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## The Multiple Roles of Egypt in China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative

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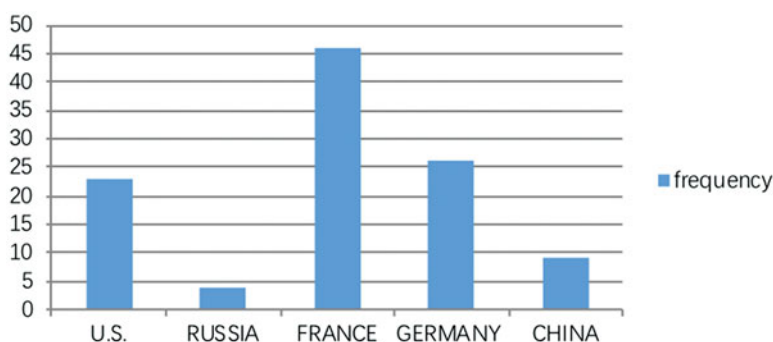
### ABSTRACT

Egypt was the first country in Africa and the Arab World to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. In 2016, the official visit of President Xi Jinping to Egypt began a new chapter in the two countries' relations and will open a brand-new page in their foreign affairs. This paper, based on the changes that have taken place in Egypt's diplomacy, highlights the core concepts of Egypt's diplomatic strategy towards China and focuses on how these outlooks can be compatible with China's 'Belt and Road' Initiative (BRI). Egypt boasts many important features: a unique geographic location which makes Egypt the meeting point of the Arab World, Africa, Asia, and Europe through the Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea; a unique civilisation and culture, with a longstanding history and interactions throughout millennia with the empires of Greece, Persia, Rome, Turkey, and more. Egypt is also considered a converging point of Islam and Christianity, boasting a relatively stable political and social order, and a fully-fledged economic system. All these features help Egypt to have global outreach; it contributes great value to China's BRI and enables Egypt to play a key role in the world with China as a strategic partner. This paper also analyses the characteristics of Egypt's new diplomacy and how they lay a solid foundation for the development of Sino-Egyptian relations. The strategic vision between Egypt and China is not limited to trade and investments, but there are still missing pieces to fill in which depend on the regional and global arenas, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Middle East security governance, national defense, and counterterrorism.

### KEYWORDS

China and Egypt; Belt and Road Initiative; Egyptian studies; China and the Middle East; strategic partnership

Egypt's foreign policy has entered a new phase since the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood on the 30 June 2013 which was followed by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's assumption of power after winning the presidential election in June 2014. In March 2018, President Sisi won a second term with 92% of the vote. In the following stage, a number of observations can be made regarding the decision-making process,



**Figure 1.** Mubarak's visits to great powers. Source: Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, <http://www.mcit.gov.eg/>. Accessed 25 June 2018.

the objectives, and the dynamics of Egyptian foreign policy's movement. In addition, China has some shared interests in Egypt that could serve as a basis for cooperation between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> China has a stake in Egypt's long-term stability and prosperity and regards Egypt as a key strategic partner due to its significance in regional stability in the Middle East and Africa, its role in providing trade and commercial passage, and its historically pluralistic society. Egypt and China are ideal allies for connecting Asia with the Arab World, the African continent, and Mediterranean nations in trade, security, and cultural exchange.

## 1. Building Strong Diplomatic Relations

Since Egypt and China established diplomatic relations, their friendship has developed rapidly. In politics, the countries' top leaders have paid frequent visits to each other. Sisi has visited China four times, the first visit being on 22 December 2014. In this official meeting, both Egyptian President Sisi and Chinese President Xi promoted the idea of a comprehensive strategic partnership. The second visit occurred on 1 September 2015, when Sisi visited Beijing and attended the 70th anniversary celebration of China's victory against Japan in World War II. Sisi's third visit to China was to attend the 2016 G20 summit held in Hangzhou, and the fourth one was for the BRICS summit in Xiamen. These visits not only show the great importance Egypt has attached to China, but also reflect the accelerated development of bilateral relations.

A survey of the recent history of Egypt-China relations reveals that Egypt was the first country in the Middle East and Africa to establish diplomatic relations with China, but Egyptian Presidents Nasser and Sadat never visited China. After Sadat, President Mubarak believed that the strategic relationship between Egypt and China was of great significance for both the Arab World and Africa, and he visited China nine times in thirty years. However, President Sisi has done more: four visits in four years.

From [Figure 1](#), it can be observed that Mubarak visited the United States 23 times, Russia 4 times, France 46 times, Germany 24 times, and China 9 times. In contrast, it highlights the more frequent visits of Egyptian President Sisi, which have become a

<sup>1</sup>A. Sharma, 'An analysis of "Belt and Road" initiative and the Middle East', *Asian Journal of Middle East and Islamic Studies*, 13(3), (2018), p. 10.

landmark in Egypt-China relations. Diplomacy is one of the earliest areas of cooperation between Egypt and China. Exchanges and cooperation between the two countries in culture, education, sports, and other areas are also expanding.

Instead of being impaired by other parties' intervention, the rapidly developing relations between the two sides will bring more positive associations. For example, Egypt does not have strong diplomatic ties with Iran and Turkey, but China does. China can assist Egypt in building better relations with these two countries. On the other side, Egypt has more stable relations with the US than China does and can help China in that regard. This can work in both Egypt's and China's favour with other nations as they support each other's position in the world.

