

China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in the Last Decade

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Abstract: *In the decade after its establishment, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum has completed its normalized, institutional construction and established more than ten kinds of communication mechanism, such as ministerial meetings, senior officials meeting, business conference and investment seminars, which cover a variety of fields in political, economic, cultural, and humanistic cooperation. It not only enriched the connotation of China-Arab cooperation, but created a new cooperation mode. Therefore, the Arab World and China have developed a relationship of mutual promotion, mutual complementation and sound development multilaterally and bilaterally, officially and privately. The development of the Forum benefited both sides insisting on mutual respect, mutually beneficial cooperation and common development concept. In the next decade, the Forum should deepen strategies, adhere to innovation, emphasize on effectiveness, and create a better tomorrow for the work of the Forum.*

Key Words: *China-Arab States Cooperation Forum; Sino-Arab Relations; Sino-Arab Cooperation; Middle East Diplomacy*

In 2014, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum celebrated its

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tenth anniversary. Though ten years is a very short time for the development of a multilateral cooperation organization. "However, it is a period of progress, providing the Arab World and China a stage for seeking their common interest and proceeding win-win cooperation, which blooms fruitful results." After a decade of efforts, the "Forum" has completed the building of a regularization mechanism. It has established mechanisms including Ministerial Meetings, Senior Officials meetings, Entrepreneurs Conference and Investment Seminar, China-Arab Relations and Civilization Dialogue seminars, Sino-Arab Friendship Conference, Energy Cooperation Conference, News & Press Cooperation Forum, cultural festivals, Senior Officials Conferences in Health Policy, etc. The "Forum" almost covers cooperation in all aspects, including political, economic, cultural, and humanistic areas, which not only enriches the friendly communications exchanges between China and the Arab countries, but also creates an innovative cooperation mode, so that the Sino-Arab relations can develop and achieve tangible results. The "Forum" has a growing influence and has become a forum of significance for multilateral cooperation followed by following the China-Africa Cooperation Forum. The Arab League officials spoke highly of the forum and named it the "most efficient and influential forum among the Arab League, regional organizations, and influential countries" (*People's Daily*, 2010: May 12). Mutual promotion and mutual complement exist in Sino-Arab relations through multilateral and bilateral organizations, as well as official and private sections, which is a benign development pattern. Currently, Sino-Arab relations are in an unprecedented booming stage.

I. The Main Responsibilities and Achievements of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum

(1) To play a leading role in the Ministerial Conferences, make elaborate plans on bilateral cooperation, and ensure that development

of the "Forum" is sustainable. The Ministerial Conference hosts the highest-level meetings and mechanisms under the framework of the forum to discuss the strengthening of cooperation between China and Arab countries in the political, economic, cultural areas etc; its duties include reviewing the implementation of the "Action Plan of the Forum" and development of new programs, as well as exchanging views on common concerns on international and regional issues. So far, the "Forum" has been held five ministerial meetings continually in Cairo, Beijing, Bahrain, Tianjin and Tunisia in total. Among them, the first ministerial meeting, which was held at the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo, and the Fourth Ministerial Meeting held in Tianjin have important significance in the history of the "Forum".

In January 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao paid a state visit to Egypt. During his visit, he had a cordial meeting with Amr Moussa, the Arab League Secretary in General and representatives from the 22 member states of the Arab League in Cairo, the Arab League headquarter located along the riverside of the Nile. During the meeting, President Hu expounded China's overall vision for the establishment of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. He pointed out that the establishment of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum is an important approach to strengthen and deepen Sino-Arab relations. It is conducive to enrich the content of Sino-Arab cooperation, consolidate and develop the collaboration of the two sides in various levels and in various fields, and help both sides to seize opportunities as well as face challenges together. President Hu also proposed the "four principles" to establish the new China-Arab partnership---the basis of mutual respect to enhance political relations; the target of common development goals to have more frequent economic and trade exchanges; to learn from each other and expand cultural exchanges; to maintain world peace and promote common development for the purpose of strengthening cooperation in international affairs (Xinhua News Agency, 2004: January 30). President Hu's speech was strongly praised and endorsed by the

