

# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

Written by Nikola Zadzorova

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## How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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NIKOLA ZADZOROVA, OCT 4 2015

Oil is a vital commodity for every state and as in many other countries; it has been of core importance in the People's Republic of China (PRC). A dream of every country is to have a surplus of hydrocarbons, in order to avoid dependency on foreign imports. Since in general there are more resource-poor states than resource-rich states in the world, for majority of them, including China, energy security means "provision of affordable, reliable, diverse and ample supplies,"[1] Oil is a significant component of the energy security of China, representing one fifth of the energy used in the country.[2] As argued by Collins, if there would be a lack of oil, "Chinese industry could still function as it is powered by coal, but it would be difficult to move raw material and goods without gasoline and diesel fuel,"[3] resulting in inability to sell and export goods either at home or abroad. Consequently, disruption of oil supplies would have serious impact on the Chinese economy and on the state's ability to achieve further, or at least sustain current level of development.

China is well aware of existing threats of oil shortage and tries to do its best to avoid any possible events of this type. Vast oil consumption of China requires policies that ensure that 1,3 billion people and tremendous Chinese market will not be affected by the lack of oil. Since China has been rising economically to such an extent, its growing oil needs should not be surprising. Indeed, all countries in the world recognize China's oil needs and in the eyes of many it has become notorious as "heavily oil intensive economy." [4] Oil is a natural resource that is exhaustible and as there is only limited amount of it left in the world, one can predict that China – yet "the largest net importer of petroleum" [5] in the world – will take all necessary steps to secure enough oil supplies for its market, which allow for its further economic development and consequently for its national stability and security. With this in mind, this essay's main aim is to examine how has China been achieving oil deals and ensuring oil supplies from two significant regions – the Middle East and Africa. The first part of the essay gives an overview of history of China's increasing oil consumption, its oil policy, and involvement of African and Middle Eastern states in it. Second part is concerned with the pre-import preparation, presenting Chinese financial contribution to foreign states, selling of weapons and political support as methods that can be identified as used by China to ensure flow of oil from the two regions. And the final part examines shipping lanes from Africa and the Middle East, their possible dangers and China's attention to it.

### Between the Oil Import-Export-Import

Compared to a large number of states, which usually possess either a lack or surplus of oil, China's experience has been different. During sixty five years of its existence, China has experienced several 'oil phases,' during which China achieved failures as well as successes. Although early ages of the PRC's existence were dominated by the International ban on oil import that pushed China to turn to the Communist bloc countries for oil supplies, already by the mid-1960s, as a result of the government-led initiative and vast investments; first oil-rich areas in China were detected and China was able to move from dependency on foreign oil import.[6] Chinese oil success did not only mean that China was able to cover its domestic oil needs, but since 1973 it even managed to supply foreign markets.[7] Hence, within approximately two decades, China coped with its natural resource situation, and moved from being the oil importing country to an East Asian oil exporter. The relatively stable position, during which China was able benefit to certain extend from the selling of oil, did not last long. Although in 1983, 10 years after China

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started to supply foreign markets, its foreign oil sales achieved historically the highest scores, already in 1988, as a result of the less oil output and higher oil consumption of the Chinese market, the country was yet dependent on the relatively large amounts of oil from abroad.[8]

Although China had already in the past experienced dependency on foreign sales of oil, the situation the country faced this time was distinct. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was clear that Chinese oil consumption, as a result of “a rapid general economic growth, the speed of industrialization, rapid urbanization, and growth of export,”[9] rose to the levels which were impossible to be matched with China’s oil stock. Under these circumstances, it was not astonishing when in 1993 China imported more oil than it exported and for the first time achieved status of net oil importer.[10] Since then, Beijing has not been able to experience any sign of oil self-sufficiency.

