



Academic Paper

The Future of Arab-Chinese relations in 2030



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Introduction	2
First: Mental Images and Historical Memory Between Arab and Chinese Societies	4
Second: The Expansion of the Arab-China Trade and Economic Relations	8
Third: Predominance of Pacifism in Contemporary Arab-China Relations	10
Fourth: Chinese Concerns Regarding Arab Regional Instability	12
Fifth: The Chinese Theoretical Framework for International Relations	16
Sixth: Direction of the Chinese Relationship with Israel and the US	17
Seventh: Limits of the Israeli Role in the Chinese Project	18
Eighth: Elements of the Israeli Strategic Attraction for China	19
Ninth: The Israeli Strategic Vision of the Relationship with the Chinese Project: ...	19
First Trend: The Security Trend.....	20
Second Trend: The Pragmatic Trend.....	21
Third Trend: The Reconciling Trend.....	23
The Cross-Impact Matrix in the Arab-Chinese Relations and its Future Repercussions	23
Analysis of the Cross-Impact Matrix of Arab-Chinese Relations	25
Endnotes	27



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Introduction

Change constitutes the central unit of analysis in futures studies. Without change, the concept of time ceases as time is a quantity of motion; hence the relative concept of time since Heraclitus and his famous phrase “No man ever steps into the same river twice” to Albert Einstein and al-Khwarizmi and his statement that “time is counted by motion.”

We initially believe that one of the gaps in contemporary futures studies in the Arab world is the lack of understanding of the relationship between accurate predictions in the study of phenomena, and the methodology of dealing with time as a relative rather than absolute concept. This latter concept assumes that time precedes phenomenon; thus, it is not an empirical concept but it exists in the mind like Plato’s “ideals,” while the relative concept does not see time as separate from the movement and the phenomenon, as we indicated with al-Khwarizmi and other philosophers and scientists. Einstein believes that moving the clock forward does not mean that your age has increased as the container of time must be filled with movement, which leads to another point represented in the sense of time and the rhythm of movement in it, as is evident in the concept of the philosopher Gustav Feschner about the sense of time in his theory of the elements of psychophysics. This makes us conclude that the year in Beijing is not the year in Nouakchott, Sanaa or Beirut, and accordingly, studying the future of Arab-Chinese relations needs a new methodology that depends on the relativity of time.¹

This means that the methodology of monitoring change in international relations requires adherence to the relative concept of time and awareness of the complexities of predicting the pattern of the relationship between two parties with varying rhythms of change and connotations of time.

To solve these problems in studying the future of Arab-Chinese relations, it is necessary to distinguish between the levels of interaction between the two sides as follows:²

- ▶ 1. Distinguishing between levels of change, as there are four levels for each phenomenon from the perspective of change:



- a. The event: This is represented in any amount of change in the relationship between the Arab and Chinese sides, no matter how simple or individual (commodity price rise, the death of a political figure, a diplomatic problem, a specific scientific discovery, the victory of a sports team, etc.).
 - b. Sub-trend: It is the interconnection of a group of “events” related to a particular phenomenon or dimension. For example, the increase of Arab students in Chinese universities, the translation from Arabic to Chinese, or the Confucius centers in Arab countries form, when linked together, a sub-trend in the cultural dimension, which can be applied to the interdependence of economic or political events.
 - c. Trend: It is the change of interrelated sub-trends. Thus, the increase in Arab-Chinese cultural interaction, the increase in Chinese or Arab tourists to the other party, or the increase in the size of Chinese or Arab diplomatic missions to the other party, all indicate sub-trends uniting to form a trend in the Arab-Chinese relationship.
 - d. Mega-trend: It is the expression of a specific path of one of the dimensions of the phenomenon, which continues for a long time and includes overlapping dimensions. For example, the increase of Chinese-Arab trade volume since more than four decades, the investments between the two sides during the same period, the employment in labor markets and the Chinese loans to Arab countries are all indications of a mega-trend of the economic sector.
- ▶ 2. The dynamics of change: The change of the Arab-Chinese relations may be linear, that is, it moves in one direction (negative or positive), and it may be non-linear, which calls for realizing the effects of this movement on monitoring change and its trends, and thus employing the Futures Wheel technique to track the successive and interrelated repercussions of the dynamics of change in Arab-Chinese relations.
 - ▶ 3. Acceleration: Researchers in futures studies of international relations agree that the pace of change of events, sub-trends, trends or mega-trends must be monitored to determine the period these dimensions need to be taken into account when projected onto the future. It is known that change may take a stable character (or the so-called monotonous change), or it may be volatile (increases or decreases from one period to another), or accelerating (speed of change increases in each stage compared to the previous one). For example, the period between various scientific inventions is decreasing, which is known as the logistic curve in technological prediction. Thus, it is necessary to consider



this acceleration in any sector of the Arab-Chinese and link it to the levels of change in other dimensions to measure the cross-impact among phenomena.

