Coexistence with the United States: New Challenges in China's Middle East Policy

与美国共处：中国中东政策的新挑战

The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is an important factor in once-in-a-century global changes. A century ago, a power transition occurred between the UK and the United States, and whether a power transition will happen between China and the United States in the future will become the most closely-watched international political matter of the 21st century. Currently, the United States views China as its biggest strategic competitor, and the situation of full-spectrum, global competition between China and the United States is increasingly becoming a reality. In the Middle East, the United States’ strategic contraction and the expansion of China’s influence demonstrate a trend of “China rising and the United States falling,” and the competition between China and the United States in the Middle East is gradually evolving from a media topic into a serious academic subject. How China and the United States coexist in the Middle East is a real and pressing issue. Changes are occurring simultaneously at global, regional, and bilateral levels, necessitating a new phase in the coexistence model between China and the United States in the Middle East.

I. An Increasingly Tense Global Environment

In May 2020, the U.S. State Department published the United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China, announcing that U.S.-China relations had moved from “engagement” to
an era of “strategic competition.” The 2022 version of the U.S. National Security Strategy directly declared, “The post-Cold War era has ended, and the era of great power competition has begun,” elevating strategic competition with China to the theme of the era for the United States. U.S.-China relations have entered an era of strategic competition, the U.S.-Russia relationship is in a “quasi-war” state, and relations between major powers have never been as tense since the end of the Cold War. In May 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivered a speech on China policy, stating that strengthening the United States domestically, building a network of allies and partners externally, and shaping China’s external strategic environment are the basic paths of U.S. policy towards China. Reviewing the actions of the Biden administration over two years, the U.S. containment system against China can be divided into three major categories: first, establishing a technology alliance with developed countries; second, building a security alliance around China; and third, organizing a loose alliance to weaken China’s influence globally.

The tech war is at the core and forefront of U.S. containment of China, with Western developed countries as its main partners. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy emphasizes, “Technology is at the center of geopolitical competition and a reliable support for U.S. security, economy, and democracy.” On one hand, the United States is enhancing or adding anti-China functions to traditional Western alliances like the G7 and NATO. In June 2022, the G7 Summit for the first time included countries such as India and Indonesia, and comprehensively criticized China’s economic and technology policies. Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor to the White House, called the G7 Summit “a steering committee of the free world.” The United States has some advocates for expanding the G7 to a G12, inviting Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, NATO, and the EU to join. In the same month, the NATO Madrid Summit for the first time invited Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea to attend, declaring China a comprehensive “systemic threat” to NATO. The United States is also forming new alliances in key technology fields. In September 2020, the United States proposed the “Chip Four Alliance,” including the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. In June 2021, the United States led the establishment of the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, which has held two ministerial meetings to date, coordinating positions on issues such as technology standards, investment review, export control, supply chain restructuring, and digital infrastructure. In October 2022, U.S. Deputy Secretary of Commerce Alan Estevez revealed that the United States is consulting with Japan and the Netherlands on a trilateral chip mechanism to coordinate sanctions against China.

Establishing political, economic, and military encirclements is the United States’ geostrategic containment of China, with China’s neighboring countries as its main partners. Beyond traditional bilateral systems such as U.S.-Japan, U.S.-South Korea, U.S.-Australia, and U.S.-ASEAN, the United States frequently builds new multilateral systems. In September 2021, the United States, Japan, India, and Australia held the Quad Security Dialogue mechanism (QUAD) in Washington, engaging in exclusive cooperation in regional security, infrastructure, supply chains, and emerging technologies; the four countries also formed the “Quad Security Dialogue mechanism+” with Vietnam, New Zealand, and South Korea. In the same month, the United States, Australia, and the UK established a trilateral security partnership (AUKUS), with the UK and the United States assisting Australia in
building a nuclear-powered submarine fleet and cooperating in digital security and other fields. In May 2022, the United States launched the “Indo-Pacific Economic Prosperity Framework” (IPEF) with 13 “Indo-Pacific” countries, targeting cooperation in trade, supply chains, infrastructure, clean energy, taxation, anti-corruption, and other fields. In September, the United States held a summit in Washington with leaders from 14 Pacific countries and economies, issuing the “U.S.-Pacific Partnership” statement.

Around trade rules, technology standards, market share, ideology, and other issues, the United States forms alliances globally to weaken China’s influence, serving as a supplementary mechanism in the U.S.’ containment strategy against China. The United States organizes networks of partnerships of various forms and sizes based on different issues, forming very loose relationships with members spread across the globe. In August 2020, the United States launched an expanded version of the “Clean Network” program, mobilizing 60 countries to join, aiming to exclude Chinese technology and products from network construction. In September 2022, the United States held the first “Mineral Security Partnership” ministerial meeting, planning to reduce reliance on China’s supply chain in key mineral areas within 5-10 years. The United States also held the “Global Religious Conference” and “Global Democracy Conference,” representing a looser and vaguer anti-China mechanism.

The competition between China and the United States is becoming increasingly global, with all regions of the world involved in the U.S.’ strategic competition against China, although the degree and manner of involvement differ. Compared to others, the Middle East is less affected and has been passively involved. Geographically, the United States relies on Europe and “Indo-Pacific” core allies, with the Middle East on the periphery; functionally, the Middle East (except for Israel) is not part of the green alliance, the “democracy alliance,” the technology alliance, the Asia-Pacific alliance, or the U.S.-EU alliance. Clearly, in the U.S.’s three types of alliance systems against China, the Middle East ranks third and is in a marginal position.

From the Chinese side, with the unfolding of the global contest between China and the United States, the Middle East’s position in China’s global strategy has once again attracted attention. As early as the Yan’an period, the leaders of the Communist Party of China considered the Middle East as the “middle zone” of the superpower contest, where German and Japanese forces could converge against China, forming a joint encirclement. After 1949, China aimed to “prevent hostile great powers from controlling the Middle East, posing an indirect military threat to China.” In 1987, Deng Xiaoping pointed out: “We care about the situation there (in the Middle East) because it involves the issue of peace and war regarding the prospects of a Third World War. From the perspective of global strategy, we are concerned about the situation and outlook of this region.” After the end of the Cold War, the Middle East was no longer the main battlefield of great power games, and China mainly focused on the Middle East market, occasionally using the Middle East to coordinate China-U.S. relations. Currently, the importance of the Middle East in great power games has once again attracted attention from domestic and international academic circles, and the concept of the “middle zone” has re-emerged.
II. A Relatively Relaxed Regional Environment

Compared to the increasingly tense global strategic environment, the situation of China-U.S. relations in the Middle East is relatively relaxed. In terms of regional affairs, there are no obvious conflicts between China and the United States. The United States is strategically contracting in the Middle East, and China maintains a relatively neutral and detached Middle East policy, resulting in little pressure for Middle Eastern countries to take sides. Of course, there are often frictions between China and the United States on certain regional hot issues, but these contradictions remain at the level of mutual accusations and non-cooperation, without escalating to direct confrontation. A report by the Council on Foreign Relations asserts that although China opposes the U.S. approach on issues like Syria and Iran, it has not directly challenged the U.S.’ regional dominance.

From the perspective of great power games, the U.S.’ strategic contraction and China’s strategic caution create a relatively relaxed space for coexistence. From the attacks on 9/11 in 2001 to the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, the Middle East was once at the core of U.S. global strategy. Currently, Middle Eastern oil remains important, but the United States has achieved energy independence; Israel is still the United States’ most important ally in the Middle East, but Israel is fully capable of protecting itself; Middle Eastern terrorism is still a major security concern for the United States, but there have been no major terrorist attacks on U.S. soil in the past 20 years. The Middle East’s share in U.S. global strategy continues to decline, and both parties’ administrations have been implementing a strategy of contraction. A report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy states, “The debate in Washington is not about whether to contract, but how to do so.” If the United States has not yet decided what to do in the Middle East, what it does not want to do there is clearer. The United States will no longer fight a large-scale Middle Eastern war, nor will it fully reshape Middle Eastern society, let alone take on the responsibility of governing the Middle East. Obama once said, “The United States does not have the ability to govern the Middle East, and the idea of doing so is wrong; even if the Middle East is particularly important to the United States, there is no way for the United States to improve the situation there.” In the past decade, the United States has not led wars in Syria, Yemen, or Libya, and its support for key countries like Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon has waned. On the Chinese side, although there has been increased attention and involvement in regional situations, there has been no substantive intervention in any regional crisis. Regarding issues like the Astana process for Syria, the Vienna conference, the Quartet mechanism for the Israel-Palestine issue, the Paris, Palermo, and Berlin conferences for Libya, and the “Stockholm Agreement” for Yemen, China either did not participate or did not play a leading role. Therefore, contrary to the predictions of power transition theory, there has been no struggle between China and the United States for strategic space in the Middle East.

From the perspective of regional countries, these countries do not want to see China-U.S. strategic competition, are reluctant to take sides, and prefer to maintain a balance among major powers to enhance their own sovereignty. During the Cold War, Arab countries formed two camps around the U.S.-Soviet competition; after the Cold War, the United States dominated the Middle East, and Arab countries were divided into moderate and radical Islamic nations according to U.S. preferences. After
the Arab Spring of 2011, non-Arab countries like Iran, Turkey, and Israel rose alongside Arab powers like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Qatar. These regional powers neither align with U.S. preferences nor choose sides between China and the United States, but seek a new balance among the United States, Europe, Russia, China, and India. The United States remains the most influential country, but the attractiveness of other countries is rising, with no Middle Eastern country fully betting on the United States. For example, the UAE simultaneously strengthens relations with China, India, South Korea, France, and Japan. In 2021, China was the UAE’s largest trading partner ($75.6 billion), India second ($61 billion), and Japan third ($37 billion), with India and Japan being the UAE’s largest export destinations, respectively. In December 2021, negotiations for the UAE to purchase U.S. F-35 fighter jets broke down, and in the same month, the UAE signed a $19 billion military procurement contract with France, followed by a $3.5 billion missile purchase contract with South Korea the next month, and an announcement to buy 12 Chinese L-15 training aircraft the following month. Although these military purchases cannot replace the F-35, the UAE’s intention to diversify its security is very clear. On the Libyan issue, the United States, Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Qatar, the UAE, the EU, the United Nations, and NATO all have been involved, with the United States not playing a leading role, and the Middle Eastern political stage has never seen so many equivalent main actors. The increasingly diversified regional pattern reduces the regional driving force of China-U.S. strategic competition.

From the perspective of self-interest, China and the United States have broadly similar interests in the Middle East, with few points of conflict and a low degree of contradiction. In 2011, Obama defined U.S. interests in the Middle East as energy, counterterrorism, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and protecting Israel’s security and promoting Israel-Palestine peace talks. Ten years later, U.S. interests in the Middle East remain in these four areas, unchanged and rarely controversial. For China, energy security, counterterrorism, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and promoting Israel-Palestine peace talks also completely align with its own interests. In this regard, China-U.S. interests almost completely overlap. A report by the RAND Corporation states outright that China and the United States have consistent interests in most areas in the Middle East, and if the United States only views China through the lens of great power competition, it will miss many areas for potential cooperation. The United States aims to protect its Middle Eastern allies, mainly maintaining Israel and some Arab countries; China implements a non-aligned balanced policy, maintaining normal relations with all countries, without distinguishing between friends and enemies, which is the biggest difference between China and the United States. Even from this perspective, China and the United States are not completely opposed and occasionally have some space for cooperation. For instance, on the Iran issue, China and the United States have significant differences in stance: the United States views Iran as an enemy, while China sees Iran as a partner, but both China and the United States do not want to see Iran become a nuclear state, and regional stability is very important to China. Therefore, in the intermittent nearly 20 years of negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program, China and the United States have generally cooperated more than argued. In August 2022, Barbara Leaf, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, testified in the Senate, stating that, so far, the United States believes China is playing a positive role in the Iran nuclear negotiations. Even in areas where China and the United States have
conflicting interests in the Middle East, there have been no active, initiative-taking actions to undermine each other’s policy goals. Overlapping interests form the basis for China and the United States to coexist peacefully in the Middle East.

From the perspective of regional influence, the United States enjoys security advantages, while China has economic strengths. Neither country shows high enthusiasm for weakening or replacing the other’s advantages, lacking the will for comprehensive competition. The nature of China and U.S. influence in the Middle East is different, making it impossible for one to replace the other, and even the cost of challenging each other is prohibitively high. Economically, China’s trade with the Middle East increased from $15.2 billion in 2000 to $284.3 billion in 2021, while U.S. trade only grew from $63.4 billion to $98.4 billion over the same period. China imports about 5 million barrels of oil per day from the Middle East, compared to about 800,000 barrels for the United States. In terms of economic affairs, China’s importance is significantly greater than that of the United States, a result of the respective economic structures of the two countries, not easily changeable. In security, from 2017 to 2019, the Middle East purchased 140.6 billion yuan in arms, with 67% coming from the United States and 6.7% from China. China’s arms exports to the UAE are less than 2% of those from the United States, and to Saudi Arabia less than 1%. The United States maintains tens of thousands of combat troops in the Middle East, while China has no stationed forces. The United States has military bases or facilities in Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, whereas China does not. The United States has seven major non-NATO allies in the Middle East, while China adheres to a non-aligned policy and has no allies. Clearly, China cannot match the United States in terms of security influence. China’s economic relationships with Middle Eastern countries are mutually beneficial; the Middle East will not abandon China simply because the United States is dissatisfied, and challenging China would require the United States to incur substantial political and economic costs. Likewise, China neither desires nor has the capability to challenge the U.S.’ security position. The United States spends $75 billion annually on regular military expenses in the Middle East, which is 15% of its total military budget, not including war costs, while China’s total military budget in 2020 was only $178.6 billion. U.S. officials judge that China is unlikely to challenge the United States in the security field, where the U.S.’ strategic advantage is very prominent. Dawn Murphy, an associate professor at the U.S. National War College, states that China’s presence in the Middle East is economic, not security-related, and China has not moved in that direction.

