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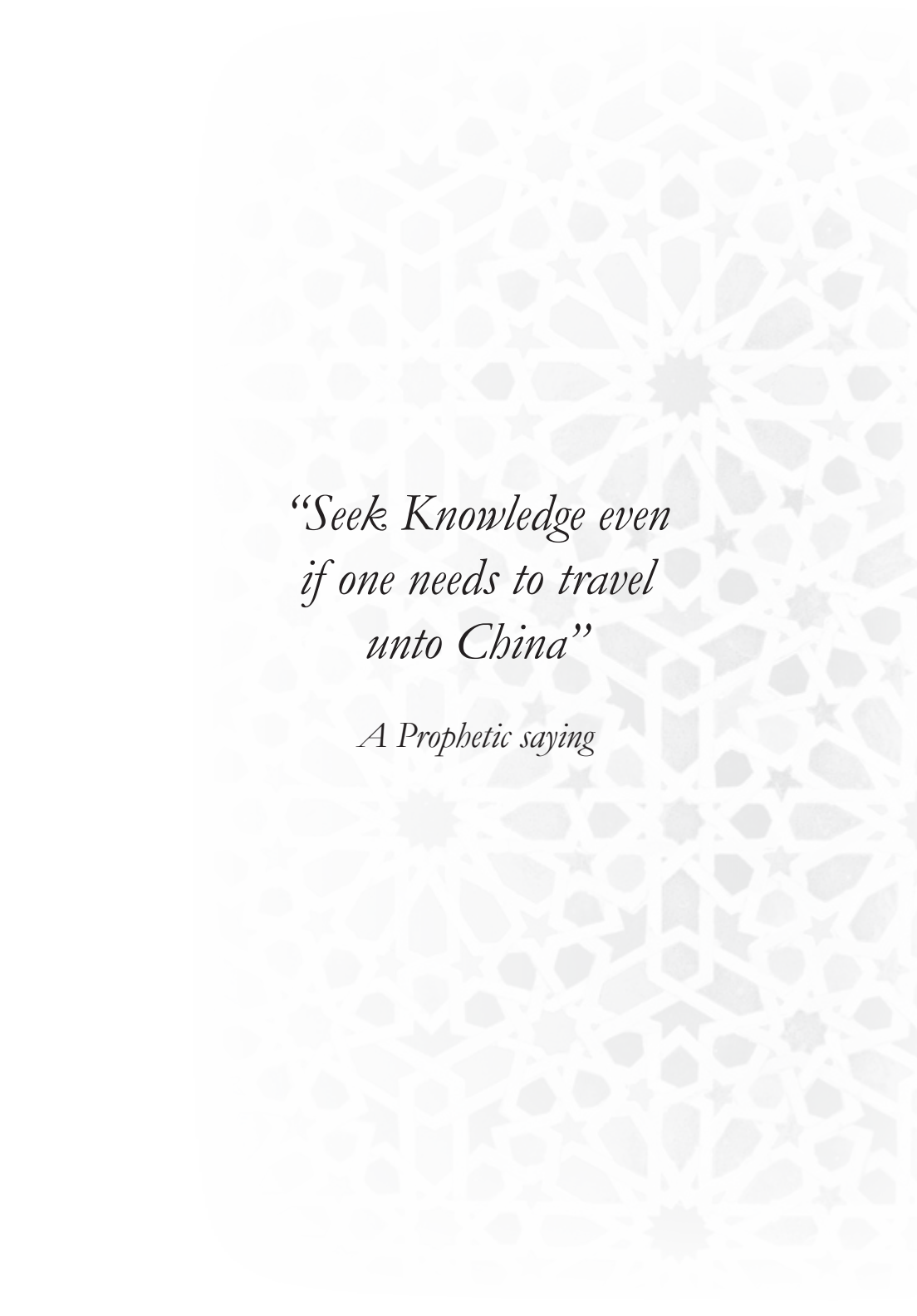
# CHINA AND THE ARAB WORLD

Past and Present



**FAZZUR RAHMAN SIDDIQUI**





*“Seek Knowledge even  
if one needs to travel  
unto China”*

*A Prophetic saying*





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**China and the Arab World**

Past and Present

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## INTRODUCTION



The relationship between China and the larger Arab World is not merely a recent outcome of the economic rise of China and its growing dependence on Arab energy resources, as many assume, but it goes back to the distant past when the cultural and commercial engagement between the two ancient civilisations along the Silk Road was very vibrant. The trade in jades, silk and other luxury goods went on for centuries along the route of Europe and Asia which today is known as the Silk Road. The role of Chinese admiral Zheng He<sup>1</sup> (1371-1433) is well-known in the annals of the Arab-China relationship as he played a pioneering role in deepening cultural and commercial ties between the Arab and China. The Chinese official accounts describe the Hui (Chinese Muslims) as a melting pot of Muslims who came from various ethnicities of the Arab World and Central Asia, and mingled with the Han Chinese and shaped a new cultural landscape but continued to preserve their own distinct religious identity.

In the past, Arab traders were thronging the route of the Silk Road but not long after the discovery of the sea route, the Arab traders lost their centuries-old monopoly over trade and their position was usurped by the Europeans who made the Asia-Europe trade shorter, faster and cheaper. With the emergence of the European traders, the fortunes of the Arab traders faded and gradually economic and political balances shifted towards the West.

Over the years, particularly amid the economic-driven interactions, globalisation, and a new pace of integration and assimilation, the two entities became much closer. Under changing economic

and political circumstances, an unprecedented level of interface began between Hui (read Chinese Muslims) and the Arab Muslims ushering in a new phase of Arabisation of Hui, reconnecting them to their past cultural and religious heritage and ending a long era of alienation and estrangement between them and their religious ancestry.

In the second half of the previous century when both China and the Arab countries were entering into a new phase of their polity, China under the leadership of Mao Zedong and the Arab World under the banner of pan-Arabism following their liberation against the imperial powers, both expressed solidarity against each other and pledged to stand together against the Western forces. Both were champions of South-South cooperation and were prominent participants at Bandung Afro-Asian Conference (1955) among others.

When global polity and relations among the nations were entering into a new phase altogether following the demise of the erstwhile Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), Chinese diplomacy showed no such zeal to modify its policy towards the Arab World. Because the region of West Asia for them was still a reflective of a fragmented and incessant unstable politics and ground for geopolitics rather than economic connectivity which was evolving to be a major component of Chinese global policy.

At the beginning of twenty-first century, China ruled over one of the most expansionist economies in modern history and to sustain this economic surge, China apart from the market, needed the energy to keep the machinery wheel rolling. The story of new economic growth there led to the enunciation of “Go Out” policy in 2001<sup>2</sup> and



henceforth the Arab World received the attention of China because of unprecedented growth in usage of hydrocarbons. In the last two decades, a new impetus has been noticed in the Arab-China relationship, which is significantly driven by the Chinese economic rise and its growing requirement for Arab oil and gas.

This twenty-first century economic-driven relationship has substantially altered the template of the Arab-China relationship and further new mode of communication, transport, flow of goods, people and capital have deepened it further. A series of state-led initiatives from both sides have elevated the relationship to a new level. In order to deepen and diversify the past template, both are invoking the rhetoric of past civilisational and cultural linkages and their urge to revitalise the ties is well anchored in the nostalgia of the Silk Road. To translate the nostalgia of the Silk Road into reality, China launched one of the biggest projects in modern times, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. To enforce the historical connectivity of Silk Road era between China and the Arab World, many of the symbols and logos in the BRI are informed by cultural symbols of Arab such as camel caravans carrying spices and other merchandise.

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diversification of the Arab economy, particularly of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, that has opened a new vista for expanding and diversifying their relationship. Countries such as Qatar, Oman and United Arab Emirates (UAE) are developing their tourism industries. The towns of Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait are filled with skyscrapers and every key global bank has its branches in these cities. Today both China and the Arab World stand out as two major economic powers in the newly emerging global order and the BRI is reaching out to every corner of the Arab World. The Arab World seems to be at ease with the rising stature of China in the global sphere because their economic and political engagements would not be conditioned by the magnitude of political vibrancy or democratic practices at home as is the case in its engagement with the Western powers. In the words of Degang Sun, “China has a vision of a multi-polar order in the Middle East based on non-interference and partnerships with other states where China will promote stability through “developmental peace” rather than the Western notion of democratic peace.”<sup>3</sup>

What further elevated the relationship is the growing political engagement of China with the region and its military ascendancy unlike in the past when China was broadly known as an economic power with no political or strategic ambitions. In addition to the economic rise of China, other global events like 9/11, the oil price hike in 2004 and China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 spurred the enterprise of consolidating the ties between the two. Today it is not only Chinese products which are floating in the Arab markets but the Chinese government, in pursuit of its soft power diplomacy, is building many mosques to woo the



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Arab traders in their country. This monograph primarily aims to unravel the contours of the China-Arab relationship in a historical perspective and see how their past is providing continuity in shaping and determining the present ties. This monograph will also attempt to explain how the growing economic engagement between the two is also helping them forge deeper political engagement, how both sides are reciprocating to each other in their respective endeavours to take the ties to a new level and how changing global political scenarios are also factoring in reshaping their relationship. ❧❧

## CHINA AND THE ARAB WORLD: A Glance in the Past



The template and nature of the encounter between China and the Arab World in the past has been significantly different from what we notice today. Over the years China-Arab relationship has continued to refashion and reorient itself as China has moved from a multinational empire to a modern nation-state composed of more than fifty official ethnic groups. The most significant transformation in their relationship has occurred during the non-Han emperors. It was under the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) of Kublai Khan<sup>4</sup> when the Mongols encouraged the emigration of large numbers of Muslims to China to control the Han population and conduct the day-to-day administration.

China's interface with the Arab World further increased during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) when the Chinese rulers launched the expansionist drive and subsequently absorbed Turkic-speaking Muslims who were traditionally linked to Central Asia, Iran and Turkiye.<sup>5</sup> Under the Qing dynasty, voluminous research works were done on Islam in vernacular language which in successive centuries resonated in the philosophy of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>6</sup>

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While exploring the foundation of the China-Arab relationship, one cannot overlook the role of a millennium-old religious seminary in the heart of the Arab World, Al-Azhar seminary<sup>7</sup> in the capital town of Cairo which played an exceptional role in bringing these two civilisations closer. For the first time, a well-known religious preacher from Yunnan region in southWestern China, Yusuf Ma Dexin (1794-1874), a Hanafi Islamic scholar, well-versed in Arabic and Persian languages, travelled to Egypt and stayed at Al-Azhar for a short stint. He later travelled to pious city of Mecca to mollify the Arab anger, after rulers of the Qing dynasty had taken control of Muslim-dominated territories in northWestern China (eastern Turkestan).

Yusuf Ma Dexin, also known as Imam Dexin, is credited with nurturing a generation of Han scholars who would later travel to Cairo and return carrying an insight about the Arab World. As a result of frequent visits of Han scholars to Egypt, region of Yunnan was flooded with books about the Arab World. Dexin composed, *Record of Pilgrimage Journey*<sup>8</sup> after his visit to Mecca in 1840<sup>9</sup> which

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serves as an encyclopedia about the early linkage between China and the Arab World.

Prominent among those who stayed at Azhar were Wan Haorn (1848-1919), Wang Jingazi (1879-1949) and Ma Songting (1895-1992). It was the visit of Ma Songting that expedited and deepened the process of engagement between China and the Arab World.<sup>10</sup> It was during his visit to Cairo when erstwhile King Fuad of Egypt announced funding the study of some of the Chinese students enrolled at Al-Azhar and he also offered financial assistance to build an Islamic library in Beijing. As a mark of appreciation for King Fuad, the Chinese government built one more library in China in Fuad's honour.<sup>11</sup> Another Chinese scholar, Wan Haorn stayed in Egypt and Turkiye between 1906 and 1908 to acquaint himself with Islam and later preached this religion in different parts of China. In 1935, a collection on Confucianism, *Analects of Confucius* was translated into Arabic as *Kitab-al-Hiwar Li Kunfushya* and published by the Salafiya Press (Cairo). The book was based on a lecture series delivered by many visiting Chinese scholars to Al-Azhar.<sup>12</sup> Many obscure Arabic texts, too, were translated into Chinese such as an Arabic anthology *Risala-t-al-Tawheed* which was translated by a Chinese scholar, Mohammad A Makin, as *Huijiao Zheuxe* in 1935.<sup>13</sup>

Later in his life, Mohammad Makin became a teacher of Islam and Arabic language at Peking University in China which was the first major institution to introduce Arabic teaching. He also translated the Quran into Chinese language and acted as an interpreter during many of the high-level meetings between the leaders of the two sides. Another Chinese scholar Ibrahim al-Jibali (b.1878) translated a few books of renowned Egyptian scholar and reformer





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Another Chinese scholar Ibrahim al-Jibali (b.1878) translated a few books of Sheikh Abduh into Chinese, headed an Al-Azhar delegation to India in 1937 and later was dubbed as a 'Perfect Muslim' by Al-Fath magazine.

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Sheikh Abduh into Chinese, headed an Al-Azhar delegation to India in 1937 and later was dubbed as a 'Perfect Muslim' by *Al-Fath* magazine. . There was another prominent preacher from China, Imam Ma Wanfu (1849-1934) who travelled to Saudi Arabia and returned as a Wahabist in 1892. He sought the implementation of scripturalist Islam and in the later part of his life was known as an anti-acculturationist.