The more economically China was rising; more it became dependent on oil supplies from rich and vast oil fields from abroad. Two particular regions – the Middle East and Africa, which together account for almost three fourths of global oil stock, have started to occupy significant part in China’s search for oil scarcity solution.[11] Historically, it was Oman, which was the first state that helped China in 1980s to cover its energy needs.[12] Within the short time period, China has started engage closer with other states from the regions. In the decisive year of 1993, the Middle Eastern and African countries, namely Oman, Yemen and Angola were among the most prominent oil suppliers to China.[13] Based on the data published in Jaffe and Lewis’s article, China’s foreign oil supplies from 1993 till 1999, originated between 40 and 61 per cent in the Middle East, and supplies from Africa accounted for up to 18 per cent.[14] Consequently, the amounts of oil flowing from the two regions in 1990s have led to China’s preoccupation with particular Middle Eastern and African states. As emphasized in the Introduction, China’s oil requirements have been rising, and as a result of that, in 2013 China with the imported quantity of oil secured itself number one rank among the global oil importers. One can thus recognize acute and enormous oil needs of China and the relevant question is how China manages to secure its vast oil needs. The following section of this essay explores China’s pre-import preparations which are the core in securing oil contracts with African and the Middle Eastern states.

## Pre-import Preparation

Before proceeding to examine some concrete methods that can be identified with the Chinese style of safeguarding of its oil supplies, it is important to define the character of states that are listed among the oil suppliers of China. Having looked at the list of the oil suppliers from Africa and the Middle East since the 2000s, countries such as Iraq, Angola, Sudan or Congo are among those which have supplied oil to the Chinese market.[15] It has been known, that these countries are among those which in the past struggled with armed conflict violence within their borders. Chinese partnership with African states has already been defined by scholars such as Brookes and Shin who rightly consider it as “aids and abets to oppressive and destitute dictatorships in Africa.”[16] Similarly, as it has been highlighted by Shinn’s article, the flow of oil from Angola, Sudan or Equatorial Guinea to China demonstrates the fact that China cooperates with these states despite “violation of human rights and serious abuses committed by their governments.”[17] Thus, it can be considered as widely held view that China ignores domestic situation in countries from which its oil reserves originate, and the violation of the humanitarian principles does not constitute any obstacle for China when procuring treaties for their oil supplies.

The oil represents almost one fifth of the China’s energy demand, meaning that yet in 2009 China needed almost 120 million tons of oil equivalent to cover its domestic oil needs.[18] There is an evidence to suggest that China uses various methods in order to provide for its oil security that can be achieved by the oil deals with African and the Middle Eastern oil suppliers. One of the Chinese means that can be identified is a financial contribution of Chinese capital into foreign markets from which the oil supplies come from.[19] There is number of states in the Middle East as well as in Africa in which the latter applies. Based on the data introduced in the Jaffe and Lewis’s article, China has already since 1996 invested substantial millions of dollars into Iranian, Nigerian and most markedly into Sudanese oil fields.[20] Deriving from the available evidence, Sudanese oil development has been since the 2000s influenced by the extensive flow of capital from China compared to other states, and it has been estimated that billions of the US dollars have been invested in Sudan since then.[21] It is thus not surprising that oil from Sudan, Iran or Nigeria have played an important role in the years that followed after the Chinese financial contribution. By 2003, Sudan and Iran accounted for almost 7 and 14 per cent of China’s oil foreign oil stock respectively, according to the

# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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research published by Lai.[22] Hence, Sudanese and Iranian oil supplied over 20 per cent of the Chinese market. Regarding the supply of Nigerian oil into China, the treaty signed in 2005 between the Nigerian and Chinese oil companies ensured that "China received 30 000 barrels per day for one year." [23] Consequently, it can be argued that it was beneficial for China to expend money in number of states, as these states helped to solve China's oil insecurity. At the same time, China's import of oil from these states supports the already stated claim that China has often been identified as cooperating with states that have just emerged from conflicts or have some unresolved domestic problems. As it was already dealt with before, China does not take into consideration domestic problems when launching its oil treaties. This is, however, not the most decisive part of their behaviour when looking for oil abroad.

