

## China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East

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**Abstract:** Since the end of the Cold War, China has gradually formulated a global and multi-dimensional partnership network. China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East is a crucial component of said network, including partners in the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the Maghreb region. Based on their level of importance to China, these countries can be roughly divided into four categories, namely "pivot states," "node states," "key states" and "stronghold states," which constitute the portfolio of China's partnership diplomacy in the region. In prospect, China's partnership diplomacy will be evolving from bilateral cooperation to multilateral consultation, from partnership with sovereign states to that with international organizations, and from state-based partnership to issue-oriented partnership.

**Keywords:** partnership diplomacy, China and the Middle East, Chinese diplomacy, strategic partnership, alliance diplomacy

Since entering the 21st century, the creation of a global partnership network has been a significant part of China's major-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. China's partnerships in the Middle East have taken two forms, namely, multilateral and bilateral partnerships. The former refers to the collective cooperation between China and the League of Arab States (22 Arab states in total, hereafter the Arab League), the African Union (including 10 Arab states), the Gulf Cooperation Council (the six Arab states in the Gulf, hereafter the GCC), the Union of the Arab Maghreb (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) and the

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Organization of Islamic Cooperation (57 member states). For instance, in 2010, China and the Arab League established a relationship of strategic cooperation, which then developed into a strategic partnership in 2018.

The latter refers to the bilateral partnership diplomacy between China and Middle Eastern countries, including the comprehensive strategic partnerships between China and Algeria (2014), Egypt (2014), Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016) and the United Arab Emirates (2018), and the strategic cooperation with Turkey (2010), innovative comprehensive partnership with Israel (2017) and the strategic partnership between China and Qatar (2014), Jordan (2015), Iraq (2015), Morocco (2016), Sudan (2016), Djibouti (2017), Oman (2018) and Kuwait (2018).

### **Dynamics of China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East**

Since entering the 21st century, China has established all-round strategic partnership, innovative comprehensive partnership, strategic partnership or strategic cooperation with 15 different countries in the Middle East, featuring an increasing number of partners, an increasing level of partnership and a further enriching of the content of bilateral cooperation. When implementing partnership diplomacy in the Middle East, China always takes into account all the relevant factors, in particular, the capability (economic strength, regional influence, political stability, etc.) and willingness (economic interdependence, political friendliness, etc.) of the target country.

First, the economic strength of the target country. The greater the economic strength of a Middle Eastern country, the greater its capability of carrying out strategic cooperation with China, thus the more proactive China's partnership diplomacy towards said country will be. Here, economic strength refers to both the domestic economic performance of the target country and its position in the international division of labor. The relevant factors include GDP, money supply, the consumer price index, the producer price index, the consumer confidence index, employment, retail goods and food sales, new housing, manufacturing and trade in value

added, stock market, etc.<sup>1</sup> This article has chosen GDP as the standard to measure the economic strength of Middle Eastern countries. According to the standard, the top 10 countries with the highest GDP in the Middle East are all strategic partners of China, while the top 10 countries with the lowest GDP (except Jordan, Sudan and Djibouti) have not yet established strategic partnerships with China.

Second, the regional influence of the target country. The greater the regional influence of a Middle Eastern country, the greater their capability of carrying out strategic cooperation with China, thus the more proactive China's partnership diplomacy towards said country will be. The core of regional influence lies in military capabilities, which include subjective and objective factors such as weaponry, command, communication, intelligence, control over key areas and morale and quality of combatants. Due to tremendous differences in the national conditions of each state, the military capabilities of Middle Eastern countries vary. There are generally three ways for a country to expand its influence: (a) projection of military might, seen, for example, with Iran, Turkey, Egypt and Israel; (b) relying on religious or sectarian power, like Saudi Arabia and Iran who both respectively enjoy a prestigious position in areas dominated by the Sunnis and the Shias; and (c) unique strategic resources, for example, the oil and natural gas in the Gulf area, the phosphates in Morocco, the Suez Canal in Egypt, the Persian Gulf controlled by Iran, the Strait of Bosphorus controlled by Turkey, the Gulf of Aden controlled by Djibouti, and so on. Here, this article has chosen military expenditures as an index to measure the regional influence of Middle Eastern countries. According to this standard, the top 10 countries in the Middle East with the highest military spending are all strategic partners of China (except Syria), while the top 10 countries with the lowest military spending (except Jordan and Djibouti) are not strategic partners of China.

