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ARTICLE



The Continuous Weakening of Ideology in the Construction of China-Saudi Arabia Relations: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

In international politics, the formulation and implementation of foreign policy guided by ideology often impede the normal development of bilateral relations between state actors. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the relationships between China and Saudi Arabia have experienced twists and turns, which roughly reflect a relational evolution from the initial political opposition and lack of interaction to the current comprehensive strategic partnership. In this process, a prominent feature is that the ideological interference has decreased with the strengthening of China-Saudi relations. This article explores the underlying causes behind this phenomenon by starting from the basic historical facts of ideological interference that changed from strong to weak in bilateral relationships between China and Saudi Arabia. With regard to the reasons for the weakening of ideology, this article holds that the change of the international distribution of power from one of bipolarity to multipolarity is the starting point and the main external political factor; the consideration of national interests is the essential factor; the pluralistic value orientation is another vital factor that continuously extends the tolerances of both sides' foreign policies. These factors are superimposed on each other and jointly weaken ideological considerations in China-Saudi relations. It should be noted that ideological interference has not completely disappeared. At specific times and events, it may still become an obstacle to the development of China-Saudi Arabia relations.

KEYWORDS

China; Saudi Arabia; China-Saudi Arabia relations; ideology; causes

Considered as an expression of symbolic beliefs, ideology mobilises, guides, organises and proves specific behavioural patterns and methods, meanwhile, it denies certain behavioural patterns and methods to form an interpretation and evaluation of other methods in the real world.¹ Ideology, a conceptual system, possesses a profound realistic basis and occupies the core of the superstructure. The directional characteristic of ideology in reality enables it to recognise, affect and remould the world. In

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¹D. Miller and V. Bogdanor, eds., translated by Z. Deng, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Beijing: China University of Political Science and Law Press, 1992), p. 345.

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international relations, these functions can be used by the ruling party and its group as tools for implementing policies. Internally, ideology assists the ruling group maintaining state order and power legitimacy. Externally, it may exert a negative impact on national foreign policies to adopt the 'either with us or against us' approach. Historical experience of international politics shows that ideology tends to rigidify the formulation of foreign policies and restrict diplomatic behaviour when it is considered the standard of demarcating enemies or friends. If ideology takes up a dominant position in foreign policies, it will be prone to negatively affecting and restricting national contacts among countries with different ideologies.

At present, the COVID-19 epidemic is raging globally. Some western countries led by the United States have started a new round of criticisms of China. One deeper reason for adopting hostile policies towards China lies in the abuse of entrenched ideology under the cloak of liberalism. It is a response of those countries to China's own changing ideological positions. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia, the last Arab country to establish diplomatic ties with China, has constantly impaired ideological interferences in the process of bilateral connections, even when the ideologies held by both states still have substantial differences. China and Saudi Arabia's approach has improved their relations in an unprecedented manner, especially during the current period of epidemic prevention. This article intends to take the weakening of ideology between China and Saudi Arabia in building bilateral relations as an example to explore the underlying causes behind and provide a preliminary understanding for the increasingly strong ideological international relations.

1. The Strong Ideological Hostility of Both Sides Before the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations

Ideology in foreign policies is generally regarded as a concrete extension of a country's diplomatic philosophy. Its impacts on relations among countries are particularly conspicuous. In the 41 years from the founding of the People's Republic of China (the PRC or China hereafter) in 1949 to the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1990, PRC-Saudi Arabia contact fell more into an unofficial or informal form, characterised by the fact that both countries were constrained by different ideologies and there was hostility towards one another.

In 1949, in the early days of its founding, the PRC carried out the 'lean to one side' diplomatic policy towards the Soviet Union, building an international image of supporting socialist revolution, opposing monarchy, and adhering to Marx's atheism. Coupled with reasons such as following the lead of the United States, adhering to a pro-US and anti-China foreign policy, and maintaining good 'diplomatic relations' with the Taiwan authorities, Saudi Arabia neither recognised the regime, nor established diplomatic ties with the PRC. The hostility and ideological divisions curbed the possibility of official exchanges; only non-governmental contacts in religion existed. In the 1950s, after seeing the potential of breaking the deadlock, the PRC communicated with Saudi Arabia on the issue of religious pilgrimage at the Bandung Conference. The Saudi government agreed to the request that Chinese Muslims would be able to