Unlike the Arab-West relationship, China's engagement with the Arab World started a bit late but was very crucial and dynamic in nature. In 1904, China began to publish a *Daily YueHua* (Crescent China) with an Arabic title *Nuzrat-al-Hilal* and the paper continued till 1937.<sup>14</sup> This *Daily* was an opinion maker among the Arabs during the Japanese invasion of China and had good circulation in parts of Asia and Africa.

Chinese regime sent an official delegation to Egypt in 1937 to create an opinion in its favour during the Japanese invasion of China in the World War Two. The delegation attended a meeting organised by the Egyptian Muslim Youth Society and on this occasion, one

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Chinese regime sent an official delegation to Egypt in 1937 to create an opinion in its favour during the Japanese invasion of China in the Second World War.

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Palestinian said that China and Palestine are both weak nations, and Chinese Muslims and Palestinian Muslims are brothers in trouble. The meeting was also addressed by the President of Al-Azhar University who condemned the Japanese invasion of China.<sup>15</sup> Among all the Arab countries, the first Chinese consulate was established in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) in 1939 and an Azhar-educated Chinese was named its first deputy counsel.<sup>16</sup> This constant engagement with the larger Arab World purged the Chinese Islam of its Turco-Persian ancestry.

It was Wang Jingzhi who linked China's fate with the larger Arab World due to the deep connection between Chinese Muslims and the larger Islamic world. For him, Muslims could serve as a bridge in China's quest for independence and leadership in the global cause against imperialism. He also remarked that a globalised vision of China's anti-imperialist's cause allows Muslim elites in China to reconcile their transnational activities with loyalty to the territorially bound Chinese nation.<sup>17</sup> It was the religious and intellectual interface in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which acquainted China with the Arab World and vice-versa.

## **CHINA-ARAB WORLD RELATIONSHIP IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**



Over the years Chinese scholars and diplomats very often portrayed China and the Arab World as the twin centres of progress that, according to them, were displaced and humiliated by the gradual rise of European colonialism. Restoration of this old mega alliance seems to have become a running theme



among those Chinese and Arab scholars who tend to believe in the revisionist world order. Not long after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Egypt was the first country in the Arab World to recognise Mao's China in 1956. The reason for an early recognition is well evident in the century-old bilateral engagement between the two as discussed earlier. The recognition by Egypt was followed by Syria and Iraq (August 1956); Yemen (1956); Morocco and Algeria (1958) Sudan (1959); Kuwait and Lebanon (1971); Jordan (1977); Libya (1978); Oman (1978); UAE (1984); Qatar (1988); Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) (1988); Bahrain (1989) and Saudi Arabia did the same in 1990 after terminating its ties with Taiwan.<sup>18</sup> Saudi Arabia was not only the last country to establish diplomatic ties with China among all the Arab countries but it was the only Arab country which had opposed China's entry into the United Nations (UN) in 1971.<sup>19</sup> Again the reason for this delay in recognition of China was the erstwhile geopolitics when Saudi Arabia had not only ties with Taiwan, an arch-enemy of China but had also imposed a trade ban against China in 1972.<sup>20</sup> Many attribute this recognition of China by Saudi Arabia to its growing defence ties with China when China supplied CSS-2IRBM to Riyadh in the backdrop of growing apprehension of Iran's military rise with the help of China.<sup>21</sup>

Zhou Enlai, the first premier of China (r.1949-76), during his maiden tour of African countries between December 1963 and February

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1964, first landed in Egypt where he announced five principles guiding Chinese foreign policies towards the Arab World.<sup>22</sup> During his stay in Algeria, credited with being recognised by China as the first non-Arab country,<sup>23</sup> he spoke of a different set of foreign policy principles with the African countries and focused on China's respect for peace, neutrality and impartiality. He also promised full support to the desire of the Arab and African nations to achieve unity and solidarity among themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike Mao's era, China's enthusiasm for the Arab World under Deng Xiaoping (1978-89) seemed to wane but China was never averse to expressing its opinions over the significant political developments in the region. It condemned the tripartite aggression of Egypt in 1956, supported the Algerian war of liberation and was the first non-Arab country to recognise the interim Algerian government established in 1958 and accorded the PLO the status of representative of the people of Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

The relationship in decades of the 1980s and 1990s witnessed some elevation as China in its eleventh Central Committee Meeting of the Communist Party of China in 1978 decided to open its economy which was very much in correspondence with the emerging new economic outlook of the Arab World on account of new petro-wealth in GCC countries. The first real diplomatic test for China came during the Iraq-Iran war when both were abandoned by

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their respective allies United States (US) and erstwhile USSR and they looked towards China as a possible solution and China approached both. China consolidated its ties with Iraq and supplied weapons to Iran despite its early disenchantment with the Islamic revolution in Iran.

With the abundance of oil wealth and the pursuit of market economy, the Gulf region was emerging as a major factor in the global political and economic spheres. The pursuit of similar policies in both parts of the world paved the way for taking the relationship to a new level where trade and commerce emerged as consequential factors in strategising the ties in the future. Later the end of the Cold War and successive rapid economic globalisation not only transformed the global order but also imposed many changes in regional politics across the world with a significant impact on the China-Arab relationship.

## **GROWING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN CHINA AND THE ARAB WORLD**



As mentioned earlier, China and the Arab countries have been well-acquainted with each other since ancient times and today the relationship has gradually progressed to a level where most of the countries in the region enjoy strong political relationships.

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imperialism which is more reflected in politics of Western intervention, and exercise of economic and diplomatic hegemony which helped China make a new political beginning with the Arab World. China has created an image for itself as a country which distributes wealth without acting hegemon and its image of a non-interventionist power also appeals the Arab leaders who for decades have been hostage to Western dictates and where hatred for everything belonging to Arabs/Muslims has been growing. China's engagement with the region is never informed by regional, geopolitical, ideological or sectarian considerations as seen in the case of the Western world. Chinese economic engagement with the Arab World or investment does not seek any modification or transformation in the internal economic or political system within the Arab countries.<sup>26</sup>

To give more comprehensive shape to China-Arab relations, China for the first time released a document, *China's Arab Policy Paper* in 2016 during the visit of President Xi Jinping to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran to mark the 60th anniversary of forging ties with the Arab World. The White Paper stated that the Arab World is an important partner for China, which takes firm steps in the path of peaceful development in its endeavours to enhance solidarity and cooperation with developing countries and establish a new type of international relation based on cooperation and mutual gain... The Chinese side is keen to conduct practical cooperation with Arab countries in accordance with the principle of mutual benefit and win-win... Expanding the circle of cooperation in infrastructure, trade and investment facilitation, in addition to nuclear energy, space, satellites, new energy, agriculture, finance, etc... The Chinese side is keen to cooperate with Arab countries to push forward a



new type of cooperation mechanism based on openness, mutual benefit and gain.<sup>27</sup>

According to the document, energy would be the major axis of the ties between the two and it would be followed by the development of infrastructure and facilitation of trade and investment and the outer circle of the relationship would be strengthened by cooperation in the field of nuclear energy, space satellites, and renewable energy.<sup>28</sup>

One can see some fundamental similarities between the Arab Policy Paper of 2016 and the Five Principles of China's Relationship with the Arab world emerged during Zhou Enlai's meeting with the late President Nasser of Egypt in Cairo in 1963.<sup>29</sup>

China always adhered to its policy of non-interference and it was well advocated by its Foreign Minister, Wang Yi who visited a number of West Asian countries in March 2021 and raised a similar issue at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) annual meeting in 2019. China's policy of non-intervention was also highlighted in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting in September 2020.<sup>30</sup> China has always focused on dialogue and communication and urged for the resolution of the Palestinian issue within the framework of the two-state solution.

On a series of global issues, both sides converge and respect each other's views and there is a commonality in the approaches among different Arab countries vis-à-vis China. Both Egypt and China are ardent defenders of national and state sovereignty, and for Syria and Libya, both have urged to preserve territorial integrity. Unlike the Washington Consensus, the Beijing Consensus (Chinese Model of Development) has always allured Arab countries because it does

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not make deeper political or economic engagement hostage to political reform or respect for human rights in the Arab World.

Many of the policy documents of the Arab World like Egypt and Saudi Vision 2030 converge with the spirit of BRI on many of the political and economic issues. The Chinese model of economic progress largely appeals to the Arab countries and Egypt was the first country in the region to join the Asia Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB) and Silk Route Fund in 2016 launched by China under BRI. Only in 2021, AIIB and OPEC Fund for International Development jointly provided a loan worth US\$ 200 million to the National Bank of Egypt.<sup>31</sup> The estrangement between USSR and China in the early 1970s paved the way for closer China-Egypt ties but later growing Egypt's reliance on the US for economic aid limited the scope of China-Egypt relationship.

But the opening of the Chinese economy under President Deng Xiaoping provided a new impetus to bilateral relationship because Egypt too had opened its economy after Camp David (1978-79) under President Sadat. Later the end of the Cold War steered the relationship to a new level when Egypt needed Chinese economic investment for its infrastructural development. A new focus on economic progress and political stability<sup>32</sup> under President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and a pursuit of new political and diplomatic





engagement on the part of China have created a new scope for the enhancement of the bilateral relationship.

Even President Morsi (2012-13), the first elected President of Egypt after the Arab uprising chose China as his first foreign destination hinting at Egypt's desire to come out of the US strategic and diplomatic fold and join other emerging world powers. As mentioned earlier, China never engaged with the regime for its ideology or geopolitical nature but has always been receptive to all governments regardless of the nature and ideology of the regime. Hence even after the unceremonious ouster of President Morsi, President Xi Jinping visited Egypt in 2014 and extended all support to the regime of Al-Sisi. The endorsement of Al-Sisi's regime by China helped Al-Sisi overcome erstwhile US President Barack Obama's threat to punish the junta's human rights abuses by withholding US military aid.<sup>33</sup> In 2016, Egypt was under immense pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the payback of loans to seek a fresh loan. Egypt sought the assistance of China to mediate with the IMF on its behalf and China gave the matching fund to Egypt to evade the economic mess.<sup>34</sup> It was only under Al-Sisi that Egypt became the first country in the region to upgrade its ties with China to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2014.

Since coming to power in 2014, Al-Sisi visited China seven times and was among the few Arab leaders to participate in the inaugural

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ceremony of the Winter Olympics. He was the only Arab leader to participate in the celebration ceremony of the end of World War Two held in China in 2015. Egypt was also among seventeen nations that sent its troops to march in the parade<sup>35</sup> to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties with the Arab World,

Unlike US' relationship with the GCC countries, China's relationship with the GCC countries was never hostage to Iran-Saudi geopolitical or ideological conflict. China has always pursued its policy towards the Gulf States independent of the strategic and diplomatic interplay within the GCC countries. President Xi Jinping paid a three-day visit to UAE in July 2018 and upgraded the bilateral relationship to the level of 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and a series of energy and financial deals were signed. After Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the only country in the region to have a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China. While Qatar too sought a similar level of relationship during the visit of Emir Hamdan Al Thani of Qatar to China in January 2019 but China decided to continue working with the framework of strategic partnership established in 2014.

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President Xi's choice of UAE as the first foreign destination after becoming President of China was an indication of a new priority in the lexicon of Chinese foreign policy.

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President Xi's choice of UAE as the first foreign destination after winning second term was an indication of a new priority in the lexicon of Chinese foreign policy. His visit to UAE in 2018 was the first visit by any Chinese president in three decades.<sup>36</sup> During the same visit, Xi Jinping was conferred the highest civilian award of UAE, "Order of Zayed" and in his honour, a mobile network in UAE was renamed *Welcome Press China*.<sup>37</sup> He was also gifted an Arabian horse, *Rabdan* during the welcome ceremony<sup>38</sup> and UAE also became the first country in the region to receive the first Silk Road Fund investment worth US\$ 3.4 billion for Hassyan Clean Coal Power Plant.<sup>39</sup> During the meeting, the Prime Minister of UAE, Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid and President Xi decided to double the trade volume which was then US\$ 54 billion annually and also double the number of Chinese tourists visiting UAE which was then one million annually.<sup>40</sup>

The visit of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman to China in 2018 laid a new foundation for the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia. Mohammad Bin Salman's visit to China was preceded by many high-level bilateral visits such as King Abdullah's visit in 2006 which was primarily in the backdrop of strained US-Saudi ties amid the Iraq war. As a Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman visited China in 2014, again as the Crown Prince in 2016 and later King himself, Salman bin-Abdulaziz in 2017. From the Chinese side, President Jiang Zemin travelled to Saudi Arabia in 1999, President Hu Jintao in 2006 and 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao in 2012 and then the high-profile visit of President Xi Jinping took place in 2016 which not only provided a new impetus but diversified the overall template of China-Saudi Arabia relationship.<sup>41</sup>

During his visit in 2018, Mohammad Bin Salman offered the US\$ 25 billion to China for the construction of Abdullah airport in the capital town of Beijing.<sup>42</sup> During the visit of Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in 2016, both sides signed a comprehensive strategic partnership deal committing themselves to enhance cooperation in political, economic, commercial, cultural, humanitarian, military, security, and energy as well as regional and global spheres.<sup>43</sup> Given the expanding trade between China and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia has decided to teach the Chinese language in all of Saudi Arabia's K-12 public schools and this decision was taken during the visit of the Crown Prince to China in 2019.<sup>44</sup>

The issue of Palestine has been integral to China's foreign policy and China has been a vocal supporter of the establishment of an independent sovereign state of Palestine. As the first non-Arab country to recognise PLO, China was also one of the countries to train Palestinian guerrillas who were fighting against Israel.<sup>45</sup> The founder of the PRC, Mao was a great supporter of the cause of Palestine. But in later years Chinese foreign policy became more coloured with pragmatism which adversely impacted the China-Palestine relationship. China supported the PLO's decision to accept the two-state solution<sup>46</sup> and only after the Oslo Accord in 1992, China chose to establish full diplomatic ties with Israel.

