

The Strategic Docking between China and Middle East Countries under the “Belt and Road” Framework

WU Sike^①

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China)

Abstract: *The Middle East is the region bringing together the land and maritime Silk Road, coupled with its unique geographical location and diverse and complex humanitarian, religious and ethnic factors, notably with an increasingly significant role of the energy sector. As an energy-rich zone, it plays a decisive role in the position of international political and economic arena. In the process of building the “Belt and Road”, Chinese government should pay close attention to the role of the Middle East region. This region will also play its rightful role in security coordination, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges under the “Belt and Road” framework, thus, achieving the strategic docking and win-win cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries.*

Key Words: *“Belt and Road Initiative”; China and Middle East; Security Coordination; Economic Cooperation; Cultural Exchanges*

“Belt and Road Initiative” refers to the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013, when he visited Kazakhstan and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiative when he visited Indonesia in October of the same year. In March 2015, President Xi delivered a keynote speech entitled “Move towards the community of common destiny,

^① WU Sike, former Special Envoy to the Middle East, People’s Republic of China; member of the academic committee of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University.

and create a new future in Asia” at the 2015 annual meeting of Bo’ao Forum for Asia. In his speech, he put forward, construction of “Belt and Road” based on the principles of discussing, jointly building and sharing. It is not a closed door initiative, but instead, an open and inclusive initiative; it is not a solo of China, but a chorus of countries along the “Belt and Road”; “Belt and Road Initiative” is not to replace the existing regional cooperation mechanisms and initiatives, but builds on these mechanisms, to promote the coordination of development strategy and achieve complementary advantages with countries along the road (Lü, Y., 2015: April 1). The Middle East is in the region bringing together the land and maritime “Silk Road”, coupled with its unique geographical location and diverse and complex humanitarian, religious and ethnic factors, notably with increasingly significant role of the energy that contributes to the daily lives of people worldwide. As an energy-rich zone, its position in the international political and economic realms is also rising. In the process of building the “Belt and Road”, Chinese government should pay close attention to the role of the Middle East region. This region will also play its rightful role in security coordination, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges under the “Belt and Road” framework to achieve the strategic docking and win-win cooperation between China and Middle Eastern countries.

National Security Cooperation between China and the Middle East

Since 2011, the Middle East has experienced dramatic changes and is in the process of turbulent transition period, which have a broad and profound impact on the Arab world, Arab countries, as well as on international relations. With the development of the situation, the reflection and understanding of these upheavals are getting more and more profound. In this process, people are

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thinking about a very important issue, that is, after entering the twenty-first Century, how to explore a right way for development of different civilizations and countries with different histories. This is a mission that is placed in front of every country and every nation, because it is related to the development of every country, and it will have a big impact on the future of the world. After a thorough analysis of the upheaval in the Middle East, the prevalence of religious extremism and terrorism in the Middle East and its spread will have significant influence on relevant countries, the region and even the entire international society. And, this also requires that China have more in-depth understanding and knowledge of ideological roots of terrorism and religious extremism.

During the period of Arab upheavals, the atmosphere of religious extremism and terrorism intensified the turmoil in the Middle East, and formed a kind of non-positive interaction, which promoted the trend of non-democracy. Lebanon—such a small country—accepts nearly 1.5 million refugees, almost reaching 1/2 of the country’s population. This is a common result of regional unrest and external factors.

From the perspective of the internal factors, in the Middle East, the religious extremist ideology has been growing for the last ten years, such as the contradiction and contest between secular forces and religious forces in Iran since 1979 Islamic revolution till now. In the Middle East, with regard to what kind of road a country should pursue, there are always two kinds of thoughts in contest, which have always been in a state of mutual stalemate. The first thought, influenced by Western views for a long time, is that the road of the West’s democratic elections will be the right way out; another one is a return to Islamic values, returning to the early Islamic path through theocracy.

As to the external causes, under the major changes in the security situation in the Middle East, some Western countries utilized the contradiction about the choice of development road in

the region to carry out interventions, or the so-called “protection”, which in fact was an attempt to reform the development of the Middle East in accordance to the values, development model and social system of the West, and through this, to continue to maintain their dominant position in the international community. So, whether it is in Libya or in Syria, the impact of external factors can be easily seen. Through the analysis of the major powers on the Syria issue, we can see that some Western powers declaimed the Syrian regime’s lack of legitimacy and supported the opposition forces with violence after the unrest in Syria, which intensified the opposition and conflict between Syrian government and opposition forces, and obviously is not in line with the national interests of the country. Instead, it is a reform according to big powers’ wish. It also affects the relationship between different nationalities and religions in the Middle East. In addition, the threat of terrorism in the region also aggravates matters because of external intervention; terrorist organizations expand their influence and control, which in turn increases the difficulty to solve the problems, and makes the country and its people suffer.

