the Chinese–Middle Eastern security nexus, the cases selected serve to illustrate a range of Chinese state relations: those with Middle Eastern non-state actors, internal non-state actors with connections to Middle Eastern actors, and finally Middle Eastern state actors.

Piracy in the Gulf of Aden

The occurrence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, mainly along the coast of Somalia, is a prominent example of China’s interaction with Middle Eastern non-state actors. It represents not only the sole theater of active operations for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), but also a source of intense media and governmental attention. The Gulf of Aden is a transit point for approximately 12% of the world’s petroleum2, and China currently receives around 50% of its oil imports from the Middle East3 – much of which inevitably passes through the Gulf of Aden. Additionally, a substantial amount of China’s export goods, and 40% of China’s imports, transit the area.4 These factors combine to ensure the Gulf’s position as a chokepoint for international trade. Furthermore, from an objectivist standpoint it would appear that China has a considerable stake in the security of the shipping lanes there.

Piracy in the region has been prevalent for centuries, but a recent upsurge began in the middle of 2007 following the swift deterioration of the Somali state. A UN resolution was passed in June 2008 authorizing states to “coordinate their efforts to deter acts of piracy and armed
robbery”, and a string of other resolutions followed, culminating in the authorization of land operations in mid-December 2008. Insurance premiums for ships transiting the area increased ten-fold, and some firms even began to undertake alternative routes. Towards the end of 2008, the Chinese Ministry of Defense announced the decision to send a fleet to provide an escort – primarily for Chinese vessels but also for foreign ships on request. This operation represents a major change in Chinese security policy and is the first time PRC vessels have entered a theater of operations outside the Pacific.

While reports regarding piracy have appeared throughout Chinese media sources since the middle of 2007 (and some even earlier) describing in detail the pirates’ activities, such reports were largely descriptive, without passing evaluative or analytical comments or noting the seemingly obvious concerns surrounding China’s export/import interests at this key transit point. The government paralleled the media silence; no ministry or official publicly addressed the issue or attempted to render it more secure.

On the international level of analysis, very little was done on the part of Chinese actors to prevent the escalation in the level of piracy. At the UN, it was France and the US, framing the debate in terms of anti-terrorism and international trade, who put forward the draft resolution of what was to become Resolution 1816. This ruling was co-sponsored by Britain and Panama, with other resolutions being drafted solely by the US. Indeed, it seems that Chinese state actors played only a minor role in securing or facilitating the security of the issue, despite the great stake that China has in trade and oil transportation. Chinese diplomats did, however, praise and welcome the resolutions, voting for them in the Security Council. In his comments on the resolution in the Security Council, the Chinese representative to the UN did depict the issue in terms of a “threat to international shipping, maritime trade and security at sea”, going on to place an emphasis on international law and the importance of limiting the operation so as not to interfere with Somalia’s sovereignty.