Despite this, the tense global strategic relationship spills over into regional affairs, influencing China-U.S. attitudes in these matters and raising some unsettling signals. Since 2015, with Russia’s intervention in Syria, cooperation between Israel, Arab countries, and the United States has increased, and Iran, Turkey, and Russia have also coordinated to some extent, creating a two-camp pattern, although China has not been involved. After the Ukraine crisis in 2022, the United States has increasingly viewed China, Russia, and Iran as a camp, signaling a return to a sort of “small Cold War” in the Middle East. United States scholars list China alongside Iran, terrorism, and oil supply as one of the United States’ concerns in the Middle East. In July 2022, before Biden’s visit to the Middle East, he wrote in The Washington Post, “Countering Russia’s aggression, better competing
with China, and making the Middle East more stable are why I am visiting Saudi Arabia.” Afterward, discussion of the great power game in the Middle East intensified.

Currently, these signals are sporadic and intermittent, sometimes even barely perceptible. Overall, conflicts and contradictions in regional affairs between China and the United States are still not prominent, and Middle Eastern affairs themselves are unlikely to lead to China-U.S. conflict. However, it is noteworthy that outside of regional affairs, Chinese and U.S. political, economic, and security activities in the Middle East increasingly display opposition and even conflict.

III. Increasingly Sharp Bilateral Contradictions

For over two thousand years, trade has been the primary link between China and the Middle East, transitioning from jewels, spices, and silk in the past to oil and industrial products today. However, in the past decade, China’s engagement with the Middle East in finance, investment, technology, arms sales, politics, and security has increased, transforming the bilateral relationship from one dominated by economic trade to a comprehensive one, climbing from the lower to the higher end of the production chain. This shift has led to a change in China-U.S. relations in the Middle East from complementary to homogenous competition, with inevitable tensions and contradictions. The United States is not concerned about China replacing its position, nor does it believe China can fully challenge its dominance. However, in the context of a tense global strategic environment, these contradictions are sufficient to stimulate the United States to adopt a policy of skepticism and hostility towards China.

In the technological field, the United States’ exclusive competition against China is intensifying, mixed with economic interests, political suspicion, and security dilemmas, steering China-U.S. relations towards zero-sum competition. Traditionally, the United States has been at the upper end of the supply chain, engaging in energy exploration, finance, insurance, design, regulation, management, and consulting, while China excels in mining, infrastructure, production, and processing, with more complementarity than competition. In recent years, China’s technological content in trade, investment, and project contracting has continuously increased, gradually moving up the supply chain and becoming more competitive in fields like the digital economy, aerospace, clean energy, and the defense industry, rapidly expanding the scope of China-U.S. economic competition. This is the natural logic of economic development. However, globalization and technological progress have blurred the line between economy and security, especially against the backdrop of a tense global strategic environment, where the United States often views economic competition from a political and strategic perspective. Barbara Leaf stated that over the years, the United States and the Middle East have formed a large system or ecosystem composed of infrastructure, military equipment, high-tech products, and dual-use technology. Now, as China aims to break through this system, the United States is concerned about the security of the system and even more worried about China replacing the U.S. system. Clearly, the United States wants to maintain the exclusivity of this system. Both China and the United States are competing for technological access and standards, which are at the heart of competition in 5G, space technology, ports, and weaponry, and represent the sharpest contradictions between China and the United States.
in the Middle East, with almost no room for reconciliation. For China, it is inevitable to expand into investment and high-tech fields while maintaining its trade advantage, extending from the economic to the political and security fields, which is both the natural logic of economic development and an inevitable choice for a major power to expand its global influence. Chinese companies have signed 116 “Smart City” and “Safe City” projects globally, with 17 in the Middle East, making it the region with the most such projects. Huawei has signed 5G cooperation agreements with 11 telecom companies in Gulf countries, making the Middle East a key area for China’s overseas 5G construction. China’s Beidou and the U.S. Global Positioning System compete in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Turkey signing digital Silk Road agreements with China’s Beidou. In these areas, the United States explicitly demands Middle Eastern countries choose sides. The United States has successfully excluded Huawei equipment from Israel’s 5G network and requested the UAE do the same by 2025. In July 2022, during Biden’s visits to Saudi Arabia and Israel, he signed technology cooperation memorandums with both countries, proposing to build dependable 5G and 6G networks, excluding Chinese technology and equipment. The 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy explicitly proposes a “national industrial policy,” reversing the tenets of free-market capitalism, strengthening the government’s role in international economic competition, and using state power to intervene in market competition, further blurring the lines between domestic policy, economy, and diplomacy. In the future, conflicts between China and the United States in this field will only intensify.

In the soft power domain, the influence of China and the United States wax and wane, constituting competition between two models, whether by active choice or natural outcome. Given the clear differences in ideology, political systems, economic systems, and diplomatic values between China and the United States, the rise of the “Chinese model” inevitably means a decline in the “American model.” Although few believe weakening the United States is the main goal of China’s Middle East policy, most think China’s actions objectively erode U.S. influence. International organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund set preconditions for economic aid, but China-led institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the New Silk Road Fund explicitly state no political conditions attached. China-led international financial institutions and the Shanghai Oil Exchange are exploring yuan pricing, challenging dollar hegemony. In response to the Belt and Road Initiative, China has established new mechanisms for resolving trade and investment disputes, weakening the trade system dominated by the West. China also offers Middle Eastern countries an alternative development model to the West, the “Chinese-style modernization” path, achieving economic growth while maintaining political stability. Compared to technological competition, the impact of China’s soft power is subtle and will not shake the U.S.-dominated political and economic system in the short term, “with no signs, except for some technological factors, indicating that the Chinese model poses a challenge to the United States in the Middle East.” However, ideological competition is very sensitive, largely a matter of sentiment and psychology, and even minor quantitative changes can easily trigger panic reactions. A poll in early 2022, the “Arab Barometer,” showed that more than half of Arab people believe democracy is not conducive to economic development, prompting a British scholar to lament, “Arab nations may lean more towards the Chinese system.”
In the field of diplomacy, the fundamental principles of China and the United States collide head-on, leading to diametrically opposed positions on certain regional matters of contention. Unlike the United States, China has not directly involved itself in these issues. However, as an emerging power approaching the center of the Middle Eastern political stage, China adheres to its principles on every major issue. China has proposed the “Five-Point Peace Initiative” on the Israel-Palestine conflict, the “Three Basic Principles” on the Libya issue, the “Six Proposals” on the Syria issue, and the “Five-Point Initiative” for security and stability in the Middle East. Although these initiatives and principles have not had a substantial impact for the time being, they highlight the stark differences in approaches and practices between China and the United States, with both sides vying for the moral high ground. On the Israel-Palestine issue, the United States has long favored Israel, while China consistently supports the Palestinian cause; the United States almost always votes against UN resolutions condemning Israel, while China votes in favor. On the Iran issue, the United States spares no effort to build a political, economic, and military cordon to contain Iran, while China insists on maintaining normal political, economic, and military interactions with Iran. On the Syria issue, the United States employs a combination of economic sanctions, military intervention, and political isolation to attempt regime change, while China has vetoed U.S. interventions in Syria 10 times in the UN Security Council. China does not directly challenge the United States, but consistently portrays itself as an alternative to the United States, questioning American development models and intervention policies. As China’s involvement in Middle Eastern affairs increases, conflicts between China and the United States in this field are likely to increase accordingly.

In the military domain, the United States regards the Middle East as a no-go zone, and any China-U.S. competition in this area would lead to sharp contradictions. Military security is a pillar of U.S. policy in the Middle East and a primary means of influencing the region. U.S. officials have repeatedly stated that the economy is one thing, but the military is another. Currently, the United States has recognized China’s leading position in trade and energy and may in the future recognize China’s advantages in investment. However, the United States is not willing to relinquish its military superiority and remains highly vigilant, even considering this a “red line.” An article in The Economist suggests that if China constructs dual-use ports or engages in sensitive technological cooperation, the United States will demand its Middle Eastern allies to choose sides. As early as 1999, when Israel sold reconnaissance planes to China, the United States exerted significant pressure, forcing Israel to terminate all military cooperation with China, a stance that remains to this day. In the spring of 2021, U.S.-UAE negotiations over the sale of F-35 fighter jets broke down, with the United States citing concerns not only about 5G but also about the UAE’s defense cooperation with China. In recent years, due to the cost-effectiveness of Chinese drones, countries like Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have purchased them from China, and in 2017, Saudi Arabia and China discussed establishing a joint drone production factory, the third such project globally. In response, in 2020, then-CENTCOM commander Kenneth McKenzie stated in a video conference that one of his responsibilities is to prevent Gulf countries from buying armed drones from China. So far, China’s involvement in the military affairs of the Middle East has been limited, with the United States maintaining a significant advantage, and conflicts between China and the United States in the military domain are not prominent, with only individual isolated incidents occurring.
In the area of strategic security, both China and the United States worry about the Middle East becoming a card in the other’s hand, potentially creating a classic security dilemma. The United States, as an existing superpower, often has excessive anxiety and a sense of peril, tending to exaggerate the power and intentions of rising nations. China, as a rising power, is often eager to showcase its strength and status. The Middle East, as a third party, worries about the United States’ contraction and is eager to use rising China to balance the United States, also willing to exaggerate its own influence. The possibility of the United States cutting off energy supply lines is a persistent shadow over China, which is China’s primary concern regarding the Middle East. Senior U.S. Middle East expert Gause points out, “Overall, if U.S.-China relations deteriorate, and the United States can control the oil-rich areas, it gains an additional card.” Conversely, the United States also worries about the Middle East becoming increasingly reliant on China for energy, potentially becoming a card in China’s hand, with Gulf countries increasingly dependent on the Chinese energy market. The United States is concerned about China controlling Gulf energy technology standards, forming exclusive trade groups.

These contradictions are inevitable. If regarded as the primary contradiction in China-U.S. relations in the Middle East, they hold strategic significance. Currently, both China and the United States view these contradictions as tactical, not altering their respective Middle East strategies. If managed properly in the future, these contradictions will not harm the overall China-U.S. relationship; however, if they are allowed to worsen or are deliberately magnified, they could easily escalate into a strategic conflict.

IV. A Critical Crossroads

Historically, the relationship between China and the Middle East can be divided into three stages. From 1949 to 1978, China actively participated in the great power politics between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Middle East. From 1978 to 2013, the focus of China’s Middle East policy was on energy and trade. Since 2014, the relationship has entered a third stage, evolving beyond energy and trade to include finance, investment, technology, and culture, becoming more comprehensive. Whether the relationship will advance to a fourth stage, transitioning from an economically dominated relationship to a more balanced engagement including political and military aspects, remains an open question.

Correspondingly, China-U.S. relations in the Middle East have also evolved. Between 1949 and 1970, the relationship was antagonistic. From 1970 to 1990, there was sporadic cooperation, and from 1990 to 2018, the relationship was characterized by parallel engagement. During this period of parallel relations, China’s approach was not to cooperate with, support, or confront the United States, and not to consider the United States as a primary factor in its Middle East policy. Currently, the strategic confrontation between China and the United States on a global scale is becoming increasingly apparent. On the regional level, however, there is good compatibility of interests and strategic space, with limited conflict. On a bilateral level, structural contradictions and security dilemmas are evident. As tensions in the upper and lower layers of relations increase, the core middle layer is pressured and impacted, making the current state of parallel relations unsustainable. A new phase in China-U.S.
interactions in the Middle East is inevitable. Global, regional, and bilateral levels are just the objective environments faced by Sino-American relations, influencing but not determining policy. The interpretation of these environments involves considerable subjectivity, and the choice of policy involves significant agency.

From the U.S. perspective, marked by the 2022 version of the U.S. National Security Strategy, U.S. policy towards China has crossed a critical juncture and entered an era of strategic competition. The China-U.S. relationship has many characteristics of the Cold War but is more complex than the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Whether it will evolve into a global and comprehensive confrontation remains flexible. Even if a form of Cold War does develop between China and the United States, it does not mean that the United States will allocate resources evenly across all regions and issues globally; such decisions will be context-specific. The United States has only a vague concept of the model of coexistence between China and the United States in the Middle East and is unwilling to see the reality of “China rising and the United States falling.” However, how much of a threat this poses to the United States and how many resources the United States is willing to invest in response are hotly debated issues within the United States.

Within the United States, there are varying assessments of the importance of the Middle East and China’s policy in the region. One view sees the Middle East as a new frontier or even a key area in global competition between China and the United States, urging the United States to stop its strategic contraction and reorganize its Middle East strategy to contain China. This perspective believes that China views the Middle East as a strategically significant area, second only to the Western Pacific, and that China-U.S. strategic competition in the Middle East is a reality that U.S. policymakers are reluctant to acknowledge. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Zakheim criticized the Biden administration for recognizing China’s challenge as global but focusing only on Asia-Pacific, leaving opportunities for China in the Middle East. Some even argue that the Middle East is not just a new frontier in China-U.S. global competition, but also a crucial area. If the United States concedes the Middle East to China, China could become the dominant power in Eurasia, contesting Eurasian dominance. U.S. Central Command chief Michael Kurilla suggested that the Middle East is the center of global competition between China and the United States, both substantively and symbolically. This view holds that the United States cannot continue to ignore China’s strategic expansion in the Middle East and must adjust its current policies.

A second perspective argues that the United States can safely engage in strategic contraction in the Middle East and quickly shift its global strategic focus to the Indo-Pacific. This view posits that with U.S. energy independence, the importance of the Middle East has declined. The United States does not need to control or dominate Middle Eastern affairs but only prevent any hostile country from doing so. According to this opinion, the United States should acknowledge the end of its domination in the Middle East and allow global and regional powers to form a new balance of power, with the United States being just one of many players. There is no great power competition in the Middle East; Russia is merely a disruptor, and China has not transformed its economic resources into political or military influence. Moreover, China and the United States have similar interests in the Middle East. Harvard Professor Stephen Walt suggests that Middle Eastern countries are simply playing a
balancing game between China and the United States, and the United States should be cautious and not satisfy all their demands because of their flirtations with China. On the contrary, if the United States opts to contain China, it could only provoke China into military competition, potentially making China a real military threat. The United States needs to learn to coexist with China, and there are many areas where cooperation is possible.

