

# China's Whole-of-Region Diplomacy in the Middle East

## Opportunities and Challenges

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**Abstract:** To safeguard its economic and security interests, China has adopted a whole-of-region diplomacy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold war. Through a multitude of regional and international organizations, China has been able to maintain constructive interactions with Middle Eastern countries while deepening its ties with other major powers like the United States, the European Union, Russia, Japan and India. China's diplomatic efforts have paid off in the Middle East and increased the influence of developing countries as a whole in international politics. Meanwhile, China's whole-of-region diplomacy is faced with a number of challenges given the complexity of ethnic, religious and security landscapes in the Middle East. China needs more holistic and well-coordinated ways of whole-of-region diplomacy to seek closer relationships with Middle Eastern countries. To this end, it is important for China to consolidate its network of strategic partnerships on the basis of bilateral

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collaboration and multilateral cooperation, further strengthen its discourse power and agenda-setting capacity, and consider adopting a common but differentiated strategy toward regional countries according to their different national conditions, political systems and paths of socioeconomic development.

*Keywords:* Whole-of-region diplomacy; China; Middle East; international organizations.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, regionalization has gained strong momentum in the developing world where many countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America as well as Central and Eastern Europe vary in their political systems and stages of economic development. Quite a few regional, sub-regional and trans-regional organizations came into existence, including, among others, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the African Union (AU), the Mercado Común del Sur (MERCOSUR), the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF).

For small and middle-sized developing countries, regional organizations are usually symbols of solidarity and platforms where collective actions can be taken to succeed in international competition and earn respect from great powers. For developed countries and rising powers, regional organizations are also a key element of diplomacy. For instance, the United States, France, Japan, Russia, China and India have all forged strategic ties with Africa for various purposes, thus giving the AU a balancing role in global politics.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the world's leading powers on one side, and small/middle-sized countries on the other, maintain regular interactions through regional organizations or multilateral institutions. China, in particular, has developed a whole-of-region diplomacy as an

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<sup>1</sup>Avaneesh Pandey, "India-Africa Summit 2015: India Seeks to Challenge China's Dominance Through 'Unprecedented' Conference," *International Business Times*, October 27, 2015; and Seifudein Adem, "Emerging Trends in Japan-Africa Relations: An African Perspective," *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2001), pp. 61–69.

effective approach to strengthen its partnerships with other developing countries.<sup>2</sup>

Based on some preliminary findings,<sup>3</sup> this paper attempts to explore China's whole-of-region diplomacy toward Middle Eastern countries. It first elaborates on the patterns of China's diplomatic practice in the Middle East, a geopolitical hot spot for decades. It then examines the features as well as deficiencies in China's whole-of-region diplomacy toward Middle Eastern countries. The third section analyzes the major challenges that China faces with regard to the complexities of the Middle East. It concludes that more holistic and well-coordinated ways of whole-of-region diplomacy are necessary for China to build closer relationships with Middle Eastern countries.

## China's Diplomatic Approaches in the Middle East

Due to its abundant energy reserves and geo-strategic importance, the Middle East has obtained an increasingly prominent position in China's diplomacy since the beginning of the 21st century. When Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in late 2013, the significance of the Middle East was highlighted as it connects Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient Silk Road — a conduit of frequent trade and cultural exchanges between the Arab world and China hundreds

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<sup>2</sup>Liu Zhongmin and Shu Meng, “中阿合作论坛框架下的中阿关系 [China-Arab Relations Under the Framework of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum],” *West Asia and Africa*, 2014(3), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Kristina Kausch, “Competitive Multipolarity in the Middle East,” *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 50, No.3 (2015), pp 1–15; Zheng Qirong and Niu Zhongjun, eds., *China's Multilateral Diplomacy* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2012); Wang Zheng, “多边主义理论与多边主义外交: 关于制度与政策的研究 [Theory and Diplomacy of Multilateralism: A Study on Institution and Policy],” *Theory Horizon*, 2015(7), pp. 137–145; Hu Dawei, “中国整体合作外交评析 —— 兼谈中国 — 中东欧国家合作 [An Assessment of China's Diplomacy of Integrated Cooperation — With a View into China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation],” *International Studies*, 2015(5), p. 75; Wang Fan, “复杂系统思维的整体观与中国外交战略规划 [The Holistic Approach of Complex Systematic Thinking and Strategic Planning of China's Diplomacy],” *World Economics and Politics*, 2013(9), p. 145; and Zha Xiaogang, “如何提高巧实力和整体外交能力 —— 基于机会成本和边际效应的视角 [How to Increase Smart Power and General Foreign Policy Capability: A Perspective Based on Opportunity Cost and Marginal Effect],” *Theory Horizon*, 2014(7), p. 165.