After Egyptian President Sisi visited China several times, he said in his talks with President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang that Egypt would be willing to expand friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation with China, especially cooperation in building capacity, investment and financing. He welcomed Chinese enterprises to actively participate in the large construction projects in Egypt. China and Egypt have reached an agreement on the construction of railway networks, solar power stations, and other projects, and signed a number of agreements in economic cooperation, including cooperation in electric power, new energy, civil aviation, and so on. Egypt has also set up a government committee led by the deputy prime minister to handle Chinese investment and cooperation. In addition to the implementation of the Suez Canal Area Development Project, the Egyptian government is also developing the northwestern coast region. It is expected that, as a result, China will increase its investments in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

China has increased its investments in Egypt from \$100 million in 2015 to its current \$1 billion, and agreements already signed will raise that number up to \$18 billion looking forward, across various industries. These agreements, when acted upon, will make China the top foreign investor in Egypt worldwide. In specific areas, China's investments in Egypt's fiberglass industry have enabled it to rise to rank third in the world's fiberglass production, and its investment in Egypt's electric rail system will soon connect the new capital<sup>3</sup> with the district of El Asher.

## **2. Egypt's Role in the Belt and Road Initiative: A Road to the Arab World**

Egypt and China have some shared interests in the Arab World that can serve as a basis for Egypt-China cooperation. Egypt cooperated with a number of Arab states and held several meetings with the Arab League's Beijing and Cairo offices to impress upon the top Arab leaders the importance of building strong relations with China. Egypt was the forerunner in the Arab World in establishing good relations with China and is leading other Arab nations in doing the same. Following Egypt's example were Oman, Libya, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, highlighting the leadership of Egypt in the Arab World.

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<sup>2</sup>K. Yao. 'Opportunities and challenges of China-Middle East countries' production capacity cooperation', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 10(2), (June 2016), pp. 9–10.

<sup>3</sup>Egypt is currently constructing a new capital about 45 kilometers east of Cairo.

Three years after President Xi put forward the BRI in 2013, he met Egypt's President Sisi in Cairo. In this historic meeting in 2016, Egypt promised to make efforts to unite the Arab World in setting on the same road as China has taken. To be on the same road as China, while embracing the opportunities brought by BRI, Sisi encouraged China to invest in Egypt and the Arab World in return.

Shortly thereafter, President Xi also met with Egypt's Prime Minister, Sherif Ismail. The prime minister mentioned Egypt and China's long history of friendly relations and noted Egypt's current efforts to further enhance this relationship. Ismail expressed his desire to see this relationship deepen and for China and Egypt to cooperate in many more fields. In this way, Egypt firmly supports BRI and will collaborate positively to achieve mutual benefits. Furthermore, Egypt will be the connecting piece between China and the Arab World.

President Xi stressed, 'Cooperation in this matter will come naturally, as the independent interests of the two countries are already aligned. With this basis, both countries should exert efforts to strive for the benefit of both. I agree with Prime Minister Ismail that Egypt will be the point of connection for China and the Arab World.'

With these remarks, the leaders of Egypt and China signed the initial agreement of their involvement in BRI, covering the aspects of infrastructure, trade, culture, news, energy and power resources, climate change, finance, technology, and air and space engineering. Additionally, Egypt welcomed China to utilise the New Suez Canal as a free trade zone.

The Suez Canal is Egypt's main source of foreign exchange earnings. President Sisi opened the New Suez Canal in 2014, which attracted more foreign investment to Egypt, and increased the annual income of the Suez Canal waterway from \$5.3 billion to \$13 billion. Egypt has also initiated the Suez Canal Area Development Project, intending to build the area of 7.6 kilometers<sup>2</sup> along the coast into a world-class port and logistics centre. One hundred new factories are operating in this area, including plants that create machinery to process oil, weave fabrics, and produce solar energy. These factories have yielded 10,000 jobs for Egyptians. The whole project is expected to bring about \$100 billion in additional income to Egypt. To date, the New Suez Canal has not brought as much income as anticipated, but this is unsurprising considering the sluggish growth of the world's economy in the last few years. When the world economy begins to pick up internationally and BRI is completed, the New Suez Canal will play a key role in transporting large quantities of goods between many countries,—as ten African nations have signed the BRI project and the Suez connects Africa, South Europe, and both West and East Asia.

In the cooperation between China and the Arab World, the Chinese strategy of 1 + 2 + 3 has set the regions up for success.

The number '1' refers to the leading cooperation section of energy resources, namely, the cooperation to produce more oil and natural gas. It also strives to ensure the security of the transportation of oil and gas, targeting at a long-term cooperation regarding energy sources.

The number '2' refers to the two wings of trade and investment. These are the two pillars of infrastructure development. Regarding 'these two sections,' China and Egypt will increase the projects initiated in both China and the Arab World. Although the

projects are initiated by the governments, they will be carried out mostly by private members of the general populace, and thus are representative of the people's welfare.