Third, the political stability of the target country. The more politically stable a Middle Eastern country, the greater its capability of carrying out

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<sup>1</sup> "The Top 10 Economic Indicators: What to Watch and Why," *American Association of Individual Investors Journal*, August 2003, accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.aaii.com/journal/article/the-top-10-economic-indicators-what-to-watch-and-why>.

strategic cooperation with China, thus the more proactive China's partnership diplomacy towards said country will be. Aiming at medium or long-term cooperation, the partnership in question requires a stable and predictable political environment as a guarantee. If a target country is in constant turmoil and its central government has lost authority, it will be impossible for the two sides to carry out medium or long-term cooperation and China's partnership diplomacy will consequently face enormous risks and uncertainties. In general, the political turmoil in the Middle East exists because of both internal and external reasons. The former mainly refer to the decline of the sense of national identity or even civil war and the de facto partitioning of the country caused by tribal, national and sectarian conflicts, which is apparent in the cases of Somalia, Yemen, Lebanon, Sudan and Palestine; the latter mainly refer to the loss of authority and weakening of the central government because of external interference, which is evident in the cases of Libya, Syria and Iraq. This article has chosen the social stability index issued by international organizations like the UN as the standard to assess the political stability of Middle Eastern countries. This standard is mainly based on 12 indicators, namely, the national security framework, factional struggle, mass events, economic decline, uneven economic development, brain drain, state legitimacy, public services, human rights and rule of law, demographic pressures, refugees and internally-displaced persons, and external intervention.<sup>1</sup> The top 10 most stable countries in the Middle East (except Bahrain and Tunisia) are all strategic partners of China, while the top 10 most fragile countries (except Iraq, Egypt and Sudan) are not strategic partners of China.

Fourth, economic interdependence. The greater the economic interdependence between China and a Middle Eastern country, the stronger its desire for carrying out strategic cooperation with China, thus the more proactive China's partnership diplomacy will be. The six member countries of the GCC, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Morocco and some other countries in this region depend on the West for their security, although they

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<sup>1</sup> "CAST Conflict Assessment Framework Manual: The Fund for Peace," accessed June 21, 2019, <http://library.fundforpeace.org/library/cfsir1418-castmanual2014-english-03a.pdf>.

pursue an economic strategy of diversification and balance. While Iran, Syria, Algeria, Sudan and some other countries in this region depend on Russia for their security, but they also pursue an economic strategy of diversification and balance. The desire of Middle Eastern countries for carrying out strategic cooperation with China is closely related to economic interdependence. In recent years, Middle Eastern countries have depended much more on trade with countries outside the region than with countries in the region. The trade dependence among East Asian countries amounts to 51%, and that among Latin American countries equates to 19%, but that among Middle Eastern countries is only 10%, in particular, that among Maghreb countries is only 4.8%. The major trade partners of the Middle East are the European Union, China, the US, India, Japan and other countries outside the region instead of the regional countries within the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> The economic interdependence between China and Middle Eastern countries mainly lies in resources, trade and investment.

As for resources, in recent years, although China's import of oil and natural gas follows a strategy of diversification, the Middle East is still the major source of its energy imports, with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, Iran and the UAE being its main trade partners. In terms of trade relations, as of 2018, China had been the largest trade partner of Iran and 10 other Arab countries, the third largest trade partner of Israel and Turkey, and also the second largest trade partner of the Arab League (next to the European Union). In 2017, the United Arab Emirates became the second largest Middle Eastern trade partner of China, with bilateral trade turnover amounting to 53 billion dollars and more than 4,000 Chinese businesses operating in the Middle East, which has been promoting the escalation of the partnerships between the two sides.<sup>2</sup> In terms of investment, the Belt and Road Initiative especially coincides with the development strategies of Middle Eastern countries, bringing about interdependence in the area of

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Bayes, "China's Emerging Diplomatic and Economic Presence in North Africa," accessed June 21, 2019, <https://atlantic-community.org/chinas-emerging-diplomatic-and-economic-presence-in-north-africa/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Fulton, "China's Power in the Middle East Is Rising," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2018.

investment between China and its target partners. China has made enormous amounts of investment in its exploration of copper and zinc in Morocco, oil development in Algeria and Sudan, construction of the East-West Highway and Africa's longest railway tunnel in Algeria, Egypt's New Administrative Capital, the Mohammed VI Bridge and the telecommunication network of Huawei in Morocco, and the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, all advancing the development of China's partnership diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> By using bilateral trade turnover as an indicator, this article attempts to examine the economic interdependence between the two sides. The top 10 Middle Eastern countries with the largest trade turnovers with China are all strategic partners of China. Meanwhile, only two countries, Sudan and Djibouti, of the top 10 countries with smallest trade turnovers with China are strategic partners of China.

