

Report

Implications of the War in Yemen on China

*Raymond Lee**

10 June 2015





[reuters]

Abstract

What are the implications of the war in Yemen on China? What are the wider issues and interests that inform China's foreign policy making? Is there a noticeable trend in China's foreign policy in the context of the ongoing conflict in Yemen? These are the main questions that the current article shall attempt to answer. In view of various strategic interests at stake in the Middle East, Beijing's official attitude toward Yemen Civil War shows great caution and strong eclecticism. To maintain its congenial relationship to all parties, China's diplomacy acted in two ways. It voted in support of UN resolution 2216 on Yemen. The resolution bans arms sales to the Houthi fighters. It also publicly urged the halt of Saudi-led airstrikes to balance the political impact of its UN vote. Such a balancing strategy is also employed by China's regional ally (e.g. Pakistan). From Beijing's point of view, China, the United States, and Russia seem share much more than they differ when facing the current problem in the Middle East. The focal point is how to prevent the Yemen conflict from hindering the negotiation process on the Iranian Nuclear program.

Introduction

Since the clash broke out on 19 March 2015, the Yemen Civil War between Houthi fighters, government troops, and Al-Qaeda militants has aggravated the tension in the Middle East.⁽¹⁾ Reactions of various key countries are divergent. Lead by Saudi Arabia, a coalition of Gulf Cooperation Council states (minus Oman), with political and logistical United States backing, started a military intervention by conducting airstrikes against the Iran-armed Zaidi Houthis.⁽²⁾ Other countries like Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan

also part of the Saudi-led coalition.⁽³⁾ Iran and Russia, however, oppose the military intervention and call for peaceful resolution through multilateral negotiation.⁽⁴⁾ China remains neutral over military action, and calls for a ceasefire, urging the international community to resolve the crisis through diplomacy.⁽⁵⁾ Pakistan, who faces divided opinions domestically, has chosen not to join the Saudi-led intervention but to still express its solid support to Saudi Arabia if it was under territorial threat.⁽⁶⁾

Beijing's official attitude toward the Yemen civil war between the Houthi fighters and the government troops shows great caution and strong eclecticism. Chinese foreign policy makers have tended to reiterate that China calls for a ceasefire and supports the United Nations to play a leading role in resolving the conflict through political negotiation.⁽⁷⁾ There is little clarification about Beijing's real position on this conflict, and this ambiguous attitude is intentionally made to create the room for remaining neutral. Beijing refuses to take sides when reporters ask questions about China's 'real position' on the Saudi-led intervention.⁽⁸⁾ In fact, Beijing only emphasizes that China supports a ceasefire based on the UN Security Council resolution resulting from GCC states' initiatives, the outcome documents of the national dialogue conference, and the Peace and National Partnership Agreement.⁽⁹⁾ All of those agreements are a result of series efforts in the multilateral negotiation, which shaped the important foundation of Yemeni political order after the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down on November 2011. China's official statement shows that Beijing deliberately obscures its political inclination and seeks a peace-broker's role in the Yemeni crisis, a position acceptable to all parties.

Nevertheless, Beijing did exert influence over Saudi Arabia to halt airstrikes. On April 18, Chinese foreign ministry released a news item on its official website that President Xi Jinping had a telephone conversation with King Salman of Saudi Arabia to express Beijing's concerns over the Yemeni crisis and anticipate resolving the conflict through political means.⁽¹⁰⁾ The news announcement signals what Beijing cares about most is to stop the Saudi-led military intervention. Its position is not entirely neutral or without a foreign policy preference, but rather leaning toward the perspective of Iran and Russia on the conflict in an implicit fashion. This perhaps explains Beijing's caution when addressing media questions about the Yemeni conflict.

Issues at Stake for China

The immediate interest at stake for China in the Yemen civil war is the protection of economic investment and the safety of Chinese personnel. According to Statistics published by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China has 14 enterprises and 460 personnel in Yemen. China's trade projects concentrate on oil extraction, telecommunication, construction, roads and bridges, and fishery.⁽¹¹⁾ While the scale of

the investment is rather small, Beijing does strengthen its economic relations with Yemen through expanding China's investment. In response to the Yemen crisis, China has finished personnel evacuation and temporarily closed its embassy since April 6.(12)

Another interest of great importance to China is the stable supply of crude oil. This is not because of concerns about the possible disruption of oil imports from Yemen, but because of the risk that the Houthis might control the seaport of Aden and obstruct the waterway transport in the Gulf of Aden.(13) Strategically speaking, 50% of China's current oil consumption relies on imports, and 21% of the oil imports comes from Saudi Arabia, 11% from Iran, and 13% from Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman combined.(14) China in fact maintains good relations with all the parties in this region. The worst case scenario for China is that both of the oil transportation routes through the straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb are interrupted by the military conflict.