The number '3' refers to the three newly developed cooperation sections—nuclear power, satellites, and new sources of energy such as nuclear and solar energy. In the future, these sections will probably become the most important parts in enhancing the cooperation and relations between China and the Arab World, as well as in building regional trust. BRI offers many benefits to the economies of all the countries involved by providing various new platforms and integrating them into a cooperating community. Egypt plays an important role in the '1 + 2 + 3' strategy, providing China with a long history of positive relations with the Arab World, which the latter needs to further its BRI Initiative in the region. Egypt is a leader in the Arab World, and the heart of the 22 Arab countries, with the largest population—abundant human resources—in the Arab nations. Egypt has an excellent education system, a developed culture that influences the surrounding nations, and the strongest hard power and soft power in the region.

China needs Egypt to access the Arab League, which is headquartered in Cairo. The secretary-general of the Arab League is mostly Egyptian (seven out of eight, with the other one being Tunisian), which underscores Egypt's prominence in the region. In addition, the initiator of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) is Egypt, and through which, China can use the platforms of both the Arab League and the CASCF to build collaborative relations with the Arab World.

Working together, Egypt and China can bring the Arab World to a level of equality with China in terms of market, natural resources, orderly administration, and relations and development (Table 1).

The above diagram indicates the extensive land, human resources and great market capacity of the Arab World. Taken together, the land area is 14,260,000 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for 9.5% of the world's land mass. In addition, the Arab World makes up 5% of the world population and is the fastest growing population with a year-over-year increase of 400 million people, among which Egypt contributes a population of 100 million as of May 2018, and of that 100 million, youth (ages 0–30) make up 60–70%. Because of such a large population, Egypt's market is the largest in the Arab World. Politically, Egypt faces fewer difficulties than many other Arab countries. All of these make Egypt a good partner for China in making BRI a successful project in this region.

### **3. Egypt's Role in the BRI: A Road to the African Continent**

Through BRI, China and Egypt, for their shared interests, are working together to assist Africa. The Nile River, most famously associated with Egypt, connects Egypt with ten other countries, making Egypt the northern door of Africa. China is in the process of opening many factories in Africa, and the Nile is a key point of transportation for goods to get to China via the China Railway Express (CRE) and other Belt and Road countries. In terms of population, Egypt ranks third in the continent, just after Nigeria and Ethiopia. What sets Egypt apart from the rest of Africa, however, is its GDP that ranks No.1 in Africa, a spot it has taken over from South Africa in the past few years (Table 2).

**Table 1.** List of Arab countries by population (2015) and types of relations with China.<sup>4</sup>

Countries	Type of Relations with China	Population	Percentage of Arab World
North Africa (6 countries)			
Algeria	Comprehensive strategic partnership <sup>5</sup>	40,100,000	10.25
Egypt	Comprehensive strategic partnership	90,046,000	22.73
Libya	Good relations	6,278,000	0.54
Mauritania	Good relations	3,632,000	0.93
Morocco	Strategic partnership <sup>6</sup>	32,950,000	8.65
Tunisia	Good relations	11,118,000	2.76
Persian Gulf (6 countries)			
Iraq	Strategic partnership	36,575,000	9.39
Kuwait	Strategic partnership	4,161,000	1.07
Oman	Strategic partnership	4,181,000	1.07
Saudi Arabia	Comprehensive strategic partnership	31,521,000	8.10
U.A.E.	Comprehensive strategic partnership	9,500,000	2.76
Yemen	Good relations	26,745,000	6.87
East Africa (4 countries)			
Comoros	Good relations	795,000	–
Djibouti	Strategic partnership	942,000	–
Somalia	Good relations	14,372,000	3.95
Sudan	Strategic partnership	38,435,000	9.87
The Levant (4 countries)			
Jordan	Strategic partnership	8,933,000	2.29
Lebanon	Good relations	4,288,000	1.10
Palestine	Good relations	4,683,000	1.20
Syria	Good relations	23,270,000	5.98

After the Mubarak era, Egypt's new policy was to ally with other African states. President Sisi has visited many African countries and attended a number of conferences and summits on the topic of bringing Africa together. The most significant of these was the 2015 summit on climate change in France led by Egypt. In 2015, Egypt hosted three important economic summits: the East African Community, Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and Southern African Development Community, during which 26 African countries signed a free trade agreement named the Tripartite Free Trade Area. All these indicate Egypt's leading role in economic reform on the African continent, which has been taken note of by the rest of the world: among African countries, Egypt receives the highest level of investment from non-African countries. In the last six years, the economic reforms have created the highest foreign exchange reserves, valuing \$44.3 billion. These statistics show a marked improvement over pre-2011 Egypt.

In 2017, GDP statistics confirmed Egypt's Leading role in Africa. South Africa's GDP was \$3,44 billion, Angola's \$1,24 billion, and Ethiopia's \$80 billion. Egypt's GDP for the same year came in at \$3,49 billion. The 2017 African Investment Guide, published by the South African Commercial Bank, remarked on the rapid economic development of

<sup>4</sup>Table compiled by the writers using information from the World Bank. 'List of Arab Countries by Population.' *Wikipedia*. Last modified June 2018. available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Arab\\_countries\\_by\\_population#cite\\_note-1#cite\\_note-1,24.5.2018](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arab_countries_by_population#cite_note-1#cite_note-1,24.5.2018) (accessed 25 June 2018).