In China’s exchanges with the Syrian factions on the national reconciliation, China highlights the people’s suffering in a violent fight, which becomes more and more clearly as time goes. In order to avoid the extreme ideologies to achieve their purposes via religions, the Chinese side also advocates the leading role of the United Nations and the resultant force of international community to provide “positive energy”. The UN Secretary General and relevant officials have also been positively involved in the issue of Syria, and held dialogues with factions in Syria. China has also tried to find common ground on the issue of antiterrorism as well as anti-extremism with the parties, and to reach a settlement in Syria. During the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015, there was a special discussion on the issue of the Middle East refugees. The international community discussed the ideological

source of the Middle East unrest and the governance of both root causes and symptoms.

In the communication between China and the Arab world, China has refused to link extreme terrorism to any religions and ethnics, which wins appreciation from Arab world and other powers. At the same time, all parties also have a discussion on how to oppose the extreme trend of thought from its source. Since 2015, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi mentioned several times that extreme terrorism tended to make use of religion to achieve its aim; therefore, they needed to change the spreading method of Islam. The Grand Sheik of Al Azhar also provided a positive response, and organized the discussion on this issue to advocate an accurate understanding of the core Islamic tenets.

In addition, on the Israel-Palestine issue, China insisted on the use of non-violent means to solve the problem, and to promote negotiations. During the Gaza military conflict in summer 2014, the Chinese government expressed sympathy for all civilian casualties, dispatched special envoy to Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Qatar timely, and promoted the ceasefire agreement together with these countries and the Arab League. The special envoy in Doha met with Khaled Mashaal, chief of the Political Bureau of Hamas especially. China told the two sides that whatever happened, life was the most valuable thing; on the other hand, China also stressed that history has proved that military means could not solve the problem; one side might temporarily take advantage, but it would not be a permanent solution—it could only deepen the hostility, and contrary to the goal of reaching peace negotiations. Therefore, the Chinese side strongly supports any initiative for ceasefire.

Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and the Middle East Countries

In 2014, in the process of economic and trade cooperation with

Arabs, China proposed the specific implementation strategy of "1+2+3" (Qian, T., 2014: June 5). "1" means energy cooperation as the main axis, to promote the overall development of China-Arab World relations as well as political cooperation and mutual trust through energy cooperation, including security cooperation in strategic energy pipelines; "2" refers to the two wings of infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation to promote the development of bilateral economic and trade cooperation; "3" refers to the fact that China should not stop at the traditional infrastructure construction and business cooperation, but should also cooperate in the high-tech industries, such as aerospace, nuclear energy and new energy. Therefore, at the end of 2014 when Egyptian President Sisi visited China, in addition to providing political support, China also discussed the strengthening of economic and trade cooperation between the two sides under the framework of "Belt and Road Initiative", including the cooperation in finance, infrastructure construction, and production capacity. China's high-quality production capacity is well-suited to Egypt's need for industrialization, urbanization, and job enlargement. In addition, China has an economic development zone in the Gulf of Suez; after more than ten years of development, it has achieved initial success. Therefore, the two sides signed a second agreement for further development, making the economic development zone a demonstration of economic and trade cooperation between China and Arab countries. Economic and trade cooperation between China and Arab States need to find the fulcrum, and fan out from one point to the whole area. China should find a good fulcrum—to find right projects as soon as possible, and the cooperation between China and Egypt may become a very important point. No matter in the history or real current needs, the Arab countries value relationship with China, and they are strategic partners by nature of China's "Belt and Road Initiative". Different countries in the Middle East have different characteristics in the economy: the Gulf oil

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producing states have strong financial strength, but after all, their economic scale is small. In order to realize long-term development, they will need a strong economy to drive and link their economy. Take Kuwait as an example, the country is ready to use \$130 billion to establish a Silk City in northern Kuwait's coastal region of Subiya and Bubiyan Island, which spreads over 1,140 square kilometer and will be completed in 2035. Then, it will become an important strategic hub connecting China and Europe on the new “Silk Road”. The initiator of the Silk City, Nasser Mohamed al-Sabah, is nephew of the Emir of Kuwait and now Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs. He has been concerned about and advocated the revival of the “Silk Road”, and logically, he is responsible for the construction of the Silk City. Kuwait is trying to set up a land, sea, and air transport hub city with the combination of finance, leisure and education while connecting Asia-Pacific and Europe through the development of Silk City. It is clear that in the Gulf region, due to the impact of the development of Dubai in recent years, the competition in the economic field is gradually becoming fierce. Although Kuwait is extremely rich in capital, it still needs a strong partner. So, when China put forward the “Belt and Road Initiative”, it got a positive response from Kuwait, which had been keen on the “Silk Road” for years. In the field of economy and trade, Oman focuses on the promotion of the Duqm special economic zones to China. This special zone belongs to Duqm state in Al Wusta of Oman; it is also the center point of the northeast coast of Oman, and facing the Indian Ocean; so it is at a key location connecting East Asia, South Asia, Africa and the hub of European voyage line. The current resident population is less than 5,000 people. It has a unique geographical advantage-- navigation from here will face smaller risks than from the Strait of Hormuz. The country is planning several economic zones, including eight blocks of port, industry, logistics, fisheries, business, leisure, tourism, and education. It can be seen as a very ambitious plan. Oman's population is small;