In light of the previous methodology, we will **monitor the mega-trends** of Chinese-Arab relations in order to depict their future picture, then establish a cross-impact matrix to measure the cross-impact between indicators and dimensions of the relationship between the Arabs and China. Ultimately, the time series technique will be employed to determine the phenomenon in 2030.

By linking events and sub-trends, as mentioned above, the mega-trends of Chinese-Arab relations are represented in the following:

First: Mental Images and Historical Memory Between Arab and Chinese Societies

In a study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) about the mental image that societies store of each other, Hadley Cantril and his research team reached an important conclusion: the dedication of mirror image is the result of the nature of the historical relationship between the two sides,³ that is, the historical relations between two



peoples leave mirror mental images, where each side maintains psychological impressions and intellectual convictions towards the other side and draws the characteristics of its national character. A negative image indicates an obstacle to the future development of the relationship, while a positive image constitutes a strong motive for strengthening and developing the relationship.

The Hydraulic theory, developed by German scientist Karl August Wittfogel, attempts to compare the river civilizations in both the Pharaonic civilization (Egypt), the Mesopotamian civilization (Iraq) and the Yellow River civilization (China). It provides an explanation for the convergence in patterns of thinking and political structures in these societies by linking this similar infrastructure (control of water resources, agriculture and production tools), and the superstructure (thought, literature, arts, metaphysics... etc.) in the Arab and Chinese societies,

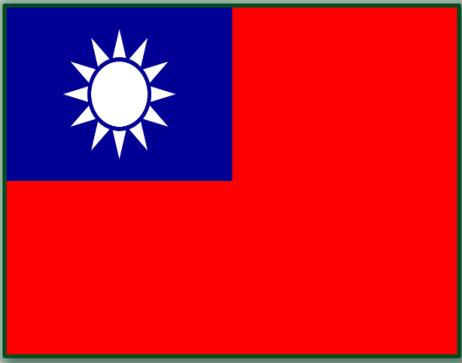


which constitutes a basis for rapprochement and harmonious vision between the two sides.⁴

Historically, concerning diplomatic relations, we find that the first ambassador of the Rightly-Guided Caliphate State at the time of ‘Uthman bin ‘Affan was to China, which is an extension of an image drawn by a call attributed to the Prophet Muhammad “to seek knowledge even in China,” not to mention that most of the first Chinese inventions were transferred to the Arab Islamic state, while mathematics, medicine and other sciences produced by the Arab-Islamic civilization reached China.⁵

Arab-Chinese relations in the eighth century CE reached the point of alliance, when the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid sent military support to control unrest in Chinese regions. Also, the voyages of the Chinese sailor Zheng He, especially the fourth and fifth voyages, reached the Arab shores during the first third of the 15th century.⁶ This was followed by the subjugation of both the Arab region and China to Western control, which formed a common memory for the Arab and Chinese sides towards “one enemy.”

In the period of Arab liberation, especially from 1952 (the beginning of the Nasserite period) to 1970, the relations between the two sides went through two phases:⁷

- ▶ 1. The stage of mutual misunderstanding: This period lasted from 1949 (the victory of the Chinese revolution) to 1955 (the Bandung Conference). During this period, most Arab countries sought diplomatic recognition of the Republic of China (Taiwan) contrary to Chinese popular aspirations. Also, Chinese media at that period addressed the Palestine issue as if the Zionist movement was a national liberation movement parallel to a Western-Arab alliance. Chinese media at that stage even described Egyptian President Gamal ‘Abdul Nasser a “military dictator.”
- 
- ▶ 2. The stage of transformation towards a positive relationship: The Bandung Conference (the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)) in 1955 constituted a turning point towards the re-correction of the relationship between the Arabs and China. After Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Tripartite Aggression (Britain, France and Israel) in 1956, the image of the



Arab national liberation movement became clearer to the elites and the Chinese society. China's recognition of the Algerian interim government in 1958 was another turning point as the People's Republic of China (PRC) was the first non-Arab country to recognize the interim Algerian government. Moreover, China's relations with the Palestinian liberation movement developed broadly, and China supported Arab positions in all international forums, especially after China occupied its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council in 1971; where Algeria was among the countries that presented this membership issue to the UN General Assembly.



