

For the Commemoration of the 10th Anniversary of
the Founding of China-Arab States Cooperation Forum(CASCF)

Building a New Silk Road: China and the Middle East in the 21st Century



Edited by
SUN Degang & Yahia H. ZOUBIR

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构建新丝绸之路： 21世纪的中国与中东关系研究

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Preface

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), known as West Asia and North Africa, is perceived as the natural extension of China's "great periphery". During the Cold War period, Chinese policymakers perceived the MENA as *Zhongjian Didai* ("the middle ground") between the Capitalist and the Communist camps; China competed with the United States, seen as the imperial hegemon, and later, from the 1960s onward, with the U.S.S.R, depicted as a revisionist, socialist empire. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and, particularly since the implementation of reforms and the opening-up policy of the late 1970s, China's diplomacy towards the MENA has pursued de-ideologized and pragmatist policies. The Communist Party of China (CPC) regards economic and trade relations with the MENA as the key to fighting poverty at home. After a three-decade economic reconstruction, China has established a prominent economic presence in the MENA ranging from infrastructure to energy and investment projects. With the increasing number of tangible commercial interests, China's perception of its role in the MENA is reaching maturity, and has increasingly become one of the key players in the MENA, seeking to build a "New Silk Road" with the Middle East countries.^①

This book volume aims to investigate the evolving China's diplomacy towards the Middle East from interdisciplinary and multi-

① See Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "China's Response to the Revolts in the Arab World: A Case of Pragmatic Diplomacy," *Journal of Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2014, pp. 2-3.

dimensional perspectives. Fifteen articles have been selected from the latest academic journals, including *the Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*, *Bustan: The Israeli Book Review*, etc. The authors have divergent backgrounds, ranging from research fellows, professors, ambassadors and others offering diverse observations of China's Middle East diplomacy and its transformation. The volume covers an Introduction and five Sections.

In the Introduction, Professor SUN Degang from Shanghai International Studies University, China, argues in his article "China's Middle East Studies in Retrospect and Prospect", that since the founding of the PRC in 1949, China's Middle East studies have gone through three stages: the beginnings (1949–1978), growth (1979–1999), and accelerated development (2000–present). Research institutes evolved from state-controlled propaganda offices into multi-dimensional academic and non-academic entities, including universities, research institutes, military institutions, government offices, overseas embassies, and the mass media. Publications also evolved from providing an introduction to and overview of the Middle East states to in-depth studies of Middle East politics, economy, energy, religion, culture, society, and security. Middle East-related research programs — funded by provincial, ministerial, and national authorities — have increased and the quality of research has greatly improved. China has established, as well as joined, various academic NGOs, such as the Chinese Middle East Studies Association (CMESA), the Asian Middle East Studies Association (AMESA, including China, Japan, and South Korea), and the Arabic Literature Studies Association (ALSA). However, Chinese Middle East Studies remain backward, both in comparison with China's American, European, and Japanese studies at home, and with the Middle East studies in the West. The establishment of Chinese research and

teaching centers entails the combination of social sciences and humanities, of general theoretical studies and the study of specific issues, of purely academic studies and policy-oriented studies.

Section One, which consists of five articles focuses on “China’s crisis management in the Arab Revolts”.

First, in the article entitled “the Upheaval in the Middle East and China’s Middle East Policy”, China’s former Vice Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Egypt YANG Fuchang, argues that Arab countries have been faced with a large scale Middle Eastern upheaval, which has attracted the attention of all the Middle Eastern countries and international community. Nearly all the Arab States witnessed upheavals. People have appealed for better social, economic, and political conditions. The problems in the MENA have been accumulating for years, which explains the repeated riots since 2010 expressing people’s dissatisfaction. The unrest has been costly, regardless of the social progress it may bring about in the longer term. At present, Syria has lived through massive destruction; hundreds of thousands have fled the country and are now refugees in neighboring countries. Since the outbreak of the Middle East upheavals, China has adopted a principle of “non-intervention in other’s internal affairs” and “mediating for peace while promoting talks” policy, which is appropriate and proactive. Ambassador YANG insists that China should adhere to this practice in the future despite opposition to and temporary misunderstandings of that policy.

The second article is entitled “China and the Arab Revolts”, in which China’s Special Envoy on the Middle East Affairs and former Ambassador, WU Sike highlights the fact that political changes in the Arab world since early 2011 have had negative impact over China’s interests in the MENA, including those related to its trade with the Arab world, the China-Middle East bilateral investments, its

investment projects, and the safety of its nationals living in the region, whether these influences are direct or indirect, overt or covert. Three aspects are strongly impacted by these negative influences: 1) Libya; 2) Northern and Southern Sudan; 3) Energy supply. The dramatic changes in the Arab world sounded warning signals to China over its national interests in the Middle East, enticing China to undertake a meticulous review of its overseas activities and draw the correct lessons from its experiences there so that practical responses can be worked out. In view of the loss that Chinese corporations have incurred as a result of the Arab political changing landscapes, China should establish its own grand strategy for its foreign relations in order to protect its growing interests overseas.