of years ago. In 2016, President Xi made a state visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, which was widely regarded as an extension of the BRI to the Middle East, making it a key region of economic engagement.

For a long time, China's diplomacy toward Middle Eastern countries has centered on developing favorable economic partnerships and avoiding major conflicts. For Middle Eastern countries, China's comparative economic advantage means new opportunities for their development; for China, cooperation with Middle Eastern countries will bring economic benefits through oil and gas trade as well as investment

China has enhanced diplomacy toward the Middle East mainly for economic reasons.

in the petrochemical industry and infrastructure construction. Meanwhile, Middle Eastern countries provide China with both huge markets for manufactured products and access to vital sea lines of communication. In short, Middle Eastern countries are becoming increasingly important for China.

In general, China's diplomacy in the Middle East follows three patterns. First of all, China has initiated a number of bilateral mechanisms together with Middle Eastern countries and taken the lead in setting the agenda of cooperation. This pattern can be described as "1 + N (China plus Middle Eastern countries or regional organizations)" approach, exemplified by the CASCF, the FOCAC and the China-GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) Strategic Dialogue. For example, the CASCF was launched in January 2004 between China and the 22-member League of Arab States (LAS). In 2010, the fourth CASCF Ministerial Meeting issued the "Tianjin Declaration," announcing the establishment of the China-Arab strategic relationship for comprehensive cooperation and common development and unveiling a new stage of China-Arab collective dialogue and cooperation. When addressing the opening ceremony of the sixth CASCF Ministerial Meeting on June 5, 2014, President Xi characterized the CASCF as of strategic importance to the long-term development of bilateral relations and substantive cooperation.<sup>4</sup> In May 2016, the seventh CASCF Ministerial Meeting was

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<sup>4</sup>"习近平出席中阿合作论坛第六届部长级会议开幕式并发表重要讲话 [Xi Jinping Attends Opening Ceremony of the Sixth Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and Delivers Speech]," *Xinhua News*, June 5, 2014, [www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-06/05/c.1111002498.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-06/05/c.1111002498.htm).

held in Doha under the theme of “Jointly Building the Belt and Road to Reinforce Strategic Cooperation.” By July 2018, eight CASCF ministerial meetings had been held and other mechanisms of cooperation, such as senior officials’ meetings, entrepreneurs’ conferences, media forums and seminars on dialogue of civilizations, had also been functioning very well.

In a similar vein, the FOCAC was inaugurated in 2000 as the official forum between China and African countries, including 10 Arab states from the Middle East. To date, three summits and seven ministerial meetings of the FOCAC have been held. Sub-forums themed on agriculture, science and technology, finance, cultural exchanges, youth, civil society and media have also been set up.<sup>5</sup> During the FOCAC Beijing summit in 2018, President Xi proposed building a closer China-Africa community with a shared future and made new financial pledges to promote industrialization and agricultural modernization in Africa. As a driving force for the Middle Eastern economy, the GCC has been China’s traditional partner in the fields of energy trade and investment. In 2004, both sides signed the *Framework Agreement for Economic Investment and Technical Cooperation* to pave the way for free trade negotiations. In June 2010, China and the GCC launched their first strategic dialogue in Beijing, succeeded by the second and third dialogues in 2011 and 2014 respectively. In 2013, China-GCC bilateral trade volume reached US\$177 billion and Chinese companies signed \$10 billion new labor deals with GCC countries.<sup>6</sup>

Undoubtedly, China’s leading role in the agenda-setting of the CASCF, the FOCAC and the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue is unique. Furthermore, China’s policy and proposals are usually hailed and embraced by Middle Eastern countries, for they have yielded favorable results in various political and economic aspects, including promotion of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process and cooperation of industrial capacities along the Belt and Road. Through this “1 + N” approach, both China and Middle Eastern countries can find win-win solutions to issues relevant to their interests.

