

Development of Sino-Arab Relations and the Evolution of China's Middle East Policy in the New Era

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Abstract: China and the Arab countries enjoy a long history of friendly exchanges. During the Cold War period, significant accomplishments were achieved in their bilateral political cooperation. Recent years have witnessed the great success of comprehensive cooperation toward mutual benefits within the framework of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. However, the turbulence in the Middle East and the U.S. Greater Middle East Initiative have emerged as a new challenge to the future development of bilateral relations. Yet China's Middle East policy has not remained stagnant; its prompt readjustments have brought momentum to the healthy development of Sino-Arab bilateral relations.

Key Words: Sino-Arab Relations; China's Middle East Policy

I

The 22 Arab countries, mainly located in West Asia and North Africa, cover an area of about 14.26 million square kilometers, around 9.5% of the world's total size. They have a population of about 270 million, 4% of the whole world. With its significant strategic position and abundant oil and gas resources, the Arab world has always been a main arena for power games and competition. The Arab world is of unique significance among China's foreign concerns. Sino-Arab relations started a new page when Egypt, Syria, and Yemen took the lead in establishing diplomatic relations with China in 1956. Generally speaking, Sino-Arab relations over the past fifty years have undergone four periods. In the 1950s, the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) made an important breakthrough in its diplomacy with the Arab world. The success of the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the promotion of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence enhanced mutual understanding between China and the Arab countries and witnessed the start of bilateral relations.

In the 1950s, national independence movements mushroomed in Asia and

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Africa. The Algerian National Liberation Front launched an armed uprising and fought heroically for the national independence of Algeria in 1954. Sudan, Morocco and Tunisia achieved their independence successively in 1956. China's firm support for Arab anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism and national independence movements won widespread acclaim around the Arab world. During this period, China established diplomatic relations with Iraq, Morocco, Algeria and Sudan after Egypt, Syria and Yemen, which was the first climax of establishing diplomatic ties between the two sides. In the 1960s, the disturbance and impairment of China's "Cultural Revolution" and its stress on ideology in diplomacy incurred suspicion and estrangement among many Arab countries. As a result, Sino-Arab relations experienced some setbacks. South Yemen was the only Arab country that established diplomatic relations with China in this period. In the 1970s, China adjusted its foreign policy, eliminated the impact of the "Ultra Leftist" ideology of the 1960s, and restored, improved or developed friendly relations with all countries in the Middle East. In such circumstances, China established diplomatic relations respectively with Kuwait, Lebanon, Jordan and Oman and welcomed the arrival of the second significant development of diplomatic relations with the Arab countries.

With the establishment of China's reform and opening-up strategy in the 1980s more oriented towards economic development, China abandoned the principle of "drawing a line" between China and other countries with a different social system or ideology, and instead, comprehensively promoted its relations with all countries in the spirit of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Therefore, Sino-Arab relations entered a new era of development. In the 1980s, UAE, Qatar, Palestine and Bahrain established diplomatic ties with China. Saudi Arabia followed in 1990. By then, China had built diplomatic relations with all the Arab countries. Establishing of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, a very influential power in the Arab-Islamic world, was a notable achievement in China's Middle East diplomacy.

In the new century, with the drastic transformation of the global and particularly the Middle East situations, the booming economy of China and its rising position in the world, China has been establishing greater interests in the Arab region. Meanwhile, China's attention to and input in the Arab region are also increasing gradually. Sino-Arab exchanges and contacts have become progressively dynamic and close. In January 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao advanced four principles for developing Sino-Arab relations when meeting Secretary-General Amr Musa and the delegates of the 22 member states of the Arab League. The two parties jointly agreed to build the China-Arab Cooperation Forum

and a new type of Sino-Arab partnership.¹ In June 2006, the second ministerial conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum was held in Beijing. The delegates had an in-depth discussion on promoting friendships, expanding cooperation, and establishing a new Sino-Arab partnership and reached consensus in many fields, which marked a new phase of comprehensive cooperation between the two sides.

The past half-century has seen the incessant development, enhancement and maturation of Sino-Arab relations from a preliminary understanding to mutual trust, which is closely related to the evolution of the global, regional and domestic situations and also reflects the adjustments and changes of both sides' foreign policies. On the whole, the mainstream of Sino-Arab relations in the past 50 years has had close-knit political contacts and constant high-level exchanges. Recent years have seen frequent visits of Chinese leaders to Arab countries and visits of state heads of Egypt, Saudi, Yemen, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar to China in return. The direct contacts of leaders from both sides played an irreplaceable role in promoting the development of bilateral relations. China has been giving constant support to the just cause of the Palestinian and Arab people and holding on to the impartial stand on many significant issues in the Middle East, which has been widely praised by the Arab countries. Meanwhile, the Arab countries have adhered to the "One China" policy on the Taiwan question. I must point out that when the 26th General Assembly decided in 1971 to pass the resolution for restoring China's legitimate UN seat, Algeria and Albania were two co-sponsors. About two-thirds of the Arab countries voted for the resolution, making historic contributions to China's return to the UN.

