



## Engaging China as a Security Actor in a Multi-Partner World

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### Abstract

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Terrorism in the Middle East is increasingly merging with the need to protect China's overseas interests, provoking China's rise as a new security actor, and presenting an opportunity for the West to engage China in a multi-partner world.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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## Analysis

### Terrorism challenge to energy, maritime and human security

The presence of ISIS and Islamic extremism in the Middle East poses a challenge for everyone including China, especially to their energy security, maritime security and human security.

#### *Threat to Energy Security*

Regarding energy, China is now the world's top importer of crude oil and over half of it comes from the Middle East—mainly from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Oman. Also, geography matters, and the Middle East is a trading hub and market entry point into Europe and Africa, where the EU is China's largest export market with trade volume at €521 billion in 2015, and Africa is an important destination for Chinese investments in energy, strategic resources and infrastructure projects. As such, the presence of terrorist groups threatens China's energy supply and trade and market access, especially via the Suez Canal.

#### *Threat to Maritime Security*

For example, in 2013 Al Furqun Brigade, an Al Qaeda affiliate, attacked China's COSCO container ship by firing Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) while it was in the Suez Canal en route to northern Europe.<sup>1</sup> So with increased military activity and ship inspections in the Suez, maritime insurance company Lloyd's List recommended that ships take the 6,000-mile (almost 9,700 kilometers) longer route around the Cape of Good Hope, essentially around the entire African continent.<sup>2</sup>

**Map 1: Suez Canal vs. Cape of Good Hope maritime route**



Source: American Journal of Transportation, [www.ajot.com](http://www.ajot.com)

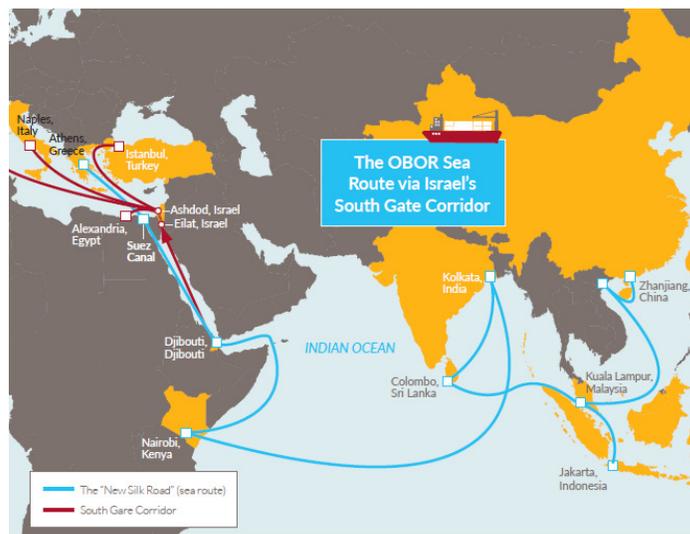
As such these shipping delays and increased risk premiums would be costly for China as the world's largest trading nation, and with over 95% of global trade still being seaborne, Beijing is heavily dependent on the Canal to reach its export markets in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> "COSCO Asia RPG hit confirmed", *Lloyd's List*, 4 September 2013, <http://www.lloydslist.com/ll/sector/ship-operations/article429012.ece>

<sup>2</sup> Christina Lin, "The Mideast: a laboratory for US-EU maritime cooperation with China?", Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) Blog, 14 April 2016, <https://blog.merics.org/en/blog-post/2016/04/14/the-mideast-a-laboratory-for-us-eu-maritime-cooperation-with-china/>; Niclas Anzinger, "Is Egypt's Instability a Threat to the Suez Canal?", *Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)*, 17 January 2014, <http://cimsec.org/egypts-instability-threat-suez-canal/9305>

Although China is building overland networks of railroads and highways as part of the planned Silk Road economic belt across Eurasia, these routes are a diversification, not replacement, of important maritime transport corridors. Thus China is also building a “steel canal” of the Med-Red Railway through Israel to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea that bypasses the Suez. <sup>3</sup> This not only elevates Jerusalem’s strategic significance on the New Silk Road, but also presents a new status of Israel from a “protected power” of the US to an “integrated regional power” in its own right, transforming Israel’s traditional narrative of seeking “protectors” to one of seeking partners. <sup>4</sup>

