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**FROM SOFT POWER TO HARD POWER: MOTIVATIONS FOR CHINA'S
COUNTER-TERRORISM EFFORTS IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ**

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ABSTRACT

This article will explore the limitations of China's foreign policy toolkit in the Middle East. To do this, a case study will be carried out on relations between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and China. In the past few years the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has had a booming economy and therefore many countries, including China, have seen a great opportunity to invest. The Kurdistan Region is known for its rich natural resources such as oil. Since 2014 the Kurdistan Region has faced domestic problems such as problems with the Iraqi government as well as conflict with ISIS. This has led to the decrease of investments and put China in an uncomfortable situation where they need to consider counter-terrorism by helping the Kurdistan Region. Contrary to investments in Africa, the investments in public infrastructure will not be enough to expand China's influence. In the Kurdistan Region, what is needed is hard power. For China to accomplish its goals it will need to establish a new precedent in its foreign policy toolkit. If China successfully makes the transition from soft to hard it will have significant implications when understanding what the rise of China means for global governance.

Key words: Counter-terrorism, China, Kurdistan – Iraq, Middle East, ISIS, Crisis Management.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism – few decades ago you could barely read it on the news or hear it in discussions. Today, terrorism is such a normal thing that when an act of terror has occurred, people are not that surprised anymore. Especially if it happens in the Middle East.

The unfortunate story of the Kurds is that they have been struggling for a while now considering both the economical crisis and the security problem with ISIS. Before 2014, Kurdistan had one of the most booming economy in Middle East and lot of foreign investors head their direction to the Kurdish land. Most of them, like Exxon was focusing on the oil industry and countries like China were focusing on exporting for example vehicles. However, in the beginning of 2014 was very unfortunate for Kurdistan due to economical crisis and problems with Baghdad, since in the end Kurdistan is still part of Iraq. Following the economical crisis, ISIS came into power and started to attack first the southern part of Iraq and slowly attacking the Kurdish areas in northern Iraq. This forced Kurdistan to neglect the economical crisis and protect their land. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to focus on how China should shift their soft power into hard power in order to fight against terrorism and thus, protect its investments and interests.

In the beginning, the paper will focus on the background of China's limitations their foreign policy toolkit when it comes to Middle East and then the paper will introduce some key facts throughout the rise of ISIS in Kurdistan. After this, a case study will be introduced. The case study will focus on introducing Kurdistan (background), their current security dilemma and in the end I will give my own recommendations.

The research question of this paper is as follows: *What are the limitations in China's foreign policy toolkit in Middle East?* The main argument of this paper is as follows: *China, as a superpower country, needs to take more responsibility in Middle East. China has shown interest in Middle East and in order to protect their current and future investments, they need to shift into hard power and assist Kurdistan in the fight against ISIS.* The reason why this research paper is important is because there has not been many research about China's interest towards Kurdistan and especially since the rise of ISIS and what it has caused financially to many investors, such as China.

As for the research, the paper will focus on data analysis.

I. LIMITATIONS OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOOLKIT

1.1 Background Information

For years, China's foreign policy toolkit insisted that its relationship with other countries be based on a long-standing emphasis on staying away from the domestic issues of other countries. China also strongly refused to acknowledge a foreign military present in the country claiming that its reasons for the involvement with any country were for the development of a beneficial commercial and economic relationship. However, in the recent past, China's security and economic interests have continued to increase significantly in the Middle East. The country has recognized the violent and volatile political transitions in the region. China has been pressurized into going against the limiting foreign policy toolkit it has practiced for years, as it can no longer remain aloof about the conflicts in the Middle East. This is because by insisting on the non-interference policy, China will be failing to do what is required of China to safeguard its economic and security interests within the Middle East (Duchâtel, 2014).

China's interests have been greatly fostered by China's initiative dubbed the One Belt One Road, which seeks to connect the entire Eurasian region by virtue of erecting interconnected infrastructure, expanding trade relations as well as through exchanged investments (Ferdinand, 2016). This has however had some significant impacts inside China and on the country's relations posture with other countries. For instance, these interests have had an impact on the country's energy security and its relations with both regional posture and powers of China and with the United States. It also negatively impacts the efforts to pacify the Islamist Uighurs and the nationalists who occupy the country's northwestern province, Xinjiang. Because of these impacts, China's non-interference policy does not allow the country to safeguard its own vital interest, forcing the country to become involved in domestic issues of the Middle East. It will thus be forced to increasingly become a regional player. This will be in competitive cooperation with external influencers in the Eurasian region. The most dominant of these external influencers in the region is the U.S, which seems to be the most dominant actor for the near future.

