Master Graduate Thesis

Change and Continuity in China’s Responses to Three Major Crises in the Middle East

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Introduction

Throughout the current decade, the active involvement of China in Middle Eastern affairs has aroused various international disputes. For example, regarding the Syrian crisis (from 2011 to 2017), China joined with Russia in voting against the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) draft resolutions on the Syrian crisis on six occasions — a historically unprecedented action that provoked furious criticism from Western countries. Jeffrey Payne, a scholar from the National Defense University in the U.S., claimed that “China has thus dodged the Syrian civil war and the costs of participation in that deadly conflict”, and accused China of “willfully ignoring a humanitarian disaster”.

In spite of furious Western criticisms, in late 2015 and early 2016 the Chinese Foreign Ministry respectively invited delegations from the Syrian National Committee and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF) to visit Beijing. After this visit, both parties expressed their willingness to engage in future negotiations with each other; meanwhile, China dispatched its senior diplomats to Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Qatar, Israel and Palestine for consultations about an alternative to the military solution. In addition to these diplomatic measures concerning the Syrian crisis, China even deployed military tactics by sending Chinese warships to the Mediterranean Sea, along with the Russian navy, near Syria.

While the Syrian case was not an exception (as China participated actively in the P5+1 group to promote dialogues and negotiations over the controversial Iran nuclear issue), at a time when the rest of the P5+1 powers could not reach a consensus, China remained relatively neutral and proposed several times to address the Iran nuclear issue through diplomatic rather than military means, within the framework of United Nations. To some extent, because of

China’s constructive engagement in multilateral negotiations, the historic deal JCPOA was finally signed between the parties in July 2015.\(^6\)

Compared with the 1990s, all of these recent moves contrasted greatly with China’s past involvements in the Middle Eastern conflicts and crises. During the last decade of 20\(^{th}\) century, China built diplomatic relationships with all of the Middle Eastern states, while (according to a Chinese scholar Degang Sun), “China identified itself as a ‘bystander’ and ‘free rider’ in the Middle East”. Furthermore, at that time, China’s participation in the Middle East was characterized as low-profile and driven by a desire not to be involved in the internal political conflicts within regional states.\(^7\) Thus, this contrast between China’s past and recent responses to Middle Eastern conflicts seems too elusive to conceptualize. As Dr. Muhamad S. Olimat commented, “China has always opposed Western intervention in the Arab world, but was never as aggressive as it has been over the past years with respect to the Syrian crisis.”\(^8\) Michael Swaine, an expert in China and East Asian security studies, regarded this aggressive change as a form of the greater emergence of “a new assertive China” that aimed at challenging the U.S. leadership capacity.\(^9\) However, if China is pursuing a more aggressive stance in international affairs and is thus becoming “a new assertive China”, then what can explain the sharp contrast between its low-profile participation in the Middle East during the 1990s and its new “aggressive” responses to the Middle Eastern crises in this decade? And what else could be driving China to participate so actively in contemporary Middle Eastern crises, other than its rising demands for energy?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to study China’s changing responses to the Middle Eastern crises over the past three decades; through which, some new light might be shed on the international academic debates over the discrepancy in China’s past and contemporary strategies. Additionally, this study also has societal relevance at an international level, as this study would aid the understanding of how China perceives itself in relation to the Middle East — thus indicating how China posits itself in the international


\(^{7}\) Degang Sun, “China’s Military Relations with the Middle East”, in *The Red Star and The Crescent: China and The Middle East* (Qatar: Georgetown University in Qatar, 2017), p. 9.


arena — and this has great significance for the changing geopolitical and geo-economic framework of the whole world today. Last but not least, an insightful understanding of the change in China’s responses to the Middle Eastern crises is important for both Chinese and international policymakers to determine China’s primary and secondary interests in the Middle East and therefore formulate practical strategies toward Middle Eastern affairs. These will have far-reaching implications on how the countries in the Middle East and the rest of the world should maintain relations with China in the foreseeable future.

**Research Question**

China’s path in responding to Middle Eastern affairs over the past few decades is not consistent. Therefore, it is crucial to study China’s past and contemporary responses to the Middle Eastern crises that took place in the past few decades to discover the pattern of China’s responses. Thus, the research question of this study would be: **What is the pattern of China’s past and contemporary responses to three major crises in the Middle East?**

By asking this question, this study aims to find the trajectory of this pattern, to see whether this is logical or contradictory, and to analyze the different priorities in China’s Middle Eastern strategy when responding to Middle Eastern crises at different times.

Given the fact that there was a series of conflicts and crises that took place in the Middle East during the past few decades, it is important for this study to narrow down the scope of this research question. In this regard, this study will consist of three sub-questions by focusing on three major crises in the Middle East and investigating how China responded to them respectively: **the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq war, and the ongoing Syrian crisis.** Each of these three crises represents a major event in its time with considerable regional and international influence, while China itself also went through significant regime changes and huge societal changes from the last decade in 20th century up to now. Therefore, this study would presume that China’s different responses to these three events indicate a process in which China keeps changing and adjusting its approach to engage with the Middle East, as a result of China’s changing interests in the region. This study will conclude with a comprehensive answer to the research question by investigating these major cases.
**Literature Review**

As one of the permanent members in the U.N.S.C. and a rising power on the world stage, China’s stance and participation in the Middle Eastern crises are within many scholars’ concerns and international disputes. Previous research regarding China and conflict in the Middle East can be sorted into four schools:

The first school conducted research on the impact of Middle Eastern crises upon China, specifically on the impact upon multilateral trade and the Sino-Middle Eastern relations after the crises; such as *Sino-Middle Eastern Perspectives and Relations since the Gulf War: Views from Below*, published by Dr. C. Gladney in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, which provides a multi-layered perspective to evaluate how China was influenced by the Gulf War and how Sino-Middle Eastern relations turned after the war. The second school consists of a number of articles and books that determine the basic theories and concepts within mediation diplomacy, including ‘mediation’, ‘arbitration and consultation’, ‘good governance’ and so forth; moreover, these works of literature are primarily focused on mediation cases conducted by the developed countries and international organizations, such as the U.S. and the United Nations. The third school examines China’s increasing interests and involvement in the contemporary Middle East, the research results provide analysis on the implications of China’s greater involvement in the Middle East and the motivations that drive China to do so; such as *China in the Middle East: Discourses and Reality*, published by Weijian Li in *Chinese Journal of West Asia and Africa*. The fourth school includes a limited number of studies that research how China itself perceives its participation and contributions in the management of Middle Eastern crises; such as *Sovereignty, Intervention and Peacekeeping: the View from Beijing*, written by J. Reilly & B. Gill in *Survival*, which examines China’s presences in Middle East peacekeeping mission, and analyzes how China balances the issue of involvement and intervention in Middle Eastern conflicts, from Beijing’s view.

So far, these studies offer informative analyses and critical opinions from different perspectives; however, there is insufficient research investigating China’s participation in dealing with the Middle Eastern crises, and because of this, the current research tends to focus more on the standard form of conflict mediations conducted by developed countries (e.g., the U.S. and European powers) and international organizations in the Middle East. As a
result, participation and measures undertaken by developing countries like China – which is a relatively new player in the region – are to some extent, ignored. Thus, this paper seeks to fill this gap and contribute further to the research on China’s responses and participation in dealing with Middle Eastern crises, at a moment when China is gaining increasing geo-economic and geopolitical influence in the Middle East, today.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to study China’s past and contemporary responses to the Middle Eastern crises during the past few decades, understanding the internal philosophy in the measures and decisions undertaken by the Chinese government is crucial. After examining some western theories of international relations, like ‘conflict mediation’, ‘foreign policy’, and ‘good governance’, as well as some political discourses formulated by the Chinese government, this study would like to use one of China’s political discourses, *Wushi Zhuyi*, namely Chinese pragmatism, as the theoretical framework of this study.

Given the fact that the theories of ‘conflict mediation’, ‘foreign policy’, and ‘good governance’ are of broad popularity in international academia, they are more applied to theorize the participation of western developed countries in international affairs and conflicts; however, as a developing country and a relatively new player in Middle Eastern affairs, China has its own diplomatic philosophy and a way of participating which is different from developed countries who have a long history in dealing with the Middle East. This is also the reason that the Chinese leaderships have consistently addressed the importance of pursuing “major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”\(^{10}\). From this point of view, this study would consider that China’s emphasis on the diplomacy with “Chinese characteristics” indicates that China participates in international affairs and conflicts in ways that are compatible with Chinese values and goals, instead of adopting models and approaches from developed countries. Therefore, it would be better for this study to use China’s political discourse to frame and explain China’s responses and participation in the Middle Eastern crises, rather than western theories of international relations.