After the apparent collapse of the Oslo Accord and the coming of the *Intifada Two* in 2000, China endorsed the Arab League's Road Map in the 2002 Peace Plan and for the first time, it appointed its envoy for the Middle East Peace Process. Under its BRI project, China has plan to invest US\$ 7.5 million in Palestinian territories<sup>47</sup> and again in



2018 it extended a loan worth US\$ fifteen million as humanitarian aid.<sup>48</sup> In December 2017, China too stood along with other countries in condemning US decision to transfer its embassy in Israel from hitherto Tel Aviv to East Jerusalem. It also voted to uphold the international consensus on the status of East Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup>

Amid COVID-19 the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE publicly expressed their sympathy for China's plight and offered large-scale aid to China in its fight against the pandemic. Qatar Airways delivered five cargo freighters carrying three hundred tons of medical supplies to China, while Saudi Arabia signed six contracts in early February 2020 to deliver drugs and medical equipment to China.<sup>50</sup> Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa was lit up in solidarity with the suffering of China, displaying the Chinese flag with the depiction of "Let's go Wuhan!" in the Chinese language.<sup>51</sup>

Though the China-Arab relationship has seen upward mobility over the years but there has been some downward moment as well in their relationship. The perception of the Arab states, particularly GCC countries about China's age-old dictum of neutrality in the conflict zone significantly changed after it stood along with Russia during Syrian crisis which did not go well with the Arab countries. This was most visible in the civil war of Syria where China either voted or vetoed along with Russia on many of the UNSC resolutions which China portrayed as a demonstration of

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its impartiality<sup>52</sup> but within the GCC it was seen as a significant change in China's foreign policy.

## **ECONOMIC PROSPERITY OF CHINA: A New Story for the Arab World**



What really altered the template of the Arab-China relationship in the twenty-first century is the burgeoning and prospering economic relationship between the two which was, apart from its past interface, primarily driven by the emergence of a globalised economic system and China was one of the major beneficiaries of the changing economic order. Gradually the economic ties between the two became multifaceted and what had once begun as trade alone expanded to include finance and investment in the orbit of their economic engagement.

Following 9/11, China replaced the US as a major Arab trade partner after the US administration put several restrictions on trade with the Arab countries. Henceforth the Arab World looked towards China as a new trade destination and as a result, the trade volume which was not more than US\$ 36 billion in 2004 jumped to US\$ 200 billion in 2014.<sup>53</sup>

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sovereign fund from East Africa to China. Since early 2000, the town of Yiwu, the largest small commodity wholesale market in the world, as designated by IMF, has witnessed an unprecedented growth of the Arab trader community and today the town is thronged by around 200,000 Arab traders every year while its local population does not exceed two million.<sup>54</sup> The other destinations for Arab traders are Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>55</sup> Today Yiwu's streets are bustling with Egyptian, Syrian, and Yemeni traders. These flows of Arab traders to the markets in China are well reciprocated by Chinese traders as a significant number of Chinese traders, both men and women can be seen arriving at Dubai's airport to fly onward to meet clients in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Chinese traders in the old city of Damascus in Syria can be seen setting up several small offices to trade in cotton and textile.<sup>56</sup> Chinese traders in large numbers also visit the Arab World as the number of Chinese travelling abroad has risen from 10.5 million to 41 million between 2000 and 2007 and Arab nations have a significant share in this growth. Muslim and Arab matchmaking sites like *Love Habibi* have a special section for Chinese Arabs and one single glance at their profile will convince one that they are recent trade migrants to China, mainly from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> Today Arab markets from Cairo to Dubai are flooded with Chinese goods.

Oil accounts for around 40 percent of the bilateral trade between Arab and China.<sup>58</sup> In recent years China accounts for nearly 40 percent increase in global consumption of oil and the Arab World accounts for nearly 28 percent of these enhanced exports of oil to China.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, China became the biggest oil importer in the world and one-half of the supply was coming from the Arab world alone.<sup>60</sup>

In 2018 only, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Oman were second, fourth and fifth largest crude oil suppliers to China respectively and then trade volume between China and the Arab World stood at around US\$ 244.3 billion.<sup>61</sup> In the same year, the Arab World stood to receive the second highest Chinese investment and by 2019, total Chinese investment in the region was at the tune of US\$ 177 billion and around US\$ 70 billion of it flowed to GCC countries.<sup>62</sup> International energy agency has reported that by 2035, oil export from the region to China will be doubled<sup>63</sup> as 65 percent of world-proven oil wealth is in that part of the world. Today Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq, Kuwait and Libya and UAE are among the top fifteen oil exporters to China.<sup>64</sup> China's most productive upstream activities are located in Iraq with Chinese National Petroleum Corporation holding substantial stakes in several large oil fields in Rumayla, Halfaya and al-Ahdab. Recently China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Company won a deal with a Russian company to provide front-end engineering and design service on Eridu in discoveries in Southern Iraq.

Today almost every state in the Arab World is keen to receive Chinese investment and what allures them towards the Chinese investment and pursuit of economic engagement is China's traditional policy of neutrality and non-intervention in its foreign policy which is likely not the case in the Arab World's engagement with the Western countries. For the Arab autocrats, China today has emerged as the

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best bargaining chip to resist the Western pressure on human rights and democracy and Chinese silence on the killing of Khashoggi is a case in point. The Arab rulers have a realisation that their worldview is more in concurrence with China rather than old-age Western friends. What further attracts the Arab World towards Chinese investment is the Chinese treatment of its trade partners as equals and not as colonial proxies. China has always stayed on good terms with regional conflicting parties (Iran and Saudi Arabia) as it never involves in harming or provoking third parties.<sup>65</sup> Today the term “strategic partnership” has become a defining theme of the relationship between China and the GCC countries. Unlike in the past when many free trade agreements between China and the GCC countries failed to make any headway because of Saudi Arabia’s veto in pursuit of its regional hegemony and endeavours to ostracise the growing size of other Gulf economies like Qatar or UAE, China now freely engages with all the GCC countries independent of each other and it is no more a case when any agreement with single GCC country virtually requires the unanimous approval of all.<sup>66</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s then Crown Prince Salman (now King) during his visit to China in March 2014 announced that “We are witnessing the transformation of the relationship with China to one of a *strategic partnership* with broad dimensions, to the benefit of both the countries”. During the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in 2016, both sides signed an investment deal worth US\$ 70 billion in energy sectors, petrochemicals, renewable and technology transfers. A major chunk of Chinese investment in Saudi Arabia was in the energy sector and between 2013 and 2019 it stood at 33.5 percent of the total value of US investment which

was at worth \$ 6.68 billion.<sup>67</sup> Saudi Arabia-China ties are anchored in energy relations and today it has entered into a new phase. Half of the total GCC's export of oil to China is covered by Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's ARAMCO agreement with China has explored increasing its crude export to China which makes China the largest market for Saudi oil export surpassing Japan and the US for the first time in history. Saudi Arabia could soon overtake Russia to reclaim the title of the biggest crude supplier to China.<sup>68</sup>

After Saudi Arabia, it is UAE which enjoys strong economic relations with China. UAE and Saudi Arabia have emerged as the cornerstone of Chinese economic policy in the Arab World as 60 percent of Chinese trade to Africa and Europe goes through the UAE alone.<sup>69</sup> In Dubai, the building of China-Middle East Investment and Trade Promotion Center is situated in an area of around 150,000 square meters. There are 3,000 Chinese enterprises and representative offices and way back in 2013, there were around 200,000 Chinese expatriates working in Dubai alone.<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, Qatar Gas in September 2018 signed a 22-year deal with Petro China International Company, a unit of Petro China Company, to supply China with around 3.4 million tons of LNG annually.<sup>71</sup> After China started its drive against air pollution, it has overtaken South Korea as the world's second-biggest buyer of LNG and Qatar

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is one of the potential suppliers of it.<sup>72</sup> Qatar is the second largest provider of natural gas to China and two major companies, Qatar Energy and Sinoper Group from Qatar and China respectively are involved in this transaction. Doha Sovereign Wealth Fund has invested heavily in real estate in mainland of China and in other joint ventures and Qatar was the first GCC country to offer Yuan-dominated transactions with China.<sup>73</sup> Gulf monarchies have been the major source of construction project contracts for Chinese firms such as those for Qatar's Lusail Stadium – the lead venue for the 2022 FIFA World Cup – and Saudi Arabia's Yanbu Refinery and high-speed rail line that connects Jeddah with holy cities of Mecca and Medina.<sup>74</sup> For Omani oil, China is the biggest market and Chinese companies are the biggest investors in the Omani port of Duqm and Muscat but Oman has also granted the US military access to facilities in both places. In August 2022 alone, China accounted for 84 percent of total Omani oil export with India having 10 percent shares followed by Japan and Thailand with 4 percent and 2 percent respectively.

It is estimated that by 2025, around 75 percent of China's trade will pass through the Strait of Malacca, one of the most important arteries of international trade for Asian and European economies.<sup>75</sup> In order to secure transport between the Gulf and the Strait, China has spent approximately \$1 billion to develop the Pakistani port

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of Gwadar. China is also involved in counter-piracy measures in the Red Sea.<sup>76</sup>

In order to make the economic and political relationship steadier and more institutionalised between China and the Arab World, both sides launched China Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004 when the erstwhile Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Arab League Headquarters in Cairo. The primary objective of the CASCF was to consolidate economic cooperation and establish a mechanism of coordination in the foreign policy between China and the Arab states. Under the CASCF, a financial consortium between the Arab and Chinese banks backed by a US\$ 3 billion fund has been established to facilitate this development with a specific focus on oil, gas, nuclear and clean energy.<sup>77</sup> At the sixth ministerial conference of CASCF in June 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined his “1+2+3 strategy in White Paper”—a comprehensive strategy aimed at upgrading Sino-Arab economic ties in the areas of energy, trade, and investment, as well as in three new sectors (nuclear power, aerospace technology, and new energy). Both the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road initiative and the 1+2+3 strategy emanates primarily from Chinese geo-economics—not geopolitical—considerations.



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In comparison to the GCC, the volume of China's trade with the African Arab countries is far less. The trade volume between China and Egypt was US\$ 12.2 million in 1954, 452 million in 1995 but in successive years witnessed a major surge as it reached US\$ 10 billion in 2013 and in 2020 US\$ 4.5 billion

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In 2016, China was the source of the largest FDI in the Arab World with a volume of worth US\$ 29.5 billion.<sup>78</sup> China, which accounted for one-third of the FDI, was followed by the UAE and the US in terms of FDI in the Arab world and according to the report of Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corp, 31.9 percent of total FDI in the Arab World in 2016 had come from China.<sup>79</sup>

In comparison to the GCC countries, the volume of China's trade with the African Arab countries is far less. The trade volume between China and Egypt was US\$ 12.2 million in 1954, 452 million in 1995 but in successive years witnessed a major surge as it reached US\$ 10 billion in 2013 and US\$ 4.5 billion in 2020.<sup>80</sup> For eight consecutive years, China remained Egypt's largest trading partner and trade volume between the two increased by 37.3 percent year on year to reach US\$ 19.8 billion, to which China's imports from Egypt were US\$ 1.71 billion with an increase of 85.2 percent year on year.<sup>81</sup> In the first three quarters of 2021, China's direct investment amounted to US\$ 223 million, an increase of one hundred fifty percent from the last year and this investment is reported to generate employment for 40,000 youth from Egypt in variable sectors.<sup>82</sup> Since 2018, China has primarily invested in reviving the textile industry by developing Egypt's largest textile industrial park, which would house more than 592 Chinese textile and apparel factories.

The park will be part of Egypt's Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ), which will in turn give Chinese companies a base from where China could export duty-free clothes to the US and EU markets.<sup>83</sup> Both China and Egypt are involved in an electricity project where China is helping Egypt with producing energy through renewable energy and the contribution of renewable energy in the production of electricity would increase to 20 percent by 2022 and would be 42 percent by 2035. China is also involved in establishing the world's largest solar plant station (Benban Solar Energy Park) in the city of Aswan.<sup>84</sup> China's state-owned Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area (TEDA) has been assigned the contract for developing the Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (SETC-Zone).

## **DEFENCE COOPERATION:** A New Template in China-Arab Ties



China has not only emerged as the biggest oil importer of the Arab World or the largest trading partner or largest investor but over the years, it has also become a major arms provider to the countries in the region. In 2019, for the first time, China expressed its desire to join the US-led Gulf security architecture and later announced that it can join the US-backed Gulf maritime security coalition which is perhaps an explicit sign of its growing

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strategic engagement in the region.<sup>85</sup> China's security ties with GCC countries are primarily confined to joint exercises on counter-terrorism cooperation, sales of some weapon systems, and joint production of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Most of the Chinese weapon supply to the region are constituted by UAVs because the US policy of arms supplies is time and again informed by a severe export restriction on drone sale. Today the only weapon system Saudi Arabia buys from China is UAV. During the visit of King Salman to China in 2017, King Abdul Aziz Centre for Science and Technology signed MoU with China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation to build a factory in the Kingdom to assemble and service Chinese Ch-4 drones for sale in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Iraq and Egypt.<sup>86</sup> This was the only third such facility outside China after Pakistan and Myanmar and it acts as a sale and service facility for other Arab buyers.