While China greatly relies on the Middle East for about half of the oil products that China imports, China's interest in the Middle East extend vastly beyond the energy docket. This

is yet another reason that is driving China to revise the long-standing foreign policy toolkit the country has practiced for years. This is due to the fact that China ought to protect its nationals and their investments, although it stands to gain strategically from the stability the Eurasian region countries may gain from the One Belt One Road initiative. In addition, China's interests have also been intensified by the threat of a reoccurrence of unrest between the Islamist Uighurs and the Chinese nationalists in Xinjiang, and in the Middle East as well. This has forced China into developing a strategic vision which outlines the policies it has to implement so as to protect the country's ever-expanding economic, strategic, commercial and geopolitical in the middle east. China also ought to reconsider its position regarding its place and role in the Eurasian region as an upcoming superpower in that region. It also ought to consider working collaboratively with the U.S in resolving or managing conflicts.

1.2 Limitations of China's Foreign Policy Toolkit in the Middle East

The most primary and biggest limitation of China's foreign policy toolkit in the Middle East is that it China has to balance its interests and relations with the with the U.S and the countries of the Middle East to prevent friction and tension in the Eurasian landmass. In the post-Cold War era, the major influencers in policies and development are majorly focused on power, geopolitics, influence, and economic gains than they ae focused on the global ideological divide. For this reason, the foreign policy toolkit in the Middle East utilized by the China is aimed at cushioning the country against the predicaments the U.S is facing in the region. This is because China's interests in the area come from an era when both the U.S and China are both becoming accustomed to China's popularity in the U.S in the Eurasian region. However, both countries have some internal interests in this region, meaning that they both won't back down in pursuit of their interests inviting an opportunity for future tensions and frictions. The foreign policy toolkit also nominally contrasts with that of the U.S in the region. The aim of this is to ensure that China does not make the same mistakes made by the U.S in the quest for national gains in the Eurasian region (Dorsey, 2014). China ought to consider the approach which China uses to approach the region, its influences, and conflicts, and how it can protect its own interests. However, the involvement of China in this region affects the country's vision of the role it plays in the affairs of other countries in the world. China is forced to rethink its view as a partial power that is diffident, risk adverse and also focused on the interests of the country, which would make it go against what it is known for in the world over. Chinese analysts and officials

maintain that the Chinese foreign policy toolkit will allow it to take less risky options, thus avoiding being caught as the U.S has in the past.

Remaining aloof will be a greater risk for her interests in the Eurasian region as it may increase the risks the country feels on her economic and security interests in the region. This is because; the Middle East and the Eurasian region, in general, have very intense and reoccurring political transitions that escalate quickly. There is a chance that these issues could break out and potentially spill out close to China. The considerable expansion beyond matters of energy with regard to the key interests of China in the Middle East makes the opportunities for China to stay aloof ever so difficult concerning the domestic issues of the Middle East as well as the volatile and violent political transition. It also needs to guard its investments and nationals in the region as it stands to gain immensely from the One Belt One Road Initiative and also from the assurance that not doing anything could spur a blow back in the unrest in Xinjiang and in the Middle East at large. Other countries in the region have to work hand in hand with both the U.S and China in the region, to ensure that the great interests of each country are protected without the occurrence of frictions and tensions.

Secondly, the limitations of the country's foreign policy prevent the country from continually diverging and evolving its interests. The country has reiterated its implementation of the long-standing principles of foreign policy through the non-interference in the domestic or internal affairs of the country. However, China has emphasized that its relations with the Middle East will only involve dialogue and mutually beneficial modes of corporation among itself and its partners in the region. China's interests in the region are largely economics, security, counter-terrorism, technical cooperation as well as energy (Fardella, 2015). The One Belt One Road initiative is also of primary importance with regard to China's interests in the Middle East. China is seen to clearly only be interested in its own economic growth than the development of the other countries it is partnering with. The personal interest of China is to create policies and not a strategy that will ensure the county's economic development is more of a priority than the Middle East is, as the region is volatile and vulnerable to violence from political transitions.