<sup>5</sup>The comprehensive strategic partnership has the following three aspects: First, the two countries should be partners, not opponents; second, the partnership is based on the overall strategy, not local, long term period; third, this strategic partnership is constructive, not exclusive. This is a partnership that neither aligned nor hostile, available at: <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/2265994857255743948.html>.

<sup>6</sup>A relationship between two commercial enterprises, usually formalized by one or more business contracts. A strategic partnership will usually fall short of a legal partnership entity, agency, or corporate affiliate relationship', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic\\_partnership](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_partnership) (accessed 30 March 2019).

**Table 2.** Egypt highest GDP in Africa.<sup>7</sup>

Countries	Percentage of GDP
Africa	
Egypt	0.45%
Nigeria	0.65%
South Africa	0.42%
Asia	
China	14.84%
India	2.83%
Indonesia	1.16%
Iran	0.57%
Israel	0.4%
Japan	5.91%
Malaysia	0.4%
Philippines	0.39%
Russia	1.8%
Saudi Arabia	0.87%
Singapore	0.39%
South Korea	1.86%
Thailand	0.53%
Turkey	0.97%
U.A.E	0.5%
Australia	
Australia	1.81%
Europe	
Austria	0.51%
Belgium	0.61%
Denmark	0.4%
France	3.26%
Germany	4.54%
Ireland	0.38%
Italy	2.46%
Netherlands	1.01%
Norway	0.52%
United Kingdom	3.85%
Poland	0.64%
Spain	1.62%
Sweden	0.67%
Switzerland	0.9%
North America	
Canada	2.09%
Mexico	1.54%
United States of America	24.32%
South America	
Argentina	0.79%
Brazil	2.39%
Colombia	0.39%
Venezuela	0.5%
Rest of the world	9.41%

Egypt and how it surpassed South Africa to become the most advantageous country in Africa for investment opportunities, as seen in [Table 3](#).

The top five nations following Egypt in attraction of foreign investments are South Africa, Morocco, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Kenya (moving from third to the sixth). Contributing to these rankings are safety ratings: according to a survey done by Gallup Law and Order Index, Egypt is viewed as the safest country in Africa, and 16th

<sup>7</sup>World Development Indices Database, 'World Bank', available at: <https://howmuch.net/articles/the-global-economy-by-gdp> (accessed 1 February 2017).



**Table 3.** Most advantageous countries in Africa for investment opportunities (2017).<sup>8</sup>

African Countries	Rank for Investment Opportunities
Egypt	1
South Africa	2
Morocco	3
Ethiopia	4
Ghana	5
Kenya	6

out of 135 nations worldwide to be rated, higher even than the United Kingdom and United States (21 and 35, respectively). The survey was done across 135 countries and included questions about nighttime safety, theft, confidence in local police, and whether the participants or their family members had been mugged or assaulted within the last twelve months. In this safety rating, Egypt was assessed as equal with Denmark, China, and Slovenia overall. The top five safest countries in Africa were listed as Egypt, Rwanda, Mauritius, Morocco, and Ethiopia. The five least safe countries in Africa (in order of the least safe to the most) were South Sudan, Gabon, Liberia, South Africa, and Botswana.

The greatest factors in Egypt's rising GDP and surpassing South Africa in foreign investments are investors' increasing awareness of Egypt's increased social stability since 2011 and their lack of confidence in South Africa's stability.<sup>9</sup> Another significant factor is Egypt's new laws and policies concerned with foreign investment, which provide increased ease for investors and encourage development. In addition, Egypt has extended effort to make public its reforms and achievements, instilling confidence among foreign investors.

In terms of security, Egypt is collaborating with many African countries to ward off terrorism. Egypt is leading the effort to unite Northern and Southern Africa against terrorist attacks, which was apparent in the first Sahel and Sahara Conference, a meeting of the defense ministers of 27 African nations held in Sharm el Sheikh. At this summit, Egypt put forward two propositions: to establish an institute for counterterrorism in the Sahara and Sahel and to combine Africa's military power to fight terrorism. Along the way to the fulfilment of these goals, Egypt is making its contribution in many ways, taking advantage of its strength, especially military strength, to offset other countries' shortcomings.

Egypt's main strategy in counterterrorism is to unite the African world: if the African nations stand together against terrorism, they will defeat it. Egypt displayed its determination by sending Egyptian Air Force planes to Libya to help combat ISIS. With the strongest military force and the most advanced military technology in Africa, Egypt also helps train various African countries' troops and police, and provides information and intel support as well. The country sends its military experts to assist other nations and has opened its military training schools to non-Egyptians. In addition,

<sup>8</sup>Most advantageous countries in Africa for investment opportunities', Xinhua News, available at: <http://3g.china.com/act/news/10000166/20170919/31472602.html> (accessed 19 September 2017).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Egypt provides personnel to the UN peacekeeping forces in Sudan, the Darfur region, and South Sudan.<sup>10</sup>

Egypt supports Africa in many other ways as well. It has established the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation with Africa (EFTCA), a subsection of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with its own budget. The EFTCA sends funds across Africa for infrastructure, education, water resources, and overall sustainable development. Since 2004, 6,000 non-Egyptian African experts have graduated from Egypt’s training courses, and the country has sent more than 10,000 of its own experts to assist various African countries in the fields of medicine, trade, economics, and foreign affairs.<sup>11</sup>

China and Egypt are both strong in infrastructure, with Egypt leading North Africa and strong among Arab countries in this regard. The two countries can work together to exemplify exceptional economic development, particularly working on green energy sources and low carbon emissions (Table 4).