In addition, both sides provided each side with its needs through economic exchanges and carried out "win-win" cooperation. Nowadays, the Sino-Arab economic and trade cooperation has entered a stage of comprehensive and multi-field co-operation. The bilateral trade volume between China and the Arab countries reached more than 51.2 billion US dollars in 2005, almost ten times as much as that in 1995. The Arab countries have become China's eighth largest trading partners and seventh largest export market and import source. Meanwhile, great progress has also been made in such fields as project contracting, cooperation in labor services and mutual investment. On May 31, 2006, when meeting with the Arab delegates of the second ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, President Hu Jintao made an insightful summary of the successful experience of the smooth development of Sino-Arab relations in the last half century:

First of all, both sides should stick to mutual respect, mutual trust and treating each other sincerely. Although the national conditions of China are different from

¹ "Chinese Foreign Minister Attends the First Ministerial-level Conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum," *People's Daily*, Sept. 15, 2004, p.3.

those of the Arab countries, both sides ought to stick to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, surmount discrepancies of social systems and ideologies, and actively boost friendly and cooperative relations, so that the two sides can become trustworthy good friends and good partners. Secondly, both sides should abide by the principle of mutual benefits, 'win-win' cooperation, and common development. In the course of national construction and development, both sides have consistently supported and helped each other and kept expanding the reciprocal cooperation in all fields, and scored actual achievements, which have laid a sound foundation for the development of Sino-Arab relations. Thirdly, both sides should support each other, coordinate closely, and safeguard common rights and interests. Regarding the key issues of world peace and development as well as global and regional affairs, both sides should persevere in coordination and cooperation, which has created a favorable external environment for respective development, safeguarded the developing countries' legitimate rights and interests, and made great contributions to peace, stability and development of the region and the world.²

The successful development of Sino-Arab relations in the past half-century has laid a solid foundation for the establishment of a new Sino-Arab partnership.

II

The communiqué and the action plan issued by the ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum declared that both sides had decided to promote a comprehensive cooperation in the fields of politics, economy, science, culture, personnel exchanges and dialogues among civilizations in order to establish a new Sino-Arab partnership. It is the first time for the 22 Arab states, as a whole, to issue an important political manifesto on the development of bilateral relations with China. This is also a strategic option made by both sides to meet the challenge caused by the dramatic changes of global and regional situations after the Cold War.

The Arab countries are facing a new period of social transformation. Their main task is to create a peaceful regional and surrounding environment, gradually enhance political, economic and social reforms, and realize the rejuvenation of their states and nations. After the end of the Cold War, especially following the Iraq War, the continuous turbulence in the Middle East has produced a tremendous negative impact on the Arab world and seriously impeded the pace of reform and development.

Firstly, consider the impact of the continuous chaos in the region. The regional disputes surrounding the Middle East issue are unsettled after so many years.

² "Hu Jintao Meets with the Heads of the Arab State Delegations of the Second Ministerial Conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum," *People's Daily*, June 1, 2006, p.3.

Instead, they seem to worsen day by day. No doubt the half-century Middle East problem relates to a series of complicated issues concerning different nations and religions, but one of the most important factors is that the U.S. regards Israel as its most significant strategic pillar in the Middle East and has long taken a partial, supportive and even permissive stance towards Israel. So far, the U.S. has vetoed the Security Council resolutions for resolving the Arab-Israel disputes seven times. The self-centered U.S. policy disregarding the Arab national interests is an important reason why the Arab-Israel disputes cannot be fairly resolved. This has resulted in the illegal occupation of a lots of Arab territories, the appearance of millions of homeless Palestinian refugees, the increasing aggravation of the humanitarian crisis in Palestine, and the severe destruction of Arab countries' peaceful environment for development and rejuvenation. The Iraq War launched by the U.S. did not bring peace and tranquility to the Middle East. On the contrary, it aggravated the tensions there. Terrorism shows a tendency of spreading and expanding. Iraq has become a new source of chaos in this region. In Iraq, the contradictions between occupation and resistance as well as control and rebellion haven't decreased at all; new contradictions are looming instead. The internal conflicts between different sects and races are rather tense. The two contradictions are mutually interwoven and their impacts will spread to the entire region. The long-term nuclear confrontation between Iran and the U.S. has brought threats of war to this region. The Arab countries are extremely worried about the complicated and grave situation in the Middle East. How to mitigate disorder and chaos in the Middle East becomes a pressing problem facing the Arab nations.

