

China-Arab States Strategic Partnership: Myth or Reality?

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Abstract: *Since the establishment of the Chin-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004, the two sides have forged special political relations. Such a special relationship, different from that of a military alliance, has strategic attributes of alignment, and has transcended the common state-to-state relations in the world. In the next decade, Sino-Arab strategic cooperation will live through a golden historical opportunity. But, whether the Forum will rise to a formal organization like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is determined by two competing factors. The positive factors derive from China and the Arab countries sharing a series of common values, emphasis on national dignity, revitalization, political multi-polarity, diversity of development modes and non-interference in each other's internal affairs; the negative factors rest on Arab countries having intrinsic internal discords, low integration and*

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divergent attitudes towards the West, particularly since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. To further promote the strategic relations, China and the Arab States should eliminate the impact of the “Islamic threat” and the “China threat” in their respective media, give priority to each other in their separate overall diplomacy and respect each other’s vital interests.

Key Words: *Sino-Arab Relations; China’s Middle East Policy; Strategic Cooperation; Middle East Governance; China’s Diplomacy*

I. Introduction

Ten years have passed since the establishment of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in 2004. In the next decade, China will not only have strategic opportunities with its peaceful development, but will also face the challenges and hurdles of various uncertainties. China and the twenty-two Arab states are all developing countries with similar national conditions: they all focus on improving their people’s livelihood rather than on military expansion, highlighting economic growth instead of getting involved in foreign intervention, maintaining the diversity of development models instead of imposing their political systems on others, and promoting gradual reforms instead of radical revolution.

Tens years have elapsed since the establishment of CASCF, and the question yet to be answered is: what is the nature of Sino-Arab relations? Is that an alliance, a strategic partnership or an ordinary relationship? Is the China-Arab brotherhood a myth or reality? There have been some discussions and preliminary conclusions on this issue among scholars. Ambassador An Huihou believes that a broad and

solid foundation has been laid for Sino-Arab cooperation in the new era, not only at the strategic and security levels, but also in political, economic and cultural dimensions (An, H., 2005: 58). Li Rong believes that the early 21st century is the best time in the history for Sino-Arab ties. Given the obstacles and favorable factors that exist in Sino-Arab cooperation, the opportunities still outweigh the challenges (Li, R., 2005: 2). Li Weijian believes that after the Cold War, the Arab world has stepped into a critical period of political and social transformation. Arab states face tremendous pressure from the United States as well as from their own public opinion on political reform. In this context, Sino-Arab relations take on special significance (Li, W., 2005: 5). In general, academics have advanced several definitions on the nature of the current Sino-Arab relations, including “comprehensive cooperative relations”, “partnership”, “comprehensive partnership” and “new partnership”. In this article, we argue that the current Sino-Arab relationship can be defined as a strategic partnership, which is broadening and deepening and will continue to do so in the years to come, although there are also big hurdles in the way.

There are three primary reasons for defining Sino-Arab relations in the new era as “strategic partnership”: first, the nature of China’s rise is a process of peaceful development. China defends the existing international order rather than challenge it. China’s rise will offer other countries development opportunities, particularly the developing countries. Beijing’s Silk-Road diplomacy entails a westward strategy, while the Arab countries’ “looking-east” policy has provided an opportunity to build a closer link with China. China and Arab countries are likely to achieve simultaneously peaceful development, as well as the revival of Chinese and Islamic

civilizations, respectively. Second, China's peaceful development needs a stable surrounding environment and the Arab world is an important part of China's Great Periphery Diplomacy. Third, China and Arab countries share common interests in many areas, and their bilateral strategic partnership will lay the foundation for economic and trade relations (Shanghai Social Sciences Association, 2006: 140). For instance, China and Saudi membership in the G20 has propelled the bilateral relations to the global level. As former Premier Wen Jiabao pointed out, "recalling the nearly two hundred years of history, China and Arab countries have missed too many historical opportunities. We have hundreds and thousands reasons to strengthen bilateral cooperation, accelerate the development, and catch up with the step of the new era. There is no excuse for hesitating and mistrust. Every politician who is dedicated to his country and responsible to his nation, every ambitious entrepreneur, and capable man should soberly realize the historical responsibility on their shoulders." (cited in Ma, F., 2010: April 23).