participating countries. The two sides signed the “Communiqué of Establishment of China - Arab States Cooperation Forum”. On September 14, 2004, the first Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was held at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo. Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and the Arab League’s Secretary-General Moussa signed the “Declaration of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum” and the “Declaration of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum”. The two documents have clear goals, and are informative and practical. If we say that President Hu’s visit started the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, and pointed out the direction for the “Forum”, then Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing’s visit and the signing of the relevant documents actually built a legal framework for the “forum” completed the institution-building of the “Forum”, and drew a blueprint for the future of Sino-Arab relations. The China-Arab State Cooperation Forum has entered its right track and steadily moves forward towards the target.

In 2008, influenced by the global impact of the global financial crisis, both international policy and economy had gone a suffer. In this context, as developing countries, China and the Arab countries felt the urgency to further strengthen cooperation and jointly respond to crisis. As a result, the two sides had several discussions at the Fourth Ministerial Meeting held in Tianjin in 2010 and decided to formally establish a “comprehensive Sino-Arab cooperation and common development of the strategic partnership” (Department of Asian and African Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 2010: 54-61). Sino-Arab relations upgraded from the new partnership to a strategic partnership, entering a new historical stage.

(2) Take advantage of the mechanisms of Entrepreneurs Conferences, conduct solid economic work, and bring tangible benefits to both sides. China and the Arab countries have strong economic complementarity. With the rapid development of Sino-Arab economic and trade relations, the bilateral trade volume in 2004 reached \$36.708 billion; in 2009, despite the grim situation of the

international financial crisis, Sino-Arab economic and trade cooperation thrived: the bilateral trade volume rose to \$1,074 billion, increasing by 34.7% compared with the previous year; in 2013, it climbed to \$2,388.62 billion. In 2012, Chinese enterprises signed new contracts on contracted projects valued up to \$19.94 billion in the Arab countries. The completed turnover of \$19.35 billion. Chinese investment amounted to \$1.39 billion in the Arab countries.^① The rapid development of Sino-Arab economic and trade relations also benefited from the Entrepreneurs Conference and investment seminars as an important platform under the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum. In those ten years, the Business Conference and Investment Seminar has been held four times in Beijing, Amman, Hangzhou and Sharjah, respectively. In addition, during the China International Fair for Investment and Trade in Xiamen, the two parties also held the “Business Cooperation Seminar of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum”, “Oil and Petrochemical Research Seminar of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum”, “Cooperation on Agriculture Research Council of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum,” etc. These high-level economic and trade events have overall been practical, and beneficial to both sides to exchange information, enhance understanding and grasp business opportunities. The two sides signed contracts of up to hundreds of millions of dollars. These meetings increasingly attract great attention of Arab entrepreneurs, and encourage the Chambers of Commerce of both sides to establish closer cooperation. The Entrepreneurs Conference and Investment Seminar has become a shining mark of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

Energy cooperation has become an important driving force for the development of China-Arab economic and trade relations, and also an important part of China-Arab State Cooperation Forum on trade and economic cooperation. With rapid economic development, China’s

^① Data quoted from the website of Ministry of Commerce, People’s Republic of China, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn>.

demand for energy is increasing. In 2013, the estimated imports of crude oil amounted to 300 million tons, and the expected dependence on foreign oil is up to 60% (Zhang, G., 2013: September 21). Among these imports of crude oil from the Arab countries amounted to 133.08 million tons, accounting for 47.2% of China's total imports. Shale gas kicked off a new energy revolution. The world energy market is undergoing profound changes, but the Middle East's position as a major producer of crude oil in the world and China's position as one of the major consumers of crude oil will not change fundamentally. China is actively implementing energy diversification strategy, and establishing offshore energy development and utilization base, and meanwhile continues to focus on energy cooperation with the Arab oil-producing countries to ensure stable supply of energy. The Arab oil producers are taking the strategy of oil industry integration. By stepping up investment in oil industry of the oil-consuming countries, the Arab countries try to ensure and expand the crude oil market share, and shift their focus on the Asian market, especially China. Both sides need each other to realize good prospects for energy cooperation. At present, energy cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and other countries continues to widen, from crude oil trade to upstream exploration and development, petrochemical industry and other fields. They have also established appropriate mechanisms for energy cooperation. The Energy Cooperation Conference under the framework of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum has been held three times in Sanya, Khartoum and Yinchuan, respectively. The two sides exchanged views on energy development, energy security, energy use and other issues. The Energy Cooperation Conference becomes a new platform for officials and entrepreneurs from both sides to have collective dialogue, coordination, and cooperation, making it an important add-on to bilateral energy cooperation between China and the Arab countries.

