Historical Evolution of Relationship between China and the Gulf Region

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Abstract: The Gulf region is in unique geo-political position. The relationship between China and the Gulf region is deeply impacted by the international system and regional patterns, as well as the adjustments of China’s own diplomatic strategies. This article tries to analyze the historical evolution of the relationship between China and the Gulf Region from these three perspectives. At present, this study is very important for China to rightly understand the strategic environment of the “One Belt and one Road” constructions in the Gulf Region. In the period of Cold War, the relationship between China and the Gulf region is deeply affected by the Cold War system, which can be proved by the fact during that time, China’s policies toward the Gulf region depended on the relationship between China and the US and the Soviet Union. Changes in regional patterns in the Gulf Region and China’s own strategic adjustments also have influence on China’s policies toward the Gulf. After the end of the Cold War, many factors, including the changes in the international system, changes in the situation of the Gulf region and the adjustments of

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China’s development and diplomatic strategies, had influenced the relationship between China and the Gulf. However, in this period, the mutual interdependence between China and the Gulf, and the impact of the adjustments of China’s diplomatic strategies on China’s Gulf policies are increasing. In the future, jointly building the “One Belt and One Road” initiative will be the mainstream of the cooperation between China and the Gulf countries.

**Key Words:** Gulf Region; International System; Regional Pattern; Chinese Diplomacy; “One Belt One Road” Initiative

The term “Gulf Region” here refers to eight countries: the six GCC countries, Iran and Iraq. The Gulf, located between the eastern and western worlds, on the boundary of three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), within five seas (the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea), and dominating four straits (Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Bab el-Mandab and Hormuz), is of vital strategic significance (Luo, Y., 2010: 23). The Gulf is in unique geopolitical position. The relationship between China and the Gulf region is deeply impacted by the international system and regional patterns, as well as the adjustments of China’s own diplomatic strategies. This article aims to analyze the evolution of the relationship between China and the Gulf region, and summarize the characteristics of relationship from levels of international system, regional patterns and adjustments of Chinese diplomatic strategies.

**I. Sino-Gulf Relationship during the Cold War**

The relationship between China and the Gulf region is deeply affected by the Cold War system; during that time, China’s policies toward the Gulf region depended on the relationship
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between China and the US, and the Soviet Union. Changes in regional patterns in the Gulf Region and China’s own strategic adjustments also have influenced China’s policies toward the Gulf. I will review the relationship between China and the Gulf region through three phases.

1. The 1950s and 1960s

In the 1950s and 1960s, the typical characteristic of the international system was the all-out confrontation between the Western Capitalist camp represented by the US and the Socialist camp represented by the former Soviet Union. The nature of the political institutions of the People’s Republic of China established in 1949 led to China’s policy of leaning to one side and forming an alliance with the Soviet Union. Against such backdrop, supporting the national democratic movement in Asia and Africa was a part of China’s policy against the West under the confrontation of two camps. The relationship between China and the Gulf countries was restricted by this background.

In the 1950s, the Gulf countries were monarchic regimes and were Western diplomatic allies. Iran and Iraq even joined the Baghdad Pact led by the West. Therefore, from the perspective of China, the Gulf region was a part of the Western camp. Supporting national liberation movements was the main content of China’s policy towards the Gulf. China’s support to the national liberation movements in the Gulf region comes from China’s principle of ideology, meaning to fight against imperialism and its allies (bin Huwaidin, 2008: 130). In details, supporting the revolution in Iraq was the focus of then China’s Gulf diplomacy. In July 1958, a revolution broke out led by Abd al-Karim Qasim in Iraq, and Iraq quit the Baghdad Pact following the revolution. In August 1958, China established diplomatic relationship with Iraq and Iraq became the first country that had diplomatic ties with China. Because of the differences between China and Egypt at that
time, Iraq was not only the diplomatic center of China in the Gulf region, but also the diplomatic center of China in the whole Arab world (Wu, B., 2011: 11).