A third view suggests that the United States should both contract its strategy in the Middle East and be wary of China filling the vacuum. This perspective maintains that the energy transition is uncertain and the importance of the Middle East hard to judge. Historically, the Middle East has always attracted U.S. strategic attention. As former U.S. diplomat Elliot Koss says, “You may not be interested in the Middle East, but the Middle East is interested in you.” China’s strategy is also unclear, a composite of economic, energy, political, and security factors, with dynamic changes in the importance, reality, and strength of these factors. The United States must prepare for both scenarios. The rapid U.S. strategic contraction over the past 20 years was a mistake that allowed China and Russia to expand their influence in the Middle East. In the future, the United States should slow its contraction pace and build a regional environment conducive to great power competition. This “look both ways” attitude is actually a hedging strategy that seems ideal but is in fact conflicting in its objectives, high in cost, risky, and difficult to balance. Georgetown University Professor Mark Lynch warns that as China’s involvement in Middle Eastern affairs increases, the United States, in seeking a balance between regional interests and competition with China, could face dangerous misunderstandings.

Similarly, in China, there are three views on its Middle East policy. One is to prepare for a major Sino-American competition in the Middle East, re-emphasizing great power competition as a key consideration in China’s Middle East policy, significantly elevating the importance of the Middle East in international political struggle, and accordingly advancing the Middle East in China’s global strategic order, increasing economic, political, and military resource investment in the region. To some extent, this would be a return to China’s pre-1980 Middle East policy. The second view continues to see the Middle East as an important economic partner, avoiding a major China-U.S. competition in the region as much as possible. Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has been an important source of energy supply and a commodity export market for China, as well as a good partner in international politics, serving as an “ecological conservation area” for China’s peaceful development. The value of the Middle East lies in its own economic and political impact, not in the role it plays in great power competition. As China’s influence increases, it will naturally weaken the U.S.-led order, a result of natural formation, not a deliberately pursued strategic goal. As Professor Dawn Murphy of the U.S. National War College says, China does not seek to replace the existing order or confront the United States, but China has established its own system, which could confront the United States in the future. From 1980 to the present, China’s Middle East policy has largely been as such. The third view is to adopt a hedging strategy, focusing on the economic potential of the Middle East and also preparing for a major Sino-American competition in the region, preparing for the best and the worst, a compromise and mix of the two aforementioned choices. China’s establishment of an economic, political, and security system in the Middle East to hedge
against the United States, while not confronting or challenging the United States, seems to be the safest choice, but it is not without cost or risk. Ultimately, it may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy – by worrying about and preparing for confrontation, it leads to confrontation. Whether the first or third choice, both would significantly change China’s current Middle East policy. China’s Middle East policy has been distant from great power competition for over 30 years, and whether it needs to change is a significant question.

If China prematurely or excessively prepares for a China-U.S. competition in the Middle East, it would incur unnecessary costs and exacerbate the risk of regional conflicts. Conversely, a delayed response could result in strategic passivity and missed opportunities. Adopting a hedging strategy would also face cost and risk challenges. China’s economic influence naturally transforming into political influence and thereby weakening American influence is one thing; deliberately arranging economic activities to enhance political influence and aiming to weaken America’s dominant position is another. Taking the oil yuan as an example, the U.S. dollar accounts for 60% of global reserve currencies and 40% of payment currencies, while the yuan accounts for about 3% in both areas, making it unlikely that the yuan will challenge the dollar’s position in the short term. However, the oil yuan has become a sensitive topic and even a focal point of contention in the trilateral relationship between China, the U.S., and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. suspects that China and Saudi Arabia are promoting the oil yuan for political and security reasons, whereas China believes the United States is suppressing the yuan for similar motives.

Energy security is of utmost strategic importance to China in the Middle East, being a cornerstone of its Middle East strategy. Currently, China’s dependence on foreign oil exceeds 70%, with the Middle East accounting for about 50% of this. Traditionally, China has secured Middle Eastern oil through various means to ensure a stable supply. However, oil sanctions post-1973 have generally been consumer countries sanctioning producer countries, not the other way around. More importantly, these sanctions have all been initiated by the West. The last decade has shown that only the U.S. has the capability to implement oil sanctions against China, integrating oil, finance, insurance, shipping, and technology, and only the U.S. has this capacity. Thus, ensuring China’s energy security primarily targets the U.S., not the Middle East. The question of which China-U.S. coexistence model in the Middle East benefits China’s energy security is a topic worthy of in-depth study.

Long-term involvement in Middle Eastern economic affairs means that if China intends to prepare for major power competition, it needs to adjust the priorities and allocation of its global strategy. Economically, China can maintain balanced relations with all regional countries, but once it enters the deeper waters of military and political domains, such relations become nearly impossible to sustain. It can be predicted that without major sudden events, China is unlikely to proactively make significant adjustments to its current Middle East policy, instead cautiously observing and adjusting within the dynamics of China-U.S. interaction. If China and the United States can seize opportunities and make the right choices, they can avoid a continuous crisis management mode of conflicts and contradictions in the Middle East. If they miss future opportunities, the region may tilt towards comprehensive competition. Currently, the Indo-Pacific and Europe have already entered a mode of strategic competition between China and the U.S., and the future direction of the Middle East may
offer insights for Latin America and Africa.
Since the upheaval in the Middle East at the end of 2010, countries in the region have for a decade experienced varying degrees of political, economic, and social turmoil. Coupled with the ravages of terrorist organizations represented by “Islamic State” and the interference of some external forces, economic recession and unstable popular sentiment have become significant features of the development of Middle Eastern countries. To forge order from chaos and seek change in its midst have become the urgent desires of the governments and peoples of countries in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was held in November 2012, and China’s diplomacy entered into a new period, i.e., the period of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. This dovetailed fortuitously with the aspirations of Middle Eastern countries. On one hand, they hoped to establish close economic ties with China through the Belt and Road Initiative, and realize mutual benefits and win-win outcomes by hitching a ride on the “train” of rapid economic development; on the other hand, China hoped to demonstrate its responsibility as a major power in the Middle East and build up its image as a responsible great power. As of 2020, China’s Middle East major country diplomacy in the new era has been developing rapidly, with its concepts gradually taking shape and its role gradually maturing.
The results of research on China’s Middle East major country diplomacy by domestic and foreign academics have been fruitful. Domestic research has mainly focused on three levels. The first is research on the situation in the Middle East. A considerable number of scholars have been generally pessimistic about the security situation in the Middle East since the upheaval there, and suggest that China’s Middle East major country diplomacy should be cautious. They may be called “cautious pessimists.” They believe that the pattern of the Middle East has now entered a period of deep adjustment. The upheaval in the Middle East since the end of 2010 “is the product of the tortuous processes of nation-building and social development in the post-war Middle East... and is also a regional manifestation of the major changes, adjustments, and developments in the global international political and economic system in the post-Cold War era.” The Middle East region has plunged into the most turbulent period in nearly a century, with more and more countries in turmoil, traditional security threats growing, and an escalating arms race. At present and for some years to come, the Middle East will be full of contradictions and obstacles as it moves from chaos to governance under the influence of strategic forces from within and outside the region. The second level is research on the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East. Here, there are two main points of view: the “risk theory” and the “interest theory.” According to the “risk theory,” the Belt and Road Initiative faces great political, security, and third-party risks in the Middle East, and China’s Middle East policy must adhere to the principle of being “reasonable,” “beneficial,” and “segmented.” According to the “interest theory,” it is in China’s interest to properly manage friendly relationships with five key Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey. As long as the Belt and Road Initiative is successfully linked with the development strategies of these five key countries, and other countries are appropriately covered, China’s relations with the Middle East can be assured to develop along their intended track. Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative should take into account overall national interests and strategies, and emphasize the comprehensiveness of China’s interests in the Middle East. The third level is research on China’s Middle East major country diplomacy. These researchers believe that China’s Middle East major country diplomacy presents both opportunities and challenges, and that China should proactively take responsibility in the Middle East, so they can be called “positive optimists.” They argue that China’s Middle East diplomacy should not remain at the level of stance and attitude, and China should actively participate in the resolution of regional hotspot issues and put forward China’s ideas and programs. As a responsible major power, if China wants to play a more responsible role in the geo-strategically important Middle East region, it must improve its ability to manage Middle East crises. It must shift from a general diplomacy of overall detachment, biding time, and concealing strength, to a Middle East diplomacy that is energetic and aggressive. The Middle East region provides an important platform for China to assume the responsibilities of a major power, and is a rare opportunity for China to provide public goods and a new growth driver for diplomacy. China needs to increase its investment to “enhance its influence and voice in Middle East affairs.”

The main viewpoints in relevant studies in foreign academic circles are the “alternative theory,” the “non-substitution theory,” the “responsibility theory,” and the “cooperation theory.” According to the “alternative theory,” China is an alternative to the United States in the Middle East. As the U.S. government has implemented a global strategic retrenchment, it has reduced its investment of
strategic forces in the Middle East, resulting in a power vacuum there to some extent. Also given the transformation requirements of Middle Eastern countries since the upheaval in the region, China’s development model provides a more attractive alternative to the United States for Middle Eastern countries. In addition, China’s vast energy market provides a strong incentive for Middle Eastern countries to turn from the West to the East. The “non-alternative” view is just the opposite. For example, a RAND Corporation study, “China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon,” points out that China’s main concern in the region is economic interests, and it does not seek to replace the United States and dominate the Middle East. China is worried about getting involved in the Middle East’s chaos, so it will adopt a “light footprint” in the region. Both the “responsibility theory” and the “cooperation theory” hold that China should try to maintain friendly relations with all forces in the Middle East, so as to avoid making enemies and endangering itself. China’s Middle East major country diplomacy is free riding on the United States, and the United States is deeply dissatisfied with this. It hopes that China will shoulder responsibility for maintaining security and stability in the Middle East, and suggests that the United States and China should cooperate in maintaining security and stability in the region.

Domestic and foreign academics have analyzed China’s Middle East major country diplomacy mainly from the perspectives of the Middle East security situation, China’s Middle East security responsibilities and interests, and China-U.S. relations. There is overlap when it comes to the responsibilities aspect of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy, with all hoping that China will take on greater responsibilities in the region. However, the academic research on the strategic connotations, diplomatic concepts, roles, and major achievements of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy in the Middle East since the upheaval in 2010 needs to be explored further, and here the authors have attempted to perform a systematic analysis and explanation.

The Strategic Connotations of China’s Middle East Major Country Diplomacy

“How to accurately position the Middle East strategically has become a problem that must be solved by a top-level design approach to Middle East diplomacy.” The design of diplomatic strategy mainly includes the objective conditions of the strategy, strategic goals, and strategic means. China’s Middle East major country diplomacy strategy is based on the Middle East’s objective need to seek change in the midst of chaos since 2010, as well as China’s own trend of peaceful development. These have indicated the direction of China’s strategic goals for major country diplomacy in the Middle East, and chosen a specific practical paths for realizing these strategic goals.

(1) Objective Conditions

The objective global and regional environment is the external basis for the top-level design of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy strategy. At the global level, the world is in the midst of “great changes unseen in a century.” The trends toward political pluralism, economic globalization, social informatization, and cultural diversification are accelerating, and countries around the world today
remain in a state of high interdependence. While the process of globalization has not been interrupted, “anti-globalization” is gathering momentum. Currently, changing power shifts among countries are intensifying international competition, and there is great uncertainty in the world. This requires the international community to make joint efforts to propel the evolution of the international order in a just and reasonable direction and promote the common development of all countries and world peace. China’s Middle East major country diplomacy should be designed to meet the development needs of this overall environment and situation. At the regional level, peace and development have not always been the main currents. Since the upheaval in the Middle East in 2010, the situation in the region has been exceptionally complex. Politically, multiple contradictions and conflicts are intertwined. A camp-like confrontation centered on two Middle East regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, has formed within the Islamic world, and a Cold War-like trend has intensified. The situation in the Middle East has been further complicated by interference from extra-regional powers. Within the Arab world, conflicts among the Gulf States have deepened as a result of the polarization and confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Economically, the overall economic development of the Middle East has been slow, and some countries have even fallen into stagnation and regression. “The most fundamental reasons that triggered the anti-government wave in the first place were unemployment, poverty, and other economic difficulties. The United States only helped the people to overthrow a group of original governments, but it had neither the will nor the ability to revitalize economies or improve people’s livelihoods, leaving the people to struggle in a maelstrom of chaos, poverty, and bloodshed.” In addition, the wave of refugees triggered by the civil war in Syria, and the influx of refugees in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine, worsened the already fragile economic situation. In terms of security, traditional security issues such as the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are intertwined with and exacerbated by non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and public health. Middle East terrorism has been a focus of the world’s attention ever since the events of September 11. The “Islamic State” became a growing threat to the region in the wake of dramatic changes in the Middle East, and has pushed the boundaries of traditional terrorist organizations. After the elimination of the “Islamic State” entity in November 2018, a large number of foreign national “jihadist” elements returned home. They will inevitably bring back to their countries the violent psychology and ideology of the extremist organization they participated in during their time in Syria, thus bringing long-term potential security threats to their host countries.

The political, economic, and security issues in the Middle East are closely interrelated. On one hand, unemployment, poverty, and other problems brought about by stagnating and regressing economic development have been the economic root causes of the upheaval in the Middle East, leading to political unrest. This in turn triggered the political transformation of Middle Eastern countries, and was also one of the reasons for the breakdown of relations among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. On the other hand, failure to solve the problem of people’s basic needs, and high youth unemployment, made it easy for extremist ideology to penetrate the Middle East, thus making it a breeding ground for terrorists. The Cold War trend in politics has not only caused the level of traditional security threats in the Middle East to rise continuously, but the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran has also been exploited by extremists, and has turned into a root cause behind the
growth of extremist organizations. Whereas the security situation in the Middle East has been created by the region’s deteriorating economic and political problems, it in turn further affects the political and economic situation in the region. Many problems at the three levels interact and influence each other, and have deteriorated further under the intervention of the United States, Russia, and other foreign powers. The Middle East has thus long been caught in a “quagmire” of intertwined economic, political, and security problems from which it is unable to extricate itself.