The Chinese Ministry of Defense’s statement to deploy came shortly after the occurrence of several major events. These included the passing of Resolution 1851, four days before the official statement, the hijacking of a Chinese fishing vessel, which was ultimately forced to rely on the Malaysian navy for rescue, and the unprecedented hijacking of a Saudi-flagged super-tanker, representing the clearest threat yet to trade and energy routes. Following the Ministry of Defense’s statement, both the military establishment and the Foreign Ministry made a flurry of security moves, which have been interpreted as a succession of “high profile public relations campaigns”. In terms of referent objects, that of international law and the UNSC resolutions were reiterated by officers from the PLA and PLAN, and the “public relations campaigns” involved repeated emphasis of China’s role in promoting global “peace and safety”, and being a “responsible member” of the international community. Other actors, such as those in the state-run media and Foreign Ministry, also began to bring more attention to the threat to China’s international trade and safety of Chinese sailors. Additionally, post-announcement comments from IR analysts in China noted the importance of the Gulf region for trade, as well as China’s shift in focus on “non-traditional security”. There was, however, no mention of the pirates’ linkages with terrorism, as was found in Western discourse. Significantly, it has since emerged that the Ministry of Transportation had originally raised the notion of naval deployment in October 2008, in meetings with the Foreign Ministry, and was concerned with a loss in China’s market share of global trade. Furthermore, it has been suggested that Chinese shipping groups, which employ approximately 400,000 Chinese nationals, lobbied the Ministry of Transportation to secure an escort.
elites accepted piracy as a threat, and must have begun preparing for deployment, they refrained from attempting to secure the issue among the Chinese population or the international community, instead choosing to “free-ride” on the security efforts of other states. This suggests that Chinese officials considered the impact on China’s image, in terms of arousing potential fear of Chinese militarization and an eagerness to deploy and secure its economic interests in the Gulf of Aden, as unacceptably high. Indeed, this was not a misplaced fear, since the decision to deploy, despite UN authorization and the interim Somali government’s encouragement, did generate considerable concern among actors in South East Asia and the West\textsuperscript{25}, especially among proponents of the “China Threat” theory\textsuperscript{26}.

Thus, there are compelling indicators that China’s economic security was a core motivating factor in the decision to deploy the PLAN to the Gulf of Aden. The deployment certainly does represent a “breakthrough” in thinking within China’s elite regarding security\textsuperscript{27}, and must be viewed as an elevation of the issue of economic security out of the realms of “established political methods”; that is to say, a non-interference and non-deployment of troops on active operations, which had hitherto formed a base of elite thinking on security\textsuperscript{28}. It is significant that this aspect of China’s economic security cannot currently be diversified away from, unlike the diversification seen in the final case study in this paper. Furthermore, these underlying motives were, to a large extent, suppressed in official comments and a much greater emphasis was placed on international law as the referent object. This in turn depicts China as a responsible nation, fully integrated into the international system.

**Xinjiang and the Middle East**

China’s relations with internal non-state actors may yield implications for China’s relations with the Middle East, as well as have repercussions for China’s political and economic security. The key example of this is undoubtedly the Chinese state’s actions in Xinjiang Province. Xinjiang, meaning “new territory” or “old territory returned to the motherland”\textsuperscript{29}, is one of the PRC’s Autonomous Regions, meaning that it is characterized by a large presence of minorities, and in theory enjoys a larger degree of political and cultural freedom\textsuperscript{30}. The total land area of Xinjiang accounts for approximately 1/6 of the total Chinese mainland, and it is populated by a Uyghur-Muslim majority of around 45%, followed by a Han population of 40%. Muslim explorers and diplomatic missions first reached the coasts of China in the middle of the 7\textsuperscript{th} century. More lasting socio-cultural effects were felt deep in the northwest, of what is now considered to be the PRC, during the period of eastern expansion in the Islamic conquests that brought large areas of Central Asia under Arab rule, including present-day Kazakhstan. Throughout this period, Islam began to spread, and over 50% of the province is now Muslim.\textsuperscript{31} The region has always, throughout its time as part of the Chinese empire and the PRC, been prone to civil unrest, with “major incidents” recorded from the 1950s onwards\textsuperscript{32}, and the region’s \textit{de facto} independence from November 1933 to February 1934 remains a major source of pride and remembrance among the Uyghur population\textsuperscript{33}.

Xinjiang is important to China’s security concerns, which have all been noted: its status as a “buffer zone”, its role in meeting China’s energy needs, relieving pressures of overcrowding in the eastern provinces, its place in wider strategic concerns of exerting influence in Central Asia, and reflecting a (Han-)Chinese “civilizing identity”.\textsuperscript{34} Significant for China’s political security, it has also been proposed that the government’s assertion of sovereignty over Xinjiang is “every bit as emotion-ridden as the […] claim to Taiwan”.\textsuperscript{35} However, the relationship between the region, what links Middle Eastern actors have to it, and how these actors hold the potential to affect the situation there has been overlooked.

