

China-Arab Relations in the 60 Years' Evolution

YANG Fuchang

(Center for Strategic Studies, China Foundation for International Studies)

***Abstract:** The China-Arab relationship is one of the most significant and influential sections of China's foreign relations, and also a key area of China's diplomacy. China's friendly communication and exchange with the Arab area can be traced back as early as to the time before the founding of the Islamic religion and the shaping of great Arab Empire. Since the 1950s, China gradually established formal diplomatic relations with all the Arab countries. In this process, bilateral connections between China and the whole Arab world have been broadened to diverse fields and deepened to various levels, creating tremendous progress in mutual understanding. The central principle upheld throughout the whole experience of China-Arab relationship is friendship and cooperation, while the core spirit prevalent in this bilateral relation is mutual respect and mutual support.*

***Key Words:** China-Arab Friendship; Contemporary Middle East History; China-Arab Relations; China and the Middle East*

China-Arab relations have always been regarded as one of the most significant and influential sections of China's foreign relations, and a key area for China's diplomacy. Even before the founding of Islamic religion and the shaping of the Arab Empire, some friendly contacts had been made between China and the Arab region. Since the 1950s, China gradually established formal diplomatic relations with all the Arab countries one by one. In this process, bilateral connections

between China and the whole Arab world have been broadened to diverse fields and deepened to various levels. The central principle upheld throughout the whole experience of China-Arab relations is friendship and cooperation, while the core spirit prevalent in this bilateral relation is mutual respect and support. This makes a general review over the whole evolutionary development of China-Arab relationship in three stages.

I. Genesis of China-Arab Friendship in the Earliest Bilateral Contacts in History

More than 2,000 years ago, contacts between China and the Arab World were made by some merchants who traveled back and forth along the Silk Road that extended from inland China all the way through Central Asia to the Middle East. Chinese influence was extended to Ctesiphon of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt, together with its commodities. In this way, the original contacts were established between the civilizations thriving in the valleys of the Yellow River, the Nile, and the two Mesopotamian rivers, which are admired by archaeologists as the three earliest and most spectacular types of civilizations in the world. The Grand Four Inventions of China were spread to Arab regions along the Silk Road, while the Arab knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine was also passed on and absorbed by the Chinese. It is due to such early mutual understanding that Mohammed the Prophet, who founded the Islamic religion in 610 A.D., instructed his disciples that "true knowledge should be learned intently, even if it could only be found in a country as far away as China." His words indicted that China had already enjoyed some kind of reputation in the Arab world at that time. After his death, Osman, the 3rd Caliph of the Arab Empire, sent an envoy to China in the second year of the Yonghui Period of the reign of Gaozong Emperor of Chinese Tang Dynasty, which is 651 A.D. Chinese historians recorded that year as the beginning of the dissemination of Islamic religion in China.

From 1405-33, the great Chinese navigator Zheng He, marshal of the great imperial fleet of the Chinese Ming Dynasty, launched seven grand voyages from China into the west Pacific and the Indian Ocean. During his 4th and 5th voyages, he paid many visits to Dhofar, Aden, Mecca, and Somalia, communicating with local people and publicizing the Ming Dynasty's intent of establishing formal ties with local authorities and developing bilateral commerce. This is another milestone in the history of friendship between China and the Arabs.

Viewed from a macro historical perspective, the significance of these two historical events can be fully understood. When Mohammed the Prophet passed away, the Islamic religion entered its full-fledged outward expansion. Under such circumstances, the Muslim army of the Arabs conquered a series of areas during the reign of 2nd Caliph Umar (634 A.D.-644 A.D.), including Syria, Iraq, Persia and Khurasan, an ancient city located in Iran, Egypt, and some other areas in North Africa (Wang, 2003: 77). However, the transmission and dissemination of the Islamic religion inside China were achieved not by military conquest, but by commercial and cultural exchanges operated by envoys. When Zheng He, the Great Navigator, sailed his mighty fleet of over 200 ships through the Indian Ocean all the way to the Arab and African coasts, he did not have any intention of colonization, aggression, or rampage, and never occupied even a square centimeter of Arab land. Half a century since the end of his grand voyages, European explorers started their colonial expansion, which was full of malicious, violent aggression and lootings. Compared with western commercial and colonial expansion, peace and friendship pervaded in all the original contacts between China and the Arab world.