In addition, China can share its technology and management systems to Africa via Egypt. China also has expertise to offer Africa in the area of high-speed railways: planning, design, construction, management, and research and development centres. Furthermore, the African continent is in need of assistance in developing reliable airlines and airplane routes. Except Egypt and Ethiopia, the continent is lacking in strong airlines to serve both trade and regular citizens. China and Egypt can collaborate on offering such assistance, expertise, and ideas to African nations.

Under the framework of BRI, China should cooperate with Egypt and other strong African countries to improve the quality of aid to Africa, bettering sanitation and agriculture and reducing poverty, among other aspects of development. to succeed in all these endeavors, China should create a Sino-Egyptian Cooperation Forum, similar to the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, to facilitate discussion and problem solving in regard to BRI.

Security is a key question to BRI. It will be more cost-effective, convenient, and feasible for China not to set up its own military or security bases in Belt and Road countries, but to cooperate with nations along the way that have strong militaries. Egypt is a prime candidate, able to ensure the security in its surrounding region for BRI projects. With its strategies for counterterrorism in Africa, Egypt is already prepared to oppose violent extremism.

Egypt is also well-equipped to support security where religion is concerned. A number of African nations have numerous Christian and Muslim denominations, and

**Table 4.** Infrastructure development in major Arab and North African Countries (2016).<sup>12</sup>

Country	Infrastructure Ranking (160 countries worldwide)	Grade (1–5, 5 being best)
Egypt	49	3.18
Algeria	75	2.77
Morocco	86	2.67
Sudan	103	2.53
Tunisia	110	2.5

<sup>10</sup>A. Taweel, ‘Egypt attitudes toward Africa’, *International Policy Magazine* (209), (July 2010), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup>A. Ahmed, *My testimony ...* Ahmed Aboul Gheit (Nahdet Misr Publishing House, 2012), pp. 308–328.

<sup>12</sup>World Bank, ‘Logistics Performance Index 2016’, available at: [http://wb-lpi-media.s3.amazonaws.com/LPI\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](http://wb-lpi-media.s3.amazonaws.com/LPI_Report_2016.pdf).

disagreements between these different sects lead to violence. Comparatively, Egypt has relatively few such sects. Muslims and Christians in Egypt live together peacefully and cooperatively, and President Sisi himself attends celebrations of both Islamic and Christian festivals and holidays. The Egyptian government can capitalise on this mutual understanding to cooperate with Al Azhar University, the world's prominent Sunni seminary and oldest educational institution, as well as the Christian Church in Egypt, and encourage moderate religious doctrines rather than extremist ones. With China's stance on religion, it would support Egypt in this moderating venture and see its value in stable economic and trade development.

China-Africa cooperation will begin with China-Egypt cooperation, and, according to President Xi, it will be built by the principles of 'sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith.'

#### **4. Egypt's Role in the BRI: Connecting the Mediterranean Countries to China**

Egypt has been connected with European countries since ancient times. In the Mubarak era, Egypt began to focus on the Mediterranean region in its public policy. An example of this was the Pope's visit to Egypt on April 28–29, 2017. The diplomatic visit was also symbolic of peace between Muslim and Christian communities.

Egypt's policies with regards to the Mediterranean also focused more on the discovery of natural gas in the region. A large natural gas field between Egypt and Cyprus named Aphrodite has yielded 5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and agreements have already been signed to establish borders on it between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus. Another field called Zohr was discovered in Egyptian waters, the biggest in the Mediterranean. It houses 30 trillion cubic feet of natural gas. With this discovery, the eastern Mediterranean Sea became a strategic point for Egypt, and its public policy began to focus on this area. At this time an organisation that has yet to be named is being formed by Mediterranean countries around the natural gas fields. They are cooperating together on exporting gas to various European countries. Egypt can lend expertise to this project from its experience exporting gas to Israel and Jordan. In addition, these natural gas fields can attract China to cooperate with Egypt and Mediterranean countries.

Egypt and Mediterranean countries are also creating collaborations regarding military affairs. They have signed a number of agreements for arms deals, including Egypt buying weapons and a FREMM frigate aircraft carrier from France worth \$5.6 billion. Egypt received three Rafale fighter jets, which is seen by military experts as a significant development in the capabilities of the Egyptian armed forces. 'The new fighter jets are a massive addition to the fleet of the Egyptian Air Force,' the military spokesman commented.<sup>13</sup> Egypt signed several economic agreements with Germany at the Egypt Economic Development Conference in Sharm el Sheikh in March 2015, and reached an agreement with Siemens Company for electric power generation.

Sisi's emphasis on relations with Europe can be seen in the [Table 5](#).

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<sup>13</sup>'France delivers Dassault-built Rafale to Egypt', *Air Force Technology*, available at: <https://www.airforce-technology.com/news/newsfrance-delivers-dassault-built-rafale-to-egypt-4796885/> (accessed 28 January 2016).

