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## Will China's Middle East Policy Change?

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### **The Core of China's Middle East Policy: Economic Cooperation and the Status Quo**

Despite the complicated dynamics of the Middle East, China has expanded its influence in the region by seeking partnerships based on economic cooperation. China has built strategic partnerships with key countries in the Middle East in the process of promoting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The strategic goals of China's Middle East policy are clear: to secure energy access and to continue promoting the BRI. In that sense, what is important to China is not to solve political or religious conflicts in the region, but rather to maintain the status quo without becoming involving in those conflicts and to obtain economic interests by avoiding confrontation with the US. Therefore, China has highlighted economic relations with various countries in the region by maintaining the principle of non-intervention and 'seeking common ground while putting differences aside' (求同存异).

### **The Possibility of Change in China's Middle East Policy as its Core Interests are Infringed**

Since securing energy resources and promoting the BRI remain China's priorities, China's Middle East policy focused on economic cooperation may continue for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, with intensifying US-China strategic competition and the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, China's core interests are increasingly likely to be infringed. In that case, China will change its Middle East policy to expand its political and military influence in the region in addition to its economic influence. Therefore, we need to pay attention to three factors which might alter China's Middle East policy.

## **1. Possibility of a political coalition with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East**

The Biden administration has strengthened an international coalition of democracies and stepped up values-based pressure on China over issues like human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Given that such criticism directly attacks China's core interests and the Chinese Communist Party's ruling system, China will not make concessions and will instead respond more actively. In this situation, there is a growing possibility that China will seek to build a political coalition with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

In his first overseas trip following the stalled US-China Anchorage summit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a weeklong visit to six Middle Eastern countries in March. He visited Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman, making it the most countries visited in a single Middle East trip by a Chinese official. In his meetings, Minister Wang tried to reach a political consensus with leaders by emphasizing a ruling model with each countries' characteristics, exclusion of external power intervention, and the principle of non-intervention. China, which is being internationally isolated under pressure from democratic countries, seems to be strengthening a political coalition with authoritarian regimes in the region to maintain its influence in the international community.

Since the Biden administration will put pressure on Middle Eastern countries over human rights issues or political values, authoritarian regimes in the region are likely to actively side with China's counterarguments. In that case, they may defend each other or speak with one voice against the US in international organizations such as the United Nations. It is also notable that China's Digital Silkroad, which is rapidly expanding in the Middle East, may accelerate building a political coalition between China and Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes.

## **2. Strengthening China-Iran relations**

Recently strengthening China-Iran relations may become a trigger to change China's Middle East policy in relation to regional dynamics. Despite the possibility to deteriorate relations with the US or Middle Eastern countries which have hostile relations with Iran, China has maintained cooperative relations with Iran, even when the Trump administration applied maximum pressure on Iran. On March 27, China and Iran officially signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement and agreed on a 25-year program to cooperation in the energy, economic, and security fields with \$400 billion in Chinese investment. Accordingly, China-Iran relations will gradually develop in the Biden era.

Nonetheless, in the current situation, China is not likely to abruptly develop relations with Iran or try to change dynamics in the Middle East. This is because this will worsen relations with Middle Eastern countries which are hostile to Iran, not only Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, but also Israel.

However, if US-China strategic competition becomes fierce or another regional conflict occurs, it is possible that China will expand its political and military influence in the Middle East through relations with Iran. Firstly, China may use relations with Iran as leverage in dealing with the US. For example, on June 3 Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin mentioned “the root cause of the Iranian nuclear crisis is the US' unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and maximum pressure,” and demanded that the US should revoke all unilateral sanctions on Iran. This implies that China can be a variable in restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Secondly, if another crisis or conflict breaks out in the region, China is likely to develop its military presence in the region by promoting substantive defense cooperation with Iran. Regardless of external factors like US-China strategic competition, US withdrawal and ongoing regional instability could spark new conflicts. If China's strategic interests are severely threatened in such a situation, China, which has emphasized the ‘dream of a powerful military’ (强军梦) to protect its core interests, will project its military capabilities into the Middle East by expanding military support to Iran and pro-Iranian groups.

### **3. Increasing instability in Xinjiang due to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan**

If China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region and border area become unstable as US forces withdraw from nearby Afghanistan, it is possible that China will actively project its military capability into the region. As US forces leave Afghanistan, some concerns were raised that the Taliban may reemerge to fill a power vacuum in Afghanistan. What is noteworthy is that the Taliban has supported the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), an Islamic separatist group which advocates for the independence of Xinjiang. From a Chinese perspective, the expansion of ETIM is a risk factor which can cause severe damage to stability and security within China's territory. Also, it can increase human right abuses in Xinjiang and further suppression of the Uygur community as China clashes with Western countries over the issue. In that sense, under the pretext of protecting social stability and territorial interests, China is likely to project its military capability and expand its military influence in the region.

## **Policy Implications for South Korea**

China's changing Middle East policy may not appear to be an urgent issue for South Korea which is located in Northeast Asia. If, however, China changes its current Middle East policy focused on economic cooperation and expands its political and military influence in the Middle East, instability in the Middle East will increase. Therefore, South Korea, whose energy resources are dependent on imports from the region, needs to recognize the possibility of changes in China's Middle East policy and prepare for various contingencies. In addition, as a free democracy, South Korea needs to closely

monitor moves towards a political coalition between China and authoritarian regimes as well as human right issues related to Xinjiang Uygur region. A political coalition between China and authoritarian can inhibit the spread of universal values, such as democracy, freedom, human rights, etc. In that sense, South Korea should pay attention to strengthening relations between China and Middle Eastern countries and consider its impacts and response measures.

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(‘중국 중동정책의 변화 가능성’, <http://www.asaninst.org/?p=80473>)