China's stakes in the Eurasian landmass continue to increase with the country's interest in the region, and this forces China to be involved in the internal and domestic affairs of countries within this block as a lot is at stake in China. The resource and energy security

in China has enabled China to grow economically and raise the living standards of its people. This will be promoted through the partnerships that China hopes to develop in the Eurasian region. The region also presents opportunities of geostrategic access to the European and African markets, and thus its primary interest of One Belt One Road initiative thus becomes sensible. It also continues to heavily invest in the region by sponsoring different developmental projects. The underlying notion is that by raising living standards in the different countries in this region, the domestic stability rates in these countries are projected to increase, and the security of the regime will thus be enhanced. China aims that in so doing, it will use geopolitics and economic growth to achieve all its interest. However, since all these interests are dynamic, and that the policy does not encourage the country to be involved in internal affairs of a specific country, China could be locked out of the great opportunity for economic development and improving the living standards of the people on a long-term basis.

The foreign policy approach of non-interference in domestic affairs conceals the countries support for different autocratic regimes by hiding behind a façade of non-interference in local issues (Dorsey, 2016). This has helped China to prevent itself from the problems that have in the past affected the U.S and other European countries. China has thus steered clear of being considered another external factor that aggravates the brutal and violent undercurrents of change in the Middle East. However, the risks that China stands as a result of these violent and brutal political transitions in the Middle East have forced China to come to the inevitable adjustment of the foreign policy principles of China, especially concerning non-interference. This is because, the Middle East region has profound procedures that alter the national state structure in this region, the architecture of national security, and the post-colonial borders in the region.

II. CASE STUDY: THE AUTONOMOUS REGION OF KURDISTAN - IRAQ

2.1 Kurdistan - Iraq

Being a Kurd in the 21th century is a bliss and at the same time a bourdon. The reason for this is that for the first time in centuries Kurds won't have to answer the question "who are the Kurds?" and at the same time they have to constantly worry about their families and friends' safety. Kurds today are obligated to protect their land and the same time the rest of the world.

The inconvenient truth is that Kurds have never had a country of their own except in 1920 there was an independent Kurdistan only for 3 years. In 1923 Kurdistan was divided between the countries known today as Turkey and Iraq. (Countries and their Cultures, 2016). Since that moment Kurds have tried to reach their only goal - having their own state. If we go back few years many did not even knew the existence of Kurds but today almost the whole world is standing by them.

Kurdistan in today's map has spread its borders from Iraq, Turkey, Iran and to Syria. To make it clearer for the reader I have attached a picture below. There is a debate on how many Kurds there are overall. Some sources say there is only 20 million and some says 40 million. (Ekurd Daily, 2015). Even though most Kurds live in Turkey there are also many who fled Kurdistan in the 90's and now are living all around the world. (Chandler, 2014).