The containment of Islamic terrorists is also a key interest in Beijing's Middle East policy in general.(15) Beijing has been treading very carefully in addressing this issue. China's aim is to prevent misinterpretation of its stand by both the West and the Islamic world. Domestically, the surge of violent incidents in Xinjiang has continued for several years since 2009, and China claims that those terrorist activities are connected to al-Qaeda.(16) Recently, Chinese officials have also claimed that there are some Uighurs who joined ISIS and returned to China to engage in extremist and terrorist activities.(17) Against the backdrop of the Yemen Civil war, Beijing certainly keeps a vigilant watch on the terrorist scene inside Yemen. China was particularly concerned when the Hadi government lost effective control over the bulk of the territory that was occupied by Houthis. While sharing the same anti-terrorist interest, Beijing has never formally joined the US-led global war on terror. The reason is that China has to maintain its independence in crafting its anti-terrorist policy without being caught in the clash between the West and the Islamic world.(18)

The final issue is about great power politics. China has been known to adopt a balancing strategy against the Western dominance in the Middle East.(19) China used to be aligned with Russia in the United Nations to keep in check US hegemony. China not only used its veto power in the UN against bringing the Syrian regime to the international criminal court, but also adopted different views regarding the Palestinian problem and the Iranian sanctions. This is in spite of the fact that China does side with the West to make sure Iran does not pursue nuclear weapons. The complexity of China's Middle East policy has manifested itself fully in the way in which Beijing balances the aforementioned interests in the Yemen Crisis. On the one hand, China will continue siding with Russia and Iran in balancing the influence of the US and its allies in the Middle East. On the other hand, China does not want to see a fragmented and unstable Yemen that intensifies conflict and terrorism in the Middle East.

Recent Trend of Chinese Foreign Policy

China has followed Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy, "lay low and bide our time", to pursue rapid modernization without causing hindrance from the great power politics since early 1990s.⁽²⁰⁾ The gist of this policy is to prevent China from being perceived as a threat or revisionist power. The rise of China in recent years, particularly after the global financial crisis in 2009, has already generated discussion of foreign policy changes among Chinese International Relations scholars⁽²¹⁾ whether Deng's thinking still serves China's best interest. Discussion has gradually shifted to consideration of Beijing's new policy agenda, "a new model for relations between great powers."⁽²²⁾ While the new policy can be interpreted in different ways, it is distinct from Deng's policy. For, China will pursue a more assertive position when engaging in global politics. Some scholars even suggest that Beijing needs to recognize its great power status and should act like a responsible player instead of denying its role.⁽²³⁾ After Xi Jinping rose to the top in 2013, Beijing has shown significant change toward incorporating this new thinking into its foreign policy. Three recent changes could manifest this new direction: first, China has sought to actively participate in the multilateral institutions such the United Nations to engage in international affairs;⁽²⁴⁾ second, China intends to amplify its international influence by proposing regional political and economic initiatives, such as "One Belt And One Road" and "Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank" (AIIB);⁽²⁵⁾ third, meanwhile, China becomes more assertive in the territorial issues, especially in the South China Sea by landfills and construction of the military-length runway.⁽²⁶⁾

Given this policy change, the more important interest associated with the Yemen Crisis is the secure supply of crude oil and political consideration in great power politics. In order to maintain its congenial relationship to all parties in the Middle East, China voted in support of UN resolution 2216 on Yemen that bans arms sales to the Houthi fighters,⁽²⁷⁾ but meanwhile, China also publicly urged the halt of Saudi-led airstrikes to balance the political impact of its UN vote.⁽²⁸⁾ The message conveyed is that China did not side with either camp but emphasized the importance of peaceful resolution through political negotiation in a multilateral setting.