China’s growing interests in the Middle East and the enhancement of China’s comprehensive national strength are the internal conditions for the top-level design of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy strategy. In the face of the Middle East’s complicated objective security environment, China has, since reform and opening up began, insisted on “biding its time and concealing its strength.” It has tried to avoid direct involvement in the region’s contradictions and disputes as much as possible, maintaining a detached attitude. Some scholars believe that the Middle East is a swamp that entraps superpowers, and that China can strengthen economic cooperation with Middle Eastern countries on economic matters, but politically it is better to stop at stating its position. However, China’s interests in the Middle East are growing as its goods, labor, and personnel continue to enter the region. In the years from 2014 to 2019, import and export trade between China and Arab countries in the Middle East totaled $227.098 billion, $178.13 billion, $171.1 billion, $191.34 billion, $244.3 billion, and $266.4 billion, respectively. “The Middle East has been upgraded from a strategic extension area of China’s periphery to an important part of its larger neighborhood,” and the fate of the Middle East is closely related to China. Middle Eastern countries caught in their predicament are making ever stronger appeals for China to shoulder the responsibilities of a great power, and that is also an inevitable requirement for the development of China’s national strength. On one hand, China is a rising power, and “if it refuses to assume the ‘responsibilities of a major power’ that it should assume, it will be regarded by the international community as a ‘free-rider,’ or an ‘extreme egoist’ that only cares about obtaining benefits from the international community but is unwilling to make contributions to it. As such, it is likely to become a loner in the international community, and it will then find it very difficult to become a major power that is accepted by the international community.” On the other hand, for China, “to provide more public goods to the world on the basis of the continuous development of its own national strength is also the responsibility of a major developing country.” Therefore, assuming the responsibilities of a major power and providing public goods to the Middle East region has become necessary path for China to enhance its international voice and influence. As an extension of China’s major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, China’s Middle East major country diplomacy needs to “make its contribution,” and China’s new generation of leaders, with President Xi Jinping as the core, has seized the opportunity and designed China’s major country diplomacy strategy in the Middle East in a timely manner.

(2) Strategic Goals

The objective requirements of the Middle East and the responsibilities of a major power accompanying China’s rise have prompted China and the Middle East to reach a series of principled consensuses: First, both sides have emphasized that they should “take concerted action and
cooperate in building a new type of international relations, safeguarding the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of China and the Arab States.” Second, the two sides have clearly emphasized that they “adhere to resolving differences and disputes between countries by peaceful means through dialogue and consultation,” and that “force is not the solution, and a zero-sum mindset cannot bring lasting security. Although the dialogue process is lengthy and perhaps even repetitive, it has the least negative aftereffects and the most sustainable results.” The only way to properly resolve disputes and differences between countries is through peaceful means such as negotiation and dialogue. Third, the two sides have agreed to further enhance strategic partnerships in order to achieve common development and mutual benefits. Fourth, the two sides have emphasized that “different civilizations are all crystallizations of human wisdom, and are noble humanitarian aims. We should have mutual respect and accommodation, promote mutual exchanges and friendship among peoples, and be committed to achieving the harmonious and peaceful coexistence of different civilizations.”

On the basis of these principled consensuses, China has established goals for its cooperation with the Middle East countries, including political goals, economic goals, security goals, and humanitarian goals. Politically, we further clarify strategic mutual trust and partnership relationships. Strategic mutual trust and partnership are the political foundation of cooperation between the two sides. The concept of global partnership was first put forward in the report of the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Upgrading China’s partnerships with Middle Eastern countries was put on the agenda. “We shall deepen strategic partnerships, consolidate political mutual trust, continue to support each other on issues involving each other’s core and major interests, and strengthen bilateral political consultation and coordination on major and unexpected political issues and crises.” “Since the start of the 21st century, China has established partnerships with 15 countries in the Middle East, including comprehensive strategic partnerships, comprehensive partnerships for innovation, strategic partnerships, and strategic cooperative partnerships.” From the ancient overland Silk Road and the “maritime spice road,” to today’s mutual aid, it all reflects the deep friendship that China and the Middle Eastern countries have with each other.

Economically, the emphasis is on building a diversified cooperation network between China and the Middle East. The complementary economic strengths of the two sides are the driving force for sustained cooperation. Both sides, “in accordance with the principle of mutual benefit and win-win outcomes, and in accordance with the requirements of the laws and regulations of each party, will further deepen cooperation in the fields of energy, infrastructure, trade, and investment facilitation, give full play to China’s advantages in production capacity and the richness and diversity of Arab energy resources, and continuously strengthen cooperation in the fields of high and new technologies such as nuclear energy, space satellites, and new energy,” emphasizing the construction and development of diversified economic cooperation mechanisms, i.e., gradually expanding from isolated energy cooperation to institutionalized cooperative relationships in fields such as trade, investment, and finance, and forming a diversified economic cooperation network.

In terms of security, cooperation focusing on non-traditional security is promoted. Security cooperation is a prerequisite and assurance for cooperation between the two sides. In the field of
traditional security, [the goals are to:] Expand military personnel exchanges; deepen cooperation on weapons and equipment and various types of professional and technical cooperation; carry out joint army training; and support Middle Eastern countries’ own counter-terrorism efforts and counter-terrorism capacity building. In the field of non-traditional security, [the goals are to:] Support the fight against piracy, aggressive responses to terrorism, and joint response to pandemic diseases; establish a long-term security cooperation mechanism and an intelligence and information exchange mechanism; improve the ability to deal with non-traditional security threats; and achieve sustainable peace and security in the Middle East. In November 2019, China initiated and hosted the first Middle East Security Forum, where participants held in-depth discussions on peace and security in the Middle East. China’s security cooperation with the Middle East thus entered a new phase.

In terms of cultural relations, the institutionalization of exchange platforms has been promoted. Cultural exchange platforms are bridges of civilizational awareness and mutual understanding for cooperation between the two sides. China’s cultural exchange activities to the Middle East have gradually increased since 2013. “China’s Arab Policy Paper,” released in January 2016, for the first time systematically elaborated China’s plans with Arab states in the fields of cultural exchanges (covering civilization and religion, culture, broadcasting, film and television, the press and publishing, think tanks, etc.), people-to-people exchanges, and exchanges among youth and women, as well as tourism cooperation. Goals and requirements have been specified for each of these fields. Among them, the words “platform” and “mechanism” appear many times, such as “build bilateral and multilateral platforms for religious exchanges,” “actively study the establishment of long-term mechanisms for China-Arab think tank exchanges,” and “improve the China-Arab Friendship Conference mechanism.” This suggests that China’s cultural exchanges with Middle Eastern countries are to be elevated to a new level, i.e., transitioned from a state of fragmentation to one based on platforms and mechanisms.

(3) Practical Paths

The practical paths of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy mainly include four aspects: in politics – partnership diplomacy; in economics – the Belt and Road Initiative; in security – coordination of diplomacy by special envoys; and the official cooperation forum mechanism. In terms of partnership diplomacy, China has gradually deepened its partnership network by establishing bilateral strategic partnerships with Middle Eastern countries. “China has taken the lead among major powers in establishing partnership as a guiding principle for interstate relations.” Since the 18th Party Congress, promoting the construction of a holistic, multi-level, and three-dimensional global partnership network has become an important task of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. China has always maintained good relations with countries in the Middle East. “With the continuing enhancement of China’s comprehensive national power and international status, as well as the growing interest of Middle Eastern countries in China … China and Middle Eastern countries have increased their interdependence.” In this kind of context, it is imperative that China expand its political partnership network in the Middle East.

With regard to the Belt and Road Initiative, in June 2014, President Xi Jinping stated at the opening
ceremony of the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) that China and the Arab states should jointly carry forward the spirit of the Silk Road and jointly build the Belt and Road. In March 2015, the “Vision and Action for Building the Belt and Road” was released, putting forward the principles, framework, cooperation priorities, cooperation mechanisms, and action paths of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In July 2018 in Beijing, China and the Arab states signed the “Declaration of Action on China-Arab States Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” in which the two sides committed to carrying forward the Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual understanding, and mutual benefit and win-win outcomes, so as to achieve the communication of policies, the connection of facilities, the smooth flow of trade, the integration of funds, and the mutual understanding of people’s hearts and minds. The Middle East occupies an important geographic location connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, and is a key participant in the Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, building the Belt and Road in cooperation with states in the Middle East region is of far-reaching strategic significance for promoting the economic development of the two sides and realizing mutual benefits and win-win outcomes.

In terms of coordination of diplomacy by special envoys, as early as September 2002, the Chinese government appointed Wang Shijie as China’s first special envoy for Middle East issues, and in November of the same year, he traveled to six countries in the Middle East. This coordination of diplomacy by special envoys “demonstrates the concern that China, as a world power, has for Middle East affairs.” As of 2020, China has appointed five special envoys on Middle East issues. Their duties are mainly to “urge peace and promote dialogue” and to advance the peace process in the Middle East region, including understanding the latest situation of hotspot issues in the Middle East and the positions of various parties, expressing the Chinese government’s views on Middle East issues, maintaining communication with the parties concerned on hotspot issues, actively playing a third-party mediator role, and offering China’s propositions and solutions for the Middle East. Non-interference in internal affairs is a consistent principle that China adheres to in the Middle East, but “non-interference is not the same as doing nothing,” and China has tried to promote constructive participation in the region. Coordination of diplomacy by special envoys is a form of constructive diplomatic practice that can “transform zero-sum games into win-win cooperation in conflict management.”

As to the cooperation forum mechanism, construction of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum has been promoted. The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which began in 2004, aims to strengthen dialogue, cooperation, and exchanges between China and the Arab states. Since the 18th Party Congress, the CASCF has held its sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth ministerial conferences in 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020. The action implementation plans issued at the meetings have also become increasingly systematic and detailed. The Forum “has not only played a political leading role in China-Arab cooperation and promoted mutual political trust between the two sides, but has also broadened cooperation to many areas.” As a result, the CASCF mechanism can effectively promote further cooperation between China and Middle East countries in the political, economic, security, and cultural fields.
China designed its Middle East major country diplomacy after the 18th Party Congress in the face of changes in the world unseen in a century and the upheaval in the Middle East. Guided by the top-level strategic design, China’s Middle East major country diplomacy since the upheaval in the Middle East has achieved fruitful results, and this is closely related to the basic concepts behind China’s Middle East major country diplomacy.

Basic Concepts of China’s Middle East Major Country Diplomacy

In 2014, President Xi Jinping proposed that “China must have major country diplomacy with its own characteristics.” In June 2018, at the CCP’s Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, President Xi Jinping once again emphasized that China’s foreign affairs work should “adhere to the ideology of socialist diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era as the guiding principle, and strive to create a new situation of major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.” “China has always been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a maintainer of international order.” China’s major country diplomacy in the Middle East embodies precisely this assumption of responsibility and reflects China’s constructive major country diplomacy concepts, including the concepts of responsibility, sharing, and rules. The concept of responsibility prompts China to assume the obligations of a major power in Middle East diplomacy and contribute to the peace and development of the region; the concept of sharing prompts China to strengthen cooperation with countries in the Middle East in various fields, so as to build a community of shared interests and a community of common destiny; and the concept of rules prompts China to abide by international law and rules together with the countries of the Middle East, and is the legal assurance that guarantees the smooth implementation of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy. Together, the concepts of responsibility, sharing, and rules constitute a complete conceptual structure for China’s Middle East major country diplomacy.

(1) The Concept of Responsibility

Different countries bear different global responsibilities. As the largest developing country, China has been assuming increasing global responsibilities in the course of its rise, as in “when the Way prevails, the world is shared by all [大道之行，天下为公].” The concept of responsibility in China’s Middle East major country diplomacy refers to China’s willingness to shoulder responsibility for and contribute strength to the peace and development of the Middle East region as far as it is able. In terms of peace in the Middle East, China plays a constructive role. On one hand, it has been actively proposing constructive solutions to Middle East security hotspot issues by urging peace and promoting dialogue. On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, China has taken the initiative to invite key Palestinian and Israeli leaders to visit China. On May 6, 2013, President Xi Jinping put forward China’s four-point proposal for resolving the Palestinian issue during his talks with Palestinian President Abbas in Beijing. On May 9, Xi Jinping met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and said that China would continue to maintain an impartial and objective position, work hard to promote a political settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli issue, and contribute to maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East. This was the first time that China had taken the initiative to
invite the Palestinian and Israeli leaders to visit China at the same time, indicating that China had actively assumed responsibility for maintaining peace in the Middle East. On the Iranian nuclear issue, China supports a comprehensive agreement on the issue. On July 14, 2015, a comprehensive agreement to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue was reached despite difficulties. As a permanent member of the Security Council, China has participated constructively throughout the process of the Iranian nuclear negotiations. When the negotiations encountered difficulties and reached an impasse, China always began with the common interests of all parties, actively sought new ideas to solve the problems, and put forward China’s proposals. Unfortunately, the agreement is facing collapse due to the Trump administration’s withdrawal moves, and as a result the Middle East has been plunged into a more dangerous situation. On the Syrian issue, since the upheaval in the Middle East at the end of 2010, China has been playing a constructive role in promoting a political solution to the issue. It has successively put forward the “six-point proposal,” “four-point initiative,” “five insists,” and “four steps” with respect to the Syria issue, and has actively participated in the work of urging peace and promoting dialogue. On the other hand, China has taken the initiative to assume peacekeeping responsibilities in the Middle East. On September 28, 2015, when attending a peacekeeping summit at the UN headquarters in New York, President Xi Jinping emphasized that China would establish an 8,000-strong peacekeeping standby force and actively participate in peacekeeping operations. China has become a major troop-contributing country and contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, and has formed a hotspot issue resolution path with Chinese characteristics. Between 2006, when China set up its first peacekeeping force in the Middle East—the Lebanese Peacekeeping Engineer Battalion—and May 2020, 18 contingents of Chinese peacekeeping troops have entered Lebanon, contributing China’s strength to resolve conflicts, ease tensions, and shape peace in the Middle East.