(3) Make efforts on the social, cultural, and media cooperation to consolidate friendship with Arab countries at the civil level.

Partnership between countries is based on friendship between their peoples. In contemporary international relations, there is a growing importance of civil factors. Cultural exchange is an important bridge and linkage to achieve mutual understanding, trust, sincere cooperation, and communication between different ethnic groups. "Action Plan of China - Arab States Cooperation Forum" made specific plans for this: First, the establishment of the Sino-Arab relations seminar & Civilization dialogue mechanism. It has been held five times in Beijing, Riyadh, Tunisia, Abu Dhabi and Urumqi, respectively. Experts from national research institutions and government representatives conducted extensive exchanges on "common values of Chinese and Arab civilizations" and the "role of civilized dialogue in promoting bilateral strategic partnership development" and other issues. They proposed to promote translations of Chinese and Arabian masterpieces, scholars' visits, think-tank exchanges and other practical advice. In May 2010, the China Press and Publication Administration and the Arab League Secretariat signed a memorandum of co-publishing project on translations of books, which is the concrete implementation of the proposals of the workshop. The Civilization Dialogue seminar is a highlight as well as the most distinctive cooperation mechanism of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum. It created a precedent for international dialogue among civilizations. It effectively contributes to mutual understanding of Chinese civilization and the Arab - Islamic civilization, and promotes the two great civilizations to learn from each other for common development and prosperity, as well as dialogue and cooperation between different civilizations, and plays a positive role in building a harmonious world. The second is to continue to implement the bilateral cultural agreements and implementation plans through bilateral channels between China and the Arab countries. In addition to organizing various cultural happy hours, festivals and other cultural activities, the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum has established a mechanism to host cultural

events alternately in both countries. They decided to hold Arabian arts festival in China and Chinese Art Festival in the Arab countries every two years. The two sides have held such festivals twice in China and the Arab countries respectively. A variety of cultural activities have narrowed the emotional distance between peoples of the two sides and enhanced their friendship. The third is to strengthen cooperation in the field of human resources and education. Personnel training and improving the quality of personnel are important for a country's sustainable development. To help Arab countries cultivate all kinds of talents, China organized training courses in various fields. There are nearly 12,810 Arab students studying in China, 2000 of who obtained a number of Chinese government scholarships. In addition, each year there are more than 1,000 experts from the Arab countries getting training in China. To date, China has trained about 15,000 administrative and technical staffs for the Arab states. Learning Mandarin lessons become more and more popular in the Arab Countries. China has set up 12 Confucius Institutes in Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan and Jordan. The fourth is to strengthen the cooperation between the media. The China-Arab Press Cooperation Forum is an important mechanism under the framework of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, aiming at further strengthening the friendly cooperation between the state-owned media. It promotes collaboration in newspapers, publishing, radio and television between China and the Arab and enhances people's understanding and friendship through the channel of mass media. The China-Arab Press Cooperation Forum has been held three times in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Bahrain, respectively. The two sides are very active in media interactions. For example, CCTV and China Radio International launched their programs in a number of Arab countries. The fifth is that the local governments can play a role by carrying out a "Buddy program". Mobilization of civil and friendly forces plays an irreplaceable role in win-win cooperation between China and the Arab world in the new era. The Sino-Arab

friendship conference has been held three times, and these formed a mechanism of the growing influence. To adapt to the new era, the Arabs also established the “Arab and China Friendship Association Federation”.