In 2016, not long after the visit of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MBS) to China, Saudi Special Forces travelled to Chengdu for a joint training exercise with their Chinese counterpart including an anti-terrorism drill, hostage situations and extreme weather condition drill'. In 2019, two countries held a three-week joint naval exercise as part of training at the Saudi air base to combat maritime terrorism.<sup>87</sup>

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Between 2013 and 2017, China sold military equipment worth \$10 billion – including armed UAVs, precision-guided rockets, and ballistic-missile systems – to the Arab countries and most of the supplies went to Saudi Arabia, Iraq and UAE. In August 2017, China Nuclear Engineering Group Corporation signed an MoU with a Saudi firm to desalinate seawater using gas-cooled nuclear reactors.<sup>88</sup> China’s well-known nuclear project developer China National Nuclear Corp (CNNC) entered into an agreement with the Saudi Geological Survey (SGS) to cooperate with each other to explore and assess uranium and thorium resources.

Saudi Arabia is a potential customer of Chinese satellites and nuclear energy. Today it is eyeing the construction of a commercial nuclear reactor as a source of domestic energy and to use more of its oil for export rather than its use at home. Part 3 of the Chinese White Paper released in 2016 is fully devoted to nuclear energy cooperation between China and the Arab World. Saudi Arabia has already signed an MoU with China to supply nuclear energy for civilian use and Saudi Arabia is expected to get its first two nuclear reactors from China by 2027.<sup>89</sup>

To fulfil the motive of the “digital Silk Road”, a wider spread of satellite technology is another priority of China in the Arab region. The Chinese BeiDou satellite navigation system is commonly used in the region as it has applications in telecommunications, maritime





security, and precision agriculture. Huawei is in agreement with Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to build 5G networks. For Chinese drones, the GCC countries are the biggest market and the Chinese ballistic missiles too are in good demand in the GCC countries whose supply by the US (its principal arms provider) is very often put on hold due to Congress oversight on the pretext of poor human rights record of the Gulf monarchies. Though the US sometime expresses its inability to sell particular defence equipment to the monarchies but tacitly approves GCC's purchase of the same weapons from China.

According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute on global arms transfer between 2016 and 2020, China increased its weapon exports to the Arab World by 7 percent compared to 3.8 percent in the period between 2011 and 2015.<sup>90</sup> Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Iraq are some of the biggest buyers of Chinese arms. Saudi officials had confirmed way back in 2014 that it had bought Chinese Ding Feng-21 ballistic missiles from China. There are growing concerns that such large-scale exports of advanced surveillance technology to the Arab rulers could further reinforce authoritarian regimes in the region.

Between 2009 and 2015, China dispatched nineteen naval escort fleets to the Gulf of Aden and the Somali waters. In 2015, China evacuated around 800 Chinese and other foreign nationals from Yemen taking them by naval frigates to Djibouti to board flights home. In 2019, China conducted counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden by deploying its 31<sup>st</sup>, 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> naval escorts task force to the area.<sup>91</sup> This was the first PLA's operation beyond the Indo-Pacific region. The countries they visited include Djibouti,

Kenya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.<sup>92</sup> The Chinese army is deployed in many countries of the region as a part of the UN Peace Keeping Mission. China was one of the first countries to send its forces to Lebanon in 2006 and in 2008; it sent its vessels to the Gulf of Aden as part of the anti-piracy operation in compliance with a UN resolution.<sup>93</sup> In 2012, China's contribution to the UN Peacekeeping mission in Sudan was 700 and in 2013, its army escorted UN ships that were carrying chemical weapons out of Syria to the island of Cyprus under the aegis of the UN.<sup>94</sup>

Chinese forces are deployed in Southern Sudan, Darfur and Western Sahara since 2015<sup>95</sup> where it has considerable oil investment. In 2018, Sudan sold 23.1 percent of its oil to China alone.<sup>96</sup> As of 2018, China was the largest contributor of forces to the UN Peacekeeping mission in the WANA region with a total presence of 18, 00 soldiers.<sup>97</sup>

Over the years China seems to have altered its policy of complete non-intervention or no-military engagement as its ambassador in UAE told in August 2019 that it would cooperate in the security of Hormuz.<sup>98</sup> China - Russia - Iran joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman in December 2019 may signal that China is ramping up its military presence in and around the Arab region.<sup>99</sup> Today China has a maritime partnership with fifteen countries<sup>100</sup> and has participated in anti-piracy operations and maritime security in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In past, it had launched huge operations to rescue its citizens in Libya and Yemen.

There are reports, according to *Xinhua News Agency*, that China has built an army base in Djibouti which would ease various Chinese missions in the continent of Africa such as peacekeeping,



humanitarian aid, military cooperation, joint exercises, evacuation and protection of overseas Chinese and emergency rescue, as well as jointly maintaining the security of international strategic sea lanes. The construction of an army support base in Djibouti was a break from the past but current Chinese investment in industrial parks and ports might turn out to be a military investment in future. The growing defence pact between China and the Arab World and the presence of Chinese weapons in the armoury of the Arab World has gradually become a source of worry for the US. Michael Mulroy, the top Pentagon official for the region, recently warned that China's efforts to gain influence in the Arab World could impact the defence cooperation between the US and its Gulf allies.<sup>101</sup>

## EXPANDING SINO-MAGHREB RELATIONS



Over the years, China's presence in the Maghreb region (Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria) of Africa has expanded in terms of trade, economic cooperation and investments. In the Maghreb, China has primarily focused on the bilateral relationship with each country of the region and it is also working within the framework of CASCF and Forum on China Arab Cooperation (FOCAC). But still, the engagement between China and Maghreb has remained limited if compared to Gulf nations like UAE and Saudi Arabia. Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, its relations with the Maghreb have, no doubt, diversified but they are still driven primarily by Chinese growing economic zeal like in other parts of the world. The region has been conceived by China as a major entry point to the European markets and other parts of Africa. But the fact remains that despite two decades of deeper economic engagement Europe

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Algeria, also known as “North Africa’s Sleeping Giant” , which is the single largest oil and gas exporting country in the continent of Africa, in recent years, has forged a closer relationship with China.

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still remains the major source of investments for these Maghreb countries and each country in the region has evolved a different mechanism to deepen its economic interaction.

Algeria, also known as “North Africa’s Sleeping Giant”<sup>102</sup>, which is the single largest oil and gas exporting country in the continent of Africa, in recent years, has forged a closer relationship with China. Algeria already has a comprehensive strategic relationship with China and Mao once considered Algeria as a linchpin of the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movement<sup>103</sup> to validate his own revolutionary and ideological claims. The commercial relationship between the two began expanding after the Chinese economy began to boom and subsequently Algeria gradually shifted from its socialist policies of the 1980s towards an open economy. This trend was hindered during the decade-old civil war in Algeria but again saw a new boom at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Apart from CASCF, a significant part of their relationship has been conducted through the bilateral channel. The primacy of their bilateral relationship is anchored into three documents: The Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation (2006); Five-Year Plan for China-Algeria Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation (2014); and the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation under the BRI Framework (2018).<sup>104</sup> On the political front, China has maintained its neutrality on the Western Sahara issue where both of its close allies Morocco and Algeria are entangled for decades.



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The relationship between Algeria and China should also be seen in the larger context of the growing Arab-China relationship within the BRI framework.

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The relationship between Algeria and China should also be seen in the larger context of the growing Arab-China relationship within the BRI framework. What further enhances Maghreb's market value for China is its location between Africa, the larger Arab World and the Mediterranean, and as a vehicle for promoting the success story of Chinese model in its normative battle with Western democracy. China's exports to Algeria since 1995 have increased at an annual rate of 16 percent leading to a trade imbalance in favour of China and in exchange for Algerian exports of oil, Algeria imports machinery and electronic devices, and household appliances from China.<sup>105</sup> Recently Algeria has also imposed some restrictions on Chinese imports to reduce the trade deficit. The majority of Chinese development projects valued at US\$ 70 billion at the present are allocated to the construction of the Algerian foreign office building, Algerian Open House, Sheraton Hotel, Great Mosque of Algeria, the East-West Highway and many other state buildings.<sup>106</sup> All three Chinese giant state enterprises have been active in Algeria for almost two decades.

Algeria is the oldest partner of China in *the Maghreb* but not the only partner because China enjoys a similar level of a good relationship with other *Maghreb* countries like Morocco. Morocco is a signatory to the BRI project that has further deepened the economic ties between the two. The ties between the two in trade, tourism and cultural exchange have progressed in recent years. Chinese

firms have undertaken many developmental projects in Morocco including *Noor 2 and Noor 3* solar parks.<sup>107</sup> Over the years, China has become Morocco's most reliable economic partner in the Maghreb region. Their cooperation has increased in the field of tourism and media sectors. It was during the visit of the Moroccan King, Mohammad VI to China in 2016 when the relationship received a new fillip and new relaxations were introduced in the economic policies of Morocco to welcome more Chinese investments there.<sup>108</sup>

Like Morocco, Tunisia is also a signatory to the BRI project and is eyeing China for its economic investment in infrastructural sectors to fix its infrastructural gaps. The relationship between Tunisia and China is guided primarily under the framework of FOCAC and CASCF similar to that of China-Morocco ties. During the long period of President Bourguiba's rule (1957-87), Tunisia had an estranged or rather antagonistic relationship with China because of Bourguiba's anti-communist and pro-Western policies. But the era of President Zine-el-Abidine Bin Ali ushered in a new phase of the relationship between China and Tunisia. Even after the removal of Bin Ali amid the Arab uprising, China maintained a good relationship with Tunisia and its Vice President visited Tunisia not long after the revolution and an official statement remarked that "China respects the choice of Tunisian people".<sup>109</sup> Tunisia even extended all assistance to China by opening its ports and airports for Chinese vessels and aircraft when it was trying to evacuate its 38,000 stranded citizens in neighbouring country of Libya. As far as deepening of their economic ties are concerned, it has grown substantially over the years but Europe particularly France, still remains the biggest destination of Tunisian exports. In 2017, China



accounted merely for 9% percent of Tunisian imports and there are only ten Chinese Companies operating in Tunisia while there are more than 4000 European companies worth a combined annual turnover of US\$ 12 billion.<sup>110</sup>

Tunisia has shown some keenness to invite FDI from China and tourism, culture, agri-food, renewable energy and automotive sectors are of interest to Chinese investors but the political uncertainty, insecurity and conservative business climate following the Arab uprising are creating hindrances. After entering into the orbit of BRI, Tunisia has signed various agreements with the view to reinforce cooperation with China and to attract Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure sectors. Tunisia has called upon Chinese expertise to develop a solar power plant and plans to develop at least 835-megawatt solar power plants by 2030.

Like Morocco, Tunisia too is seeking to attract Chinese tourists. Chinese tourism in Tunisia had increased substantially as 2000 tourists visited Tunisia in 2016 and the number jumped to 15,000 in 2018. In 2018 as a part of Tunisia's entry into BRI, two sides agreed to begin direct flights to expand the tourism industry. For its military hardware, Tunisia largely depends on France but in 2013, it received a US\$ 8 million worth grant from China to buy Chinese arms to combat growing terrorism and other illegal activities on its border.<sup>111</sup> It is a fact that the imprint of China's presence in Morocco and Tunisia is increasing but it cannot match the level of engagement that these two countries have with the US or European countries because of various linguistic and cultural issues.

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China established its diplomatic ties with Libya in 1978 and since then the ties have remained cordial barring occasional digression.

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China's growing economic and trade relations in the Maghreb are mainly driven by the BRI initiative and the same holds true for Libya. China established its diplomatic ties with Libya in 1978 and since then the ties have remained cordial barring occasional digression. At the time of the Arab uprising, about 75 Chinese companies were operational in the country<sup>112</sup> valuing around US\$ 20 billion and around 40,000 Chinese workers were on the ground in 50 infrastructural projects. Before the uprising, Libya was providing around 3 percent of Chinese total oil requirement which accounted one-tenth of total Libya oil exports.<sup>113</sup>

Not with standing some early deviation in the bilateral relationship following the uprising, China has been able to maintain a good relationship with all the regimes. After the departure of Qaddafi China took no time to recognise the UN-approved Government of National Accord (GNA) formed in 2015 under the Libyan Political Agreement. China also kept its channel open with opponent of the GNA like the Libyan National Army under Khilafa Haftar which is opposed to many political groups in Libya.

But this decade-old political turmoil in Libya has inflicted a severe blow to Chinese economic interest and despite some level of political stability; it is yet to retrieve the trajectory of the past. Many of the Chinese companies were robbed and looted and their workers were assaulted and injured. The total financial loss China incurred then exceeded US\$ 1.5 billion.<sup>114</sup>





Libya joined BRI in 2018<sup>115</sup> on the occasion of eight ministerial meeting of FOCAC but has not been able to steer it ahead because of the persisting chaos and instability and the absence of a workable political and governing structure in the country. But Libya has always seen China as a country which could help develop its infrastructure. In Munich Security Conference in 2019, a GNA representative openly lauded Libya as a potential gateway for Chinese economic influence in central Africa.<sup>116</sup> As mentioned earlier, China maintained good ties with the Libyan National Army and a delegation from Libyan National Oil Corporation, controlled by Haftar's forces visited China in July 2019 to discuss crude oil purchases and mode of collaboration on exploring and developing Libya's oilfields and services.<sup>117</sup>

## **CHINA-ARAB WORLD: Soft Power Diplomacy**



Apart from growing deeper economic, political, defense and strategic engagement between China and the Arab World over the years China has also focused significantly on deepening cultural ties with the Arab world. The element of soft power diplomacy between the two has played a significant role in taking the relationship to a new level. China is making new efforts to reach out to the Arab World by enforcing and highlighting religious, cultural, linguistic and culinary components of diplomacy in their relationship.