II. Comprehensive Development of China-Arab Relations since the Founding of the People's Republic of China

The process of China's establishment of formal diplomatic relations with all the member states of the League of Arab States began on May

30th, 1956, when China established its official relations with Egypt, and ended on July 21st of 1990, when a formal diplomatic relation between China and Saudi Arabia was set up. During the past 50 years, the friendly relations between China and the Arabs have been developing continuously, without any tension or hostile confrontation. Both parties coordinated and cooperated with each other in international affairs, offering mutual support on commonly concerned issues without any hesitation or idle indifference. Meanwhile, they also adopted a non-interference policy towards the internal affairs of the other party. The international situation has changed considerably during the past half century, but the general pattern of bilateral relations remains intact, because of the similarities shared by both parties in their historical experiences, the same problems that they encountered, and their common interests. In this sense, mutual support is a natural outcome that can gratify both parties.

In the 1950s and 1960s, waves of national independence movement against imperialism and colonialism emerged in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which were sincerely supported by China, a socialist country at that time. In July 1956, the Egyptian government declared its decision to recover its sovereignty over the Suez Canal that had been controlled by Britain and France for over one hundred years. Immediately the Chinese government announced its support and praised the decision of the Egyptian government as a “just action to maintain Egyptian sovereignty and independence”, as “fully righteous in regard to legal justice and morality”. In November 1956, when Britain and France together with Israel launched a war of aggression into Egypt, the Chinese government made another announcement condemning their outrageous atrocity and again supporting the Egyptian people’s “sacred struggle.” Chinese premier Zhou Enlai telephoned Egyptian President Nasser on November 10th, and told him that the “Chinese government decides to grant the Egyptian government 20 million Swiss Francs in cash free of any charge.” (Ying, 1999: 469) When civil war broke out in Lebanon in May 1958, over 10,000 US Marine Corps landed in Beirut on July 14th to

support the pro-west Charmant government of that country. Although China had not established any official contact with Lebanon, Chinese leaders openly condemned the US, requested immediate retreat of US force from that country, and regarded US military action as an unrighteous intervention into the internal affairs of a weak country with a malicious intent to invade Jordan and threaten the revolutionary republic of Iraq that was newly founded on the ruins of the overthrown old dynasty. On November 1st, 1954, the Algerian National Liberation Army launched insurrection for the Algerian national independence from the French colonial rule. At the Bandung Conference less than half year later, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai once again expressed China's full support to the Algerian people's righteous struggle against colonial oppression. Through a third party, China offered military assistance to Algeria. On September 19th, 1958, China became the first non-Arab country recognizing the legitimacy of the newly-established Algerian provisional government.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, has turned more and more aggressive as the only superpower of the world which became beyond any effective blocking of other countries and pursuing risky offensive policies in international affairs. Taking advantage of the unbalanced power pattern in the world since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has made an effort to publicize western values, completely disrespectful of other countries in its effort to consolidate its leadership on the whole world, and without an awareness of the potential danger of stirring up extensive anti-American hatred all over the world. It is interesting that George W. Bush even asked in his speech in Congress: "why do they hate us?" Aware of this point, upon his inauguration, Barack Obama showed an intention to eliminate the "almost spontaneously responsive global anti-American resentment." It is clearly regulated in the Charter of United Nations that "the Organization of (the United Nations) is based on the principle of the sovereignty and equality of all its members." All those developing countries won their independence after extremely tough struggles, or even at the price of

blood and sacrifice. How could they accept dictatorial scolding from other countries, and how could they tolerate alien domination over them? However, it seems difficult for western countries to understand this point. Their advocacy of the concept of "human rights above sovereignty" has incurred extensive resentment and dissatisfaction from various developing countries. China and the Arabs share the same opinion on this issue. Both parties expressed their strong oppositions to such a concept on various occasions, because they both believe that the acceptance of such a concept will bring disasters to developing countries.

Chinese leaders said: "China has its own national conditions, culture, and history. How could China absolutely follow foreign directives? We will never bend our noble heads." (Li Yang, 2003: August 18) Interestingly, an Egyptian leader also said: "nowadays the issue of human rights has become an excuse of western countries to interfere into internal affairs of other countries." An Algerian leader put his idea in this way: "sovereignty is the last defense line for developing countries to defend their own interest." Therefore, China and the Arabs always stand on the same side and cooperate with each other in international conferences concerning issues of human rights, for the purpose of jointly protecting their interests. The Western policy of dictatorial interference reached its extreme in March 2003, when the US and UK invaded Iraq. Before that time, most disputes and quarrels had been oral fights. However, the Iraq War, a real war at the beginning of the new century that destroyed a sovereign state by guns and blood, could not be justified by any juridical logic. Nor could its legitimacy be supported by any true evidence. Both China and the Arab countries were concerned about the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq. China emphasized frequently its support of inspection of Iraq by UN agencies and expressed its concern on the maintenance of authority of the UN Security Council for the purpose of avoiding war. Full tolerance of such offensive military actions towards Iraq means the acceptance of a restoration towards the old age characterized by the rule of jungle. It can be concluded from the

aforesaid points that the friendship between China and Arab has been constructed on the basis of sincere consensus shaped by common historical experiences and current circumstances.