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<sup>5</sup>See an introduction to the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum at the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China: <http://www.focac.org/chn/itda/ltjj/t933521.htm>.

<sup>6</sup>Wu Sike, “‘一 带 一 路’框架下的中国与海合会战略合作 [Constructing ‘One Belt and One Road’ to Enhance China and GCC Cooperation],” *Arab World Studies*, 2015(2), p. 8.

Second, China has been actively engaged in multilateral platforms sponsored by Middle Eastern countries and fully respects their agendas. This pattern can be regarded as an “N + 1” approach and exemplified by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-speaking countries (TurkPA), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Union of the Arab Maghreb (UAM). For example, the OIC consists of 57 members and identifies itself as the collective voice of the Muslim world in regional and international affairs.<sup>7</sup> When meeting with Iyad Madani, Secretary-General of the OIC, during his state visit to Saudi Arabia in January 2016, President Xi emphasized that China would forever see Islamic countries as good brothers, friends and partners. With the improvement of Algeria-Morocco relations, the UAM has become China’s new partner of diplomacy in North Africa.

Third, China maintains its collaborative ties with Middle Eastern countries in a variety of multilateral organizations and mechanisms, whose agendas are much broader and often go beyond China-Arab relations. This pattern can be considered as a “1 + N + X” approach, because both China and Middle Eastern countries need to shape policy agendas together with other states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the UN climate change conferences, the Group of Twenty (G20), the P5 + 1 Talks on Iran nuclear issues and the Vienna Conference on Syria are all multilateral platforms where the “1 + N + X” approach applies.

At the regional level, the SCO, with China, Russia and Central Asian countries as its anchors, was founded to address regional security challenges; and its membership has been increasing gradually. Since 2005, Iran has been an observer state of the SCO. In 2012, Turkey was also accepted as a dialogue partner of the organization. The enlargement of

China has adopted a whole-of-region diplomacy toward the Middle East to foster various partnerships.

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<sup>7</sup>“习近平会见伊斯兰合作组织秘书长伊亚德 [Xi Jinping Meets with OIC Secretary-General Iyad Madani],” *People’s Daily*, January 20, 2016, p. 2.

the SCO has greatly strengthened security cooperation in the Middle East. As another organization consisting of 26 member states including China, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the CICA provides China and Middle Eastern countries with more room to enhance cooperation on promoting peace, security and stability in Asia. In addition, China is a dialogue partner of the IORA in which the Middle Eastern countries bordering the Indian Ocean are members.

At the international level, China was open to share its knowledge and viewpoints with Turkey and Saudi Arabia on how to achieve more effective global economic governance during its chairmanship of the G20. Besides, China contributed much to the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal through the P5 + 1 talks. For years, China has been working closely with Middle Eastern countries under the UN framework to fight against terrorism and de-escalate crises in Syria, Yemen and Libya. China's mediation diplomacy in the Middle East attracted wide attention as the country had a seat at the table during two rounds of Syria peace talks held in Vienna at the end of 2015.<sup>8</sup>

The three models of "1 + N," "N + 1" and "1 + N + X" mentioned above are empirical evidence of China's whole-of-region diplomacy toward Middle Eastern countries. Through such diplomacy, China has been able to gain practical experience in exploring solutions to regional security dilemmas while balancing its economic and security interests along the Belt and Road in the Middle East.