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Studying China’s responses and participation in dealing with the Middle Eastern conflicts is to study China’s foreign policy decision-making, which is inspired and largely influenced by China’s diplomatic philosophy — Chinese pragmatism.\(^{11}\) It should be noted that Chinese pragmatism is generated from the original definition of pragmatism, which is “behavior disciplined by neither set of values nor established principles”\(^{12}\) and “behavior dictated more by practical consequences than by theory or dogma.”\(^{13}\) Based on this definition, it can be seen that the philosophy of pragmatism has thereby nothing, or very little, to do with certain ideologies, instead it is a way of thinking that aims at fulfilling one’s pragmatic goals. Following the original thinking of pragmatism, Chinese pragmatism began to take hold in China’s foreign policy in late Mao Zedong’s presidency, and has been fully developed in Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, during which Deng Xiaoping held on to the belief “theory is extracted from practice”\(^{14}\) and initiated China’s “reform and opening up” in late 1978.\(^{15}\) Ever since the reform and opening up, China was becoming much more integrated into the world economy; meanwhile, a radically changing international system.

Under such context, Chinese pragmatism developed its own tactics that guided China to make relevant responses and adjust its decision-making when dealing with international affairs, especially conflicts and crises. By examining the practice of Chinese pragmatism in response to regional crises in the Middle East, this study finds out certain characteristics of this practice. first and foremost, Chinese pragmatism guides China to act flexibly to preserve or maximize its national interests when involved in a regional crisis; secondly, China would always promote a peaceful settlement of any crisis, since a military solution would inevitably undermine China’s relevant interests in the region; thirdly, China would prefer maintaining stability than taking risks, as taking risks may result in much more loss of its interests; lastly, regardless of any situation, China was uncompromising with others’ demands that would threaten China’s most crucial interest—regime stability.


Throughout three cases of Middle Eastern crises, Chinese pragmatism has guided China to make different responses under different contexts, nevertheless, China’s fundamental purpose remained all the same—to preserve or maximize China’s national interests. In the case of 199 Gulf War, this study is going to examine how Chinese pragmatism guided China to prioritize Sino-U.S. relations in the wake of 1989 Tiananmen incident, and thereby abstain on its vote for Resolution 678 (1990); regarding the case of 2003 Iraq War, this study aims at evaluating how Chinese pragmatism motivated China to consistently remain neutral between disputing parties, cautiously balance its responses to the United Sates, and actively participate in the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1441 (2002) on the Iraqi issue; with regard to the contemporary Syrian Crisis, this study is going to analyze how Chinese pragmatism propelled China to proactively engage in the Syrian issue by successive use of vetoes and skillful diplomacy, in order to protect its relevant interests.

With regard to all of three cases, China has responded to them by different responsive approaches, however, the only thing remained consistent is the internal philosophy of China’s responses and engagement — Chinese pragmatism, which could provide an effective theoretical framework that frames China’s responses to three cases in the same picture, and helps this study to reach a comprehensive analysis of the pattern of China’s past and contemporary responses to three Middle Eastern crises.

**Methodology**

**Data selection**

This study will be a qualitative research relying on source materials that consist of primary sources and secondary sources. The analysis of this research will be largely based on historical facts and archival data, therefore, the primary sources will be the highlight of the research. So far, the primary sources include Chinese authoritative remarks and international documents concerning three cases of Middle Eastern crises. On the Chinese side, the primary sources are Chinese former president Jiang Zemin’s (presidency from 1993 till 2003) public speech in 2002, former president Hu Jintao’s (presidency from 2003 till 2013) comments on
the Iraq war in 2003, and current president Xi Jinping’s (presidency from 2013 till now) statements in 13th National People's Congress in 2018. Moreover, statements and remarks on three cases declared by Chinese Foreign Ministry and Chinese Ambassadors to the U.N. On the international side, the primary sources contain U.N.S.C. Resolutions 660, 661, 662, 678 on the Gulf war, Resolution 1441 on the Iraq war, and a series of draft resolutions concerning the ongoing Syrian crisis. Besides, statements issued by The White House and speeches delivered by American leaders such as George W. Bush and Colin Powell on the Iraq war are also an important part of the primary sources in this study.

In addition to the primary sources, the secondary sources mainly come from three kinds of sources. Firstly, publications concerning three cases issued by certain Chinese figures (such as Chinese former leader Deng Xiaoping and former foreign minister Qian Qichen) and a number of international scholars. Secondly, relevant research papers published by various Chinese and international research institutes, think tanks, and key academic journals, including the China Institute of International Studies, PLA Academy of Military Science, the U.S. Army War College, China Quarterly, Arab World Studies, China Leadership Monitor, Pacific Affairs, and Middle East Journal. Lastly, a number of news reports released by both Chinese and international news sites, such as Xinhua.net, People’s Daily, China Global Television, The Diplomat, and The Guardian.

**Data analysis**

This study is designed as a qualitative research and will employ historical case study as its analytical approach. Basically, the historical case study is an approach combining the strength of both historical analysis and case study, used for addressing problems related to process, pattern, change, continuity, and evolution.\(^\text{16}\) Regarding the research question of this study *“What is the pattern of China’s past and contemporary responses to three major crises in the Middle East?”*, this study will be a case-based research investigating China’s responses and participation in the Middle Eastern crises case by case, furthermore, this study not only aims at discovering the pattern of past events but also relating the analysis of past happenings to the analysis of contemporary events, and finally to find out the pattern of

China’s involvement during the past few decades, historical case study is thereby the best approach for this study.

Choosing appropriate cases is the first and foremost step of applying the historical case study approach. In order to study China’s responses to the past and contemporary crises in the Middle East, and to find out how is the pattern of China’s responses like, such as consistency, contradiction or evolution, there are three factors to be taken into consideration when choosing the cases: **the time of the crisis** (two cases in the past and one in the present), **the influence of the crisis**, and **the applicable data of the crisis**. Since there were too many regional crises that took place in the Middle East over the past several decades, taking these factors into account can help to pick out the most representative cases with considerable influence and enough data to conduct the research. In this regard, this study selects the 1991 Gulf war, the 2003 Iraq war, and the ongoing Syrian crisis as the research objects of this study.

The analysis section in this study is organized into three chapters based on three sub-questions to study three cases. By applying the historical case study approach, the first chapter is going to brief China’s historical context prior to the first Gulf war — 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, meanwhile, to investigate how China’s pragmatism-thinking guided China to remain overall low-profile and take Sino-U.S. relations as the top priority in the wake of 1989, and thereby silently give permission for the U.S.-led intervention against Iraq. The second chapter is going to examine China’s participation in the multilateral debates over the Iraqi issue prior to the war, followed by studying China’s responses to the following Iraq war; moreover, this chapter aims at analyzing how China’s pragmatism-thinking propelled China to make a pragmatic calculation of its interests and concerns, which led to China’s active promotion of a peaceful settlement of the Iraqi crisis, meanwhile, cautious responses to the relevant parties. The last chapter will focus on China’s involvement in the ongoing Syrian crisis, especially on China’s successive use of vetoes and skillful diplomacy; attempting at analyzing how China’s pragmatism-thinking determined its interests and concerns, and thereby oriented its responses and involvement throughout the Syrian crisis. Based on the close examination of China’s responses, each chapter will answer the relevant sub-question, analyze China’s interests and concerns in each case, and describe characteristics of China’s responses to each case in the evaluation section.
By studying three different cases, this research is going to draw a comprehensive answer to the main research question in the final conclusion, which consists of summarizing the characteristics of China’s responses under different historical contexts, elaborating on the pattern of China’s responses to studied cases, and finally analyzing the implications of this pattern. The result of this study aims at contributing to a better understanding of the process in which China’s pragmatism-thinking has kept guiding China to change and adjust its way to engage in Middle Eastern crises.
Chapter I: China’s Responses to the First Gulf War¹⁷
1990-1991

Following China’s embrace of the “reform and opening up” policy, initiated by the pragmatist leader Deng Xiaoping in late 1978, Chinese foreign diplomacy entered a new phase of development. In the following decade, China invested much more effort into establishing diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern countries, and by 1992, China had built diplomatic relations with all of the countries in the Middle East. However, the beginning of the 1990s saw the breakout of the Gulf war, when Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing U.S.-led military campaign against Iraq offered China a great lesson in recognizing the intractability of dealing with Middle Eastern conflicts. Regarding the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq, China’s abstention on the U.N.S.C. vote played a crucial role; silently giving the green light to the use of forces against Iraq, by inertia. Given the fact that China was consistently opposed to a military resolution, it should be asked: what drove China to abstain on its vote to prevent a devastating war? To study this question, this chapter is going to examine how China’s dilemma in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, and how China’s diplomatic philosophy “wushi zhuyi”—Chinese pragmatism—guided China to make its decision that tacitly allowed the U.S.-led intervention against Iraq in 1991. This chapter aims at analyzing China’s actual priorities, interests, and concerns beyond its inconsistent path in responding to the Gulf War.