Due to Xinjiang’s long history of social unrest, the Chinese government has had substantial opportunity to present its narrative of the tensions there and to justify its actions, which have included an escalation in arrests and convictions, known as “Strike Hard” campaigns, restrictions on freedom of speech, and extensive censoring of cultural and educational activities.\textsuperscript{36} Recur-
rent increases in security, legitimizing such measures, has consistently focused on separatism, which, before the September 11th attacks in the United States, was characterized in terms of the acts of individual perpetrators. Following 9/11, a governmental policy paper re-interpreted the unrest in Xinjiang as connected to highly organized terrorist groups, which were known under a wide variety of names featuring East Turkistan: most prominently the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO).37 Moreover, the Chinese government explicitly connected these newly mentioned amalgams of terrorist organizations with “the terrorist forces led by bin Laden”, claiming substantial funding, training, and coordination with Al-Qa’ida, other Central Asian terrorist organizations, and Afghanistan’s Taliban.38 Consequently, the US and UN recognized the ETIM – whose existence is still a matter of debate – as closely affiliated with Al-Qa’ida39, and placed it on their list of terrorist organizations.40

Initial Chinese state media reports linked the July 2009 riots, the most recent eruption of violence which was sparked by the killing of two Uyghur workers in Guangdong Province, with “separatist and terrorist actions”.41 Furthermore, the violence was presented as “premeditated” and “organized in advance”.42 Government sources also accused the prominent Uyghur businesswoman, Rebiya Kadeer, and her “World Uyghur Congress”, of “masterminding” the violence43, reinforcing the notion of organized violence, as opposed to an outburst of ethnic tensions as Western media analyses have framed the Xinjiang issue44. Significantly, in the recent unrest, Al-Qa’ida was not cited as involved in the violence, nor, indeed, were ETIM, ETLO, or other East Turkistan terrorist organizations, nor was there any mention of Islam or Islamic terrorism, as has been implied in past reports of tensions in the region.

The PRC government was quick to publicize the praise it received from various states, particularly Middle Eastern states (including Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and the UAE) congratulating the Chinese for how the rioting in Xinjiang was handled.45 Chinese state media has also utilized the testimony of a number of diplomatic and academic sources in minimizing the significance of the violence in terms of religious tensions. From the other side, the rioting was largely unreported in the Arab media, especially when placed in contrast to the furor generated over the contemporaneous murder of Egyptian national Marwa Sherbini in a German courtroom.46

A noticeable exception has been the reactions inside Turkey, where a number of journalists and politicians labeled the Chinese response to the riots as an assault against “ethnic brothers”47 and called for action in response to the “sufferings in [Turkey’s] ancestral lands”48. Most prominently, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan labeled the incidents an “atrocity” and “almost genocide”49, adding that Turkey could not “remain as a spectator” to the violence in Xinjiang50. Additionally, the Minister for Trade and Industry, Nihat Ergün, as well as various trade union leaders, called for the boycott of Chinese goods in protest.51 Popular anger also manifested itself in Ankara through street protests where Turks and expatriate Uyghurs chanted anti-Chinese slogans and burned Chinese flags and goods.52 It is, however, important to note that the official Turkish reaction was much more restrained, with the Foreign Ministry merely expressing its “deep sadness” at the events in Xinjiang.53