In the eighth edition of CASCF ministerial meeting in 2018, for the first time, Chinese President Xi Jinping focused on the importance of the China-Arab intra-civilisational dialogue and regular roundtable

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to reduce extremism.<sup>118</sup> The roundtable primarily aims to bring together government officials from the Arab governments and their Chinese counterparts to promote intercultural communication and revive the history of the past interaction between the two. In the same meeting, the President had pledged to host young Arab leaders in an innovation program where 200 young scientists and 300 science professionals from across the region would join a workshop in China and the innovation program would also be attended by 100 Arab clergies and 600 senior leaders from Communist Party of China.

The Chinese government has tied many of the BRI initiatives with the cultural and people-to-people outreach platform. Under the BRI, a project has been initiated to translate hundreds of Chinese books into Arabic language and vice versa<sup>119</sup> to promote the cross-learning of Arabic and Mandarin language. Today one can see a lot of Chinese speaking Arabic language with all ease and comfort in different commercial cities spread across China. One such city is Yiwu where the number of Arab traders visiting the city is continuously surging. There are reports that in a single city of Yiwu

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there are around one thousand Arabic translators. Until 1980, there were only two Arabic learning institutes in the city but today the number has reached to hundred with more than 10,000 students registered to learn Arabic.<sup>120</sup>

*Al Jazeera* office in Beijing once reported that while doing their shows, they have no trouble in finding out good Arabic-speaking Chinese, unlike Iran or Turkiye where there is a complete dearth of such talent. *Al Jazeera bureau* in Beijing runs a special show, 'Eye on China' for the Arab audience and very often the anchor can be heard greeting with the word, *NIHAO*, a Chinese word for Hello.<sup>121</sup> Likewise, *Al Jazeera* occasionally airs live interviews of Chinese officials from the West Asia division in the Chinese Foreign Ministry which is very much similar to the Hard Talk show aired on *BBC*.<sup>122</sup> *Al Jazeera* has opened a new line of communication between the Chinese and the Arab capitals and has become an important channel for raising the profile of China in the Arab World.

China is reaching out to the Arab World through its own media outlets with the same zeal and passion. *Xinhua*, a Chinese state news agency has its bureau almost in every Arab capital and its bureau headquarters is based in Cairo, established in 2005.<sup>123</sup> Egypt's prominent weekly *October Weekly* very often carry news item from *Xinhua* news agency to acquaint the Arabs with Chinese domestic affairs and growing China's economic and political engagement in

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The opening of the Arabic department at Foreign Language University in Beijing is another testimony of the growing Arabic language popularity in China.

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the Arab World.<sup>124</sup> Chinese Radio International regularly produces Arabic-language stories for publication in the Arab press. Similarly, Chinese media agencies run several blogs on the Arab World and for the first time, it received the attention of the people when in 2006 Lebanon-Israel war was most talked about issue among the bloggers. The Chinese government encourages its diplomatic corps to learn the Arabic language and today its diplomatic corps is heavily populated with Arabic speakers.<sup>125</sup>

The opening of the Arabic department at Foreign Language University in Beijing is another testimony of the growing Arabic language popularity in China. One can see thousands of sites offering jobs to Arabic translators in several Chinese export companies. During his visit to China in July 2006, the King of Saudi Arabia was amazed to see the fluency of the host in the Arabic language and it was highlighted that they spoke the sophisticated language and did not use slangs.<sup>126</sup>

It is not only China that is promoting the learning of the Arab language but the Arab World too is equally showing enthusiasm towards the promotion of the Chinese language. For instance, Saudi Arabia has decided to integrate the Chinese language as a part of its educational system. The decision was taken following the visit of Saudi's Crown Prince to China in February 2019. Under the MoU, it was decided that a group of Arab teachers would regularly visit



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The philosophy of Confucianism has been further utilised as a soft power element to bring these two entities closer. Many Chinese philosophers have drawn analogies between global Islam and Confucianism.

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China to learn the Chinese language to impart it back to Saudi students. Some journalists like Salman Al-Dosari has interpreted this decision as an effort to forge a deeper alliance and to control the global economy.<sup>127</sup>

China, in recent years, has made a series of efforts to create a novel template of bilateral ties with the Arab World. The establishment of the China-Arab Research Centre on Reform and Development at the Shanghai International Studies University in 2017<sup>128</sup> is one such example. The President of the Chinese Islamic Association, Hassan Yang Faming informed that recently China sent 40 students to different Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt and some of them participated in recitation competition held in Saudi Arabia.<sup>129</sup> In 2019, *Al-Ahram*, an Egyptian Arabic Daily published an article in which the Chinese Islamic Association celebrated the exchange program organised with the Al-Azhar University in Cairo.<sup>130</sup>

The philosophy of Confucianism has been further utilised as a soft power element to bring these two entities closer. Many Chinese philosophers have drawn analogies between global Islam and Confucianism and a series of conferences have been organised in China in recent years highlighting the exchange between Islam and Confucianism.

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There are 12 Confucius institutions in the region, six of which are in the continent of Africa (two in Egypt, three in Morocco and one in Sudan) and the other six are in the Gulf and Levant regions.

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There are 12 Confucius institutions in the region, six of which are in the continent of Africa (two in Egypt, three in Morocco and one in Sudan) and the other six are in the Gulf and Levant regions: one in Bahrain, one in Lebanon, two in UAE and two in Jordan.<sup>131</sup> Dubai Confucius Institute opened in 2011 and has the largest number of students enrolled there. One observer pointed out that growing economic ties between the two countries are forcing each other to know not only politics or geography but history and culture as well. According to the same observer, the two most famous statements in the world today are ‘I love you and Made in China’.<sup>132</sup> Maryam, an Emirati, works in tourism sector in Fujairah who drives for three hours three times a week to attend the Chinese language class. She once remarked, “After 10 years, Chinese will be the most useful language for the tourism industry in the Arab world”.<sup>133</sup>

Confucius Institutes are perhaps the most visible element of China’s “Soft power” initiative not only in the UAE but across the Arab World. Lebanon was the first country in the Arab world to establish a centre for the Chinese language in 2007 at St. Joseph University in Beirut with the joint collaboration of the Chinese government and the Confucius Institute. It was also the first Chinese language and cultural institute in the Arab world.<sup>134</sup>

The Chinese soft power diplomacy is not only limited to the promotion of Arabic and Chinese language or the spread of Confucianism in the Arab World but there are other activities such



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In pursuit of crafting a new narrative for the Arab audience and discredit the stories about the repression in the Xinjiang region, Islamic Association works to delegitimise the link of Uyghur Muslims with Arab Muslims.

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as the establishment of many Islamic associations by the Chinese government which function like mouthpieces of the government to counter the allegation levelled against China for its treatment of the Muslim minority. The first such Islamic association in China was established in 1953<sup>135</sup> with Burhan Shahidi as its first president who was then the governor of Xinjiang province. It was a time when local Islamic religious courts were being replaced with the People's Court. The Soviet attack on Afghanistan and subsequent Chinese-Soviet hostility also expanded the scope for China to pursue a Muslim-friendly policy across the Arab World. The Foreign Ministerial Level Meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Islamabad in 1980 was exploited by the Chinese Islamic Association to create an anti-Soviet view and opinion in the Islamic world.<sup>136</sup>

In pursuit of crafting a new narrative for the Arab audience and discredit the stories about the repression in the Xinjiang region, Islamic Association works to delegitimise the link of Uyghur Muslims with Arab Muslims. The task of these Islamic associations is to advocate the uniqueness of Chinese Islam and to show how the pluralist and moderate Islam of China is under threat from external influences.

The association also endorsed the Religious Regulation Act of China passed in 2006.<sup>137</sup> The Association is so powerful that it has passed an order which says the architecture of Chinese mosques

should not resemble Arab architecture or design.<sup>138</sup> According to a report published in Kuwaiti Arabic magazine, *Al-Mujtama*, the organisation is planning to impart socialist and Chinese cultural values in the Chinese mosques for prayer holders.<sup>139</sup>

Since 2016 under Xi Jinping, a new campaign has been launched to practice local Islam which aims to reduce all links between Chinese Islam and Arab Islam which is more shaded with the philosophy of political Islam. In August 2019, President Hassan Yang Fammong of the Islamic Association held a meeting with the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, to discuss the Hajj pilgrimage.<sup>140</sup>

Hajj is another element of public diplomacy or soft power approach to reach out to the larger Arab World and even this part is taken care of by the Islamic Association. It is the association which is looking after the provision of Hajj since 1955. In 1984 around 14,000 Chinese visited Mecca for performing Hajj and in 1987, the figure reached 20,000.<sup>141</sup> During the Hajj, senior officials of the association meet higher officials in the Kingdom to rebuke the anti-Chinese campaign, particularly with regard to the hostile situation for Muslims in the country and the state of religious freedom in China.<sup>142</sup> As part of the projection of its soft power diplomacy, China, from time to time hosts different kinds of exhibitions highlighting Arab food and calligraphy. In the town of Ningxia, an Islamic food expo and an Arabic calligraphy exhibition were held.<sup>143</sup> The Han officials and scholars there view indigenous Muslims ( Hui ) culture as a magnet for Arab tourists and investors and the support of the Chinese government for this display is a major boost for local tourism as well.<sup>144</sup>





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Since the launch of BRI in 2013, religious soft power has been used more rigorously by the Chinese government to boost its relationship with the Arab and Muslim world as well as Muslim-dominated nations of Central Asia.

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Over the decades, more than a hundred restaurants serving the Arab cuisines have sprung up in the town of Yiwu and some of the restaurants showcase the belly dancing show - one of the most popular Arab dances. Many restaurants serve Lebanese food and many Chinese women can be seen in the restaurants owned by the Arabs.

The first major display of soft power diplomacy vis-à-vis the Arab world on part of China was during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. One of the showstoppers was designed as a tribute to the legendary Seven Voyages of Admiral Zheng. Admiral Zheng was a fifteenth century Muslim commander who built and sailed the Ming dynasty armada of treasure ships on several voyages to the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the east coast of Africa and Arabia.<sup>145</sup>

One of the most entertaining examples of Islam's appeal in Chinese popular culture in recent times is the enormous affection for Afanti - the legendary Sufi folk hero who is also known as Mullah Nasreddin in Turkish and Persian or Goha in Arabic.<sup>146</sup>

Since the launch of BRI in 2013, religious soft power has been used more rigorously by the Chinese government to boost its relationship with the Arab and Muslim world as well as Muslim-dominated nations of Central Asia. Under the auspice of the Muslim World League, a wealthy Saudi religious and charitable organisation,

thousands of mosques have been built in China. A number of private Arabic or Sino-Arabic schools have opened all over the country. There is a substantial growth in Muslim/Arabic teaching in the country.<sup>147</sup> They often go by name of Sino-Arabic School, Muslim Culture School, Arabic School, The Right Path School, Muslim Light School of Arabic, School of Hui Culture and many others.<sup>148</sup> The government in China has founded many Quranic institutes that have been established with the support of the Department of Religious Affairs and the Islamic Association of China and they receive major state funding.<sup>149</sup> A brand new Sunni mosque, a blend of Gulf and Central Asian architecture has been built in the town of Yiwu which is attended by around 7,000 Muslims on the eve of Friday prayer. A smaller Sunni Mosque in the Futian market caters to the pious traders and a Hui Imam gives sermons in a mix of Arabic and Mandarin. The prayer times clock in the centre of Yiwu town shows that this small Chinese city is firmly on the spiritual map of Arab Muslims.

## CHINA AND THE ARAB UPRISING



China's growing dependency on external resources and economic expansion over the years is well reflected in its foreign policy transformation. China's political and strategic postures towards the Arab uprising were driven by its pursuit of the protection of its long-term economic and political interests. Amid the turmoil, China also emerged as an prospective alternative to the Western powers when many of the old allies of the Arab World in the Western hemisphere turned their backs or became reluctant to continue their ties based on economic aid and defence cooperation



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In the early days of the Arab uprising, China was seen evading the policy of sharing the street echoes or allying with the mass sentiments because it was not willing to witness the similar protest on its own streets it had witnessed two decades ago.

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because of the growing domestic and political pressure at home. This was also an era when China started to project itself as a power beyond its territory, contrary to its past political conservatism.