In the new era, Sino-Arab cooperation rests on three bases: first, a shared traditional and comprehensive friendship, i.e. the historical links of the "Ancient Silk Road"; second, the modern market principles of win-win trade expansion, i.e. the economic links; third, strategic and security interests of both sides (Wang, Y., 2008: 6-18), i.e. the geopolitical links. With the continuous development of China's economy, its dependence on overseas markets, raw materials, fuels and resources will inevitably increase. Economic globalization has tied China with other countries in the world economy: interdependence and win-win development have characterized the state-to-state relations. Under the new concept of "all-round diplomacy", China has

abandoned given priority in its diplomatic relations to the developed economies, such as the United States, the European Union, Japan, Australia, and Canada. With its domestic market increasingly saturated, Beijing has had to explore and expand overseas markets for its oversupplied commodities. The geographically-broad and promising markets from Central Asia to West Asia, and from North Africa to Black Africa, are of great significance. The 22 Arab states stand at the strategic corridor, and are of strategic significance. The Chinese government tries to establish closer political ties with Arab countries, in order to lay the foundations for their all round partnership. Meanwhile, Arab countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Algeria, and North Sudan, have been actively seeking strategic partnerships with China in recent years. This has provided favorable political conditions for the development of Sino-Arab economic and trade relations.

II. Special Political Relationship between China and the Arab World: A Perspective of Strategic Cooperation

Political and economic relations are two sides of the same coin: healthy political relations will lead to good economic links; trade and economic relations between China and the Arab World constitute the “barometer” of their political relations. Sovereign states tend to have impetus to extend economic and trade relations with allies and strategic partners instead of with rivalries, because the profits obtained by allies and partners will go to their defense, becoming the public goods of the allies and partners as well (Gowa, J., 1995). Therefore, politicians often exert different forms of “political leverage”

to restrict trade and economic cooperation with their enemies, and expand economic and trade exchanges with allies. For example, in the post-Cold War period, China and the United States experienced conflicts on the RMB exchange rate, anti-dumping issues, market access, trade deficit and other frictions, which reflected their relatively “unhealthy” political relations. In contrast, China and the Arab states maintained the good momentum of development in economic and trade ties, which is undoubtedly related to their positive political relations. In 2008, Chinese enterprises made direct investments in the amount of \$700 million in the Arab states, an increase of 40% compared to the previous year. The actual amount invested in China from Arab countries reached \$400 million, an increase of 61% (West Africa Department, Department of Commerce, 2009: April 21). In 2009, in spite of the impact of the global financial crisis, the mutual trust between the two sides still had a positive and strong impetus to their bilateral trade and economic relations. As a result, bilateral trade volume reached \$108.24 billion in that year, and cooperation in the fields of energy, finance, investment and infrastructure also continued to make headway. China and the Arab countries have signed bilateral economic, trade and technological cooperation agreements at various levels, set up economic and trade committee, and held regular and ad hoc meetings (*China-Arab Relations*, 2010: September 15).

Based on the breadth and depth of cooperation, state-to-state relations can be roughly divided into six levels: alliance, quasi-alliance, strategic partnership, constructive partnership, common relations, and hostile relations. Despite the fact that the Arab world is divided instead of being monolithic, Sino-Arab relations fit the third category: strategic partnership.

First, alliance is the highest level of interstate relations. The 20th century is often labeled as the “century of alliances”. NATO was founded in 1949 to contain the Soviet Union; China and the Soviet Union signed the security pact in 1950 partly to counter other alliances (SEATO, CENTO, and ANZUS). Five years after the birth of NATO the USSR set up the Warsaw Treaty Organization to counter NATO. The alliance strategy became the cornerstone of the Cold War rivalry between the communist and the capitalist blocs (Rosenau, J. & Thompson, K. & Boyd, G., 1976: 371). The mainstream researchers in this area highlight that alliance is established only when the security cooperation is written down in the form of a formal agreement, that is, the security commitments is endowed with legal force (Kegley, C. & Raymond, G., 1990: 52). Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf underscore that alliance, in a broad sense, includes coalition, but not all coalitions are alliances. The nature of alliance is when two or more countries sign a formal agreement through a collection of military commitments to coordinate policies and strategies, in order to enhance their mutual security (Kegley, C. & Wittkopf, E., 1999: 463). The Modern Chinese Dictionary also emphasizes that “alliance refers to a security community formed by two or more countries through covenants to conduct joint action” (Dictionary Editing Office, Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1998: 785; Adler, E. & Barnett, M., 1998). Accordingly, only security cooperation with formal military agreements can be defined as “alliance”.

Second, quasi-alliance is next to alliance which consists of security cooperation between and/or among states on informal security agreements. The parties concerned in this constructive cooperation have not formed a framework of all-round cooperation, although they

have a sound foundation for cooperation. Their cooperation often stays in some non-sensitive areas with task-based respect, such as anti-terrorism.

Third, quasi-alliance is followed by strategic partnership. What is strategy? Simply put, strategy is to organize all forces to achieve the goal of the implementers. Policymakers should consider not only the strategic objectives, approaches and means, but also plan for complex decision-making processes. Strategy is therefore a comprehensive planning of the political leaders to guide the government and ensure the consistency of the core logic of various policy items. This logic represents the idea of the government, that is, how to serve the country's interests and goals in the most cost-effective way, based on the country's ability and feasible means within the international context (Jin, J., 2008: 22). In the process, the first step is to identify the national security objectives; the second step is to design a grand strategy; the third one is to develop a military strategy; the fourth is to develop operational war strategies; and the fifth is to map out specific tactics (Snow, D., 1991: 13-20).