Secondly, consider the impact of the U.S.'s plan of democratic transformation in the Middle East. The Arab countries have been seeking a path of development that suits their own practical conditions after independence. They have never stopped their efforts to pursue democratic reform. After the Iraq War, the U.S. initiated the Greater Middle East Initiative, which regarded the Islamic world as the soil breeding terrorism and weapons of massive destruction that would pose grave threats to the U.S.. Washington leaders tried to unite its Western allies to promote democracy and freedom in the Middle East together by political, economic and cultural means. Later, under widespread opposition from the Arab countries and extensive suspicion from its Western allies, the U.S. had to change its plan, emphasizing that the implementation of reforms depends on the relevant countries themselves, and their reform should not and also could not be imposed by external forces. Also the uniqueness and diversity of the countries concerned ought to be respected in the process of reforms. Nevertheless, the U.S.'s acceleration of political democratization, economic liberalization and cultural Westernization in the Middle East hasn't yet changed in its nature. Consequently, the Arab countries are under unprecedented pressure. In the process of reform, the Arab countries are confronted with various serious challenges, such as how to maintain Arab-Islamic

characteristics, speed up modernization independently and progressively in accordance with their own national conditions, and avoid repeating the same mistakes made by the Iranian Shah Pahlavi Dynasty and Algeria. The fact that Pahlavi promoted complete Westernization in the 1970s and Algeria copied Western political pluralism and a multiparty system in the 1990s triggered political crises respectively. The appearance and intensification of contradictions between the U.S. and the Islamic world have put some Arab governments in a more difficult predicament after the Iraq War. This is especially so when they try to deal with some major internal and external affairs or introduce measures for political, economic and social reforms; they find themselves under more restraints than ever and have even less room to maneuver. On the one hand, they have to consider the American factor to avoid clashing with the U.S. directly and becoming the target of U.S. punishment. On the other hand, they need to take people's sentiments into account and keep from touching off social unrest as a result of improperly settling related matters. Compared with other developing countries, it is a more prominent problem for the Arab countries to balance reform, development and stability in social transformation.

Thirdly, consider the impact on the traditional Islamic culture. Islam and its culture have a solid age-old basis and powerful vitality, but both are confronted with various pressures and challenges. With the gradual progress of political and economic reforms in the Arab countries, all circles of society call for religious reform. Meanwhile, there have always been persistent religious extremists who oppose reforms and demand restructuring regulations according to the ancient classics and return to Islam. Frequently, extremists instigate incidents and stir up troubles and disorder. The U.S. and some other Western countries have demonized Islam by charging that the terrorist acts of violence committed by some religious extremist forces represent an Islamic trend in general. It has become a pressing task for Arab countries to listen to the call of the times, interpret Islam correctly, construct a mainstream religious culture, conduct dialogues among civilizations and create a favorable international opinion environment in the fields of social ideology and culture.

Under internal and external pressures, the Arab countries started adjusting their policies and gave governmental priority to speed up reforms in the fields of politics, economy, society and education in order to realize the rejuvenation of the Arab nations as early as possible. The issue of reforms was studied in-depth and relevant declarations and plans were made at both the 16th Arab League summit in May 2004 and the 17th summit in March 2005. The plans included pursuing pluralistic diplomacy, actively developing relations with other world powers, strengthening the internal construction of the Arab League, revising the Charter of the Arab League, setting up an Arab Parliament in order to quicken the pace of

uniting and self-strengthening, and increasing the ability to solve internal disputes and resist outside interference. Relations with the U.S. still occupy a very important position in Arab countries' diplomacy. The implementation of a pluralistic diplomatic strategy aims at expanding Arab countries' flexibility in the world to respond better various challenges. Developing ties with China is an important step to their pluralistic diplomacy. At the December 2005 Beijing "Symposium on Sino-Arab Relations and Sino-Arab Cultural Dialogue", the statesmen, scholars and experts from China and Arab countries had extensive in-depth discussions on the political basis, opportunities, challenges, and prospects for the further development of Sino-Arab relations. The remarks delivered by Ali Maher, a Senior Egyptian ambassador, are very representative. Among several permanent members of the Security Council, he said, China is the only permanent member that represents a civilization unlike Western civilization. A big power, China belongs to the third world; it is a giant with vital interests but never has hegemonic ambitions. China plays a unique role in international affairs and shares the same goal with the Arab countries in fighting hegemonism, safeguarding world peace and promoting the development of the global economy. In implementing comprehensive cooperation with China, the international status of the Arab states can be raised.