## Evaluating China's Diplomacy in the Middle East

Whole-of-region diplomacy is not new in the history of international politics. During the Cold War era, two military alliances were built up in the Middle East by the United States and the Soviet Union as regional proxies of confrontation. Later on, both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to facilitate dialogues and negotiations between Israel and Arab states through whole-of-region diplomacy.<sup>9</sup> However, these diplomatic efforts

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<sup>8</sup>Wang Huaicheng, "维也纳会议聚焦叙利亚 [Vienna Conference Focuses on Syria]," *Guangming Daily*, November 16, 2015, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>Huang Wenyong, "从阿以冲突走向马德里中东和会 [From Arab-Israel Conflicts to Peace Talks in Madrid]," *Foreign Affairs Review*, 1992(1), p. 54.

ended in failure after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the escalation of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. In 2002, the Middle East Quartet was founded by the United States, Russia, the European Union (EU) and the United Nations to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which did not make any breakthrough either. As another attempt of whole-of-region diplomacy by the EU, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy once proposed establishing the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) as an intergovernmental institution bringing together the EU and some Middle Eastern countries from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean to promote dialogue and economic cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, the UfM has long been stagnant due to ensuing political and social crises in the Middle East.

Compared with the United States, the EU and Russia, China is a new player in the Middle East. But it has made remarkable achievements thanks to its whole-of-region diplomacy. At the same time, some deficiencies need to be overcome to improve the country's diplomatic practice in the Middle East.

To begin with, the CASCF has become an inclusive political community built upon maximum consensus of cooperation and principles of equality, non-interference in domestic affairs and compliance with the norms of international relations.<sup>11</sup> At the sixth CASCF Ministerial Meeting in 2014, China laid out the "1 + 2 + 3" framework of cooperation with Arab states: "one" refers to energy cooperation as the main axis; "two" stands for the two wings of infrastructure construction as well as trade and investment; and "three" means that breakthroughs need to be made in the three high-tech areas of nuclear energy, aerospace satellite and new energy. During the seventh CASCF Ministerial Meeting in 2016, both sides agreed to strengthen their ties under the BRI with a focus on policy alignment and industrial capacity cooperation. Despite its success, the CASCF is still lacking in institutional progress since its creation fifteen years ago. For instance, in contrast with the FOCAC, no leaders' summit of the CASCF has been held so far — although each CASCF ministerial meeting issued a joint

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<sup>10</sup>"Nicolas Sarkozy's New 'Club Med,'" *Der Spiegel*, July 14, 2008.

<sup>11</sup>Yang Fuchang, "中阿合作论坛十年成就载史册 [Ten Years of Achievements of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum to Be Remembered by History]," *Guangming Daily*, June 2, 2014, p. 8.

declaration and an action plan, these documents are usually non-binding principles that can hardly be put into practice without follow up measures mandated from the top leadership.

In addition, China invested enormous resources in and greatly benefited from official diplomacy; however, the huge potential of people-to-people exchange has yet to be fully tapped. Over time, China has become used to a top-down approach in the country's diplomacy and international cooperation to manage both domestic and international situations.<sup>12</sup> It is doubtless that China's official diplomacy has been successful with its unique advantages. However, contributions from enterprises, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), volunteer groups and even the general public are also expected, as these actors have become integral components of diplomacy of a country. In many cases, NGOs, civil societies, religious groups and philanthropic foundations play a rather active role in the Middle East diplomacy of the United States and the EU to help project their influence and soft power. By contrast, Chinese media, companies, universities, think tanks and social organizations have had very limited diplomatic participation in the same region. Therefore, the significance of people-to-people exchange in complementing official diplomacy needs to be further amplified.

### Security cooperation remains a weakest dimension of China's diplomacy in the Middle East.

Moreover, China's role in regional security cooperation has long been marginalized although it has continued consolidation of economic partnerships with Middle Eastern countries. From the Chinese perspective, socioeconomic development should be prioritized, which can bring about better solutions to security problems in the Middle East, because "development means the greatest security and the master key to regional security issues."<sup>13</sup> This is why China concentrates most of its diplomatic efforts on economic cooperation with

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<sup>12</sup>Zhang Qingmin, "理解十八大以来的中国外交 [Understanding China's Diplomacy Since the 18th CPC National Congress]," *Foreign Affairs Review*, 2014(2), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup>Xi Jinping, "New Approach for Asian Security Cooperation," in Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 393.