A review of Arab history from the angle of international conflicts unequivocally indicates that the mental image about Asians among Arabs is less hostile than that about the West. This makes the development of the Arab relations with Asia unconcerned with the capitalist colonial control and the Western arrogant perspective, kept in the Arab historical memory. Thus, these conditions create an environment conducive to the mission of the Arab diplomat to nurture the pace of the pivot to the east. Colonial wars and the western occupation of Arab lands since the Crusades, then the waves of settlement invasion in the Maghreb and Palestine, as well as the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte, represent a deeper memory with negative connotations, when compared with the legacy of Arab-Chinese relations.

Anthropological studies of the cultural and societal structures in these Asian societies indicate that they are “relatively close” to Arab societies in comparison to Western societies. Also, the Muslim presence in a large number of Asian societies reinforces this aspect, as population data indicate that Muslims of Asia (non-Arabs) constitute 74.5% of the world's Muslims and 28% of the population of Asia.⁸

Despite some contemporary circumstances (which we will address later in this study) of the Arab-Asian relations in general, and China in particular, Arab public opinion polls of various periods and sources, confirm the positive Arab view toward China, whether at the level of the Arab public or the elites. This is evident in the results of the following surveys:⁹



Table 1: Attitudes of Arab Public Opinion: A Comparison of the Stances Towards the US and China

Indicator	US (%)	China (%)
Favored as a superpower	7	23
Favorable country to live	7	8
Preferred country to study	20	2
The country posing the biggest threat (2010) to the category of 36 yrs and over	80	4
Acceptance of it as a mediator to settle the problems of the Arab region	11	49
Acceptance of it as a mediator to settle international problems	8	51
General attitude toward the country (positive)	20	62
Would develop economic relations with it	24	54
More aid to Arab countries	48	57
The position of the elites on strengthening the relationship with the country	21	34
Taking a just position on the Palestine issue	8	88

The previous table indicates that the image of China in the Arab mind, on the level of the public and the elite, is dominated by the positive aspect, which increases the possibilities of developing the bilateral relations. If we add to this the negative image about Israel in the Chinese mind, the possibilities of positive development of the Arab-China relations are further enhanced. In response to the question “How do you view Israel's influence in the world,” 57% of the Chinese sample said that it was closer to the negative role compared to 15% who described it as positive.¹⁰ Yet, this should not hide the beginning of a positive shift in Israeli public opinion toward China. In 2018–2019, international opinion polls revealed



an increase in Israeli positive view of China by up to 11%, which is an important indicator, due to developments of the Arab-Israeli-Chinese relations network (we will return to this later), not to mention that the volume of Chinese investments and contributions to the development of Israeli infrastructure has participated to strengthening the Israeli individual's perspective of China.¹¹

Second: The Expansion of the Arab-China Trade and Economic Relations¹²

- ▶ 1. The comparison of the Arab-China trade volume indicates two important phenomena: Its continuous increase, which at the beginning of 2018 reached \$244.3 billion, an increase of 28% from 2017, compared to \$25.4 billion in 2003 and about \$30 billion in 2014. In 2020, according to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, it increased to \$266.4 billion, which means an annual increase of about \$15 billion. Chinese imports from Arab countries amounted to \$146 billion in 2019, an increase of 4.8% year on year. In the same period, Chinese exports to Arab countries amounted to \$120.4 billion, up 14.7% year on year.
- ▶ 2. Chinese data showed that Chinese direct investments in all Arab countries amounted to \$1.42 billion in 2019, an increase of 18.8% compared to the previous year. The value of project contracts signed by Chinese companies with Arab countries amounted to \$32.5 billion in 2018, down 8.7% year on year, while the business value of Chinese companies amounted to \$30.5 billion, up 9.8% year on year. Chinese official figures indicate that the total volume of China's investments in the Arab region rose from \$36.7 billion in 2004 to \$224.3 billion in 2018.
- ▶ 3. Chinese aid to Arab countries: In 2018, China provided an aid package to Arab countries amounting to about \$23 billion, about 87% of which was in the form of loans allocated to develop projects and create job opportunities, and \$90.6 million of this aid was in the form of humanitarian and construction aid to Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Lebanon. Egypt was also lent up to \$1.2 billion to construct a 68 km electric railway reaching to the new Egyptian administrative capital. Egypt also received a Chinese investment to build 8 towers in the business district in the administrative capital, at \$3 billion, and China provided 85% of which as a loan, the repayment of which starts after 10 years, that is around 2030.