Strategic partnership is a new political and security partnership since the end of the Cold War which features the following characteristics: first, it is a political coordination between the major global or regional powers (including the clubs and concerts formed by great powers), highlighting the important role of major powers and their groups in the new era. Second, it is often ambiguous and has a strong symbolic significance, so that relations between countries become more blurred, not easy to define. The various names of strategic cooperation between countries usually tend to reflect the degree of closeness of bilateral relations. For example, from a semantic

point of view, there are some subtle distinctions among China's partnership with the United States, Russia, Japan, India, Pakistan and the Arab countries. Third, strategic partnership constitutes a complex network of relationships, so that almost all the major countries attach great importance to the strategic position of the other great powers. It seems that partnership has become an asset, instead of a liability (for there is no need for members to worry about the security dilemma). Therefore, political leaders believe that the more the number of partnerships, the more and abundant strategic resources they possess. Fourth, it is closely associated with geopolitics. Leaders in major countries mainly evaluate their own strategic interests in the 21st century mainly from the view of the country's geopolitics, i.e. a global vision. The strategic relationship between the major powers tends to promote regional integration. Fifth, it reflects the democratization of international relations. Strategic partnership rests on the basis of sovereign equality, regardless of size or power of their counterpart; all countries should have the right to participate in international affairs. However, great powers or conglomerations that they formed will undoubtedly take a lead in international affairs, and sometimes even wantonly interfere in the internal affairs of other countries which is against the general trend of the democratization of international relations. Hence, the partnership between the major powers is actually challenging the basic Western norms of international relations. Sixth, it reflects the multi-polarization trend in the post-Cold War world. As Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin pointed out in his speech at the Russian State Duma in April 1997, "under both global and regional profiles, and in both political and economic fields, multi-polarity is becoming a trend. Several powers or groups can no longer

monopolize the world, nor dominate the fate of other countries. Relations among major powers continue to change, and multi-polarization is on the horizon" (cited in Xie, Y., 1999: 534).

What has been the political impetus of the special relationship between China and the Arab countries since 2004? In recent years, the international system appears to be characterized as "a strong West vis-à-vis a weak East, and a strong North vis-à-vis a weak South. Generally, China and the Arab states are under pressure from Western countries and are often labeled as "dictatorial", "authoritarian", "undemocratic, with bad human rights record". Both have been in a strategic defensive position for a long time and thus have mutual sympathy with and mutual support for each other in international affairs. The Chinese and the Arabs have enhanced their political trust and established a strategic partnership, standing between quasi-alliance and constructive cooperation. Although this strategic partnership has less credibility on commitment than quasi-alliance, its advantages are also apparent.

First, strategic partnership is in line with the "Nonalignment" policy of China and the Arab countries. It is a useful supplement to independent foreign policy; "Nonalignment" policy does not equal strategic cooperation. On May 29, 1984, Deng Xiaoping insisted when he met with then Brazilian President Figueiredo, "China's foreign policy is independent and is truly non-alignment policy. China does not ally with the US, nor with the Soviet Union" (Deng, X., 1999: 57).

At that time, China had established a strategic partnership with the United States to prevent the perceived expansion of the Soviet Union. The implicit logic of strategic cooperation is the use of external resources while maintaining diplomatic flexibility and independence.

Secondly, the strategic cooperation can guarantee the freedom of diplomatic activities of both sides. The internal logic of alliance is to limit foreign policy options of allies by restricting the actor's own activities. It increases a country's cost, but it can help prevent the allies from implementing opportunistic behavior, thus making it more deterministic behavior. Strategic partnership expands the degree of freedom for countries in order for them to have opportunistic behavior, thus adding to the uncertainty of security cooperation. Therefore, for both Chinese and Arabs, strategic cooperation is an important diplomatic asset.

In the new era, China and Arab countries have built a solid foundation for strategic partnership. First, at the beginning of the 21st century, the international system had an unbalanced status. After NATO's eastward expansion and the further strengthening of the US-Japan alliance and the US-Australia alliance, China's development in East and Southeast Asia was severely and negatively harmed. India has been a rising power in recent years while Russia has seemed to reemerge as a superpower. There is improvement in security coordination among the great powers, but the political competition has become increasingly intense. As a result, China has had to broaden its grand periphery to the Middle East and the Arab world at large. Meanwhile, the "Greater Middle East Initiative" the United States initiated after 9/11 has posed a challenge to a number of Arab regimes. The situation of "strong West with weak East, and strong North with weak South" imposed upon the Chinese and the Arabs to form a soft political "balance of power" against Western hegemony. Since the establishment of CASCF, frequent political exchanges between the two sides have increased. In April 2006, former President Hu Jintao visited

