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ARAB-CHINESE RELATIONS UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD
INITIATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The topic area of that's paper dealing with nature of relations between Arabs and China during last decades, indeed Economic interests are a high priority in China's relations with Arab countries, which in turn overlap with other interests in a complex manner. Some of these interests complement each other while others are otherwise. Since China became an oil importer in 1993, the importance of the oil-rich Arab region has increased for China, the imports of which have increased annually. This encouraged China to include this region in the Belt and Road Initiative. It is possible for Arab countries to exploit their good relationship with China to benefit from its experience in the field of development and economic reform if they want to advance their state of affairs, which is witnessing a major stumble in this field. This is the case in recent years, especially after the outbreak of the Arab revolutions and uprisings and the internal problems that plagued them and the spread of terrorist movements that left destructive traces in the various structures of these countries. The Arabs and Chinese sides largely agreed on a number of questions, including preserving national sovereignty, pursuing peaceful solutions to resolving contentious issues, promoting peace and stability, reforming the United Nations and changing climate.

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Silk Road, which has always linked China with the Arab countries in the past ages, has returned today with a new image under the name "The Belt and Road Initiative" put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. It is hoped this will become the bridge linking the two sides and make their

relationship more profound and realistic. The Arab countries responded positively to this initiative and actively participated in it and each Arab country expressed its support and desire for future cooperation in order to achieve the goals of this initiative.

China launched the Belt and Road Initiative in light of the comprehensive development needs of Arab countries, and implemented the content of “communication policy, access to facilities, trade facilitation, auditing of financial resources, and promotion of popular sentiments.” This initiative will largely enable the Arab countries to continue its march of innovation with China on the path of joint success in all political, economic, social, cultural and other fields. This is because the Belt and Road Initiative is an opportunity for Arab countries to participate in an important platform in the international system. It is also a model from which Arab countries can learn from China’s experience of how to manage state affairs, develop industry, improve people’s livelihood, provide job opportunities and develop Arab economies and its integration into the global economy (Chong, 2018, p. 65).

The hypothesis of this research is based on the fact that Arab-Chinese relations are developing under the Belt and Road Initiative, but their path is somewhat slow due to obstacles and problems that impede their progress.

The structure of this research has been divided into five axes and s follows:

First: the objectives of Arab-Chinese cooperation.

Second: fields of cooperation between China and Arab countries.

Third: Mechanisms of Arab-Chinese cooperation.

Fourth: The challenges of Arab-Chinese relations.

Fifth: The future of Arab-Chinese relations.

1. The objectives of Arab-Chinese cooperation.

The objectives of cooperation between China and the Arab countries, as set out in the document of the China-Arab Executive Declaration on the construction of the Belt and Road, issued in September 2018 (Chinese Government, 2018, p. 2) are focused on the following foundations:

- 1- Arab-Chinese cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative aims to achieve the common development goals of the two sides, as well as scientific cooperation and sustained growth, which would enhance political, security, economic and social relations between the two sides.
- 2- Emphasizing the importance of cooperation in building the Belt and Road initiative in accordance with consultation, cooperation and mutual benefit, making it the path of peace, prosperity, openness, creativity and civilization between the Arab countries and China.
- 3- Both sides encourage the rules of the multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization for the member states of the organization and what it aims to raise in sustainable growth rates at the level of the various countries of the world.
- 4- The two sides will work to adhere to the concepts of mutual respect, fairness, justice, mutual gain and respect for the core interests of the other party, and

to deepen trust and mutual benefit in the light of a community with a common future.

- 5- The two sides will work to ensure the progress of cooperation between the Arab countries and China in all fields, including the full utilization of the existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms in which the two sides participate, as well as benefiting from effective regional cooperation frameworks. This is done in accordance with the national laws and regulations of both parties with fulfilling, at the same time, the international obligations and commitments of both.

The Fields of Arab-Chinese Cooperation

China has been able to develop its relations with the Arab countries through new visions and directions at the level of political, economic and trade cooperation. It has also been able to strengthen its inter-relations with it under the Belt and Road Initiative by forming the cooperation equation (1 + 2 + 3) represented in focusing on the axis of energy first, and the structure second, infrastructure and trade and investment facilitation, and advanced technology such as nuclear energy, space, satellites, renewable energy and energy production third (Muhammad, 2018, p. 170).

