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THE ARAB-CHINESE COOPERATION FORUM: A STUDY OF THE ROLE
AND EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Since its founding in 2004, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum has made great achievements that have helped develop relations between China and Arab countries. It has also sought to build a strategic partnership and achieve the development goals of both sides establishing more than a dozen mechanisms covering various political, economic, social and cultural fields, under which many agreements have been signed. Also, many meetings have been held at all ministerial levels, senior officials, experts and specialists. In addition, many events and activities have been organized that have contributed to deepening cooperation between the two sides and established a common basis on which to expand its activities and projects and extend them to other aspects. These aspects are necessarily not covered by the areas of cooperation, and thereby making this forum an example in establishing forums established by China in other parts of the world. Despite the great achievements achieved by the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, some aspects are still below the level hoped for. Therefore, the forum needs to do more to activate these aspects and deepen cooperation in other fields.

INTRODUCTION

The major countries differ in their policies and strategies in order to enhance their position and impose their influence on the international community. China is one of them as it adopted the establishment of forums and organizations in strengthening its relations with various countries and regions of the world. The

aim of these forums is to strengthen cooperation in various fields among all members of these ties without China imposing its visions and policies on other countries. Rather, the benefit and interest of all is the basic rule governing the relationship of the parties in these ties.

The China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, announced in 2004, is one of these forums, which, thanks to the seriousness of the work in its development, has made it one of the most active and effective forums in the Middle East. It has been able to document the cooperation between China and the Arab countries and make it more intertwined and complex in terms of its consistent route in establishing cultural, social and media events. This has been through holding regular meetings on strategic and political issues and implementing joint work programs agreed between Parties.

The hypothesis of this research is that the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum has played a major role in strengthening and deepening Arab-Chinese relations and giving it a strong impetus forward so that it has reduced many years that such cooperation would have taken without the Forum. In order to clarify the great role played by this forum in raising the level of Arab-Chinese relations, this research will be divided into three axes:

The first axis: the establishment of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

The second axis: the mechanisms of action of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

The third axis: the future of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

The Establishment of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum

The United States tried to impose its hegemony on the world as the sole pole in it after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This aroused the fear of the Arab countries of this hegemony and pushed them towards China, with which they established close relations of strategic dimensions that guarantee the common benefit of both sides as China showed increasing interest in joint cooperation with Arab countries. This is especially in the energy sector in order to support its economy, solve its domestic development problems, strengthen its position at the Asian and global levels. The policy of openness adopted by China in the diplomatic and economic fields has helped to strengthen and develop cooperation with all Arab countries, and China became at the forefront of giant economic blocs that invested in the Arab world.

Thus, the direct and long-term objectives that contributed to the establishment of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum have gradually begun to be achieved. First and foremost: promoting economic and social development in Arab countries to achieve internal stability; addressing the problems of poverty and unemployment; helping China in the search for a peaceful solution to the Arab-Zionist conflict; and encouraging Arabs to play an active role in establishing a fairer and more humane globalization.

China called on Israel to respect the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people; end its occupation of the Syrian Golan; stop its ongoing daily attacks on Lebanon; and help the Gulf Arab states protect energy sources to ensure sustainable development, stable industrial development and global growth rates (Dhafer, 2018).

The Arab League and China have been able to find an effective and sophisticated mechanism that will enable them to strengthen Arab-Chinese relations by agreeing to establish a forum for Arab-Chinese cooperation in 2004 between former Arab League Secretary General Amr Musa and Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing. This is a framework for dialogue and collective cooperation based on equality, mutual benefit and partnership relations characterized by cooperation and equality. Article 2 of the forum's declaration emphasized the basic principle of China's support for the Middle East peace process on land-for-peace and in return for Arab support for the one-China principle. The declaration also called on both sides to coordinate politically on various international and regional issues, support economic cooperation and encourage investment (Musa, 2018, p. 164).

