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Taq Taq oil field in Arbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. Photo: Reuters

An Independent Kurdistan: Will China Overhaul its Non-intervention Policy?

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During a meeting on June 6, 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq led by Mesut Barzani revealed its decision to call a referendum for Kurdistan's independence on September 25th. A majority of the adults living in the Iraqi Kurdistan region voted in favor of independence. This result quickly led to reactions from other governments, especially countries where the independence of the Kurds is a problematic issue. Nations with large Kurdish populations, like Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, raised sharp objections against the establishment of a new state. The Unites States, the greatest supporter of Kurdistan which helped the Kurdish population to evolve from a tribal power to the threshold of state formation, has indicated that the decision for independence was taken too early, but has never disguised its support for this decision. For Russia, the result involved some drawbacks because this new state could lead to a new US order in the Middle East. Examining the opinions of neighboring countries and the superpowers allows us to define in some ways the reactions to this decision at the global level. As for the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Beijing’s position concerning the creation of Kurdistan is much more complex, and the analysis of this position can be very interesting from a political point of view.

Iraq holds 143 billion barrels and 8.7 percent of world oil reserves. 45 billion barrels are located in the Kurdistan region. In addition, the Kurdish region has as much oil in reserve as the total reserves of five Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) members. While opposed rhetorically to separatist views, China, the world's largest oil importer, is trapped between pragmatism and non-interference as regards Kurdistan's independence because of this geostrategic feature of the Kurdish region.

This essay looks at relations between China and Kurdistan, at the same time

querying the attitude China is likely to take toward a possibly independent Kurdistan. The possibility that China's non-intervention policy has lost its meaning in Iraq is among the topics examined here.

Historical Background of Sino-Kurdish Relations

The relationship between China and the Kurds began with the 1959 Kirkuk rebellion. During the July rebellion against the Iraqi central government, China supported the Kurdish struggle against Baghdad. With the end of the rebellion in 1975, relations between China and Iraq also began to improve. From the 1980s onward, Iraq became a prominent client of the Chinese arms industry, such that some weapons from China were used by Saddam even against the Kurds. However, the the overthrow of Saddam in 2003 signaled the Kurds' increasingly feasible transition to autonomous status and the beginning of their domination over a major oil region, which in turn helped to revive Beijing's interest in the region. The new president of Iraq and president of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Celal Talabani, paid an informal visit to China in early August 2003 and established very important contacts. Talabani's participation in this important diplomatic mission was accompanied by the rising national prominence of the Kurdish coalition, which secured 75 parliamentary seats in the elections of January 30, 2005. These events attracted the attention of Chinese officials and since then Northern Iraq has become an important region for China.

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On 15 May 2005, Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) president Masud Barzani met with the Ambassador of China in Iraq, who invited Barzani to China on behalf of his government. During their meeting the ambassador emphasized China's appreciation of the sacrifices of the Kurds and declared that relations between the People's Republic of China and the regional government of Kurdistan, and especially the relations between the CCP and the KDP, should be expanded. After these overtures, the People's Republic of China further demonstrated its interest by opening a general consulate in Erbil on 30 December 2014.

China’s divided interests

Since its invasion by the United States in 2003, Iraq has become one of the world's largest oil producers, and China is today the main customer for this oil. Beijing is keenly interested in the rich oil fields in northern Iraq, especially those controlled by the Kurds. The Chinese know that the Kurds will resume control of fields in Kirkuk and Hanakin, and will discover and open new ones. This is why, beyond philosophical opposition to an independent Kurdistan, China’s current intention is to increase its population in the region and informally facilitate a new political conjuncture. In recent years, hundreds of Chinese citizens have begun to live in the region and China's investment in Kurdish oil fields and infrastructure had increased rapidly. Sinopec had already acquired significant investments in the region by purchasing Addax Petroleum in Kurdish Iraq in 2009. Chinese companies such as Huawei, Sinoma-Suzhou, and CMEC are also making serious investments in northern Iraq. Sinoma-Suzhou invested $ 13.4 million in the Kurdistan Region, while CMEC's cement plant construction project is ongoing.

Chinese Ambassador to Iraq Li Huaxin, 2005. Photo: Getty Images

However, over against economic and geostrategic considerations, we note that the People's Republic of China in the post-Mao period has taken a consistent stand against separatist movements in other countries due to its own problems in Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet. Thus China has to formally maintain a policy position that is

explicitly opposed to the pro-independence sentiment among the Kurds, which means that so far China has been emphasizing the protection of Kurdish rights in Iraq and other neighboring countries, such as Turkey and Syria. Despite the adversity faced by Kurdish populations in these countries, China argues that separatist ideals ultimately mean war and instability for the world.

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In the face of overwhelming popular support for Kurdish autonomy as expressed in the September 25 referendum, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang told a daily news briefing, “The Chinese government supports Iraq’s sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. We hope the relevant sides can resolve the differences via dialogue, and find an inclusive solution that takes into account history and reality, to jointly protect Iraqi and regional stability.”

What we see, then, is a situation in which Beijing allowed the emergence of an independent Kurdistan before September 25, but now rhetorically opposes it. These mixed and transitory diplomatic signals suggest that under Xi Jinping the non-interventionist and anti-separatist policies of the Chinese government could soften or even diminish in the oilfields of Northern Iraq. This could mark a larger shift in geopolitical strategy or it could simply indicate that for China, petroleum ultimately trumps policy in the Middle East.

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