perform the Hajj in Mecca.² In 1966, however, under the influence of extreme 'Left' ideology, the PRC advocated 'World Revolution' when domestic society was trapped in the 'Cultural Revolution' chaos. Saudi Arabia therefore intensified the impression that the PRC was a 'heretic'. In 1971, Saudi Arabia was the only Arab country who cast a negative vote on the UN's proposal to restore the PRC's legitimate seat. After the end of the 'Cultural Revolution' in 1976, although the PRC's government continued to seek improved relations with Saudi Arabia, the situation did not change substantially. The PRC had been more active in mending relations with Saudi Arabia, including proactively conveying the hope of establishing diplomatic relations, giving up its support for revolutionary movements in the Middle East. Although Saudi Arabia still opposed building formal connections, the efforts made by the Chinese government actually laid a solid foundation for the final establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990. In general, the strong ideological hostility in diplomacy that the two sides held before 1990 mainly stems from the following three reasons:

Firstly, the emergence of the Cold War made it difficult for both the PRC and Saudi Arabia to shake off their self-imposed ideological constraints. The end of World War II led to a global distribution of power, there were two hegemonic paths provided for countries in urgent need of recovery and development. One was the Soviet path, it was a highly concentrated economic model that argued for public ownership of the means of production, implemented planned economic management, and attached importance to heavy industry and military industry; the other was the American path, which emphasised free competition of the market economy and believed that open economic policies and free production systems could help maximise social production efficiency. The Soviet Union and the United States, respectively taking a leading part in the socialist camp and the capitalist camp, were spreading their own political ideas and values for the acquisition of world hegemony. Unsurprisingly, the PRC entered into an alliance with the Soviet Union at the beginning of its founding. Except that the Soviet Union offered assistance during the Anti-Japanese War and was the first country to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with the new regime, the PRC and the Soviet Union also shared common communist beliefs. It was widely accepted that the Soviet Union would provide good reference for the inexperienced Chinese Communist Party. As a new-born power, the independent growth of the PRC needed the guarantee of heavy industry, the Soviet Union's socialist model and its emphasis on heavy industry corresponded to its requirements. Moreover, the PRC was blockaded and suppressed by Western capitalist countries, the internal and external environment prompted the PRC to join the socialist camp. For Saudi Arabia, oil was a key factor that made it take the American side. Since the official establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, oil had greatly accelerated the modernisation of the Saudi economy. As early as 1933, Saudi Arabia cooperated with Standard Oil of California to begin oil exploration in the eastern region. 'However, due to lack of technical and financial support, Saudi Arabia's oil economy was completely controlled by

²Mohemed Bin Huwaidin, translated by J. Yao and K. Ji, *China's Relations with Arabia and the Gulf, 1949–1999* (Beijing: Thread-Binding Books Publishing House, 2008), p. 213.

the United States before the World War II'.³ After World War II, with the successive release of the Truman doctrine and Marshall Plan, the United States' economic recovery plan for Western European countries stimulated international demand for Saudi oil. Saudi Arabia's dependence on the United States had gone further because of oil. In addition, there was no formal communication or direct benefit correlation between the PRC and Saudi Arabia. The bipolar pattern divided the two countries into different camps.