Saudi Arabia during which he gave a speech, titled, “Promote peace in the Middle East, and build a harmonious world”. China and the Arab states reached consensus on such topics as opposing hegemonism and great power politics, and the promotion of political multi-polarization as well as cultural diversification. Anti-Americanism is still popular at the grass-root level of the Arab world, particularly since the outbreak of Israel-Hamas hostility in 2014. Thus, the Chinese and the Arabs have a common strategic objective in thwarting US predominance in East Asia and the Middle East, pushing for the establishment of a multi-polar structure and the restoration of a balance of power. The Arab world has a unique perspective on the international system which is not dominated by the West. Compared to East Asia, Southeast Asia and Europe, the United States and other major powers’ governance over this area is weak. China and the Arab countries belong to the Oriental society and thus share many similar views on the international order, democracy and human rights issues. For example, they both believe that democracy cannot be exported, nor imposed by outsiders. Instead, democracy must match domestic values—must be either socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics or Arab democracy with Muslim characteristics. They both believe that there should be diversity in the world and that cultural diversity and development models can better help realize the harmonious coexistence of sovereign states. Countries should resolve their disagreements through dialogue and negotiation, opposing the use of force. In recent years, China and the Arab countries have explored paths of economic and social transformation in an incremental manner. Currently, the major powers, including the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia, India, and even Latin American

countries, are trying to expand influence in the Arab world. In recent years, Arab countries, especially those of Gulf, have offered an Arab version of the Arab World, emphasizing the necessity of active diplomatic relations with East Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as keeping “equidistance diplomacy with great powers” – they will need China to balance against major powers. The equilibrium of great powers serves the interests of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria and other major Arab states.

Second, the Arab world is an important component in China’s “all-round diplomacy”. The Arab world plays an important role in strengthening China’s energy security, expanding overseas markets and propelling soft power in the next decade. China needs the Arab world in its long-term development while China’s economic growth also provides an important impetus for the economic growth of the Arab countries. The Arab world is also crucial for China to fight against Somali piracy, to rescue Chinese nationals in case of emergency, and protect China’s overseas investment projects. China and the Arab countries are all developing countries, so their economy-oriented strategies are compatible with each other. They also have been supporting and identifying with each other in international affairs. Currently, none of the 22 Arab countries has official connections with Taiwan; none of them has supported “Taiwan independence”, “East Turkistan separatism” or “Tibetan separatism”. Their support may help China uphold national unity and territorial integrity, two vital interests of China. Furthermore, in the United Nations Security Council, China always sides with the Palestinian cause, and supports the independence of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its Capital which is universally appreciated in the Arab world. In

addition, the Sino-Arab strategic partnership will help prevent China from being caught in an isolated position in case of conflicts with its neighbors due to territorial disputes, as these countries could at least keep “benevolent neutrality”. China does not approve of the US-led “Greater Middle East Initiative” or “humanitarian intervention” forced by the Western world. China’s stance may help Arab countries maintain political stability and a sustained economic development.

III. The Paths to Promote China-Arab Strategic Partnership: The Bilateral Channels

The Sino-Arab strategic partnership can be promoted mainly in two ways: through bilateral channels and in multilateral arena. First, objectively speaking, there exist some cultural differences between China and Arab countries, although both sides belong to oriental society with emphasis on collectivism, dignity, national revitalization and family orientation. Among the Arab countries, political systems, religion-society relations and the degree of intimate relations with Western countries also vary greatly, which requires China to treat these countries differently when building a strategic partnership, and to find the greatest common interests in cooperation. From the perspective of bilateral relations, the major Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria and Sudan, are constantly enriching their bilateral cooperation with China. These countries are of geopolitical significance in the Gulf region, eastern Mediterranean and northern Africa.

First, the strategic partnership between China and Saudi Arabia continues to heat up in recent years. Saudi Arabia is a great regional

power in the Gulf region, as well as a key pivotal country in the Arab world. It is one of the initial sponsors of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, renamed Organization of the Islamic Cooperation), and plays an active role in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Saudi Arabia is also the guardian of the two holy sites of Mecca and Medina, so developing bilateral economic, political and security relationship with Saudi Arabia will enhance China's influence from the Gulf to the Red Sea. More importantly, Saudi Arabia is of special significance for China's energy security. In the Gulf region, Saudi Arabia is an important oil producer and exporter. In recent years, with the decline of US imports from Saudi Arabia and more dependence on shale gas at home, there is a promising prospect of Sino-Saudi Arabian cooperation in oil. Officials and public opinion of Saudi Arabia are dissatisfied with the US policy of "neglect" since the Arab upheavals; this has added an important motivating factor in the Sino-Saudi Arabia strategic partnership. The complex US-Saudi relations, "balance of power" strategy of Saudi Arabia in recent years and the "Eastward" strategy actually provide an opportunity for a Sino-Saudi Arabia strategic relationship (Korany, B. & Dessouki, A., 2008: 343-396). Former President Hu Jintao visited Saudi Arabia in 2006 and again in 2009, which indicates China's attention to its relationship with Saudi Arabia. Since Saudi Arabia strides at the converging points of "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century", both proposed by President Xi Jinping, China will undoubtedly promote Sino-Saudi relations to a new height.

