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FORCED INTO EMPIRE?: China, Aramco and the Peaceful Rise in the Middle East

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In the last weeks, different sources are suggesting the possibility that PetroChina and Sinopec –companies owned by a Chinese public consortium of which the sovereign fund of this country is also a part- acquire between 5% and 10% of Aramco, the Saudi state-owned oil company. If this Initial Public Offering finally takes shape, the operation would represent a new step of the Chinese government in its quest for solutions for their great energy supply problem. It would take place concomitantly with this quarter’s purchase of around 15% of the Russian Rosneft by CEFC China Energy. Moreover, it would represent a consolidation of Beijing’s positions in the Middle East in a moment when, ironically, Washington seems to be taking a step back in the region as a consequence of their “pivoting to Asia” strategy. At this point there are still some geopolitically important loose ends to tie up such as whether the operation is going to be based in New York, Frankfurt or in the *City* of London -aiming at showing muscle amid the Brexit negotiations. But, beyond the economic impact of the acquisition over the region and Beijing, it might raise some questions about the long process setting off China to the condition of superpower in the current complex unipolar system.

To this point, Chinese foreign policy has been marked by the peaceful rise theory. This is not only based on a principle of prudence advising to avoid any form of confrontation against the hegemonic superpower and the rest of the actors of the international system. The apparently conscientious observance of the non-interference principle (especially, its political aspect) is central as well. According to the CCP’s party-liner thought, China must grow apart from any behavior akin to that of the European colonial empires, first, and the United States, afterwards, as Beijing understands itself as victim of those actions. Any alternative would be paradoxical in light of Beijing’s Third World-leadership narrative and its defense of the pacific coexistence principles, all based on the idea of a shared oppression history among former colonial territories.

Yet this representation of the colonial phenomenology takes out of the equation a fundamental element of its origins. It is true that the terrible condition of being a colony and the atrocities suffered by women and men were linked with ideas of racial hierarchies and religious and civilizational proselytism. The obsessive-compulsive extractive exploitation syndrome of many states was vital. However, in

practice, the monster can only be explained in many instances by the will of some countries to protect private commercial privileges and interests obtained before the landing of the first dress coats and muskets. In some cases, the imperialist drift was originated by the zeal of assisting fundamentally long-lasting non-public interests in front of unexpected and prejudicial situations.

Some examples of this historical casuistic underrepresented by the Chinese narrative are the Dutch colonialism in Indonesia since the 16th century as response to the petitions by the Dutch East India Company, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against the East India Company –originating the British Raj-, the British invasion of Egypt in 1882, or even the two British-Chinese Opium Wars. More contemporary examples, such as the American actions in Iran in 1953 after Mossadeq's renationalization of oil, are also revealing.

Will China be able to sit so easily on the fence amid events taking place in the Persian Gulf from this point onwards? What will it decide to do in front of those situations where the defense of its citizens' interests becomes incompatible with the non-interference principle and the bases of pacific coexistence? Will it accept to stand idly by in circumstances where those are at stake amid regime changes or nationalizations? The reasons why China could decide to change its course of action, and start intervening more regularly and forcefully in someone else's affairs, might not necessarily be constructed around old-fashion arguments of *mission civilisatrice*. Not even around greedy and expansive ones. It is also possible that colonial attitudes and behaviors will be the result of unselfish conceptions presented as protective and defensive acts before uncertainties and threats of change. Paradoxically, the fact that Beijing is asking itself this type of questions marks its arrival to the status of global superpower.