Secondly, both the capitalist camp and Saudi Arabia itself were inherently hostile to communist ideology. 'A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism', this analogy in the Communist Manifesto already revealed the hostility of western countries towards communism. One manifestation of American ideology was anti-communism, which was based on American liberalism and democratic values. During the Cold War, containment of communist expansion became a central principle of its foreign policy. The United States indicated that there was an essential conflict between the liberal idea of law-based government administration in capitalist countries and the totalitarian tyranny of the Soviet Union.⁴ To a certain extent, the hostility Saudi Arabia held towards communism resulted from the leader's choice of ideological position. The interventionism of the United States and the Soviet Union had shaped the international and domestic frameworks of political, social and cultural changes among Third World countries. Political plans formed by elites of the Second and Third Worlds were often conscious responses to the development paths provided by the two major rivals. In many cases, Third World leaders' choice of an ideological position meant that they were in close collusion with one of the two superpowers.⁵ For Saudi Arabia, after the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States in 1943, the two countries had created a strong bond. Saudi Arabia chose the American side in the Cold War, because the long-term rule of the Saudi royal family needed help from the United States, and Saudi Arabia played an important role in the implementation of the United States' Middle East strategy and global strategy. Not only that, Saudi Arabia's strong Islamic religious ideology was also the reason for its firm position in opposition to communism. Since its formal independence from Great Britain in 1927, Saudi Arabia had paid great attention to the presence of Islamic ideology in diplomacy. During the period of Ibn Saud (1926–1953), the status of Islam in diplomacy had been determined,⁶ it emphasised the construction of Islamic legitimacy. In the 1960s, the PRC proposed the theory of 'Revolution in the Middle Zone', supported the Third World to achieve liberation through national war of independence, and responded actively to the anti-colonial movements in secular Arab countries. The PRC's values and concepts were in serious conflict with those of Saudi Arabia, for whom stability and continuity of kingship were the fundamental requirements.

³Y. Shi and Q. Ma, 'The construction and characteristics of Saudi Arabia's modern economy', *International Data Information* 6, (2017), pp. 18–26.

⁴Z. Mei, *Assembly of the National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Beijing: Current Affairs Publisher, 1996), p. 312.

⁵O. Westad, translated by K. Niu, *The Global Cold War: Third world interventions and the making of our times* (Beijing World Publishing Corporation, 2012), p. 3.

⁶Z. Liu, 'Islam and diplomacy of contemporary Saudi Arabia', in Y. Xu, ed., *Religion and American Society* Vol. 9 (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2014), p. 33.

Therefore, during the rule of King Faisal (1964–1975), anti-communism was a basic stance of Saudi Arabia's diplomacy. From the perspective of Faisal, communism that encouraged revolution and upheaval would not only be a threat to the security of the Islamic world, but also conflicted with Islam.⁷

Finally, the PRC failed to pinpoint the position of ideology in diplomacy in the early stage of its socialist construction. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the newly established China faced a complicated domestic and international environment with its regime staying unstable. Under the effect of the ideology of pursuing socialist rationality, the PRC followed the Soviet Union's anti-American diplomatic strategy so as to safeguard national security and promote economic development.⁸ During this period, China abided by the principle of drawing lines according to ideology. From the late 1960s to the 1970s, China-Soviet relations had deteriorated. The Soviet Union posed a direct threat to China's national security. In this context, the PRC's diplomatic strategy underwent changes from anti-Soviet and anti-US to associating with the United States while being anti-Soviet. In addition to its support for national liberation movements, the PRC's domestic religious system that was influenced by 'Left' ideology confused the increase of political consciousness with the decrease of religious beliefs, which deepened Saudi Arabia's negative perception towards China. Major changes took place internally and externally in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When China began to focus on domestic economic construction, ideology in its foreign policy started to weaken. Due to the efforts of the Chinese government, economic and religious contacts with Saudi Arabia increased. Even though these contacts were highly political-oriented, they had indeed helped both parties to embark on a track of positive understanding.

2. The Appearance and Causes of the Gradually Declining Ideology in China-Saudi Arabia Relations since the Establishment of Diplomatic Ties

Generally speaking, the less the negative effect of ideology, the more we observe contributions of positive reinforcement to relationships. Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia in 1990, cooperation in various fields has produced fruitful results. It gives a sign that the hindrance of ideology on their foreign policies has become less efficient. China and Saudi Arabia's overall relationships reflect 'three upsurges', including an 'upsurge in high-level exchange', an 'upsurge in economic and trade cooperation' and an 'upsurge in human exchange'.⁹ The sway of ideology in these three areas has declined by degrees.

First of all, ideology in high-level exchanges has not been overemphasised. For an Arab country that did not recognise the PRC's regime at the outset and only established formal diplomatic ties 40 years after the PRC's founding, Saudi Arabia's change of stance on relations with China embodies the efforts of both parties in overcoming and exceeding ideology. Their relations are premised on the principle of non-interference

⁷W. Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil* (Washington D.C: The Brookings Institution, 1981), p. 64.