Second, Egypt and Algeria are located at the crossroads of Asia and Africa, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, as well as the East and the West. Their location is of geopolitical importance, so China sees

them as pivotal states. In recent years, Egypt and Algeria have been facing the dual tasks of developing their economy and maintaining domestic stability; both maintain a strategic relationship with China, which shares similar national goals. The United States had put pressure on the Mubarak and thereafter the Morsi administrations as well as on the Algerian Abdelaziz Bouteflika government, urging them to follow a Western path of democracy. This left the two countries no choice but to seek external support, such as using China to balance against Western powers (Kamrava, M., 2007: 177-202). Egypt and Algeria are not only Arab countries, but also African countries. Therefore, the two countries are crucial for both China-Arab relations and China-Africa relations.

Finally, in terms of the strategic cooperation between China and Sudan, China's performance on South Sudan and the Darfur issue has successfully paved the way for the development of bilateral relations and mutual trust. Since a substantial reserve of oil was discovered in Sudan in the 1990s, the two countries have begun to gradually establish a strategic partnership through energy and trade ties. Moreover, Sino- Sudanese cooperation in the energy sector had tied the two countries for further strategic cooperation (Liu, H. & Li, X., 2008: 246-247). The strategic cooperation between China and Sudan is a good example of new cooperative relations. The strategic cooperation between China and Sudan, to some extent, is the result of the impact of globalization on national security. From China's perspective, as Beijing's new security is a comprehensive security concept, it requires that leaders should not only pay attention to the safety issues of sovereignty, territorial integrity and other issues in high politics, but also to consider the market, employment, stability

and energy supply issues in low politics (Kirshner, J., 2006: 297). Globalization has made it a must for China's national security strategy to obey and serve the overall situation of "reform and opening up" policy, modernization, and China's economic security. Within this context, energy development in the North Sudan has brought jobs to China, as well as the precious "share of oil". Therefore, energy cooperation between China and Sudan not only has a strong economic role, but also is of a positive strategic significance.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Sudan and later north Sudan (as opposed to the new country of South Sudan born in 2011) has been the largest oil producing base of CNPC. In 1999, CNPC started to develop petroleum resources in the Muglad Basin; in 2002, this project achieved an annual output of 12.68 million tons of oil; on July 25, 2003, CNPC made a major breakthrough in the 3/7 district, discovering a world-class oil field which was proven to have geological reserves of about 2 billion barrels and recoverable reserves of about 600 million barrels (Qian, X., 2007: 248-249). Energy cooperation is the foundation of the Sino- Sudanese strategic cooperation, and CNPC's oil projects in Sudan represent Beijing's largest overseas interest. In 2006, gross profit of CNPC in Sudan amounted to \$25.8 billion, with net profit of \$14.69 billion; in contrast, Sudan's GDP in that year was just \$38 billion (Liu, H. & Li, X., 2008: 246). China and Sudan share a de facto community of interests.

In recent years, military exchanges and cooperation between Sudan and China have also been expanding. On April 2, 2007, the former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission Cao Gangchuan met the Chief of Staff of the Sudanese Armed Forces Haj Ahmed El Gaili. Cao pointed out that although China and Sudan were

far away from each other, the two countries had a strong friendship, and the military exchanges went smoothly. Cao expressed his wish that the two sides would expand their cooperation to various fields. ^①

Sudan actively promoted closer cooperation with China in the political and economic fields, and supports China on the question of “human rights” and the “Taiwan issue”, among others. China, meanwhile, also actively uses its position in the United Nations Security Council to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sudan. For example, the Chinese government highlighted that the Darfur issue is entirely an internal affair of Sudan. China proposed that proper solutions should be explored through dialogue and consultation, opposing Western sanctions or coercive manners to interfere in Sudan’s internal affairs. It also emphasized the importance of an equitable manner to persuade Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir’s government to compromise and offered constructive advice to both northern and southern Sudan.