III. Full-fledged Development of China-Arab Relations in a New Historical Stage since the Beginning of the New Century

Amid impacts of unprecedented events on the turnover between old and new centuries, significant and intrigue changes have occurred in the international community. In the 9/11 event of 2001, a wave of terrorist attacks was initiated directly towards the homeland of the US, shocking the whole world. In order to revenge this act of terrorism, the US launched a war in Afghanistan, putting its target at the al Qaeda, which is positioned as the culprit of the 9/11 attack. In 2003, the US and the UK launched an invasion into Iraq, bringing more disturbance and turmoil to the world. It seems that the economic globalization as a double-bladed sword has both uplifted the global economy and widened the gap between the rich and the poor all over the world. Those who are smart enough to catch hold of opportunities can drastically upgrade themselves, while some others who cannot take advantage of them have been ruthlessly left behind. New trends of power patterns of the world just appear in such a complicated and messy manner of evolution. In September 2008, a new global financial crisis broke out, bringing difficulties and impacts to various countries, and dealing a serious impact to the global economy. Under such a situation, China and the Arabs should strengthen their cooperation so as to jointly respond to challenges.

First, China and the Arabs should continue to offer mutual support to each other, regarding each other as reliable friends. Since 9/11, the Islamic religion has been put into the spotlight of maliciousness and hostility, and Arabic countries have been the first group encountering unfair and hostile treatment. Faced with such situation, in order to promote its traditional friendships, China has adopted three measures.

(a). The Chinese-Arab Friendship Association was established at the end of 2001, for the purpose of channeling support to Arab countries and setting up a platform for the non-official exchanges and communications between both parties. (b). The post of Chinese Special Envoy for Middle East Affairs was created in 2002, whose duty is to clarify Chinese attitudes on Middle East issues and to make mediations between various relevant actors of Arab-Israel conflicts that have troubled the whole region for over a half century. (c). China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was organized in 2004, providing a more flexible and broader platform for mutual contacts and exchanges between both parties in various fields. This forum has not turned itself into an empty document of declaration, as some so-called forums do. In the framework founded by this forum, a lot of work has been done, concerning a wide variety of aspects of both official and non-official relations, including exchanges and communications on politics, economy, culture and humanitarian affairs.

Mutual support of both parties on politics can be found on the following points: (a). China and the Arabs both support the core interests of the other party. The Arabs adhere to the principle of one China, while China supports the Middle East peace process and the establishment of a Palestine State in accordance with the peace proposal of the Arabs (PRC-LAS, 2004: September 14). (b). After 9/11, confronted with words and actions of hostility against Arab countries, both parties emphasized that they “condemn any form of terrorism, and oppose any tendency to connect terrorism with specific ethnic groups or religion” (PRC-LAS, 2004: September 14). (c). In 2004, when the US promoted its “Great Middle East Initiative” by pressing Arab countries to accept its own values, China together with the Arabs declared that they both “respect and support the self-made choice of development model based on one’s own domestic conditions” (PRC-LAS, 2008: May 21). (d). On the Iraq issue, both parties maintain that “the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Iraq should be fully respected, and [the] Iraqi people should be given full right of self-determination on their own future” (PRC-LAS, 2008: May

21). These sincere mutual supports not only fit the fundamental interests of both parties, but also help to maintain regional stability. It is in this way that the traditional China-Arab friendship is being continuously maintained.

Second, both parties attach great importance to the democratization of international relations, upholding a common opposition against unilateral dominance on international affairs, with a clear objective of constructing a kind of equal relationship and new political order among various countries. As for the issue of seeking a proper ideology to guide the frequently discussed new international political order, rather diverse opinions have been offered by various parties, in addition to the concept of democratization and equality raised by China and the Arabs. The advocates of hegemony come up with the idea of "unilateralism", "preemptive action", and "overthrowing of rogue regimes", and put them into practice. In 2005, China raised its own idea, i.e., the concept of building a "Harmonious World", which coincides with the trend of peaceful development. The Arab world also has proposed many ideas of reform over the international system. In a symposium held in Xi'an, China in November 2009, Arab scholars raised the thought of "al-Qaradawi": religious piety to God and love to others, opposition of hegemony on international affairs, denial of the theory of clashes of civilizations, peaceful manner of handling things, and firm objection to violence and terrorist activities." This thought is not a pure extension of international relations theory. Nor has it occupied a position in the mainstream of academic circles. However, people have been attracted to some elements of this thought related to international relations. As a matter of fact, the "moderitism" was originally presented as early as half a century ago, but it did not arouse so much attention as it does now, because the Arab world is now endeavoring to change some extreme opinions of the international community over the Islamic religion and Muslims, and to guide Muslims to abide by the true principles of the *Quran* and sacred sermons that request the abandonment of violence and the respect on the opposite sides of

everything so as to fulfill harmony.