China does not only neglect internal situation, but it has even pursued steps that have worsened domestic situation in particular states in Africa and the Middle East. These actions may be considered as a component of the Chinese foreign oil policy. From an historical point of view, China had already in the early second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century impact on the development of domestic issues when it "supported revolutionary movements, such as the one in Iraq in 1958, and in other states in the Gulf region." [24] However, at that time the Chinese involvement was not directed by its oil needs, despite the fact that some of the states in which China seek to spread its influence have become later its oil suppliers. The actions launched by the Chinese authority in the recent period, have not only had an impact on the development of situation in countries, but it has been undoubtedly motivated by the aim of ensuring availability of the foreign oil as the subsequently examined cases reveal.

China has been identified with the arms selling to foreign countries, and according to the Amnesty International; among its customers can be found countries such as Angola, Iraq, Iran or Sudan.[25] This essay particularly looks at Iran and Sudan and via these examples tries to demonstrate that via arms sales China has tried to achieve guaranteed flow of the oil supplies. Jaffe and Lewis in their article confirm that one can see the linkage between arms sales and oil import, as during the 1990s when China was selling arms to Iran, it has simultaneously arranged to buy three times more oil, compared to the earlier period when no arms sales were commenced.[26] One can argue, that Iran's ranking among China's three best Middle Eastern oil selling markets of the early 2000s could have been to some extent result of the Chinese strategic arms sales which took place before.[27] While China through selling of arms could to some degree helped to facilitate itself oil resources from the country, there have been some effects of the arms imports observed in Iran as well. Since Iran was for Beijing the most preferred Middle Eastern market, it was able to qualitatively and quantitatively enriched own weapon system and hence overall military capability.[28] Sudan is another notable example of the Chinese engagement in selling of weapons to foreign armed groups and movements.

Despite the fact that some authors such as Shinn emphasize that "Khartoum can easily purchase military equipment from China by using revenue from the oil that China helped to develop," [29] it is important to examine not only economic side of the trading, but also dependence which had arisen. When countries have significant economic ties, it becomes more difficult for one of them to withdraw from the economic commitment. Hence, when China was selling its weapons to Sudan, it became difficult for Sudan to refuse to deliver oil to China, as China was able to cease weapons delivery. Even more decisive is the time frame during which the weapons were sold to Sudan. According to the Human Rights First, "since 2004 when the United Nations Security Council imposed an embargo on arms transfers to Darfur, China has been supplying approximately 90 per cent of small arms," [30] thus being the crucial supplier without which there would be almost no small weapons in Darfur. Since the weapon mediation took place during the armed conflict in Sudan, it made it very difficult for Sudan to dispense with these weapons. As a result of that, it can be argued that China has achieved its oil import also through its sales of weapons to Sudan. It is interesting to observe that during the same time period when weapons deliveries started to rise on the intensity, between 2004 and 2006, the value of Sudan's oil deliveries to China almost doubled.[31] Taken together, it may be argued that similarly as in the case of China-Iran relationship, China was via selling of weapons able to arrange commitment to receive oil from Sudan.

In addition to the already examined means of achieving oil supplies, China has also used its political power to make its 'oil alliances' with certain countries in the Middle East and Africa worth to be launched and sustained. This essay briefly identifies how China uses its political strength to attract states and consequently gain access to the resource

# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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reserves of oil-rich states. The influence of China has been particularly noted within the United Nations Security Council, in which it has been holding as well as actively using its dominant permanent position with veto power. The case when the country's UN representatives "have been active in preventing the UN applying more severe sanction to curb the actions of Khartoum government in the Darfur conflict,"[32] or its expression of resistance when "the United States wanted to refer Iran to the Security Council over its nuclear program,"[33] support the view that behaviour of Chinese officials can and often is aiming to protect their national interests. Simultaneously, actions taken by the Chinese can be an example for other states to launch cooperation with it, as they have observed that its actions are often carried in way of protecting of its allies. It can be consequently the way how China can safeguard even more oil supplies, when it will be recognized as a reliable ally. This chapter has demonstrated that China pays close attention to its pre-import preparations and uses various means, namely financial contributions, selling of arms as well as political support of its oil suppliers to safeguard its oil needs. The next part of the paper assesses the process of the import of oil from the Middle East and Africa, with the particular attention to dangers which may have arisen while the oil is transported.