The most serious and explicit security concern has been posed by a group known as “Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb” which has threatened China and Chinese assets abroad, specifically the large Chinese expatriate population in Algeria.54 In contrast to the reaction from Turkey, these warnings have come as a result of “Muslim deaths” in Xinjiang, and they represent the first threats to China from a group claiming to be affiliated with Al-Qa’ida.55 Clearly there is also the concern that other groups intending on propagating nebulous concepts of “Jihad” will follow suit, and a re-conceptualization of China as a “legitimate” and desirable target, despite attempts to divorce the unrest from religion on China’s part, will emerge. This is a concern noted by political risk consultancy Stirling Assynt’s analysis56, and which following announcements from Al-Qa’ida proper seem to have confirmed57, although as of yet no re-
percussions appear to have actually occurred. An apparently little-noted detail is that this most vocal and explicitly articulated threat to China from the Middle East, arising as a result of the situation in Xinjiang and Chinese state reactions, has emanated from Algeria, a country with which China historically has strong ties. The implications of this is that rising animosity towards the Chinese state may be generated as a result of Chinese policies and the role of migrant workers in Algeria⁵⁸, inevitably leading to fears that other jihadist groups will take a similar or more active interest in targeting China and Chinese migrants as Chinese economic activities expand throughout the rest of the Middle East.

In terms of safeguarding its international image, it once again appears that the international community is of great concern to Chinese state elites. It has been seen that Chinese governmental sources went to great lengths in order to legitimize actions in Xinjiang by aligning civil unrest there with the global terror discourse in the early 2000s. It would seem that the Chinese state’s security moves were successful due to state elites’ recognition and exploitation of the emerging prevalence of the discourse of terrorism in the West, although other analyses point to the likely deal-brokering between Chinese and US officials regarding Chinese acquiescence, and even limited cooperation, in US-led preparations against Iraq, in exchange for official recognition of China’s alleged terrorist problem in Xinjiang.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, such security-related speech acts and the effort expended on the Chinese government’s part to gain official US and UN recognition of the existence of active terrorist groups within its borders, suggests a deep concern with seeking international legitimacy and at least tacit support for state crackdowns. It also speaks to the desire to be seen as integrated and positively involved within the international system, as I have discussed in the less controversial case of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and will discuss in terms of the Iranian nuclear issue.

The supportive reactions from Arab governments and the restrained comments from the Turkish government have neither framed the issue as one of security nor called for extraor-

dinary political action. This is perhaps partly due to the potential for counter-critique regarding various Middle Eastern governments’ treatment of a wide variety of ethnic and religious minorities – from the Berber population of North Africa to Shiite populations in many of the Gulf states. Turkey’s own tumultuous history concerning its treatment of Armenians and Kurds may also have been a motivating factor in restraining official responses, as well as the strong and growing economic and political ties which the Middle East and China enjoy.⁶⁰ The strong responses in Turkey would appear to be attributed to perceptions of ethnic homogeneity, as opposed to sentiments of Pan-Islamism, as might perhaps be expected. While it could be argued that Turkey enjoys a relatively more liberal political system than much of the Middle East, the fact that politicizing moves from the press and popular demonstrations have pointed to ethnicity as the referent object would seem to suggest that shared heritage has taken priority over a shared religion in this instance and that various groups in Turkey feel that their social security (that of ethnic Turkic society) is under threat from Chinese state actions in Xinjiang.

However, AQIM and Al-Qa’ida proper have taken the referent object of Islam, and these groups represent the most articulated threat towards Chinese interests that has originated from the Middle East. Thus, these actors also feel their societal security, here defined by Islam, is under threat – the result of which could pose political threats to China’s claims of sovereignty should the fear that these groups will aid separatists and radicalize the Uyghur population be realized.⁶¹ Additionally economic and human security could come under direct threat, should terrorist attacks begin to be carried out on targets both within China and abroad.

Thus, Middle Eastern actors’ responses to how the Chinese state behaves towards groups with linkages to the Middle East may have an impact on China’s economic and political security. The threat from state actors is for now minimal, and the primary threat comes from AQIM, which has vowed revenge on Chinese economic interests and may provoke separatist tendencies in Xinjiang province. As observed in the previous case study, the Chinese state has expended con-
siderable effort in presenting its actions as responsible and legitimate. The recognition of the US and UN, representing the global hegemon and global policeman respectively, of China’s terrorist problem, combined with securing and publicizing Middle Eastern and Muslim support for its actions, once again shows a preoccupation with image.