Fifth, bilateral political friendliness. The greater the political friendliness that a Middle Eastern country holds towards China, the stronger its desire for carrying out strategic cooperation with China, thus the more proactive China's partnership diplomacy will be. Political friendliness mainly manifests itself in the desires of China and Middle Eastern countries to defend the core interests of each other and the frequency of high-level visits. The core interests of China mainly concern sovereignty, security and development interests, with sovereignty being of supreme importance. Although Middle Eastern countries all adhere to the One China policy and respect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, their enforcement of this policy in actual practice differs from one another. For instance, in terms of the Taiwan issue, the Gaddafi administration of Libya once had an equivocal relationship with the Taiwan authorities; some Turkish officials and social organizations secretly connive with or publicly support separatist actions against China; and Israel once obtrusively allowed the Dalai Lama to visit. The high-level visits in question should be measured according to the ranks of the visiting leaders from both sides and the frequency of such visits. This article has chosen the number of mutual visits made by high-level

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Bayes, "China's Emerging Diplomatic and Economic Presence in North Africa," accessed June 21, 2019.

leaders of China and Middle Eastern countries as an indicator of political friendliness.<sup>1</sup> According to this standard, since 2011, aside from Oman, Iraq, Jordan and Sudan, there have been more than four such mutual visits between China and each of its other 11 strategic partners in the region. As for the 10 countries which have not established strategic partnerships with China, the number of such visits has been roughly zero to two since 2011.

### **China's Partnership Diplomacy towards the Pivot and Node States**

China adopts a layered management system for its partnership diplomacy in the Middle East. To be specific, based on the economic strength, regional influence, political stability, trade interdependence and political friendliness of the target country, this article divides the 15 strategic partners in the region into four layers: on the top layer is the comprehensive strategic partnership with the five comprehensive powers; and on the second layer is the strategic partnership (of cooperation) with the other two comprehensive powers.

Indeed, the capabilities (economic strength, regional influence and political stability) and the desire (trade interdependence and political friendliness) of Middle Eastern countries for strategic cooperation with China determine their position in the partnership network between them. In accordance with the overall weight of the target countries, China conducts layered management of its partnerships, with pivot states and node states being China's priority.

#### **I. Pivot States**

Pivot states in the Middle East refer to the regional comprehensive powers, which function as a pivot or hub in the partnership network of China in the region. They play an important support role for China to safeguard its global interests, security and influence. Speaking of pivotal

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<sup>1</sup> Here, high-level leaders refer to the top three political leaders of China and those in Middle Eastern countries: for example, President, Premier and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China; King, Crown Prince and Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia; Prime Minister, President and the Speaker of the Parliament of Iraq, etc.

states, for example, Russia is an important global pivot state. Apart from having a mechanism for holding an annual meeting of heads of state and a direct hotline between them, China and Russia also have several channels of cooperation at prime minister and ministerial levels.<sup>1</sup> Although the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Middle Eastern countries is no match for the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, they do share some similar characteristics and their bilateral strategic cooperation is also of global significance. The five comprehensive strategic partners of China in the Middle East, Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE, serve as pivot states in China's partnership diplomacy in the region, functioning as pivots for the Maghreb region, the Red Sea area and the Gulf region respectively. These pivot states have three characteristics as follows:

First, pivot states can help expand China's political, security and economic influence on the international stage in three-dimensional and multi-dimensional ways. They are regional strategic partners with global influence as well as important cooperators of China participating in the security management of the Middle East. As the largest country in Africa, Algeria was an important co-sponsor for restoring the legitimate seat of China in the UN, while firmly supporting China via the Arab Union, the African Union, the Mediterranean Union and other platforms. Further, China was the first non-Arab state to have officially recognized Algeria and, for many years, was its largest trading partner in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until 1990 that China and Saudi Arabia established a diplomatic relationship, yet bilateral strategic cooperation has had the fastest rate of progress. In 2006 and 2009, Hu Jintao paid two visits to Saudi Arabia. As the largest trade partner of China in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia plays an irreplaceable role in the GCC, the Islamic Cooperation

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<sup>1</sup> Feng Zhongping and Huang Jing, "China's Strategic Partnership Diplomacy: Engaging with a Changing World," accessed June 21, 2019, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/chinas-strategic-partnership-diplomacy-engaging-with-a-changing-world/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Zambelis, "China's Inroads into North Africa: An Assessment of Sino-Algerian Relations," *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information*, Vol.10, Issue 1, 2010, 12.