Map 2: Med-Red Railway in Israel



Source: *Diplomatic Courier*, 1 September 2016

### Threat to Human Security

Terrorism also threatens China’s human security. China has an estimated 5 million workers abroad with 2 million in Africa and the Mideast, and in 2014, Chinese outbound tourists reached 109 million. <sup>5</sup> Thus protecting Chinese citizens overseas is a dire challenge for the government, and the uptick of terrorism in 2015 was instrumental for changing China’s threat perception.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Levitt, “Israel-China Alliance Moves Forward with \$2 Billion ‘Red Med’ Freight Rail Link Alternative to Suez Canal”, *Algemeiner*, 24 March 2014, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/03/24/israel-china-alliance-moves-forward-with-2-billion-red-med-freight-rail-link-alternative-to-suez-canal/>; Galia Lavi, Jingjie He, Oded Eran, “China and Israel: On the Same Belt and Road?”, *INSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 18, No. 3, October 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10886> [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan18\\_3ENG%20\(4\)\\_Lavi.%20He.%20Eran.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan18_3ENG%20(4)_Lavi.%20He.%20Eran.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Michel Valantin, “China, Israel, and the New Silk Road”, *Red Team Analysis*, 8 June 2015, <https://www.redanalysis.org/2015/06/08/china-israel-new-silk-road/>; Jean-Michel Valantin, “Israel, Natural Gas and Power in the Middle East”, *Red Team Analysis*, 27 July 2015, <https://www.redanalysis.org/2015/04/27/israel-natural-gas-power-middle-east/>; Barney Breen-Portnoy, “Analyst: Israel Must Take Advantage of Chance to Become Key Stop on New International Chinese Trade Route”, *Algemeiner*, 4 September 2016, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2016/09/04/analyst-israel-must-take-advantage-of-chance-to-become-key-stop-on-new-international-chinese-trade-route/>; Niv Elis, “Israel, China launch joint task force for expanding ties”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 March 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Business/Israel-China-launch-joint-task-force-for-expanding-ties-395610>

<sup>5</sup> “China Outbound Travelers Spent Close to \$500B Overseas in 2014”, *China Internet Watch*, 4 May 2015, <https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/13292/outbound-traveler-2014/>; Roi Feder, “What China’s New Silk Road Means for Israel”, *Diplomatic Courier*, 1 September 2016, <http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/2016/09/01/chinas-new-silk-road-means-israel/>



Prior to 2015, China largely viewed that political instability was the main threat to Chinese interests abroad, and terrorism was a byproduct.<sup>6</sup> As such Beijing's remedy was mainly economic aid and trade, and they often mention "maintain stability" (维稳, *weiwēn*) as a goal, and in 2013 rolled out the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) of economic integration to help reduce ungoverned spaces for terrorist actors to thrive.

However, in 2015 with terrorists targeting Chinese citizens in the August Bangkok bombings, the November ISIS execution of the kidnapped Chinese national and the murder of three Chinese executives in Mali, the November Paris ISIS attacks, coupled with the Saudi war in Yemen that prompted another evacuation of Chinese citizens similar to the 2011 Libyan evacuation, Beijing began to see terrorism as an independent threat rather than just an indirect byproduct of political instability.

As such now the Chinese talk about "counter terrorism", *Fǎnkǒng* 反恐, in addition to "maintain stability", *weiwēn* 维稳, and is responding by upgrading its foreign security posture.

### Provoking a more robust security posture

China has begun to adopt an expeditionary approach to counter-terrorism. In December 2015 it passed a new anti-terror law that allowed the Chinese military and paramilitary to operate abroad, and began to build a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.

Shortly after the Bangkok bombing, in September 2015 President Xi Jinping offered the UN 8,000 Chinese peacekeeping troops on permanent standby for rapid deployment anywhere in the world including to Syria, and China's main vehicle to combat terrorism abroad—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO—admitted India and Pakistan as members to enable a more comprehensive regional approach to counter-terrorism. Afghanistan is currently an SCO observer, and with the application of Egypt and Syria in 2015 and Israel in 2016 to partner with the SCO, this expands the China-led security bloc all the way to the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup>

Beijing also tried to step up mediation and security ties in both Afghanistan and Syria, which they dub the new Afghanistan. China appointed a new envoy for the Syrian crisis in March, and in August, China and Syria signed agreements to upgrade military ties as well as an agreement between China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan for counter-terrorism.<sup>8</sup> China is already equipping and training Afghan security forces on counter-terrorism, and enlisting Afghanistan and Pakistan's help to combat Uyghur militants and other al Qaeda affiliates in AfPak. Now that AfPak militants have migrated to Syria, China is also undertaking similar cooperation with Damascus. As such China is taking a comprehensive approach towards the two Afghanistans, as it were.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Ghiselli, "Growing Overlap Between Counter-Terrorism and Overseas Protection Acts as New Drive of Chinese Policy", *China Brief*, Vol. 16, Issue 9, 1 June 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/growing-overlap-between-counter-terrorism-and-overseas-interest-protection-acts-as-new-driver-of-chinese-strategy/>

<sup>7</sup> "Syria, Egypt, Israel apply to join the SCO", *Fort Russ*, 26 June 2016, <http://www.fort-russ.com/2016/06/syria-egypt-israel-apply-to-join-sco.html>; Mikhail Korostikov, "Further expansion of SCO could make it hard to control", *Russia beyond the Headlines*, 24 June 2016, [https://rbth.com/international/2016/06/24/further-expansion-of-sco-could-make-it-hard-to-control\\_606041](https://rbth.com/international/2016/06/24/further-expansion-of-sco-could-make-it-hard-to-control_606041)