In February 2019, the KSA signed 12 joint trade agreements with China worth \$28 billion. Aramco's share alone amounted to \$10 billion, as the company signed an agreement to establish a complex for refining oil and petrochemical industries in



China. The UAE also signed 16 agreements with China in the fields of economy, oil and environment. These agreements included entrusting the development of a residential and entertainment area in the vicinity of Beijing Daxing International Airport to the Emirati company Emaar through an Emirati investment of \$11 billion.

- ▶ 4. Energy relations: Arab oil is of great importance to China. The volume of Arab oil exports to China in 2018 amounted to about \$107.7 billion, while 3 Arab countries were among the top 5 countries covering the major part of China's energy need in the same year. These 3 countries were: KSA in second place (worth \$29.7 billion), Iraq in fourth place (worth \$22.4 billion), and Oman in fifth place (worth \$17.3 billion).
- ▶ 5. Chinese-Arab employment and tourism: Data issued by the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2019 showed that the number of exchanged visitors between China and Arab countries increased by an average of 16.5% annually throughout 2014–2019 thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The number of Arab visitors to China in 2018 reached a total of 338.8 thousand Arabs, while about 1.456 million Chinese visitors visited Arab countries for tourism as a first stop, with an increase of 0.7% and 8.9% for 2018–2019. Flights between the Arab countries and China reach an average of 28 per day.
- ▶ 6. The BRI constitutes a future horizon for Arab-Chinese relations. China has signed agreements with 18 Arab countries to participate in this initiative, and 9 Arab countries have joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with these relations covering various energy sectors. The League of Arab States signed a memorandum of understanding with the Global Energy Interconnection Development and Cooperation Organization in China, while the China Atomic Energy Agency signed another memorandum of understanding with the Arab Atomic Energy Agency to establish a training center for the peaceful use of atomic energy in the Arab region.
- ▶ 7. Arab-Chinese cultural cooperation: Chinese data reveal that since 1987, China began forming the Chinese Society for Arabic Literature Studies, and many classic



Chinese literary studies have been translated into Arabic, while Arab relations have deepened with the increase in the number of Arab and Chinese students in universities on the other side. As of 2019, there were 20,149 Arab students in Chinese universities, compared to 1,129 Chinese students in Arab universities. China also increased the number of Confucius Institutes in Arab countries to reach 12, in addition to four Confucius classrooms in 9 Arab countries.

Third: Predominance of Pacifism in Contemporary Arab-China Relations¹³

All the above-mentioned evidence indicates that the general feature of the Arab-Chinese relationship is pacifism, as the Arab-China relations are devoid of the tendency of military intervention in the Arab region or founding active military Chinese bases in the Arab region. Also, China is not among the top countries in arms sales to the region.

Western sources estimate that the US has about 32–35 thousand military personnel, most of whom are in the Gulf states, in addition to a presence in Syria and Jordan. If we compare Western military facilities with Chinese military facilities in the Arab region, we find that there are about 30 Western military bases or facilities in Arab countries (13 facilities for the US, 6 France, 4 Italy, 2 Russia and 5 UK), while China has only a logistic base in Djibouti.

In 2015, China issued its first national military strategy, whose main tasks are as follows:

1. Dealing with all kinds of emergencies and military threats against China's national territorial integrity as well as its air and sea sovereignty.
2. Supporting national reunification of all Chinese territory.
3. Preserving the new forms of security and interests of the nation, and preserving the integrity of external interests.
4. Maintaining strategic deterrence and preparing for nuclear counterstrikes.
5. Participating in regional and international security cooperation for the sake of regional and global peace.
6. Strengthening efforts to combat infiltration, separatism and terrorism, and protect national political security and social stability.
7. Participating in humanitarian disaster relief.



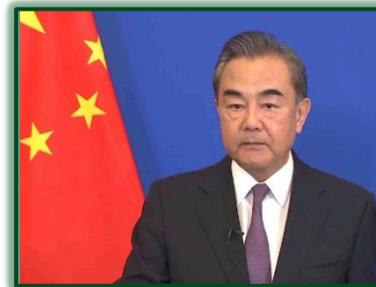
Although China has adopted a foreign policy of “military non-intervention” since 1953, and although this policy is embodied in the preamble to the Chinese Constitution, the indications for adapting this principle to the new developments in the world are increasing clearly. Several indicators can be presented as examples of this adaptation:

- ▶ 1. The announcement of the Chinese President Hu Jintao, in 2004, regarding “new historical missions” for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army to protect vital Chinese interests abroad. This reflected in the increase of Chinese supply bases in maritime areas, outside the Chinese borders. The Chinese Xinhua News Agency reported in January 2013 that there was a tendency to build 18 Chinese bases on the high seas (Egypt’s Port Said and Lebanon’s Tripoli may be candidates for that). In addition, there is an increasing tendency to build aircraft carriers supporting the movement abroad.