ECONOMIC ASPECTS

The Belt and Road Initiative can achieve many gains for Arab countries, enhance China's political and economic presence as a reliable economic partner, and provide an opportunity to benefit from China's production and financing capabilities necessary to support infrastructure. Among the practical steps that China has taken in this field, Chinese President Xi Jinping's pledge during his visit of some Middle Eastern countries in 2016 to provide loans and investments to the region with a total value of about \$55 billion.

China welcomes the participation of Arab countries in the initiative, given the latter's great political and strategic importance, so that it can be the bridge linking the European and Asian markets. Therefore, we find countries such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, UAE, Libya and others have taken the initiative to strengthen their cooperation with China by concluding a number of memoranda of understanding and agreements. This is order to enhance the necessary infrastructure investments in implementing this initiative, which made the Belt and Road initiative the most distinguished in collective cooperation between China and the Arab countries. This is evidenced in the volume of trade exchange between China and the Arab countries in 2017, which amounted to \$191 billion. Chinese exports included mechanical and electrical products, textiles, clothing and high-tech products, while its imports from Arab countries focus on crude oil and petrochemical products, making China the second trading partner of Arab countries. The volume of trade exchange between the two sides is expected to increase to \$600 billion within the framework of the aforementioned Initiative in which the Arab countries occupy a prominent position within its framework due to their strategic location, economic potential, and human and natural resources (Musa, 2018).

Cooperation in the technological field can enhance the Belt and Road Initiative in the Arab region, the countries of which can benefit from the Chinese experience in this field, especially the field of alternative energy technology. This can be operationalized by signing more agreements and memoranda of cooperation in the technological field and benefiting from the courses and grants offered by China to Arab countries. This is in addition to exchange visits between officials concerned with this sector to explore the available cooperation opportunities and work to benefit from them. In this regard, a memorandum of understanding was signed to establish Chinese-Arab centres for technology transfer between China and the League of Arab States to transfer technology to Arab countries and to train Arab cadres on supervising and implementing this task in cooperation with the Chinese side. For its part, China established the China-Arab Centre for Technology Transfer in the Chinese region of Ningxia during the opening of the second session of the China and Arab Countries Expo (Ningxia Expo) on September 10, 2015 with the aim of transferring Chinese technologies and technology to Arab countries. This includes the fields of high-speed trains, space communications, nuclear energy and energy Alternative and modern agriculture.

Arab countries can take advantage of their good relationship with China to benefit from its experience in the field of development and economic reform if they want to advance their economic situation, which is witnessing a major stumble (Muhamed, 2018, pp. 79-80).

The Political Field

The Chinese policy toward the Arab region has historically been determined on firm foundations and principles, most notably supporting the Palestinian cause and the rights of the Palestinian people, and dealing equally and without discrimination with all Arab countries with which it has official relations. It also entails that the Chinese deal with the ruling political regimes rather than with the armed opposition (Bahbahani, 1987, pp. 52-54).

The Arab and Chinese sides believe that their joint responsibility towards the Belt and Road Initiative includes respect for the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law, strengthening peace and cooperation. This is in order to achieve comprehensive and sustainable development, raise the standard of living of citizens, and enhance security and stability in the Middle East, which contributes to maintaining the sovereignty and stability of Arab countries and their regional integrity and establishing international relations based on mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs. On this basis, Arab-Chinese relations increased in quantity and quality by bringing them to the level of comprehensive strategic partnership with nine Arab countries (Chinaarabbcf, 2018, p. 10). This can be seen through the establishment of a mechanism for the annual meeting between the Chinese Foreign Minister and the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries as well as the establishment of the Chinese-Arab exhibition in the Chinese city of Ningxia. It can also be seen in China's signing of cooperation agreements regarding joint construction of the Belt and Road with five Arab

countries, as well as the accession of seven Arab countries to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Relations between China and the Arab countries received a strong boost after Chinese President Xi Jinping's tour of the Middle East in 2016, which included a number of Arab countries and delivered a speech at the Arab League in which he proposed Sino-Arab partnership in building the Belt and Road and joint work to maintain stability, innovate means of cooperation, and transfer production capacity and enhance friendship (Yuzhen, 2017, pp. 196-197).