Organization and other regional organizations. In 2006, Xi Jinping paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia and the two countries issued the *Joint Declaration of the Government of Saudi Arabia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*, which noted, "Under the background of multi-polarization of the world and constant advancement of economic globalization, the Sino-Saudi Arabia relationship is increasingly strategic and global, and the two countries have become the most important cooperation partner of each other."<sup>1</sup>

Egypt is a representative member of both the Arab Union, with its headquarters in Cairo, and the African Union, as well as the most populated country in the Middle East and among all Arab countries. *The 2014 Joint Declaration between China and Egypt on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* declared that the two sides "will enhance consultation in global and regional affairs such as the reform of the UN, 'South-South cooperation,' the Sino-Africa relationship, the relationship between China and the Arab Union, BRICs, the Islamic Cooperation Organization and prohibit weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East."<sup>2</sup>

As a political, military, economic and cultural power in the Middle East, Iran plays a decisive role in regional affairs concerning Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, refugees and counter-terrorism. Besides, Iran is also a senior observer of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as an important partner for political and economic cooperation with China.

Second, there have been frequent high-level mutual visits between China and these pivot states. In 2016 and 2018, during President Xi Jinping's visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran and the UAE, China established comprehensive strategic partnerships with all of them. President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah al Sisi, has paid six visits to China (in December 2014, September 2015, September 2016, September 2017, September 2018 and April 2019), during which he attended the G20

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Declaration on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, accessed June 25, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/20/c\\_1117828248.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2016-01/20/c_1117828248.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Joint Declaration on Establishing Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between the People's Republic of China and Egypt, *People's Daily*, December 24, 2014.

Hangzhou Summit and BRICS Xiamen Summit.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Prime Minister of Algeria, Ahmed Ouyahia, King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Crown Prince of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, have also made several visits to China. In the context of the recent decrease in the dependency of Western countries on the energy exports of the Middle East and the increasing dependency of the Asian powers, Saudi Arabia has been trying to reduce its strategic dependency on the US, pursuing what may be termed "Look-East Diplomacy."<sup>2</sup> In 2017 King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud paid a visit to China while Crown Prince Mohammad paid two visits to China in 2016 and 2019. All these interactions were aimed at establishing geo-economic partnership with China while maintaining the geo-political partnership with Western countries.

Thirdly, in order to realize the goals set by these comprehensive strategic partnerships, China and the relevant pivot states usually establish various permanent supporting institutions. For instance, after the conclusion of the *Five Year Plan of Action for Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between People's Republic of China and the Arab Republic of Egypt* in 2016, a series of mechanisms such as the Sino-Egypt Consultation Mechanism on the UN Affairs, the Sino-Egypt Consultation Mechanism on African Affairs, the Sino-Egypt Consultation Mechanism on Counter-terrorism, the Sino-Egypt Cooperation Mechanism on Production Capacity, the Sino-Egypt Joint Economic and Trade Commission, the Sino-Egypt Commission of Defence Cooperation, the Sino-Egypt Joint Commission of Defence Science and Technology, the Sino-Egypt Joint Commission of Science and Technology and the Sino-Egypt Joint Commission of Culture were established one after another.<sup>3</sup> After the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership

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<sup>1</sup> "Relations between China and Egypt," accessed June 25, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq\\_676201/gj\\_676203/fz\\_677316/1206\\_677342/sbgx\\_677346/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/fz_677316/1206_677342/sbgx_677346/).

<sup>2</sup> Makio Yamada, "Saudi Arabia's Look-East Diplomacy: Ten Years On," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No.4 (2015): 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Five Year Plan of Action for Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between People's Republic of China and the Arab Republic of Egypt*, accessed June 25, 2019, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/wh/slxxy/htws/document/1466160/1466160.htm>.

between China and Saudi Arabia in 2016, a high-level joint commission, led by Vice Premier Han Zheng on the Chinese side and Crown Prince Mohammad on the Saudi side, was established. As of February 2019, the two sides had held three high-level joint commission meetings. In addition, China and Iran had also established a joint commission of economic and trade cooperation.