It is expected that China could play a more dynamic role in international and regional affairs to find an impartial solution of the regional conflicts to mitigate the prolonged and turbulent regional situation. China enjoys a huge market and promising developmental prospects and through cooperation with China the economy in all the Arab countries could be further improved and promoted. The Arab world could draw lessons from China's mode of economic development and learn from its successful experiences in balancing reform, development and stability. Therefore, numerous Arab countries have one after another recently expressed their wish to establish strategic cooperative relations with China. As a matter of fact, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria have already achieved that goal. The idea of setting up the China-Arab Cooperation Forum has also been initiated by the Arab side. Secretary General of the Arab League Majid proposed an "Arab-China Cooperation Forum" in 1990, to which the Chinese side gave a positive response. In recent years, the Foreign Ministers Council of the Arab League passed resolutions successively on relations with China, calling on the member states to develop friendly relations with China in all fields. In March 2006, the 18th Summit Meeting of the Arab League adopted a special resolution reiterating its basic principle of the One-China policy.³

As for China, the Arab countries always play an important role in China's overall diplomatic strategy. Although the international situation has undergone

³ "The Arab League Summit Conference Kicks Off," *People's Daily*, March 29, 2006, p.3.

profound changes, the significance of this role has not lessened but has been strengthened. It is the basis of China's foreign policy to enhance relations with the developing countries. The Arab world is a significant part of the developing countries. Compared with other developing nations, the Arab world holds a more important strategic position and plays a vital role in world affairs. Quite a few significant issues in the contemporary world are centered in the Middle East, which is also a focus of various contradictions and conflicts. The fights between hegemonism and anti-hegemonism, unilateralism and multilateralism, control and anti-control, interference and anti-interference are very conspicuous in this area. As victims of hegemonism and power politics, the Arab countries have become an important force in containing them, and an active driving force in establishing a new international political and economic order that is just and rational. As a big power pursuing peace and development, China supports multilateralism, actively promotes democratization in international relations, strengthens international cooperation, safeguards common security and seeks common development. In this regard, the Arab countries' support is very important to China.

Meanwhile, the Middle East is the significant stage for the great powers to conduct diplomatic affairs. China's Middle East policy does not take only Arab countries and people into account but also affects China's relatively stable relations with other great powers. In other words, it is an important part of China's diplomatic efforts to strive for a peaceful and stable international environment. Economically, the Middle East is rich in resources and boasts potential huge markets in infrastructure, railway transport, electricity, telecommunications, tourism, environmental protection and finance and bond. In particular, its oil reserves and output, which influence the development of the world economy, respectively accounts for 70% and 30% of the world total. The Middle East is of great importance for Chinese and Arab enterprises to open mutually beneficial markets and exchange resources by making use of their own advantages. It is of great significance for the Chinese side to put into practice the strategic blueprint made by China's central government, namely, "two (domestic and overseas) resources, two markets and two capitals," to maintain a sustainable and stable development of China's national economy and to realize the reciprocal and common development of China and Arab countries.

III

China always attaches great importance to its work concerning the Middle East. Over time, China's Middle East diplomacy has experienced great changes in its priorities and connotations. In the 1950s and 1960s, against the background of national independence and liberation movements and the U.S. siege and blockade

against China, China took it as the priority of its Middle East diplomacy to support Arab people's struggles against imperialism, and old or new colonialism, in order to achieve and maintain their national independence. China's Middle East policy was fully reflected in "the Five Principles on Developing Relations with the Arab Countries" proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai on his 1963 visit to Algeria. In the 1970s, Chinese leaders developed the theory of "Three Worlds" and put into practice their strategy of "forming the widest anti-hegemonist united front." As a result, the ideological consciousness in China's Middle East diplomacy was weakened and China regarded the Arab countries as the major force to curb the Soviet Union's expansion in the Middle East and China developed comprehensive relations with all Arab countries. After the Cold War or the start of the 21st century to be exact, China fundamentally adjusted its national and international development strategies, shifting the focus to promoting economic construction at home and peace, development and cooperation abroad.

China will continuously stick to peaceful development modes. Internationally, China will continue to advocate democracy and justice and promote coordination and cooperation, to safeguard security for all on the basis of harmony and mutual trust, promoting common prosperity on the basis of equality and mutual benefits. China will continue to be open-minded and tolerant, promote dialogue among civilizations, and work to make the international order more just and equitable.⁴ Based on general guidelines, China has proposed the specific rules to develop relations with the Arab countries.