China’s dilemma in late Cold-war era

As the Cold War began to fade in late 1980s, the bilateral relations between the United States and China (that was largely based on their anti-Soviet beliefs) were at a crisis. Although China and the Soviet Union were both adhering to the Communist camp during the Cold war, their relations were hindered by ideological divergences, geopolitical competitions and historical distrust. Each of them believed that they were the real Communist followers while the other was on a wrong path, and hence tried to become the leader of the Communist

¹⁷ To make it clear, this study interchangeably uses the terms “First Gulf War” and “Persian Gulf War”, both referring to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the ensuing U.S.-led military intervention of Iraq in 1991.
The Sino-Soviet split eventually became the foundation for Nixon’s historical visit to China in 1972 and the beginning of U.S.-China anti-Soviet alliance during the late phase of the Cold War. As for the United States, competing with the Soviet Union and containing its expansion in Eurasia was the first priority for American foreign policy during the Cold War. As a result, the United States and China were both on the anti-Soviet side, while the fundamental ideological differences between them were temporarily put aside. However, the situation began to change when the Cold War was coming to an end.

In 1989, the territory of the Soviet Union began to fall apart and its Communist regime was challenged by liberal democratic values. Under such context, the overwhelming concern of the Chinese government gradually shifted from containing the military threat imposed by the Soviet Union to preventing the values and ideals of Western liberal democracies from threatening the Chinese Communist regime. However, the Chinese government was unable to control the emergence of political unrest on this subject, and in mid-1989, over 100,000 students in Beijing initiated the largest student-led demonstrations in China’s history, calling for democracy, political accountability, freedom of press and speech. Several weeks later, with more and more student protestors joining the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government—led by hardliner leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng—decided to crack-down on the demonstrations by force. In June 1989, the violent suppression of student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square took place in front of international journalists (who originally came to report on Soviet leader Gorbachev’s visit to China) and as a consequence, China’s international reputation was destroyed overnight.

This was at a moment when the United States was aware of its prevalence over its counterpart Soviet Union, therefore, there was no longer a necessity for the U.S. to stand with China on the same side. As a means to punish China for the violent Tiananmen incident, the

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18 For the troubled relations between China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, see Chen Jian, Mao’s China and the Cold War. And, Lorenz M. Luthi, Sino-Soviet Split Cold War in the Communist World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
21 Ibid.,
U.S. imposed sanctions against arms sales to China and suspended the U.S.-China anti-Soviet cooperation, which made Chinese government furious. By resorting to violent means, the Chinese government had successfully controlled the massive demonstrations; yet, the Tiananmen Square incident also forced Chinese government to realize the impact of such actions on its international reputation, and that maintaining good relations with the U.S. should be cautiously cultivated. The Tiananmen incident impeded U.S.-China relations in many profound ways. The most crucial one that affected China’s subsequent decision-making during the Gulf War was that it resulted in a complicated attitude from China towards the United States. On the one hand, American sanctions as a punitive means increased the Chinese government’s suspicion and hatred towards the U.S., while on the other hand, improving U.S.-China relations became an even higher priority for China in 1990s—in the sense that the Chinese government was in desperate need of rebuilding its reputation and gaining international recognition at that moment, and there was no international recognition from any other country than the United States that could be more significant in saving China’s reputation.

According to a declassified telegram written by American senior diplomat James Lilley in July 1989 in Beijing, which noted, “Today, the Chinese are engaged in a massive campaign to discredit U.S. influence to the Chinese people. At the same time China wants our trade, our technology and enough of a security connection so that it does not end up facing the Soviet Union alone”23, China’s seemingly contradictory reactions in criticizing the U.S. domestically while eagerly trying to maintain good relations with the U.S. was actually a reflection of what China had learned from the radically changing international system. This lesson China learned received the best summary from Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in the collection of his interviews:

“We have to cautiously watch the development of the international environment; there are questions out there that we cannot see clearly at the moment. The world is big, very big, there are deep conflicts that are emerging to the surface. There are conflicts that we can take advantage of,

there are forces we can take advantage of, and there are opportunities out
there. The question is, how do we take advantage of them?”

This lesson was so important that it greatly affected China’s decision-making in the following Gulf War.

China’s failure and acquiescence during the Gulf War

The year 1990 witnessed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait due to Saddam Hussein’s attempt to annex Kuwait on 2nd August, and on the same day the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 660 demanding Iraq’s immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. In the following days, the Security Council passed Resolution 661 which imposed comprehensive sanctions against Iraq, and Resolution 662 which condemned Iraq’s illegal annexation of Kuwait.

Regarding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it seemed that China also had its concerns. A Chinese government spokesperson firstly expressed China’s “strong attention and uneasiness about the incident”, calling for “immediate cease of military actions” and “peaceful solution to solve disputes.” It should be particularly noted that the spokesperson chose the word “incident” to refer to Iraq’s illegal annexation of Kuwait, rather than “invasion”; in other words, China was shocked by Iraq’s military action against Kuwait yet tried to avoid blaming any party. This was a way in which China’s pragmatism mindset can be seen—guiding China to try to keep a low-profile and avoid making enemies with Middle Eastern countries. In addition, Chinese Ambassador to the U.N., Li Daoyu, indicated China’s main position was to insist on Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and a peaceful settlement of the issue, as “China was

in principle against big countries to intervene the crisis by military forces.” 29 From the Ambassador’s words, it can be seen that China consistently called for a peaceful solution to the crisis, but on balance, was far more concerned about the intention of “big countries” in using military forces against Iraq.

The situation became even worse, however, when Iraq refused to withdraw its troops from Kuwait and the possibility of military intervention led by the U.S. loomed on the spot. At this moment, Chinese leadership soon realized that this could be seen as an opportunity for China: in the words of Deng Xiaoping, “there are conflicts that we can take advantage of.” It was China’s pragmatism-thinking that guided China to take advantage of others’ conflicts, especially considering that even if China would fail to manage the conflict, it would lose nothing; while if China would succeed, it could be a great opportunity for China to repair their damaged relations with the U.S. (in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen incident) and rebuild its international image.

Hence, for the sake of its own pragmatic considerations, China dispatched the Foreign Minister Qian Qichen as a special envoy to mediate the tense situation in the Middle East in November 1990, who later explained the aim of his visits to the Middle East in his published memoir:

“In the Middle East, China has no direct and crucial links (to any warring party), China does not seek selfish interests, and therefore China’s position is special and is trusted and respected by Arab countries......Visiting the Middle East at this moment, and seeking a peaceful solution to the Persian Gulf Crisis will significantly enhance China’s international reputation and expand China’s influence in the region.”30

During his trip, Qian respectively met with several major Middle Eastern rulers, including Saddam Hussein, during which Qian was asked about China’s opinion regarding the situation, Qian did not explicitly indicate China’s position on a military solution other than repeatedly insisting on Iraq’s withdrawal and the sovereignty of Kuwait.31 Again, Qian’s

31 Ibid., p. 67.
vague answer regarding a military solution implied China’s cautiously balanced attitude, which was in line with China’s pragmatic approach to avoid offending any party when dealing with conflicts. However, China’s intention to mediate the situation in the Middle East was apparently thwarted by Qian’s meeting with Saddam Hussein, as, tough and stubborn as Saddam Hussein was, China failed to persuade Iraq of complete withdrawal and thereby prevent a devastating war in the Middle East. More profoundly, Saddam’s stubbornness broke China’s last hope of enhancing its international status and improving U.S.-China relations through diplomatically solving this crisis.

Yet, although China’s diplomatic attempt proved to be a total failure, it also acted as a chance for Chinese leaders to realize that China was unable to make any difference to those major players in the region without any real economic or military power. On 29th November, 1990, the resolution 678 drafted by the U.S. was awaiting its vote by the U.N.S.C. This draft resolution addressed Iraq’s noncompliance to execute previous U.N. resolutions and proposed to “use all necessary means to uphold and implement resolution 660 (1990) and all subsequent relevant resolutions to restore international peace and security in the area.”32 At this moment, China was placed in a unique position of power, as—with its decisive vote-or-veto authority as one of the five permanent members at the U.N.S.C.—China’s vote was crucial for the implementation of Resolution 678. Now that it seemed that military action to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait was becoming increasingly inevitable, would China hold on to its diplomatic principle of non-interventionism to prevent a devastating war, or forgo this principle and give the green light to a U.S.-proposed military plan?

According to Qian Qichen’s memoir, the Americans knew exactly why China was hesitating on this, and thereby offered China a deal that was difficult to reject—exchanging China’s approval of Resolution 678 for Qian’s meeting with President Bush, which could be China’s last chance to repair its relations with the United States.33 After voting ‘yes’ for all previous U.N. resolutions, this time China voted neither for nor against, deciding instead to abstain from voting on Resolution 678. With China’s abstention and the other four permanent members’ votes being for Resolution 678, the U.S.-led coalition forces were authorized to implement the resolution “by all necessary means.”