In terms of development in the Middle East, China has been actively involved in economic development. In June of 2014, President Xi Jinping pointed out that “China pursues common development. We not only want ourselves to live well, but also want others to live well.” In November, President Xi Jinping re-emphasized, “We should effectively implement the correct concept of righteousness and benefit, do a good job in foreign aid, and truly succeed at promoting justice for others and accommodating their interests.” Since the upheaval in the Middle East, the economies of the region have stagnated, and “problems that have long plagued West Asian countries, such as people living in poverty, economic stagnation, high unemployment, lack of fairness, institutional rigidity, and corruption of the powerful and wealthy, have led to serious ‘governance deficits’ in the countries of the region.” Middle Eastern countries face a difficult transition, with the emergence of problems such as national economic structures that are deeply dependent on traditional energy trade, lack of high-tech industrial systems, and backward agricultural infrastructure. As a result, “many countries in the Middle East are also showing strong demand in many areas, such as infrastructure construction, capacity optimization and upgrading, industrial transformation, and agricultural development.” Given Middle Eastern countries’ fragile state of economic development and their economic transformation requirements, China has insisted on contributing to the development of the Middle East, and has always insisted on treating both the symptoms and the root causes. On one hand, “treating the symptoms” means providing humanitarian assistance to Middle Eastern countries.
to alleviate the negative impacts of economic deterioration on the people. After the Middle East was beset by security difficulties, China gave timely emergency relief supplies or cash to countries in the region in which civil wars had occurred or that had fallen into turmoil, in order to help the people of the war-torn countries weather their difficulties. In January 2016, President Xi Jinping pledged: “To resolve hotspot issues, a ceasefire is the top priority, political dialogue is the fundamental path, and humanitarian relief cannot be delayed. China will provide another 230 million yuan of humanitarian aid to the people of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, and Yemen this year.” On the other hand, “treating the root causes” means providing industrial development assistance to Middle Eastern countries to help them achieve economic transformation. As President Xi Jinping has pointed out, “We shall promote the industrialization of the Middle East and launch production capacity linkage operations ... The cost-effectiveness Chinese equipment, coupled with technology transfer, personnel training, and strong financing support, can help Middle East countries establish steel, non-ferrous metals, building materials, glass, automobile manufacturing, power plants, and other urgently needed industries at less cost, fill in industrial gaps, and develop new comparative advantages. The combination of China’s superior production capacity and the Middle East’s human resources can create more and better employment opportunities.” In short, even as China achieves national prosperity and strength through rapid economic growth, it has not forgotten its international responsibilities, including those to the development and prosperity of Middle Eastern countries. China will take the path of common prosperity together with the countries of the Middle East. The Middle East is one of the most volatile regions in the world today. Various contradictions and conflicts are intertwined, and there is mutual interaction between conflicts, which are mixed with ethnic issues, religious beliefs, ideologies, national development models, and geopolitical interests, so they are exceptionally difficult to resolve. Achieving regional peace will require not only the efforts and development of the region’s countries themselves, but also external assistance. China is a power that is getting ever closer to the center of the world stage. As such, its national interests have extended to the Middle East region, and the region’s turmoil and chaos harm not only the Middle East itself, but also China and the world. According to the United Nations Charter, one of the powers of the Security Council is to “maintain international peace and security in accordance with the principles and objectives of the United Nations.” As a permanent member of the Security Council, China has the responsibility and obligation to contribute to the maintenance of global and regional peace. In today’s rapidly changing world, the time that it can set aside for the Middle East is limited. If Middle Eastern countries are to successfully complete their economic transformation and boost their level of economic development, they will also need help from external forces. Since the 18th Party Congress, China has provided humanitarian assistance to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and other troubled countries in the Middle East to the best of its ability, demonstrating China’s firm belief in proceeding from the fundamental interests of the people of the Middle East and contributing China’s strength to the cause of humanitarian assistance to Middle Eastern countries. As a major power among developing countries, China has deep traditional friendships with Middle Eastern countries, and has the historical friendship and responsibility to help them successfully complete the task of transformation and achieve national development. “In their exchanges through time and space, the two peoples of China and Afghanistan have treated each other sincerely, lived in harmony coming and going on the ancient Silk Road, shared their joys and sufferings in the struggle for national independence, and
watched over and helped each other on the journey of nation-building.”

China’s concept of responsibility for Middle East major country diplomacy is the result of the combined effect of China’s rising comprehensive national power and the expectations of the international community and Middle Eastern countries. As China’s international standing and influence gradually increase, calls from the international community and Middle Eastern countries for China to play a more initiative-taking role in the Middle East have grown louder as well. In this regard, China must respond to the expectations of the international community and countries in the Middle East by assuming responsibility for the region’s peace and development. Assuming the responsibilities of a major power is an important sign that China practices major country diplomacy in the Middle East.

(2) The Concept of Sharing

The concept of sharing in China’s Middle East major country diplomacy refers to abandoning the “zero-sum game” mindset and working together to build a community of shared interests and a community of common destiny. As a major developing country in the world today, China’s economic achievements have attracted the world’s attention. In 2019, China’s gross domestic product amounted to RMB 9,908.65 billion, an increase of 6.1 percent over the previous year, and it has ranked second in the world for a decade. China’s development is not for its own enjoyment. Rather, it wants to share the fruits of development with the world, especially with the numerous developing countries. As early as 2012 when President Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the World Peace Forum, he emphasized, “If a country wants to seek its own development, it must let others develop; if it wants to seek its own security, it must let others be secure; if it wants to seek its own well-being, it must let others enjoy well-being.” In a speech delivered at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2013, President Xi Jinping pointed out: “The world … is increasingly becoming a highly interdependent community of common destiny.” “Countries and peoples should enjoy dignity together,” “enjoy the fruits of development together,” and “enjoy security together.” This was the first time that China put forward to the world at an international occasion the idea of a “community of common destiny” with its concept of sharing. Therefore, the concept of sharing in China’s Middle East major country diplomacy can be reflected specifically in the following three aspects:

First is shared dignity. The most fundamental manifestation of shared dignity is respect for national sovereignty. In the international community today, there are differences between countries in terms of territory, comprehensive national power, and international influence, but national sovereignty is an attribute that all modern countries possess. This means that countries are equal. They have the supreme right to govern internally and the right to independence externally, and they have strong exclusivity. Therefore, countries have the right to choose their development paths independently, and interference by any external forces is not permitted. “A country’s development path can only be decided by its people, based on their own historical heritage, cultural traditions, and level of economic and social development.” In January 2016, when President Xi Jinping held talks with Iranian President Rouhani, he pointed out that China respects and supports the countries and people
of the Middle East in independently exploring the political systems and development paths that suit their national conditions.

Second is the shared fruits of development. Here, sharing has two interrelated aspects: On one hand, China welcomes Middle Eastern countries to “free ride” on China’s economic development. The countries of the Middle East have low levels of economic development. They are deficient in infrastructure and lack mature modern industrial systems. China can help Middle Eastern countries improve their levels of economic development through industrial aid, technical assistance, project-based cooperation, and other ways. On the other hand, China can profit from the resource advantages of Middle Eastern countries. In the context of sustained economic development, China’s demand for fossil energy such as crude oil and natural gas has grown dramatically, and it can import the energy resources necessary for its development from Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, there are comparative advantages in the development of both sides, and from those comparative advantages China and the Middle East can form a virtuous cycle development mechanism.

Third is shared security. Both China and Middle Eastern countries face a series of traditional and non-traditional security issues, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism. In contemporary times, these issues are not only clearly cross-border in nature, but are also increasingly pervasive, catalyzed by the rapid development of media technology. Hence, no country can solve these problems on its own. Cooperation between countries is needed to cope with them. “Security is not just the state of one country, but also a state of ‘superior coexistence’ among regional actors. It requires enhanced cooperation, collaborative innovation, and a heightened sense of mission and responsibility, so as to jointly cope with the challenges of terrorism.”

China’s concept of sharing is rooted in traditional Chinese culture, which emphasizes that “if poor, you can help yourself alone; become rich, then you can help everyone.” A person should have a heart of kindness and compassion, and “if you want to establish yourself, help others establish themselves; if you want to become rich, help others become rich,” but do not be insensitive or uncaring. This is the cultural foundation of China’s concept of sharing. Since the 18th Party Congress, the concept of sharing has taken on new connotations under the new conditions of the times: “Sharing means equal development and sharing together with all countries, so that all the world’s countries and their people can enjoy equal opportunities for development and share the fruits of the world’s economic development together.” In June 2014, President Xi Jinping pointed out, “Sharing means having the fruits of construction benefit the Chinese and Arab peoples more, and more equitably, creating a Chinese-Arab community of interests and community of common destiny.”

The concept of sharing is an inevitable product of the conditions of interdependence between China and the Middle East, and is the key to shaping a community of common destiny. Rapid advances in human material technology have made global transportation and interconnection networks more developed and refined, enabling instant connectivity and complete synchronization across continents, regions, and countries. The deepening development of economic globalization has enabled all countries of the world to participate in transnational financial, trade, and sales networks, and it is
difficult for any country to be detached from these networks and isolated from the world. In this interdependent world, it is only through sharing that humanity can truly express the value of people as human beings. China and the Middle East are also increasingly interdependent within globalized networks, and it is only through sharing rather than exclusivity that the community of common destiny between China and the Middle East can be shaped.

Due to historical reasons and their own specific conditions, different countries have experienced different results under the impact of the wave of globalization, resulting in different gaps or even chasms. Changing this situation will require a sharing mindset rather than a zero-sum game mindset. With a zero-sum game mindset, one wants to benefit oneself alone and not work with others, attending only to one’s own security and ignoring the security of others. Therefore, zero-sum game thinking is incompatible with an era of peace and development, and is a “tumor” in the increasingly close international community. The future of the international community is sharing.

Therefore, in the context of the new era, China adheres to the concept of sharing in Middle East diplomacy: Politically, respecting each other and seeking common ground while maintaining differences; economically, complementing each other’s strengths for mutual benefit; and in terms of security, cooperating in order to cope with challenges and ensure that all human beings can share political dignity, economic development benefits, and common security.

(3) The Concept of Rules

The concept of rules in China’s Middle East major country diplomacy means that, in its exchanges and cooperation with Middle Eastern countries in various fields, China adheres to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and to international law and rules based on the United Nations Charter. International law and rules have been established over centuries and have withstood the test of time. Therefore, adherence to international law and rules is a fundamental concept that every country today should uphold.

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence still have a fundamental guiding role and fresh vitality under the conditions of the new era. In June 2014, when President Xi Jinping participated in a conference commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, he noted the significance of carrying forward the Five Principles in the new situation, including “adherence to sovereign equality, common security, common development, win-win cooperation, inclusiveness and mutual understanding, and fairness and justice.” China’s exchanges and cooperation with countries in the Middle East do not come at the cost of infringing any party’s national sovereignty or interfering in the internal affairs of a country, but rather, on the basis of mutual equality and voluntariness, they are aimed at achieving mutual benefits and win-win outcomes by upgrading political and friendly relations, deepening economic and trade cooperation, strengthening security cooperation, and promoting the development of cultural exchanges. In January 2016, the Chinese government issued “China’s Arab Policy Paper,” which made it clear that “China adheres to the development of relations with Arab countries on the basis of the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in
each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.” The priority of upholding the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence was emphasized in the declarations of the ministerial conferences of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in both 2016 and 2018.

The basic principles of the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are fundamental rules that all countries in the world need to abide by. In January 2017, President Xi Jinping emphasized in his speech titled “Jointly Building a Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva: “Based on the UN Charter, countries have concluded a series of international conventions and legal instruments in fields such as political security, trade and development, social and human rights, science and technology and health, labor and property rights, and sports and culture. The life of the law lies in putting it into practice. All countries have the responsibility to uphold the authority of the international rule of law, exercise their rights in accordance with the law, and fulfill their obligations in good faith.” The declarations signed at the ministerial conferences of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2014, 2016, and 2018 emphasized: “Abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter,” dealing with the Middle East within the framework of UN and international law resolutions, “strengthening dialogue and cooperation within the framework of the United Nations and other international organizations, and promoting the development of the Middle East region in the framework of the United Nations and other international organizations,” “reaffirming the importance of upholding the authority and the leading role of the United Nations in international affairs,” and reaffirming unwavering commitment to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, and respect and support for each country’s independent choice of its own path of development and its own social system.”

There are four main reasons why China’s Middle East major country diplomacy upholds the concept of rules: First, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are the fundamental guiding principles of China’s foreign relations. They have long been enshrined in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, and the inclusion of these principles in the country’s fundamental law determines their guiding status in China’s foreign relations. These principles serve as a guide for China’s exchanges and contacts with all countries, regions, and organizations in the world. Secondly, practice has proven repeatedly that, in the Middle East, only adherence to international law and rules based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence is conducive to maintaining peace and stability in the region. The Palestinian-Israeli issue has remained a chronic problem in the Middle East to this day. The failure of the two sides, especially Israel with the support of the United States, to comply with international law and rules, and its behavior based on self-interest, is one of the major reasons why this issue has not been properly resolved for so long. Israel started the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank of the Jordan River in 1963. In December 2019, the Israeli Defense Minister announced in a statement the approval of a plan to build new Jewish settlements in the Palestinian city of Hebron in the West Bank. The international community considers these illegal settlements a threat to peace and stability in the Middle East. If Israel were to abide by international law and rules, stop the expansion of new Jewish settlements, and respect the sovereignty and
territorial integrity of Palestine, the gravity of the Palestinian-Israeli problem might be largely alleviated. Again, rules-based governance is conducive to promoting the Middle East’s development. President Xi Jinping has emphasized, “Only the people of a country have the final word as to whether its development path is appropriate or not, just as we do not expect all flowers to be violets.” In dealing with the development issues of different countries, we cannot “cut the feet to fit the shoes.” Respecting the development paths chosen by other countries and not interfering in their internal affairs is one of the necessary preconditions for promoting development in the Middle East. Finally, adherence to the concept of rules helps China play a constructive role in the Middle East.

