

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Why China will Avoid an
All-Out Confrontation
with the US in the Middle
East Following the Gaza
War*

REPORT

Speaker :

Atul Aneja

10 Jan 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The seminar focused on how Xi Jinping's leadership has marked a "new era" in China's foreign policy. It was posited that China, shedding its hitherto hesitant stance, is asserting its core interests more openly. As a result, China has also reconfigured its global partnerships.
- Amid the US-China rivalry, China's outreach to the Middle East has become more purpose-oriented. Robust energy and trade ties have been forged with the Gulf Cooperation Council nations, meeting 50% of its oil needs from the region. China is also the largest infrastructure investor in the GCC.
- According to the speaker, this has influenced China's approach to the Gaza conflict. Instead of the Palestine issue, China's focus is on securing its core interests in Eurasia. Stability in the region, particularly in Syria, has been prioritised as it acts as a crucial defence line for Chinese interests.
- Regime survival and the protection of the Eurasian heartland are critical for China to nurture and expand its geo-economic objectives. Therefore, the speaker concluded, China is averse to interfering in a regional war, making an all-out confrontation in the region highly improbable.

WHY CHINA WILL AVOID AN ALL-OUT CONFRONTATION WITH THE US IN THE MIDDLE EAST FOLLOWING THE GAZA WAR

REPORT

Speaker: Mr. Atul Aneja, Editor, *India Narrative*.

Chair: Dr. Hemant Adlakha, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 10 January 2024

Venue: Zoom Webinar

Dr. Hemant Adlakha observed that although the existing discourse stems from American media and think tanks, there is a marked absence of any clear indication from the Chinese side expressing any aspiration to contest against the US in the Middle East, especially in the wake of the 7 October 2023 attacks in Israel. Notably, the Chinese have neither displayed any inclination to get involved in the affairs of Middle Eastern nations, nor to replace the America military presence in the region.

Taking the discussion forward, Mr. Aneja contended that under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has transitioned into a “new era of international relations”, shedding its hitherto hesitant stance with regard to asserting its core interests. Referring to China as the “workshop of the world”, the speaker highlighted the significant economic development the country has experienced since the 1990s. With surplus capital and a compelling drive for exploration and expansion into new markets and resources, China's robust economy has played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in shaping its relations with other nations.

According to the speaker, China is presently in pursuit of a new economic paradigm, moving beyond its traditional local areas of real estate, infrastructure, and export-driven models. The goal is to transition into a high-tech growth model. Therefore, China's engagement with other nations, especially in the Middle East, can be seen as a strategic move to connect with and integrate into the emerging new economy.

Furthermore, in the backdrop of the heightened US-China competition, China has made a strategic pivot towards the Middle East. Notably, in terms of energy relations with GCC countries, China presently sources 50% of its oil needs from the region, a figure projected to rise to 77% by 2030. At the same time, the speaker argued, the region's importance extends beyond energy, with trade between China and the Middle Eastern nations now amounting to over \$330 billion. Chinese construction firms are actively involved in developing infrastructure, with a substantial investment of \$126 billion. As the largest investor in the GCC, these developments testify to the increasing significance of the Middle East for China.

Traversing beyond economic considerations, the speaker explored the political significance of the Middle East for China. Towards this end, Mr. Aneja highlighted two key events that have significantly strengthened China's ties with the Middle East: the Arab Spring Movement of 2011 and the assassination of Saudi Arabian journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. In the aftermath of both of these events, countries in the Middle East sought improved relations beyond the West, with China emerging as a preferred partner.

Stressing upon his argument regarding China's minimal interest in getting involved in a regional war, the speaker emphasised the intricate economic and political connections that have developed within this region. Mr. Aneja also drew attention to the altered perceptions of Russia and China with respect to the Middle East, especially in the post-2011 period. It was posited that the primary area of concern for both Russia and China is Eurasia, and safeguarding their

respective interests in this region is of utmost importance. Furthermore, since 2011, Syria and Iran have emerged as their first and second lines of defence respectively.

The speaker concluded by stating that China's approach towards the Gaza War is consistent with its broader stance of maintaining regional security and stability. He further asserted that China's focus lies on ensuring the safety of its core interests in the region. As a result, the probability of China engaging in an all-out confrontation in the Middle East is quite low.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Adlakha highlighted the ideological disparities between the Chinese and the American militaries, and their respective charters. Whereas the US overtly states its intent to protect liberal democracy and associated rights, China operates on a different political and ideological premise. The Chinese do not advocate for the export of Chinese socialism, unlike the Americans who actively seek to promote liberal democracy globally. As a result, such disparities eliminate the impetus for the Chinese military to intervene in the region.

This report was prepared by Kashish Tomer, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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