**Table 5.** Sisi's visits to European countries.<sup>14</sup>

Countries	No. of visits	Dates	Significance
France	2	26-11-2014 29-11-2015	Increasing the investments, especially in the new Suez Canal area /buying aircrafts/attending climate change summit
Germany	2	3-6-2015 11-6-2017	Expanding friendly mutual cooperation with Germany/ participating in G20 Summit
United Kingdom	1	4-11-2015	Expanding friendly mutual cooperation with UK/ asking strong companies for cooperation in investments
Italy	1	24-11-2014	Economic cooperation/visiting the Pope/ peaceful relations between Muslim and Christian communities
Switzerland	1	12-1-2015	Participating in international economic summit/ security and counterterrorism cooperation
Spain	1	30-4-2015	Supporting the role of Egypt in the UN Security Council
Hungary	1	5-6-2015	Expanding good relations between the countries and encouraging Hungary to invest in Egypt
Greece	1	8-12-2015	Establishing cooperation between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus/Mediterranean countries cooperating on natural gas fields, tourism, etc.
Portugal	1	21-11-2016	First Egyptian president to visit in 20 years/ expanding cooperation, especially in investments and counterterrorism

The above table shows the importance of relations with the Mediterranean countries and President Sisi's emphasis on building such relations. These visits represent the highest level of cooperation happening among governments; other high-level officials are also exchanging visits between these countries, including ministers and prime ministers. The visits highlight the countries' ability to find shared interests in the region and help Egypt maintain its advantage as a bridge between the Mediterranean and the Arab World. In counterterrorism efforts, the most significant cooperation is Egypt's minister of security offering a security agreement to Germany in 2016, which was accepted and signed by Germany on April 28, 2017. This agreement covers many fields, the first of which is monitoring those who invest in terrorism and the exchange of information between those parties. It also covers the security of airport and sea-ports—any place that connects the countries.<sup>15</sup> Germany believes Egypt to be the greatest cooperative partner in combating extremists, especially Al Azhar's International Institute for Counterterrorism.<sup>16</sup> Mediterranean countries believe the stability of the Middle East is essential to the prosperity of European countries, as it impacts Europe economically, politically, and in overall stability. Recent influxes of refugees have contributed negatively to Europe's economy and stability. Egypt is a key

<sup>14</sup>Table compiled by the writers using information from the following news sources: 'Egypt's Sisi inaugurates 'new Suez canal', in a ceremony attended by Arab and foreign leaders', available at: <http://www.france24.com/ar/20150806> (accessed 7 August 2015); 'Results of Sisi visits to 24 countries in one and a half year', Al Mal News, available at: <http://almalnews.com/story/19/263460> (accessed 29 December 2015); 'Sisi begins European trip in Italy and France', Al Arabiya, available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/egypt/24/11/2014> (accessed 24 November 2014); M. Adly, 'Sisi's official trips: Egypt's role in international and regional forums', available at: <http://wataninet.com> (accessed 19 December 2015); 'Madrid supports Cairo for Security Council seat', available at: <http://defense-arab.com/vb/threads/91401> (accessed 29 April 2015).

<sup>15</sup>J. Mohammed. 'Why Germany bet on signing the security agreement with Egypt?', available at: <http://www.europaelyoum.com/?s=%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85+%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF+%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7+> (accessed 12 June 2017).

<sup>16</sup>Deputy speaker of the German Parliament: we support the role of Al-Azhar in spreading the values of coexistence', available at: <http://www.tahrirnews.com> (accessed 20 February 2011).

ally in this situation, again because of its strategic location. Refugees from Ethiopia, Sudan, or other parts of Africa, or on their way to Libya to take a boat across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe pass through Egypt. President Sisi has launched a cooperative research with European countries to study such social problems and endeavour to find a solution. Egypt also hosts refugees from many countries who will either stay in Egypt or try to get to Europe; therefore, Egypt has a direct stake in the effective resolution of this situation.

In addition, Egypt is cooperating with European countries on human rights. The European Union issued an official statement criticising the human rights situation in Egypt in United Nations Human Rights Council Session 27 in September of 2014. Several countries published reports against the Egyptian regime with charges of human rights abuses.<sup>17</sup> The Egyptian delegation at the UN denied the allegations by issuing a report in November of 2015 stressing that Egypt has adhered to international human rights legislation and respected the sovereignty of the law.<sup>18</sup> Egypt's UN Delegate Amr Ramadan refuted the charges more specifically, noting Egypt's efforts in counterterrorism. Experts argue over whether terrorist attacks occur more frequently in countries with more comprehensive freedom such as the UK, France, and Germany and other European countries alike. Unlike these countries, Egypt has denied its citizens a few freedoms in order to keep them safe from terrorist attacks, which is being misperceived by European countries as human rights abuses. For example, some extremist criminals who had been sentenced to the death penalty or life in prison escaped to Europe during Egypt's revolution of 2011. Because Egypt lacks the jurisdiction to retrieve these extremists, they are running free in the countries of Europe, radicalising others along the way. Some European countries have not recognized the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and therefore given entrance to extremists associated with the organization.<sup>19</sup>

In UN Human Rights Council Session 34 in March of 2017, the EU encouraged Egypt to continue improving the civil and political rights of citizens and offered its help to achieve this goal. While Egypt balances counterterrorism and civil rights, it has the support of major world powers in this effort.

The new policy of Egypt focuses on European countries, especially South Europe and the Mediterranean region, in its counterterrorism efforts. The visits of President Sisi to these countries have emphasised the importance of fighting extremism to promote economic development and overall stability in the region.

