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AUAR: Next Gen ISR

18 October 2021

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### Abstract

This paper's objective is to provide AFCENT with CCP focus areas that are in line with the shift to strategic power competition. The CCP has a growing popularity in the Middle East especially with their Belt Road Initiative which leads to large scale investment in developing countries. The creation of a 400-billion-dollar comprehensive agreement with Iran diminishes any resistance to the BRI; the CCP will likely meet its national goal of connecting Beijing to the Mediterranean thus the European market. While the countries in between will have access to a Chinese trade system they will also be heavily influenced by the CCP. This would leave India vulnerable to encirclement and diminish U.S. influence within the Middle East.

### Controlling the Narrative: Why the Middle East is Important to China

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a rapidly growing economy and the ambition to change world power dynamics. The Middle East is a vital node to the CCP's conquest to connect European markets to East Asia via the Belt Road Initiatives (BRI) by land and maritime trade routes. This initiative has the potential to put 55 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP) and 75 percent of the current energy reserves under CCP influence (Sarieddine 178). The CCP's allure is also growing in popularity across the Middle East while the United States appears to be waning; Chinese support reduces U.S. dependency while ensuring a country's authoritarian regime remains intact (Friedrichs 1645). The U.S. and consequently U.S. Air Force Central (AFCENT) must maintain a level of focus that counters CCP influence in the Middle East and promotes U.S. interests.

The CCP's popularity among elitists and common citizens is incredibly strong compared to the U.S. Pew research polls highlight the CCP has a 50 percent favorable view while the U.S. is at 29 percent (Friedrichs 1635). This favorable view happens even though China imports at a discounted price of consumer goods and infrastructure; much as western powers did during the colonial periods. Additionally, the contractors hired for the BRI rarely come from the local population, approximately seven percent are local compared to other countries that typically higher above 40 percent. The CCP can maintain this favorable view because they can control the narrative on colonialism by acting on the Middle East's insecurities with the prior colonial western cultures.

The CCP has also taken advantage of the breakup of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and strengthened its ties with Iran. The CCP is a major importer of energy from the Middle East and formal trade relations with Iran would diversify their energy import

portfolio. Iran is set to gain a major 400-billion-dollar agreement that aims to build infrastructure, the addition of 5G technology, cyberspace control, and establish free trade; allowing Iran to export up to 8.5 million barrels of oil per day (Monshipouri and Heiran-Nia 158). Iran will in turn benefit by having two proponents, Russia and China, being on the UN Security Council with veto power. An Iranian and CCP relationship ensures the ruling class maintains their political power regardless of the socioeconomic and political consequences imposed by the U.S.

The CCP continues to increase its military expenditures allowing them to be the world's fifth-largest exporter of weapons. The CCP developed the following internal regulations for arms sales to legitimize its arms deals the CCP has agreed not to allow the transfer of arms to non-state actors, not sell to those on the U.N.'s embargo list, and not allow the re-sell of Chinese arms to third parties without consent (Solar 225).

1. Exports should be conducive to a country's legitimate self-defense
2. Exports should not undermine the peace, security, and stability of the region concerned and the world as a whole
3. Exports should not be used as a means of interfering in the internal affairs of the recipient country

The empirical data regarding their arms deals between 2001-2014 tell an interesting story as well. CCP arms exports are typically targeted towards developing countries with lower political freedom, are willing to export energy, and have a low to mid GDP. These autocratic countries typically do not have access to advanced democratic markets and need to buy cheaper weapons (Yang 171). These self-governance rules and their observed practices make no guarantee that illicit arms transfers are not happening within the Middle East.

Finally, the CCP has successfully navigated the geopolitics of the Middle East and quelled any incitement of their human rights violations of the Uyghur Muslims. The two leading Muslim countries of the world, Saudi Arabia and Iran are both quiet when it comes to criticism of CCPs actions due to their interdependences with energy trade. Despite a bloody CCP incident with the Uyghurs in 2009, Saudi Arabia did not air a single protest so as not to disrupt the 15 percent of their oil exports (Friedrichs 1647). The same goes for Iran, the CCP is too valuable in circumventing embargos and sanctions that they would risk a protest. State interests motivate the Muslim ruling parties would rather embrace their advantageous relations with the CCP than to let their religious bonds create further isolationism.

The CCP waits for opportunities to create advantageous relations with Middle Eastern countries. They also have done well to control the narrative, thus far, ensuring their national interests are advanced and their popularity remains high despite the predatory and colonial tactics that take advantage of developing nations. Their popularity is a misconception that has been ignored by Middle Eastern citizens and elitists; the CCPs actions speak volumes of their intentions. Arms deals are another opportunity to focus and circumvent; the CCP preys on poor countries to trade with. The CCP does not have full control of their military sales and cannot adhere to their self-governance; they may well be playing both sides of a conflict. AFCENT must take the initiative to focus and discover ways to circumvent CCP influence to promote healthy regional cooperation that advances global interests.

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