Regional Implications

China pursued a balanced Middle East policy and sought to maintain a peaceful status quo in the region. One potential impact of the Yemen Crisis is related to China's relations with Pakistan, for its decline of Saudi Arabia's request to join the military intervention against the Houthis.⁽²⁹⁾ Despite the fact that Pakistan's refusal seems contradictory to China's attitudes toward the UN resolution against the Houthis, Pakistan and China converge on the eclecticism employed in dealing with this sensitive issue. Pakistan's decline to take part in Saudi Arabia's intervention is mostly associated with the divided domestic opinion and lack of political consensus on the fundamental issues behind the

Yemen Crisis. The Shiite minority and domestic militant groups have different takes in reading the military conflict inside Yemen from the official viewpoint of the Pakistani Government. Pakistan's best strategy, therefore, is to avoid disentanglement in the proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran, while showing an empathic and supportive attitude toward Saudi Arabia without actual engagement. Such an effort can be found in Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's speech when he emphasized that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are close strategic allies, and highlighted the right interpretation of the parliamentary resolution that "Pakistan will defend Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity" (if it is in danger).⁽³⁰⁾ Apparently, what Sharif suggests is that Pakistan remains a strong ally to Saudi, but it wants to stay neutral on this particular issue due to its domestic political landscape. Furthermore, Pakistan believes that the Yemen Crisis should be resolved politically in a peaceful way.

The above analysis indicates that the relationship between China and Pakistan is unlikely to be affected despite the seemingly different reaction to Saudi Arabia's request of support. Both countries intend to play neutral and make some diplomatic effort to offset negative repercussions from their political decisions being wrongly interpreted as favoring one camp over the other. Similarly, Pakistan might have voted yes to the UN resolution on Yemen if it were a UN Security Council member. All of this is speculative, but chances are China and Pakistan would do the same things to avoid claims of favoritism is support of either Riyadh or Tehran.

What the Yemen Crisis means to China in terms of Great Power Politics?

A rising China with a confident President like Xi has brought a significant change in Beijing's foreign policy. The Yemen Crisis in view of China is not simply a civil war or a proxy war, but rather a regional conflict which has profound strategic implications to the great power politics. Beijing has to contemplate all the issues involved and how its reaction might be interpreted and responded to by other great powers. In this regard, what Beijing really care is what position the United States and Russia would take and how they are going to move. Interestingly, both of the US support and the Russian objection toward the Saudi-led intervention stay at the symbolic level. Although the United States did provide logistic and verbal support to Saudi, Washington continues to engage with Iran to resolve the nuclear deal with other five major powers. This suggests that the Iranian nuclear problem has much higher priority to the great powers than does the Yemen Civil War. Likewise, while Russia publicly opposed Saudi's military action, it did not really pose a challenge in the UN but instead simply abstained from participation to show its position. As a matter of fact, Russia also adopted the same position as did China in the Yemen Crisis: stopping military action and seeking peaceful resolution through political talks. From Beijing's point of view, the three great powers share much more than they differ on when facing the current problem in the Middle East. The focal

point is rather how to prevent the Yemen conflict from hindering the negotiation process on the Iranian nuclear program. The strategic interest of China, Russia, and the United States intersects at one issue: verifying that Iranian Nuclear program is restricted to peaceful application as well as stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Copyright © 2015 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.

***Raymond Lee** is a specialist in Chinese affairs.

Endnotes

1. "Yemen Crisis: Who is Fighting Whom?" BBC News, 2015-03-26. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
2. Dan Roberts and Kareem Shaheen, "Saudi Arabia Launches Yemen Air Strikes as Alliance Builds against Houthi Rebels", theguardian, 2015-03-26. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/26/saudi-arabia-begins-airstrikes-against-houthi-in-yemen> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
3. Marie Cabural, "Yemen Conflict: Which Countries Support And Oppose Saudi Arabia", ValueWalk, 2015-03-31. <http://www.valuewalk.com/2015/03/yemen-vs-saudi-arabia/> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
4. "Iran, Russia Demand Immediate Halt to Saudi-led Intervention in Yemen", RT, 2015-03-26. <http://rt.com/news/244373-iran-yemen-saudi-airstrikes/> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
5. Adam Taylor, "What Yemen's Crisis Reveals about China's Growing Global Power", The Washington Post, 2015-03-31. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/03/31/what-yemens-crisis-reveals-about-chinas-growing-global-power/> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]; Muhammad Tahir, "News analysis: Pakistan Opts for Neutral Stance in Yemen Conflict", Xinhuanet, 2015-04-11. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-04/11/c_134142899.htm [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
6. "Pakistan Will Defend Saudi Arabia's territorial Integrity: PM Nawaz", Dunya News Network, 2015-04-13. <http://dunyanews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/273621-Pakistan-will-defend-Saudi-Arabias-territorial-in> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
7. From March 19 to April 18, China foreign ministry spokesman has repeated five times (March 26th, March 27th, March 30th, April 7th, April 18th) the same statement about Yemen regarding the ceased fire of all parties and peaceful resolution through political negotiation. See the official website of Chinese ministry of foreign affairs http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/ [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
8. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 30, 2015", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2015-03-30. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1250354.shtml [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
9. See the first statement China published on March 26th. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on March 26, 2015", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2015-03-26. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1248965.shtml [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
10. "Xi Jinping Talked with King Salman of Saudi Arabia on the Phone", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2015-04-18. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1255849.shtml [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]