Egypt's new policies with regard to Mediterranean countries and its involvement there can help China introduce BRI to South Europe and ensure trade security on its way to Europe. With Egypt's strong military presence in the Arab World and North Africa, it can ensure the safety of shipments of BRI projects, especially those coming along the Suez Canal (Table 6).

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<sup>17</sup>Arab Strategic Report 2015 (Cairo: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2016), p. 591

<sup>18</sup>Criticism at the United Nations responded to Egypt with a statement 'Concern for Europe', available at <http://zahma.cairoline.com> (accessed 16 March 2017).

<sup>19</sup>Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act of 2015', 114th US Congress (2015–2016), available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/2230/text>.

**Table 6.** 2018 military strength ranking.<sup>20</sup>

Countries	Rank among Mediterranean Countries	Rank Worldwide
France	1	5
Turkey	2	9
Italy	3	11
Egypt	4	12
Israel	5	16
Spain	6	19
Algeria	7	23
Greece	8	28
Syria	9	49
Morocco	10	55
Libya	11	74
Tunisia	12	77
Albania	13	86
Slovenia	14	92
Lebanon	15	106
Montenegro	16	121
Bosnia and Herzegovina	17	124
Cyprus	–	–
Croatia	–	–

The table above indicates that France, Turkey, Italy, and Egypt are the strongest military powers in the Mediterranean region. By cooperating with them, China will not need to bring its own military forces to the region, relying instead on these partners. All of these powers can contribute to the security of BRI, but Egypt is the one that hosts the Suez Canal, a strategic trade waterway.

In addition, BRI covers much more than trade; it also encompasses exchange of civilisations and cultures. Egypt has been interacting with Europe for millennia, and therefore has more cultural insight into European countries than China does. Egypt can act as a bridge, lending its experience to China and encouraging China's further cultural exchanges and museum collaborations with Europe. Every outpost of BRI can have museums featuring exhibits from the countries involved, enhancing mutual understanding between both businessmen and the average citizens of each nation. Additionally, China can construct Confucius Institutes in countries along the Belt and Road, introducing its language and culture as well.

## 5. Egypt, China, and BRICS: Participating in the Administration of the Global Economy

In September of 2017, the 9th BRICS summit was held in Xiamen, China. It was a historic conference, with more than 70 decisions made jointly. The 2017 BRICS also provided an important cooperation platform for developing countries, inviting the heads of five countries, Egypt included, to join the conference to take part in strategic dialogue. This invitation for President Sisi resulted in his fourth official visit to China. He attended the forum on strategies for the emerging markets of developing countries and met with President Xi Jinping and the leaders of the other BRICS countries, which brought positive results in cooperation between China and Egypt across many fields.

<sup>20</sup>'2018 Military Strength Ranking', Global Firepower (2018), available at: [www.globalfirepower.com](http://www.globalfirepower.com).

China supports Egypt's stability and continued development, particularly after the establishment of their comprehensive strategic partnership. In addition, they have initiated a number of agreements in the fields of technology, economy, transportation, and security. From 2016 to 2021, they will actively maintain the comprehensive strategic partnership and ensure its success. At the same time, China has put forward the concept of BRICS Plus, which will include more developing countries and deepen the connections and interactions of those already collaborating. Egypt can play an important role in BRICS Plus because of its connections across Africa and the Arab World, such as the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and Sino-Egyptian Cooperation Forum, which offer opportunities to the participating nations. At this time, Egypt is in the process of becoming an official member of BRICS Plus.

The BRICS countries have established the New Development Bank in Shanghai and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in Beijing for the benefit of developing countries. It is especially focused on the financial assistance of roads, energy, and railways. Over the coming few years, many developing countries will benefit from these banks, as they will invest multiple billions in the nations' infrastructure projects. This is part of the reason scholars and experts are calling the 21st century 'the century for Asia.' Egypt is making the most of the opportunity provided by BRICS Plus to connect with these nations at this strategic time.

Along with joining BRICS Plus, Egypt is also participating in G20, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Agenda (GATTA). These invitations and opportunities are arising because of the economic improvement in Egypt in the current era—a strength that was not seen in Egypt's economy in the Mubarak era. In the past, the economy was a weak point for Egypt; now, it is a strength, and it can play an important role in such organisations and summits. Participating in these groups is also beneficial to Egypt, as is BRI.

## **6. Challenges to Stability and Security on BRI**

Although BRI has brought many benefits to Asia, Europe, and Africa, it still faces great challenges in establishing security for the trade of the three continents. One of the greatest challenges in security and stability is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has been ongoing for more than seventy years. Before BRI, China was far removed from this problem, but with new relations established across the three continents it has become a more proximal issue. Israel was the first nation in the Middle East to recognise the People's Republic of China as the rightful government after China's Cultural Revolution. China recognised both Israel and Palestine as sovereign states in 1988 and established diplomatic ties with the countries in 1992, improving trade relations. As a nation with good diplomatic relations with both Israel and Palestine, China can be a part of the peaceful resolution of this conflict. This differs from the position of the US, which only has positive ties with Israel.