In January 2004, at the headquarters of the Arab League, the visiting President Hu Jintao proposed four principles of developing new Sino-Arab partnership in the new area, i.e., "promoting political relations on the basis of mutual respect, keeping close economic and trade contacts for the sake of common development, expanding cultural exchanges in order to learn from each other, and strengthening cooperation in international affairs in the spirit of safeguarding world peace and promoting common development."⁵ In May 2005, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan addressed the opening ceremony of the second ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. He said that China and the Arab countries should become friendly partners promoting mutual confidence, common development, the harmonious coexistence of various cultures, and safeguarding world peace, security and stability.⁶ China raised this new proposition on Sino-Arab relations in

⁴ "The Report on the Work of the Government by Premier Wen Jiabao at the Fourth Session of the Tenth National People's Congress," *People's Daily*, March 6, 2006, p.2.

⁵ "An Interview with General Secretary of the Arab League: Injecting New Vitality into Arab-China Cooperation," http://news.shangdu.com/category/10002/2006/05/31/2006-05-31_312822_10002.shtml.

⁶ "State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan's Remarks on the Opening Ceremony of the Second Ministerial Conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum," <http://www.pjinfo.gov.cn/html/2006/06/2006060115351-1.htm>.

response to the changes of situation 40 years after Premier Zhou Enlai put forward the Five Principles for developing Sino-Arab relations. It covers various fields such as politics, economy and culture, and states clearly that the Chinese government will participate in Middle Eastern affairs and will promote friendly and cooperative relations in a more active and pragmatic way. Moreover, it reflects China's better understanding of Middle Eastern affairs, its interests in the Middle East, and the opportunities and challenges in its ties with the Arab countries.

With so many important issues interwoven, the chaotic Middle East is the intersection of the main contradictions of current international relations. It is also a focus of the U.S.'s global strategy and an important arena of international politics and power diplomacy. Consequently, its evolving situation is not regional, but has an overall impact on the practical implementation of U.S. global strategy, on big power relations' interactions and adjustments, and on world peace, stability and prosperity. Undoubtedly, the turmoil in the Middle East will affect China's vital interest there and the stability of China's surrounding environment. In terms of its diplomatic strategy, China's core targets are to seek peace, promote development and strengthen cooperation. It means that China will create and keep a favorable peaceful environment for its domestic economic development and modernization through its own efforts. Similarly, China will create a favorable peaceful environment for the universal development and prosperity of every country. More than any other powers, China intends to promote world peace while safeguarding its own favorable peaceful environment, and match the Chinese people's fundamental interests with the common interests of all other peoples in the world. Moreover, actively participating in the Middle East affairs and striving to ease the enduring tension in this region is an inseparable part of China's Middle East diplomacy.

Admittedly, China has great political, economic and security interests in the Middle East. The Middle East is an important strategic partner for China to rely on in international politics. The Arab-Islamic world is an influential state bloc which consists of developing countries. China needs their support and cooperation in its international efforts. Economically, the Middle East is China's largest foreign energy supplier, an important destination for its commodities and labor services export, and also a market for contracted projects. From the security perspective, the Middle East is in the frontline for overcoming the "Three Forces of Terrorism, Extremism and Separatism" and keeping stability in China's western border. The Middle East is also one of the essential arenas for containing the expansion of "international space" of "Taiwan independence" forces. Protecting the national interest is the starting point and ultimate goal of China's diplomacy. China strongly safeguards its core, long-range and comprehensive interests and always puts its sovereignty and national security in the first place. How to safeguard

China's own interests is a significant consideration in China's Middle East diplomacy. It is clear that the rapid development of globalization interweaves the interests of all countries; each country influences another and more and more relies on one another. Therefore, in the process of safeguarding its own interest, China should consider the vital interests of its partners, seek their shared interests and pursue reciprocity and "win-win" cooperation. China should especially consider the interests of those marginalized developing countries in the process of economic globalization. It is an important guiding principle for China's Middle East diplomacy in the new era to consider the interests of other sides while defending its own interest in order to achieve mutual benefits and "win-win" results.

China has established a profound traditional friendship and a steady political basis for comprehensive cooperation with the Arab countries. It is the only big power in the world that keeps good relations with all the regional countries, more than any Western power. This is also an advantage for China to further play its unique role. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that the changes in Middle East patterns have challenged China's bilateral relations with the Arab countries. After the end of the Cold War, the once less open national, religious and even sectarian disputes and conflicts began to surface, while the outside interference mixed with all kinds of complicated internal contradictions, among which many are quite difficult. China should refrain from involving itself in the disputes among these countries while maintaining their friendships. What's more, the situation in the Middle East has been consistently complicated and capricious. After the Gulf War, especially following the Iraq War, the U.S. began to dominate the Middle East affairs, which may not change soon in the future. China has no intention or capability to challenge the role of the U.S.. On the contrary, China will, on the basis of its own principles and positions, coordinate with the U.S. in some issues so as to keep Sino-U.S. relation stable. As a developing power, China finds itself still short of some strength and means to participate more fully in Middle East affairs.

