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Can China Participate in Middle East Stabilization Efforts by Supporting Regional Connectivity?

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Yoram Evron, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “If China takes a prominent role in the establishment and operation of international transportation lines, this would make Beijing a *de facto* stakeholder in and facilitator of regional stability and development.”

Despite repeated efforts, so far Washington has failed to convince China to share the burden of stabilizing the Middle East. To date China’s approach to the region remains unchanged: engaging in activities of high economic self-benefit while refusing to invest substantial political resources or take considerable risks in shaping regional developments. In view of China’s pragmatic approach to the region, one way to convince it to share the burden of stabilizing the Middle East is by encouraging it to undertake roles closely related to its interest and within its capacity and intentions. China’s extensive engagement in the construction and operation of transportation infrastructure across the region, recently framed by Beijing’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) concept, provides such an opportunity. More specifically, if China takes a prominent role in the establishment and operation of international transportation lines, this would make Beijing a *de facto* stakeholder in and facilitator of regional stability and development because such a project would bolster regional interdependence and require multiple states to cooperate.

The visionary Israel-Gulf Economic Corridor (IGEC) could be such a project. Suggested by Yigal Maor, Director-General of the Israel Shipping and Ports Authority, this corridor would connect Jordan to the Mediterranean by a railway line from the Israeli-Jordanian border to the Port of Haifa. At the border it would connect to the Jordanian railroad system, thus creating direct and continuous ground transportation from the Mediterranean through Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, all the way to the Persian Gulf. Currently, this route consists mostly of roads, but there are already plans and agreements — including with Chinese companies — to expand the railway system in the relevant countries. As revolutionary as it may sound, such a vision is neither new nor abstract, and its basic physical components already exist. In November 2016 a new railway line between Haifa port and Beit-She’an — a city on the Israeli-Jordanian border — began to operate, with the declared intention of eventually connecting to the Jordanian railroad system. Furthermore, with the civil war in Syria severely disrupting cargo transportation between the Mediterranean and Jordan (and through Jordan to the Persian Gulf), the attractiveness of Haifa port as Jordan’s gateway to the Mediterranean has increased dramatically. Indeed, the port already serves Jordan and certain Gulf states through the same route, but so far only by trucks. By an Israeli estimate, some 30,000 trucks traverse the cargo terminal on the Israel-Jordan border annually. Replacing the trucks with trains would increase both the capacity and the efficiency of this transportation line, making it much more attractive to businesses; a train line would also facilitate continued economic development along the Haifa port-Persian Gulf line. Such development could involve all concerned parties, including the Palestinian Authority, while enhancing regional interdependence, and providing strong incentives to resolve conflicts and discord.

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Arguably, China has both the interest and the means to realize the IGEC vision. The PRC already has a stake in this project. A state-owned company, Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG), has won a 25-year concession to operate a new port in Haifa, whose construction (by another Chinese company) has already started, and in 2015 China and Jordan signed a \$2.8 billion agreement to construct the Jordanian national railway network. The IGEC is expected to increase significantly the volume of cargo that goes between Haifa port and Jordan, thus providing larger income for various Chinese companies along its route. Those companies will presumably include SIPG and others involved in transportation, logistics and related economic ventures. The IGEC may also reduce costs to Chinese companies that are based in the Gulf and working with European markets and suppliers. Above all, construction and operation of the IGEC harmonizes well with China's declared intention to play a role in the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict and with its OBOR vision. Considering Iraq's instability and the security problems in Central Asian countries, which the ground route of OBOR is planned to cross, the IGEC crosses much more stable countries — partly due to US dominance in this area. The IGEC can therefore be included in an OBOR ground network as an alternative to the main route, to be used when political-security conditions demand it.

Moreover, China is probably better equipped than any other world power to facilitate the IGEC. The establishment and subsequent operation of this transport line is expected to face major opposition, on both economic grounds (e.g. by competing transportation channels like the port of Aqaba) and political-ideological grounds (objection to any cooperation with Israel). The latter pressure will most probably surge time and again whenever Israel is involved in a local or regional conflict. In addition, the completion of the IGEC will require extensive financial investment. Maintaining good relations with all the involved parties, and being engaged in large-scale construction and logistics projects in the region, China is optimally placed to address these challenges. Beijing's ability in 2009 to force the Turkish President Erdogan to tone down his attacks against China's crackdown on the Uighur population demonstrates the ability to impose its will on regional players when specific interests are jeopardized, though it does not do this often. And if needed, China can seek assistance from other world powers that share similar interests of regional stability and cooperation.

The realization of the IGEC vision by China can have far-reaching outcomes and implications. First, it will provide China with a much more concrete interest and role than hitherto in the preservation of regional stability and cooperation, and it will allow China to utilize its unique advantages without intimidating other world players operating in the region. In addition, China will gain the reputation it has so far unsuccessfully sought as a responsible big power in the Middle East, without stepping on other world powers' toes. And last but not least, this focused and framed experience will promote concrete China-US cooperation and interdependence in the Middle East; while the US provides stability, it faces hardships in promoting regional cooperation because it is suspected of being pro-Israeli. China, on the other hand, can be more successful in promoting economic-based regional cooperation but depends on the US as a regional security provider. Such cooperation can serve both Beijing and Washington as a case study as to how China can be constructively involved in regional development and cooperation endeavors.

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