## II. Node States

Here, node states refer to those partner states of China in the Middle East that enjoy a special status, namely, functioning as a bridge or link during China's cooperation with other great powers (or groups of great powers) or the preservation of China's overall interests in the "China-pivot states-other great powers" structure.

Although the partnership diplomacy between China and these pivot states is of global influence, the bilateral relationship is not yet incorporated into China's global strategy. Turkey and Israel are two representatives of such node states.

In 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao paid a visit to Turkey, during which both sides agreed to establish a strategic partnership of cooperation. *The Sino-Turkey Joint Declaration on the Establishment and Development of a Strategic Relationship of Cooperation* points out that both sides agreed to "address all kinds of global challenges and push forward multi-polarization and democratization of international relations, and deploy concerted efforts to build a harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity."<sup>1</sup> In the same year, both sides agreed to hold high-level (Deputy Chief of Staff) military talks. The next year, China and Turkey decided to establish a joint-working group mechanism, further enriching bilateral cooperation.

When the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in China in 2017, Erdogan was the only head of state from the

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<sup>1</sup> "Joint Declaration on Establishing and Developing Strategic Cooperation Relationship between People's Republic of China and the Republic of Turkey," *People's Daily*, October 9, 2010.

Middle East who attended the forum.<sup>1</sup> In July 2018, when meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Erdogan said that Turkey supports the joint construction of the Belt and Road, opposes protectionism and stands for free trade, adding that his country is willing to boost communication and coordination with China in international affairs.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Sino-Turkey relationship has not reached the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership. Although Erdogan and the Turkish government have repeatedly voiced their opposition to any political action towards separatist forces from China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, some Turkish officials, political organizations and non-governmental organizations, however, have been secretly supporting such actions. In 2019, a spokesman of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made some rather indiscreet remarks regarding rumors about the rightful de-extremism measures that China has taken in Xinjiang, even going so far as fabrication. In February 2019, China shut down its consulate in Izmir, which is believed to have been a countermeasure against the Turkish government.<sup>3</sup>

Israel is another node state of China in the Middle East. Since the establishment of an innovative comprehensive partnership between China and Israel in 2017, Israel has become a special strategic partner of China in the Middle East (in a relationship similar to the innovative strategic partnership between China and Switzerland). Israel also established a number of mechanisms so as to promote cooperation between them. In 2013, the two sides established a governmental mechanism of economic technology, and in May 2014, they also established a joint commission mechanism of innovative cooperation. In addition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel and the Communist Party Central School of China also established a mechanism of joint training.

The strategic cooperation between China and Israel is conducive to

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Faruk Isik and Zou Zhiqiang, "China-Turkey Security Cooperation Under the Background of the 'Belt and Road' and the 'Middle Corridor' Initiatives," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, Vol.13, No.2 (2019): 5.

<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping Meets with Turkish President Erdogan, *People's Daily*, July 27, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> "China Shuts Turkey Consulates in Wake of Uygur Row," *South China Morning Post*, March 1, 2019.

promoting the cooperation between China and a third party, serving as a bridge and link for the implementation of its all-round diplomacy. In building their innovative comprehensive partnership, both sides agree to strengthen their innovative cooperation with third parties in the field of infrastructure under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, of which Israel was one of the founding members.<sup>1</sup> With a cooperation pattern of “China-Israel-third parties,” Israel becomes a key node state for China’s diplomacy in the Middle East as well as a window for all-round cooperation between China and other great powers (for example, the US) and groups of great powers (for example, the European Union).

Despite its compatibility, interference from the US with regard to the Sino-Israel innovative comprehensive partnership is unavoidable. Since 2019, the US has been complaining about Chinese companies’ involvement in the operation of and investment in the Haifa Port and Ashdod Port, assuming that the security of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean may be at risk as a result.<sup>2</sup>

### **China’s Partnership Diplomacy towards the Key and Stronghold States**

China’s partnerships with medium and small states ranks second. On the first layer is the strategic partnership with the three key states; on the bottom layer is the strategic partnership with the five stronghold countries in the Middle East.