China's diplomatic practice in recent years reveals its priorities of Middle East diplomacy as follows.

1. Supporting peace actively, participating in the solution to regional disputes, and mitigating the tense regional situation, China establishes its image as a responsible and constructive power. As for the Palestine-Israel issue, China has increased its involvement and has attempted to lobby all parties concerned for peace negotiations, which reveals China's unique constructive role in the Middle East peace process. China offered its own corresponding propositions on the key Palestine-Israel disputes in different periods. The end of the last century saw some new changes in the Middle East peace process. Mr. Barak, who was called Rabin's successor, was determined to "make the greatest concessions" in order to realize "the peace of the valiant" after he was elected Israeli Prime Minister in 1999. U.S.

President Clinton, who was also eager to solve the Palestine-Israel disputes at the end of his term, also made efforts to advance the peace process. In such circumstances, Palestine and Israel started negotiation for a permanent status of Palestine. Both sides fought hard to safeguard their vital interests and both hoped to rely on China's support. In April 2000, President Jiang Zemin visited Israel and Palestine, the first time for a Chinese head of state to visit there. As President Jiang summarized in the way of traditional Chinese thinking, China's stance towards the solution to Palestine-Israel disputes in the new situation was as follows: "Peace is most valued" as the Oriental philosophical thought, which has survived the test of time, should be able to enlighten the world on the solution to the Middle East issue. The solution lies in negotiation but not on the use of force, in cooperation but not confrontation and in mutual understanding but not mutual exclusion. President Jiang put forward China's four principles on the solutions while meeting with Egyptian President Mubarak in Alexandria.⁷

Yet in 2004 the Middle East peace process witnessed serious setbacks. Israel pushed forward the "Disengagement Plan," sped up the construction of the "separation wall," attacked the Palestinian radical forces, and even launched a threat to Yasser Arafat. At the end of the year, Arafat died of illness. Abbas succeeded him in his post. The international community spared no efforts to break the deadlock of the peace negotiation and appealed to both sides to return to the negotiation table as early as possible. At the critical moment of the situation, Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan paid a visit respectively to Israel and Palestine, and proposed China's four principles to address the Middle East issue: the first is to build mutual confidence progressively and resume peace negotiation; the second is to speed up the implementation of the "Road Map" and establish an independent state of Palestine; the third is to obtain support from the international community for convoking a peace conference attended by the permanent member states of the Security Council and other parties concerned; and the fourth is to work for a comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East.

The appointment of a special envoy is an important measure taken by China in its Middle East diplomacy. It was the first time for China to have established an envoy working mechanism for major international issues outside China's surrounding area, which fully demonstrated China's concern about and active participation in the Middle East affairs. Since the establishment of the post in September 2002, two envoys have visited the Middle East nine times to urge both sides to resume peace negotiation, to give all parties concerned a better understanding of China's Middle East policy and to play a constructive role in promoting the Middle East peace process. The special envoy to the Middle East

⁷ Zhong Zhicheng, *For a Better World— President Jiang Zemin's State Visits* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2006), p.432.

has become an indispensable part of China's Middle East diplomacy.

In resolving other conflicts and disputes in this region, China has taken many positive and reliable measures in its own way. China's constructive role in the course of peaceful resolution has won widespread acclaims from these regional countries. On the Iraq issue, China advocated respecting the Iraqi people's will and choice, and fulfilling the goal of "the Iraqis administering Iraq." That issue should be solved within the UN framework so as to give full play to the significant role of the UN. The legitimate rights and interests of every country should be respected. The reasonable concerns of Iraq's neighboring countries and other Arab countries should be taken into consideration. For this purpose, China put forward proposals at the Security Council about that problem and played a constructive role in the passage of Resolution 1546. China also actively participated in various international conferences about the Iraq issue. On the Darfur issue and Iran's nuclear issue, China insisted on solving the practical problems through political and diplomatic channels, which resulted in a positive influence. In October 2005, China took part in the UN Peacekeeping Operation in Sudan and sent a peacekeeping force of 432 soldiers with a view to supporting Sudan's peace process. Furthermore, China provided as much humanitarian assistance as it could to Palestine, Sudan and Lebanon.