The problem facing China's political relationship with the Arab countries is that it is governed by the diplomacy of the pursuit of oil and trade. Therefore, it is governed by an elite political or commercial framework in comparison to the relations of the Arab countries with the United States and Europe. Accordingly, the visits of officials from both sides are geared towards enhancing opportunities for cooperation and rapprochement between them, since the predominant nature of these relations is characterised by the commercial aspect in which businessmen work away from political relations of a strategic nature or cultural relations of a deep nature (Abu Ahmed & Lu, 2019, pp. 145-146).

Security Aspect

The importance of the Arab region to China in the security field, albeit not geographically adjacent to it, is represented in non-traditional security, especially in the field of combating terrorism. Therefore, it is necessary that there is cooperation and coordination in place between them in this field through the following:

1- Bilateral or multilateral cooperation in the field of combating terrorism:

In recent years, the economic interests and the Chinese communities in the Arab region have been attacked by some terrorists, especially in Algeria, Sudan and Iraq, which led to material losses and human damage. This requires strengthening communication, coordination and cooperation in this field in order to protect Chinese interests in the Arab region.

2- Reaching common views in the field of combating terrorism:

Although the fight against terrorism inside China is a purely internal affair, it needs the understanding and support of Arab countries in this matter. This is particularly so since terrorist organizations inside China receive funding and technical support from their counterparts in Arab countries. Therefore, China needs the cooperation and assistance of the Arab countries. The East Turkistan Movement, which China accuses of practicing terrorism, performs its activities under the pretext of protecting human rights and the interests of minorities and religious freedoms in order to deceive public opinion and create confusion. Western media usually use these themes to discredit China's international reputation, which has led to unfriendly feelings towards China in Arab countries (ibid).

CULTURAL FIELD

The Arab-Chinese relations under the Belt and Road Initiative, especially in the cultural aspect, could witness further development in the short and medium term. This is because both parties need to reformulate these relations and correct the wrong impressions on both sides. Cooperation in the media field can carry out this task as well as exchanging visits at the popular and official levels, and strengthening cooperation in the educational field. This latter aspect can be achieved through the exchange of missions, professors and scholarships, especially in the field of teaching Chinese and Arabic languages given their major role in achieving rapprochement between the two sides (Muhamed, 2018, pp. 78-79).

MECHANISMS OF ARAB-CHINESE COOPERATION

There are multiple political and economic mechanisms that have contributed to pushing the Arab-Chinese relations forward, most notably:

a) The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum was established in 2004 and has become a framework for collective cooperation that includes several fields. There are 10 mechanisms emerge from it and these were delivered during the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the Forum in 2014 to identify priority areas and directions for China-Arab collective cooperation (Chinese Government, 2016, p. 2).

b) The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

This forum was established in October 2000 at the initiative of China to be the main framework for consultation and dialogue between China and the African continent. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, this forum took a great step forward, as the volume of trade exchange between the two parties increased from \$149.2 billion in 2016 to \$170 billion in 2017, making China the largest trading partner of African countries.

3- The China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Strategic Dialogue

An action plan for the strategic dialogue between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (2014-2017) was approved. According to this plan, the objectives of cooperation between the two parties were defined in the fields of politics, economy, trade, energy, environmental protection, climate change, culture, education, health, sports, etc. As well as working towards speed up negotiations on the establishment of a free trade area between the two parties. Because they possess what enhances economic integration between them, the two parties took to signing many contracts in the fields of oil, construction and commodity trade with Saudi Arabia and the UAE by taking advantage of the Arab Free Trade Zone to transport Chinese goods without customs obstacles from Dubai to the rest of the Arab countries (Muhammad, 2018, pp. 172-174).

c) *China's Arab Policy Paper*

In 2016, China issued an official document outlining its policy towards the Arab countries, clarifying the guiding principles to which it is committed to developing its relations with the countries of the region and drawing future lines for Chinese-Arab cooperation in light of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is based on deepening strategic cooperation relations, and enhancing cooperation between the two sides in various fields ranging from basic, economic, social, cultural, humanitarian, to peace and security. It is also based on developing the work of the Arab-Chinese Cooperation Forum, and strengthening the relationship with Arab regional organizations such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Further details can be seen in the aforementioned Policy Paper.

