



China and the Independent Kurdish State

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Iraqi Kurdistan region will be holding a referendum on independence on September 25, 2017. While Beijing fears that Kurdish independence could fuel separatist movements within China, the emergence of a Kurdish state could turn out to be a net positive for the Asian giant. China maintains cordial diplomatic and commercial relations with the Kurds, but opposes a unilateral Kurdish declaration of independence. It will support an independent Kurdish state only if it obtains the consent of the regional states.

This past June, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani announced that on September 25, 2017, a referendum on independence would be held on the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The referendum will take place within the borders of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, as well as in disputed territories that have been under de facto Kurdish control since their liberation from ISIS (e.g., Kirkuk). Kurds will vote to decide whether autonomous Kurdistan should disengage from Iraq and become independent or remain within the Iraqi state.

The referendum is neither a declaration of independence nor a trigger of immediate change in the nature of Kurdish sovereignty in northern Iraq, since the vote lacks both a legal framework for binding implementation and support from the international community. However, the referendum will be the Iraqi Kurds' first concrete step towards realizing their over-a-century-old dream of an independent Kurdish state. The vote will likely give the Kurds more bargaining power vis-à-vis Baghdad and the international community once the fight against ISIS has been concluded.

The question of independence has existed ever since the Kurds established a semi-autonomous region in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. These aspirations have gained momentum during the current period of turmoil, which has seen the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS, and the aftershocks of the "Arab Spring." The Kurds took advantage of the instability to seize an opportunity for radical change in the balance of power in the Middle East.

More importantly, the major role the Kurds have played in the US-backed campaign to defeat ISIS has brought them growing international attention and wider acknowledgment of their achievements and national rights. However, without international recognition and support, Kurdish statehood will remain a dream.

China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC) with ambitions to become a major player in the Middle East, will need to take a clear position on the "Kurdish question." The issue is not simply a matter of regional security and stability. It is also a matter of international law and moral norms that involve Chinese interests and national security.

In the post-Cold War era, China has become increasingly engaged in the Middle East due to broader national interests – namely, to continue its economic growth, preserve its Communist-ruled political system, defend its sovereignty from foreign threats and other interference in its internal affairs, and expand its global influence as a rising economic and political power.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has strongly opposed separatist movements abroad as a means of gaining support for its own opposition to separatist movements within China. Beijing officially considers separatism one of the "three evil forces," along with terrorism and extremism. This reflects its uncompromising adherence to the maintenance of territorial integrity at all costs – primarily with regard to Taiwan, but also to Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. China avers that self-determination should not necessarily involve national independence, and that stateless nations should not necessarily form or be given states.

Beijing's policy on the Kurdish question is part of its overall policy on Iraq, which in turn is part of its policy towards the Middle East in general, which in turn is part of its foreign policy at the global level. The core of China's official Middle East policy is to maintain a stable and peaceful regional environment that facilitates continued domestic reform and development. On the matter of Middle East hotspots, Chinese policy is to promote peace and the reasonable settlement of disputes through dialogue and negotiation, with an emphasis placed on the role of the UN Security Council.

Beijing has officially supported the Iraqi central government in its efforts to safeguard sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity and establish respect, equality, and mutual benefit based on bilateral relations. It actively supports political reconstruction and national reconciliation, as well as Iraq's counter-terrorism efforts in fighting ISIS. China firmly advocates the adoption of a peaceful democratic process to achieve security and stability in Iraq.

However, there are several interests underlying Beijing's Kurdish policy. First, an independent and friendly Kurdish state – particularly one China helped create – could provide Beijing with a new ally in the Middle East and a new instrument of influence in the region. Second, despite Beijing's official opposition to separatist movements, Chinese companies have strong energy and economic stakes in Kurdistan, making it different from other such movements. Third, Beijing has found the Kurds to be a reliable regional ally as well as a lethal and valuable asset against ISIS and al-Qaeda. Fourth, the Kurdish issue provides China with leverage against Turkey, which continues to host Uyghur separatists and organizations. Fifth and most important, China is interested in Iraqi Kurdistan's rich oilfields, which could diversify its oil supplies.

With all that said, an independent Kurdistan would have a range of negative implications for Chinese interests and national security. First, an independent Kurdish state could unleash regional instability that would be detrimental to China's economic and strategic interests, and which could encourage other separatist movements (notably the Uyghurs and the Tibetans) to fight for their own causes. Second, the birth of a new Kurdish state would face strong opposition from the major regional states, produce greater instability, and possibly be accompanied by war. Baghdad, Tehran, Damascus, and Ankara are all opposed to an independent Kurdish state for the same reason the prospect gives China pause: it could encourage separatism among their own minorities. Support for an independent Kurdistan could harm Beijing's relations with regional powers that it has spent years attempting to cultivate.

Kurdish secession could destabilize the rump Iraqi state politically, economically, and militarily. Beijing is not in the least interested in further destabilizing Iraq or in alienating Baghdad. Moreover, Washington has historically shunned the idea of breaking apart the Iraqi state out of fear of setting a precedent for secessionism throughout the region.

However, the behavior of President Trump, who is both malleable and volatile, may prove favorable for Iraqi Kurds' aspirations towards independence. It is quite clear that if a Kurdish state emerges, it will be friendly to the US, which will have important consequences for its regional interests and national security.

The emergence of an independent Kurdistan would have favorable implications for the Western powers: it would likely be relatively well-governed and stable, and it would be pro-Western. Such developments could significantly weaken Chinese economic and strategic interests in the region.

The Kurdish referendum cannot lead to independence without international recognition, a crucial pre-condition to full statehood. Since the KRG is located in a war-torn country and in a region of economic and geopolitical significance, it will need support and legitimacy to be conferred by both global and regional powers.

Beijing's position on the Kurdish question is intricate. China has traditionally had friendly relations with the Kurds, and joined the other four members of the UN Security Council in opening a consulate in Erbil. However, Beijing opposes a unilateral Kurdish declaration of independence. It will support an independent Kurdish state only if it emerges with the consent of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad and other countries in the region.

China's dilemma with regard to the Kurds is not necessarily insoluble. Beijing could opt to allow the emergence of an independent Kurdistan while remaining rhetorically opposed to it at the same time. That kind of approach has been a common tactic of Chinese diplomacy in the region.

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