In the early days of the Arab uprising, China was seen evading the policy of sharing the street echoes or allying with the mass sentiments because it was not willing to witness the similar protest on its own streets it had witnessed two decades ago. The first reaction at home was in the form of clamping down on the internet service and restrictions on the Google search for terms like Egypt and Jasmine Revolution. It also banned all political protests. Foreign journalists on Chinese soil were asked not to report the protest on the Arab uprising and they were threatened with arrests or cancellation of their visas.<sup>150</sup> They were also asked to seek prior permission before reporting the protest in any part of China. Moreover, China also feared that any replacement of the current regime in the larger Arab World with the Islamists forces would be more supportive of the separatist Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province that would threaten China's national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Further, China did not want to join the global chorus against the human right violation in the Arab world in the name of solidarity with the resistant voices because it would have put

China itself under scanner because of its own poor track record and would have retriggered similar demand for democratic polity in China. What further shaped and determined China's policy towards Arab uprising was its aversion to the replacement of authoritarian regimes with whom China had forged a deeper economic and strategic relationship in recent past and any change in political dispensation would have hampered burgeoning trade and economic relationship.<sup>151</sup>

Over a decade or so, China has invested heavily in the development of oil and refinery sectors in the region which made China opt for a 'wait and watch policy' when the turmoil started in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. China's initial approach was largely confined to the call for the preservation of national sovereignty, non-interference and territorial integrity which broadly reflected China's decade-old policy of peaceful coexistence, laid down by the founder of modern China, Mao.<sup>152</sup> China's initial reaction towards the January 2011 protests in Egypt was informed by its traditional principle because for China any change in the nature of polity would harm the prospect of economic investment and burgeoning trade relationship. It is worth mentioning here that both China and Egypt established strategic cooperation relationship in 1999 and as a result by 2009, there was a tenfold increase in trade volume and Chinese investments in Egypt.<sup>153</sup> China always stood for a stable and secure Arab World as it fulfilled fifty percent of China's oil requirements. China was equally concerned with the growing proximity between transnational Jihadists and Uyghur Muslims of China and there were reports of hundreds of Uyghur Muslims joining the civil wars in Syria and Iraq.<sup>154</sup>



Similarly, its stance in Libya and Syria was determined by its economic profile, concerns for the security of its citizen, growing risk to its economic and commercial interests, emerging security vacuum and political instability in the region. These concerns were obvious when one sees its divergent stance on Libya and Syria. China's realisation of not gaining anything but losing everything by abstaining from the UNSC resolution altered its decision on Syria where it vetoed along with Russia a resolution condemning the regime of Syria. In Syria, China had major stakes in two of the big refineries and before the uprising, it had made significant investments in other major infrastructural projects which might have like Libya shaped its policy in Syria.

China's old historical economic and defence ties with Libya were the reasons for China's lukewarm response to the democratic movement there and later condemnation of the removal and killing of Qaddafi in a NATO-led operation. China also sought the protection of its huge economic projects from the Transitional National Council (TNC) and China reportedly lost worth US\$ 20 billion due to the sudden departure of Qaddafi from the political scene.<sup>155</sup> China had to evacuate its 35,000 nationals amid the political chaos following the killing of Qaddafi and later China suffered major economic losses when many of the Chinese companies were looted, and its workers were assaulted and injured and the total financial loss China incurred then had exceeded

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China's old historical economic and defence ties with Libya were the reasons for China's lukewarm response to the democratic movement there.

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around US\$ 1.5 billion as mentioned earlier. China's abstention in the UNSC vote on Libya was largely criticised by Arab and Western countries and many dubbed it as an act by an irresponsible power.<sup>156</sup> In an interview, Lu Shay, Director General of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Africa Affairs Department warned against NATO intervention in Libya and said that it was a thinly veiled gambit to restore waning Western influence in Africa and it fears that Western military intervention in the crucial energy market could eventually restrict its access to oil and gas.<sup>157</sup> Chinese officials also argued that the US and NATO's rhetoric of "human rights", "responsibility to protect" and "democracy" was nothing but a fig leaf for regime change to serve Western interests.<sup>158</sup>

Unlike in Libya, China pursued a policy of diplomatic activism in Syria and never hesitated from opening channels of communication with Syrian opposition leaders. An opposition delegation, the "Syrian National Commission for Democratic Change" visited China in September 2012<sup>159</sup> at the invitation of its foreign ministry despite vetoing a UNSC resolution calling for the removal of President Assad and international intervention. In the pursuit of its diplomatic engagement with the changing regional order, China sent a series of delegations to the countries affected by the uprising like Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Iran and Israel.

China in its new incarnation as an international conflict management actor employed a flexible, non-directive and non-coercive approaches that utilised bilateral and multilateral channels and humanitarian assistance in the post-uprising conflict. Further, China had little impact on the conflict except joining Russia to thwart the US-led attempt to oust President Assad from



power when both vetoed series of the UNSC resolutions. China's approach towards Syria in the last decade has been shaped by its long-standing principle of non-interference and preservation of territorial integrity at least in the case of the Arab World whereas the Western powers have more than often pursued the policy of intervention. In 2014 Geneva II Peace Conference, a maiden attempt to bring the government and the opposition together, China consistently opposed every move calling for the global sanction against the government or any referral of President Assad to the Criminal Court. China took part in every initiative ranging from Geneva I to Geneva II to Vienna Peace Talk and welcomed the Astana Peace Process-launched by Iran, Russia and Turkiye.

It was between 2014-2015 when the region in general and Syria, in particular, was exposed to large-scale onslaught of terrorism, Syrian forces along with Russia had gone for a full-blown operation against these forces. During that time Muslims in large numbers from the Xinjiang region travelled to Syria to join anti-Assad Jihadists forces and China was scared of the emergence of a new alliance between Syrian fighters, Uyghurs and Afghan Jihadists as it could pose a severe security threat to China. The fear of growing proximity between radical elements in Xinjiang region and terror outfits from Syria further pushed China to act for strengthening the government of President Assad and President Xi Jinping declared that China would furnish humanitarian assistance worth US\$ 30 million for internally displaced people in Syria.<sup>160</sup>

After some nascent signs of restoration of political stability in Syria, China's official discourse shifted to the reconstruction of Syria and its then ambassador to Syria pledged full support to the

Syrian government in its pursuit of national reconstruction. Along with Iran, Russia, Turkiye and many Arab Gulf states, today China is also in the race to rebuild post-war Syria and today it is part of many of the reconstruction projects. In 2017, it pledged US\$ 2 billion for the construction of an industrial park<sup>161</sup> and hosted first trade fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects. Meanwhile many Chinese business houses started reopening their offices and sending their representatives to Syria to bid for the construction projects. Syria on its part has always solicited Chinese involvement in the reconstruction program and in 2018, Syria's Ambassador to China said that only China can play a leading role in helping Syria realise its reconstruction dream. He also asserted that Chinese companies and businesses would receive priority in the reconstruction.<sup>162</sup>

## MUSLIMS IN XINJIANG, CHINA AND THE ARAB WORLD



Over the years the issue of the treatment of Muslims in the Xinjiang region by the Chinese authority and the apparent ignorance or no-matter attitude on the part of most of the Arab governments has been a focal point of Arab-China diplomatic parlance. China's North-Western autonomous region of Xinjiang is home to around 12 million Muslims who are considered to be culturally and racially different from Hans as Muslims in Xinjiang belong to ethnic Uyghur, Kazakh and Kyrgyz. The region constitutes one-sixth of the country's territory, bordering eight countries is a sight of strategic mineral resources and is a key geographical bridge for China's overland pipelines and transport corridors for energy supplies over potential conflict across the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea or South China Sea.





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The Muslims from Xinjiang have always been conceived to be belonging to the fifth column and gradually their socio-political status is morphed into a rebel force.

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In comparison to Hui, the story of Uyghur Muslims is different and since the defeat of the national party and subsequent usurpation of China by the Maoist forces in 1949, Muslims in Xinjiang very often pursue their separatist agenda with demands for association with Turkmenistan.

The Muslims from Xinjiang have always been conceived to be belonging to the fifth column and gradually their socio-political status is morphed into a rebel force. Today Chinese authorities castigate many of them for their extremist religious views and for showing an inclination toward the imported Arab Islamic ideology and engaging in the Arabisation of Chinese Islam. Even Hans have started complaining about the Arabisation and Islamisation of Chinese society. There are reports that many of the Muslims from Xinjiang have crossed over to fight along with rebel forces in Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and central Asian countries. Some are reported to have joined Turkistan Islamic Party which is facilitating their movement towards Syria and later joining ISIS and other extremist factions.<sup>163</sup> After the bombing of Xinjiang in 2011, for the first time, Uyghur separatists planted a Salafist flag rather than the usual East Turkmenistan flag.<sup>164</sup>

Around 10 percent of Xinjiang's total 12 million population is subjected to acculturation or new socialisation in various detention centres. China's war on terror in Xinjiang constitutes the harshest campaign of forced social re-engineering in the post-Mao period. In 2014, the Chinese authority launched a "Strike Hard Campaign"

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Through this Strike Hard Campaign, Chinese authority imposed unprecedented control over religious education.

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against violent terrorism<sup>165</sup> to reform their socio-religious thoughts in general and moderate their religious orientation in particular. There are reports that around 5000, ethnic Uyghur Muslims from China are fighting various extremist factions in Syria against the regime and significant numbers of Muslim youth from Xinjiang region are reported to have fled to Iraq to join various militia groups.

Through this Strike Hard Campaign, Chinese authority imposed unprecedented control over religious education and permission for religious education introduced in 1980 was once again under the state scanner in 1996 after the trouble with Uyghur Muslims began.<sup>166</sup> In recent years, the number of internment camps have doubled and there are reports of harsh population control measure, forced abortions and sterilisation and forced IUDs.<sup>167</sup>

Amidst all these criticism and condemnation of Chinese brutality against the Uyghur Muslims in the region of Xinjiang, what has come as a surprise is the appalling silence of the Arab/Muslim governments over an issue that has caused rage among the governments and human rights agencies across the world. In the past, these Arab rulers and autocratic regimes have expressed their concerns over communal strife, religious discrimination or ethnic genocide such as in the Balkan region, Palestine, Myanmar, Kashmir and other parts of the world but in the case of brutality against the Muslims in Xinjiang region, most of the Arab leaders have either endorsed the action of Chinese régime or maintained conspicuous



silence because of their political, economic and strategic interests. Heavily dependent on Chinese trade, investment and oil sales, particularly UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have not only remained silent about the reported abuses in Xinjiang but actively praised China's efforts to control its domestic Muslim population. They have empathised with China claiming that they themselves are fighting the war against religious fanaticism.

When China was in the line of fire in the past from major Western powers for human rights abuse against Uyghur Muslims, around thirty-seven Arab countries including UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Algeria, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Pakistan, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia signed a letter on August 9, 2019, to UN Human Rights Council praising the Chinese contribution to International human rights cause.<sup>168</sup> Qatar was the only exception when it refused to sign the 2019 letter addressed to UN Human Rights Council. Except for Qatar none of the Arab countries spoke against the oppression of Muslims in Xingjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) which is home to around 12 million Muslims.

The letter said that China has secured safety and security after facing terrorism, extremism and separatism in Xinjiang province. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohamed Bin Salman not only endorsed the Chinese policy in the region but during his visit to China in February 2019, on reported atrocities against Muslims in Xinjiang said, "Saudi Arabia respects China's right to combat terrorism and take measure to safeguard national security".<sup>169</sup> The same monarchic regime of Saudi Arabia in the rarest example had warned China in 1997 against the violation of Muslim human rights

during ethnic riots in the city of Yining in Xinjiang province in February 1997 when nine Muslims lost their lives.<sup>170</sup>

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in his 2021 visit to Saudi Arabia claimed that the Islamic world was with China and added that some countries were trying to sow discord between them on human rights issues and also remarked that the Islamic world was backing Chinese legitimate position in Xinjiang.<sup>171</sup> Not only this, but the OIC, one of the biggest Arab religious and charitable organisations praised China for taking care of Chinese Muslims.<sup>172</sup>

China's control of its Islamic discourse within and outside China and the story of Muslim treatment through the Chinese Islamic Association are well known. The association is not only committed to project a positive image of the Chinese regime when it comes to its encounters with Islam or its interactions with the Muslim community but also tries to moderate the imported puritanical version of Islam and look after the miscreants.<sup>173</sup> When Mohammad Bin Salman as a Crown Prince visited China in 2014, members of the association took him to different mosques in Beijing which subsequently resulted in a donation of US\$ three million by Saudi Arabia for the construction of an Islamic and Cultural Centre in China.<sup>174</sup> Today China's radical anti-extremism strategies pose a dilemma for Arab leaders. The silence of the GCC nations and other Arab leaders may undermine the credibility and legitimacy of their

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claims to defend their larger Muslim *Ummah* but they have chosen to remain quiet given their growing economic, political and strategic interests in China. Moreover, even if these Muslim countries stand up to the plight of Chinese Muslims, it is unclear what it would entail for them and what exactly the Arab leaders would gain in exchange for condemning or criticising the Chinese regime.

## BRI AND THE ARAB WORLD



One of the most significant diplomatic and economic engagements for China in the twenty-first century is the launch of the new Silk Road Project, very often dubbed as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The ‘Belt’ (the Silk Road Economic Belt) stretches from Western China to Europe via Central Asia. The ‘Road’ (the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road) links China to Europe via the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.<sup>175</sup>

The project would connect Europe and the Pacific through a series of transcontinental and transoceanic networks that would run across the major Islamic/Arab countries of Africa and Asia. China is using the slogan of BRI to describe the Silk Road Economic Belt (the overland route through Central Asia and West Asia) and Maritime Silk Road (the sea-land joining the Pacific and Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean). The scope of the BRI is very broad covering almost seventy-two countries with six huge economic corridors: The New Eurasia Land Bridge; the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor; the China-Magnolia-Russia Economic Corridor and the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic

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Over the last two decades, amidst its economic rise and its subsequent growing reliance on Arab oil and gas, China started seeing the region as a focal point of its strategic outreach.