therefore, it particularly needs international cooperation. Its intention to cooperate with China is also very clear – they wish the Chinese side to participate in the construction. Now, Oman has realized docking with China through “China-Arab States Expo”, some Chinese enterprises comes to Oman and investigates the special economic zones. There is strong cooperation desire in both sides. One of Qatar’s responses to the “Belt and Road” is the construction of Doha new port area. At present, the capacity of Doha port is limited, and must be expanded. There is railway planning connecting railways of six GCC countries. Therefore, in addition to the expansion of the port in Doha, there is also a set of road construction design. Qatar expects Chinese enterprises to participate in, and to strengthen cooperation with China under the framework of “Belt and Road Initiative”. Although the state of Qatar is small, its natural gas reserves are abundant, so are its capital resources. In recent years, the role and activity of Qatar in the Middle East have been gone far beyond its national size. The world’s major powers are concerned about the country. Lebanon represents another type of Middle East countries. Economic strength of these countries is not very strong, and they have been in turmoil for a long time. Now, its main duty is seeking stability and development, and the Lebanese government hopes boosting the country’s development through the “Belt and Road Initiative” and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. Currently, Lebanon all starts from scratch, but it aims to be the channel and gateway of “Belt and Road” leading to Mediterranean Sea. Different countries have different characteristics, economic and trade cooperation under the framework of “Belt and Road” must be in accordance with the local situation, strengthen the mutuality so as to realize win-win cooperation.

Moreover, in promoting economic and trade cooperation and giving full play to the role of enterprise and market, we should avoid China’s dominance in cooperation with foreign enterprises, especially be careful with old ideas and old methods like the “Silk

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Road Fund is our own", "we are a big shareholder of Asian Infrastructure Investment bank". We need also pay attention to the risk control, and to further study and play a role in the market. These are also very important for the smooth implementation of the "Belt and Road Initiative".

Reviewing the unrest in the Middle East since 2011, one understands that the most fundamental problem is that development of this region is lagging behind, and people's living has not been improved in a long time, thus creating a social basis for the generation of extreme ideas. With the development of China, to dock with the Middle East countries and to achieve common development, cooperation and win-win under the framework of "Belt and Road Initiative" is conducive to fundamentally solve and eliminate unrests in Middle East.

Cultural Exchanges between China and the Middle East Countries

In the field of cultural exchanges, President Xi Jinping summed up the spirit of the Silk Road as "peace and cooperation, openness and tolerance, mutual learning, and mutual benefit and win-win". More specifically, he proposed the establishment of the Silk Road in the new era, namely "discuss, jointly build and share", in which "share" mainly refers to how to balance the interests of all sides, and properly handle relationships with all sides. This is also a consideration in the process of cultural communication between China and the Middle East countries. In particular, the Middle East is now experiencing great changes, and in the process of transition. Using the phrase "everything waits to be done" to describe the Middle East is not an exaggeration; therefore, they view "Belt and Road" as their historic opportunity, and wish China to invest more. We need to carry out ideological communication in order to mobilize the enthusiasm of both sides so that both sides can

establish a win-win situation. Through the cultural exchanges, we can truly find an agreement that maximizes the interests of both sides, and establish more stable cooperation and develop together in the longer-term. These are what both China and Arab countries need to work on.