China and Iran

The final case study represents an exploration of the traditional domain of IR: state-state interactions. This yields further insight into how the Chinese state approaches its economic and political interests in the Middle East. The relative paucity and novelty of China’s relations with Middle Eastern state actors undoubtedly explains the corresponding lack of academic attention. Given the prominence and pertinence of Iran’s alleged nuclear ambitions, coupled with China’s well-developed association with Iran, it would appear that one can learn about China’s interests and its approach to international relations through this bilateral relationship. This relationship, developed many decades ago, now seems to revolve mostly around Chinese firms’ participation in large-scale infrastructure projects within the Islamic Republic, as well as Iran’s role in meeting China’s energy requirements – factors which have led some commentators to go so far as to herald the coming of a Chinese-Iranian “alliance”.

The issue has been discussed extensively within the Chinese media and governmental sources, and a notably consistent approach can be discerned since Iran’s nuclear program began to generate interest and concern in the West from late 2002 to early 2003 onwards. Chinese diplomats and Foreign Ministry spokesmen have maintained a stance advocating diplomacy and continued negotiation with regard to the Iranian nuclear issue and have repeatedly emphasized these principles in a number of fora. Additionally, China has made repeated calls for patience, restraint, and continued dialogue from all parties concerned and has reiterated a clear desire to keep the issue away from the UN Security Council and within the jurisdiction of other international bodies.

Similar to the case of piracy in the Gulf of Aden – before the announcement of military intervention – there is what would appear to be a non-evaluative tone in state media commentary on the issue of Iran’s nuclear program, which neither condemns Iranian actions nor condones them. Despite repeated official claims to be playing a “constructive role” in the issue, there is a distinct sense that the Chinese government is not a key player in resolving the crisis. This is generated in part by the Chinese government’s and diplomats’ lack of intervention regarding solutions to the crisis, especially when placed in contrast to Turkish, Brazilian, and Russian efforts, as well as by a noticeable silence in official state media on China’s role in the matter, besides reiterated calls for negotiation and diplomacy echoing governmental announcements.

Despite statements in public and to the press urging restraint and the continuation of negotiations, Chinese state elites have played a role in the sanctioning of Iran in the United Nations. Indeed, despite repeated speech acts which have attempted to keep the matter out of the UNSC, Chinese diplomats to the UN have consistently voted for resolutions censoring Iran, in the first instance drafted by the British, German, and French delegations and lately sponsored by the former three plus the US. However, while not exercising its veto or even abstaining on the Security Council, China appears to have been consistently working with Russia in order to dilute the severity of the sanctions and resolutions which frame them not as punishing Iran, as Western interpretations often have, but rather as coaxing the Iranians into returning to negotiations. Chinese elite sources have also offered rather weak and non-committal promises to step up its ties with Iran, promoting “bilateral development in all fields”, furthering cooperation in the fields of “politics, economy, and trade [...].” These statements, it would seem, add to a very limited sense of solidarity with Iran that has been observed through the dilution of UNSC-initiated sanctions.

It would rather appear that a greater security threat for China lies in external action against
Iran. Given Iran’s possession of the world’s third-largest amount of oil resources and current status as OPEC’s second largest oil producer, it would appear that any sustained military intervention which could threaten oil supplies or the validity of the Persian Gulf as a secure transit route would greatly endanger China’s energy routes and consequently its economic security – a potential threat which Israeli actors utilized in lobbying China before key UN votes\textsuperscript{77}, and which the Western media has noted\textsuperscript{78}. However, few academics have observed that Chinese oil firms, which are largely state-owned\textsuperscript{79}, have been dramatically reducing their dependence on Iran as a supplier of oil\textsuperscript{80}. Total supplies from Iran have declined by some 74\% from May 2009 to May 2010\textsuperscript{81}, which now means that Iran supplies around 6\% of China’s oil imports, down from a peak of 16\% in January 2009\textsuperscript{82}, despite China’s overall energy imports rising during that time\textsuperscript{83}.