Hu Jintao

- ▶ 2. The statement by Wang Yi, the Chinese minister of foreign affairs, in December 2014, that his country could “help Iraq to defeat ISIS.” Although he did not specify the mechanism for this assistance, the statement suggests a willingness to participate in joint combat missions with other powers when feeling the threat to Chinese national security and interests. China’s intervention in Libya to save its nationals (about 36,000 individuals) might be an indication of this trend, especially since China lost in Libya about \$20 billion in investments, which made it realize that abandoning other regions may generate the same experience, so the principle of non-military intervention abroad must be modified.



Wang Yi

- ▶ 3. In September 2014, China announced its willingness to send 700 infantrymen to South Sudan as part of international forces even though Sudan does not provide more than 5% of China’s oil needs. China also sent troops to southern Lebanon as part of international forces, the same as it did in Mali and South Sudan. Also, the commander of the international mission on the island of Cyprus between 2011 and 2014 was a Chinese officer.



- ▶ 4. China conducted joint military exercises with Iran in September 2014, which had clear political overtones, and joint military exercises with Iran and Russia were repeated in 2021. Indeed, the strategic agreement in March 2021 between China and Iran confirms “China’s policy of adaptation” to the developments in the security situation in the Middle East, especially since the agreement does not refer to security dimensions or cooperation in the defense industries,¹⁴ while some reports indicate that there are possibilities for military cooperation, especially in the areas of countering terrorist movements and intelligence cooperation.¹⁵

Fourth: Chinese Concerns Regarding Arab Regional Instability

Available data from various references indicate that the Arab region is one of the most geopolitical regions that are politically unstable. Based on about 45 major political, economic, social and military indicators, with about 300 sub-indicators adopted by international standards concerned with measuring the degree of stability, the following is noticed on the stability scale, which consists of 5 positive levels (0 - +2.5), and 5 negative ones (0 - -2.5):¹⁶

- ▶ 1. Only 4 countries fall within the circle of political stability (Qatar, the UAE, the Sultanate of Oman and Kuwait), and the positive points in these countries range from 0.7 to 0.13. These countries ranked 53, 54, 59, and 83 respectively, and they constitute 4.7% of the total Arab population.
- ▶ 2. Fourteen Arab countries, representing 95.3% of the Arab population, fall within the region of instability, with a negative rate of about -1.3. The Arab countries in the lists of political instability occupied ranks ranging from 127 to 195 out of 195 countries monitored in the world.
- ▶ 3. Arab military spending indicators show that Arab military spending rate in relation to GDP is 5.4%, compared to a global spending rate of only 2.2%. This means that international spending reaches 40.7% of the Arab average, knowing that the US is the first supplier of weapons for the Arab region by a large margin compared to the rest of the major countries.

This Arab environment constitutes a source of concern for Chinese foreign policy, given the possibility that all of these aspects will reflect on the development of the Arab-Chinese relationship and affect trade flow, the growth of investment and the development of the BRI across the Arab region.



This means that there are necessities that may push China to shift towards further “soft” external interference, which can be “coercive” later according to the developments. Here, it is sufficient to reflect on the following indicators:¹⁷

- ▶ 1. An Islamic minority live in China, including the Turkic-speaking Uyghur minority in the western region of Xinjiang, estimated at about 11 million people, and they have political movements calling for secession from China and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Turkestan. The most prominent of these movements is the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement, which has an arm in Istanbul hiding behind the East Turkestan Solidarity and Education Association, and there is the Turkestan Islamic Party led by Abdullah Mansour, not to mention the incitement practiced previously by Ayman al-Zawahiri against China on a number of occasions. The region witnessed severe turmoil in 2009, where around 200 people were killed, mostly Han. In 2013, there was a suicide attack in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and in Urumqi in 2014 with car bombs.