In 2007, the US and Egypt invited China to the Annapolis Conference in Maryland for Middle East peace talks to reopen the conversation between Palestine and Israel. Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries were looking forward to China bringing a balance of power to the discussion and to the region. However, the Arab League did

not immediately see the impact of this in China's decisions. For instance, in the 2010 cooperation conference between the Arab World and China, China did not sign the document stating that Jerusalem should be the capital of Palestine. China has shown consistent neutrality in this regard, though the country also showed no support for US President Trump's decision to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

With the start of BRI in 2013, however, China presented a peace initiative for Palestine and Israel. In this initiative, China proposed building Palestine according to the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital, while still expressing respect for Israel and its rights, and recognising its concerns over security. When Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Li mentioned that the stability of the Middle East depended on the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, and that China would remain neutral, not favoring one over the other.

BRI has created an opportunity for China to be involved in creating stability in the Arab World, and its differences from the US are notable. First, the American government has been involved in the Israel-Palestinian project since the beginning, standing on Israel's side, without coming to a peaceful resolution. By remaining neutral, China has a better position from which to broker peace between the two sides. China is less biased by self-interest than the US, as what helps China is not for Palestine to gain or for Israel to gain, but for there to be stable peace, regardless of the exact political lines drawn at the end.

Egypt can be a partner for China in this process because of its good relations in the region as well. Egypt established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1979, forty years ago, in the peace agreements following the October War. With Palestine, Egypt began relations as early as 1952. Former Egyptian President Mubarak saw the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one of his main areas to focus on during his thirty years in office, working for a peaceful solution.

Another challenge for China in the stability of the Middle East and North Africa is negotiation regarding nuclear weapons. With the escalation of regional conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is necessary to try to get nations to disarm from nuclear weapons; BRI is in a precarious position as long as major conflicts and these weapons exist side by side. China can contribute to this negotiation process.

Israel was the first country in the region to arm itself with nuclear weapons. Because of this threat, the surrounding nations must think about defending themselves and arming themselves similarly so as to keep balance in the region. Israel refused to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the international treaty to prevent the spread of nuclear weapon technology. Egypt was the first in the Middle East and North Africa to sign the NPT, hoping to lead Israel and other nations in that direction. The US has urged Israel to sign the treaty as well, but so far in vain. Iran has signed the NPT but is still working to build nuclear weapons regardless, which Israel claims to have evidence of. In this way, to a degree, Israel's refusal to sign the treaty creates uncertainty among other nations in the region that drives them to arm themselves, either for self-protection or for a balance of power. Although Egypt and Iran are both Islamic countries, Egypt does not support the nuclear program of any country, Iran included, preferring the stabilizing objective of the NPT.



Egypt's stance is that all countries across the region should sign the NPT to maintain the stability of the region's economy, trade, and overall relations. It is likely that if Iran arms itself with nuclear weapons, a war will break out and the US and other world powers will become involved. The most likely route for the US to transport weapons to Iran is through the Suez Canal, which Iran may then bomb to prevent. Thus, Egypt has an even more direct interest in this issue. These events would also increase terrorist incidents in the entire region, raise the price of oil, lower energy production, cause investors to withdraw their resources, decrease tourism and shipping, reduce Egypt's economic output, and strain relations between the Middle East and the Western world. All of these are reasons for Egypt to encourage other nations in the region to sign the NPT and dispose of their nuclear weapons.

Egypt is a great partner for China in this aspect of BRI as well. Its positive relations in the region and personal interest in nuclear disarmament ensure that it will strive for the stability and security of the Belt and Road.

## 7. Conclusion

In the final years of former Egyptian President Mubarak's tenure, he was too elderly to travel extensively, and Egypt's foreign policy lost some of its strength. The new policy of Egypt under President Sisi in the past four years has focused on re-energising this area. Previously, Egypt's national goals centred on the convergence of the Arab World, the Islamic World, and Africa; now it has broadened these interests to include China, the BRICS countries, and the Mediterranean countries as well. Egypt has begun to join these new circles while maintaining the historical ones of its closest region.

Another goal in the country's new policies is to achieve stability and security and put an end to terrorism. President Sisi remarked, 'In the last few years, the region has faced systematic financially-supported terrorism that has torn countries apart. Several countries in the region have drowned in the stormy waters of terrorism. This chaos is the ideal environment for the growth of more terrorist cells. In addition, there are many powerful countries supporting these terrorist organisations behind the scenes by buying their natural resources and providing them with weapons, weapon repair, technology, training, and health care.'<sup>21</sup> Egypt is committed to counterterrorism, willing to combine resources with any nations that will also fight actively against extremist individuals and organisations. In this way, it is a perfect partner for China's BRI so that trade and cultural exchanges can continue with safety and security.

Egypt is ideally situated in terms of geography, politics, military and economy, but it is also surrounded by the challenges of wars, refugees, nuclear weapons, religious extremism, and terrorism. In recent years Egypt has lost some of its prominence in the Middle East, but with the help of China through the cooperation of BRI, Egypt can overcome these difficulties and emerge as a strong player in the developing world. With the help of Egypt, China can establish better trade relations, increase the security of BRI, and provide a strong military presence along BRI. Egypt is perfectly positioned for this role as bridgehead to the three continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

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<sup>21</sup>Mohamed kamel, 'Egypt's new foreign policy', *International Policy Magazine* No. 209 (2010), p. 28.

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## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.