## Process of Import: Dangers and Challenges

While the previous chapter examined the ways China tries to ensure future oil deals, once the agreements are signed, the question which arises is how the oil can be safely delivered to China. Although China may have endeavoured to safeguard as much oil as it needs, it does not necessarily mean that every barrel agreed in the treaties with its oil suppliers, will reach Chinese ports. Connection between the purchasing and supplying state, hence China and its Middle Eastern and African suppliers, is in this case ensured by the maritime transportation. The Middle Eastern oil not only needs to get through approximately 7000 nautical miles, but it also has to successfully pass strategically significant places – the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca.[34][35] Regarding the oil from Africa, having looked at the map of Chinese oil imports based on the US Department of Defence data from 2009, one can see that there were two other routes used, one to deliver oil from Angola, and another one for Sudanese and Libyan oil supplies, and while the African routes are significantly longer than the shipping lanes from the Middle East, they all go via the Strait of Malacca.[36] Available statistics even more strengthen the claim of significance of the Strait of Malacca, as they indicate that during 2013 more than 15 million barrels of oil passed the Strait of Malacca every day.[37] The Strait of Malacca is not only significant regionally, but particularly for China, it represents a decisive point in its oil security, as almost 80 per cent of its oil from abroad needs to cross this point in order to reach the Chinese territory.[38] Hence, if any accident would take place there, China loses substantial amount of oil.

Although the importance of the Strait of Malacca for Chinese oil supplies can be recognized, China is attempting to provide for the overall security of its shipping route from the Middle East. As stated before, there are different routes used for oil shipping from African and the Middle Eastern suppliers, however, since in recent years approximately twice as many barrels of oil have been bought from the Middle East than from Africa, greater focus to the Strait of Hormuz than to other less important shipping lanes would be comprehensible.[39] This is not to say that there has been no attention paid to shipping lanes linking African states with China. However, as steps taken by Chinese show that their area of interest is the safeguarding of oil flow between the Strait of Hormuz and Chinese ports, which have been translated into its so called "string of pearls' strategy that aims to build close ties with countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia in order to protect sea lanes." [40] Ultimately, this may also mean in part decreasing of threat to oil imports from African states, but only in the areas where the Middle Eastern and African shipping routes meet. In addition, various plans have already been proposed for boosting of the oil security of China, ranging from constructing of new pipelines, reduction of use of maritime transportation or even use of Chinese navy guarding during transportation of oil.[41] However, this essay considers the most effective to be the launching of closer cooperation with states, even though it is the long-term goal that requires some time in order to be achieved. The question which should be asked is whether China will have enough time to engage with the Indian Ocean littoral states and increase security of its oil shipping, since the most serious threat to its oil security – the United States – is already present in the region.[42]

## Conclusion

To sum up, the essay has examined the Chinese import from the Middle East and Africa, pointing to history of oil

# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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policy and significance of the two regions in it, it has also identified pre-import strategies that can be identified with China, as well as the import per se that could endanger China's oil security. The essay has at the beginning attempted to look at how China has moved between the need of oil import, to the phase of oil export, and with the growing consumption and lack of domestic oil stock back to the dependency on import, and have finally resulted in China's worldwide lead in the oil consumption. Since China's oil needs were growing, it needed countries with vast oil stock to buy the oil from, and these were found in the Middle East and Africa. In order to safeguard its oil supplies, China has provided extensive capital, sold weapons and even showed support to its oil suppliers such as Iran and Sudan. The last part of the essay pointed to the dangers of the oil import via the Indian Ocean. While arguing that the Strait of Malacca is of the core significance for Chinese oil security, the essay has also pointed out that China cares substantially about the security of the overall shipping route from the Middle East to China. Interestingly, the essay has concluded that despite the fact that China has been trying to strengthen security of the shipping, the United States' presence makes the goal of safe oil deliveries very fragile.