⁸Z. Yang, *Mao Zedong Era's Diplomatic Strategy of China towards the USSR and the US under the Influence of Ideology*, Dissertation, Wuhan University, 2001, p. 123.

⁹Three upsurges present in the development of China-Saudi Arabia relations: interview with Chinese ambassador Li Chengwen', *PLA Daily*, (18 January 2016).

in others' internal affairs. China advocates that relations between countries should not be determined by the similarities or differences of social systems and ideologies. Even when the social systems and ideologies are different, both of them should be willing to establish and develop friendly and cooperative relations on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence.¹⁰ On account of this, as shown in Table 1, high-level exchange visits between China and Saudi Arabia have increased since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Under the leadership of both governments, upgrades from opponents to friends, from strategic and friendly relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership have been completed. From the contents of the reciprocal visits, the leaders not only downplay topics related to ideology, but also show appreciation for each other's certain values. Former Saudi King Abdullah once said that China is a close and friendly country because she always stands with truth and justice.¹¹ Starting from scratch, current high-level exchanges are at the stage of deepening and improving. It should be mentioned that external factors, such as regional competition may affect the exchanges between China and Saudi Arabia. For example, Saudi Arabia has maintained a good alliance with the United States, its fights with Iran and other neighbouring countries have continued in recent years. China has not only kept friendly relations with the Middle Eastern countries, but also been regarded as a strategic competitor by the United States. However, attributed to the correct guidance from leaders of both states, these factors or contradiction are only apparent and do not hamper the current strategic partnerships. In the face of Middle East affairs, China's approach has gained acceptance from Saudi Arabia. China advocates persevering in the main forum of the United Nations, valuing voices from regional organisations and countries more, and taking full account of the particularities of regional history, ethnicity and sects. Saudi leaders highly appreciate China's insistence on non-interference in others' internal affairs and China's proposition of peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue. Also, Saudi Arabia commends the contributions of China in maintaining international peace and security.¹² Now, high-level visits keep growing, showing the attenuating of ideology in their political connections. With the high-level attention and guarantee, the breadth and depth of China-Saudi Arabia cooperation and exchanges will be further boosted. If the two countries continue to consolidate and innovate their relations, negative influence of ideology will be easier to be controlled.

Moreover, driven by economic dynamics, ideology in economic interactions is de-emphasised. Economic exchanges have always occupied an important position in developing bilateral relations since the establishment of China-Saudi diplomacy. For one thing, the two economies are highly complementary and enjoy great potentials for cooperation. Statistics show the total trade volume was about \$400 million in 1990,¹³ \$64.4 billion in 2011 and a record high of \$78.18 billion in 2019.¹⁴ In fact,

¹⁰'Congratulations on the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia', People's Daily, (23 July 1990).

¹¹'Building China's economic growth pole (new practice of governance)', People's Daily, (21 February 2016).

¹²'After the two sessions, the first foreign head that Xi Jinping met was him', (17 March 2017), available at: <http://opinion.haiwainet.cn/n/2017/0317/c456318-30798431.html>.

¹³T. Wang and S. Lin, General History of Middle Eastern Countries: Saudi Arabia (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2000), p. 324.

¹⁴Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, '2019 China-Saudi Arabia trade hits record high', available at: <http://sa.mofcom.gov.cn/article/i/202003/20200302941346.shtml>.

Table 1. Main high-level interactions between China and Saudi Arabia since the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations.

Time	People and events	Achievement
September 1990	Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal visited China	The first stop in high-level exchanges between China and Saudi Arabia
January 1991	Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Saudi Arabia	Leaders of China visited Saudi Arabia for the first time
October 1999	Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Saudi Arabia	Chinese President visited Saudi Arabia for the first time, signed cooperation agreements involving education, radio and television, communications and others
January 2006	Saudi King Abdullah visited China	Saudi King visited China for the first time; signed cooperation agreements on oil, gas, minerals, vocational training and other fields
April 2006	Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Saudi Arabia	The two sides reached consensus on strengthening friendly cooperation and continued to promote strategic friendly cooperative relations
June 2008	Then Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia	The two sides published China and Saudi Arabia joint statement on strengthening cooperation and strategic friendly relations
February 2009	Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Saudi Arabia	Beijing and Riyadh put forward six proposals on the strategic friendly relations between China and Saudi Arabia
March, 2014	Saudi Crown Prince Salman visited China	The two sides published the Joint Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
January, 2016	Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia	The two sides published a joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on building a comprehensive strategic partnership
March 2017	Saudi King Salman visited China	The officials discussed issues on the docking of China's Belt and Road initiative with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030
December 2018	President Xi Jinping met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed in Buenos Aires	Crown Prince Mohammed agreed on China's position and proposition in international affairs
February 2019	Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed visited China	The two sides emphasised enhancing mutual political trust and strengthening the docking of development strategies