Five months after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, in January 1991, the U.S. launched the so-called *Desert Storm Operation*, dropping tons of laser-guided missiles to destroy Iraqi troops, aircrafts and radar systems, making Iraqi military forces literally helpless against the precise air attacks. Right after this intense strategic bombing campaign, the Americans then began a full-scale ground intervention against Iraq. With the casualties of Iraqi troops amounting to over 200,000 within only one month, Saddam Hussein called for an unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait in February, 1990.  

It should be noted that the U.S.-led *Desert Storm Operation* was historically the first war between a modern army equipped with high-tech weapons and a conventionally mechanized army, as well as being the first war to be fully live broadcasted worldwide.

**Evaluation of China’s responses to the Gulf War**

This study found that over the course of the Gulf War, China remained low-profile overall in its responses. Despite China making an attempt at mediating the tense situation in the region, its response to the whole conflict, especially relevant parties, were cautious and inexplicit.

Among these, what should be particularly studied must be China’s abstention on U.N.S.C. Resolution 678, which suggests that there were certain motivations and concerns that drove China to make this decision to abstain on the vote, and in other words, to tacitly approve the U.S.-led military intervention against Iraq. Out of the nature of China’s pragmatism-thinking, to protect its national interests, China’s abstention was primarily based on its diplomatic priority to enhance U.S.-China relations; especially at a time when Sino-U.S. relations had recently deteriorated (ever since the U.S. imposed sanctions on China after 1989 Tiananmen incident), Chinese government was particularly reluctant to offend the American leaders. Knowing that a U.S.-led military campaign against Iraq was bound to happen with or without the U.N. authorization, China would not risk itself being blacklisted by the U.S. through voting against this Resolution. What’s more, choosing to oppose the international community would not have complied with China’s pragmatic need to resolve its position of being internationally isolated. At the same time, however, it was even more impossible for China to publicly support a military resolution to the Gulf crisis, because supporting a military

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resolution was not only contradictory to the diplomatic principle of non-interventionism which China held on to, but also to China’s insistence on a peaceful solution to the crisis, as it had consistently advocated for. Therefore, China’s decision to abstain on the vote was a compromise guided by China’s pragmatism-thinking, in order to avert political risks while preserving its own interests.

Furthermore, it should be particularly noted that, unlike the contemporary situation of China being in huge demand for the Gulf oil, the country’s overall interests in 1990 and 1991 were quite limited in the Persian Gulf. Since this was a time when China had not yet become a net oil importer, the vast energy resources in the Persian Gulf therefore meant little for China’s foreign decision-making at that time. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Persian Gulf was far less important to China’s international relations than the U.S. was. Taking these motivations into account, China’s decision to abstain on its vote for Resolution 678 could be clearly understood as simply choosing the best option to preserve its national interests and recover from the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen incident after China’s pragmatic calculation of both risks and benefits.

After witnessing how the U.S. overwhelmingly defeated the Iraqi troops (which had historically been the strongest army in the Middle East), Chinese leadership were deeply perturbed, instantly changing their rhetoric to condemnation of the Americans’ excessive use of military force against Iraq. Ten years after the Gulf War, China officially defined the war as “the war of a global hegemon (the U.S.) against a regional hegemon (Iraq).” This study would suggest that China’s inconsistent response after the U.S.-led intervention of Iraq mainly derived from China’s fear of American interventionism and a self-awareness of its own military incompetence.

Chinese leadership soon realized that the Cold War was coming to an end and there was no longer a competent rival like the Soviet Union to counterbalance America’s power and ambition worldwide; the post-Cold War world was determined to be dominated by the U.S., and if the U.S. could militarily intervene Iraq, it would also be capable of doing so to China someday. American interventionism thereby became the gravest nightmare for Chinese

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35 China did not become a net oil importer until 1993.
leadership. What was worse, in the 1990s, China was totally incompetent in military forces compared with the modern American armies that were equipped with high-tech weapons and advanced information technology. The Gulf War made the Chinese government realize its own military weaknesses, and the reality that China was left far behind the U.S. in terms of military technology. As a result, the Gulf War became the catalyst of China’s military modernization program which started in the mid-1990s.

Regarding the Gulf War, this study suggests that an understanding of China’s internal and international context is central to understanding China’s responses and decision-making, overall. At the beginning of 1990s, China itself remained politically isolated, economically weak and militarily incompetent, resulting in a lack of fundamental interests in the Middle East, and largely limiting China’s regional influence during the Gulf War. In this regard, despite China not being in favor of a military solution to the crisis, it ultimately gave silent permission for the Desert Storm Operation to take place. Although this is a seemingly inconsistent response, this study would argue, however, that China’s pragmatic goals had in fact remained the same over the course of the crisis—to improve its international status and relations with the United States. In the case of the Gulf War, it can be seen that China’s pragmatism-thinking drove China to make a precise calculation of risks and benefits before responding to the conflict: demanding that China remain cautious and low-profile, avoiding direct confrontation with any relevant party. Yet, due to this pragmatic calculation and limited regional influence, China could not make any difference to the outburst of the Gulf War.
Chapter II: China’s Responses to the 2003 Iraq War

As a result of the collapse of Soviet Union, the old bipolar world system which lasted for several decades was replaced by the American-led unipolar system. Meanwhile, the overwhelming Desert Storm Operation in 1991 marked the beginning of American dominance in Middle Eastern affairs. When the U.S. was busy dealing with the Middle East, the hostility between Iraq and the U.S. allowed China a golden decade of development. During this decade, China began to put more focus into military modernization and economic reforms, and the year of 1993 marked China’s turning point in becoming a net oil importer. Realizing the vital importance of energy security to national security, China showed increasing interests in energy imports from the Middle East, in particular from Iraq. A peaceful Iraq was thereby indispensable for the stable energy supply to China, whereas the prospect of another U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in the post-9/11 era gravely threatened China’s most pragmatic needs—energy—in Iraq. So how did China respond to this Iraq war? What were China’s interests and concerns at play? This chapter focusses on how China participated in the multilateral debates over the Iraqi issue and how China responded to the following U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Based on China’s responses, this chapter will analyze how China made its responses driven by a pragmatic calculation of its interests and concerns throughout the Iraq war.

Multilateral Debates over the Iraqi issue

One year after the devastating terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, American president George W. Bush delivered a speech in the 57th U.N. General Assembly on 12th September, 2002; during which, Bush provided a series of evidence accusing the Iraqi regime of violating the U.N.S.C. previous resolutions, supporting al-Qaeda terrorists, hiding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and concluded that “if Iraq’s regime defies us again, the world must move deliberately, decisively to hold Iraq to account.” Since the 9/11 attack, the U.S. labeled Iraq as a grave threat to its national security, and this time Bush’s tough attitude seemed to indicate Americans’ intention of going to war with Iraq once

Text of President Bush’s speech to the 57th UN General Assembly-2002-09-12, VOA News, 30th October 2009. Available at https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2002-09-12-32-text-67581067/388950.html
again. Bush’s words not only made the international community nervous about the intense situation, but also placed Iraq under huge pressure. Just several days after Bush’s speech, the Iraqi Foreign Minister declared Iraq’s permission for the U.N. weapons inspectors to return to Iraq for the immediate resumption of inspections. It seemed that the Iraqi regime wished to ease the hostility and aggressiveness of the U.S. by allowing U.N. weapons inspectors to restart inspection work in Iraq; however, Iraq’s concession could hardly satisfy America’s actual intention—to overturn the regime of Saddam Hussein.

In October 2002, the U.S. and the U.K. co-issued the “Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq”, by which Americans’ attempt to deploy military forces against Iraq could not be more explicit. Regarding the American-British “Joint Resolution”, France and Russia stood in opposition by directly indicating that they would use their veto authorities if the U.S. would put this resolution on the table at the U.N.S.C. While China’s response was not as hardline as France and Russia, without threatening to use their veto authority, China insisted on a political solution to the Iraqi issue within the framework of the United Nations. It could be seen that China’s first response was relatively neutral and cautious by not choosing any side among the disputing parties, which was a typical approach of China’s pragmatism. In this way, China would not explicitly express its favor or opposition, rather, holding strategic ambiguity in order to avoid offending any relevant party.

Knowing that other permanent member states would hardly approve the “Joint Resolution”, the U.S. and the U.K. had no choice but to amend the resolution. Eventually in November 2002, the U.N.S.C. Resolution 1441 was passed unanimously with 15 votes, and was seen to be the most significant resolution adopted over the course of Iraq war. It is worth noting

that the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1441 was accomplished under China acting as the rotating president of the Security Council, during which, China participated actively to promote a consensus among member states with different opinions. Regarding this resolution, the Chinese spokesman declared that:

“We resolutely advocate using peaceful methods to resolve the issue of Iraq, acting within the framework of the United Nations, by way of political and diplomatic measures. The Chinese government has always called on Iraq to implement the relevant resolutions of the Security Council strictly and in full, to cooperate fully with the United Nations, and to investigate thoroughly and destroy weapons of mass destruction……. based on the status of Iraq’s implementation of the resolutions, the Security Council should consider suspending and ultimately abolishing the sanctions which have been imposed against Iraq for the long span of time of twelve years.”  

