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## Check the Oil? China Wants To Get Behind the Wheel

The twin crises over Iran and Iran and China's response to U.S. pressure to "do something" about them, are providing an opportunity for Washington to get a glimpse of how the coming multipolar system would look like. It is discovering that getting there requires more than just getting a little help from old friends like Britain or Japan during the Cold War. In the new world disorder where the interests and the values of the U.S. and the other major powers are diverging, the U.S. will not even be able to take for granted their agreement over this or that policy objective not to mention over the means to achieve it.

At best, a mishmash of ad-hoc deals as well as agreements to disagree would lead to interim and unstable arrangements the ones that have been made by the U.S. and China on Iran and North Korea. And at worst, Washington is going to be challenged by emerging powers like China or for that matter, Brazil and Turkey who have tried to undermine the U.S.-led coalition against Tehran.

U.S. policymakers currently assume that they have the right and the obligation to steer the wheel of international diplomacy -- whether it is on the Korean Peninsula or in the Persian Gulf -- towards a certain geo-strategic destination. The corollary of that thinking is that China and other regional and global powers are expected to assist the Americans in getting there by providing good directions, checking the oil, or kicking the tires.

But the view from Beijing (and other capitals) is very different. First, unlike the U.S. and some of its allies, the Chinese leaders do not perceive Iran's nuclear stalemate and South Korea's accusations that the North sank a South's warship as "crises" that require urgent response by the outside world. In fact, the main reason that Beijing is even placing these two issues somewhere on the top of its agenda is Chinese concerns over the American response and that of its allies to these developments; and in the case of South Korea and Israel, Beijing expects Washington to restrain them.

President Barack Obama has hoped that his energetic nuclear nonproliferation agenda would help convince China and other governments of the urgency in joining the U.S. in dealing with the threat of nuclearized North Korea and Iran. But there is no indication that this approach is working, especially since the Chinese recognize that notwithstanding all the affected platitudes about the abolition of all nuclear weapons, the Americans have not punished - and actually rewarded -- India after it went nuclear and are providing support to Pakistan, a failed and unstable state -- where Osama bin-Ladin and his cohorts are residing - after it has followed India's example. And in any case, U.S. decision to reach agreements with the Russia on reducing nuclear arms is more a reflection of U.S. national interests than an idealistic zero-option vision.

And the fact the fact that Kim Jong-Il and members of his clique continue to cling to power in Pyongyang while employing their small nuclear arsenal to deter an attack from the South is very much in line with Chinese national interest in preventing the reunification of Korea under a pro-American government.

Similarly, while China is interested in preventing a preemptive strike by the U.S. and/or Israel against Iran' nuclear installations, it regards Tehran as an important trade and strategic partner. China is Iran's second leading petroleum export destination (after Japan) while Iran is China's second major source of crude oil imports (after Saudi Arabia).

Moreover, the spectacular growth in China's economy depends very much on having access to new energy sources. About 60 percent of its current oil imports come from the Middle East and according to some studies the region could provide around 70 percent of China's imports by 2015, indicating that China will have a growing interest in strengthening its influence there.

Hence while an armed conflict involving Iran and that could destabilize the entire Middle East runs contrary to Chinese interests, the current American hegemony in the region could pose a long-term strategic threat to China if and when its relationship with Washington deteriorate and lead to a war over Taiwan. In that case, the Americans could be in position to deny the Chinese access to the energy sources in the Persian Gulf.

This suggests that any attempt on the part of Washington to foster long-term agreements with Beijing on Korea and Iran as well as other regional and global problems will require the Americans to make major concessions that could affect U.S. core national interests and force it to redefine them. Hence a reunification of Korea could take place only if China is invited to take part in determining the nature of that outcome; for example, by getting the U.S. to terminate its current security agreement with South Korea and by securing the neutralization of a reunified Korea. To put it in more concrete terms, an assertive China unlike a weak Russia would not allow for the kind of scenario that evolved after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when a reunified Germany was invited to join NATO.

Similarly, it is unlikely that the Chinese will accept any step that would lead to the military defeat of Iran by America and its allies which could create the conditions for the establishment of a Pax Americana in the entire Persian Gulf. But China may allow the Americans to use military force against Iran a part of an agreement with Washington that would bring an end to its defense agreement with Taipei and give the Chinese a green light to exert their de-facto control over the rebellious territory.

But taking into consideration the "correlation of forces" worldwide and the political balance of power in Washington, no U.S. president and Congress will be ready any time soon to pursue these kind of policies - a neutralized Korea and the abandonment of Taiwan - that would amount to inviting the Chinese to get behind the wheel, to join the U.S. in managing global directorate, a contemporary version of the 19th Century Congress of Vienna system.

Instead one should expect the kind of short-term deals with the Chinese (and the Russians) over

Iran, Korea and other critical foreign policy issues that are not going to resolve them in a way that would satisfy American leaders and that would invite other rising powers, like Brazil and Turkey, to try to exploit the differences between Washington and Beijing. It is going to be quite a messy world, a very fluid and unstable multipolar system that will steer between war and peace - and the unstable in-between - for a long time.

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