

VIEWS

Fan Hongda

US should reflect on its role in Middle East

Following Israel's strikes on Iran's military facilities on Saturday, the Middle East crisis has worsened. The ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, which has lasted more than one year, and the resulting Israel-Hezbollah conflict have been intensifying. Since Iran launched a retaliatory attack on Israel on Oct 1, a possible war between the two countries has been hanging like the sword of Damocles over the Middle East and the regions beyond.

Some view the ongoing Middle East crisis as an opportunity for China. But I don't agree with this view. If a full-scale Israel-Iran war were to break out, China's losses would far outweigh its potential benefits.

China does not want to see the Middle East crisis escalate, as a volatile Middle East would create innumerable challenges for China, and many other countries. So the argument that the Middle East crisis is conducive to China challenging the United States' position in the Middle East is untenable. To begin with, China has no plans to challenge the US over its role in the region.

For decades, China's interactions with the Middle East have primarily focused on trade and economic cooperation, with the scope of collaboration continuously expanding. China respects its trade partners' sovereignty and territorial integrity, and has been working to foster regional stability and peace, earning praise from the international community.

Although China and the US have serious disagreements on many issues, both agree that it is necessary to prevent a possible Israel-Iran war.

However, the damage caused by the US to the Middle East has become increasingly clear. True, many Middle East countries have strengthened their relations with China in recent years, partly because they are unhappy with the US' role in the region. But they view China as a reliable partner, one that offers an alternative to the US, not as a "rival" of the US.

But if the Middle East crisis deepens further, especially if an Israel-Iran war breaks out, China's advantages could be undermined. Although most Middle East countries may have grown increasingly resentful of the US, their heightened security needs in a time of crisis could prompt them to depend more heavily on the US. This increased dependency could, in turn, lead to the US interfering in their cooperation with China, potentially complicating, if not restricting, the development of China's economic and diplomatic ties with the countries in the region. In such an emergency scenario, the strategic balance may shift back toward the US, despite

many Middle East countries being frustrated with the US.

Also, since China does not have enough influence to reason with the conflicting parties, its efforts to help restore peace in the Middle East, if unsuccessful, will disappoint the countries in the region. Not to mention that despite provoking widespread resentment among Middle East countries, the US' unique allure in the region is yet to fade.

Many Middle East countries have been known to be angry with US policies but simultaneously yearn for US support. This remains a fundamental reality in the Middle East.

When analyzing the potential impacts of the Middle East crisis on China, experts often focus on the competition between China and the US in the region. But does such a competition truly exist? In fact, Beijing does not see it that way. To the best of my knowledge, China has not formulated plans or policies aimed at competing with the US in the Middle East.

China is aware that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to undermine the US' position in the Middle East, not least because Washington has numerous military bases there. China is also aware of the influence the US exercises in the region. Therefore, I believe that rational thinkers in China do not consider it feasible for the country to directly challenge the US' position in the Middle East.

Many view the Belt and Road Initiative

as China's ambitious overseas expansion plan, but this is a misconception. The initiative is primarily a response to China's internal development challenges. Similarly, some interpret China's increasing focus on international organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS as its intention to confront the US and other Western powers. In reality, Beijing's efforts, and the Belt and Road Initiative, are more of a response to the US' growing China-containment strategy.

Instead of challenging, let alone making efforts to replace, the US in the Middle East, China seeks to focus on its development and fostering cooperative relations without engaging in direct rivalry with Washington.

Although China and the US have serious disagreements on many issues, both agree that it is necessary to prevent a possible Israel-Iran war. I believe that like China, the US too hopes for peace in the Middle East; the difference between them lies in the approach to achieving it. As the two most influential global powers today, the US and China have the responsibility to make positive contributions, both separately and jointly, toward restoring and maintaining peace in the Middle East.

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Govts tackling population aging problems one at a time

At a dinner with old friends and former colleagues recently, our conversation turned from our health to our grandchildren's performance in school, and from our travel experiences to our eldercare plans. Yes, eldercare has become a hot topic of discussion in China.

A media report last month said the number of Beijing residents aged 60 or above had reached 4.31 million by the end of last year, making up 30.2 percent of the capital's registered permanent residents. The aging problem is not better in other parts of the country. With China's life expectancy increasing to 78.6 years, millions of people are joining the elderly population every year. By the end of last year China had 297 million elderly people.

Dealing with the aging population problem has become part of the national policy. Over the past few years, the government has issued documents and taken measures to ensure the elderly people lead a decent life.

According to a Ministry of Civil Affairs report, by the end of June, China had about 410,000 eldercare institutions, of which 369,000 were service centers operated by communities. In fact, more than half of the eldercare centers were established in 2019 or later — showing the efforts the central and local governments have been making to deal with the aging problem.

Though one has to pay for such services, the reasonable price and the fact that one can receive professional services while sitting at home have made the arrangement popular.

Many people aged 80 or above have chosen to live in eldercare centers. But they may soon find that a room in a high-end old age home could cost them a fortune. Three of my former colleagues are now living in such a center about 30 kilometers east of Beijing. Each of them pays about 10,000 yuan (\$1,404) a month for a small apartment where they also can have dinner, take part in entertainment and recreational activities and get timely help if and when needed. An aged couple have been paying the center more than 10,000 yuan a month to ensure the center has an apartment ready for them when they decide to shift there.