Arab states, especially under the frameworks of the BRI, the CASCF, the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue and the AIIB.<sup>14</sup> Just as President Xi emphasized when addressing his audience at the headquarters of the LAS in Cairo at the beginning of 2016: rather than searching for a proxy in the Middle East, China promotes peace talks; rather than seeking any sphere of influence, China calls on all parties to join the circle of friends for the BRI; rather than attempting to fill any “power vacuum,” China tries to build a cooperative partnership network for win-win outcomes.<sup>15</sup> But in the long run, China needs to build up its capacity on overall planning, strategic design and agenda setting, especially in the fields of security and political cooperation where principles of pragmatism and utilitarianism are dominant for the time being.

In addition, the central government of China can encourage more participation from the provincial level in the country’s diplomacy in the Middle East. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Chinese leadership headed by President Xi has conducted a series of institutional reforms to better leverage China’s diplomatic resources. For example, the National Security Commission (NSC) and the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission were set up under the CPC Central Committee. Within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Department of International Economic Affairs and the Advisory Council of International Economic and Financial Affairs were also created. As a key step of reform, the Chinese government has reshuffled the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) by integrating fragmented sectors such as maritime surveillance, fisheries administration, maritime patrol units and the maritime anti-smuggling police.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in comparison with the enhanced coordination at the central level, institutional cooperation from Chinese provinces, municipalities as well as autonomous regions are lagging behind. At present, only Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and a few cities in the

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<sup>14</sup>Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, “China’s Economic Diplomacy towards the Arab Countries: Challenges Ahead?,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 23, No. 95 (2015), pp. 18–19.

<sup>15</sup>Xi Jinping, “Increase Sino-Arab Dialogue and Expand Common Ground,” in Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China II* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), p. 503.

<sup>16</sup>Gao Xiaosheng, “新时期中国外交转型的原因和影响 [Cause and Impact of Chinese Diplomatic Transition in New Period],” *Teaching and Research*, 2015(5), p. 47.

coastal area like Yiwu, Xiamen and Guangzhou are involved in China's trade with Middle Eastern countries; and Ningxia remains a leader in Arab economic links with China through hosting the China-Arab States Expo. Measures must be taken to encourage more regions of China to join in the rapidly growing ties between China and Middle Eastern countries.

## **Challenges Ahead for China's Whole-of-Region Diplomacy**

The Middle East is known for its complexity of ethnic, religious and security landscapes, which are challenging for any major power to achieve positive outcomes from whole-of-region diplomacy. The setbacks in the diplomatic efforts by the United States and the EU in history seemed to be unavoidable since the regionalization process in the Middle East is far from being completed.

Today, the Middle East remains quite chaotic because most regional organizations still languish at a low level of cooperation. Founded in 1945, the LAS has fallen into lasting political fragmentation where its members dispute over a number of issues such as the solutions to Yemeni and Syrian crises and the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Likewise, the GCC was at one time regarded as the "Holy Alliance" of six Arab states based on shared culture, value, ethnicity, religion and political system. Unfortunately, the objective of creating a single currency and a common market has never been fulfilled within the territories of GCC countries, let alone the integration of their military and politics. As for the UAM, barriers to solidarity are obvious due to the rivalry between two of its members, Morocco and Algeria. Additionally, no institution has been arranged so far to manage the relations of Arab states with non-Arab states, in particular Israel, Iran and Turkey. Since the war in 1973, Israel and the Sunni Arab states have been in hostility for decades. Saudi Arabia has no formal diplomatic relations with Israel and does not even recognize Israel as a state. Still, recent evidence shows that ties between the Sunni Arab states and Israel are improving as a result of their mutual distrust of Iran. Both Saudis and Israelis seem to have found a common enemy in Iran, which means more complicated relations among Middle Eastern countries.

For China, similar challenges are waiting ahead as the emerging power further steps into this geopolitical hot spot to conduct its whole-of-region diplomacy. The most prominent one comes from the religious landscape.