The Arab and Chinese sides are so important to implement and activate their decisions and recommendations that 17 years after its founding, the Forum has become a successful platform for friendly cooperation between China and Arab countries in various fields. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao has put forward four basic principles for the development of Arab-Chinese relations under the forum. These are: i) strengthening political relations on the basis of mutual respect, ii) intensifying trade communication to achieve common development; iii) expanding cultural exchange for mutual benefit, and iv) strengthening cooperation in international forums for the preservation of world peace. Since its inception up to the present, i.e. 17 years, the Forum has played an important role as an effective framework for collective dialogue, developing strategic cooperation relations between China and Arab countries in accordance with their fundamental and strategic interests, and contributing to the promotion of peace, stability and development in the world (Yuzhen, 2018, pp. 195-196).

The forum has an important strategic opportunity to successfully track trade liberalization negotiations between China and the GCC countries and spread this path to other parts of the Arab region. If successful, the relationship between the two parties could become a single economic bloc to avoid fluctuating energy and mineral prices that negatively affect bilateral trade between the two parties, especially in the presence of new and promising areas of cooperation such as joint investment in petrochemical industries, renewable energies, agriculture, high technology and the peaceful use of nuclear energy (Hamshi, 2018, p. 228). The establishment of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum has been a strategic step to meet the challenges of globalization and develop Sino-Arab relations on a long-term strategic perspective. Thanks to joint efforts, the forum's activities have evolved significantly in accordance with various mechanisms that have achieved important achievements in the political, economic, commercial, cultural and popular fields (Dhafer, 2018).

The Mechanisms of Action of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

The China–Arab States Cooperation Forum has several mechanisms of action: First: Ministerial Meeting Conference: This meeting discusses mechanisms and ways to enhance cooperation between China and Arab countries in all fields and exchange views on regional and international issues of common concern. The important issues raised at the meetings of the United Nations and its specialized agencies are also discussed, as well as follow-up the implementation of the forum's work program and other issues concerning the two parties (People.com.cn, 2012).

The meetings of this conference are held biennially and alternately between China and Arab countries. Nine meetings were held until 2020, but the most prominent meetings in which important decisions were taken at the forum level is the fourth conference held in May 2010, which introduced relations between the two sides in a new phase of growth.

At the sixth annual meeting held in Beijing on June 5, 2014, attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping, new ideas were put forward by him in accordance with the principles of the Sino-Arab partnership under the Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013, which is based on a succession of cooperative trilogy (1+2+3) of energy sector as a major focus. This is in addition to infrastructure, trade facilitation and investment as wings. Moreover, there are three areas with advanced technology including nuclear energy, space, satellites and renewable energy as breakthrough points (Yuzhen, 2018, p. 196), in cooperation and promotion of production capacity, and the development of cooperation with the six major countries that are pillars in China's relationship with the Arab region: Saudi Arabia, Iraq, UAE, Egypt, Sudan and Algeria.

Six projects have been identified for work in the first phase:

1. The establishment of a Sino-Gulf free trade area, a joint investment fund between China and the UAE and the promotion of Arab capital infusion to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.
2. Launching Arab-Chinese cooperation in a communication system via satellite No. 1 to Algeria.
3. Renewing and changing the Gulf of Aden and cooperating in land oil blocks in Abu Dhabi.
4. Organizing visits for 10,000 Chinese and Arab artists over the next 10 years.
5. Pushing and strengthening bilateral cooperation to develop 200 Chinese and Arab institutions.
6. Inviting 500 talented Arab artists to China to do research and train 600,000 qualified people in various fields over three years. The training includes developing poverty reduction capabilities, exchanging appropriate technology with Arab countries, and encouraging the largest number of young people to study in the country of the other side, and to strengthen cooperation in the field of tourism and media, especially satellite channels. Chong (2017, p. 62) discusses these in more detail.

The 8th Session of the Forum held in Beijing on July 10, 2018 in the presence of Chinese President Xi Jinping, the late Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and Arab foreign ministers, made progress in strengthening relations between China and Arab countries and gave them a boost forward by emphasizing the two sides to raise these relations to the level of strategic partnership. This was also through working to advance communication on their vision of management and good governance, employing the advantages of integration and deepening cooperation and coordination between their development strategy, mutually benefiting from the culture of the two parties, and holding in-depth consultations on the most prominent regional and international political issues of common concern.