(4) The government and the people together actively carry out public diplomacy; expand the influence of the Forum. Due to the Middle East unrest, many Arab countries were caught in the political disorder, economic recession, and social turmoil. Their way to explore development is facing difficulties and setbacks. The principles of independence, mutual benefit and common development that China advocates are becoming more and more popular. They provide a good foundation for introducing China’s foreign policy and development strategies, exchange experience in governance, and conduct public diplomacy. As part of the “Forum”, China has sent out delegations to visit Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries several times through the channel of Arab think-tanks such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum Research Center. Moreover, China also issues invitations to Arab experts, scholars, elites and youth to visit China. This combination of “bringing in” and “going out” approaches not only plays a role in promoting mutual understanding, fostering friendship, strengthening cooperation and expanding the influence of the Forum, but also provides strong support for the education of the young generation and to make sure that Sino-Arab friendship will last through generations to come.

II. The Basic Concept of the Development of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum

The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum can achieve rapid and sustainable development, because:

(1) It is rooted in the fertile soil of the traditional friendship and is a strategic choice based on common interests. The friendly exchanges have continued for two thousand years. The famous “Silk Road” and

“Marine Silk Road” have linked the two nations closely together and helped them influence each other as well as learn from each other. This has not only formed a deep friendship between the two sides, but also made important contribution to the development of human civilization. In modern times, Chinese and Arab peoples have always supported each other in struggle against imperialism and colonialism and fight for national liberation and independence. They are close allies fighting in the same camp. Since the founding of the P.R. China, in the struggle to preserve the sovereignty and national dignity as well as the pursuit of economic development, China and the Arab World have showed mutual sympathy and mutual support, and closely collaborated in international affairs to establish sincere and friendly relations. They trusted each other and became friends. In the new century, the international situation has become more complex and the international structure has gone through profound adjustments. In the new situation, China and the majority of Arab countries have faced both rare opportunities to accelerate development as well as complicated problems and new challenges. Both sides are firmly opposed to hegemony and power politics, and advocate the democratization of international politics; they firmly support pragmatic cooperation of mutual benefit and advocate changes in the global economic governance system; they firmly support the settlement of international disputes through political negotiations, and thus safeguard world peace and prevent foreign interference. They firmly support a country’s own path of development in accordance with its own national conditions, and are against Western countries’ attempts on imposing their own models upon other countries; they firmly support the view that different civilizations learn from each other and together create a harmonious world. Both sides’ common interests continued to expand, and their desire for cooperation grows stronger. China always treats its relations with Arab countries as a diplomatic priority. The Arab countries also view China as their reliable strategic partner. Many senior Arab politicians pointed out

that China and Russia are the only two permanent member of the UN Security Council that do not belong to the Western civilizations. Moreover, China is a big country, but belongs to the Third World--it is a giant who only has key concerns but has no hegemonic ambitions. China has played a unique but important role in opposing hegemonies and safeguarding world peace and promotes global economic development. It stands alongside the Arab countries and provides a solid foundation for Sino-Arab relations in the 21st century. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum is built on this foundation.

(2) It is based on mutual respect and mutual understanding. The two sides established a partnership of equality on the basis of peaceful co-existence. They always understand and support each other's core concerns. The Palestinian issue is at the core of the Middle East affairs, and has great emotional effects on the majority of the Arab peoples. China firmly supports peace in the Middle East and the "Arab Peace Initiative", backs the Palestinian people to restore their legitimate national rights and their constructive effort to realize a comprehensive, just and lasting peace. The communiqué of the fifth Ministerial Meeting of the Forum in 2012 made it clear once again that in terms of the Palestinian issue, China is in support of the establishment of a Palestinian State with the fully sovereign rights based on the 1967 borders and have the East Jerusalem as its capital city, under the framework of the "two-state solution" upon which the international community has reached a consensus (China - Arab States Cooperation Forum, 2012: June 1). In terms of the problems brought by the Middle East turmoil, in December 2013, Foreign Minister Wang Yi expounded China's policy towards the Arab countries in the new era in Algeria. He proposed the "four supports": China firmly supports the Arab countries to insist on their own path; supports the Arab countries to solve the hot issues by political means; supports the Arab countries to strengthen cooperation with China; supports Arab countries to safeguard their legitimate interests (Wang, Y., 2013: December 22). The "four supports" approach has been warmly welcomed and endorsed

