

**China boosts ties with nations vital to its economy**  
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**By Frank Ching**

STRATEGIC VALUE: New Chinese leader Xi Jinping's first overseas trip is aimed at shoring up the country's economic interests

THE new Chinese leader Xi Jinping is currently on his first overseas trip as president, visiting Russia as well as three countries in Africa --Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo.

The first trip of a leader is usually heavy with symbolism. The previous Chinese president, Hu Jintao, also went to Russia on his first visit abroad and Vladimir Putin visited China as part of his first overseas trip last year after he resumed the Russian presidency.

China, the world's largest oil importer, and Russia, a key energy exporter, are economically complementary. Soon after Xi's arrival in Moscow, the two countries pledged to cooperate in the fields of oil, natural gas, coal, electricity and new energy.

Africa, too, is important for China. Beijing likes to point out that China is the world's largest developing country while Africa is home to the largest number of developing countries.

On a more practical level, Africa has become China's second largest source for crude oil while China has provided investment in infrastructure such as roads, railways and pipelines.

The new president's first overseas trip, therefore, is aimed very much at cementing China's relations with a country and a continent vital to its economic well-being, which provide much of the fuel for its booming economy.

While China is busily looking after its interests overseas, it is unhappy that the United States is doing the same thing by shifting its attention to the Pacific instead of the Middle East, where it has been bogged down for a decade.

Washington sees dynamic East Asia as of greater strategic value to the US than other parts of the world.

A commentary by the Chinese state news agency Xinhua urged the US to readjust its overall diplomacy by abandoning the "Asian pivot" in favour of renewed attention to the Middle East, which it called "probably the most politically volatile patch of land on earth".

"Washington cannot afford to overlook the Middle East," the commentary said, "especially after the region saw overthrow of several long-time rulers and is filled with uncertainties, and needs more than ever the helping hands from a responsible and constructive super power."

This is rare praise from China, which often criticises Washington for interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, but now sees America as being responsible and constructive.

While the United States is approaching self-sufficiency in energy, China continues to be dependent on Middle Eastern oil. As a result, China is more concerned than ever about instability in the region and is eager for Washington to play a positive role.

Xinhua pointed out that peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians have made no progress -- despite US President Barack Obama's four-day trip to the Middle East -- and the crisis in Syria "which just passed its two-year anniversary" continues with no signs of improvement.

It is ironic that China is asking the United States to focus more on the Middle East, especially Syria, when Beijing has vetoed -- together with Moscow -- three attempts by the United Nations Security Council to adopt resolutions aimed at tackling the crisis.

One primary reason for Xinhua's concern, of course, is that it opposes the American "pivot" to Asia under which Washington has strengthened its military alliances in Asia and announced plans to shift 60 per cent of its fleet to the Asia-Pacific region by 2020.

Washington has explained that its "pivot" to East Asia is driven by American interests in the region in order to seize opportunities for a more secure and prosperous future.

But Xinhua complained that the focus on East Asia by the Americans has done nothing to improve stability in the region.

"On the contrary," it said, "they emboldened a few of its Asian allies to be more assertive in territorial disputes with China and triggered speculation from Chinese experts that an 'Asia pivoting' Washington actually takes aim at China, creating strategic mistrust," said Xinhua.

China, which calls itself a responsible power, now says that it can cooperate with the US in safeguarding peace and stability in the Middle East.

"As permanent members of the UN Security Council and the world's two largest economies," it said, "the United States and China could join hands in safeguarding peace and stability and increasing trade and investment in the Middle East."

Increasingly, it seems, China and the US share similar interests in the Middle East. And if Middle Eastern problems cause America to divert its attention from East Asia, China would like that even more.

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