The two sides reached common understandings in several areas, most notably: i) China's support for Arab causes, especially the Palestinian issue, the emphasis on the unity, safety and independence of Arab countries in exchange for the latter's support for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, ii) the emphasis on freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the straits of Bab Al-Mandab and Hormuz, iii) the condemnation of terrorist acts in all its forms, iv) continuation of building mechanisms for economic and trade cooperation, v) encouraging cooperation in the financial and energy field, peaceful uses of nuclear energy, renewable energy, human resource development, agriculture and combat desertification, vi) promoting cooperation in tourism, education, scientific research, science and technology, health, media, publishing and intellectual property, vii) cooperating in issues pertaining to youth, women and library, as well as viii) adopting the executive program of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (2018-2020) and the Sino-Arab Executive Declaration on Belt and road Construction (Chinaarabbcf, 2018).

The ninth session of the ministerial meeting, which was held via video conferencing on June 6, 2020, saw the signing of a joint statement between China and Arab countries on solidarity between them in the fight against the Covid 19 pandemic (Tao, 2020).

Second: The meeting of senior officials: this is held annually and hosted by the two parties alternately or whenever necessary by the agreement of the two parties in order to prepare for the regular meetings of foreign ministers and follow up on the implementation of the resolutions and recommendations issued by these meetings. They also exchange views on Sino-Arab relations and international and regional issues of common concern, most recently the fifteenth session held in Beijing on July 9, 2018.

Third: Other cooperative mechanisms: these are held biennially and alternately between China and one of the Arab countries:

- 1- High-level political strategic dialogue: Four sessions of dialogue were held at the senior level, most recently in Beijing on July 9, 2018.
- 2- China-Arab Energy Cooperation Conference: The Arab and Chinese sides held various sessions of this conference (Dhaher, 2018), the most recent of which was held in Beijing in 2016, which resulted in the signing of the memorandum of understanding between China, the Arab League and the

- Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization on May 14, 2017 in Beijing.
- 3- Symposium on Sino-Arab relations and dialogue of civilizations: held its seventh session in 2016, followed by a roundtable to counter extremism held in Chengdu, China, in August 2017. The emphasis on continuing efforts to deepen civilized dialogue and communication on an equal footing, promote mutual understanding between Arab and Chinese cultures, promote cooperation in deradicalization and praise the establishment of the King Hamad International Centre for Peaceful Coexistence in March 2018.
 - 4- China-Arab Media Cooperation Forum: In this forum, the communication between media institutions is strengthened and journalists from both sides are encouraged to exchange visits, hold training courses, participate in media activities held by the two parties, and implement memorandums of understanding to enhance cooperation between the media signed with the media in the Arab countries (Chinaarabbcf, 2018). The fourth session of the Media Forum, which was held on October 24, 2020 in the presence of officials and experts from 10 Arab countries, called for the media to assume its responsibility to promote joint Sino-Arab development in light of the Corona pandemic.
 - 5- Arab Businessmen's Conference: this aims to increase trade and investment and enhance cooperation between the private sector on both sides (Chinaarabbcf, 2018).
 - 6- Arab-Chinese Health Cooperation Forum: One of the important mechanisms of the Forum for Arab-Chinese Cooperation. The most important meetings held by the two sides in this field was the meeting held in the Chinese city of Yinchuan in September 2015 with the participation of Arab-Chinese officials responsible for health issues. The two sides in this meeting agreed on a number of important points, most notably:
 - i) Joint efforts to implement the Executive Program for Cooperation in Health (2014-2016) signed by the State Committee for Health and Family Planning in China and the General Secretariat of the Arab League.
 - ii) strengthening direct cooperation between therapeutic and medical institutions and support them; calling for the establishment of an Arab-Chinese association for cooperation and development in the fields of medical treatment and health.
 - iii) establishing joint medical institutions, and pushing academic and scientific institutions to establish a mechanism for cooperation and exchange periodically in the field of traditional and modern medicine.
 - iv) Exchange of talent in the field of medical services.
 - v) Cooperation in the transfer of medical technology and techniques and exchange of information in the field of medical laws and policies.
 - vi) Conducting joint medical research and experiments, setting standards and control of medical products and ensuring their quality and effectiveness (Bukhari, Leayib, & Shalgoum, 2018).