2. While continuing to promote high-level exchanges of visits, and deepen political mutual trust and cooperation, China should be engaged in pragmatic economic cooperation on the basis of mutual benefit and "win-win" development, which will be deemed as the priority of Sino-Arab relations in the new era. First of all, China should give full play to the advantage of great mutual complementarities of the two sides, promote the free flow of commodities, capitals, techniques and services, and enlarge the scale of bilateral trade. The bilateral trade volume reached 51.2 billion US dollars in 2005 and it will most likely reach 100 billion US dollars by 2010 through concerted efforts of both sides.⁸

Secondly, China should encourage mutual investment and promote cooperation between the enterprises from both sides in the fields of energy, communication, transportation, electric power, technique and agriculture. In recent years, due to the continual hike of oil price, the financial power of Middle East energy exporters has increased tremendously. The income from oil-exports of OPEC, whose members are mainly Middle Eastern oil producers exceeded 500 billion US dollars in 2005. Relying on their abundant funds, they have opened up a new round of investments in infrastructure construction, domestic producing capacity and overseas

⁸ "State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan's Remarks on the Opening Ceremony of the Second Ministerial Conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum," <http://www.pjinfo.gov.cn/html/2006/06/2006060115351-1.htm>.

development, which are in greater need of China's markets and technologies. Hence, this could be a golden opportunity for bilateral cooperation in the above-mentioned fields. Energy is an important part of the Sino-Arab economic cooperation. Currently, China's crude oil import from the Arab countries has already amounted to 55 million tons, representing 43% of China's whole crude oil import.⁹ With its rapid economic development, China's crude oil import from the Middle East will further increase. Meanwhile, the Arab countries are pursuing diversification of their oil markets. Therefore, deepening energy dialogue and cooperation and establishing long stable, reciprocal and supplementary cooperative relations not only serve the interests of two sides, but also help maintain the stability of world energy markets.

Thirdly, China should develop relations with regional and sub-regional economic cooperation organizations. At present, the Arab countries are speeding up regional integration. The six Gulf countries are accelerating such a process and have already accomplished the union of tariffs. They will achieve economic and financial integration as soon as possible and will become an entity featuring "one market, one economy and one finance." In January 2005, the project of the Great Arab Free Trade Area covering 22 Arab countries was launched, which facilitates the negotiation of the Sino-Gulf Free Trade Zone. The two sides will try their best to sign relevant agreements as soon as possible. The timely establishment of the Sino-Arab Free Trade Zone not only involves enormous economic interests of both sides, but also is of far-reaching political significance and conforms to the reciprocal and "win-win" principles. It is note-worthy that with the unceasing development of Sino-Arab economic cooperation, economic and trade frictions are also rising. Due to the discrepancies between the two sides in economic structures and levels of development, most of the Arab countries have had some trade deficit with China in varying degrees. Chinese commodity exports to the Arab countries in bulk gives an impact on some of their domestic markets and national industries. In addition, the propaganda of the Western media accelerates the spread of "the China threat" in some of these countries. Therefore, it is of vital importance for both sides to explore a new mode of Sino-Arab economic cooperation in a reciprocal, cooperative and "win-win" way. To achieve this goal, China should appropriately reduce some of its profits, strengthen the vitality of local national industries, support small and medium-sized enterprises and increase employment in these countries.

3. In recent years, China's aid policy towards the Arab countries has turned to combining aid to them with the enhancement of their ability of self-development. The Chinese government continues to provide the Arab countries with all assistance it can afford. Moreover, it has given top priority to the cooperation in the field of human resources. By the end of 2005, China had already trained nearly 2600 officials

⁹ See Arab Information Center, <http://www.arabsino.com>.

and technical personnel for the Arab countries. As they are more interested in China's managerial and administrative expertise, China is determined to strengthen bilateral exchanges on how to advance reform and development, and increase bilateral cooperation in the field of human resource training. In May 2005, State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan announced at the ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum that in the following three years China would train 500 technical and administrative personnel every year for the Arab countries.

4. China needs to increase cultural exchanges, advocate dialogues among different civilizations and make joint efforts to build a harmonious world. Since the cultural tie is an important ingredient of Sino-Arab relations, China pays great attention to cultural exchange and cooperation with the Arab countries and has already signed agreements on cultural cooperation and their executive plans with all Arab countries. High-level visits, within the framework of these agreements and plans, have never ceased. Official and private cultural exchanges are on the increase and so are projects of cultural cooperation. China has successively held several large-scale and comprehensive cultural activities such as "Quanzhou and the Silk Road on the Sea Cultural Festival," "Chinese Culture Expo in North Africa" and "China Cultural Week in the Gulf," etc. The Arab countries have conducted "Egypt Cultural Week" and "Syria Cultural Week" in China. Especially, the grand "Arab Arts Festival" held in China in 2006 raised the bilateral cultural exchanges to an unprecedented high level. Today, as the core element of soft power, culture is highly stressed by all countries in the world. Cultural diplomacy is playing an increasingly important role in international relations.