In the 1960s, because of the worsening relationship between China and the Soviet Union, China viewed the Arab world, including the Gulf region, as a stage to confront the Soviet Union and Western imperialism. In 1965, the Dhofar Liberation Front in Oman carried out armed struggles with the Sultanate of Oman government. In June 1967, the delegation of Dhofar Liberation Front visited Beijing, which decided to provide assistance. In 1968, this organization changed its name to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. The reason why China supported the liberation movement in Oman was to establish an example of revolutionary movement in the Gulf region and to weaken Western influence there, as well as compete with the Soviet Union (bin Huwaidin, 2008: 101).

2. The 1970s

At the end of the 1960s, due to the worsening relationship between China and the Soviet Union and the start of the border conflict between the two countries, the Soviet Union became China’s biggest enemy. China formed a united front to prevent Soviet Union from expanding to the Third World, which became the main target of China’s foreign policy. At the first stage of the 1970s, in order to move southward to the Indian Ocean, Soviet Union expanded its influence in the Gulf region, with the signing of cooperative agreements between Soviet Union and India in 1971 and between Soviet Union and Iraq in 1972. In order to confront the expansion of Soviet Union, China began to improve its relationship with the US and reconsider the relationship between Gulf countries and the West. That is why China accepted US policies toward the Gulf region at that time.

To establish diplomatic relations with the Gulf countries,
China ended its support to revolutionary movements in the Gulf region. Since 1971, China gradually ended its support to the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf. In 1973, Iran helped the Omani government to fight against anti-government forces. China did not oppose it (Wu, B., 2011: 12). The reason behind China’s policy is to wipe out obstacles of establishing ties with Gulf countries. Both Iran and Kuwait supported Oman’s suppression of the rebellion in Dhofar, and the deep-rooted reason for that is to prevent Soviet expansion in Gulf region.

To prevent Soviet Union from filling out the vacuum left by UK’s withdrawal from Gulf region, China began to develop relations with Gulf countries. At the same time, Gulf monarchies also had demands for dealing with the threats from Soviet Union and Iraq. Against such backdrops, the development of the relationship between China and Gulf countries was fruitful. In March and August 1971, Kuwait and Iran established diplomatic relationship with China, respectively. China regained its seat in the United Nations in October 1971. In 1972, US president Nixon visited China, the relationship between China and the US was greatly improved. China’s diplomatic strategy of establishing a united front with the US and fighting against Soviet Union was gradually formed, which further improved the relationship between China and the Gulf countries. Pro-Soviet forces took power in Yemen in 1978. To balance the influence from the Soviet Union, Oman established diplomatic relationship with China in May 1978. After the mid-1970s, the relationship between Iraq and Soviet Union began to alienate apart. For this reason, the relationship between China and Iraq was recovered and improved.

3. The 1980s

In the 1980s, relying on the US and contending Soviet Union
were the main contents of China’s diplomatic policies. However, the differences and conflicts between the two countries happened continuously and the relationship between China and Soviet Union moderated. China began to recognize the importance of the balanced relationship between the US and Soviet Union (bin Huwaidin, M., 2008: 91). In terms of China’s own situation, after 1982, modernization and economic construction became the fundamental tasks of the country, and independence was China’s main diplomatic policy. Dramatic changes in China’s diplomacy also exerted impacts on China’s policies toward the Gulf.

First, China became pragmatic on important regional issues such as Iran’s Islamic revolution and Iran-Iraq war.

Because of the all-range confrontation between Iran and the US, the good relationship between China and former Iranian monarchical regime, coupled with China’s worry of the possibility of alliance of Iran and Soviet Union, the question regarding how to deal with its relationship with Iranian monarchy constituted a challenge. Finally, China held that the differences in ideology and social systems should not stand in the way of the development of bilateral relations. Therefore, China carried out noninterference policies toward the internal affairs of Iran, meaning neither supported nor participated in the sanctions against Iran (An, W.). Under the framework of this policy, smooth transition has been achieved in Sino-Iranian relationship.