This is what has already happened as China contributed significantly during the spread of the Covid 19 pandemic to provide more assistance to Arab countries, especially in the field of vaccines, as a memorandum of cooperation was signed between China's Sinofarm and Morocco to establish an African innovation centre in the field of biopharmaceuticals and vaccines to serve the continent and

the world. It also included Chinese companies conducting the third phase of clinical trials of the anti-Covid 19 vaccine with Morocco (People.com.cn, 2021), UAE, and Bahrain, where the ministerial meeting between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries stressed the need for cooperation of the two sides in the fight against the pandemic, especially in the field of vaccine search (Ke & Xiang, 2021). Both China and Arab countries refuse to politicize the pandemic and link it to a specific country and call for cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) in order to cooperate in developing a joint plan to combat the pandemic, activate its leadership role and improve global governance in the field of public health (Yi, 2020). The meeting, held electronically on September 23, 2020 by the Chinese Foreign Ministry in cooperation with the National Health Committee and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology with the Council of Arab Health Ministers and experts from 10 Arab countries to focus on discussing, assessing, preventing and controlling the risks of Corona virus.

- 7- Chinese Arts Festival Course
- 8- Sino-Arab Friendship Conference.

Contact Group: The task of this group is to communicate between the two parties and follow up on the implementation of the resolutions and recommendations reached in the meetings of foreign ministers and senior officials. The Chinese Embassy in Egypt and the Office of the Chinese Secretariat of the Forum for Arab-Chinese Cooperation in West Asia and North Africa of the Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry is the Chinese Focal point while the Council of Arab Ambassadors and the Arab League mission in Beijing are the Arab Focal point.

These measures have contributed to raising the level of Arab-Chinese partnership, strengthening political trust between them by i) exchanging support on issues related to the fundamental interests of both, ii) promoting harmonization of development strategies through cooperation using various mechanisms, and iii) by cooperation in various fields including energy, technology, investment and trade, and intensifying popular communication between the two sides through joint activities and events (Yi, 2020).

The Future of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum

Despite the great role of the Forum for Arab-Chinese Cooperation in strengthening relations between China and Arab countries in various fields, its role is still limited and modest in the field of supporting translation from Both Arabic and Chinese. The forum called at its sixth session held in Beijing in 2014 to work on the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two sides in the field of translation and publishing of Arabic and foreign books. To develop Arab-Chinese cooperation in translation, the two sides can translate 20 or more books a year by exploiting the mechanisms of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum so that both sides translate half of them. The Arab League can benefit from the efforts of the Higher Translation Institute of the Arab League based in Algeria, encourage individual efforts in translation by universities, intellectual and social institutions and the business sector. It can

also develop an electronic register that identifies the titles of books translated to and from both languages and activate the collective legal mechanisms signed within the framework of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum or bilaterally signed with Kuwait and Egypt (Mohamed, 2018, pp. 77-78).

There is a possibility of turning the forum into an organization similar to the Shanghai Organization for the purpose of strengthening political relations between the two parties, especially after the issuance of china's policy document towards Arab countries that have a strategic vision of cooperation and partnership with Arab countries. There is also possibility to working to raise the level of business conferences held under the forum that discuss investment and trade issues after achieving success in achieving integration between the Chinese and Arab economies, supporting cooperation in the field of energy, especially oil and natural gas and in the fields of extraction, refining and transportation, achieving coordination in engineering and technical services in several fields. These include oil fields, trade equipment and sectoral standards. There is also strengthening cooperation in the field of renewable energy, especially solar, hydro and wind energy. Both sides can achieve a partnership in the construction of the China-Arab Clean Energy Training Centre, and the establishment of a Sino-Arab joint bank or fund to take advantage of the material savings of both parties similar to the China Infrastructure Investment Bank (Bukhari, Leayib, & Shalgoum, 2018).