Since his inauguration, President Obama has attempted to change the policies of his predecessor, repeatedly expressing his intent to abandon US "unilateralism" and to extend attentive listening and dialogue, so as to cure the trauma in the US-Arab relations. On June 4th, 2009, Obama made a speech in Cairo University, proposing his goodwill for initiating a new start of friendship between the US and the Muslim world. In the Iranian new year of 2009, Obama also presented a friendly speech to Iran but still insists on the US bottom-line on the Iranian uranium concentration. It is a pity that no substantial progress has been made on the bilateral relations between US and Iran. Meanwhile the Arab-Israel conflict remains an everlasting difficulty that still obstructs US endeavors to recover its relations with Middle Eastern countries. As a matter of fact, it directly determines the possibility of initiating a new start for.

US and Arab countries have improved relations. Obama mentioned in his speech that both Israel and Palestine should mutually respect the right of survival of the other party. He also called for more efforts on the fulfilling of the internationally-accepted approach focused on the coexistence of both an Israeli state and a Palestine state. A successful coexistence of both an Israeli state and Palestine state has long been regarded as a substantial blueprint by the whole world. However, few in the international community has ever proposed any feasible means or plans to actually implement this blueprint. As a matter of fact, Israel has been requested to terminate its construction of residential settlements for a long period, and the call for support to Palestinian nation-building process has also been maintained for many years, which was first proposed by the UN resolution 242 several decades ago. Nevertheless, half a century has elapsed without any substantial achievement of that resolution. The issue of the Palestine-Israel conflict enjoys a very significant status in the minds of Muslims, because they regard it as the root of all the problems and turmoil of the Middle East. Due to impeccable relations between the US and Israel, they have a great expectation on the role of

the US in the settlement of this issue. Therefore, the US could not gain the trust of the Islamic world or achieve a new start for US-Arab relations, nor could peace be established in Middle East, unless the US makes a substantial contribution to the settlement of this issue.

Third, bilateral economic relations have been sustained with a broad prospect for future development. In the field of China-Arab economic relations, their bilateral trade relation is one of the most outstanding ones that has attracted widespread attention. In 1979, when China just initiated its reform and opening up, the total volume of bilateral trade was only 789 million US dollars, whereas it was uplifted to 36.71 billion US dollars in 2004 when the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was established. In 2008, the bilateral trade volume reached the level of 132.8 billion US dollars, exceeding the ceiling of 100 billion US dollars. It is a natural outcome that China has increased its demand for oil during its fast economic growth, which inevitably uplifts the bilateral trade volume. China became a net importer of oil in 1993, and its oil import surpassed the level of 100 million tons in 2004, which means that it took China 11 years to complete its first 100-million-ton increase of oil import. In 2007, its oil import reached 196.8 million tons, approaching the level of 200 million tons. So China only spent 3 years in completing its second 100-million-ton increase of oil import, half of which was imported from Arab countries. In addition to trade, mutual investment has also been continuously promoted. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia cooperate with Chinese companies on the construction of new oil refineries in Zhanjiang and Tianjin, investing over ten billion RMB on each of these refineries. Actually Gulf investors have been seeking new targets of their investment since they shrank their ventures in the US due to the 2008-2010 financial crisis, regarding China as their ideal destination of financial adventures for "win-win programs." China also considers it profitable to cooperate with these oil-rich countries in the Persian Gulf, because they can bring sound technologies of oil refining and guarantee the source of raw materials for those cooperative programs. For example, the Basic Industry Company of Saudi Arabia provides 10

million tons of crude oil annually for its cooperative program jointly operated with SINOPEC in Tianjin municipality.