In May 2007, China established a Special Representative Office on the Darfur issue, and repeatedly visited the North and the South Sudan, other African countries, Europe and the United States to carry out the mediation diplomacy. China also communicated with the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab League and the European Union, and seized the opportunity in July 2007, when China became the rotating Chair of the Security Council, to promote resolution 1769. This contributed to the consensus in the United Nations, the African Union and the Sudanese government—to deploy the African Union-United Nations “hybrid operation” in Darfur and to send

^① See http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200704/02/eng20070402_363135.html for more information on China-Sudan military diplomacy.

multi-functional engineering company consisting of 315 people to this region (Liu, H. & Li, X., 2008: 21-22). In the early 21st century, China sent out the largest amount of peacekeepers among other permanent members of the UN Security Council. This, together with its active participation in Darfur and other hot issues within the framework of the United Nations, embodies the changes of minds of Chinese leaders (Gill, B., 2007: 132). In February 2007, former President Hu Jintao visited Sudan, and held talks with President Bashir (Department of Policy Research, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008: 173). In July 2008, the International Criminal Court accused Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir of genocide, anti-human crimes as well as other charges, and prepared an arrest warrant. This was the first time a supra-national institution accused the current leader of a sovereign state of being guilty. China expressed serious concerns and defended the Bashir government against those charges.

In recent years, there has been great progress in the Sino-Sudanese strategic partnership. On February 4, 2009, Former Chinese President Hu Jintao exchanged congratulatory messages with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Chinese government said, "China and Sudan are developing countries, and further development of sincere and friendly bilateral relations of equality and mutual benefit is of great significance to deepen South-South cooperation, seek common development, and promote regional peace and stability, as well as China-Africa and China-Arab states new strategic partnership" (*People's Daily*, 2009: February 5).

On June 6, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping attended the Sixth

Ministerial Conference of CASCF. At the opening ceremony, he proposed the establishment of a “1+2+3” pattern of cooperation, namely, to take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as two wings, and three high and new tech fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as new breakthroughs. In the next 10 years, President Xi underscored that efforts should be made to increase the bilateral trade volume from \$240 billion in 2013 to \$600 billion in 2023 (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

IV. The Paths to Promote Strategic Partnership between Chinese and the Arabs: the Multilateral Arena

In addition to bilateral channels, China has propelled the strategic partnership with the 22 Arab members through multilateralism, such as the CASCF, the Arab League, the GCC, the Arab Maghreb Union, the UN, IMF, World Bank, and the G20. China has an age-old history regarding its relationship with the Arab world as a whole. On December 21, 1963, Zhou Enlai proposed five principles to deal with relations with Arab countries during his visit to the United Arab Republic (Egypt), namely: first, China supports the Arab cause to fight against imperialism, win and safeguard national independence; second, China supports the Arab countries to pursue peaceful and nonalignment policy; third, China supports the Arab people to achieve national solidarity and unity in their own ways; fourth, China supports the Arab countries to resolve their disputes through peaceful negotiation; fifth, the sovereignty of Arab countries should be respected by all countries and China opposes any aggression and

interference against them (Communist Party Literature Research Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1990: 387). In 1971, 13 Arab countries, together with African countries, voted in favor of restoring the People's Republic of China's seat in the United Nations Security Council. Meanwhile, China stood by the Arab countries in all United Nations resolutions on the Palestinian issues.

Among the multilateral arenas mentioned above, the CASCF is the most far-reaching, and both sides view their relations as a "strategic partnership". In September 2004, the first Ministerial Conference of the CASCF was held in Cairo, headquarters of the Arab League. The "Declaration on CASCF" and the "Action Plan of CASCF" were released during the meeting. Within the framework of collective dialogue and cooperation between the two sides on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, the Forum is in line with the common aspiration and interests of both sides, conducive to a new partnership of equality and comprehensive cooperation (Luo, J., 2006: 318). In July 2007, the fourth Senior Officials Meeting of CASCF was held in Cairo; on June 23, 2009, the Sixth Senior Officials Meeting of CASCF was held in Beijing; in November 2009, former Premier Wen Jiabao pointed out in his speech at the Arab League headquarters of Cairo that similar experiences and the pursuit of common goals of development have endowed China and the Arab countries with profound friendship. Chinese people view Arabian people as good friends, good partners, and good brothers" (*People's Daily*, 2009: November 8). In terms of opposition to hegemonism and great power politics, the pursuit of political multi-polarization, civilization diversity, and deeper economic and energy cooperation, China and the Arab countries have built a solid foundation for strategic cooperation. On May 13, 2010, the

Fourth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF was held in Tianjin. In this meeting, both sides formally defined their relations as a “strategic partnership” for the first time. Former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao showed up at the opening ceremony of the Conference and delivered a keynote speech. He illustrated comprehensively the Chinese government's views on the international political and economic situation and relevant policies. He proposed to establish the strategic partnership and comprehensive cooperation between China and the Arabs to promote common development as well as world peace, economic development, and progress. China’s strategic partnership with 22 Arab countries has created a new picture of China-Arab relations, and provided the two sides with more strategic resources. In June 2014, at the sixth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF, President Xi Jinping pointed out that China and Arab countries should carry forward the spirit of the Silk Road, advocating dialogue and peace. China firmly supports the Middle East’s pursuit of peace, and continuously supports an independent state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital on the basis of the 1967 border, and China wishes it could enjoy full right as a sovereign state (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

In regional multilateralism, China will establish closer multilateral strategic partnership with the GCC in the next decade. As a first step, the two sides will accelerate the pace of establishing a free trade area; China and the GCC will establish a closer strategic relationship to promote the consistency of Arab countries in foreign policy.