In June 2014, China announced the execution of 13 Chinese on charges of joining terrorist groups, meaning that China realizes that it has an environment that may embrace extremist organizations, such as ISIS, and threaten its internal security, Also, it is concerned that the Arab environment constitutes a base for such terrorist organizations. In one speech, in July 2014, ISIS former chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spoke about what he called China’s persecution of Uyghur Muslims, and he listed 20 countries accused of persecuting Muslims, with China topping the list. In late July 2014, a statement by ISIS branch in the Syrian city of Aleppo called on Chinese Muslims to join the caliphate state and immigrate to its territory. It is likely that the Chinese government was taking these calls seriously, especially after the Malaysian Minister of Interior Ahmad Zahid Hamidi stated that about 300 Chinese crossed his country on their way to join ISIS.¹⁸ In early 2015, the Chinese police arrested a number of Turks providing fake passports to Chinese to join ISIS,¹⁹ and three Chinese Islamists were executed by ISIS after they had suspected their desire to escape from Syria,²⁰ one of whom was a



Ahmad Zahid Hamidi



university student from China studying at a Turkish university. Also, in July 2014, the Chinese National Space Administration reported that photographs were taken of tunnels in Xinjiang to smuggle weapons and trainees from neighboring countries.²¹

► 2. The effects of armed Islamic movements on Chinese foreign interests: These are as follows:²²

a. Threat to the New Silk Road Project, the Land Road and the Maritime Road: The Silk Road extends across Eurasia (from Beijing to Rotterdam), but it will intersect with the components of the Caliphate state according to the map previously published by ISIS, from what it called Khorasan (which includes parts of China), passing through the Islamic countries of West Asia, especially Iran, Syria and Iraq. The Maritime Silk Road extends from Fujian Province in the southeast of China through the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, especially after its recent expansion, reaching the Mediterranean Sea to intersect with the land road in Italy, which is also in contact at several points with the project of the caliphate state according to ISIS map (in Asia and the Sinai desert). This means that the project of ISIS or of extremist Islamic movements pose a threat to the Chinese project.

b. Chinese concern—which is clear—about the transfer of Islamic movements to Afghanistan; the increase of their strength, especially following the withdrawal of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US forces from there; and the possibility of a return to activity of the Wakhan Corridor between the Chinese and Afghan borders, which was used by the Taliban movement to train and arm the fighters of Sinkiang connected to Afghanistan through this corridor.

c. The energy issue: This issue is represented in several aspects:

- According to the estimates of oil sources, China is the first investor in the Iraqi oil sector, and it supplies approximately 20% of its oil needs from Iraq. Also, around 10 thousand Chinese were working in the Iraqi oil sector when ISIS rose to the fore, which means that the chances of the revival of the activity of Islamic movements may pose a major threat to China's energy resources, not to mention the threat to Chinese investments.
- The expansion of the circle of Chinese interests in the energy sector in the neighboring Muslim regions in West Asia (60% of its oil comes from the Middle East). This will urge China to ensure the stability of its oil import sources, especially after some Islamic movements have controlled—at one time—60% of Syria's oil.



- A significant proportion of natural gas pipelines coming from Central Asia pass through Xinjiang, which means that the disruption of this region will pose a threat to these Chinese supplies.
- In response to these developments, and to protect China's interests internally and externally, the Chinese defense and security expenditures have increased remarkably annually, which suggests Chinese concerns about the future. For example, security expenditures on internal security in China increased between 2010–2014 from \$87 billion to \$135 billion, while defense spending rose in the same period from \$84.6 billion to \$131.57 billion. It is necessary to note that the Chinese accounting system for defense expenditures does not include the expenses of producing warplanes and warships, as these are placed within the ministry of heavy industries. Also, the retirement of hundreds of thousands of the military is not counted in defense expenditures, but is counted with the ministry of social affairs, etc. This means that adopting the usual methods of calculating defense expenditures will make Chinese spending greater than the announced figures.

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) indicate that Chinese military spending rates have increased linearly from 2010 to 2020, and foreign estimates of Chinese military spending indicate that actual spending may be much higher than official figures. In 2019, the Chinese government announced an official defense budget slightly under \$178 billion, while SIPRI estimated actual (nominal) spending at \$261 billion. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated China's defense spending at \$225 billion.²³

- It is natural for China to realize that the success of the principle of “multipolarity” that it advocates with Russia is not destined to succeed without contributing with the international community, especially its central forces, to the burdens of international decisions' expenditures. Hence, China will not hesitate to adapt the concept of intervention against Islamic military organizations to serve its interests that I mentioned and in a manner that ensures these interests on the one hand, and the gradual transition from intervention with soft tools, guided by the theory of Zheng Bijian of peaceful rise, to some coercive intervention, on the other hand.