Additional services, such as expensive full daycare, make it unaffordable for most pensioners, unless they have fat bank deposits. There are cheaper old age homes where an elderly person can get a bed in a dormitory-like room for a few thousand yuan a month. But one may have to wait in a long line to get a bed in such centers, and even if a person is fortunate enough to get one, he or she has to make do with poor services and outdated facilities.

The Chinese tradition of respecting and supporting the elderly people prevents many young people from sending their parents and/or grandparents to eldercare centers even if they can afford to pay for it. My mother-in-law's question, "Why should I leave home and live in an eldercare center when I have my sons and daughter to take care of me" must have been echoed by millions of elderly people.

The central and local governments are promoting community eldercare service centers, with governments offering preferential policies to help communities operate such centers locally. These centers not only provide in-center daycare services for the elderly people but also coordinate with service companies to provide door-to-door services for the elderly. In cities such as Beijing, emergency devices have been installed free of charge in senior citizens' homes that allow elderly people to seek help by just pressing a button.

Though one has to pay for such services, the reasonable price and the fact that one can receive professional services while sitting at home have made the arrangement popular. The arrangement is probably unique to China and difficult for other countries to emulate. China reportedly has more than 5 million social workers working in about 40,000 townships, communities and other institutions. Without their coordination and help, a project involving millions of people can't be put into operation.

The former colleagues living in the eldercare center are still trying to persuade me to join them, saying the services there are excellent. Despite being in my mid-60s, I am enjoying traveling, and rarely think about eldercare arrangements. I hope that by the time I have to make a decision, the system would be developed enough to provide me with the necessary services that I enjoy at home.

Shen Dingli

BRICS offers both opportunities and challenges

The two major aspects of the just-concluded 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, were a possible major expansion of BRICS membership, and de-dollarization efforts.

The then four-nation BRIC held its inaugural summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 2009, and welcomed a fifth member, South Africa, in 2011, turning BRIC into BRICS. The participation of Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in BRICS cooperation is, therefore, a more significant enlargement.

The expansion of BRICS is important for many reasons, one of them being the cumulative GDP of the grouping's member states is now higher than the collective GDP of G7 members. Over the past 15 years, the growth of BRICS, comprising emerging market economies and developing countries, has represented the natural and logical demand for a fairer world economic order and global governance system.

Thanks to economic globalization, the North-South economic and trade bond has deepened. But the unbalanced international development calls for further reform of the world order, which the Global South has been seeking by deepening South-South cooperation, which has been made possible because of the rise of emerging economies such as China, Russia and India.

BRICS' major expansion has opened a new page. The grouping has become more representative and inclusive with the inclusion of African and Middle East countries. This will encourage the grouping to play a more important role in the global economy in a fairer and more balanced manner.

The global economic democratization the grouping is trying to promote includes an alternative international financial settlement mechanism. While the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) system is still the dominant mechanism facilitating global trade transactions, there is no harm in allowing parallel systems to grow. In fact, TARGET2 (a real-time gross settlement system for the eurozone) and CIPS (a renminbi-based settlement system) are both developing steadily, offering an alternative but safer and more robust global settlement system. Such endeavors are needed to reform the international financial system.

The BRICS Summit in Kazan not only formalized the grouping's expansion but also attracted a number of dialogue partners, some of which have already applied to join the grouping.

More important, there is a need to ponder what President Xi Jinping said in his speech at the Kazan summit: that BRICS should be built into a "peaceful", "innovative", "green" and "humanitarian" grouping. It goes without saying that the creation of a BRICS-based settlement mechanism could improve the overall global settlement mechanism, and ena-

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ble the grouping's member states to make more contributions to international development.

However, BRICS faces various challenges, some of which arise from within the grouping. Most of the member states are more interested in sharing the economic opportunities, and may or may not share the political and strategic motivation of the major economies that make up the

grouping. Member states that disagree with transforming a geo-economic BRICS into a political grouping could be wary of the grouping's political and strategic activity. In this regard, the Russia-Ukraine conflict could have affected the cohesiveness within BRICS.

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not physically attend the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, due to the Moscow-Kyiv conflict. And the Western sanctions and restrictions, which have reduced Moscow's global visibility, go against BRICS' efforts to help build a "peaceful" and "prosperous" world.

Addressing, if not resolving, the important differences between BRICS members could also take time. Thankfully, the BRICS Summit saw Chinese and Indian leaders meeting on the sidelines and agreeing to take measures to restore peace along the disputed borders. Simul-

taneously, the two countries' armies reached a deal on patrolling their disputed borders to end a military impasse last week.

The formal expansion of BRICS will certainly create new opportunities. Yet all BRICS member states should work to help end the Russia-Ukraine conflict. While economic collaboration is often conducive to enhancing members' mutual political trust, resolving member states' strategic differences is more crucial for laying a solid foundation for intra-BRICS cooperation. And before further expansion of BRICS, the existing member states should strengthen the grouping's internal unity.

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