These actions, combined with China’s general cooperation in the UNSC, suggest a desire to avoid potential conflict with Western powers both in major international organizations and outside of those organizations, should some form of hostilities erupt. Indeed, it would appear that China has gone to great lengths in accommodating Western hostility towards Iran through diversification of its oil suppliers, with an increasing reliance on suppliers who are traditionally allies of the West, such as Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{84}. Such a decision was by no means inevitable, and it appears that instead of, to use the vocabulary of Realism, attempting to decisively balance against Western power with Russia on the UNSC, or through an escalation of military support to Iran, the PRC’s government has instead decided on a course of accommodating hostility to Iran, while using its influence to weaken sanctions. This suggests that the Chinese state prioritizes its relationship with the West over its economic requirements from Iran and will diversify away from risk if possible. That said, it also suggests that China is prepared to intervene if risk cannot be diversified away from, as observed in the case of piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

Regarding the Copenhagen School, because fears of invasion and diversification of oil suppliers have not been voiced in the Chinese state or media sources, the Copenhagen School lacks the ability to capture them within its framework, requiring the analysis of \textit{actions} to be incorporated as well – the overlooking of which has been noted as one of the Copenhagen School’s shortcomings\textsuperscript{85}.

As in the other two cases, the audiences of Chinese state elites’ dissolution of security measures must be considered. The issue in China has received relatively little attention, and has not been framed as a core security concern, suggesting that the issue has remained unresolved through the absence of speech acts. Rather, Chinese efforts to keep the matter politicized, and efforts to deemphasize the aspects related to state security, are aimed firmly at the international community. Yet again it is seen that Chinese authorities exhibit a clear concern for managing China’s image as a responsible, constructive power that is fully integrated into the existing global order.

\section*{Conclusions}

A number of findings have been outlined in this paper, encompassing not only the Chinese–Middle Eastern security relationship, but also an insight into China’s modus operandi in conducting its international relations with Middle Eastern state and non-state actors. In addition, how China’s relations with internal non-state actors can affect the former two relations and implications for China’s attitudes to the rest of the world and the international system:

\textbf{Economic security:} It is clear from the above cases that China’s economic security is becoming more and more dependent on the region. Specifically, a concern for economic security has led to the PLA Navy’s first expedition out of the Pacific. The Iranian issue demonstrates China’s ability to diversify its economic security away from specific states in the Middle East and has shown that it is possible to take a dynamic approach with regard to energy security. These observations further suggest that China may take a more rigid stance with regard to transportation routes – which cannot be diver-
sified to such an extent – in the coming years. Observations regarding Al-Qa’ida and a re-conceptualization of China as a valid target also suggest the as yet unrealized potential for economic disruption, both at home and, more likely, in centers of Chinese activity abroad, especially in the Middle East.

Political: There is little indication that the Middle East poses a political threat to China, or more specifically, the government’s claims to sovereignty over Chinese territories. An emerging potential threat to China’s political security can, however, be found in recent threats of terrorism, and fears that Al-Qa’ida may, as well as targeting economic assets discussed above, give aid to secessionist forces in China’s far western provinces. On a state level, there is little to no threat to China’s political security in this regard. On the contrary, this study has noted the generally supportive, or at least restrained, attitudes of Middle Eastern state actors to Chinese actions in Xinjiang.

Non-confrontationalism: This attitude has been most explicitly displayed in a diversification of energy supplies away from Iran, and a general, although limited, cooperation with Western powers on the UN regarding the Iranian issue. This position is, of course, a far cry from the PRC’s anti-hegemonic stance, which was pursued for the greater part of the 20th century, and does not suggest that the PRC is an overtly revisionist power. Thus there is a clear intention in China’s Middle Eastern policy to avoid confrontation with other powers, even if that means going to extensive lengths and accommodating other states’ hostility.

ENDNOTES


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