

China Conducting New Strategic Middle East Diplomacy

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China is conducting remarkably aggressive, strategic diplomacy in the Middle East. On March 24 through 30, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman, holding talks with their top leaders and ministers.

As China has expanded oil demand and imports, its presence as an oil and LNG sales destination for the Middle East has increased. While global oil, natural gas and LNG demand declined due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, China was the only major country that boosted such demand, though more slowly than earlier years, enhancing its presence and its influence on energy markets. China's presence for Middle Eastern countries is enormous as an oil and LNG export destination, an economic and trade partner and a provider of strategic economic cooperation, investment and funds under the concept of the so-called Belt and Road Initiative. In such situation, Foreign Minister Wang's tour of the Middle East has demonstrated to the world that China is conducting Middle East diplomacy from a new strategic viewpoint.

China's strategic diplomacy is understood as an initiative to drive a wedge into the anti-China containment network that the United States is developing along with its allies amid its intensifying confrontation with China. The six countries that Minister Wang visited include Iran confronting the United States, as well as Saudi Arabia and other countries positioned as U.S. allies. Generally, the five countries other than Iran give priority to the maintenance and enhancement of friendly relations with the United States for their national security. How strategic was China's diplomacy through Minister Wang's six-nation Middle Eastern tour?

In Iran that is in a confrontation with the United States, Foreign Minister Wang agreed with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to enhance bilateral relations with the two countries' confrontation with the United States in mind. Specifically, China and Iran announced a 25-year cooperation agreement, which reportedly includes China's purchase of Iranian crude oil and its massive investment in Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors. Regarding Iran's relations with the United States over the Iran nuclear deal, China has called for lifting U.S. sanctions on Iran, indicating its understanding of Iran's position.

The U.S. Biden administration has indicated that the United States could come back to the Iran nuclear deal from which the previous U.S. administration withdrew unilaterally. Tehran had expected that Washington would change its attitude on Iran through the U.S. government change. The Biden administration has indicated its potential dialogue with Tehran but has done little for such dialogue until recently. It has retained its attitude of urging Iran to halt uranium enrichment and comply with the nuclear deal. Tehran for its part asserted that Washington should ease or lift sanctions on Iran. Washington and Tehran have thus remained in a stalemate. If the stalemate is prolonged, a hardliner conservative seeking a tougher attitude against the United States could win an Iranian presidential election on June 18. Amid the U.S.-Iran stalemate, Beijing and Tehran agreed to

enhance bilateral relations with their relations with Washington in mind, exerting pressure on Washington.

The Iran visit and the 25-year cooperation agreement were a highlight of Minister Wang's Middle Eastern tour from the viewpoint of strategic diplomacy regarding relations with the United States. Particularly, however, Minister Wang's diplomacy in Saudi Arabia and Turkey attracted my attention.

During his March 24-25 visit to Saudi Arabia, Minister Wang at his talks with Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman positioned the China-Saudi relationship as a strategic partnership and vowed to further develop the relationship. China-Saudi economic and trade cooperation is expected to include the enhancement of COVID-19 countermeasures and cooperation in advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and fifth-generation mobile networks. Attracting my attention is that according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Prince Mohammed supported China's position over the Xinjiang Uyghur, Hong Kong and Taiwan issues when Minister Wang indicated China's attitude of respecting Saudi Arabia's sovereignty.

U.S.-Saudi relations were in a honeymoon phase under the Trump administration. Although then President Donald Trump had good personal relationship with Prince Mohammed, U.S.-Saudi relations have rapidly become more complicated under the Biden administration that gives priority to human rights. As the Biden administration and the United States have taken a critical attitude against Saudi Arabia over the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia that gives priority to relations with the United States has been required to deftly handle the bilateral relationship. The China-Saudi initiative to enhance bilateral cooperation through Minister Wang's visit to Saudi Arabia can be taken as including the two countries' sharing of opposition to interference with internal affairs. It apparently represents China's strategic diplomacy with Saudi Arabia that has been in a complicated situation regarding the relation with the United States.

In Turkey on March 25, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang agreed with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to enhance and promote their countries' economic cooperation. As the Turkish president is also struggling to cope with the Biden administration's human rights campaign and has been plagued with the Turkish lira's rapid depreciation, the enhancement of economic cooperation with China is significant for foreign, economic and other Turkish policies. At a meeting with Minister Wang, President Erdogan emphasized that he had received a Chinese COVID-19 vaccine and that China-Turkey cooperation in COVID-19 countermeasures and in infrastructure development and investment would be important. He refrained from criticizing China over the Uyghur issues while several tens of thousands of people fled from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to Turkey. In Turkey and Saudi Arabia that have sensitive issues with the Biden administration emphasizing human rights, China sent a message of pushing the principle of non-interference with internal affairs and promoting strategic cooperation in an apparent strategic bid to drive a wedge into their relations with the United States.

It may be needless to say that the Middle East is the supply side's most important gravity center in international energy markets and the linchpin of market stability. The power of the United States has traditionally played a key role in stabilizing the Middle East. The United States for its part has recognized that the Middle East and its stability are critically important for U.S. national interests. In response to the Soviet Union's invasion into Afghanistan, then U.S. President Jimmy Carter announced the so-called Carter Doctrine saying, "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United

States of America.” More than four decades later, the circumstance surrounding the Middle East and the United States have dramatically changed along with the United States itself. As the new “U.S.-China cold war” is likely to enter a new phase with bilateral confrontation intensified, we must pay attention to what strategic viewpoint the United States would have in facing the Middle East. This is because the United States’ policy on the Middle East is critically important for the stability of the region and the international energy situation.

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