by the Arab countries. China and the Arab countries have disagreements on some issues, for example, some Arab countries expressed dissatisfaction about China's veto three times in the UN Security Council on the Syrian issue, but after extensive contacts and deep and frank exchange of views on their concerns, these countries gradually overcome their misunderstanding. Their views tend to be rational and pragmatic, reflecting the honesty and trust between friends.

On issues of China's core interests, major Arab countries and China always stay together. According to the communiqués of the successive Arab League summits the Council of Foreign Ministers, and the Councils of the Forums held in recent years, the Arab countries have emphasized the strengthening of relations with China. They reiterated the "one China" principle and supported China's peaceful reunification; they showed support for the Chinese government's stance and policy on Tibet and were against the "three forces" that engaged in anti-China separatist activities. After the Wenchuan earthquake, Saudi Arabia and the UAE generously provided \$50 million assistance, respectively, which fully embodies the profound friendship between China and the Arab countries.

(3) It is based on mutually beneficial cooperation and common development. Only mutually beneficial cooperation between countries can be sustained, and Sino-Arab economic and trade cooperation has always been practicing this principle. On one hand, when China is collaborating with the Arab countries whose economy is relatively weak, China gives more consideration to each other's interests, pays more attention to their needs, and never does anything selfish. China also provides assistance within its capacity toward these countries. So far China has provided economic assistance to Arab countries valued at 23.6 billion RMB, and contributed to constructions, including roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, conference centers, and a number of other major employment projects. On the other hand, in foreign trade, China advocates mutual market opening, take full advantage of each other's

comparative advantages, and increase bilateral trade. China does not pursue trade surplus, so it has been trying to import more goods from the Arab countries, especially non-energy commodities. The purpose is to make the trade more reasonable and balanced. Energy cooperation between the two sides aims at building long-term stability and mutually beneficial relations. This cooperation has a long-term, strategic and reciprocal feature. Chinese enterprises invest and set up factories in Arab countries. They carry out many important projects, which not only enhance the targeted country's economic power, but also benefit the ordinary people. The Sudan is a typical example. Chinese oil companies carried out projects in Sudan to help Sudan build a vertically integrated, technically advanced, scale modern oil industry, which led to the development of Sudan's national economy as well as a substantial increase in local employment. It also helped train the local business managers, engineers, technicians and workers. Chinese companies also built roads, hospitals, water supply and other facilities. As a result, the local residents' living environment has been greatly improved.

III. Move towards the Future, and Create a Better Tomorrow

After decades of development, the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum is gradually transferred from the exploring period to the consolidation stage of development. In the new era, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum should focus on the following points:

(1) To enforce the strategic direction. Both sides should pay more attention to the overall strategic plan for China-Arab relations. Despite the current chaotic situation in the Middle East, as an important part of China's strategy of "great diplomacy", the region is of rising importance for China in global diplomacy. The Middle East is not only an important part of Chinese diplomacy with neighboring countries, but also an important place to balance great power relations; it is not only an important channel to build the energy cooperation zone

westwards, but also an important factor to fight against the “three forces” and safeguard the stability of the western border. To consolidate and develop friendly relations with the Arab World is a prerequisite to build the geopolitical environment for China’s peaceful development. For the Arab countries, although the regional turmoil continues and it will be a long time for countries to transfer from chaos to stability, the desire of majority of the Arab people for stability and development is the strongest ever. Their wish to “look Eastwards” becomes more and more obvious, and the China-Arab relationship is stepping into a stage of strategic opportunities. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, as an important platform for collective dialogues and cooperation, has entered a new stage where it can play a huge role. We should be aware of the opportunities and challenges, and design the development of the Forum strategically in next decades. The two sides should also convene senior level summits and explore a long-term strategy for Sino-Arab cooperation to keep the bilateral relations vivid.