Source: The author organises herself based on public information.

China-Saudi trade cooperation started late with a weak commencement foundation. It once showed negative growth under the effect of the global financial crisis. However, the China-Saudi trade partnership withstood these tests in the past three decades. Now, the two sides give full play to the complementary advantages in each other's economic structures, which greatly reinforces their interdependence. What's more, the content of economic exchanges has been enriched. China is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner. As China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aligning with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, new cooperative models and prospects are clearly revealed. To put it simply, China can bring huge investment, advanced technology and mature industrial manufacturing capabilities to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabia will bring excellent petrochemical technology to the Chinese market. In 2019, in order to deepen strategic connection, China and Saudi Arabia signed 35 cooperation agreements, valued at more

than \$28 billion.¹⁵ It is of great significance to promote pragmatic cooperation in the fields of energy, infrastructure, trade and investment, and high value-added industries. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the construction of the China-Saudi Arabia partnership has yielded abundant economic results from a national strategic height. Ideological interference is less drastic as the two states adhere to the principle of common development. China-Saudi Arabia economic and trade relations have progressed by leaps and bounds strategically.

Lastly, cultural as opposed to ideological identities are getting closer attention in human exchanges. With the strengthening of China-Saudi relations after Xi Jinping's state visit in 2006, the two countries embraced a deeper understanding of coexistence and mutual learning. Both parties state that different civilisations are the crystallisation of human wisdom and that within different civilisations the two countries should realise mutual respect, tolerance, and harmonious coexistence.¹⁶ In 2008, when a devastating earthquake occurred in Wenchuan, Sichuan province, Saudi Arabia provided China with cash and material assistance at once, totalling more than \$60 million. It was the largest individual overseas donation received by the Chinese government.¹⁷ The continuous enhancement of China-Saudi Arabia relations pushes forward the bilateral cooperation in the area of humanity, especially at the moment of deepening the link between the BRI and the Vision 2030. Strengthening human interaction between the people is the key to forming closer people-to-people ties. Based on the fact that China and Saudi Arabia own different value systems and there was a strong ideological confrontation before the establishment of diplomatic relations, consolidating good cooperation in religious affairs does play a crucial role. China upholds communication between different religions and advocates building a platform for bilateral and multilateral religious exchanges to increase tolerance and harmony in this field.¹⁸ For example, in terms of the managerial mode of the Hajj, China fully cooperates with Saudi Arabia and Islamic institutions and establishes a favourable cooperation mechanism for pilgrimage.¹⁹ With concrete efforts, China and Saudi Arabia will solve actual problems in exchanges and enhance mutual understanding of each other.

3. The Main Lessons for the Gradual Weakening of Ideology in Bilateral Relations between China and Saudi Arabia

During the Cold War, it was obvious that negative effects appeared when the PRC and Saudi Arabian foreign policies were dominated by ideology. Those effects were mainly manifested in three aspects. First, ideology was apt to confine diplomatic concepts of countries and then led to erroneous perceptions, such as ideology outweighing national interests, and enemies and friends being divided by ideology. Thus,

¹⁵'The China-Saudi investment cooperation forum facilitated a US\$28 billion cooperation agreement', Xinhua News, (22 February 2019), available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2019-02/22/c_1210065864.htm.

¹⁶'Joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on building a comprehensive strategic partnership', Xinhua News, (20 January 2016), available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-01/20/Content_5034541.htm.

¹⁷'Be good partners for common development', People's Daily, (29 January 2016).