China, with a broader vision and strategic thinking, attaches great importance to cultural exchanges with the Arab countries. It regards the dialogues among different civilizations as the significant part of bilateral cultural exchanges in order to promote China's international image, create a friendly environment of public opinions, and boost the establishment of a harmonious world. Since the Islamic culture has been seriously distorted and even demonized by some Western media, the Arab countries also need to reshape their self-images by carrying on their traditional cultures and promoting dialogues among different civilizations. In December 2005, the Beijing International Symposium on Sino-Arab Relations and Dialogue was very productive. In April 2006, President Hu Jintao paid a visit to Saudi Arabia and delivered a speech entitled "Promoting Peace in the Middle East and Building a Harmonious World" at the Saudi Consultative Council. We should admit, he stressed, that there are some differences of cultural traditions, social systems, values and development modes among different countries. But this can't be used as a pretext to give irresponsible remarks on other countries' domestic affairs. We cannot even attribute the problems and contradictions existing in the current world to a certain civilization, a certain nation or religion. We should spare no

efforts to make all civilizations and nations cooperate in harmony and promote the lofty cause of world peace and development.¹⁰ President Hu Jintao's speech aroused strong resonance. The Sino-Arab dialogue has pioneered the dialogues among different civilizations in different countries, which represents the features of the era and set up a good example of its kind.

5. Relying on the success of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum, we should create a situation under which Sino-Arab bilateral and multilateral relations can interact in a healthy way. The development of bilateral relations with the Arab countries is the basis of China's Middle East diplomacy. The establishment of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum is the extension and deepening of Sino-Arab traditional friendship and also an important platform for strengthening Sino-Arab collective dialogues and cooperation. In September 2004, at the first ministerial conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum held in Cairo, the two sides signed the "China-Arab Cooperation Forum Declaration" and "China-Arab Cooperation Forum Action Plan" that identified the directions for the Forum's construction and development. Over the past two years, all the work of the Forum has been smoothly carried out on a large scale. In April 2005, the Forum held the first Entrepreneurs Conference in Beijing. Governmental officials, industrialists and businesspersons from both sides attended the conference and discussed projects of cooperation in detail and explored new fields and new ways of bilateral cooperation, which all turned out to be fruitful. In June 2005, at the second senior officials' conference held in Beijing, the two sides exchanged views on Sino-Arab relations and other regional and global issues of common concern. Both sides unanimously agreed to set up a political consultation mechanism of high-level officials. At the first International Symposium on Sino-Arab Relations and Dialogue held in Beijing in December 2005, experts, scholars and officials from both sides conducted in-depth discussions and exchanges of view. The symposium focused on two topics, i.e., Sino-Arab relations and Sino-Arab civilization dialogue in the new era and the two sides reached a consensus on many issues.

In particular, the second ministerial conference held in Beijing in May 2006 turned out to be a great success. Focusing on the establishment of a new Sino-Arab partnership, the conference summarized the history of Arab-China relations in the last half-century, exchanged views on the friendly cooperation of the two sides in the fields of politics, economy, energy, culture and environmental protection. The two sides signed "the Communiqué of Second Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum," "China-Arab Cooperation Forum Action Plan of 2006-2008," and documents on establishing an entrepreneurs' conference mechanism

¹⁰ "The Speech by President Hu Jintao at the Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia," *People's Daily*, April 23 2006, p.1.

and environmental cooperation.¹¹ The success of this conference was widely acclaimed by the Arab countries and attracted worldwide attention. An article published in a Russian weekly *Politics Journal* said that the second ministerial conference of China-Arab Cooperation Forum scored abundant achievements. China has already built a permanent mechanism and can use it as a platform to conduct in-depth and comprehensive cooperation with this rising region in the current international political and economic arena. The consolidation of Sino-Arab cooperation not only can help address various regional issues, but also can change the global balance of power.¹² The article concluded that China is aware that competition with the U.S. is inevitable. If they don't compete with each other for the absolute global leadership, they at least strive for carving out spheres of influence around the world. This conclusion absolutely is not viable. Through two years' practice, the China-Arab Cooperation Forum has gradually consummated the principles and guidelines of mechanism construction, namely, considering the other aspects while highlighting the priorities, emphasizing substantial results while proceeding step by step, gaining mutual benefits and "win-win" results while treating each other genuinely and stressing the principle of openness and transparency. The China-Arab Cooperation Forum has formed a cooperative framework that not only attaches great importance to political, trade and cultural cooperation, but also takes into consideration other affairs. It is believed that this cooperation will bring about practical benefits to both sides, good welfare for their people and will also contribute to regional peace, stability and development.

¹¹ Wu Wenbin, "The Sino-Arab Friendships Remain More Unshakable Over Time," *People's Daily*, May 31, 2006, p.7.

¹² Xinhua News Agency, Moscow, June 20, 2006, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>.