CHALLENGES OF ARAB-CHINESE RELATIONS

The strengthening of Arab-Chinese relations faces several challenges, most notably:

- 1- Concerns over the growth of Western influence in the Arab region, especially after the events of the so-called “Arab Spring,” will threaten Chinese interests there, especially the economic ones.
- 2- The increasing Chinese concern about the expansion of terrorist groups in the Arab region, which poses to a threat to its stability and unity and in turn to the unity and stability of China, where separatist groups are present.
- 3- The negative impact of Western media on the development of the relationship between China and the Arab countries, as it conveys an unclear and inaccurate picture of the course of the situation and conditions taking place on both sides.
- 4- China's development of renewable energy poses a challenge to the Arab oil countries, as China's dependence on imported oil will decrease in the long run from these countries the national income of which depends largely on selling oil.
- 5- The limited role of Arab embassies in China due to the apparent weakness in the capabilities of their cadres, their inability to communicate socially and popularly in China, and their lack of strategic visions and diplomatic planning.
- 6- The lack of institutes and research centres concerned with the Chinese issue, which can provide the decision-maker and Arab public opinion with various research and studies on China, including recommendations and proposals for the development of Arab-Chinese relations. On the other hand, there is weakness on the Chinese side in not paying the cultural factor sufficient attention to strengthening its relationship in the Arab countries, except in recent years, when Chinese cultural centres and Confucius Institutes have opened. This gap cannot be filled by the Arab-Chinese friendship associations or the joint political and economic committees (Muhamed, 2028, pp. 70-74). Therefore, it is necessary to find knowledge groups that include researchers and experts who have the ability to analyse Chinese policy and make realistic and practical recommendations that influence decision making in their countries.

- 7- The concentration of the foreign policies of the Arab countries towards the West and their need for it in many issues, especially the Palestinian issue and economic partnerships, despite the escalation of the Chinese role in the current world order. It is necessary to ease this position towards China in the interest of Arab countries by deepening bilateral and multilateral economic partnerships that will provide an entry point for China's involvement in Arab issues.
- 8- Asymmetric economic exchange between China and Arab countries. China exports most of its commodity exports to Arab countries at cheap prices while some Arab countries export energy products such as oil and gas.
- 9- Dual benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative project. Since the Arab Mashreq countries represent a geostrategic corridor for the project to reach Europe and the Maghreb Arab countries, they will find themselves in front of two paths that they have to choose from: either to remain just a geographical corridor for exports and imports passing through their lands, in addition to continuing as a consumer market of a wide range of goods or changing its role to a geo-economic player that actively participates in the global economic movement that will be active across its lands.
- 10- The state of security instability that the Arab region suffers from, especially after the outbreak of the so-called (Arab Spring), as well as the Arab-Israeli conflict and tension in the Arab Gulf region. This requires China to harness its mechanisms and tools to create peace and stability in the region in the short and medium term, if it wanted to continue the flow of oil to it from this region. Also of impact here are the sharp divisions between the Arab countries, especially after 2011, which have had negative impact not only in terms of political positions on regional issues, but also on the development of the relationship of Arab countries with China now and in the future (Hamshi, 2018, pp. 218-225).

The Future of Arab-Chinese Relations.(Prospects)

The Arab-Chinese cooperation brings benefits to both parties, so if the Chinese goal is to strengthen its role in the global economic system and present its vision in it based on achieving justice and equality between the various countries of the world, then the Arab goal is to seek to develop its economic investments and develop its infrastructure with China to achieve common benefits for both sides (Muhammad, 2018, p. 180).

The Arabs can build for themselves a privileged position in the international system through their compatibility with the new status that Chinese President Xi Jinping wants to achieve for China globally. This would enable them to improve their weak position at the international level and benefit from China in building a deep development for their countries and societies. However, they should pay attention that the time when China will have an advanced global position will not start before the year 2049, which is the year that China planned to become the next economic superpower in the world. It will be useful for the Arabs to start their engagement with China from now on in preparation for its future role, and to prepare for the transition from the commercial character that governs this relationship to the civilized role based on the mechanism of benefiting from China's technological development in exchange for what the

Arabs offer to China i.e vital oil for the continuation of its industry. Further details can be found in (Abu Ahmed ,& Lu, 2018, pp. 145-150).

The Arab world needs balanced, equal and non-prejudicial relations with non-traditional major powers such as China, which does not have a colonial legacy in the region. It is the only major power that can make credible and reliable promises, but the challenge facing China's relationship with the Arab countries can be seen in the political and economic problems that left behind by the events of the so-called Arab Spring. However, the Arab countries should realize that the transformations that occurred in the region after 2011 could provide a strategic entry for China to readjust its role in the region in line with the requirements of the next stage (Hamshi, 2018, pp. 234-236).