Historically, Britain, France, the United States, and other countries have adopted the strategy of violating the sovereignty of Middle Eastern countries, interfering in their internal affairs, and using divide and rule, and have safeguarded their own interests in the Middle East region by installing puppet regimes, seizing oil and gas resources, and occupying strategic sites. Such practices not only jeopardize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Middle Eastern countries, but also hurt the feelings and self-esteem of all their citizens. China treats all countries in the Middle East equally, respects their sovereignty and territorial integrity, does not interfere in their internal affairs, [adheres to] equality and mutual benefits, and develops mutual relations on the basis of compliance with international law and rules. Consequently, China plays a constructive rather than a destructive role in the Middle East. This is why, wherever China goes, it brings with it international rules and peace and development.

The concept of responsibility is the core of China’s concept of Middle East major country diplomacy. It is China’s response to the expectations of the international community and the Middle East for China following the rise in its national strength and international standing. The concept of sharing is the foundation of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy, and is an important guiding principle for China and Middle Eastern countries in achieving common development and building a community of common destiny. The concept of rules is the guarantee of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy. It is an important assurance for China and the Middle East countries to safeguard the inviolability of their respective national sovereignty and interests during exchanges and cooperation in various fields. Based on the concepts of responsibility, sharing, and rules of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy, the roles China plays in that diplomacy are to be a good partner of the Middle East in mutual learning and mutual understanding, a maintainer of peace and stability, a promoter of common development, and a defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East.

The Roles Defined for China’s Middle East Major Country Diplomacy

“There are two dominant views among international observers on China’s role in the Middle East: “security free rider” and “business seeker.” China has in fact become increasingly active in the Middle East, playing the role of a constructive participant. Since the upheaval in the Middle East, and especially since the 18th National Congress of the CCP, President Xi Jinping has elaborated on China’s role in the world on various international occasions: China must build a network of partnerships around the world and be a “builder of world peace,” “a contributor to global
development,” “a maintainer of international order,” and “a defender of international fairness and justice.” In keeping with this, China in the Middle East should also play the roles of “a good partner in the Middle East for mutual learning and mutual understanding,” “a maintainer of peace and stability in the Middle East,” “a promoter of common development in the Middle East,” and “a defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East.”

(1) Good Partner for Mutual Learning and Mutual Understanding in the Middle East

In today’s world, there are different races, nationalities, and countries, and everyone lives on the same planet. No race, nation, or country should be conceited and disparage other races, nations, and countries. “They may be compared to the four seasons in their alternating progress, and to the sun and moon in their successive shining. All things grow together without injuring one another, their paths running in parallel without collision.” President Xi Jinping has emphasized: “The diversity of civilizations is a basic feature of human society. The world today has a population of 7 billion, more than 200 countries and regions, more than 2,500 ethnic groups, and more than 5,000 languages. The different peoples and civilizations are richly varied, each with its own unique contributions. None are superior to others, and they only differ in their characteristics.” Based on considerations of respect for the diversity of peoples and civilizations, we should also establish the concept of mutual learning and mutual understanding. “Everything has its strengths and weaknesses. We should advocate exchanges and mutual learning, draw on all the excellent cultural achievements created by different countries and peoples, complement each other’s strengths, and incorporate the best from everywhere in a joint effort to create a splendid human civilization.” In its dealings with Middle Eastern countries, therefore, China has always insisted on the role of partner in mutual learning and mutual understanding.

China’s dealings with countries in the Middle East are a continuation of history. The Western Han Dynasty sent Zhang Qian as an envoy to the Western Region, and thus began the history of China’s interaction with Middle Eastern countries. “By the Sui and Tang dynasties, the Silk Road prospered as never before, with merchants from West Asia, the Middle East, and beyond gathering in the eastern capital of Luoyang and the western capital of Chang’an, and with tens of thousands of Arabs and Jews settling there. Through the Silk Road, ancient Chinese science and technology were transported to all parts of Western Asia along with a great number of commodities, while religions from areas to the west of China, such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaism, and Nestorianism, also came to China along the Silk Road and gained many adherents in the Chinese heartland.” China and Afghanistan have a splendid and glorious historical tradition of mutual learning and mutual understanding through the ancient Silk Road land route and maritime spice route. Therefore, it is necessary to carry forward and develop this excellent tradition in the new historical period.

Mutual learning and understanding between China and the Middle East have evolved from the physical dissemination of cultural achievements to today’s exchanges of experience and cooperation in governance, as well mutual dependence on each other. The China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development, initiated by President Xi Jinping, has made China and the Arab states good
partners in mutual learning and understanding since its establishment. President Xi Jinping has pointed out, “The China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development has been functioning well and has become a platform for the two sides to exchange experience in reform and opening up and governance. In the future, the center should be enlarged and strengthened to provide more intellectual support for both sides.” Therefore, China is willing to be a good partner for mutual learning and understanding with countries in the Middle East, so that we gain more wisdom and nourishment from each other under the conditions of the new era, and at the same time introduce China’s experience in governance to the Middle East.

**Maintainer of Peace and Stability in the Middle East**

Conflicts and turmoil in the Middle East are both problems of the Middle Eastern countries themselves and problems of interference by external forces. Big power hegemony in particular is one of the root causes of conflict and turmoil in the Middle East. Western countries, led by the United States, have always practiced the logic of power politics in which big countries control small countries and strong countries dictate to weak countries. In order to maintain its global hegemony after the Cold War, the United States has continuously waged wars and promoted color revolutions in the Middle East. Especially since the Trump government came to power and started “fanning the flames” everywhere in the Middle East, a series of policies has been implemented to stir up the situation in the region: Moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and so on, but also continuing to agitate the Saudis, support Israel’s confrontation with Iran, even issuing irresponsible statements and taking irresponsible actions at will, including assassinations of Iranian intelligence and military leaders. On December 29, 2019, the United States suddenly bombed Iranian bases in Syria and Iraq. During this operation, Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s overseas intelligence and special operations forces, the Quds Brigade, was killed. On January 5, 2020, Trump again threatened on Twitter that 52 Iranian targets had been identified. These statements and actions have exacerbated the geopolitical conflict in the Middle East. The essence of the Trump administration’s Middle East strategy remains hegemonic logic. In contrast, since China established diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1956, China has always maintained politically friendly relations with all Middle Eastern countries, and played an active role in maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East.

Historically, China has suffered from imperialist bullying, and therefore China “has an instinctive rejection of the “power-based nature of Western big power diplomacy, an innate aversion to imperialism, colonialism, and hegemony, and a strong desire for equality, independence, democracy, and inclusiveness in international relations.” The Chinese people finally gained hard-won peace and stability after an arduous struggle. Therefore, not only does China itself reject foreign interference, hegemony, and power politics and maintain its own peace and stability, but it also firmly champions the maintenance of peace and stability in the Middle East.

China’s role as a maintainer of peace and stability in the Middle East is mainly reflected in two ways: First, it respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries in the Middle East, does not
interfere in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern countries, and does not invade the Middle East out of self-interest, triggering conflicts and turmoil in the region. Exchanges and cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries are all based on the norms of international law, for which the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are fundamental. With regard to the future development of Middle Eastern countries, China maintains that, as sovereign states, they have the right to freely choose their own development paths. Any brutal interference in or trampling on the sovereignty of other countries is bound to cause turmoil and unrest. Secondly, China has always insisted on resolving conflicts in the Middle East through political dialogue, negotiations, and other peaceful means. Communication and dialogue are the only ways to achieve peace and stability, rather than countering violence with violence. “China will participate in regional affairs in a constructive manner, fight for justice, work with Arab states to promote dialogue to find the largest common denominator of the concerns of all parties, and provide more public goods for the proper resolution of regional hotspot issues.” China has always played the role of maintainer of peace and stability in the Middle East.

(3) Promoter of Common Development in the Middle East

Today’s international community has long since ceased to be a Hobbesian jungle world. Life-and-death struggle and zero-sum games are no longer the mainstream of the times, and the concepts of peaceful coexistence, common development, and mutual benefits have taken root in people’s hearts. China’s engagement with the Middle East aims to promote the region’s common development and thereby achieve win-win outcomes. As the world’s second largest economy, China hopes that other countries will benefit from its economic development. At the same time, China also benefits from cooperation with developing countries.

Middle Eastern countries have still not been able to extricate themselves from economic development difficulties since the upheaval in the region, but this is also a development opportunity for countries in the region—an opportunity to independently explore development paths and changes in their political and economic systems—so the countries of the Middle East are at a critical moment in their development. At the same time, China has entered a decisive stage in building a well-off society in an all-round way and achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Both China and the countries of the Middle East are at critical points in their national development. Therefore, deepening economic and trade cooperation between the two sides and promoting their common development has become the only way to go.

To this end, China is willing to help Middle Eastern countries build complete industrial development systems, help them promote the industrialization process, and lead them as they set forth on a new cost-effective, people-oriented, and green industrialization path. “The cost-effectiveness of Chinese equipment, coupled with technology transfer, talent training, and strong financing support, can help Middle Eastern countries establish iron and steel, nonferrous metals, building materials, glass, automobile manufacturing, power plants, and other urgently needed industries at less cost, fill in industrial gaps, and cultivate new comparative advantages. The combination of China’s superior production capacity and the Middle East’s human resources can create more and better employment
opportunities.” An important facet of China’s promotion of common development in the Middle East is facilitating the linkage of China’s development strategies with those of Middle Eastern countries, so that each country can make use of its own strengths and capabilities, and give full play to each other’s potential and strengths in order to promote common economic development. The “1+2+3” [nuclear energy, space satellites, and new energy] cooperation pattern proposed by President Xi Jinping emphasizes that, given the Arab states’ superior location and outstanding energy endowment, and China’s mature infrastructure development and outstanding human resource advantages, the two sides should deepen their cooperation and jointly promote the economic development of the Middle East. What countries in the Middle East need for development is capital, technology, and production capacity, and what China needs to expand its foreign exchange and cooperation is to export capital, technology, and production capacity. Economic cooperation between the two sides is thus mutually beneficial. China is willing to be a promoter of common development in the Middle East, adding momentum to deepening cooperation and common development.

(4) Defender of Fairness and Justice in the Middle East

China has always started out by looking at matters on their own merits, without taking sides. It has expressed its position based on the standards of international law and rules, and put forward China’s proposals for solving hotspot issues in the Middle East. On one hand, China has no self-interest in the conflicts among Middle Eastern countries. It does not have any intention, nor will it take any action, to support one side and criticize the other. In the face of the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the Syrian issue, the Iranian nuclear issue, and many other hotspot issues in the Middle East, China will state its attitude based on the merits of the issues themselves. On the other hand, international law and rules based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are the rules that maintain international fairness and justice. The program that China has put forward on Middle East issues based on international law and rules is a program of international rule-based governance, the core of which is the maintenance of fairness and justice in the Middle East. Therefore, China can be said to be the defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East.

To a large extent, the chaos in the Middle East today is due to the divide-and-rule policies of Britain, France, and the United States in the 20th century. After the end of the Cold War, some Western countries, led by the United States and adhering to the Cold War mentality and zero-sum thinking, manipulated the situation in the Middle East through armed invasion, economic control, and cultivation of proxies, aiming to polarize and disrupt the Middle East, constantly create hotspot issues, and benefit in the aftermath. In contrast, China not only has no intention of controlling the Middle East, but also has not acted or sought to fill so-called “vacuums.” The Middle East is located in the “land of five seas and three continents,” and is endowed with extremely rich oil and gas resources. Given the continued development of China’s comprehensive national strength and the rise of its international standing, its interests in the Middle East have inevitably expanded. However, the expansion of its interests does not mean that China has pursued only self-interest like a hegemonic country, or tried to dominate and control the Middle East. Therefore, in the face of the complex situation in the Middle East, China has always been able to take international law and rules as the
standard and propose solutions that are not biased toward any side, thus becoming a genuine
defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East.

Specifically, on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, China insists on achieving a just, comprehensive, and
lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of a “two-State solution.” In accordance with the
relevant treaties and agreements, China supports the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people,
including the right to self-determination and the right to establish an independent state based on the
borders of June 4, 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital, and supports the obtaining of full-fledged
United Nations member status by the State of Palestine. On the Syrian issue, China has emphasized
the maintenance of Syria’s unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and strives to seek a political
solution in order to protect the lives and security of Syrians. On the Iranian nuclear issue, China
insists that, as Iran denuclearizes, the international community should respect and protect Iran’s
normal economic interests, including safeguarding legitimate economic and trade exchanges with
Iran, encouraging further investment in Iran, and allowing Iran to continue to export its oil and gas
resources. On the issue of counter-terrorism, China opposes all forms of terrorist activities and
organizations. At the same time, China opposes linking terrorism to any ethnic group, religion,
country, or civilization, and advocates international counter-terrorism cooperation on the basis of
mutual respect.

In summary, the role of China’s Middle East major country diplomacy has been basically clarified: To
become a good partner in the Middle East for mutual learning and mutual understanding, a
maintainer of peace and stability in the Middle East, a promoter of common development in the
Middle East, and a defender of fairness and justice in the Middle East. Accurate role positioning is
also the key reason why China’s Middle East major country diplomacy has made a series of
achievements.

**Major Achievements of China’s Middle East Major Country
Diplomacy**

With its concept of major country diplomacy and by playing a constructive role, China’s Middle East
major country diplomacy has achieved fruitful results since the 18th Party Congress: Multi-layered
strategic partnerships between the two sides, diversified economic and trade cooperation, dual-track
security cooperation, and institutionalized cultural exchanges and cooperation.

**(1) Multi-Level Strategic Partnerships between China and the Middle East**

Since the 18th Party Congress, strategic partnerships between China and Middle East countries have
been developing steadily, and are characterized by being differentiated and multi-level. In November
2014, President Xi Jinping pointed out that “we should make a wide range of friends and form a
network of partnerships across the globe on the premise of adhering to the principle of non-
alignment.” Guided by this idea, China has steadily developed strategic partnerships with countries
in the Middle East. It maintains good relationships with almost all countries in the region, including
relationships on two levels—partnership and non-partnership. Partnerships comprise three levels:
comprehensive strategic partnership, strategic partnership, and comprehensive partnership for innovation. As of May 2020, nine countries in the Middle East had established strategic partnerships with China (see Table 1): Comprehensive strategic partnership countries (first level) are the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran; strategic partnership countries (second level) are Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and Iraq; and Israel and China have established a “comprehensive partnership for innovation (third level).” The strategic partner countries in the Middle East region have different degrees of “pivot country” status in China’s Middle East major power diplomatic strategy. With pivot countries as strategic partners, “China will gain ‘levers’ in the Middle East with which to leverage Middle East affairs, and China will have an important geo-strategic support for promoting Middle East strategy,” which is conducive to China’s constructive involvement in Middle East affairs and the protection of China’s interests in the region.