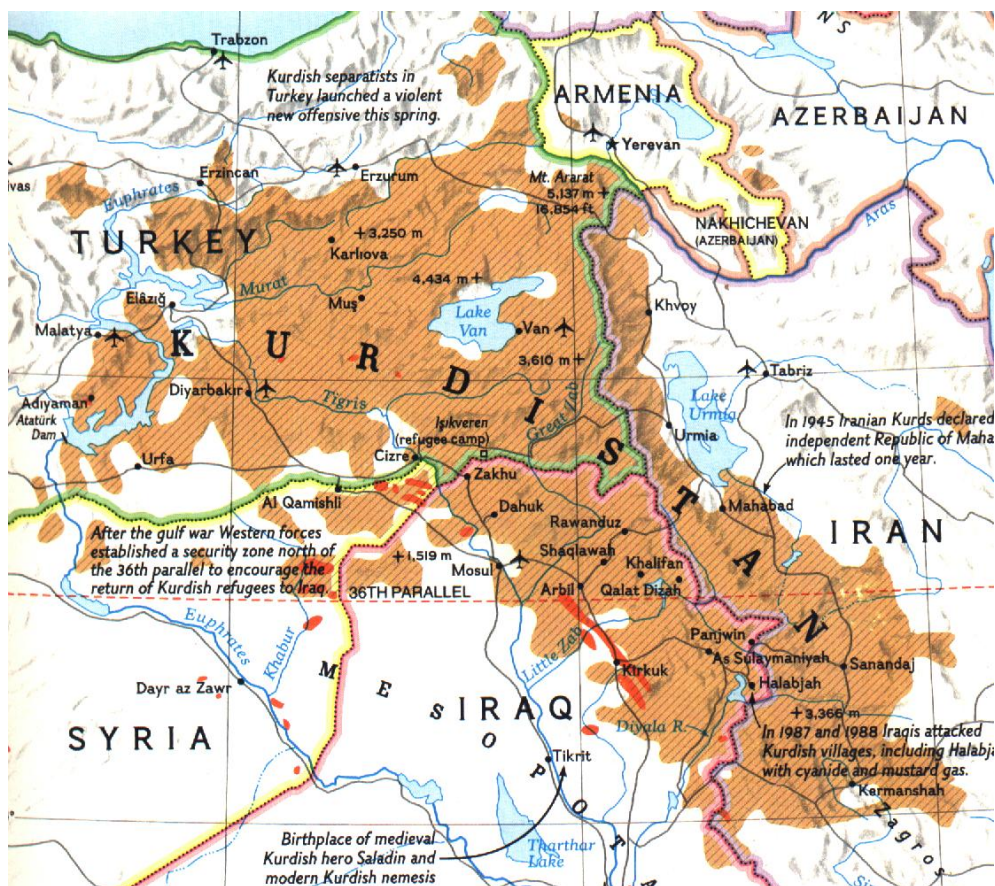


Figure 1. The Map of Kurdistan (Oriental Review, 2015)

Since Kurds are not just located in one area it has led to a differentiation between them. The Kurds who live in Iraq has comparatively a much better situation than the Kurds in Turkey or Syria. The reason behind this is that Kurds have been persecuted in Turkey and

they did not even have the right to speak their own language. (Kurdish Academy of Language, 2016). But then again, the Kurds in Iraq managed to achieve semi-autonomous region after the fall of Saddam Hussein. This led to a Kurdish President, Kurdish Parliament and official army. (Kurdistan Regional Government, 2016).

The semi-autonomous region is known as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Like many other states in Middle East, also KRG was born due to conflict and with the support of major power countries. “The KRG is a Parliamentary Democracy within the federated Republic of Iraq”, which means that KRG is still responsible of their political actions to Iraq and all of their budget plans are also planned together with Iraq. Legally, KRG has three legal jurisdictions over provinces: Erbil, Duhok and Sulaymaniyah. Nevertheless, since the occupation of ISIS, the collapse of the Iraqi Army – the Kurds managed to gain de facto jurisdiction over Kirkuk. The constitution of KRG is called the Provisional Constitution of Federal Republic of Kurdistan and it was written in 1996. The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament has 111 seats. Both the president and the prime minister share executive powers. With the majority vote, the parliament can create and pass laws but the president has veto power to any bill. (The Kurdish Project, 2015a).

In order to understand Kurdish communities, one must understand the cultural and the religious aspect. Kurdistan is both ethnically and religiously a very mixed region. The religion of the Kurds is not perceived as simple as the media shows. Surely, most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but Kurds are known for being a bit light holders of Islam. One of the reasons for this is that Kurds have been oppressed years by other Muslims. The second reason is that the original religion of Kurds is Zoroastrianism. (The Kurdish Project, 2015b).

Kurds have one of the richest cultures, because they share commonalities with many other regional cultures and this has led to a mix culture of Iraqi, Turkish, Arabic and Persian culture. The toughest part for all Kurds have been the fact that practicing their own language and teaching it to others has been forbidden. There were times when a Kurd could not even say that they are a Kurd without being persecuted. (The Kurdish Project, 2015c). Today the situation is quite different, especially for the Kurds in Syria. Currently the Kurds in Syria hold an autonomous region, which has led them to have their own official army and the right to practice their own cultural identity. This has given the Rojava governance a chance to show how democratic, egalitarian and secular they are. (Lieber, 2016).

2.2 Kurdistan's Current Security Dilemma: ISIS

“The fighting between ISIS and the Kurds stretches along a six-hundred-and-fifty-mile front in northeastern Iraq—a jagged line that roughly traces one border of Iraqi Kurdistan, the territory that the Kurds have been fighting for decades to establish as an independent state.” (Filkins, 2014).

The Kurds in Iraq are currently facing their worst nightmares. Since 2014, ISIS has been around Iraq and attacking the Kurdish territories. “Twenty-four hours before, fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had made a huge incursion into the Kurds’ territory. They had overrun Kurdish forces in the western Iraqi towns of Sinjar and Makhmour, and had surged as far as Gwer, fifteen miles from the capital city of Erbil. At the Mosul Dam, on the Tigris River, they had seized the controls, giving them the ability to inundate Baghdad with fifteen feet of water. The Kurdish army is known throughout the region for its ferocity—its fighters are called peshmerga, or “those who face death”—and the defeat had been a humiliation.” (Filkins, 2014).