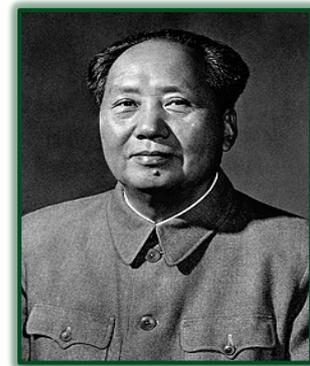


Fifth: The Chinese Theoretical Framework for International Relations²⁴

The Chinese political literature in the post-1978 period reveals a certain shift in the Chinese strategic vision of international relations and the international system. The most important of these new shifts can be identified in the following inclinations:

- ▶ 1. Theories of pragmatism at the expense of the ideological perspective:²⁵ Until the 1990s, discussions in the Chinese political literature revolved around the nature of the international system. These discussions focused on the questions posed by the Chinese thinker QIN in 1978, represented in a number of strategic questions about the nature of the international system and whether it should be viewed from the angle of war and conflict, or from the angle of peace and development, and whether China achieves its goals through integration into the international system, or through competition and power.

Chinese intellectual literature sought to achieve three strategic goals that were referred to in the theory of peaceful rise, which turned into the theory of peaceful development. The theory, formulated by Chinese thinker Zheng Bijian, called for establishing an international system based on multipolarity, and then shifting from a country seeking to change the existing international system, as was the case in the Mao Zedong period, to one seeking to integrate into the existing system and presenting itself as a leader in the process of globalization. However, it requires being accepted as a country with a special position in the international system commensurate with its rising international position.



Mao Zedong

These trends were based on an intellectual perspective identified by two theories that prevailed in contemporary Chinese thought after the death of Mao Zedong, namely:²⁶

- a. The bird-cage theory proposed by Deng Xiaoping, which is based on the idea of not abandoning socialism, while deploying some capitalist mechanisms. That is, China should remain in the “cage of socialism” with the need to expand the space of the cage.
- b. The cat color theory, which was formulated by Lou Jiwei, which is an expression of the pragmatic tendency in China, in the post-Mao Zedong period. The color of the cat is not important, what’s important that it hunts



mice. That is, what matters are economic and political results no matter what the “ideological color” is.

- ▶ 2. Intellectual trends with a pragmatic tendency were reinforced by the growth of a Chinese nationalist tendency, whose features were embodied in the revival of the Chinese heritage since the reign of Xia (Hsia) (2200 BC), and the work on building more than one hundred national centers to accomplish this task. This was accompanied with a change in curricula that reflects significant indicators; For example: replacing the interpretation of building the wall from repelling the invaders, to the tendency for national unity, and that the watch towers were to facilitate communication between the various Chinese groups, as an indicator of national unity. This indicates a Chinese return to some features of the Westphalian view of the role of the state.

Sixth: Direction of the Chinese Relationship with Israel and the US

Despite what we indicated at the beginning of this study about the stage of “misunderstanding” between the Arabs and China throughout 1949-1955, and despite Arab recognition of Taiwan at the time when Israel recognized the People’s Republic of China without recognizing Taiwan, the relationship returned to its positive orientation later (as we mentioned). However, the post-Arab Spring period (2010-present), the emergence of the BRI in 2013, and the expansion of Arab-Israeli normalization since 1979 (the Israeli-Egyptian treaty) to the Jordanian and Palestinian treaties, then waves of Arab normalization with Israel, in addition to the repercussions of the Middle Eastern scene after the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and the American invasion of Iraq and other Arab countries; all of these were variables that produced a series of repercussions with a relative impact on the Arab-Chinese relations as follows:²⁷

- ▶ 1. It comes at a time when the US strategic tendency is to gradually and quietly disengage from the deep US involvement in the Middle East, and particularly when China is the number one trading partner of the Middle East. The conditions of US energy independence from the Middle East oil have increased, and there is a European reluctance to expand the scope of NATO’s work outside the European framework, which in turn increases the burdens on the US. In addition, Russia seeks to ensure a secure Middle Eastern environment as a strategic belt for its Eurasian project and that would narrow



the movement area of the US strategy. For there is a high degree of Chinese-Russian harmony, where both are members in international, regional and intercontinental organizations, not to mention the overlap between the Eurasian project and the BRI.