Two scenarios govern the future Chinese strategic projects in the region: The first, which is the weakest, is China's military spread in the region given that the expansion of the base of Chinese commercial interests and the presence of the Chinese in the investment and trade areas will push China to provide protection for these facilities. This is evidenced by China's establishment of a naval base in Djibouti in 2014, and the increasing contributions of China in The United Nations' missions of peace operations and cessation of hostilities, as is the case in Lebanon, South Sudan, Darfur and Western Sahara.

- The second scenario, which is the , is represented in following a strategy with main lines, the most prominent of which is the adoption of a policy of balance between regional adversaries, such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia, through importing oil from both. Other examples such as between Palestine and Israel through establishing trade relations with them, and between Morocco and Algeria through continued cooperation with them despite the sensitivity between them. The policy may also include the adoption of a military service presence in the region similar to what exists in other regions through the sale of weapons, training and bases to protect Chinese interests, especially from terrorism and piracy, and the evacuation of Chinese nationals in case they sense a danger to them. It also includes maintaining good relations with all countries in the region to ensure the passage of the project (One Road, One Belt) through the areas it is scheduled to cross to connect its markets with Europe through the Middle East,. It also means that the Chinese role in settling disputes in the region will remain relatively at least in the near term, as it is satisfied with sending envoys to communicate with the parties to the dispute without appearing as a third party in international settlements, and undermining the Russian role in international forums, especially in situations in which China feels a strategic threat to its interests. This is the case with regard to extremist religious movements, as the two sides have similar positions on the two issues and the Syrian issue when China sent a group of ships to the Mediterranean off the Syrian coast, which represented a Chinese alignment with Russia. China abandoned its soft power to hard power through its sale of arms to countries in the region and its entry into the arms market for reasons that come at the forefront:

- cooperation in combating terrorism, the development of the issue of the Muslim minority in the Xinjiang-Uighur region towards the demand for secession.
- The fear of the return of Chinese fighters joining ISIS to China and carrying out sabotage operations (Abdul-Hayy, 2017, pp. 29-30). Therefore, cooperation with Russia came in Syria, by removing this threat before moving to China, and for fear of cutting off the geographical road through which the belt passes from China to the eastern Mediterranean due to the return of the terrorist threat represented by the control of ISIS over large areas of Syria and Iraq for the period between (2014-2017).
- The return of the Middle East region to the forefront of American strategic interest, along with the East Asia-Pacific region, in an American attempt to strategically encircle China to prevent it from Compete with the United States militarily by 2030 and narrow its economic opportunities.

China will make great efforts to avoid linking economic relations with geopolitical tensions in order to maintain a minimum of its moral force to influence economically the countries of the region. However, the facts indicate that China will not be able in the medium term to maintain this policy and that it will gradually engage diplomatically and militarily in the ongoing conflicts in the region (Katib, 2018, p. 27).

CONCLUSION

China has sought to bring this region into this initiative and to establish economic and strategic partnerships with some countries of the region to contribute effectively to this initiative. This is because part of China's plans is to expand the base of the countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative. It is because of the fact that the Arab region enjoys geo-economic and geo-strategic importance given its great wealth and its location halfway between Asia, Europe and Africa, the path through which the Silk Road corridors cross land, sea and air.

If China is the initiator of establishing such partnerships and forums, we find, on the other hand, that the response of the Arab countries to such steps is slow and ineffective. This has had negative effects on the Arab countries, which, due to their lack of interaction, were unable to benefit from the Chinese initiatives although there are many countries that have achieved many benefits by entering into the projects of this initiative.

There is a number of factors that led to an interaction that is not up to the level desired by China by most Arab countries with the Belt and Road Initiative. These factors include apprehension and fear of the Belt and Road Initiative, which the Western media strongly promote, considering it a Chinese endeavour to extend influence and control the capabilities of other countries, and the dependency relations that link most Arab countries to the West and the pressures exerted by the latter on them. Another factor is represented by the internal conflicts in some Arab countries and interventions in Foreign affairs, which generated a state of political and security instability, so that these countries devote most of their efforts and resources to solving their internal problems instead of focusing on expanding and strengthening their external relations. We

may also add the negative effects of the Corona pandemic, which caused great losses to local economies and restricted many of their foreign transactions.

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