China and Arab countries will develop strategic ties to become partners in Belt and Road construction, as China and Arab countries share two qualities: belonging to the developing world, and facing the tasks of reform, development and stability in order to stimulate manufacturing, technology and high-tech development processes, and improve the living standards of their peoples. They also share their efforts to achieve their medium- and long-term development plans and strategies. China, for its part, is working to build a well-off society and exploit the situation conducive to launching a new march to build a modern socialist state in an all-round way, as well as Arab countries seeking according to their internal circumstances to develop themselves and build their economies through various plans. These include the "Plan for the Recovery of the Egyptian Economy" in Egypt, "Vision 2030" in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar, "45th Annual Plan" in Algeria, "Sustainable Development Strategy" in Jordan, "Vision 2025" in Kuwait, "King Mohammed VI City of Science and Technology" in Tangier, Morocco, Iraq's reconstruction projects that reached 157 projects and others. In order to achieve the common development goals of both, China will cooperate with Arab countries by achieving and developing strategic convergence in order to reach their common goals under the Belt and Road Initiative.

China and Arab countries will promote regional and international cooperation by opposing hegemonic policies and the imposition of force by major powers on small and vulnerable countries. They will also call for maintaining the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

China also supports the Arab League in playing a pivotal role in international and regional affairs. China and Arab countries will strengthen coordination and

communication on burning issues such as the Question of Palestine, the Syrian and Yemeni crisis, the fight against terrorism in the Middle East as well as promoting a peaceful and just settlement of important issues in the Middle East. China participates in multilateral global governance platforms such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the G20, to preserve the rights and interests of developing countries jointly.

In line with China's desire to head west and Arab countries to head east as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, both will promote mutual understanding, which will expand and deepen the frameworks of their relations, as this will help to increase the number of Chinese and Arab tourists and students steadily.

Women, youth, religious figures, artists, media, colleges and think tanks for both sides will become ambassadors for dialogue of civilizations and friendly exchanges. And in the future, the Chinese people will strive to realize the Chinese dream of renewing the renaissance of the Chinese nation, and the Arab countries will strive to realize the Arab dream of national prosperity and development. The Arab and Chinese peoples can join hands in building the Cultural Silk Road in the 21st century.

As part of the joint cooperation to build the "Belt and Road", collective cooperation between China and Arab countries and the process of building and developing the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum have entered a new era. Under the joint efforts and cooperation between the two sides, the establishment of the Forum mechanism can become more systematic, the operation process more effective, and collective cooperation between China and Arab countries within the framework of the Cooperation Forum will achieve the results and achievements envisaged in its establishment (SISU, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Arab-Chinese cooperation under the forum has taken an upward turn in terms of achievements gained during the past 17 years of its founding and the achievements it has gained have prompted the two sides to do more to develop it and improve the level of its work and activities.

Although Arab-Chinese cooperation has made significant progress, it is still below the desired level, as it has not yet reached the level of cooperation between China and its neighbours in the near field for a variety of reasons, most notably:

- 1- US interventions trying to disrupt relations between the two sides for fear that China will occupy the dominant position of the United States in the Middle East.
- 2- The political and security instability that the region suffered, especially after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of Arab uprisings and protest movements.
- 3- Economic hardships suffered by China and Arab countries due to the Corona pandemic that hit the world at the end of 2019.
- 4- The state of competition that prevailed in the Middle East during this period between the major powers in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran,

and the political polarization that has left its impact on the Belt and Road Initiative sponsored by China, of which the Middle East countries are a major part and contributor.

All the above reasons did not prevent the parties from overcoming these difficulties through joint action and continuing to hold meetings and establish various activities even if through video conferencing technology

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