11. "Ministry of Commerce: PRC Navy Evacuate 571 people from Yemen", CHINADAILY.COM.CN, 2015-03-31. http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-03/31/content_19961370.htm [retrieved April 19, 2015]
12. "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Announcement of the Temporary Closure of the Chinese Diplomatic and Consular Missions in Yemen", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China, 2015-04-06. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1252339.shtml [retrieved April 19, 2015]
13. Adam Taylor, "What Yemen's Crisis Reveals about China's Growing Global Power".
14. Zhang Jian, "The Source of Imported Oil for China? By Number", FRACp-China, 2015-03-12. <http://www.fracchina.com/report/336> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
15. Chen Jianyu, "Yemen: The Next Hotbed of ISIS", Insight Post, 2015-01-28. <http://www.insight-post.tw/eurasia/20150128/11508> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
16. "Taliban: A Buddy of Xinjiang Independence Movement", SOHU WORLD, 2013-06-27. <http://news.sohu.com/s2013/shijieguan-396/> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
17. "ISIS and Xinjiang: Do Some Uyghurs Really Join ISIS?", Voice of America, 2015-03-05. <http://www.voachinese.com/content/isis-uyghurs-20150302/2665113.html> [retrieved Apr 19, 2015]
18. Zhang Jiadong (2007), "Common Interests and Difference of China and U.S. in the Middle East", Arab World Studies 2007(March): 50-59.
19. Gabriel Domínguez and Ju Juan, "Soft power - China's expanding role in the Middle East", Deutsche Welle, 2015-04-02. <http://www.dw.de/soft-power-chinas-expanding-role-in-the-middle-east/a-18233271> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
20. Editorial, "Deng Xiaoping's lasting legacy", The Japan Times, 2014-08-27. <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/08/27/editorials/deng-xiaopings-lasting-legacy/#.VTSFqSGqgko> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
21. David Shambaugh (2011), "Coping with a Conflicted China", The Washington Quarterly Vol.34, No. 1, pp.7-27. [retrieved June 2, 2015]
22. Rudy deLeon and Yang Jiemian (Eds.) (2014). U.S.-China Relations: Toward a New Model of Major Power Relationship. Center for American Progress. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ChinaReport-Full.pdf> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
23. Baohui Zhang (2010). Chinese Foreign Policy in Transition: Trends and Implications. Journal of Current Chinese Affairs 2/2010: 39-68.
24. Yufan Hao, C.X. George Wei, and Lowell Dittmer (2009). Challenges to Chinese Foreign Policy: Diplomacy, Globalization, and the Next World Power. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, p.28.
25. Philippa Brant, "One belt, one road? China's community of common destiny", the interpreter, 2015-03-31. <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/03/31/One-belt-one-road-Chinas-community-of-common-destiny.aspx?COLLCC=2226406180&> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
26. Victor Robert Lee, "South China Sea: China Is Building on the Paracels As Well", THE DIPLOMAT, 2015-04-14. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/south-china-sea-china-is-building-on-the-paracels-as-well/> [retrieved April 19, 2015]

27. "Security Council Demands End to Yemen Violence, Adopting Resolution 2216 (2015), with Russian Federation Abstaining", United Nations, 2015-04-14.
<http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
28. "Xi Jinping Talked with King Salman of Saudi Arabia on the Phone", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China.
29. Mohammad Mukashaf, "Pakistan Declines Saudi Call for Armed Support in Yemen Fight", REUTERS, 2015-04-10. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/10/us-yemensecurityidUSKBN0N10LO20150410> [retrieved April 19, 2015]
30. "Pakistan Will Defend Saudi Arabia's territorial Integrity: PM Nawaz", Dunya News Network, 2015-04-13. <http://dunyaews.tv/index.php/en/Pakistan/273621-Pakistan-will-defend-Saudi-Arabias-territorial-in> [retrieved April 19, 2015]