On the issue of the Iran-Iraq war, preventing the war from expanding, maintaining the stability of the Gulf region and preventing the expansion of Soviet Union were the main targets of China’s policies (Qian, X., 2010: 12). Therefore, China was neutral in the Iran-Iraq war, calling for resolving the problems through peaceful negotiations, and gained some economic interests through military trade. Because China is the only country that kept good relationship with Iran and Iraq among the permanent
members of the UN Security Council, after the UN Resolution 598, China was the first permanent member of the UN Security Council that sent diplomats to the Gulf Region to mediate (bin Huwaidin, M., 2008: 109), which was the beginning of China’s mediation in the conflicts in the Gulf region. After Iran’s acceptance of the UN resolution 598, China positively promoted the negotiations on postwar affairs, and supported the efforts of UN Secretary-General’s mediation.

Second, China continued to commit to establishing diplomatic relationships with Gulf countries. After the establishment of the diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in 1990, all Gulf countries established diplomatic ties with China.

In the 1980s, developing the relationship with the GCC and its members became another focus of China’s policies toward the Gulf. In 1981, to thwart the threat from the Iran-Iraq war, GCC was established by Gulf monarchies. After the establishment of the GCC, then foreign minister of China, Huang Hua, sent a telegram of congratulations to the Secretary General of the GCC and established formal ties with GCC (Zhang, M., 2009: 2). Because of the independent and noninterference diplomacy of China, relations between China and Gulf countries have been further developed. The continuous development of the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia directly promoted the development of the relationship between China and other Gulf countries. UAE, Qatar and Bahrain established diplomatic relations with China respectively in November 1984, July 1988 and April 1989 (Gupta, A.). With the improvement of China’s religious policies, recognition of Saudi Arabia on China’s Middle East policies, as well as the expanding of trade and cultural communication between China and Saudi Arabia, relationship between China and Saudi Arabia has achieved great development.
visited China. In November 1988, both sides decided to set representatives office to the capital of the other. In July 1990, Saudi Arabia established diplomatic ties with China. Since then, China has established official diplomatic relations with all eight Gulf countries.

II. Sino-Gulf Relationship after the Cold War

After the end of the Cold War, many factors, including the changes in international system, changes in the situation of the Gulf region and the adjustments of China’s development and diplomatic strategies, had impacts on the relationship between China and the Gulf region. However, in this period, the mutual interdependence of China and Gulf region, and the impact of the adjustments of China’s diplomatic strategies on China’s Gulf policies have increased. This section will analyze it from three following periods.

1. The 1990s

In the 1990s, international and regional environment of the relationship between China and the Gulf have undergone great changes. Firstly, Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War ended and the dominance of the US was formally established. The relationship between China and the West worsened because of the Tian’anmen square incidents, which led to escalating tensions between China and the US; dominance of the US was established in the Middle East after the Gulf crisis and the Gulf war. The issue as to how to coordinate its relations with the US and regional countries in the Gulf crisis and the Iraq issue became the biggest challenge ahead of China at that time. Finally, from China’s perspective, it was China’s main targets to make use of the Gulf crisis to improve its relationship with the West, and to maintain the energy supply of the Gulf region and to create favorable
conditions for its modernization strategies.

First, China positively responded to the Gulf crisis and the Gulf war. After the breakout of the crisis, China firmly opposed Iraq’s invasion to Kuwait in the UN framework. However, at the same time, it also opposed big powers’ military intervention in the Gulf affairs. China voted for the UN resolutions on condemning and sanctions on Iraq while voted against the UN resolution 678 on military intervention. Besides, China also actively carried out diplomatic mediation. In November 1990, then Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq prior to the Gulf war, persuading Iraq to withdraw armies from Kuwait, and promoting peaceful resolution of the Gulf crisis through negotiations among regional countries. Objectively, China made use of the Gulf crisis to ease its relationship with the US without interest exchange. After the Gulf war, China held that Iraq should implement UN resolutions comprehensively and earnestly. At the same time, China opposed to setting up no-fly zone in Iraq, appealing to the US and UK to stop air raids on Iraq and calling for an early end to sanctions against Iraq (An, W.).