It is well known that the Middle East is home to conflicts among different religions and various religious sects. Throughout history, the effect of religion on politics has been of fundamental importance. It can be argued that the Middle East is probably the sole geographic region that is situated on the axis of political-religious confrontation. Religion-based conflicts in the Middle East can be first examined within the context of the interactions between Muslims and Jews. Notably, Israel is rather unique in the region as it is the only country within a completely different religion other than Islam. The Jews in Israel believe that Middle Eastern lands, including those they are living on now, were given to them by Jehovah and thus need to be recovered. Meanwhile, the Arabs also have no intention of sharing their land with the Jews. Countries in the Islamic world like Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are all regional powers, while the majority of their population is either Shia or Sunni Muslims. In Saudi Arabia, Sunni Muslims are quite dominant in political affairs, whilst Shia Muslims are the majority in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain. Even in countries like Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, Shia as an Islamic sect boasts huge political influence. In the Middle East, both national identity and ethnic identity have been eclipsed by sectarian identity. The diversification of identities is therefore considered a strong impediment to regional integration.<sup>17</sup>

The divergence of political institutions and developmental approaches among Middle Eastern countries has been another major obstacle to China's whole-of-region diplomacy. On the one hand, monarchies and republics co-exist in the region; and rare cases can also be found such as Israel, a parliamentary democracy of western style, and Iran, a country worshipping Islamic theocracy. On the other hand, several countries like Qatar and the UAE are highly developed economies whereas Yemen and a few others are stricken by extreme poverty. In most Middle Eastern countries, governments are reliant on commodity exports and tourism as major revenue sources. Without industrial and agricultural modernization, countries in pursuit of peace and

Religion-based conflicts in the Middle East may undermine China's diplomatic efforts.

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<sup>17</sup>Louise Fawcett and Helene Gandois, "Regionalism in Africa and the Middle East: Implications for EU Studies," *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (2010), p. 617.

development find it extremely difficult to reach their national goals. From the perspective of social governance, some countries including Israel, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the UAE have been successful in securing stability and progress, while others are still under reform and transformation with lots of uncertainties about their directions down the road. Furthermore, turbulent states should not be neglected as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan remain fragile in their political and socioeconomic development.

In the meantime, the intervention and competition of traditional powers in the Middle East like the United States, the EU and Russia may also undermine the whole-of-region diplomacy by emerging countries such as China and India. Given the legacies left by Western colonial powers as well as the close trade linkages with the outside world, Middle Eastern countries tend to maintain a strategic balance among regions and major powers. For instance, Iran would like to seek balance between Central Asia and the Middle East, and Turkey tries to keep the same distance with the East and the West. Furthermore, member countries of the UAM prefer a middle position between Europe and Africa. Israel and Egypt, as allies of the United States, often adopt balancing tactics when dealing with other powers like the EU, Russia and China. The geopolitical games among major powers in the Middle East like the U.S.-Russia rivalry and particularly the proxy wars and regime changes promoted by the United States have not only crippled the governing capacity of Middle Eastern countries, but also exacerbated ethnic and sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

In 2002, the G.W. Bush administration proposed the "Greater Middle East Initiative" to promote democratic reforms in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the U.S. perspective, autocracy and dictatorship were culprits of turmoil and sources of terrorism in the Middle East; and lasting peace, progress and prosperity would never be achieved without democratic systems.<sup>18</sup> However, Iraq failed to be transformed into a role model of democracy in the region. Instead, the U.S. intervention fueled the spread of crises in Libya, Yemen and Syria and even reversed the democratization process in Turkey and Israel as two of U.S. allies. Nearly a decade later, the

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<sup>18</sup>Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, "The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start," Policy Brief, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, No. 29 (March 29, 2004), p. 1.

Kurdish Spring backed by the United States, the EU, Britain, Australia and Canada in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has proven to bring further ruin to the Middle East and aggravate the split of the whole region.<sup>19</sup> At the forefront of anti-terrorism, the United States, Russia and Saudi Arabia have also set up military or intelligence alliances with their own regional partners, which makes China's whole-of-region diplomacy even more difficult in the highly disintegrated region.

## Conclusion

To safeguard their economic and security interests, Asian powers like China, India and Japan have adopted whole-of-region diplomacy in the Middle East, an approach pioneered by the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Russia. As a result, the region is moving further toward multi-polarization.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, small and middle-sized states are trying to defend their autonomy and dignity through joint actions and gain economic returns from their interdependent relations with major powers. On the other hand, although multilateral institutions often require "self-restraints," major powers can still establish close political and economic ties with a number of developing states by means of whole-of-region diplomacy and thus create a sound environment for their development.<sup>21</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, China has launched its own whole-of-region diplomacy toward various groups of developing countries through a multitude of regional and international organizations. Evidently, China's diplomatic efforts have paid off in Northeast, South, Southeast and Central Asia and broken up the Western monopoly on institutions and the supply of regional public goods. Consequently, the entire developing world has increased its weight in international politics, which has led to more

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<sup>19</sup>David L. Philips, *The Kurdish Spring: A New Map of the Middle East* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2015).