#### **I. Key States**

Here, key states refer to those regional powers in the Middle East, which have considerable economic volume and development potential, as well as influence on their neighboring countries. In terms of China’s partnership diplomacy in the Middle East, Sudan, Iraq and Morocco are

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<sup>1</sup> “Joint Declaration on Establishing Innovative Comprehensive Partnership between the People’s Republic of China and Israel,” accessed June 25, 2019, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/t1447466.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Amos Harel, “Israel Is Giving China the Keys to Its Largest Port — and the U.S. Navy May Abandon Israel,” *The Haaretz*, September 17, 2018.

representatives of such key states, playing a leading role in the Red Sea region, the Gulf region and the Maghreb region respectively.

First of all, the above-mentioned key states are cooperative partners of China in terms of safeguarding its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Sino-Sudan Joint Declaration issued in 2015 points out that “Sudan would continue to stick to the One China policy, support China’s position on issues related to Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet, oppose any form of ‘Taiwan independence’ and support the peaceful development of the cross-strait relationship and all the efforts the Chinese government makes for the reunification of China,” while China “will support the efforts by the Sudanese government to safeguard its sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and enhance its domestic security and stability.”<sup>1</sup>

Second of all, key states are cooperative partners of China on the international stage. China and Iraq have both agreed to “strengthen strategic communication, expand common ground and enhance strategic mutual trust in terms of bilateral relationship and international and regional issues of common concern.”<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the *Sino-Morocco Joint Declaration* points out that both sides are pleased with the precious contributions that the Sino-Africa Cooperation Forum has made to strengthening the Sino-Africa comprehensive strategic partnership and supporting South-South Cooperation. China appreciates the role of Morocco in the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum and the Sino-Africa Cooperation Forum.

Finally, key states play a leading role in helping China to promote its Belt and Road Initiative. In Eastern Africa, Sudan is both the largest country and an important partner of China in promoting this initiative. In the Gulf region, Iraq is, no doubt, a regional power, whether in terms of size or population, while China is the largest trading partner of Iraq. Investment in Iraq has the capacity to spread throughout the region. In the

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<sup>1</sup> “Joint Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership between People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Sudan”, accessed June 23, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/01/c\\_128188802.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/01/c_128188802.htm).

<sup>2</sup> “Joint Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership between People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Iraq,” accessed June 25, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/22/c\\_1117546252.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/22/c_1117546252.htm).

Maghreb region, Morocco is an important partner of China with multiple identities. It is an Arab state, an African state, a Mediterranean state, an Atlantic state, and a cooperative partner of China in promoting its Belt and Road Initiative. The above-mentioned three countries are key states that promote interconnection between the three sub-regions.

## II. Stronghold States

Here, stronghold states refer to those partners of China in the Middle East with a relatively small size, population and economic volume, but a relatively higher degree of friendliness towards China and a relatively stronger desire for bilateral economic and trade cooperation projects, functioning as strongholds for the protection of China's interests in the region. These countries are Qatar, Oman, Djibouti, Jordan and Kuwait.

Firstly, stronghold states feature limited economic volume and scale. For example, with a population of less than one million, Djibouti is one of the most underdeveloped countries in Africa. In this respect, Qatar, Oman, Jordan and Kuwait are also small countries, each with a population of less than five million. Sandwiched between neighboring powers, these small countries are vulnerable to regional conflicts, while strategic cooperation with great powers outside the region helps balance the regional powers. For instance, Djibouti is surrounded by Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea<sup>1</sup>; Kuwait was once invaded by Iraq in the early 1990's when Saddam Hussein was in power; Jordan struggles under the power rivalry between Israel, Iraq and Saudi Arabia; and Oman and Qatar live under the shadow of the geopolitical gaming between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, stronghold states are of geographical significance. For instance, Djibouti guards the outlets to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; Jordan owns Aqaba, a key port; and Oman, Kuwait and Qatar are close to the Persian Gulf region, which possesses half of the world's total oil reserves. Their unique geographical positions suggest these small countries have an important strategic resource so that they can maintain a dynamic balance against the political gaming between powers. The US, France,

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<sup>1</sup> Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "The Eagle's Nest in the Horn of Africa: US Military Strategic Deployment in Djibouti," *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 51, No.1 (2016): 111.

Italy, Japan and China all have military bases in Djibouti. In November 2017, Ismail Omar Guelle, President of Djibouti, pointed out that the important strategic position of Djibouti means Djibouti is an “island” which can help Asia, Africa and the Middle East to realize stability.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Jordan and Oman have long been following a strategy of balancing great powers.