Second, the energy cooperation between China and the Gulf countries was strengthened. With the rapid economic development of China, dependence on oil exports also increases, which can be proved by the facts that China became the oil net importer in 1993 and crude oil net importer in 1996. Against such backdrop, the Gulf region became the most important region from the perspective of China’s energy needs. China’s energy dependence on this region was increasing and the energy cooperation between the two sides was also continuously strengthening. Although China tried to achieve the diversification of energy imports, more than half of the importing oil comes from the Middle East, in which the oil imports from Saudi Arabia and Iran account for about 30% (Bajpaee, C., 2006: March 10). In 1999,
China and Saudi Arabia signed the agreement on establishing strategic oil partnership, which further enhanced the strategic nature of bilateral energy cooperation.

Third, the Iran nuclear issue became the constraint of Sino-US relationship. At the first stage of the 1990s, Iran restarted its research and development activities on nuclear technologies. The US held that Iran aimed to develop nuclear weapons and gained support from China in technologies and intelligence. From then on, Iran nuclear problem became an influential factor of Sino-US relationship. In November 1991, former US secretary of state James A. Baker visited China, asking China to stop nuclear cooperation with Iran. Fierce battle happened between China and the US on Iran nuclear issue during the fruitless negotiation. In September 1992, the US decided to sell 150 F16 fighters to Taiwan. Soon after that, former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited China and signed an agreement with China on cooperation on nuclear technologies. China agreed to cooperate with Iran on building nuclear power plant, which led to strong dissatisfaction of the US. After Clinton’s took power in 1993, Washington continued to put pressure on China because of Iran nuclear issue, requiring China to halt its help to Iran in building nuclear power plant, while China raised the issue of US arms sales to Taiwan as a response. In September 1995, prior to Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s visit to the US, China announced the suspension of the cooperation with Iran on building a nuclear power plant (Hua, L., 2014: 5-6). Later, the US decided to carry out sanctions against Iran, which had negative impacts on energy, economic and trade cooperation between China and Iran.

2. The First Decade of the Twenty-First Century

The unfolding of the 21st century, the breakout of the 9/11 attacks and the Iraq war had deep impacts on the international system and the regional patterns of the Gulf region. The
international and regional environment of China’s Gulf diplomacy became increasingly complex while the speed of China’s modernization, energy demands and independence of diplomacy became the internal driving force of the adjustments of China’s Gulf diplomacy. During this period, the main context of the relationship between China and the Gulf region included the deepening of the strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and GCC, the participation of the postwar reconstruction in Iraq, developing the energy cooperation with Iran and participating in the Iran nuclear negotiations at the same time, as well as balancing the relationship with the US.

First, strategic cooperation between China and GCC has achieved great development.

After the 9/11 attacks, against the backdrops of the dramatic changes in the international situation and regional patterns, enforcing and deepening the bilateral strategic cooperation met the interests of both sides. Since the enthroning of King Abdullah, strategic cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia has developed rapidly, with the important symbols of King Abdullah’s visit to China in January 2005, president Hu Jintao’s visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2006 and February 2009, respectively, and vice president Xi Jinping’s visit to Saudi Arabia in June 2008. Economic, trade and energy cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia have also developed rapidly. Saudi Arabia has been China’s biggest oil supplier and China has become Saudi Arabia’s biggest oil consumer ahead of the US since 2009 (Wu, B., 2011: 12). The relationship between China and GCC also made fruitful progress. In July 2004, secretary general of GCC and finance ministers of the member countries jointly visited China, during which China and GCC signed the framework agreement on economics, trade and investment, and announced to kick off negotiation on FTA. In June 2010, the strategic dialogue
mechanism between China and GCC has been set up and the first round of that was conducted in Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC).

Second, on Iraq issue, China firmly opposed US launching the Iraq war. But at the same time, in spite of the objections, China did not have direct confrontation with the US. Moreover, it participated in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq through bilateral or multilateral channels after the war.