ISIS is an ideology that is considering itself as a “Islamic Caliphate”. They are currently controlling some bits of Western Iraq and Eastern Syria. This radical group is attacking anyone who isn’t allegedly a Muslim and they have conducted slavery, rape, mass murder and many other means of murdering innocent people. “There are about a dozen countries (some of which hate each other) fighting ISIS. All of them (except for Iran, Syria, and Iraq) are basically doing it by bombing them from the sky. The U.S. has committed a few hundred “advisors” to the fight (and they are most certainly not wearing boots). Despite a yearlong campaign against ISIS, the group still controls a lot of territory (even capturing new ground like Palmyra in Syria) and has demonstrated that it can strike in the heart of the Western world.” (The Week, 2015).

Kurdistan is not facing only security issues with ISIS but also problems with its economy that might be even a bigger problem than ISIS. Since Kurdistan is officially still part of Iraq, Kurdistan gets a huge portion of their budget from Iraq and in the beginning of 2014, Iraq cut off Kurdistan’s budget and this led to a serious economy crisis in the region. It didn’t take long before the threat of ISIS arrived. Only few months after the economical

crisis Kurdistan was not only facing internal disputes but also security problems with the threat of ISIS. (Alaaldin & Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2016).

2.3 China's Investments in Middle East and Iraq

In 2017, the Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that he will host a Belt and Road Summit for international cooperation and most of the countries in Middle East has been invited. It's no wonder that Middle East is important for Beijing and thus, including Middle East in their future is quite important. In 2014 China had bilateral trade flows with Iraq by over 25 billion dollars. As Saudi Arabia was the first one with over 60 billion dollars, Iraq was the fifth in the list. China has interest and need for oil and in 2015, China took over the US as the world's top importer of crude oil. This has led to China exporting oil from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. (Dusek & Kairouz, 2017).

The overall investment in Kurdistan Region – Iraq from 2006 to mid-2012 was amounted to 22 billion US dollars, whereas 79 % was national investment, 15 % FDI and 6 % joint ventures. Kurdistan Region has many trading partners and China is the third biggest one. (Board of Investment – Kurdistan Region – Iraq, 2012). “With China already sucking up more than half of the oil production coming from Iraq, the Kurds may be next in the Chinese energy cross hairs. The Chinese begun to sink their teeth into the Kurdish Region's vast oil potential in 2009 when Sinopec acquired Addax Petroleum, which holds a joint agreement with Genel Energy to develop the Taq Taq oil field. To date, a total of 16 development and appraisal wells have been drilled in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, according to a report from The Oil & Gas Year Review for Kurdistan in 2013.” (Cordoba, 2013).

2.4 Recommendations

Considering the situation Kurdistan is facing – both the economical crisis and the security problem – finding a solution or even recommendations is not the easiest. However, since the topic is solely focusing on how China should turn their soft power into hard power in the fight against terrorism, cases like this need solidarity. In my opinion, no one can fight ISIS alone since they are not only in Iraq and Syria, but also terrorizing Europe. China, as a superpower country, could start by taking more responsibility in Middle East since it has been already mentioned before that China has a lot of interest towards Middle East.

To me, these are the major recommendations I would give in this case:

- Both China and Kurdistan needs to cooperate together in order to protect their investments and oil fields. This could be done by sitting around the same table and discussing what and how China could cooperate with Kurdistan.
- Currently, Kurdistan has gotten military aid from the West and this has helped the Kurdish army (Peshmerga) a lot since most of them are lacking the correct military training. However, Kurdistan has asked for more ammunition, proper guns and so on. The reason for this is that ISIS has more advanced technology when it comes to guns. China could step in and perhaps offer advanced technology.
- In order to win the fight against ISIS, Kurdistan would also need physical help in the fight. Perhaps, China could give some assist in this as well.

CONCLUSIONS

For years, China's foreign policy toolkit insisted that its relationship with other countries be based on a long-standing emphasis on staying away from the domestic issues of other countries. However, in the recent past, China's security and economic interests have continued to increase significantly in the Middle East. This interest is limited by the volatile, violent, and brutal political transitions in the Middle East as it forces China to risk losing so much in the event of a violent political transition. The long-standing principles of the Chinese Foreign policy which emphasize on non-interference challenge the national state structure, security, and the borders of the region as a result of ethnic and ethno religious groups. The effect of this is that the mutual benefits of economic developments are thus negatively influenced leading to a rejection and a refusal of the development of a foreign military presence. The non-interference principle of the Chinese foreign policy challenges China's position as a rising global force. This force has however forced the immense potential of China as a rising superpower to gradually ignore its own policies and principles, so as to secure an increasing number of investments in the Middle East region thus guaranteeing rapidly growing communities for Chinese expatriates and economic growth and development for both countries.

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