¹⁸'China's Arab Policy Paper', Xinhua News, (13 January 2016), available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/13/c_1117766388.htm.

¹⁹S. Niu, 'The impact of Hajj on PRC-Saudi relations', *Arab World Studies* 4, (2020), pp. 104–106.

possibilities of communication between countries would be reduced and ideological differences amplified. Second, ideology bound the borders of diplomatic behaviour, making foreign policy lack flexibility and innovativeness. Also, the orientation of blindly pursuing ideological similarity could seriously restrict the depth and breadth of bilateral exchanges. Third, as a product of the Cold War, ideological diplomacy passively conformed to the confrontation in the old international pattern. But it is unable to adapt to the international community with diversified and differentiated development in the post-Cold War period. Conducting as a diplomatic subject, a state must fully recognise the current objective needs of weakening ideology in diplomacy. In bilateral relations between China and Saudi Arabia, the foothold of ideology weakening is in the strong desire of both countries to control negative interaction between ideology and diplomacy. The main lessons for the gradual weakening of ideology in their relations are as follows.

On the one hand, the international pattern changing from bipolar to multipolar is the starting point and the main external political factor of the weakening. The bipolar pattern during the Cold War triggered ideological combat between the two camps. Ideological diplomacy accommodated the objective environment of US-Soviet hegemony and became prevalent all over the world. Far from building a unipolar society under American hegemony, the end of the Cold War promoted a new pattern of 'one superpower and many powers' in the international community. A great many emerging countries were springing up rapidly. The continuous division and reorganisation of powers among political entities were attributed to the growing strength of regional and state powers, international politics was therefore stepping into multi-polarisation. Objectively, the multi-polarised structure puts higher demands on initiative and flexibility of a country's foreign policy. Although regional unrest and political games among major powers still exist in this context, the international community shows a general trend of peace and development. Without the bipolar pattern serving as an environmental carrier, the interference effect of ideology gradually attenuates in the multipolar international community.

The weakening of ideology in bilateral relations between China and Saudi Arabia is closely related to the development tendency of multi-polarisation in international politics. For China, diluting ideology would be beneficial to create peaceful surroundings. In the late 1960s, when its relations with the Soviet Union worsened, China began to mend fences with the United States. The establishment of diplomatic ties between the PRC and the United States in 1979 heralded the fact that the ideology within China's diplomacy started to decline. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, China unswervingly followed a path of peaceful development. Since then, its diplomatic goals went through a fundamental transformation from 'war and peace' to 'peace and development'.²⁰ Considering that the pursuit of internal 'development' objectively requires 'peace' in the external environment, maintaining initiative in diplomatic strategy and striving for friendly relations were necessities. Being 'one pole' in the multipolar world, China increasingly emphasises surpassing the limitations of his-

²⁰S. Li and X. Gao, 'The third plenary session of the eleventh Central Committee: the turning point of China's diplomacy', *Longjiang Party History* 6, (1998), p. 36.

tory, ideology and social system.²¹ Especially in recent years, as China continues its rise as a great regional power, obstacles created by the United States have constantly shown up. Under such circumstances, adhering to the peaceful development path is more favourable for China to break through barriers and safeguard national interests. China has made its efforts to transcend ideological differences. The Chinese proposal of building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind shows its spirit of mutual respect, it injects strong impetus into the new pattern of relationships between great powers. For Saudi Arabia, removing emphasis from ideology is a necessary step to diplomatic transformation. In fact, Saudi Arabia's diplomacy particularly pays attention to the legitimacy of Islam. But when extending and developing pan-Islamist foreign policy, Saudi Arabia also 'lays great emphasis on the effective balance between religious concepts and national interests'.²² If religious ideology is neither enough to help the state overcome disadvantages in regional competitions nor resist impact of regional unrest in the era of political multi-polarisation, for the benefit of Saudi Arabia, adjusting foreign policy to adapt to multipolar development is inevitable. Ever since the Cold War, Saudi Arabia has gradually degraded the degree of ideology and began to deepen multiple diplomatic relations with Britain, Russia, Japan and other countries, releasing a signal of diplomatic transformation. Especially after Bin Salman came into power, the momentum 'Looking East' in his foreign policy has been massively strengthened. Saudi Arabia shows a more pragmatic diplomatic philosophy by actively expanding diplomatic space and adjusting diplomatic layout.