Prior to the breakout of the Iraq war, China actively promoted the resolution of the Iraq issue within the framework of the UN Security Council and relative resolutions and contributed to UN Resolution 1441. It made great efforts in avoiding the war. During this period, the UN became an important platform for China to assert its policies, oppose US unilateralism and try to politically resolve the Iraq crisis. China’s diplomatic efforts in resolving the crisis has been shown while the Sino-US was not negatively impacted to a large extent.

During the Iraq war, China insisted on its position without forming anti-war alliance with Europe and other countries, such as Russia. It maintained the independence of its policies and proved its diplomatic art that combines both principles and tactics. On the issue of military intervention in Iraq, China clearly opposed US unilateralism while it did not want to be viewed as the leader of the anti-US camp (Yu, J., 2004: 14).

After the end of the Iraq war, China actively participated in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq through bilateral or multilateral channels. As for the political reconstruction, China firmly supported the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Iraq, appealing to resolve the differences among the parties through political process, and peaceful and democratic methods, so as to achieve security and stability of Iraq. As for the economic reconstruction, China provided support to Iraqi economic
reconstruction through developing economic and trade relationship and supporting Chinese enterprises’ investment in Iraq. To promote the reconstruction, China wrote off 80% of Iraq’s debt. In 2006, China provided $25 million in economic aid to Iraq. In May 2007, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi announced when attending the international conference on Iraq issue that the Chinese government would provide 50 million RMB in aid (Liu, Z., 2011: 84).

Third, revolving the Iran nuclear issue, China tried to balance its relationship with the US and Iran, and safeguard Chinese economic interests in Iran at the same time.

Since the Iran nuclear crisis broke out in 2003, China long insisted on three basic principles: Iran should not insist on developing nuclear weapons; the international society should not resolve the Iran nuclear issue through force; Iran nuclear issue should be resolved through peaceful talks. Insisting on maintaining international the non-proliferation system, positively promoting the comprehensive cooperation between Iran and the IAEA, resolving the nuclear issue through political dialogue and maintaining the normal development of Sino-Iranian relationship represented the basic position of China (Jin, L., 2005). Therefore, for a long period, China held that the Iran nuclear issue should be resolved through diplomatic mediation of the US and EU instead of through the UN Security Council. With the coming to impasse of EU diplomatic mediation, coupled with Iran’s resuming the uranium enrichment activities in January 2006, Iran nuclear issue experienced three periods: coordination by IAEA, consultation in six-party mechanism and discussions in UN security council. These three periods were interconnected and intersected. From the beginning, China tried to resolve the Iran nuclear issue through IAEA, negotiating with Iran through bilateral channels, urging Iran to take methods, strengthening the cooperation with IAEA
and pursuing to resolve the issue through dialogue.

In February 2006, promoted by the US, the Iran nuclear issue was submitted to UN Security Council (Shin, J. & Tkacik, J., 2006: September 26). Against such transformations, China participated in the Six-party talks under the framework of UN. In June 2007, six countries reached the six-country plan which decided to restart the negotiation on Iran nuclear issue. However, because Iran insisted on not giving up the uranium enrichment activities, the Iran nuclear issue heated up. The US pushed hard for UN sanctions against Iran, threatening that the possibility of military strike on Iran had not been excluded. In such a case, UN resolution 1737 and 1747 were successively passed. Out of consideration on maintaining Sino-US relationship intact, China voted for the resolutions above. However, China still stressed that diplomatic negotiations remain the best choice for resolving the Iran nuclear issue.

On Iran nuclear issue, maintaining the cooperative relationship with the West, especially the US, and avoiding the damage on energy cooperation between China and Iran were the difficulties ahead of China. From 2006 to 2010, strongly promoted by the US, four resolutions on sanctions against Iran were passed by UN Security Council. Due to China’s insistence, contents and clauses which directly hurt China’s huge economic interests in Iran were excluded (Hua, L., 2014: 7). However, the tensions between China and the US on Sino-Iran energy cooperation increased. Iran also showed some discontent toward China.