Strategic partner relationships are the basis for China to play a constructive role in the Middle East: It is only with partnerships that China and the Middle East can better learn from and understand each other, and that China can have the legitimacy to act as a defender of peace and stability in the Middle East, be more willing to take part in the process of common development in the Middle East as a promoter role, and be more motivated to act as a defender to support fairness and justice in the Middle East.

Table 1. Middle Eastern countries that have established partnerships with China (as of May 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Partnership</th>
<th>Country and Time of Partnership Establishment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive partnership for innovation</td>
<td>Israel (2017)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: China and the UAE established a strategic partnership in 2012, which was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2018. Source: Author’s own work based on information from the website of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201, 2020-05-12.

(2) Diversification of China-Middle East Economic and Trade Cooperation

China’s economic and trade cooperation with the Middle East is the embodiment of China’s role as a promoter of common development in the Middle East. Traditionally, economic and trade cooperation between the two sides has focused mainly on oil and gas resources, but since 2013, it has increasingly diversified into the “1+2+3” cooperation pattern proposed by President Xi Jinping. Under the guidance of this pattern, China and the Middle East countries have achieved fruitful results in terms of economic and trade cooperation mechanisms.

1. Energy cooperation has been perfected. First, China’s crude oil import transactions with Middle
Eastern countries have increased year by year. From 2013 to 2018, the overall trend in tons of crude oil imports by China from oil-producing countries in the Middle East region has shown steady growth (see Table 2). Second, cooperation in oil exploration, extraction, refining, and other upstream oil sectors has been gradually developed. For example, in December 2015, China National Petroleum Corporation signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Mubadala Petroleum [now Mubadala Energy] of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that specifically includes cooperation in onshore conventional projects, offshore projects, and liquefied natural gas projects; in January 2016, Sinopec set up a technology innovation center in Dharan Techno Valley Science Park in Saudi Arabia; in July 2018, BGP Inc. (4P) signed a contract with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) for physical exploration and acquisition. Third, the construction of oil and gas resource channels between China and Middle Eastern countries is being perfected. In 2013, the Abu Dhabi crude oil pipeline project, which plays a positive role in stabilizing the supply of oil and natural gas in the Middle East, was put into operation by China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau.

Table 2. China’s crude oil imports from Middle Eastern countries, 2013-2018 (in units of 10,000 tons)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UAE (United Arab Emirates)</td>
<td>1027.6</td>
<td>1165.2</td>
<td>1257</td>
<td>1218.3</td>
<td>1016.2</td>
<td>1220</td>
<td>8.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>2548.2</td>
<td>2974.3</td>
<td>3206</td>
<td>3507</td>
<td>3101</td>
<td>3290.7</td>
<td>13.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>124.9</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>208.4</td>
<td>208.7</td>
<td>29.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>934.7</td>
<td>1062</td>
<td>1442</td>
<td>1634</td>
<td>1824.5</td>
<td>2321</td>
<td>57.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>101.4</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>222.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>5389</td>
<td>4966</td>
<td>5054.2</td>
<td>5100</td>
<td>5218.4</td>
<td>5673</td>
<td>2.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>245.3</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>155.9</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>156.7</td>
<td>124.5</td>
<td>-28.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>2351.4</td>
<td>2858</td>
<td>3211.4</td>
<td>3621.6</td>
<td>3686.5</td>
<td>4505</td>
<td>38.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>2144</td>
<td>2746</td>
<td>2661.6</td>
<td>3129.5</td>
<td>3115</td>
<td>2927.4</td>
<td>16.85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. The demonstration effect of project promotion cooperation has been obvious. First, the construction of infrastructure projects by China and countries in the Middle East has developed rapidly in recent years. The Mecca Light Rail project in Saudi Arabia, constructed by China Railway Construction Corporation, has provided 30,000 jobs for Saudi Arabia’s young labor force and more than 2,000 trainings for students of several universities, and will provide training for managers in the future. Second, China and Middle Eastern countries have seen rapid development in the construction of power stations and other major projects. In September 2015, PowerChina signed a $230 million contract with Saudi Electricity Company (SEC) for a large-scale power station. This has played a positive role in further deepening power cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia.
and expanding the influence of Chinese power and engineering contracting enterprises in the Middle East.

3. Cooperation in high-tech fields has grown rapidly. In the field of nuclear energy, in August 2017, a joint research project on uranium extraction from seawater between China National Nuclear Corporation’s Beijing Chemical Metallurgy Research Institute and King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology was officially launched. In the field of new energy, the ministers of finance of China and Israel signed a China-Israel clean technology financial cooperation protocol in Beijing in September 2017. According to the protocol, Israel will support the construction of Chinese projects in the field of clean technology and provide China with preferential loans for the introduction of Israeli equipment and technology. In the aerospace field, the first China-Arab States BeiDou Cooperation Forum was held in Shanghai in May 2018. China and the Arab states will jointly study satellite navigation application technologies and solutions in the fields of intelligent transportation, land surveying and mapping, precision agriculture, public security, etc., and promote the BeiDou system to serve the economic and social development of Arab countries.

4. Negotiations on the construction of free trade areas have made positive progress. As of July 2019, three free trade areas (FTAs) had been negotiated between China and Middle Eastern countries, namely the China-GCC FTA, the China-Israel FTA, and the China-Palestine FTA. In February 2016, the sixth round of negotiations on the China-GCC FTA was completed in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, and in January 2019, the first round of negotiations on the China-Palestine FTA was held in the provisional Palestinian capital, Ramallah. In May, the sixth round of negotiations on the China-Israel FTA was held in Beijing. “The FTA negotiations involve trade in goods and trade in services, including government procurement, technical cooperation, standardization and many other complex contents,” but all parties are still actively promoting the negotiation process and making positive progress.

5. The construction of industrial parks has expanded. Industrial parks refer to large tracts of land developed “for simultaneous use by a number of enterprises to facilitate their geographical proximity and sharing of infrastructure.” Enterprises entering an industrial park can not only share infrastructure and various services, but may also reduce logistics costs and even transaction costs due to the geographic proximity of supporting or cooperating enterprises.” China’s construction of industrial parks in Middle Eastern countries aims to promote exchanges and cooperation between the two sides in the policy, economic and trade, and social and cultural fields through the development of local infrastructure construction, agricultural and mining resource development, high-tech industry, medical industry, etc., by resident Chinese enterprises. The China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone is a key project in China’s “Going Global” strategy. By the end of 2018, the project had exceeded $1 billion in actual investment, paid more than 1 billion Egyptian pounds in taxes, directly met the employment needs of more than 3,500 people, and trained and made available a number of excellent management personnel and technical staff for Egypt. The Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone provides a model for the construction of cooperation zones. It plays an active role in the Belt and Road Initiative through effective linkage with the development strategies of other countries. In addition, in April 2019, Guangdong Evergreen Group Co., Ltd. signed a contract with
Saudi company Falcon Vision for an aquaculture industrial park in Saudi Arabia. After completion, the industrial park will greatly promote the development of Saudi Arabia’s aquaculture industry, provide high-quality aquatic products for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, benefit the Saudi people, and contribute to Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030” plan.

6. The construction of financial cooperation mechanisms has grown rapidly. In December 2015, China and the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding on an investment cooperation fund, with the two sides seeking to invest in a variety of fields, including conventional and renewable energy, infrastructure, science and technology, and advanced manufacturing. Going from traditional economic and trade project cooperation to the establishment of a China-UAE investment fund represents an important step for deepening economic cooperation between the two countries in the new era, which is of strategic significance for cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, the Asian Infrastructure Development Bank (AIDB) and the China-Arab States Bank Consortium have played a positive role in establishing a long-term, stable, and mutually beneficial financial partnership between China and the Arab states, and have provided important financial support for China-Arab state cooperation in various fields. As of May 2020, the UAE, Oman, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Iran, Bahrain, and Lebanon were all members of the AIDB. This not only strengthens bilateral financial exchanges and cooperation between countries and effectively coordinates their development plans with the Belt and Road Initiative in the financial field, but also enables them to obtain funds through the AIDB to promote the construction of infrastructure projects in their respective countries.

Economic and trade cooperation between China and the Middle East has gradually gone from traditional single-commodity trade to industrial cooperation, technical cooperation, and financial cooperation. From the viewpoint of industrial cooperation, the two sides have formed their own industrial systems in different areas of trade in goods, and China is helping Middle Eastern countries achieve industrial upgrading. From the perspective of technical cooperation, the two sides seek to deepen cooperation in clean energy and alternative energy technologies in order to take more initiative in the future, and China is helping countries in the region achieve technological innovation. In terms of financial cooperation, if the Middle East countries are to feel more assured, they need cooperation in the exploitation of petrochemical energy, mastery of advanced extraction technology, and a solution to the problem of energy funding. On the other hand, technology and capital are precisely the advantages China has for helping the Middle East. In addition, the petro-yuan and the central bank’s digital currency (DCEP) will be conducive to financial cooperation between the two sides and the enhancement of China’s financial role. With the accelerating internationalization of the yuan, the petro-yuan has been launched. “The establishment of the petro-yuan will expand the application of the yuan in international settlements based on international trade in oil, and will drive the implementation of yuan settlement in other international trade areas, establish a mechanism for the circular flow of the yuan in the international monetary and financial systems, and boost the yuan’s internationalization.” And the DCEP, which had already been proposed by the People’s Bank of China in 2014, is in the works.
China’s cooperation with the Middle East on responding to non-traditional security threats has moved from single-track to dual-track cooperation with both official and civil channels. This fully reflects China’s role as a maintainer of peace and stability in the Middle East. In addition to traditional security threats, the Middle East is also subject to non-traditional security threats. Since the upheaval in the Middle East in late 2010, non-traditional security threats in the Middle East have mostly included piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the “three forces” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism), with official cooperation being the main way for coping with them. Piracy in the Gulf of Aden has had a serious impact on the security of oil and gas sea lanes in the Middle East. From December 2008, when China first participated in escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters, through to May 2020, China had dispatched a total of 35 escort formations, which have accomplished their escort missions well and ensured the smooth flow of the Maritime Silk Road’s key corridors. The “three forces” are the primary security threats to people in the Middle East. At the same time, China has also targeted these “three forces” for resolute attack. Also, the “Eastern Turkestan” terrorist forces represented by the “Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement” have used the Middle East as their base, posing a huge threat to the safety of Chinese embassies and diplomats in Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, there is great potential for cooperation between China and the Middle East in combating the “three forces.” Specific measures include joint counter-terrorism exercises, transnational operational training for police personnel, establishment of a joint crisis early warning mechanism, and the curbing of extremist ideology. For example, in April 2016, during the Fifth Foreign Ministers’ Meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu and Foreign Minister Wang Yi reached an agreement on effectively strengthening the two countries’ cooperation on counter-terrorism and security, combating the “Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement,” and curbing illegal migration. In October 2016, China and Saudi Arabia held their first joint counter-terrorism training. In November 2016, May 2018 and June 2019, China held three consecutive sessions of the Great Wall International Forum on Counter-terrorism, at which representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Israel and other Middle Eastern countries explored and shared effective measures for combating the threat of terrorism.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic at the end of 2019 led to the dual-tracking of China’s non-traditional security cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, the results of which have been fruitful. Dual-tracking means that the official and private sector tracks run in parallel. The first is the official track. It can be divided into two phases: In the first phase, mainly after the outbreak of the epidemic in China, Middle Eastern countries provided support and assistance to China. Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Israel, and Qatar “provided emergency medical supplies to China.” In the second phase, after the COVID-19 epidemic in China was basically under control, China returned the favor to the Middle Eastern countries. “China sent emergency medical teams, assisted with ventilators and masks, set up a COVID-19 testing center, donated epidemic prevention manuals, held a video conference on epidemic prevention, introduced its experience in fighting the epidemic, and provided medical assistance to Middle Eastern countries.”

On March 25, 2020, during the
critical period in Iran’s fight against the epidemic, the Chinese government provided emergency medical supplies to Iran, the country in the Middle East where the epidemic was most severe, effectively alleviating the difficulties of Iran’s shortage of medical supplies. On March 26, China held a video conference with health officials and experts from 16 countries in the Middle East region as well as the GCC, with the aim of exchanging information, deepening cooperation in the fight against the epidemic, and working together to safeguard regional and global health security. The video conference was jointly hosted by the Department of Asian and African Affairs of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Department of the National Health Commission, with assistance from Chinese embassies in West Asia and North Africa.

The second is the private sector track. Guided by cooperation and exchanges at the official level, Chinese private sector groups have made important contributions to the fight against the epidemic in Middle Eastern countries. On March 25, Chinese-funded enterprises and overseas Chinese in Turkey donated a total of 65,200 masks, 10,000 pieces of surgical headgear, and 5,000 surgical gowns to Turkey; the Sichuan Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai donated a total of 220,000 masks to Iran, and the Islamic Association of Shanghai donated a total of RMB 100,000 worth of medical equipment to Iran. Shanghai enterprises such as Ctrip, 54Traveler and China Resources C’estbon Beverage donated more than 500,000 masks to Iran, and a large number of medical supplies were donated by the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation to 54 African countries, including North African countries, to help them fight the COVID-19 outbreak.

The dual-tracking of non-traditional security cooperation between China and the Middle East breaks past the single-dimensional nature of cooperation at the official level to form a dual-track mode of cooperation with official guidance and carried out by both the governmental and private sector. This makes up for the shortcomings of official cooperation on the one hand, and on the other hand makes cooperation more flexible. Compared with the more programmed official cooperation, private sector cooperation is more flexible, and appropriate cooperation strategies can be formulated and cooperation methods can be changed according to the specific situation, thus making the cooperation more effective. This has provided inspiration for China and Middle East countries to carry out dual-track cooperation in other non-traditional security areas.