(2) We should insist on innovation. After years since the establishment of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum, we have made remarkable improvements in building the mechanism currently. On the one hand, we should further improve the existing cooperation mechanism and implement the follow-up efforts; on the other hand, we should strive to innovate on the content, forms, and means of the cooperation based on the new situation and new problems. In 2013, the President Xi Jinping put forward the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (Xi, J., 2013, September 8)^① and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (Xi, J., 2013: October 4).^② This initiative is consistent with the trend and carries important historical and practical significance. The “One Belt

^① On September 7, 2013, the P.R. China President Xi Jinping made an important speech in Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. He proposed to build the “Silk Road Economic Belt”.

^② On October 3, 2013, President Xi Jinping deliver a speech in the Indonesian Congress Building. He proposed to build the “Maritime Silk Road” in the 21st century.

and One Road" strategy will bring new historical opportunities to economies that locate along the road, which is in line with the vital interests of those states. The Middle East is an intersection of the two "Silk Roads". The Arab countries have keen interests in the "Silk Road Economic Belt". Therefore, both sides should seize the opportunity to establish a mechanism of "Silk Road Economic Belt Seminar" within the framework of the forum. Terrorism, transnational crime, and food security and other non-traditional security issues have become increasingly significant, especially the spread of terrorism, which seriously endangers social stability and economic development. China and the Arab countries are victims of terrorism. They both oppose linking terrorism to specific religions or ethnic groups, and are in favor of strengthening international cooperation against terrorism. The Forum should establish a mechanism of "Security Cooperation Seminar", pursuing cooperation and dialogues between China and the Arab countries in non-traditional security issues. In addition, based on the existing group of Arab scholars, the Youth League and the political elite group, we can set up a "Political Elite and Youth Seminar" under the framework of the Forum. It can address some of the major issues in Sino-Arab relations as well as the global affairs by exchanging opinions and making achievable proposals. In the long run, this can also cultivate future political leaders that are friendly to China and the Arab world.

(3) It has outstanding effectiveness. The "Forum" has a key feature: it combines theory with practice. We need to avoid being idealistic in this work, because, without tangible results, the "Forum" cannot be sustainable. Therefore, to achieve the real effectiveness, we should make full use of the mechanism of senior officials meetings to explain China's policies towards the Middle East. With the evolvement of China's "diplomacy towards hot issues", China will comment on many hot issues, and put forward its own ideas and solutions. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to increase the frequency of senior officials meetings, strengthen communication with Arab countries, and gain the

understanding and support of Arab countries on China's policies. Economic and trade cooperation is an important bridge that connects China and the Arab world and ensures the stable development of bilateral relations. Therefore, we should further upgrade the scale and efficiency of Arab economic cooperation, and increase the frequency of trade and investment seminars. Arab countries are in transition; they are currently facing a challenging task of economic reconstruction, and thus in urgent need of external funding to build the projects that concern people's livelihood and political stability. The Gulf oil producers are also launching a new round of infrastructure to ensure sustainable economic development. This provides a good opportunity for Chinese enterprises to implement "going out" strategy, utilizing China's economic advantages. China should encourage Chinese enterprises to actively participate in the construction of the relevant national projects, such as railways, bridges, ports, mining and other large projects, when safety is ensured. China should provide financial support, and should consider the establishment of a Sino-Arab infrastructure investment fund or bank. At the same time, we must actively carry out public diplomacy, maximize the influence of think tanks, such as the Sino-Arab State Cooperation Forum Research Center, arrange for experts and scholars to "go out", i.e., participating in international exchanges, and tell the "story of China".

In the second decade of the 21st century, as long as the two sides continue to strengthen cooperation, firmly grasp the opportunity of the times, follow the historical trend of development, the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum will certainly move forward to a better tomorrow.

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