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Corridor.<sup>176</sup> Of the six BRI corridors, the West Asian corridor is the most critical for China because it acts as a gateway to Chinese connectivity with Europe and the Mediterranean Sea.

The plan was first revealed in 2013 during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesia and Kazakhstan. The BRI signals a new emerging trend in China's foreign economic policy and has been described by China as the third round of China's opening after the development of the Special Economic Zone in the 1980s and accession to WTO in 2001.<sup>177</sup> The total cost of the BRI is expected to be somewhere between US\$1.2 to 1.3 trillion.<sup>178</sup> Many sources have highlighted that BRI includes sixty five countries, 4.4 billion people, about forty percent of the global GDP and seventy percent of the world's energy.<sup>179</sup>

Over the last two decades, amidst its economic rise and its subsequent growing reliance on Arab oil and gas, China started seeing the region as a focal point of its strategic outreach. This new Chinese outreach also coincided with Arab's eastward movement in search of new allies after the apparent signs of US disengagement from the region, most visible during last decade of Arab turmoil after its decades-old economic, strategic and diplomatic presence in the region.

The BRI inspired neo-globalisation template is the core of China's strategy to expand its reach and influence throughout the Arab



market. Definitely, the launching of the BRI and the Middle Eastern Corridor will provide wider scope and greater potential for China but at the same time, the countries in the Arab World have high economic and geopolitical stakes in China's BRI projects. Many countries in this region supply oil and natural gas and China is also the largest trading partner with many countries in the region. Over the years Sino-Arab trade volume has increased 17-fold from US\$18 billion to US\$312 billion.<sup>180</sup> In 2010, China replaced the US as the region's largest trading partner. To many Arab countries, the Chinese promise of an enormous infrastructure and investment program has become quite attractive. This is due to the fact that most of these countries in the region have slow economic growth as a result of falling oil prices and the existing political instability and poor governance.

Chinese companies have already been involved in major construction work in the region. For the purpose of steering the BRI further, China created AIIB, where it has fused the US\$ 100 billion.<sup>181</sup> The Bank has been joined and endorsed by the majority of the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) countries that are members of the BRI. Similarly, the New Silk Road Fund worth US\$ 40 billion has been created by China to promote private investments along the BRI which has already begun joint endeavours in the region such as power projects in Egypt and UAE. Over the years, the economic relationship between China and countries in the region is increasing and more importantly, we can see currency swap agreements signed between the People's Bank of China and central banks in the region.<sup>182</sup> To felicitate the BRI and it would also help in the internationalisation of Renminbi (official name of Chinese

currency) A Chinese bank signed this agreement for a local currency swap worth US\$ 2.6 billion in 2016.<sup>183</sup>

During Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt in January 2016, he outlined plans to provide US\$55 billion in loans and investments for infrastructure projects in the Arab World. The AIIB backed by its US\$100 billion capital, was designed to be the principal source of funds. Qatar has established a US\$20 billion investment fund for bilateral projects, while the UAE is setting up a US\$10 billion joint sovereign wealth fund.

Apart from the obvious economic importance of China to the region, there are two key reasons why Arab states are showing such interest in the BRI. Firstly, these countries — most notably the Gulf states — occupy a key strategic position with regard to both the land and maritime routes. The second is that with the decline of fossil fuels now firmly on the agenda, they need to diversify their economies with some alacrity; Saudi Arabia is the most compelling example. The Arab states have propelled the development of other forms of economic investments for infrastructure development to sustain their economies and diversify their trade.

In 2019, China signed agreements with twenty one WANA countries including 18 Arab states to join the BRI project.<sup>184</sup> The region's soaring interest in China was also highlighted in the 2016 when the China -Arab Policy Paper laid out a detailed plan of strategic cooperation between China and the Arab world. Being an Arab Policy Paper, it ignored the non-Arab states of the region like Iran and Israel. The foremost objective of China in the region has been to dissociate trade and economics from the complexities of





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The 2016 visit of President Xi Jinping to three major countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran) was primarily to promote BRI and during this visit, he announced US\$ 55 billion in loans (commercial and preferential) and additional investments in the region.

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regional politics, whereas one of the BRI's defining characteristics has been the deployment of economic tools to serve strategic and political purposes.<sup>185</sup>

The 2016 visit of President Xi Jinping was primarily to promote BRI and during this visit, he announced US\$ 55 billion in loans (commercial and preferential) and additional investments in the region.<sup>186</sup> During this visit, China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with all three countries and later signed an MoU with other Arab countries to make them part of the BRI. The Arab World has indeed received significant attention in the 2016 China-Arab Policy Paper. Under BRI, China has increased its economic ties with the region. According to one report, the Arab World would receive twenty four percent of the total BRI investment.<sup>187</sup> Further, the Arab World has been attracted towards the BRI because of the weakening revenues from the oil sector and ongoing turmoil and continuing instability.

Under BRI, China will export labour and technology to the Arab countries and will strengthen education sectors and people-to-people exchange. Chinese companies like HUAWEI and ZTE have already set up new branches in the region which is expected to increase investment in future.

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One should also understand that BRI does not stand to benefit all the countries in the region equally given their economic condition, resource endowment and their geographical and strategic locations.

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The Arab World is situated at the heart of the BRI not only as a convergence of three continents but also the Arabian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Caspian Sea and Black Sea converge in the region. The maritime strategic channels like Hormuz, Man dab, Bosphorus and Dardanelles also fall in the same region. Likewise, the Levant as a subset of the region is of vital importance to China's BRI project because it is connecting route between Asia, Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean. The Levant region offers an alternative route through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea through the China -Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor.<sup>188</sup>

One should also understand that BRI does not stand to benefit all the countries in the region equally given their economic condition, resource endowment and their geographical and strategic locations. China has invented many small and big tools to promote the BRI in the region which include monetary linkage, deeper investment and enhanced trade relations. China is stepping up its investment, joint ventures, grants and bilateral lending (in the form of commercial and low-interest preferential loans with long-term payback periods) to the region through Chinese policy banks. Under the BRI, Chinese investment in the fourteen countries of the region reached US \$136.2 billion in the period until 2016.<sup>189</sup> It has also signed a local swap currency agreement with Qatar, UAE and Egypt.



China has already launched many mega projects in the region which converge very well with the Saudi Vision 2030 development program launched by Saudi Arabia. The alignment of Saudi Vision 2030 and BRI have a high level of synergy which indicates the growing significance and influence of China in the West Asian region. For sure, the oil trade is the pillar of this relationship between the two nations and the Kingdom's desire to upgrade its infrastructure has proved to be beneficial for China.

Many times, both sides have claimed that the convergence between BRI and Saudi Vision 2030 will help in enhancing the military ties as well. In 2017 Saudi Arabia's King Salman visited China and extended full support to BRI and in exchange, China too endorsed Saudi Vision 2030 and expressed its willingness to help Saudi Arabia diversify its economy.<sup>190</sup> Many Saudi scholars and commentators have analysed the convergence between the Saudi Vision 2030 and the BRI to highlight the interconnected investment projects as the key feature of both the countries.

Similarly, Neom mega city creates another kind of synergy between Vision 2030 and the Chinese Digital Silk Road (DSR 2015) which have paved the way for further Chinese inroads into Saudi Arabia. HUAWEI has been a big part of the DSR story in Saudi Arabia which has signed five agreements with Saudi companies focusing on buzz word of the day, "smart".<sup>191</sup> Major projects under BRI with Saudi Arabia are investments in the energy sector and trade cooperation and the volume of trade between the two is US\$ 51 billion. In 2019, Saudi oil exports to China surpassed that of Russia and China over the years has invested heavily in the geological survey in Saudi

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The ports and industrial parks have been central to many of the Chinese projects in the region which would create an economic chain linking China to the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean.

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Arabia. Saudi Aramco and Chinese Sinopec in recent past have signed a series of agreements.

The ports and industrial parks have been central to many of the Chinese projects in the region which would create an economic chain linking China to the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean. China back in 2018 had called these industrial parks and port interconnections a two-wheel and two-wing approach which would be a major feature of Chinese presence in the Arab World. The Khalifa port in UAE, Duqm port in Oman, Jizan port in Saudi Arabia, Port Said in Egypt and Ain Sokhna port in Djibouti all form part of Chinese ongoing projects in the region under BRI. Chinese firms are likely to play role in interconnection projects in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Under the BRI framework, China has linked trade with development and has emerged as a major provider of economic aid in the region. To ensure the sustainability of the BRI project, China has developed a direct interest in the stability and security of the region. Through the BRI, China is also providing public goods that can contribute to the Arab World's stability and prosperity.

The BRI has emerged as an important axis of the Gulf-China economic partnership as China has adopted an ambitious plan with a total allocation of US\$1 trillion.<sup>192</sup> China has a strategic partnership with the UAE and it would be the real beneficiary of



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China has a strategic partnership with the UAE and it would be the real beneficiary of the BRI and the project seems to be a catalyst in its shift towards other partners in the region.

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the BRI and the project seems to be a catalyst in its shift towards other partners in the region. The UAE is not only a founding member of AIIB but is very keen to invest in BRI. It is also building a new Arab logistics hub along the BRI route, particularly in the Horn of Africa to preserve its position as an economic power of the region. Businesses in the UAE would be the main beneficiary of any anticipated boosts to economic activity by the developments of the BRI and the major focus of the BRI in UAE is deepening the financial and commercial engagement. The UAE has been well to the fore in broadening its relationship with China. A UAE-China investment fund was established in 2015 and the UAE sees itself as becoming a major financial hub of the region.

Egypt occupies a central position in the BRI being a gateway to the European markets through its Suez Canal which connects the region to Europe. Major project under BRI with Egypt involves China-Egypt Suez economic and trade cooperation zone. China has depended on it as its essential shipping mode to Europe, and around 20–25 percent of the vessels crossing the Suez Canal are Chinese and around 59 percent of the Chinese exchange is through sea transportation.<sup>193</sup> Many of the Chinese companies have already pledged around US \$20 billion in Egyptian infrastructure and obtained contracts for building major portions of the new capital to be established in the east of Cairo. China have listed Egypt as one of the top five destinations for mergers and acquisitions activity

under the BRI initiative. Chinese direct investments in Egypt leapt to US\$260 million in 2017.<sup>194</sup>

China has invested heavily in establishing the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone. Thus for China, it is the only state-level economic and trade zone in the Arab World. Apart from providing jobs and offering training to local technicians, the zone is likely to play an important role in enhancing bilateral industrial cooperation and driving cooperation in investments and financing. The China-Africa Development Bank is partially financing the expansion of the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone.

Apart from Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia, China has taken the BRI to other regional countries like Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Oman, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain and Qatar. Like with the UAE, the major focus of BRI with Qatar is the enhancement of financial and commercial engagement. With Iraq, it is about trade and infrastructure and with Oman, it is more about the development of the industrial zone in Duqm. In Jordan under the BRI, China aims to build a Sino-Jordan University. With Jordan, it also has a strategic partnership and in Kuwait it would establish a Silk City under the BRI project.

The BRI has a huge economic and strategic implication for the region given the declining oil prices, seeping political instability, the emergence of a complex business environment, weakening central authorities across the territories and lack of economic diversification, and all these have limited ruling class's ability to tap the potential for economic growth. The BRI is likely to fulfil the requirement for high-quality infrastructure to accelerate



investment, provide new jobs, and create sustainable economic growth. According to the World Bank, the Arab states need around US\$ 100 billion in investments<sup>195</sup> to maintain existing infrastructure to serve its burgeoning population and the BRI might be of great assistance to the Arab states in this regard.

## THE ARAB WORLD BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA



China's growing presence in the Arab World comes at a time when the US economic and political clout in the region is perceived to be on the wane and European powers seem to have become fatigued with the region. With the 'Pivot to Asia' announced by President Barack Obama and later President Trump's policy of selective engagement in the region, uncertainties are growing about the US security commitments to the Arab rulers. US's past commitment under the Carter Doctrine of 1981 to stabilise the Gulf seems to be diminishing very fast and China appears to be a true alternative to the post-US region because of changing dynamics of the regional politics and the growing economic and strategic worth of China in the new world order. Today many rulers in the Arab World see China as a great asset in the pursuit of diversifying not only its economy but its polity as well in the wake of US's growing disengagement from the region.

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Although the US has been since the time of President Obama quietly reducing its presence in the region -with its new foreign policy dictum of ‘Pivot to Asia’ and ‘Lead from Behind’ – but it is also a fact that it cannot disengage itself from the region as a whole. It needs to maintain its strategic influence over the flow of energy resources so that the ruling elites of the Arab World do not feel insecure in an increasingly fragile and insecure regional order.

Unlike the US, China is not conceived to be a colonial or imperialist power and does not condition its economic engagement in the region to any proposition like the promotion or practice of democracy or respect for human rights and political freedom. This philosophy of Chinese politics always suits the political culture of the Arab World that believes in economic development and the provision of public goods for peace and is least disposed towards democracy. The Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism fascinates many Arab regimes which see cooperation with China as a mean to resist Western pressure to pursue governance reforms and human rights accountability in return for development aid and investment.