From these words, it is clear that China was very concerned with the Iraqi issue, as China not only tried to persuade Iraq into full compliance with U.N. resolutions, but also attempted to persuade the U.N. into suspending and abolishing the sanctions imposed on Iraq. However, it would be more accurate to say that China was concerned about its own pragmatic interests than to say that China was concerned about the chaos in Iraq, since a peaceful Iraq without sanctions was fundamental to Chinese trades and contracts worth millions of dollars in Iraq, and this was one of the main driving forces for China to participate so actively to address a political solution to the Iraqi issue.

As soon as Iraq accepted Resolution 1441, the U.N. weapons inspectors restarted inspection work in Iraq in December 2002. After two months’ work, the U.N. weapon inspectors presented reports concluding that there was no provable evidence of the existence of WMD in Iraq and thus called for a longer-term inspection. However, the war-hungry U.S. was not satisfied with the results presented by the U.N. inspectors, and in the following month, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered a speech at the U.N.S.C., during which he presented a series of tapes, videos, and pictures to prove Iraq’s failure to disarm WMD and

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concluded by claiming that “Today, Iraq still posed a threat and still remained in material breach of Resolution 1441.”

It could be argued that at this moment, the efforts made by Colin Powell to prove Iraq's violation of Resolution 1441 was the last attempt of the U.S. at persuading other member states and acquiring authorization from the U.N.S.C., in order for the U.S. to be able to justify its following invasion.

Regarding Colin Powell’s words, the U.N.S.C. split into a pro-war camp and anti-war camp; member states like Spain and the U.K. in support of the U.S., while Russia, France, and Germany explicitly expressed their opposition against the deployment of military forces against Iraq. When it came to China’s response, Chinese foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan stated that “as long as there was still the slightest hope for political settlement, the utmost effort should be exerted to achieve it, China was ready to join others in working in that direction.”

Once again, by repeating its insistence on a political solution to the conflict, China’s inexplicit response indicated its reluctance to stand with either the pro-war or anti-war camps. Even though it was in principle against the use of military forces, China was more concerned with the potential risks of joining any of the camps, as it would certainly offend the U.S. by standing with the anti-war camp, or be condemned by the rest of international community if it would support a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq—neither of which would be an option that China was willing to accept, given the larger context of early 2000s being a time when China was in need of maintaining a China-friendly international environment, beneficial to its economic development and modernization.

*The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq*

In March 2003, the furious debates over the Iraqi issue came to the last round of confrontation. France, Russia, and Germany co-issued a joint declaration, officially declaring that “we will not let a proposed resolution pass that would authorize the use of force.”

Although China did not join the French-Russian-German joint declaration, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan delivered his words at the General Assembly. With the knowledge that

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46 Ibid.,

the Americans’ intention to deploy military forces against Iraq was determined, Tang tried his last effort and claimed:

“China was not in favor of a new resolution, particularly one authorizing the use of force......in order to be responsible for history and safeguard the common interests of all peoples in the world, the Chinese Government strongly appeals to the Security Council to take up its responsibility and to do all it can to avoid war.”

At this point, the multilateral negotiations over the Iraqi issue appeared to reach a deadlock, due to the difficulties for the U.S. and its allies to garner the U.N.S.C. authorization on a military solution and for other member states to change America’s determination as well. This time, the U.S. chose to wage the war against Iraq without obtaining authorization from the United Nations. On 17th March 2003, George W. Bush delivered a final speech prior to the Iraq war, presenting Saddam Hussein with an ultimatum to leave Iraq within 48 hours, or to face war. As a result of Saddam’s refusal to leave Iraq, the U.S. commenced the military campaign against Iraq two days after Bush’s speech, on 20th March. The coalition forces launched a series of high-intensity air strikes and ground combats, which lasted for forty days; by 1st May, President Bush announced the overwhelming occupation of Iraq, marking the end of major military combat in this invasion.

Regarding the unauthorized U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Chinese Foreign Ministry first issued a statement and expressed China’s “serious concern” about the situation in Iraq, which stated:

“On March 20, bypassing the UN Security Council, the United States and some other countries launched military operations against Iraq. The Chinese Government hereby expresses its serious concern. The Chinese Government has all along stood for a political settlement of the Iraq issue within the UN

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framework, urging the Iraqi Government to fully and earnestly implement relevant Security Council resolutions and calling for respect for Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity by the international community. ... We stand for settlement of international disputes by political means and reject the use or threat of force in international affairs. The Chinese Government strongly appeals to the relevant countries to stop military actions and return to the right path of seeking a political solution to the Iraq question.”

Following this, on 25th March, Chinese president Hu Jintao also expressed his deep worries about “the humanitarian disasters and impact on regional and global peace, stability and development” that the war in Iraq would cause, and called for “the countries involved to stop military actions as soon as possible and return to the correct path of solving the Iraq issue by political means.” It could be found that China responded to the war in Iraq immediately with opposition to Americans’ use of forces in general, whereas both the responses from Chinese president and Chinese foreign ministry appeared to be quite cautious and restrained when compared with others’ reactions. For instance, on the first day of the Iraq war, Russian president Putin delivered a speech harshly condemning the U.S. for its unauthorized invasion of Iraq as a “great political error.”

This study would suggest that although both China and Russia were not in favor of what the U.S. and its allies did to Iraq, China was considerably more concerned with its own position in avoiding direct confrontations with the U.S.; once again driven by China’s pragmatic calculation of the possible stakes and risks that would result from condemning the U.S. for waging a war that China was, in any case, unable to change. From China’s pragmatic point of view, the war in Iraq had already happened and would inevitably result in much loss of Chinese oversea interests in Iraq, yet, it would be futile for China to try to stop the U.S. or prevent the war. Thus, China preferred to remain cautious and restrained, in order to avoid causing much more unnecessary loss, and more importantly, American hostility.

Evaluation of China’s responses to the Iraq War

With regard to China’s reactions from the very beginning of the multilateral negotiations to the outbreak of the Iraq war, this study has found that the country’s responses were a combination of active participation and great caution, which was in line with the nature of China’s pragmatism approach to preserving its national interests, and meanwhile, to avert political risks when involved in an international conflict.

During the multilateral negotiation stage—when China and other member states were aware of Americans’ intention to use military forces against Iraq—as a rule, China consistently called for a peaceful solution to solve the conflict within the U.N. auspices. Ever since China turned to a net oil importer in 1993, the following decade (1993-2002) witnessed China’s increasing demands for crude oil. Therefore, Middle Eastern oil, especially Iraqi oil, became indispensable for China’s economic development and modernization. Despite the fact that China’s trades with Iraq were significantly impeded in the following years of the first Gulf War, its total amount of trades with Iraq gradually increased from 1997 to 2002 and reached its peak at 517 million dollars in 2002\(^{53}\), the prospect of a U.S.-led invasion thereby greatly threatened China’s contracts and projects worth millions of dollars in Iraq. The stability of Iraq and the broader Middle East was a “partial interest” with crucial significance for China’s overall national interests, China thereby desired for a peaceful Iraq more than anyone else, which could explain why China consistently advocated for a peaceful solution prior to the war and participated actively to promote the adoption of Resolution 1441 (2002) under its rotating presidency in the Security Council.

Apart from economic interests, this study would argue that China had further hidden interests to pursue when dealing with the Iraqi crisis. As the unauthorized U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began to stigmatize America’s image, labeled “American hegemony” and “American expansionism”, this became an opportunity that China would have wanted to take advantage of.

Taking advantage of others’ conflict was one of the typical practices of China’s pragmatism-thinking. This can be seen in China’s attempts to take advantage of the first Gulf War to

repair its relations with the United States in the 1990s, and similarly, China saw its opportunity when the U.S. intervened in Iraq in 2003. Over the course of the Iraq war, by holding on to its principle of non-intervention and addressing the importance of maintaining world peace and stability, China’s image formed a sharp contrast to that of the U.S. Chinese pragmatist leaders would like to take advantage of this moment to showcase China’s commitment to a peaceful international community, thus improving China’s international image—especially at a time when the notorious 1989 Tiananmen incident was beginning to fade from people’s memory. However, unlike in the First Gulf War, when China, as a permanent member state, could use its veto authority against a military campaign, this time, the U.S. and its allies’ decision to sidestep the U.N. and wage a war against Iraq regardless, made China and others’ veto powers useless. On the other hand, for Chinese pragmatist leadership, the more violent the Iraq war was, the more hegemonic the U.S. would be deemed, and the more accountable and responsible China would appear to be, in contrast.