3. Post “Arab Spring”

At present, many facts, such as the Middle East upheaval, US strategic contraction in the Middle East, improvement of the relationship between the US and Iran, progress in Iran nuclear negotiations, recurrence of turbulence of Iraq, the rise of extremism organization ISIS, breakout of Yemen crisis, and Saudi
military strike on Yemeni Houthi, led to great changes in the regional situation in the Gulf. Against such backdrops, properly dealing with the impacts brought by the Middle East upheaval on the relationship between China and Gulf Arab countries, actively participating in Iran nuclear talks and mediating between the West and Iran have been the main focal points of China’s Gulf diplomacy. In 2012, the new generation of Chinese leaders, at the core of President Xi Jinping, was elected. Subsequently, Chinese diplomacy became more proactive. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forth the “One Belt and One Road” initiative. The Gulf region is located at the intersection of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. For this reason, the “One Belt and One Road” initiative brings huge opportunities to the development of the relationship between China and the Gulf. Meanwhile, however, risks and challenges should also be attached importance to.

First, the so-called “Arab Spring” undermined the relationship between China and GCC to some extent. But with the efforts of both sides, these negative impacts have been properly dealt with and the bilateral strategic cooperation has been elevated to higher levels.

After the breakout of the “Arab Spring”, there has been an obvious difference in policies toward the so-called “Arab Revolutions” between China and Gulf Arab countries. Beijing’s position is mainly in three regards: Firstly, China insists on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, that is, China respects and supports regional countries handling their internal affairs independently and believes that those countries and their people have the capacity and means to find development paths and governance methods suited to their domestic conditions. Secondly, China opposes the use of force and calls on all parties to solve disputes through political means in a
peaceful manner. Finally, China urges the international community to support the efforts of the regional countries to restore political stability, develop economy, solve hotspot issues, in particular, push forward the peace process in the Middle East, and create a favorable external environment for peace, stability and sustainable development of this region (Liu, Z., 2012: 8). In short, China does not oppose Arab people’s reforming pursuits of improving people’s livelihood and developing democracy, while China opposes external interferences, especially military interferences, which is the policy option guided by the noninterference diplomatic principle. GCC countries support the oppositions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, but support Bahrain regime’s repression on Shiite opposition. GCC countries also participated in NATO’s international military intervention in Libya, and actively supported the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria through intervention (Alterman, J., 2013: August). The reason for GCC countries’ Syria policies is to balance the power of Shiites and Iran. The biggest difference of foreign stance between China and GCC countries lies in the Syria issue. China opposed military intervention and vetoed UNSC resolutions to that effect three times from 2012 to 2013, While GCC countries supported it.

China’s Syria policy caused the discontents of GCC countries. Arab media from GCC countries even misunderstood that China was supporting the Assad regime. However, the Syria issue has not caused great damage to the relationship between China and GCC. In contrast, because of China’s active interpretation of its policy toward GCC and the huge demands of both sides in the field of energy cooperation, the strategic cooperative relationship between China and GCC stepped up rapidly. In early 2012, Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao made successful visits to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, at a time when the strategic partnership
between China and Saudi Arabia had improved and the strategic partnership with UAE had been established (Wu, S., 2015: 9). Strategic dialogue and cooperation mechanism between China and GCC had also been enhanced. In May 2011, the second round of Sino-GCC strategic dialogue was held in UAE’s capital Abu Dhabi. In January 2014, the third round of this dialogue was held in Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC).

Second, China actively participated in the negotiations on Iran nuclear problem. It made great efforts in diplomatic mediation between the West and Iran. It has played a constructive role in promoting the political resolution of the Iran nuclear issue. After Hassan Rouhani took power in June 2013, appeasement of the relationship between the US and Iran created conditions for political solution to the Iran nuclear issue. Since the restart of the Iran nuclear negotiations in October 2013, China has long played a positive role. In November 2013, President Xi Jinping had a phone call with Iranian president Rouhani, stressing that China always advocates in the equality principle, supports the peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogues, hoping Iran to seize the opportunities, maintain the dialogues, search for common grounds, and strive for the best results. After the restart of Iran nuclear negotiations, China made five proposals in resolving the Iran nuclear issue: Insisting on dialogue between Iran and six countries; searching for comprehensive fair and reasonable resolution; take phased and equality principle; creating favorable environment for talks; searching for tackling the dispute and comprehensive ways (Gao, Z., 2015: 19-20). These advocates aimed at bridging the differences among parties, and promoting them to reach comprehensive agreements in predetermined time. It marks the first time for China to raise its own proposal on Iran nuclear issue.