China will expand its overseas interests in the Arab world and even throughout the Middle East via multilateral mechanisms of the Arab League, although it faces various hurdles. China supports the

Arab League and hopes it would play a more active role for the Middle East in international affairs. China will also enhance the strategic cooperation with the GCC countries through the United Nations General Assembly, the U.N. Security Council, G20, IMF and other multilateral and regional organizations.

V. Characteristics and Problems of Strategic Partnership between China and the Arabs Countries

Strategic cooperation between China and the Arab countries displays a number of characteristics. The first is policy flexibility. China does not identify friends and enemies due to their political systems, nor by how close a country is to other great powers. Instead, China has been actively developing relations with any country as long as it can contribute to China's national security and overseas interests in the new era. For example, Saudi Arabia is a special security partner of the United States, but in recent years, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and China has made tremendous headway (Sun, D., 2008: 34-41). The second is to keep low profile. Building an official alliance or quasi-alliance with the Arab League members may trigger the suspicion of the United States, Europe, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Moreover, nowadays it is not in China's long-term interests to overtly challenge the hegemony of Western countries in the Middle East which is likely to provide a pretext for hardliners in the United States to further contain China, leading China to probably be caught in a "Clash of Civilizations" trap. Therefore, when constructing the China-Arab strategic partnership, China has emphasized cooperation of mutual benefits, avoiding targeting any third party. The third

attribute is to keep the strategic partnership at the “lukewarm” level. A strategic partnership between China and the Arab countries is compatible with the “Dos and Don’ts” approach, and China’s participation is largely confined to political cooperation, thus avoiding being entangled in the Middle East security disputes (Sun, D., and Zoubir, Y.: 2014: 2).

After the Iraq war, the Arab countries have been pushed to the forefront of conflicts between the Islamic world and the West. The Obama administration tried unsuccessfully to change US relationship with the Arab and the Islamic world and to relax tensions in US-Arab relations.

Although tensions between the Arab world and the West seemed to have eased after Obama delivered his Cairo speech in 2009 (*New York Times*, 2009: June 4), contradictions and differences in culture, values and views about the international system between Muslims and Westerners have remained intact. Therefore, the Arab countries as a whole are important to China in terms of their rich oil and gas reserves and their important geostrategic position. There is still vast room for further improvement in economic and trade relations between the two sides. Statistics show that the market share of Arab countries exceeds \$2 trillion, while Sino-Arab trade volume was only \$240 billion in 2013, about 10%, and only 5.3% of China’s total international trade volume, which amounted to \$2.5 trillion.

In the next decade, Chinese and Arabs will also be facing a number of unavoidable problems in building a strategic partnership, which, if not properly addressed, will certainly affect the depth and areas of the bilateral strategic cooperation.

First, there are serious problems of discord within the Arab world.

After the Middle East upheavals, Arab states, which have divergent interests, national conditions and political development models, hold different opinions on their respective external strategies. They disagreed on issues, such as the Israeli war on Gaza, the Syrian civil war, the Iranian nuclear issue, participation in the global and regional governance and some other major issues, all of which have affected negatively the effectiveness of their bilateral strategic cooperation. Today, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has become an international organization with a global influence. Furthermore, summits are held within the framework of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC); but, the CASCF is still held only at the ministerial level, which reflects the inconsistency among the Arabs.

Second, regional integration in the Arab world is relatively low. Compared to North America, Europe, South America, Southeast Asia, and even Africa, the Arab world has a lower degree of integration, although its regional organizations were set up earlier. The Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, the GCC, and OAPEC all have problems in decision-making and implementation. The Arab world, Turkey, Iran and Israel have long been at a low level of regional integration, which will also affect its strategic cooperation with China as a whole.