Despite the fact that that China was eager to pursue its own interests throughout the Iraq war, it could be seen that China’s responses were nevertheless quite cautious and restrained. In this regard, this study would argue that China’s responses were constrained by certain concerns from the other side. From this study’s point of view, one of China’s concerns was that it had no capability or even intention to prevent the U.S. from being too interventionist towards Iraq. At the beginning of the 2000s, China remained a developing country who owned limited influence in international conflicts—especially in the Middle East—in spite of the fact that China was trying to enhance its status and expand its regional influence. Out of a pragmatist way of thinking, China chose to voice its opinions with great caution, in order to avoid direct confrontations with other major powers. This was particularly strong concerning its relations with the U.S., which could account for China’s restrained words as well as its non-alignment with countries like Russia and France in the anti-war camp. In this way, China played its role by maneuvering somewhere in between the pro-war and the anti-war camps. Although China was not in favor of America’s military campaign against Iraq, it seems that its cautiously balanced responses paid off; in the sense that China was excluded from the U.S.
list of countries that were prohibited from bidding for the reconstruction projects in post-war Iraq (whereas countries like Russia, France, and Germany were on the list).\textsuperscript{54}

In addition, this study would suggest that China’s responses and participation in the debates surrounding the Iraq war were constrained by the awareness among Chinese leaders that China’s domestic development outweighed its foreign engagement at that time. At the beginning of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, domestic development and modernization remained the paramount priority for China, especially after China had realized the huge modernization gap between itself and the U.S.—an unforgettable lesson that China gained from the first Gulf War. While the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 not only reinforced China’s lesson from the first Gulf War, but also reminded Chinese leaders of the humiliating history of how China suffered from imperialist invasions during the Second World War; reaffirming Chinese leaderships’ belief in the old Chinese proverb “weakness or backwardness means that one will be beaten.”\textsuperscript{55}

From China’s point of view, weakness not only referred to military incompetence, but the overall level of national power; given the gap between the national power of the U.S. and that of China’s in early 2000s, it was rational for China to set domestic development as the primary concern and center Chinese foreign engagement around its domestic needs. China’s calculations of domestic development and foreign engagement was an exact reflection of China’s pragmatism-thinking which preferred maintaining stability more than taking risks, as taking risks might reap some benefits but may equally lose all the stakes. In realizing the risks of too much involvement in the Iraq war, China would rather remain cautious and restrained.

Determined by its pragmatic pursuit of domestic and international interests, China participated actively to promote a peaceful solution to the Iraqi issue within the U.N. auspices. However, China’s awareness of the risks of direct confrontations with the U.S. and the limits of its own national power constrained its responses to the Iraq war, forcing it to step with great caution with its responsive strategies. In this way, China gained enough flexibility to


voice its opinions yet not enough to risk itself offending any relevant parties or to have any negative influence on the outcomes. In the case of the Iraq war, this chapter would conclude that China’s overall behavior was exactly in line with the practice of China’s philosophy of pragmatism, which set the pragmatic calculation of China’s domestic needs as the priority in its engagement in the Iraq war.
Chapter III: China’s Responses to the Syrian Crisis.

In the following years of the 2003 Iraq war, the United States was busy with counterterrorism and order rebuilding in the Middle East, while China’s cautious participation and overall non-involvement in previous Middle Eastern conflicts earned it enough flexibility to focus on its own domestic development. As President Jiang Zemin stated in 2002, “the first two decades of the 21st century represent an important strategic opportunity for our country that we Chinese must seize firmly.” In the following decade (2002-2011), China constantly contributed to the pursuit of economic development and modernization, and as a result, China became the world’s second largest economy by the end of 2010 (after the United States). With this rapid economic development, China is also looking forward to playing a bigger role with more discursive power in international affairs—especially in regions where China used to have limited influence, such as the Middle East.

Inspired by the overwhelming revolutionary wave of “The Arab Spring” in 2011, the Syrian crisis began as a series of anti-government demonstrations which later turned into a long-lasting battle of violence between government forces and opposition groups, resulting in a massive (and continuing) death toll and displacement of millions of refugees—causing great concern to the United Nations. From 2011 up to now, the U.N. have drafted and adopted a series of resolutions concerning the Syrian crisis; during which, China joined with Russia to cast vetoes on relevant draft resolutions six times, invoking great criticism from Western countries to the extent that it was even regarded as an “abusive use of veto power”. Regarding China’s response to the Syrian crisis, particularly China’s vetoes, a question should be asked: what drives China to respond in this aggressive manner, in such contrast to its behavior in previous cases? This chapter is going to examine China’s votes and participation in the Syrian crisis, aiming to deduce what exactly China was opposed to, and more importantly, analyzing China’s interests and concerns beyond its successive vetoes.

China’s responses to the Syrian crisis

Starting in late 2010, the “Arab Spring” spread from North Africa to the broader Middle East, leading to the successive toppling of authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The domino-like revolutionary wave soon occupied Syria, and in March 2011, Syrian people began to take to the streets to protest against the regime of Bashar al-Assad and call for government reform. However, Assad’s government responded to protestors by a brutal crackdown, resulting in massive “deaths, injuries, internal displacement, increase in the number of refugees and other forms of casualties.”59 This violent escalation caused these initial anti-government demonstrations to evolve into an endless civil war between government forces and opposition groups.

Lasting for several years, from 2011 till today, the Syrian crisis raised great concern for the United Nations; consequently, a series of U.N.S.C. resolutions concerning the Syrian crisis were drafted, adopted, or blocked during these years. The international community held extremely different views when it came to the Syrian issue, debating intensively over whether measures like sanctions on Syria or even foreign intervention should be adopted by the U.N. as a solution to the escalated situation in Syria. Western countries, led by the U.S. and the U.K., as well as some Arab countries, insisted on settling the Syrian crisis by U.N.-authorized intervention and sanctions, whereas China and Russia were opposed to this in an explicit manner, in that they cast vetoes six times on the proposed U.N.S.C. draft resolutions.

China’s use of several vetoes on the Syrian case was such unprecedented behavior for this country, in response to Middle Eastern conflicts. As Dr. Muhamad S. Olimat commented that, “China has always opposed Western intervention in the Arab world, but was never as aggressive as it has been over the past years with respect to the Syrian crisis.”60 Regarding the Syrian case, China indeed displayed stronger and more explicit opposition to the solutions backed by certain Western and Arab countries when compared with the previous cases of the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq war (in which China abstained on the vote that authorized the U.S.-led intervention of Iraq in 1991, and chose not to join the anti-war camp that opposed

America’s attempt to invade Iraq in 2003, even though China was in actual fact opposed to a military solution).

Statistically, based on the latest U.N. report *The Security Council Veto*, this study found that ever since it restored its seat in the U.N.S.C. in 1971, China has cast 13 vetoes in total on U.N.S.C. resolutions, six of which were on the Syrian case. In contrast to China’s cautious responses to the Middle Eastern conflicts in the previous decades, this time China devoted nearly half of its total amount of vetoes to the Syrian case; clearly representing China’s evolving departure from its previous responses to the Middle Eastern conflicts.

After a close examination of China’s votes on key U.N.S.C. documents concerning the Syrian crisis (Table 1), this study found that China was mainly opposed to the use of sanctions on Syria and potential foreign interference in Syria’s political transition. China did, however, consistently give support for a negotiated and political solution to the conflict, for example, the establishment of a U.N.-authorized investigation or supervision team in Syria, with emphasis on respect for the independent state sovereignty of Syria. When China confronted conflicts in the Middle East, addressing the need for a political solution and simultaneously opposing to the military solution was always the first rule in China’s responses. With regard to the Syrian crisis, China’s justifications for its use of vetoes should be particularly focused on.

Table 1: key U.N.S.C. documents on the Syrian crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.N.S.C. documents</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>China’s vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S/2012/77</td>
<td>04/02/2012</td>
<td>-demanding ceasefire in Syria -supporting the League of Arab States’ Peace Plan</td>
<td>Veto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution 2042</td>
<td>14/04/2012</td>
<td>-deploying unarmed observer forces in Syria</td>
<td>Affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution 2043</td>
<td>21/04/2012</td>
<td>-establishing a U.N. supervision mission in Syria (UNSMIS)</td>
<td>Affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/2012/538</td>
<td>19/07/2012</td>
<td>-deadline of 10 days for Assad’s withdrawal -sanctions on Syria</td>
<td>Veto</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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When China cast its first veto on draft resolution S/2011/612, Chinese ambassador to the U.N. Li Baodong explained China’s stance:

“under the current circumstances, sanctions or the threat thereof does not help to resolve the question of Syria, instead, may further complicate the situation...As it now stands, the draft resolution focuses solely on exerting pressure on Syria, even threatening to impose sanctions, it does not help to facilitate the easing of the situation in Syria, China therefore against it.”

Over the course of the Syrian crisis, Western countries repeatedly suggested the use of sanctions on Syria on the grounds that sanctions could effectively constrain the armed conflicts between government and opposition groups, while from China’s point of view, the use of sanctions would only lead to further complications, rather than assist in resolving the issue.