Regarding the overall Chinese oil policy, some authors such as Yi-Chong argue that China "has behaved like a normal player, buying as much resources as it can,"[43] however, this essay, cannot agree with this. While Chinese financial contribution to its oil supplying states or allying with states proximate to the shipping lanes, as identified in this essay, can be considered within a framework of normal behaviour, some of the Chinese actions when managing its oil supplies, has demonstrated that China has ignored 'fair-play' that should be part of every game and respected by every player. Hence, as the essay has shed light on the Chinese actions such as selling of weapons or a back-up of countries in the United Nations, these are the actions that not only worsened situation in countries like Sudan, but they have also posed a threat to the whole international community. Since oil, as argued in the beginning, is significant for the Chinese economic development, it has an impact on the overall rise of the country. From this point of view, 'peaceful rise' that has been advocated as Chinese strategy of development, should be called into question.

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# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

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## Footnotes

[1]Kalicki and Goldwyn, *Energy and Security*, p.9.

[2]See statistics in: "China,"p.3

[3]Erickson, Goldstein and Li, *China, the United States, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Sea Power*, p.26

[4]Lee, "China's Quest for Oil Security,"p.269

[5]"China is now the world's largest net importer of petroleum."

[6]Kong, *China's International Petroleum Policy*, pp.7-8

[7]Lee, "China's Quest for Oil Security,"p.267

[8]Daoijiong, "China's Energy Security," p.180

[9]Yi-chong, "China's Energy Security,"p.269

[10]See, for instance: Myers Jaffe and Lewis, "Beijing's Oil Diplomacy," p.115, Lee, "China's Quest for Oil Security," p.267, Daoijiong, "China's Energy Security," p.180

[11]Thomson and Horii. "China's Energy Security," p. 644

[12]Daoijiong, "China's Energy Security," p.180

[13]Lee, "China's Quest for Oil Security,"p.270

[14]See research in: Myers Jaffe and Lewis, "Beijing's Oil Diplomacy," p.119

[15]See: International Energy Agency, "Oil & Gas Security,"p. 6, and Lai, "China's Oil Diplomacy,"p.523

[16]"China's Influence in Africa."

[17]"Africa, China, the United States and Oil."

[18]International Energy Agency, "Oil & Gas Security,"p.4

[19]Jakobson and Daojiong, "China and the Worldwide Search for Oil," p.64

[20]Myers Jaffe and Lewis, "Beijing's Oil Diplomacy," p.123

[21]"China's Influence in Africa."

[22]Lai, "China's Oil Diplomacy,"p.523

[23]"China's Oil Rush in Africa,"p.11

# How Has China Been Safeguarding Its Oil Imports from the Middle East and Africa?

Written by Nikola Zadzorova

[24]“China and the Persian Gulf,”p.3

[25]“The Big Six Arms Exporters.”

[26]Myers Jaffe and Lewis, “Beijing’s Oil Diplomacy,” p.124

[27]“China’s Oil Strategy Toward the Middle East,” p.2

[28]“Chinese Arms Export,” p.7

[29]“Africa, China, the United States and Oil.”

[30]“China’s Arms Sales to Sudan.”

[31]See the data in: “China’s Arms Sales to Sudan.”

[32]Pannel, “China’s Economic and Political Penetration in Africa,” p.721

[33]Ma, “China backs push to avoid nuclear linked sanctions,” in Lee, “China’s Quest for Oil Security,” p.283

[34]Yi-chong, “China’s Energy Security,” p.280

[35]Thomson and Horii. “China’s Energy Security,”p.648

[36]See the map in: “China’s Reliance on Shipping Crude Oil Through the Strait of Malacca.”

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[37]“World Oil Transit Checkpoints,” p.2

[38]You, “Dealing with the Malacca Strait Dilemma,” in Tow (Ed.), *Security Politics in the Asia-Pacific*, pp.247,248

[39]See: “Oil & Gas Security: The People’s Republic of China,” p. 6, and“China.” p.11

[40]Lai, “China’s Oil Diplomacy,” p.528

[41]See: Thomson and Horii. “China’s Energy Security,” p.653, and Salameh, “China’s Global Oil Diplomacy,” p.22, and Gautam, “Mapping Chinese Oil and Gas Pipelines and Sea Routes,” p.603

[42]See, for instance: Salameh, “China’s Global Oil Diplomacy,” p.22, andDadwal, “China’s Search for Energy Security,” p.895

[43]Yi-chong, “China’s Energy Security,” p.265

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