Third, in the article, titled, “China’s Middle East Policy toward the Arab Revolution”, former Chinese Ambassador to Turkey YAO Kuangyi points out that, due to the upheavals, many Middle Eastern countries experienced regime change, and projected that Syria would be the next target and epicenter of this political swirl. The rise of Islamic forces is a serious problem for these countries in transition to deal with. Because of these disturbances, the Middle Eastern configuration is facing challenges; the contradictions among regional powers have experienced both growth and decline. The adjustment of America’s Middle East policy has affected the trend of the Middle East situation. China’s “non-interference in others’ internal affairs” principle gained the international society’s attention and China’s diplomacy towards the Middle East has opened important opportunities, but it has also faced enormous challenges. Ambassador YAO points out that Beijing should seize the opportunity and seek the new development of China-Middle East relations.

Fourth, in the article entitled, “Political Unrest in the Middle East and China’s Response”, Professor LIU Zhongmin from Shanghai

International Studies University, argues that from crisis management to the overall planning, China's response to the unrest in the Middle East has achieved great success. Today, he argues, China should understand the influence of the unrest in the Middle East by taking the overall international and domestic situations into consideration, namely, understanding its influence as "tests in the external environment" and the changes it causes to the international setting of China: China should review its experiences of coping with the unrest in the Middle East and correct any flaws in its present policies; China ought to work out scientific, mid-and long-term strategies for the Middle East and take measures accordingly. In particular, Beijing should improve its understanding of the strategic position of the Middle East and enhance its participation in Middle Eastern affairs while adhering to its traditional diplomatic principles.

Fifth, in the article entitled "China's Emerging Role in the New Arab World", Dr. Mohammad El-Sayed SELIM, Professor of Political Science at Faculty of Social Sciences, Kuwait University, highlights that the Arab Spring has changed the political landscape in the Arab world. The spring which began as genuine grass-root movement designed to create more equitable social projects, was steered by Western powers and local Islamists in different directions with these powers heavily intervening to control and/or weaken Arab states. China has pursued a policy of non-intervention in the domestic affairs of Arab states, and letting the peoples decide on their own future. China may have miscalculated when it allowed NATO to interfere in Libya which has had catastrophic consequences for China and Libya. Consequently, China, in collaboration with Russia decided not to repeat the same experience in Syria especially that foreign intervention in this case will be even more catastrophic. China vetoed Security Council draft resolutions calling for regime change

in Syria and insisted on letting the Syrians decide peacefully their future course of action. Further, China under the new leadership has suggested for the first time a four-point program to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The article argues that the Chinese-Russian approach to the Syrian crisis is bound to have long-term implications for the future of the Arab world. As the signs of the positive contributions of that approach are emerging, China should proceed to reinforce these contributions through a concerted approach to engage with the new regimes in the Arab world, strengthen the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, correct the imbalances of Sino-Arab trade, especially with the countries of the Arab Spring, focus on investing in these countries in labor-intensive industries, putting the four-point proposal on the agenda of Arab-Israeli negotiations, and most importantly deal with the question of the Israeli nuclear capabilities and the potential of Israel going to war against Israel, a scenario which will represent a major setback to the Chinese achievements in the region.

Section Two, which includes three articles, focuses on “China’s Political and Security Ties with the Middle East”.

The first one is entitled, “On the Strategic Relationship between China and the Middle East Islamic Countries”. Professor ZHU Weilie from Shanghai International Studies University, points out that the relationship between China and the Islamic countries has been of strategic significance; mutual understanding and mutual respect in their political ties has been the mainstream in the bilateral relationship. Since the founding of New China, their relationship has undergone two phases: from bilateral to multilateral relations and from focusing mainly on the political dimension to comprehensive ties in the economic and trade, resources, security, culture and other fields. For future development of bilateral relationships, Professor

Zhu warns that issues such as misjudgment and misunderstanding, trade imbalances, and conflicts of interest must be resolved. To do so, strategic significance must be attached to bilateral relationships in order to uplift the strategic position of the Middle East in the overall Chinese diplomacy, establish a Middle East strategy with Chinese characteristics and strengthen China's cultural diplomacy, including religious exchanges with the Islamic countries in the Middle East.

Second, in the article, "China's Strategic Option: Approach the Greater Middle East through the Eurasian Hinterland", Professor ZHANG Xiaodong from China's Academy of Social Sciences underscores that there is no immediate military threat to China's northwest and north; it is imperative for China to connect quickly with other countries and regions through the development of transport and communication technologies. Particularly, the acceleration of the globalization and innovation of the internet technology has even linked the most remote areas of China with the world. However, the geopolitical factors in the hinterlands of the Eurasian continent still significantly exert a major impact on China's security and development. Therefore, it is crucial for China to make another and even more significant and extensive "Expedition to the West Regions" — to strategically approach the greater Middle East through the hinterland.

Third, in the article entitled, "The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and China-Arab All-round Cooperation", Dr. Muhammad Numan JALAL, the former Egypt Ambassador to China, member of Egypt Foreign Relations Committee, and political adviser for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain argues that the "China-Arab States Cooperation Forum" is an important cooperation mechanism between the Arab world and China. Though the forum has made remarkable achievements since its establishment, enormous challenges