Oman put forward an important cultural symbol in the cultural exchange with China. In the mid-8th century, a ship named "Sohar", which sailed from Oman's Zufar to Guangzhou, which has become a much told story. In the 1980s, they rebuilt a "Sohar" in accordance with the specifications of the original ship, and traveled the old path to Guangzhou in over 200 days. After the ship returned to Oman, it was exhibited on the square in front of State Guesthouse, and has become a scene of the city of Muscat (Xing, X., 2002: March 26). Now they propose to build a Zheng He Memorial Park as well as a monument at Salalah port, which Zheng He had been to five times. They also want to open a Chinese restaurant and create a leisure tourist area, which can not only commemorate the grand occasion of Zheng He's "Sailing to West Ocean", but also solicit tourists from China and all over the world. The proposal connects Zheng He with the Sohar ship, and has a profound cultural connotation. "Belt and Road Initiative" includes five communications, including policy communication, facilities connection, trade, finance and public communication. The idea Oman proposes is part of public communication, which is worthy of Chinese attention. Zheng He Memorial Park will drive both cultural and tourism exchanges, and will also highlight the exchange of ancient Chinese culture, spreading the spirit of the peaceful exchanges of Zheng He's "Sailing to West Ocean", which is a very good idea and of great meaningfulness for both sides.

In addition, the Middle East has its own characteristics in terms of ethnicities, religions, and culture, which are very remarkable and complex. To increase mutual understanding, communication is very important. Thus, based on the original China-Arab civilization

dialogue, it is very important for us to think about how to increase exchanges between think-tanks and increase the mutual understanding between China and Arab countries. The think-tank exchanges as well as people to people communication sometimes can play a big role that official diplomacy cannot achieve. In the future, we need to further increase these kinds of communication, including youth, party, religion and other aspects of communication. Through this communication, we can achieve three targets of "Belt and Road Initiative" in the Middle East: community of interests, community of destiny and the community of responsibility.

Overall, in the history of both China and Arab countries, there is no interest contradiction or conflict, and mutual complementation of friendly exchanges and common interests is the theme. The two sides have a very good foundation of friendly cooperation. During the 6th ministerial meeting of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum held in Beijing, the Qatari Foreign Minister told the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during his visit to China, that the "Belt and Road" can easily touch the heart of people in both countries; in the new period, the two sides will have a more broad cooperation and development prospects. On the 10th anniversary of the Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum, Foreign Minister Wang Yi also said, the political mutual trust between China and Arab countries "cannot buy even with gold" which was precious and worthing cherished.

Conclusion

In June 2014, the 6th Ministerial Conference of China-Arab State Cooperation was held in Beijing. During the opening ceremony, President Xi Jinping put forward the strategic concept of "Belt and Road Initiative" as part of China-Arab Cooperation. This is undoubtedly the biggest highlight of the conference, and pointed to the direction for the future development of bilateral relations. The

“Silk Road” once closely linked Arab civilization with Chinese civilization, and both sides have special feelings towards the “Silk Road”. The modern version of the “Belt and Road” is not a simple copy of the ancient “Silk Road”; it has a wider scope and richer connotation. This strategy is a combination of China’s “opening to the West” policy and the Arab World “Towards the East” policy.

In the economic and trade fields, Chinese large enterprises should not only “go out” but also “step into” its cooperative partners’ society down to earth, building benefit community and destiny community, and bringing benefits to both sides. This is the mainstream. Only by doing so, China’s development in overseas market has good prospects. But, unfortunately, there are also a number of “go out” enterprises that only care about their short-term interests while ignore social duty and ecological protection, which leading to undesirable consequences. These require strengthening education to avoid such a bad situation and to ensure sustainable long-term cooperation. Now, large enterprises going overseas pay more attention to the contribution to the local community, such as building roads, schools, hospitals, etc.; the government should guide enterprises to take social responsibility.

When major changes occurred in the Middle East, the Chinese government stressed noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries, and respected the choice of other peoples, and never imposed what we think is good for others. China has a correct outlook of righteousness and benefit, adheres to achieve equality, mutual assistance and common development through cooperation, and avoid predatory behavior like the old colonialists. Energy cooperation between the two sides is actually the mutual need and complementation of each other; the producing countries need a stable consumer market, and the consumer needs oil sources; this is equally and mutually beneficial, and contributes to mutual development. It is not a slogan, but indeed an action.

Some people in the international community may have some

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misunderstanding of China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”, think China is going to expand its influence and carry out another “Marshall Plan” in the new era. In fact, the mischief of Cold War thinking and a lack of understanding of the concept of China’s win-win cooperation, which requires China’s explanation and communication. It will need a certain amount of time, and need patience and concentration to go forward. No matter what, strategic communication, dialogue and mutual understanding with the great powers is of great importance and is an important part of strategic docking between China and the Middle East countries under the framework of “Belt and Road Initiative”. China and Russia have a stable communication channel. China and EU also keep contact and communication and be able to seek much in common. Therefore, to enhance the cultural exchanges with the Middle East countries and all aspects, in addition to regional dialogue and communication, China also needs to communicate with the great powers to reduce obstacles during China’s implementation of the “Belt and Road Initiative” as far as possible. Zero obstacles are impossible, but we should try to resolve them and continuously improve the plan in the process of implementation and strategic docking.

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