Furthermore, the ultimate goal of realising national interests is the essential factor in weakening ideological interference in China-Saudi Arabia relations. In general, the formulation of a country's foreign policy is not merely a result of ideology, but also a result of national interests. However, foreign policies that only consider ideological factors are usually unsuccessful, because 'national interests play a key role in a country's diplomatic decision-making, and no other factors can replace it'.²³ The standards for formulating foreign policy are closely matched with national interests. Due to that, a country's foreign policy will be altered to be more suitable according to the priority sequence of national interests. For China and Saudi Arabia who have already guaranteed the national interests of independence and sovereignty, achieving economic interest is another strategic goal. Because it is concerned with national survival and development. Therefore, the foreign policies of the two countries are at the service of economic construction.

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of China witnessed the shift of the Communist Party's focus to economic construction. After the reform and opening-up policy, China's awareness of globalisation continued to increase. Aiming at serving the country's economic growth, China's diplomacy established the concept of not exporting revolution, not confronting, expanding the scope of diplomacy, and endeavouring to build friendly relations with more countries around the world in a peaceful way. In the mid-1980s, the world economy showed interconnections on a global scale. Benefiting from the reform and opening-up policy, the

²¹Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Vol.3 (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993), p. 330.

²²Z. Liu, 'Islam and diplomacy of contemporary Saudi Arabia', p. 28.

²³S. Ni, *Contemporary Western International Relations Theory* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2001), p. 259.

economy of China won a period of rapid development in the 1990s. China's export-oriented model accelerated its interaction with the world. In 1993, it transformed from an oil exporter to a net oil importer. Since energy was the lifeblood of national economy, ensuring a stable source of oil from the Middle East guaranteed the sustainable development of China's economy. Obviously, strengthening friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude oil exporter, was conducive to the advancement of oil cooperation. Promoting cooperation through friendly relations not only met the internal requirements for economic construction, but also conformed to China's peaceful development path. Saudi Arabia was a country of single economic structure, it largely depended on oil and took oil exports as the backbone of national economy. Ensuring the stability of the oil consumption market was of great importance, because it intimately correlated with national economy. After the Iraq War in 2003, the United States enhanced its influence and power in the oil market of the Middle East. In order to offset the control of the United States as well as change its single product structure, Saudi Arabia started to focus on economic reforms and diversification of oil exports. China's economic progress, the increasing focus of oil import diversification and expansion of the oil import sources all aroused Saudi Arabia's interest in the Chinese market.²⁴ Particularly in recent years, the rapid advance of China's economy and mode of growing have provided Saudi Arabia with new ideas for economic restructure. In the era of economic globalisation, the consideration of ideology inevitably gives way to the consideration of economic benefits. Spurning ideology and strengthening petroleum cooperation are in line with the inherent requirements of both countries' economic development. As strong complementarity in economy continues, China and Saudi Arabia's cooperation potential and willingness are booming. At the present stage, China's BRI and Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision are converging, the scope of cooperation between the two states are expanding largely from petroleum to industry, infrastructure construction and other fields. Alleviating ideological negativity and making economic construction the main goal become a common choice. Economic ties are indispensable assets which have slowly grown into a stabiliser in China-Saudi relations, they are bonds that deepen the diplomatic connections. Bilateral diplomacy in the future will have a stronger ability to defuse the negative effects of ideology.

On the other hand, multi-value orientation is a vital factor in enlarging the tolerance of China and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies in the development of bilateral relations. The wave of multiple values affects the positioning of ideology in foreign policy. Globalisation accelerates global cultural exchanges, which creates a precondition for the diversification of values. Under this background, the vast majority of sovereign states are slowly accepting the coexistence of multiple values; they are inclined to downplay ideology in diplomacy. As far as a country's foreign relations are concerned, paying attention to multiple values can facilitate communication of different ideologies, help the mainstream ideology of a country receive and listen to other rational voices, assist in better balancing the common interests between countries in the process of exchanges, and avoid falling into the constraints of ideological diplomacy.