Closer economic and trade contacts will inevitably bring disputes and frictions, which are natural outcomes with no damage to the general pattern of bilateral relations. Arab countries were not spared from the heavy loss brought by the global financial crisis that broke out in September 2008. It is estimated by the Asia Development Bank in March 2009 that the total value of financial assets of the whole globe may have been depreciated by over 5 trillion US dollars. At a symposium on international finance held in April 2009, Kasaer, the chairman of the Arab Association of Industry, Commerce, and Agriculture, said that "the loss that Arab countries suffer on their overseas investment has exceeded 2.5 trillion US dollars. Meanwhile their loss in the domestic markets surpassed 600 billion US dollars, worsened by oil price slumps and financial recession." The total sum of both overseas and domestic losses of Arab countries exceeded 3 trillion US dollars (Chen, 2009: April 2). Although not relying on oil sales only for its income, Egypt also suffered losses due to the decrease of foreign exchange income from overseas Egyptians, the damage dealt by the financial crisis on tourism, and the shrinking of its income from the Suez Canal. It is calculated by the Egyptian official census that its income from the Suez Canal has been on a downward trend since the beginning of 2009. For example, its income from the Suez Canal in April 2009 was 340 million US dollars, a decline by 22.9% compared to the same period of the previous year. In that month, only 148 vessels passed through Canal, a decrease by 13.4% compared to the same period of the previous year, due to the shrinking global trade. A series of measures have been adopted by various countries confronted with difficulties brought on by the financial crisis. In January 2009, the Arab Summit for Social and Economic Development was held in Kuwait, at which participants made a joint decision to establish an Arab Development Fund totaling 2 billion US dollars so as to offer financial support to Arab countries.

At the third session of the Entrepreneurs' Assembly and

Investment Symposium for the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, which was held in China on April 21st, 2009, both the Chinese and Arab participants declared their intention to strengthen cooperation for a joint response to challenges brought by the financial crisis, with some suggestions for specific issues. It is very interesting that China usually has deficits in its trade with oil-exporting Arab countries, while at the same time it enjoys a surplus in its trade with those Arab countries not exporting oil. This is because Arab countries usually have single or unitary economic structures that can only offer limited items of products for their export. At that conference, China showed its willingness to help the Arab countries to upgrade their export mix and expand their exporting categories through cooperation with various trade and economic organizations of the Arab world. One or two single measures or conferences cannot reduce the loss of either party in this financial crisis, but they fully reflect the sincere friendship between the two parties. It is predicted that China's demand for Arab oil will continuously increase and Arab demands on Chinese products will be further expanded onto daily items from machinery to steel. Therefore, China-Arab relations will again greet a warm spring when they get through the difficulties of the financial crisis.

Fourth, new chapters of friendship have been composed amid sustained and steady development of China-Arab relations. China remains a developing country despite its very fast expansion of GDP by 18 times during the past 31 years of reform and opening up (Li Yuanchao, 2009:October 16). Notwithstanding countless praise and compliments, China is still retained on a low level of economic development, with its national income per capita ranking 130th in the whole world, a mere 1/17 of that of the US (Li Yuanchao). Therefore China will regard its relations with developing countries as the cornerstone of its diplomacy, which is reflected in its intention to strengthen and develop its relations with Arab countries, one of the largest groups of developing nations. When the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was established in 2004, both China and the Arab world decided to establish a kind of new-type partnership based on equality and comprehensive cooperation (PRC-LAS,

2004: September 14). Compared to other partnerships of the world, the new quality of this partnership is characterized by the following points: (a). Both parties are equal, without any dominance or prevalence. (b). Both parties are making an effort to achieve democratization of international relations, hoping to bring their model of equal relations to the international community. (c). Both parties endeavor to achieve international peace and security and eliminate international offenses or invasions. (d). Both parties will strengthen bilateral cooperation on economy, trade, and finance, for a joint development towards wealth and power. (e). Great importance will be attached to humanistic exchanges so as to enhance the mutual understanding and friendship between China and Arab countries. Since the establishment of the Cooperation Forum, three inter-civilization dialogues and two friendship assemblies have been sponsored. Due to joint effort, great achievement has been made for the construction of a new-type partnership.

IV. Conclusion

Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, western scholars have come up with the concept of G2: China and the US. However, Wen Jiabao, the Premier of the State Council of China, denied such concept at the China-EU summit held on May 20th, 2009. He said: "it is entirely groundless and wrong to talk about anything like a pattern of exclusive joint governance by China and US (2009: May 20)". China will not accept such concept because it does not fit the basic principle of China's foreign policy that opposes the domination of one or two countries in international affairs. Although China has always regarded China-US relations as one of the most important sections of its foreign relations, it will not sacrifice its relations with other countries, including its relations with the Arab world, only for the maintenance of its relations with the US. Impeccable friendship between China and the Arabs has been built on the basis of similar historical experiences and common goals of development. Their bilateral relations have been filled with friendly

cooperation, without any tension or conflict. The Chinese treat the Arabs as real brothers, reliable partners, and good friends. The friendly relations between China and the Arab world will be developed in a sustained and steady way.

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