Third, China and the Arab countries' roles in each other's overall diplomacy is relatively marginalized. Regarding China's diplomacy, the grand strategy is described as "regarding great powers as the key, surrounding neighbors as the primary, developing countries as the fundamental and multilateral relations as the stage". China has regarded the United States, Russia, Europe, East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Central Asian countries as diplomatic priorities; in

contrast, the Arab world is still playing a relatively minor role. For their part, many of the Arab countries also view their relations with the United States, the EU, surrounding countries and the Islamic world as their priority, especially in the security realm. Represented by the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, major Arab countries rely on Western powers to provide them with a security umbrella (i.e. “looking west for security”), while relying on Asian powers, such as China, India, Japan and South Korea for economic development (i.e. “looking east for development”). This geopolitical and geo-economic dislocation is likely to affect the level of strategic cooperation between Chinese and the Arabs countries (Sun, D. 2014: 4-5). For example, in 2008, the United States had maintained its military presence in all Gulf countries, with 3,432 military and civilian personnel in Qatar, 1,496 in Bahrain, 500 in Saudi Arabia, 5,000 in Kuwait, 546 in the United Arab Emirates, 26 in Oman, and 35,000 to 50,000 in Iraq (Grimmett, R., 2010: January 27). French President Nicolas Sarkozy officially announced the establishment of the first permanent military base in the Gulf on May 26, 2009 – the Abu Dhabi military base in the UAE. This military base can accommodate up to 500 soldiers made up of army, navy and air force personnel (*Tehran Times*, 2009: May 27). In addition, France, the US, and Japan have opened military bases in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa, so does Iran in Jask (in the Gulf of Oman) (Sun, D. & Deng, H., 2010: 24). Egypt under President Sissi, Jordan, Morocco and some other Arab countries also view security cooperation with the US and the EU as their long-term priority. How to break the “zero-sum game” among major powers in the Arab world, and to achieve mutual benefit and win-win results, are important tasks for China and the Arab countries.

Fourth, it is crucial to eliminate the negative impact of the Western media and to reduce misunderstandings among ordinary Chinese and the Arab people, especially how to eliminate the “Islamic threat theory” in China and the “China threat theory” in the Arab World, and to shape positive images for each other via the media and through public opinion. With the building of the New Silk Road both on land and at sea, Chinese and Arabs may rediscover their historical links and cultural congeniality in contemporary economic exchanges.

Fifth, a major question is how to improve the bilateral trade. China has now been the largest trading partner of the Arab world. In the next five years, China’s foreign direct investment will reach more than \$10 trillion. However, in 2013, Chinese imports from the Arab countries amounted to \$140 billion, only 7% of the estimated total annual imports of goods (\$2 trillion on average each year). Chinese foreign direct investments in the Arab countries reached only \$2.2 billion, or 2.2% of the total volume. The gap is still very large (Xi, J., 2014: June 6).

VI. Conclusion

The China-Arab States strategic partnership is a reality, not a myth. Since 2004, thanks to the continuously consolidated bilateral strategic partnership, economic and trade relations between China and Arab countries have been developing steadily. The major objective of China’s strategic cooperation with the Arab countries is to maintain strategic flexibility and thus make readjustments when opportunities arise. Decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis according to the decision-makers’ assessment of the tradeoffs.

Alliance politics is a tool of the US to seek and maintain its world hegemony; in contrast, the China-Arab strategic partnership only aims at creating a favorable environment for bilateral economic and political cooperation rather than targeting third parties. In other words, this cooperation is not undertaken at the expense of other countries' interests. Therefore, the strategic partnership is simply to maintain the China's and the Arab world's right to development. It also aims at enriching China's independent foreign policy of peace. In terms of implementation of the strategic cooperation with the Arab countries, China can make not only use of bilateral channels, but can also take advantage of the multilateral arena, such as the CASCF, the UN, IMF, G20, the Arab League, the Arab Maghreb Union, the GCC, the OAPEC, and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation.

To deepen the China-Arab strategic partnership, the two sides can take the following measures: first, efforts should be made to continue to strengthen political cooperation within CASCF and transform the forum into a regional organization; second, the two sides should have a stable energy supply relationship, carry out mutually beneficial trade relations; third, the Chinese and the Arabs should support each other on political issues: China should continuously and actively support the Arab countries' right of development in general and to support the Palestinians in particular. In return, the Arab countries should support China's reunification and the protection of its interests in the Middle East; fourth, the two sides should increase security cooperation, including training officers from the Arab countries and carrying out joint anti-terror military drills; fifth, efforts should be made to increase visits of high-level officials, as well as non-governmental and student exchanges; sixth, the two sides

should regulate the China-Arab strategic partnership systematically, and establish various channels of dialogue and cooperation. In short, the strategic cooperation with Arab countries will play an important role in enhancing China's energy security, expanding overseas markets for goods and services, safeguarding national unity, promoting multi-polarization, democratization and diversification of development models.

All in all, Chinese and Arabs share similar dreams of achieving their respective national rejuvenation in the 21st century. As two great civilizations, the "China Dream" and the "Arab Dream" share great similarities. The China-Arab states strategic partnership, if promoted proactively, may be conducive to a more balanced and stable multi-polar world in the years to come.

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