Besides, China was also active in communicating with
different parties, committed to eliminating differences and promoting the Iran nuclear negotiations for political resolution. During the negotiations in November 2013, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had extensive contacts with foreign ministers from the US, Russia and Iran, trying to bridge the differences among the parties and promote the negotiations to make substantial progress. After hard negotiations, the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan was reached as a preliminary agreement, marking the first step of resolving the Iran nuclear issue through diplomatic methods. Afterwards, Iran nuclear negotiations were delayed many times. However, China still insists that political resolution should be the general direction of the Iran nuclear negotiations, hoping that comprehensive agreement could be reached as soon as possible.

Third, China’s “One Belt and One Road” initiative creates new historical opportunities for the win-win cooperation between China and Gulf countries as well as risks and challenges.

When President Xi Jinping visited Central Asia and Southeast Asia in September and October 2013, he raised the initiative of jointly building the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (referred to as the Belt and Road). In March 2015, the Chinese government drafted and published the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” to promote the implementation of the Initiative, which have attracted close attention from all over the world. The Belt and Road Initiative should be jointly built through consultation to meet the interests of all, and efforts should be made to integrate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road. The key areas of the Belt and Road include policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds. It promotes practical cooperation in all fields, and works to build a community of shared interests,
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destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness. In other words, The Belt and Road cooperation features mutual respect and trust, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation, and mutual learning between civilizations (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2015: March 28).

The inauguration of the “One Belt and One Road” initiative comprehensively enhanced the cooperative relationship between China and Gulf region. This strategy has also got response from Gulf countries. In January 2014, during his meeting with GCC delegation, President Xi Jinping expressed that China will always develop friendly relationship with GCC; China would like to make joint efforts with GCC to promote establishing the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Maritime Silk Road” (Wu, S., 2015: 9). In June 2014, during his speech in opening ceremony of sixth ministerial conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), President Xi Jinping pointed out that China and Arab countries should hold a broader vision and down-to-earth attitude to establish a “1+2+3” cooperation pattern, namely, to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as new breakthroughs. President Xi also stressed the importance of establishing the Sino-GCC FTA, Sino-UAE mutual investment fund, and Arab countries’ participation in Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Xi, J., 2014: June 5). In his speech on Sino-Arab strategic cooperation, it is without doubt that the Gulf region, with its huge potential, plays an important role. Jointly building the “One Belt and One road” will be the mainstream of the cooperation between China and Gulf countries.

Of course, the cooperation between China and Gulf countries
involving the building of “One Belt and One Road” also faces risks and challenges. Firstly, the security situation in the Gulf is not optimistic. Continuous turbulence can be found in Iraq and Yemen; terrorist organizations such as ISIS are widespread. These are all security challenges that China and Gulf countries are facing. Secondly, the geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two regional powers, has become fierce. This is a political task that China must properly address and find a way to balance its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Finally, China and the US share both common interests and obvious differences on hotspots in the Gulf region. How to deal with its cooperative and competitive relationship with the US is the long-term challenge of China’s Gulf diplomacy.

III. Conclusion

Development of the relationship between China and the Gulf region are influenced by the international system, regional patterns, as well as China’s own diplomatic strategic adjustments. In this last part of the article, I will summarize the basic contents and characteristics of the relationship between China and the Gulf.

The 1950s and 1960s: In terms of international system, this period was characterized by the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union under the Cold War system. During that time, the main contradiction in the Gulf regional pattern was the contradiction between national revolutionary movements and the monarchy, namely, the contradiction between Republic Iraq and the Gulf monarchies. China’s diplomatic policy then was to support national revolutionary movements. Due to the alliance between Gulf monarchies and the West, the relationship between China and Gulf monarchies was hostile, so China established diplomatic relationship with post-revolution Iraq in 1958, and
supported the leftist revolution against Sultan of Oman.