²⁴M. Chen, 'China-Saudi Arabia oil cooperation', *West Asia and Africa* 9, (2006), p. 48.

Both China and Saudi Arabia's foreign policies take into account multiple values. For China, the concept of contemporary Chinese diplomacy is an external manifestation of the traditional culture of '*gui he shang zhong* (acknowledging that there are two ends of contradiction in things, and emphasising the realisation of harmony through a moderate method)'. The Chinese nation underlines the value of harmony and the virtue of moderation. It is believed that all contradictions should be coordinated to achieve harmonious coexistence. Therefore, China's diplomatic philosophy contains the strong connotation of acceptance of multiple values. There are more than 20 million Muslims living in China. Properly handling the issue of Chinese Muslims requires mutual learning of Chinese and Islamic civilisations. This embodies the compatibility of national interests with religious values. Entering the period of reform and opening up, China's foreign policy has begun to self-reflect and adjust. The changes in China's diplomatic guiding values, China's cognition of international issues and the new understanding of China's relations with the world, all give evidence that China has bid farewell to the idealistic 'revolutionary diplomacy'.²⁵ With the emergence of the concept of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind, China's diplomatic philosophy on the premise of respecting multiple values has clearly presented its logical characteristics of respecting multiple civilisations. Therefore, the inclusiveness to diversified values in China's diplomacy promotes its exchanges with other civilisations. For Saudi Arabia, the expanding of diplomatic tolerance also comes from the practical need to improve the international image of Islam under the wave of multiple values. Religion provides legitimacy for the ruling Saudi royal family. Any question of Islam is essentially a question of the legitimacy of Saudi kingship. The brutal growth of Al Qaeda, the 9/11 terrorist attacks that shocked the world and the raging growth of the 'Islamic State' emerged successively in the Middle East. As a result, the international image of Islam or Wahhabism has been terrifically challenged by Islamic extremism. The diplomacy of Saudi Arabia naturally assumes the task of reshaping its appearance of religious peace. It starts to pay attention to self-reform in foreign policy. Since entering the 'Salman's New Deal' period in 2015, Saudi Arabia has fully recognised the conservatism and exclusiveness in Wahhabism. It strives to use the New Deal to reconstruct religious discourse, reshape ideology to strengthen the country's modernity, and lead the revival of Islamic civilisation. In addition, Saudi Arabia has actively encouraged multiculturalism and recommended a construction of an open and inclusive new country.²⁶

4. Conclusion

Diluting diplomatic ideology and avoiding negative interaction between ideology and bilateral relations were the keys for China and Saudi Arabia to successfully establishing diplomatic relations and achieving important breakthroughs in the past three decades. During the Cold War, the PRC's emphasis of ideology in diplomacy was not suitable

²⁵B. Zhang, 'Changing yourself and influencing the world: the basic clues of Chinese diplomacy in the 20th century', *Social Science in China* 1, (2002), pp. 4–19.

²⁶X. Ma, 'Salman's new deal: an analysis and evaluation of Saudi Arabia's domestic and diplomatic policies', *West Asia and Africa* 2, (2018), pp. 3–30.

for the country. Instead, after China's reform and opening up policy in 1979, the idea of highlighting the supremacy of national interests and diluting ideology has won a wider development space in the international community. And for Saudi Arabia, the nature of the integration of politics and religion makes its ideology in diplomacy quite stubborn, its diplomacy aims not only for political and economic interests, but also for religious interests. However, in response to changes in the regional and international landscape, diluting diplomatic ideology has widened Saudi Arabia's international arena. In other words, the ideological confrontation at the beginning of the Cold War alongside the gradual weakening of ideological effects after the deepening of bilateral relations steadily reflect the subjective initiative of China and Saudi Arabia in decreasing ideology. Ideology hindered their diplomatic relations for a certain period of time, and the strengthening of relations now turns out to be closely related to the weakening of ideology. However, one can never say that diluting ideology is the equivalent to ending ideology, because ideology is still a component of national interests and national security. Especially at present, some western countries are trying to find a breakthrough to attack China by creating so-called 'ideological crises' in China's Xinjiang region. China and Saudi Arabia should carefully control the ideological factors in bilateral exchanges.

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