China’s opposition to imposing sanctions on Syria inevitably invoked great international criticism, especially in the most recent draft resolution S/2017/172 which proposed to sanction Syria due to the alleged use of chemical weapons by Syrian authority. China’s veto was even accused of “enabling Syrian government’s attempts to escape accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity.”

According to Chinese authoritative remarks, China was resolutely opposed to, and strongly condemned the use of chemical weapons by

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any state, given the fact that China itself had been a victim to the use of chemical weapons by other states; nevertheless, imposing sanctions on Syria at this moment would be in no way helpful to solve the issue of chemical weapons in Syria, and would not be conducive to the following peace talks in Geneva as well.64

In addition to opposing the use of sanctions on Syria, what China opposed most strongly was potential foreign interference in Syria’s political reform. In February 2012, China and Russia cast vetoes on the draft resolution S/2012/77, backed by Western and Arab countries, which called for the ceasefire and the implementation of the League of Arab States’ Peace Plan—demanding Bashar al-Assad to step down from power.65 Regarding this draft resolution and others’ demands for the resignation of al-Assad, China voted against them without hesitation, as China was determined to prevent any foreign or external power from interfering in Syria’s political transition.

It should be noted that China’s approach to the Syrian case was informed by China’s own unpleasant experience during the 2011 Libyan crisis, when China abstained on U.N.S.C. Resolution 1973 (in 2011) that was intended to establish non-fly zones in Libya and protect Libyan civilians, but was later abused by Western coalition forces to forcibly overthrow the regime of Muammar Qaddafi.66 With the Western-led regime change in Libya hindering Chinese oversea economic and political stakes, Chinese leaderships were outraged by this, explicitly referencing that “the original intention of resolution 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011) was to put an end to violence (in Libya), we are opposed to any attempt to willfully interpret the resolutions or to take actions that exceed those mandated.”67 Suspecting that the Syrian situation might therefore evolve similarly like the Libyan case, this time Chinese leaderships refused to approve any U.N. resolutions that would lead to a Western-led regime change in Syria. In other words, China’s Libyan experience made Chinese leaderships more suspicious

of Western motivations that advocated for foreign intervention in Syria, even on a humanitarian ground.

Regarding China’s opposition to foreign interference in Syria, some scholars deemed that China was meant to shield the al-Assad regime from being overthrown by military forces, but this study would argue that China was not so concerned with whoever would be in power (either al-Assad’s government or the opposition group), but was more anxious about the possible ramifications of a Western-oriented regime change in Syria—a scenario that China was unwilling to see. In this regard, the Chinese government made all of its efforts to prevent Western countries from interfering in Syria by not only vetoing the resolutions, but also by publicly condemning “certain Western countries” in China’s official newspaper:

“Certain Western countries still have not given up on regime change in Syria, and have provided increasing support to rebel forces. Their open discussion of a no-fly zone, along with other irresponsible words and actions, has undermined the solidarity of the Security Council, causing the international community to be unable to reach consensus.”

Although there was no exact mention of the names of “certain Western countries”, China’s frankness and directness in the official newspaper was remarkable, given that China used to intentionally avoid any reference to “regime change” during the debates over the Libya crisis. China’s explicit opposition to the possibility of a foreign-led regime change in Syria indicated China’s uncompromising stance to preserve the freedom of the Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political transition.

In the case of the Syrian crisis, China’s reactions consisted of more than just vetoing six draft resolutions to block the use of sanctions and foreign interference against Syria; diplomatic and economic means were part of China’s approach as well. Regardless of the furious Western criticism to China’s successive use of vetoes, Chinese government respectively invited delegations from both Syrian government and Syrian opposition groups to visit Beijing in late 2015 and early 2016, aiming to promote peace talks with both parties and

70 Courtney J. Fung, p. 700.
negotiate for a political solution.\textsuperscript{71} Although Chinese leadership hosted meetings with both parties separately, this was the first time that China had acted as a conflict mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts over several years, which on one hand highlighted China’s proactive engagement in dealing with the Syrian crisis, and on the other, indicated China’s intention to play a “positive and constructive role” in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts as pledged by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.\textsuperscript{72}

Together with a diplomatic approach, China has continued to provide economic humanitarian aid to Syria over the past several years. Up until 2017, the humanitarian assistance offered by the Chinese government to Syria included food supplies, reconstruction of infrastructure and transportation, and other humanitarian aid operations, worth over 40 million dollars.\textsuperscript{73} By providing material assistance to the reconstruction of the war-inflicted Syria, China earned itself significant discursive power in dealing with the Syrian crisis.

\textit{Evaluation of China’s responses to the Syrian crisis}

With respect to the Syrian crisis, China’s responses could be characterized as strong opposition to the Western-backed resolutions and proactive engagement through the use of skillful diplomacy and material humanitarian aid. Compared with the previous case studies, it could be argued that China’s responses to the Syrian crisis represent a significant departure from its responses to previous cases and a remarkable evolution of its approach to Middle Eastern conflicts. Nevertheless, whenever China was confronted with an international or regional conflict, its decision making was primarily guided by Chinese pragmatic calculations of its own interests and concerns.

Over the course of the Syrian crisis, China’s most prominent response must be its use of six vetoes on relevant U.N. resolutions—a controversial and unprecedented behavior which was largely oriented by China’s concerns and worries. Regarding the intentions of certain


\textsuperscript{72} “China to play ‘positive, constructive’ role at UN in solving Syria Issue”, \textit{People’s Daily}, 20\textsuperscript{th} September 2013. Accessed through: \url{http://en.people.cn/90883/8404922.html}

\textsuperscript{73} “China’s humanitarian aid arrives in Syria”, \textit{China Global Television}, 28\textsuperscript{th} February 2018. Accessed through: \url{https://news.cgtn.com/news/316b444e35677a6333566d54/share_p.html}
Western countries to forcibly overthrow Bashar al-Assad regime, China held strong and consistent opposition, which was based on China’s deep concerns with foreign interference in Syria’s political transition that could lead to a “coercive regime change.” From China’s pragmatic point of view, foreign interference in Syrian political affairs could be a potential threat to China’s most crucial interest, regime stability, in the sense that if certain Western states succeeded to interfere with the internal political affairs of a non-democratic state and enforce Western democratic values and rules upon it, then the regime stability of the Chinese Communist Party could also be threatened. In general, China’s pragmatism-thinking guides the country’s leaders to act flexibly to protect its national interests, but to be uncompromising with foreign intentions that could threaten China’s regime stability or vital interests.

Therefore, for Chinese leadership, it would not be permitted to allow any possibility of foreign interference in Syria (even on the grounds of humanitarian intervention) that could threaten Chinese regime stability in future, and its strong diplomatic principle of non-interventionism.

What’s more, China’s use of six vetoes was meant to prevent any single power from manipulating Syria’s internal affairs, as Chinese pragmatism-thinking believed that only a multilateral system could serve China’s interests best, thereby any single power’s monopoly over Syria (even the broader Middle East) would break the regional balance and hinder China’s interests overseas. China’s deep concern with the foreign monopoly over Syria, to some extent, also came out of China’s previous loss of its oversea interests during the Libya crisis—which reinforced China’s determination to prevent the same scenario from happening once again in Syria—and this thereby consolidated China’s alliance with Russia to oppose any foreign attempt at dominating Syria.

Apart from these concerns, China’s responses to the Syrian crisis were a reflection of its pragmatic pursuit of economic interests. On one hand, Chinese exports to Syria amounted to over 2.4 billion dollars in 2011, and China thereby became Syria’s biggest trade partner of the year; on the other hand, Syria was an important source of oil supply to China, based on the fact that the China National Petroleum Corporation held shares in two of Syria’s largest

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74 Courtney J. Fung, p. 697.
oil firms, and the Sinochem Corporation held a nearly 50% stake in Syrian oil fields. Aware of the possible economic loss which could be caused by Western-proposed sanctions on Syria and the potential foreign-led regime change, China blocked relevant U.N.S.C. resolutions, with the aim at preserving its oversea interests and bilateral cooperation with Syria. Out of the nature of China’s pragmatism thinking, economic interests are the fundamental national interests that China would like to pursue in its foreign engagement. Thus, when a regional crisis appeared to undermine its relevant economic interests, China would always center its decision-making on preserving or maximizing its economic interests.

On another level, China’s proactive participation in mediating the Syrian conflict was also a crucial indication of China’s attempt at expanding its regional and international influence. At the regional level, China not only acted as a conflict mediator by approaching both Syrian government and opposition groups over the past few years, but also sent Chinese senior diplomats to several Middle Eastern states to negotiate for a peaceful settlement of the Syrian issue. All these moves indicate that China is no longer willing to take a passive role when dealing with Middle Eastern affairs, but is instead aiming at making its voice louder and broader. When China’s efforts pave the way for the country to exert much more influence during multilateral debates, there are also immediate pragmatic benefits for China: now other stakeholders have to interact with China and take its opinions seriously with regard to the Syrian crisis. Inspired by pragmatism thinking, which motivates China to take advantage of others’ conflicts to maximize its own strategic interests, China would thereby like to take the Syrian crisis as an opportunity to bolster its influence within the Middle East more profoundly.