Finally, stronghold states are relatively more friendly towards China and are active in developing economic and trade relations with it. The above-mentioned five states all declared in their joint declarations on establishing strategic partnership with China that they “stick to the one-China principle, recognizing Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory and supporting the position of the Chinese government on issues concerning Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet.” In 2018, Kuwait declared that it would further enhance policy coordination with China and promote connectivity between the Belt and Road Initiative and the “New Kuwait 2035 Vision” according to the co-designed bilateral cooperation plans.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 Hierarchy of China's Partnerships in the Middle East

Partner state	Level of partnership	Year	Category of partnership	Region
Algeria	Pivot state	2014	Comprehensive strategic partnership	The Maghreb Region
Egypt	Pivot state	2014	Comprehensive strategic partnership	The Red Sea Region
Saudi Arabia	Pivot state	2016	Comprehensive strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
Iran	Pivot state	2016	Comprehensive strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
UAE	Pivot state	2018	Comprehensive strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
Turkey	Node state	2010	Strategic cooperation relationship	Eastern Mediterranean Region

<sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping Meets President of Djibouti, *People's Daily Overseas Edition*, November 24, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping Meets the Emir of Kuwait, Sabah, *People's Daily*, July 10, 2018.



Israel	Node state	2017	Innovative comprehensive partnership	Eastern Mediterranean Region
Sudan	Key state	2014	Strategic partnership	The Red Sea Region
Iraq	Key state	2015	Strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
Morocco	Key state	2016	Strategic partnership	The Maghreb Region
Qatar	Stronghold state	2014	Strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
Jordan	Stronghold state	2015	Strategic partnership	The Red Sea Region
Djibouti	Stronghold state	2017	Strategic partnership	The Red Sea Region
Kuwait	Stronghold state	2018	Strategic partnership	The Gulf Region
Oman	Stronghold state	2018	Strategic partnership	The Gulf Region

Source: the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Retrieved June 24, 2019 from: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao\\_674904/1179\\_674909/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/); Georg Strüver, "China's Partnership Diplomacy: International Alignment Based on Interests or Ideology," 62-64.

## **Prospects of China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East**

China's strategy of partnership diplomacy originated from the recognition that alignment diplomacy no longer accords with the times. In the Middle East, both military alliance networks and sectarian front networks are, in nature, antagonistic groups that stick to an "either enemy or friend" mentality. As a socialist power on the rise and a nonaligned country, going beyond political and ideological differences, China has established a global partnership network on the basis of partnership rather than alignment, seeking common ground while reserving differences, which is also consistent with its philosophy of diplomacy and interests.

Since entering the 21st century, the contents of China's partnership diplomacy has changed quietly, with its targets changing from great powers and neighboring countries to medium or small countries in the Middle East,

Africa and Latin America, from bilateral cooperation to multilateral cooperation, from partnership with sovereign countries to regional and international organizations, and from entity partnership to issue partnership. For instance, the dynamic development of UN peace-keeping in Africa and its coordination, cooperation and co-existence with great powers provide important opportunities for China's participation in related UN activities and the building of peace and security in Africa. In addition, global development partnership is the core spirit of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has further enriched traditional partnerships. Similarly, partnership diplomacy with Chinese characteristics is also being enriched and developed in practice.

Looking into the future, however, China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East also faces many challenges. First, the appeal of China's economic growth makes it possible for Middle Eastern countries to benefit from their partnerships with China and in turn expand mutual trust and consolidate the basis of their partnerships. Meanwhile, however, China's partnership diplomacy, which still lingers on a low level of politics, may come across serious hindrances once it faces conflicts in the field of high level politics.<sup>1</sup> Many Middle Eastern countries, which are still caught in their own respective security dilemmas, hope that China can play a greater role in terms of security. However, at present, the emphasis of China's partnership in the Middle East is still on the economic and low political levels so as to avoid any involvement in regional disputes. China's partner countries' claims on the public good of security do not perfectly match with their public good of economy.