<sup>8</sup> Yao Jianing, "Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan issue joint statement on anti-terrorism", *China Military Online*, 14 August 2016, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-08/04/content\\_7191537.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2016-08/04/content_7191537.htm); "China says seeks closer military ties with Syria", *Reuters*, 16 August 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china-idUSKCN10R10R>; Christina Lin, "The Changing Nature of Terrorism in China", *The Cipher Brief*, 27 September 2016, <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/asia/changing-nature-terrorism-china-1089>



This need is underscored by the August 30 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan by Syria-based Uyghur militants Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), financed by the rebranded Al Nusra Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), and coordinated from Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

In the face of rising threats to China's citizens and interests abroad, Beijing will continue to increase its security posture in the Middle East. This in turn presents a unique diplomatic opportunity for the US and EU to engage China. Rather than viewing China's rise as a security actor through a cold war mentality of "east vs. west", this can be changed to a narrative of aligning "the west and the rising rest" against a shared civilizational threat by international terrorism. A *multi-polar* world also means a *multi-partner* world, and Syria could present a good test case and laboratory for cooperation and realignment in the Middle East.

### Multi-partners in a multi-polar world

In face of converging interests in countering terrorism and piracy, safeguarding trade and energy corridors, and maintaining regional stability, China's interests in the region provide an opportunity for the US and the EU to engage Beijing on non-traditional security cooperation in the Mideast segment of China's new silk road.

Given legacy institutions from the Cold War have built in bias, so that NATO has a tendency to be suspicious of Russia, or China harbors distrust of NATO due to the 1999 bombing of its embassy in Belgrade, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and SCO may be timely alternative paradigms for global engagement between the West and rising powers.

This is especially important post-Brexit, now that EU no longer includes Britain. In contrast, OSCE includes EU, Britain, US, Russia, and overlapping countries across Eurasia, and may be a more appropriate platform for the EU to engage China.<sup>10</sup> Also, geography matters, and with OSCE and SCO's overlapping memberships of Russia and four Central Asian republics, this would facilitate Eurasian connectivity via the OBOR initiatives.

OSCE is also a timely platform to help reduce current tension between Russia and the West—given it was initially conceived as a forum to mitigate tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>11</sup> Its inclusive multilateral cooperative security platforms for confidence building and crisis management, and focus on non-traditional security issues such as counter-terrorism and conflict prevention/resolution, converge with China and SCO's mandate. As China enters the Mideast security scene, OSCE can engage China via its partnership program to address these new security challenges.

Finally, OSCE could offer a platform to test China's role as a conflict mediator, following its participation in the P5+1 deal with Iran and its present role in the Syrian crisis. Beijing also has a unique role in the current Saudi-Iran tension over Syria, given its "cleaner" scorecard than other permanent members of the UN Security Council. The US is seen as being pro-Israel and pro- Saudi, Russia is perceived to be backing Iran and Shia Muslims with its military operations in Syria, and Europe has colonial baggage in the Mideast region.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.guanchna.cn/Neighbors/2016\\_09\\_06\\_373642.shtml](http://www.guanchna.cn/Neighbors/2016_09_06_373642.shtml); Olga Dzyubenko, "Kyrgyzstan says Uighur militant groups behind attack on China's embassy", *Reuters*, 7 September 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-kyrgyzstan-blast-china-idUSKCN11C1DK>

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Ferrier, "Post Brexit, the OSCE should transcend the EU for dealing with China", *Harbour Times*, 5 July 2016, <http://harbourtimes.com/2016/07/05/post-brexit-the-osce-should-transcend-the-eu-for-dealing-with-china/>

<sup>11</sup> Daniela PISOIU, "The OSCE and the SCO—Perspectives for Cooperation", *Austrian Institute for International Affairs Policy Paper 8*, 7 December 2015, [http://www.oiiip.ac.at/index.php?id=49&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=20&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=906&cHash=f6633ed6a893f8c4a8c28cd1f7eca8b8](http://www.oiiip.ac.at/index.php?id=49&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=20&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=906&cHash=f6633ed6a893f8c4a8c28cd1f7eca8b8)



In contrast, China enjoys good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia—the largest crude oil supplier to China. It also has good relations with Israel. In fact, China contributed 1,000 peacekeeping troops in UNIFIL in Lebanon after the 2006 Lebanon war at the request of Israel. Israel did not want Arab troops and requested Asian troops from China, South Korea, India, Malaysia that were viewed as more neutral in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As such, Beijing has the potential and capability to become an important partial security provider through UN peacekeeping operations, a partner in counter-terrorism, and a mediator in the Mideast especially in the face of current western standoff with Russia. With the incoming 2017 Austrian chairmanship<sup>12</sup> of the OSCE placing counter-terrorism as a priority, China can become an important security partner for the US and EU in a multi-partner world.

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<sup>12</sup> OSCE Secretariat, "In first address to OSCE Permanent Council, Incoming Chairperson-in-Office Austrian Foreign Minister Kurz, stresses need for decisive action and cooperation", 14 July 2016, <http://www.osce.org/pc/253846>



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