(4) Institutionalization of Cultural Exchanges between China and the Middle East

If China and the Middle East are to become good partners in mutual learning and mutual understanding, they need to make breakthroughs in the field of cultural exchanges. With the rising tide of political, security, and economic relations between China and the Middle East, cultural exchanges between the two sides have increased. Cultural exchanges between China and Middle Eastern countries have clearly strengthened since 2013. The 2014 Beijing Declaration of the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF states that it “welcomes 2014-2015 as the Year of China-Arab Friendship, which will enhance understanding and friendship between the Chinese and Arab peoples through the development of cooperative activities in various fields, such as economy and trade, culture, education, science and technology, journalism, health, youth, and women.” In both the 2016 Doha Declaration of the Seventh Ministerial Conference of the CASCF and the 2018 Beijing
Declaration of the Eighth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF, the action goals in humanities fields have been increased compared to the previous ones, with 10 and 15 entries, respectively, and the division of action goals has become more detailed, with a greater number of humanities fields involved, such as scientific research and education. On July 6, 2020, the Ninth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF was held virtually, with the theme of “Joining Hands to Build a China-Arab Community of Common Destiny for the New Era.” The meeting produced the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum 2020-2022 Action Implementation Plan, which elaborates on China-Arab cooperation in broad areas of cultural exchanges. The rich and varied content includes cooperation in tourism, human resource development, intellectual property rights, cultural cooperation, and dialogue of civilizations, as well as cooperation in the fields of libraries and information, education and scientific research, health and social development, journalism, the private sector, women, youth and sports, sustainable development, and population policy. Humanities exchanges have evolved from the occasional introduction of history and culture and lauding of cultural achievements to fixed and organized exchanges. At present, the institutionalization of cultural exchanges between China and the countries of the Middle East is mainly manifested in the holding of regular conferences on dialogue of civilizations, the building of cooperative research centers, and construction of Confucius Institutes.

First is the holding of conferences on dialogue among civilizations. In June 2013, the Fifth Seminar on China-Arab State Relations and China-Arab Civilization Dialogue was held in Urumqi, Xinjiang. The seminar emphasized that the Chinese and Islamic civilizations are treasures of human civilization and have made great contributions to the civilizational progress of human societies, and that the continuous deepening of the concepts of peace, inclusiveness, understanding, and dialogue among civilizations can help to promote exchanges and mutual understanding between China and the Arab states and their peoples, and is helpful for jointly maintaining the diversity of world cultures and expanding China-Arab cooperation. In August 2017, the China-Arab Dialogue of Civilizations and Roundtable on Eradicating Extremism was held in Chengdu, bringing to fruition the proposal for a China-Arab conference on dialogue of civilizations and eradicating extremism put forward by President Xi Jinping during his visit to the headquarters of the Arab League in 2016. The main topics of the conference were “Dialogue of Civilizations in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative” “Eradicating Extremism,” “Golden Mean (Doctrine of the Mean) Thought in Chinese and Arab Civilization,” and “Respecting and Protecting Diversity.” At the conference, in-depth discussions were held on how to cut off the spread of extremist ideas through the Internet, social media, etc., and a consensus was reached on promoting positive reporting in the field of eradicating extremism on both sides, facilitating interaction among religious communities, and further promoting the philosophy of moderation and the golden mean. In December 2019, the 8th Seminar on China-Arab State Relations and China-Arab Dialogue of Civilizations was held in Morocco. At the seminar, the issues of “Using Soft Power Diplomacy to Promote a Culture of Peace,” “The Role of Sustainable Development in Promoting a Culture of Peace,” “Promoting Cultural Diversity” and “Using Traditional and Modern Means of Communication to Oppose Terrorist Violence and Extremist Ideologies” were discussed in depth.
Second is the establishment of the China-Arab States Research Center on Reform and Development and holding the China-Arab States Forums on Reform and Development. In January 2016, Xi Jinping initiated the establishment of the China-Arab States Research Center on Reform and Development, and the Center was formally established in April 2017. The research center is committed to integrating external exchanges, joint training, think tank consulting, and other functions as a world-class think tank and thought exchange platform. The Center holds the China-Arab States Forum on Reform and Development every year, in which government officials, experts, and scholars from China and Arab countries exchange their experiences in governance, and explore China’s path and the development paths of Arab states, and promoting construction of the China-Arab “Belt and Road,” among other topics. At the first China-Arab States Forum on Reform and Development, held in Beijing in April 2018, in-depth discussions were conducted on these topics. In April 2019, the second China-Arab States Forum on Reform and Development was held in Shanghai under the theme of “Building the ‘Belt and Road’ and Sharing Development and Prosperity,” and discussions were held on “Policy Communication,” “Deepening Cooperation,” and “Think Tank Exchanges.”

Third is the promotion of cultural exchange through Confucius Institutes. Confucius Institutes have become an important platform for cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries. Since 2013, the implementation plans announced by the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum have all emphasized “supporting training programs for Chinese language teachers in Arab countries by opening Confucius Institutes in Arab countries and other means.” As of June 2019, China had set up 17 Confucius Institutes and 3 Confucius Classrooms in 9 countries in the Middle East.

In July 2019, the Confucius Institute Headquarters and the Ministry of Education of the UAE signed a “Memorandum of Understanding on Integrating the Chinese Language into the Primary and Secondary Education System of the UAE,” making the UAE the first Arab and Middle Eastern country to incorporate Chinese into the national education system. This will have a positive impact on language and cultural exchanges between China and the UAE, and will play an important role as a model for Chinese language teaching in the Middle East and around the world. China’s opening of Confucius Institutes and Classes in Middle Eastern countries helps people in the Middle East understand China’s history, culture, current development situation, and development concepts. Confucius Institutes have become important nodes and cultural links between China and the Middle East.

**Conclusion**

Since the upheaval in the Middle East in 2010, China’s diplomacy entered a turning point stage in the implementation of major-country diplomacy. As China’s national strength and international standing have increased, calls for China’s participation in Middle East affairs by the international community and countries in the Middle East region have gradually grown louder. In the face of the complex security situation and the need for stability and development in the region following the upheaval in the Middle East, China, on the basis of a series of principled consensuses on the development of mutual relations with the countries of the Middle East region, has designed its strategic goals for the Middle East, choosing the four major practical paths: partnership, the Belt and Road Initiative,
coordination of diplomacy by special envoys, and the mechanism of forums for official cooperation. In order to promote its Middle East major country diplomacy strategy, China adheres to the three major diplomatic concepts of “responsibility, sharing, and rules,” strives to play the role of a constructive participant in the Middle East region, and has achieved fruitful diplomatic results. China’s Middle East diplomacy has formed a holistic logical framework of “strategic connotation—diplomatic concepts—diplomatic role—diplomatic achievements.”

In the future, China’s Middle East major country diplomacy will face many difficulties: First, a Cold War-style tit-for-tat relationship has formed between Iran, the leader of the Shiite sect in the Islamic world, and Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia. China needs to think deeply about how to maintain policy balance in its dealings with each. Second, although the Israeli-Palestinian issue has been gradually marginalized due to the upheaval in the Middle East, the civil war in Syria, and the ravages of the Islamic State, the Trump administration’s series of Middle East policies have again intensified the Israeli-Palestinian issue. China needs to pay attention to how to respond to the Israeli-Palestinian issue more flexibly and effectively on the basis of adherence to the principles of international law. Third, while China’s promotion of the BRI in the Middle East has made great achievements in general, the progress of some specific cooperation projects has been slow, and there have been many contradictions. This has generated both optimism and pessimism. Therefore, how to prevent over-optimism and pessimism is another major issue that China’s Middle East major country diplomacy will face in the future. Fourth, properly handling relationships with extra-regional actors in the Middle East, such as the EU, Russia, and the United States, especially handling the strategic competition with the United States, is a major challenge for China’s Middle East diplomacy. In the view of the United States, China’s influence in the Middle East continues to rise, rendering the United States’ “strong monopoly” unipolar structure in the Middle East somewhat out of control, and the United States is worried that China, Russia, and others will become “vacuum-fillers” in the region. It is constantly casting suspicion on China with insinuations, in the belief that China, Russia, and other countries will fill the vacuum in the Middle East region caused by the collapse of states and prolonged regional conflict. Fifth, the security, economic, and social risks in the Middle East have become more pronounced in recent years. Especially after Trump came to power, the U.S. government has arbitrarily bombed the Middle East, arbitrarily expanded sanctions against Iran, and arbitrarily assassinated Iranian leaders, so the uncertainty of the U.S. Middle East strategy is increasing, and all kinds of security risks in the Middle East will become even more complicated and confusing. In the future, the top priority will be to promptly design, adjust, and gradually adapt China’s Middle East major country diplomacy strategy and China’s role as a constructive participant in the Middle East, on the basis of adherence to the concepts of responsibility, sharing, and rules, and in accordance with changes in Middle East issues and the strategic environment, so as to avoid the major security risks that may appear in the Middle East region.

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The Accession of Arab Countries to the BRICS Is an Important Milestone in the Trend of Diversification in International Politics

阿拉伯国家加入金砖国家是国际政治多元化趋势的重要里程碑

The most important reasons for Arab countries to apply to join the BRICS is to try to reach an Arab consensus by changing the international system and transforming it into a “multipolar” system, and to activate the balancing role that Arab countries have on the international stage. In addition to repositioning the energy field, especially within the framework of the “OPEC+” group, they are simultaneously striving to balance relations with the major powers of the East and West in the process of the diversification of economic and political relations among Arab countries.

A milestone in the trend of diversification

Arab Wall, an influential think tank in the Arab world, published a commentary on August 27 stating that, at the BRICS Summit in Johannesburg, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa confirmed that
the BRICS organization would strengthen its ranks by adding “six” new countries, including “three” Arab states: the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. According to Brazilian President Lula da Silva, starting from January 1, 2024, the addition of these new members will strengthen the group in terms of purchasing power parity. These new members “will enlarge the BRICS share of global GDP from about 32% to 37%.”

The accession of three Arab countries to the BRICS is an important milestone for the organization, giving it a major role in changing the balance of economic power on the world stage. The accession of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran gives BRICS countries more say in oil and natural gas, while adding technological advantages in the development of the rare earth industry. In addition, the three Arab countries (the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) can become candidates for the production and export of clean energy in the coming decades. These clean energy sources will give a competitive edge to BRICS countries over others that rely on fossil fuels.

**Motivation to join**

There are many reasons why Arab countries seek to join the BRICS, the most important of which are the following:

1. There is compatibility between Arab countries’ desire to join the BRICS and their attempts to change the international system. Through the continuous attempts of Russia, China, and other countries, the world order is rapidly transforming from a unipolar system led by the United States to a multipolar system. Today, Arab countries can transform, leaving behind their uniform identity as just oil and gas exporters and leveraging the BRICS organization to become Arab states with other significant advantages. It is worth noting that the requests of Arab countries to join BRICS are seen as a trend toward the “East.” BRICS seeks a clear goal, namely, “establishing a world order different from the current order.” China, which accounts for 70% of the BRICS GDP, is helping to shift the economic center of gravity to this part of the world by proposing a new economic strategy.

2. Activate the flexible balancing role of Arabs on the international stage: The Arab countries applying to join the BRICS hope to implement a “flexible balancing” strategy among major international powers by having Arabs move eastward and join active organizations in Asia and Eurasia, such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. However, all this does not mean moving away from traditional strategic allies as represented by the United States and its European allies.

In particular, in anticipation of any political or economic changes, the characteristics of the strategies of Arab countries [will change]. For example, the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict produced changes in various fields such as economics, trade, and security. The countries that represent the center of gravity in the region seem to need to diversify their strategic allies in the region in order to achieve balance in the field of international relations.

3. Diversification of international economic and political relations: Many advantages will be gained as Arab countries gain recognition as members of the BRICS bloc. Although these countries have
different national conditions, most of them have common economic needs. On the one hand, Arab states, especially the Gulf states, are seeking to diversify their economic and political relations by pursuing new investment partnerships, especially with China. At the same time, in addition to coordination within the “OPEC+” group, they seek to establish close cooperation with Russia in the energy market.

On the other hand, they are seeking a balance in economic relations. Here, the obvious example is Egypt, which seeks to achieve two goals: First, to move into the future in a strategic and clear-eyed manner in cooperation with “new allies” representing a diverse and powerful economic bloc. Second, to rely on alliances with “multipolar” forces to reduce pressure from the West, at least in terms of economics and finances.

4. Restructuring the energy market: BRICS, with its enormous capacity to control a large part of the global energy market in terms of production and even consumption, especially after the accession of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has also enabled member countries to play an important role in the restructuring of the global energy market.

Specifically, the new members Saudi Arabia and the UAE are major global oil producers, while China and India are major global oil consumers. Russia, an original member of BRICS, UAE and Saudi Arabia hold a pivotal position in global oil production. At the same time, Russia and new member Iran are also among the top global producers of natural gas.

In addition, according to an analysis by the Dutch bank ING on August 20, BRICS will also benefit from the membership of oil and gas exporting countries, specifically Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran. This is because membership signals tacit alignment with the bloc’s attempts to deepen “trends” around the use of currencies other than the U.S. dollar in oil trading and the siege of the U.S. dollar’s dominance in global trade.

**Dual Hopes**

Against this background, as many countries are expressing interest in joining BRICS, it can be said that the organization is expected to become a player in global governance, especially given the potential diversity of countries seeking to join. While this is a matter of Arab interest, Arab states do not, however, seem to see their future participation in BRICS as being incompatible with their participation in other (regional or global) economic blocs.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the Arab focus is on benefiting from the common goal of the BRICS countries to establish a multipolar world order, especially in the wake of developments at the global level, specifically in the context of the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent schism in international relations. Perhaps most importantly, a situation of “dual hopes” has emerged between the BRICS countries on the one hand and the Arab countries joining BRICS on the other, wherein both parties wish to jointly benefit from this accession, especially in the economic field.
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