Second, China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East is bound to be affected by outside powers, which are major factors of uncertainty in China's partnership diplomacy in the region. The Sino-US relationship is a bilateral relationship of overall significance in China's foreign relations. Despite the compatibility between both the US' alignment diplomacy and China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East, disputes between the

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<sup>1</sup> Zhou Yiqi, "When Partners 'Encounter' Alliances: A Study of the Pattern of Interaction Between China's Partnerships and the Alignment System of the USA," *Global Review*, No. 5, 2016, 21.

two sides are unavoidable, and sometimes the former may seriously hinder the development of the latter. Such has been the case in Iran, Sudan, Iraq and Algeria. China is Iran's largest trade partner, oil buyer and investor, while Iran is one of the most important political, economic and trade partners of China in the Middle East. Iran also happens to be a linchpin in China's Belt and Road Initiative, with Chinese infrastructure investment in Iran totaling \$8.5 billion in loans from the Export-Import Bank of China through early 2018.<sup>1</sup> In May 2018, the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and re-imposed sweeping sanctions against the Middle Eastern country. In April 2019, American President Donald Trump declared his desire to drive Iran's oil exports to zero. All this has posed a threat to the Sino-Iran comprehensive strategic partnership. In addition, China's participation in port construction in its partner countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, Oman and Djibouti triggered much doubt and criticism in the USA.

Third, further research is necessary in terms of how China can give full play to the advantages of its strategic partner countries in its participation in regional security affairs. Many of China's 15 strategic partner countries in the Middle East have considerable economic volume and regional influence. Apart from their relative political stability, their economic dependence on and political friendliness towards China are also relatively high. However, to this day, there are still 10 countries which have not yet established partnerships with China, including Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Libya and other countries that are still in conflict. Being increasingly marginalized in the global economic system, together with the trend of normalization and the spillover from their domestic problems, these countries have become a focus and a challenge in terms of security management in the Middle East. Enhancing cooperation with the above-mentioned pivot, node, key and stronghold states in conflict areas and forging a "strategic partner plus" cooperation model will play a considerably positive role for peace and development in the Middle East.

Fourth, China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East must be

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<sup>1</sup> Owen Daniels, "How China Is Trying to Dominate the Middle East," accessed June 21, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-trying-dominate-middle-east-29922>.

more creative in terms of formulating rules and regulations. So far, China has offered numerous material public goods in its global partnerships. However, China has been met with much criticism in respect to nonmaterial especially ideological public goods.<sup>1</sup> Until now, China has been weighing gains and losses in its relations with the regional powers in the Middle East while carrying out multi-track partnership diplomacy there, which helps promote peace through development and bridge the differences between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Israel and its Arab neighbors, the Sunnis and the Shias, the pro-Muslim Brotherhood alliance and the anti-Muslim Brotherhood alliance, and the pro-Western camp and the “resistance alliance.” However, long-term exploration is still needed as to how to put forward new concepts, ideas and approaches concerning the security management of the Middle East with China's partnership diplomacy and how to safeguard its commercial interests, provide ideological public goods in the form of solutions to the regional conflicts and help Middle Eastern countries build communities of shared interest, communities of security and even communities with a shared destiny.

### **Conclusion**

Under the ideational guidance of “partnership instead of alliance,” the partnerships fostered between China and Middle Eastern countries is of strategic significance. Since 1949, the development of China-Middle East relations has undergone a process, from bilateral to multilateral and from ideological to pragmatic cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Middle Eastern countries have become an important link in China's goal of establishing a global partnership network and its overall cooperation with other developing countries. Meanwhile, China's partnership diplomacy and alignment diplomacy in the Western world are also theoretically different.

China's partnership diplomacy in the Middle East has objectively

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<sup>1</sup> Zhang Chun, “Strategic Thinking on China's Participation in the Global Partnership of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” *Global Review*, No. 5 (2015): 112.

<sup>2</sup> Zhu Weilie, “Strategic Relations Between China and Islamic Countries in the Middle East,” *World Economics and Politics*, No. 9 (2010): 4.

diluted the influence of the alignment system of great powers, facilitating the formation of a multipolar pattern in international relations and constituting a kind of “soft balancing” force against hegemonism and unilateralism. Almost all the allies of the US, Europe and Russia in the Middle East are strategic partners of China. Their partnership with China protects them from asymmetric dependence on other great powers. The US has been compelling countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Algeria and the UAE to speed up their democratization process through political and economic pressure, while the establishment of a strategic partnership with China alleviates the consequent political pressure. The establishment of partnerships between China and medium and small countries in the Middle East, such as Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Djibouti, which strive for subsistence among regional powers, no doubt strengthens the capacity building and security of their governments, thereby increasing their security autonomy.

*(edited by Zhao Jinfu)*