<sup>20</sup>See Geoffrey Kemp, *The East Moves West: India, China and Asia's Growing Presence in the Middle East* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2010).

<sup>21</sup>Song Wei, "中国的周边外交: 多边主义还是双边主义 [Chinese Neighborhood Foreign Policy: Multilateralism or Bilateralism]," *Journal of SJTU (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2015(4), p. 7.

balanced power distribution, more diversified approaches of development and more sustained economic growth.<sup>22</sup> As the only permanent member of the United Nations Security Council that is able to maintain friendly exchanges with all parties in Middle East conflicts, China can be said to have made the fewest diplomatic mistakes so far. As evidence, China has won increasing political support from the LAS and its members including Qatar, Algeria, Lebanon, Yemen and Saudi Arabia in the country's claims in the South China Sea, as the Doha Declaration issued during the seventh Ministerial Meeting of the CASC in May 2016 acknowledged China's national sovereignty as well as maritime rights and interests. Despite great achievements, China's whole-of-region diplomacy in the Middle East is still faced with many challenges. The complexity of ethnic, religious and security landscapes of the region makes it even harder for China to benefit from its diplomatic endeavors.

Looking into the future, China needs more holistic and well-coordinated ways of whole-of-region diplomacy to seek and build closer relationships with Middle Eastern countries. First, China can try to consolidate its network of strategic partnerships on the basis of bilateral collaboration and multilateral cooperation. At the bilateral level, China has forged both comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Algeria and such multilevel strategic partnerships as with Turkey, Sudan, Iran, Morocco, the UAE, Qatar and Jordan.<sup>23</sup> At the multilateral level, China has been able to maintain constructive interactions with Middle Eastern countries via a myriad of "1 + N," "N + 1" and "1 + N + X" platforms, which help deepen China's ties with other powers like the United States, the EU, Russia, Japan and India.<sup>24</sup> In the long run, a balanced network of strategic partnerships is expected for China to upgrade its cooperation with Middle Eastern countries.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Wang Cungang, "论中国外交核心价值观 [On China's Core Diplomatic Values]," *World Economics and Politics*, 2015(5), p. 19.

<sup>23</sup>Sun Degang and Wei Jinshen, "中国在国际组织中的规范塑造评析 [An Assessment of China's Norm Setting Role in International Organizations]," *Global Outlook*, 2016(4), p. 107.

<sup>24</sup>Zia Mian *et al.*, "South Asia, Russia, China & the Middle East," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2007), p. 34.

<sup>25</sup>Li Weijian, "中国中东外交战略构建研究 [Research on China's Middle East Strategy Construction]," *Arab World Studies*, 2016(2), p. 10.

In addition, China can further strengthen its discourse power and agenda-setting capacity by making full use of its diplomatic resources. Since its foundation in 1949, the People's Republic of China has been adhering to principles of non-alignment, taking no sides, making no enemies, seeking no spheres of influence and looking for no proxies, which are valuable assets and unique advantages of the country's diplomatic practice. China deserves a bigger role and a stronger voice in Middle East affairs, particularly on some key topics including the socioeconomic reconstruction of war-torn states, the refugee resettlement, the prevention of spread of small arms and light weapons (SALW), the promotion of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and the de-escalation of crises in Syria and Yemen. As a first step, China can convene international conferences among powers within and outside of the region to discuss those topics.

Finally, China should consider adopting a common but differentiated strategy and tailor its foreign policies toward four sub-regions of the Middle East, namely, the Gulf region, the Red Sea region, the Eastern Mediterranean region and the Maghreb region in North Africa, according to their different national conditions, political systems and approaches to socioeconomic development. A strategy of sub-regionalization would better fit into the geographical and political realities in the Middle East and facilitate the implementation of the BRI on the ground.