The 1970s: On the level of international system, confrontation between the US and Soviet Union had changed, and the Soviet Union had enhanced its expansion in the Gulf region. On the level of regional patterns, Britain’s retreat from the Gulf region and the independence of monarchical state in Gulf region provided opportunity for China to establish diplomatic relations with Gulf States. With respect to China’s foreign strategies, due to the intensification of conflicts between China and the Soviet Union and the easing of the Sino-US tensions, the main target of China’s policy toward Gulf Region in this period was confronting the Soviet Union. For this reason, China began to establish relations with Gulf monarchies, such as Kuwait, Iran and Oman.

The 1980s: As to the international system, Soviet Union started the Afghan war while the US raised the Carter doctrine to respond to Soviet Union’s expansion. As to regional patterns, after the Iran Islamic Revolution in 1979, the conflict between Iran and Iraq and the conflict between Persians and Arabs featured the main regional tensions. Such tensions led to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War. To protect themselves, six Gulf countries formed the GCC. As to China’s foreign strategies, after the reform and opening up, China began to dilute the factors of ideology in diplomacy and carried out independent foreign policies. China adopted neutral policies toward the Iran-Iraq War and continued to develop relations with Gulf monarchies. It established relations with the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain in this period, and finally established ties with Saudi Arabia in 1990. By then, all eight Gulf countries had diplomatic relations with China.

The 1990s: In the field of international system, the US had a dominant position after the collapse of Soviet Union. It established hegemony in the Middle East through the Gulf War. In the field of regional patterns, the main challenge in this period was the
trilateral structure among Iran, Iraq and the GCC. GCC countries coordinated with the US to contain Iran and Iraq. In the field of China’s diplomatic strategies, China took the diplomatic strategy of “hide our lights and bide our time”. Generally speaking, China adopted a reserved position on important affairs, including the Gulf War and Iraq disarmament crisis. However, taking the opportunity of the Gulf War, China improved its relations with the US and other Western countries. US actions began to influence China’s policies. Economic and trade cooperation between China and Gulf countries have started since then, and national interests began to play a role in China’s policies toward Gulf countries.

The First Decade in 21st Century: In the field of international system, since the 9/11 attacks, US global strategies have been guided by wars against terrorism while its national strength has also declined because of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. On regional patterns the in Gulf region, the Iraq war and the Iranian nuclear crisis became the main foci in regional security. Iran has risen with strong momentum, which worsened the tensions between Iran and GCC. On China’s foreign strategies, against the backdrop of the improvement of the Sino-US relationship after the 9/11 attacks, China proposed the concept of the period of strategic opportunity. It carried out the “going outside” strategy and launched negotiations and strategic dialogues on FTA with GCC countries. Meanwhile, China also participated in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq and negotiations on Iran nuclear problem. The relationship between China and Gulf countries has been increasingly close. However, US actions still restricted relations between China and Gulf countries, especially the Sino-Iranian relationship.

Post-“Arab Spring”: In terms of international system, the multi-polarity of the international patterns has been pushed by the financial crisis. The rise of emerging powers, including China, has
led to profound changes in international system. The US began to carry out the strategic rebalance toward Asia-Pacific and strategic contraction in the Middle East. Regarding regional patterns, the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” and the withdrawal of US army from Iraq led to the intensification of sectarian conflicts. US efforts in promoting the improvement of the US-Iranian relationship and the negotiations on Iran nuclear problem all resulted in the worsening of the tensions between the GCC and Iran. On China’s foreign strategies, after the taking power of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Chinese diplomacy became more active, and attached more importance to diplomatic relations with neighbors. The launch of the “One Belt One Road” strategy provided the driving forces for the cooperation between China and the Gulf region. At the same time, however, the differences between China and Gulf countries on regional affairs, such as “Arab Spring”, Syrian crisis and Iranian nuclear problem, still stand in the way of China’s balancing the relationships with the GCC and Iran.

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