At the international level, China’s approach to the Syrian issue is a prominent and significant evolution in its foreign engagement strategy “from passively following international norms to actively making them.” Unlike in the 1990s and 2000s, China has become the second largest economy in the world by the end of 2010, which propelled China’s motivation to pursue more discursive power in dealing with international affairs. By emphasizing “discursive power”, Chinese leadership displayed a strong desire to set agendas in

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76 Ibid., p. 698.
international affairs, instead of merely accepting and following agendas set by others. Over the course of the Syrian crisis—by explicitly expressing its opposition and proactively addressing a political solution to the crisis—China leveraged its normative gesture when confronted with other major players, which could help China gain more discursive power in countering the established international norms and reshaping them in accordance with its own interests and preferences.

In conclusion, the Syrian crisis marked an evolution in China’s responses to Middle Eastern conflicts, in the sense that China responded to the Syrian crisis in an unprecedentedly proactive manner. Through the combination of explicitly countering Western alliance and actively engaging with relevant players in the region, it could be seen that China was trying to develop its own strategies in dealing with the Syrian situation; no longer to passively participate in the Middle Eastern affairs. In the contemporary decade, China attempts to gain even more discursive power with respect to the Middle East, as a result of its rising demands and increasing interests in the region; while whether China’s ambition is achieved remains to be seen, its strategy and responses to the Syrian crisis and the broader Middle East are becoming more skillful and proactive.

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78 Courtney J. Fung, p. 706.
Conclusion

After a close examination of China’s responses to three major crises in the Middle East, attention should be drawn back to the main goal of this study: to discover the pattern of China’s past and contemporary responses to these cases. With regard to three different cases, this study found that—despite appearing to have drastically changed its behavior in each case—China has in fact remained consistent in its position of supporting a peaceful political solution to each crisis. Yet, the country’s responses did display different characteristics in the different contexts.

In the case of the 1991 Gulf War, China’s responses to the whole event were generally vague and inexplicit. Despite China’s attempts at mediating the intense situation in the Middle East (which later proved to be a total failure), China remained overall low-profile, with behavior that would avoid causing offense to any relevant party—especially the U.S. (its abstention on Resolution 678 (1990) being a significant indication of its desire to avert potential political risks). Similarly, in the case of the Iraq war, China held the same strategic vagueness when engaging with disputing parties; its responses to the Americans’ intention to invade Iraq, and to the following Iraq war, were again cautious and restrained. Nevertheless, China did participate actively to facilitate the unanimous adoption of Resolution 1441 (2002) with a desire to promote a consensus within the U.N.S.C. members. Regarding the most recent case of the Syrian Crisis, however, China’s responses were explicit, strong, and proactive, forming a sharp contrast to its responses to the previous cases. Throughout the Syrian crisis, China strongly opposed to certain Western-backed resolutions in a more explicit way, by its use of successive vetoes on relevant resolutions—an unprecedented behavior for China in response to Middle Eastern conflicts. What’s more, China approached the Syrian issue through a combination of skillful diplomacy and economic humanitarian aid, which was a crucial implication of China’s proactive engagement in the Syrian issue.

To make sense of the summary above, this study argues that the pattern of China’s responses to the three Middle Eastern crises displays an evolution in China’s foreign engagement in the Middle East which can be reflected in three key interrelated aspects. First of all, there is the evolution of China’s material interests in the Middle East from the 1990s to 2010s. Before
the country became a net oil importer in 1993, China had few significant interests in the Middle East, thus, the huge need in energy imports thereby became a fundamental reason for China to be concerned with Middle Eastern affairs after the mid-90s. In the following decades, China's Middle Eastern involvement increased further, when the country diversified its interests to sectors including infrastructure, finance, tourism and so on. Moreover, with Chinese president Xi Jinping’s proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, China has developed its geo-economic and geopolitical interests in the region, as well. Without a doubt, the Middle East has become increasingly important for China’s material needs over the studied time-frame, and as a result, China’s interests in the Middle East are now quite different from those in the past; consequently leading to a shift in China’s approach to Middle Eastern crises in the contemporary era.

The second aspect thus addresses China’s evolving diplomatic approach to the Middle Eastern crises, which have seemingly become more skillful and sophisticated in recent years. During the time of the first Gulf War, it could be seen that China’s responses to the war were passive in nature, with vague and inexplicit words and actions which exposed China’s lack of skillfulness and familiarity in dealing with Middle Eastern affairs in the 1990s. Later, with the impending 2003 Iraq War, China responded more shrewdly by actively participating while maintaining a safe balance among the relevant parties. In this way, China’s approach to the Iraq war appeared to be more mature and well-calculated. However, the evolution of China’s approach can be seen most clearly in China’s responses to the Syrian crisis. By explicitly expressing its opposition, and employing a combination of diplomatic and economic means, China’s approach to the Syrian crisis indicates that it is developing its own, seasoned and well-crafted strategies in dealing with contemporary Middle Eastern issues.

Lastly, as a result of the evolution of China’s interests and approach to the Middle Eastern crises, the role that China has played in these crises has significantly evolved as well. In the case of the Gulf war, given that China was lacking in fundamental interests in the region, China “identified itself as a ‘bystander’ and ‘free rider’ in the Middle East,”

79 which could be affirmed by the fact that China failed to make a difference to the outbreak of the war, due to its limited regional influence. For a long time, China remained an “outsider” in Middle Eastern affairs. In the 2000s, when the Iraq war was about to breakout, China made its efforts

by participating actively to promote a political solution to the crisis. Even though China was unable to prevent the outburst of the Iraq war (as the U.S. invaded Iraq without U.N. authorization), China improved its image by making a commitment to advocate for world peace. Contemporarily, when it comes to the Syrian crisis, China now is no longer satisfied with being an “outsider” or with following the established norms set by other international players. By explicit opposition and proactive engagement with the Syrian issue, China makes itself a relevant player; attempting to reshape the international norms and expand its regional influence more broadly. With regard to the three cases, it can be seen that the role China has played on the international stage has gone through a momentous transformation—from being an “outsider” to a relevant and powerful player, which is a crucial reflection of the evolution of China’s foreign engagement in the Middle Eastern conflicts.

To better understand the pattern of China’s responses to the different Middle Eastern crises, it is crucial to understand the internal logic of China’s responses. Although Chinese leadership responded to the three crises in quite different ways, this study found that China’s main goal remained consistent over the course of the three cases. With regard to each case and context, the national interests involved indeed varied in their specific form, nevertheless, China’s responses and engagement in each case were guided first and foremost out of its desire to preserve or maximize its national interests; which goes to show the nature of China’s pragmatism-thinking.

China’s pragmatism-thinking is generated from the basis of the original pragmatism—a way of thinking oriented more by practical outcomes than by certain theory or dogma.\(^{80}\) China’s pragmatism indeed follows this way of thinking and acting, nevertheless, it develops its own unique tactics that guide China to make and adjust its responses in dealing with each Middle Eastern crisis. Apart from preserving or maximizing China’s national interests, based on China’s responses to three cases, it could be concluded that China’s pragmatism-thinking guided China to respond in several specific ways.

Firstly, whenever China was involved in a crisis, it would consistently address a political solution to each crisis, as a political settlement to a crisis would be the least undermining to

China’s relevant interests in the region, and thus, would be the most advantageous outcome for China aims for. Secondly, China tuned its responses based on a pragmatic calculation of possible benefits and risks, and since Chinese government usually preferred stability to risk-taking, this could account for China’s cautious and restrained responses to the Gulf War and Iraq war. Lastly, when involved in a conflict, China was likely to make some concessions to preserve certain interests (like in the case of its abstention on the vote for Resolution 678 in order to maintain Sino-U.S. relations during the first Gulf war), yet at the same time, China was uncompromising with any threat that would undermine its regime stability; manifested through China’s strong opposition to potential foreign intervention in Syria’s political reform.

To conclude, based on China’s responses to three Middle Eastern crises that respectively took place in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s, this study finds that the pattern of China’s responses and engagement in the Middle East maps the evolution of China’s material interests in the Middle East, the diplomatic approach, and the role that China played throughout these crises. Given the fact that China is a relatively new player in the Middle East when compared with other major players, this pattern indicates a process in which China keeps learning, adjusting, and accommodating its engagement in Middle Eastern crises in line with its changing needs and concerns over the studied time. More profoundly, this pattern leads to a better understanding of China’s pragmatism thinking, which has consistently guided China to respond to Middle Eastern crises in a way the it perceives to be conducive to China’s best interests in the region.
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