China’s pursuit of a policy of non-interference is very much integral to its traditional foreign policy which primarily calls for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and this has its own appeal to the rulers of Arab states. The Chinese model of engagement with the Arab World is likely to impact the US and Europe negatively because China is not for a democratic project but merely is enthused for economic investment and deeper trade relationships. Arab states are now learning the art of capitalising on China as a bargaining chip in their interactions with the Western powers. For instance, only a few months after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi





Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appeared to use his tour of Asia, including China to warn Western powers against any move to put a ban on the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia.

China's standard on the viability of development and economic progress does not converge with the Western countries where the issues of democracy, human right, rule of law and good governance is considered to be highly valuable.

At present China maintains an opinion that its expanding entrenchment in major parts of the Arab World will gradually displace the American decades-long clout. China seems content to reap the economic benefits of stability provided by the US presence and even in the future, it seems comfortable in letting the US take the lead in providing peace and security in the region as long as its own economic interests are not harmed.<sup>196</sup>

The core of the Chinese relationship with the Arab World in the past was broadly defined by its political and ideological principles rather than the present, which are completely anchored into its quest for Arab oil and markets which has largely changed its pattern of engagement with the region.

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World too including the GCC nations are on the path of diversifying their economic, political, strategic and diplomatic engagements instead of relying solely on the US. This new phenomenon has occurred because China is likely to need more and more Arab oil for its new pace of industrialisation and the increasing uncertainty of the Arab-US ties in near future.

China's engagement in the region is no longer confined to expanding its trade and commercial interests but it is transcending these economic and commercial confines and gradually entering into the political domain as well. China has used its political clout in the UNSC to counter many of the Western initiatives in the Arab World. It has blocked many of the West-supported UN actions on Sudan, Syria and Libya.

The nature of the expansion of the BRI in the Arab region and the keenness of the Arab governments has become a source of worry for the US. It is yet to be seen if the Arab World soon turns into an arena of struggle for a new world order between the US and China. There are already indications of the US obstructing China's growing influence in the region. Former President Trump during his stint in office had warned Israel when it had planned to give management of Haifa port to the Shanghai International Port Group. He told both then Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo

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The US also exerted pressure on Egypt to avoid Chinese companies in preparation for the launch of 5G networks in the country. Egypt's imports of arms from France and Russia are not as annoying for the US as from China because of the economic and strategic footprint of China

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and US National Security Advisor John Bolton told Israel to choose between China and the US and similar warnings were issued to the Arab states too against the introduction of 5G in their market.<sup>197</sup>

Egypt, on account of growing pressure, finally succumbed to the US and resorted to Exxon and Nokia, which are members of the US-led coalition, for its 5G technology. Similarly growing Sino-Egypt defence partnership is under immense US pressure as over the years Egypt has diversified its source of arms import and has signed many arms deals with China. The US recently threatened Egypt to invoke penalties on Egypt through the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) if Egypt proceeds with purchasing specific classes of weapons from China or Russia. The US also exerted pressure on Egypt to avoid Chinese companies in preparation for the launch of 5G networks in the country. Egypt's imports of arms from France and Russia are not as annoying for the US as from China because of the growing economic and strategic footprint of China in the region and every new level of engagement between China and the Arab World would amount to a zero-sum game for the US.

Many explain the visible apathy of the US towards the growing brutality of the Arab regimes against the opposition forces in the

light of US fear of losing the regimes and the region both to China which has already made enough inroads in the region. Despite its blockade of military aid after the ouster of President Morsi in 2013, the US never turned its back on Egypt and resumed aid to Egypt at an annual level of US\$ 1.3 billion. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have repeatedly turned to China to purchase drones amidst the refusal of the US to provide them with desired technology. Given the apprehension of deepening China-Arab defence ties, then President Trump threatened to bypass Congress to push the sale of advanced armed drones to Saudi Arabia and UAE.<sup>198</sup>

Despite obvious signs of growing economic, military and strategic engagement between China and the Arab World in recent past, the governments in the Arab World are not oblivious of the limited capability of China. Further Chinese lack of knowledge about the political realities of the region and this understanding on the parts of the Arab leaders have made them manage and sustain their relationship with the US as well. ❄❄



# CONCLUSION





The China-Arab relationship has endured for centuries. Past relationship was primarily anchored in economic spheres on the legendary Silk Road and once again is prospering in the economic sphere. The burgeoning economic relationship of the past had lost its track after the discovery of the Sea route when Europeans replaced the Arabs as a major trading partner. But the relationship founded through trade and travelling continued later also and a new phase of cultural and intellectual exchange in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century provided a new impetus to the bilateral relationship. The visit of a series of Chinese academic delegations and individual scholars to Egypt and other parts of the Arab World and the subsequent translation of various Chinese and Arabic texts into Arabic and Chinese languages brought both sides close to each other.

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, Mao solicited a new level of relationship but failed to receive a desirable response from the Arab leaders. What really prevented the emergence of close relationship were the treatment of communism with deep suspicion and distrust by the majority of the Arab leaders. The atheist ideology pursued by the Chinese regime under Mao was seen as an antithesis to Islamic philosophy and even the emergence of some socialist regimes in the Arab World failed to forge any solidarity with China. China continued with its efforts to receive recognition from the countries of the Arab World which would make it a legitimate player in the international arena. Even the process of recognition of China by the Arab World itself was deeply influenced by the erstwhile politics of the Cold War and that was



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Diversification of the relationship and horizontal widening of the China-Arab diplomatic template. China's growing need for Gulf oil also led China to redefine its past priorities with the Arab World.

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well reflected in the recognition of China by Saudi Arabia only in 1990 and the recognition of Israel by China in 1992.

But it was the economic rise of China and the growing dependency of China on Arab oil in the last decade of the past century, imposed a sort of diversification of the relationship and horizontal widening of the China-Arab diplomatic template. China's growing need for Gulf oil also led China to redefine its past priorities with the Arab World. China's recognition as an emerging global power has enabled it to evolve a comprehensive policy towards the Arab World and later, the demise of the USSR brightened the prospects of China to emerge as a competing non-Western power and this new status of China has been well exemplified in many of the recent stances of China on global issues.

Over the years China has successfully projected itself as an anti-thesis of Western imperialism, exemplified more by politics of intervention and exercise of economic and diplomatic hegemony, which has helped China make a new political beginning with the Arab World. China has an image of a country which distributes wealth without acting as a hegemon and its image of a non-interventionist power also appeals to the Arab leaders who themselves are not so keen to promote democracy and are content with the status quo policy. What has further defined the core of the relationship between the two is that their ties are never informed

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The new wealthy and strong states in the large  
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by the regional, geopolitical, ideological or sectarian divide of the region as in the case with the Western world.

China's economic model has captivated Arab governments in two ways. China, unlike the West, does not believe in linking economic aid for the Arab World to pursue political reform when many Arab officials view economic reform as a Trojan horse for political reforms. Second, the economic rise of China promises a new global order for the Arab World which has suffered on account of multiple Western pressures for decades. For example, Egypt has benefited enormously from Western aid and advice, and yet President Hosni Mubarak was an admirer of China. The economic and military rise of the Arab World over the years has further brought the two sides closer and now both harbour a view that they are together capable of carving out a new global order where the US as a hegemon can be subdued.

The new wealthy and strong states in the large swath of the Arab World already see themselves as trans-regional actors with global influence and they are keen not only to establish a new framework of relationship but learn from China about its model of economic diversification, a mechanism for poverty eradication, creative arts and development of tourism. One can judge the passion and urge of China and the Arab World to forge deeper ties by looking at China's Arab Policy Paper which talks of expanding the circle of cooperation





in fields of infrastructure, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear energy, space, satellites, new energy, agriculture and finance. They are keen to cooperate with Arab countries to push forward a new type of cooperation mechanism based on openness, mutual benefit and mutual gains. What has been witnessed in the recent past is the growing political interest of China in the affairs of the Arab countries and subsequently, its growing defence relationship with the region has transformed the past economic relationship into a strategic comprehensive partnership which is evolving independent of the regional or global order.

What has added a new fillip to the bilateral relationship is the growing application of soft power diplomacy in the consolidation of the China-Arab relationship. To expedite the process of cultural interaction with the Arab World, the Chinese government is promoting the learning of Arabic languages in China and today one can see a lot of Chinese speaking the Arabic language with all ease and comfort in different commercial cities spread across China. Today China has many specialists on Arab political and economic affairs who provide a good understanding of the changing Arab priorities which help China to develop its policies for the region. The historic Chinese project of BRI has surpassed all the past efforts to deepen China-Arab ties and the project is likely to bring political, economic, diplomatic and strategic aspects to their bilateral relationship. Nearly every Arab country in the region has shown

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China has many specialists on Arab political and economic affairs who provide a good understanding of the changing Arab priorities which help China to develop its policies for the region.

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all zeal and passion to be part of the BRI and it is likely to benefit those countries in particular which are desperate to diversify their oil-based economy due to fear of oil losing its economic value in near future.

One also needs to see if the relationship, primarily based on the economic transaction would be able to replace the relationship that has existed between the US and the Arab World for decades as many are claiming that China is intending to replace the US in the region. China and the Arab World do not share the span of political engagement that the Arab-US relationship has. The warmth in the China-Arab relationship is a very new phenomenon and there are few Chinese living in Saudi Arabia and very few Saudis living in China. The possibility of establishment of the US-Arab style of relationship is very nascent because the US had entered into the region as a security provider and China is entering into the region which is different from the past in all its aspects and moreover China's primary focus has been to expand the economic engagement. China will have to deal with a complex mix of the political model in the region like Saudi Arabia and the UAE where the former is a conservative polity and the latter is a polity which is in pursuit of forsaking its past cultural and religious baggage.

One does not know what future this relationship holds if there is an economic meltdown or an unfavourable economic situation

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In China's overseas investments, a key challenge will be transparency and this challenge is further multiplied by the fact that land and maritime routes under the BRI pass through regions with a high level of corruption and weak government.

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arises within the global economic system. Many of the projects and investments China announced within the framework of the BRI have been already abandoned or heavily delayed. It remains to be seen whether the BRI will be able to change the international system in which China must navigate in its engagement with the larger Arab World. In China's overseas investments, a key challenge will be transparency and this challenge is further multiplied by the fact that land and maritime routes under the BRI pass through regions with a high level of corruption and weak governments. Moreover, one should have no doubt that US would have its role to play in making the BRI story a success in the region and one cannot overlook the fact that if BRI contradicts the long-term US interest in the region, the US along with Israel may sabotage it and exert pressure on its regional Arab allies to either abandon the BRI project or make China accommodate the interest of the US as well.

Meanwhile, in areas such as arms sales, Chinese firms are far from being credible alternatives to Western suppliers. One does not know what China can offer to the Arab World except oil and defence hardware as many countries like Saudi Arabia does not need hard cash as long as oil prices remain stable. China lacks security commitment in the region and is not keen to involve in the constantly changing regional order which does not help in tipping the balance between each other.

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In face of any sort of Chinese ascendancy in the region, the US could utilise all its diplomatic and strategic means to prevent China from expanding its role beyond commerce and entering as a strategic and military player.

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There are many other challenges which have the potential to spoil the prospects of strong ties between China and the Arab World. One has no idea for how long can the Arab rulers justify their silence about the Chinese treatment of its Muslim minority in the region of Xinjiang. Similarly one does not know for how long it would be possible for China to act as a fence sitter and not get involved militarily in the chaotic Arab World and just focus on protecting its economic and trade interest. Though China has been in pursuit of the policy of non-intervention since it entered into a burgeoning relationship with the larger Arab world and it has been successful in its pursuit because of the current nature of its engagement in the commercial and economic arena. As its orbit or confines and domain of the engagement widen in the coming months and years, one needs to see how far China succeeds in adhering to its conventional policy and how it evades the choice of either allying with Saudi Arabia or Iran: two contestant hegemonies in the region. As long as the tension between the two Gulf powers remains low, China can evade the politics of alliance or encampment but in case of high-level conflict, it would be challenging for China to remain neutral or manoeuvre in accordance with the past policy dictum.

Another big challenge for the China-Arab relationship would be how to overcome the hegemonic policy of the US in the region. In face of any sort of Chinese ascendancy in the region, the US could



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At the same time, China will have to see whether it has the necessary resources to prevent the sectarian violent and radical forces of the Arab World from penetrating its vulnerable western provinces.

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utilise all its diplomatic and strategic means to prevent China from expanding its role beyond commerce and entering as strategic and military player.

One also does not know how China would respond if there is another wave of revolt against the governments in the Arab World and one cannot predict if China would still remain adherent to its decade-old policy of non-interference or alter its policy and show some involvement in the regional polity. China should also learn from the Arab Spring event that any support to corrupt and unaccountable rulers might adversely impact its economic stakes in the long term.

At the same time, China will have to see whether it has the necessary resources to prevent the sectarian violent and radical forces of the Arab World from penetrating its vulnerable Western provinces. It can be concluded that China is still a new entrant to the region and has a long way to go to establish itself as a trustworthy ally because China happen to be the first generation of actors in the Arab World, unlike the Westerners who are not alien to the region.

Lastly, one thing which can overcome all these internal and external constraints on the China-Arab relationship is a collective assertion of Asian solidarity. There has already been a revival of Third-Worldism along with the belief in “Asia Rising” particularly when

the Arab World has realised that they have been merely looser by their political, diplomatic and strategic engagement with the West for decades. Arab World is already locating its civilisational link with Asia and in course of any assertion of Asiatic identity, China would be an inevitable force and Arab-China Alliance would be a matter of choice, not of compulsion like with the Western powers. ❧❧



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