- ▶ 2. There is an Israeli concern over the prospect of “gradual militarization” of the Chinese project, which necessitates thinking deeply of how to deal with this possibility, whose signs began with the establishment of China military base in Djibouti. A Pentagon report that was submitted to the US congress has outlined this possibility. It indicated that there is a possibility of establishing additional military bases in Pakistan and in countries that have a precedence of for hosting foreign military bases, especially in the Middle East.
- ▶ 3. Israel is thinking about how the Chinese project would affect European-Israeli relations, especially in light of the sharp reaction of some European countries and the US to Italy’s announcement of its participation in the BRI, where the latter is the only one among the seven countries that took this stand.

Seventh: Limits of the Israeli Role in the Chinese Project²⁸

The Israeli contribution to the Chinese Belt and Road project can be identified in an infrastructure represented by the following features:

- ▶ 1. The construction of a railroad from Eilat to Ashdod ports to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.
- ▶ 2. Chinese interest in the purchase of Israeli insurance companies or in being contributors in them.
- ▶ 3. Beijing’s aspiration to win tenders for the construction and operation of the two private ports in Ashdod and Haifa and a twenty-year concession to operate the latter.

- ▶ 4. China’s contribution to the construction of tunnels, and the extension of pipelines to transfer natural gas out of Israel. In 2021, the EuroAsia Interconnector project, which is a subsea cable system connecting the electricity grids



of Israel, Cyprus, and Greece with the European transmission network, will be finished, making Israel a pure source of electricity to Europe. In addition, Israel produces in its sunny southern part 200 Mega Watt of renewable energy, and by 2021 the EuroAsia Interconnector project is supposed to contribute



significantly to the clean energy from Israel to Europe, and China is working on connecting the EuroAsia Interconnector project to the BRI.

Eighth: Elements of the Israeli Strategic Attraction for China²⁹

There are a set of variables that constitute the elements of Israeli attraction for China, and these elements are as follows:

- ▶ 1. The geo-political and geo-strategic position of Israel: It is a connecting point between the three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe), which is of China's interest.
- ▶ 2. Israel is ranked the second lowest investment risk on the Economist Intelligence Unit BRI risk index, out of 63 countries, making the investment in the Israeli market highly attractive for China.
- ▶ 3. Israel is an important gateway to China to access Western technology, especially in light of the intensified US blockade of this aspect of its relation with China. China considers this Israeli aspect important, since there are many partnerships between Israeli companies and American ones in particular and European ones in general.
- ▶ 4. The discoveries of potential energy sources on the shores of the Mediterranean have increased, making Chinese options to access energy sources expand, especially when the indicators of economic convergence between Israel, Greece and Cyprus are increasing.
- ▶ 5. The growing Arab openness to Israel has made China pay attention to the new trade corridors between the Arab countries and Israel.



Ninth: The Israeli Strategic Vision of the Relationship with the Chinese Project³⁰

The approach to the relationship with China in Israeli strategic thought can be divided into three trends, with controversy among them, focusing on the future prospects of the Israeli-Chinese relationship in the next three decades.



First Trend: The Security Trend

This trend prevails among the Israeli military and security circles, and believes that China is “employing soft power tactics aimed to make it a new imperialist power that aims to control South East Asia, East Africa and the Middle East, while its next targets are the relatively weak economies of Europe.” This trend compares between what appears to be a positive image of China today and the contrast between the very positive image of the US in the world before World War I and before it became greatly involved in international wars and how things ended up at a later stage, where now the US is at the top of the world’s most hated countries, and this may happen to China later.

Since this trend reflects the Israeli perspective of international relations; where security is one of its main features, it warns against going too far along the Chinese project. For there are concerns over the negative impact of the growing Chinese-Israeli relations on the US-Israeli relations. Since this trend views that the US-Chinese trade competition would particularly increase, it considers that deepening the relationship with China may threaten the US-Israeli relationship, and would make Israel the back door for China to ease US sanctions on it. There are precedents in this area, for when in 1999 the US forced Israel to cancel a deal with China, through which China was seeking to obtain from Israel an advanced airborne radar system on surveillance planes.

There are also US concerns that the Chinese-Israeli relationship may be a gateway for China to access sensitive US technology, especially in military, security, and computer fields, etc, which could threaten the US-Israeli relations. This trend considers the Chinese presence in Haifa, and facilitating their operation there, could be a Chinese hotspot for gathering information about the US Sixth Fleet stationed there, a matter considered by Washington to be of the utmost gravity.

This trend warns of China’s penetration into the Israeli economy domestically or in some academic institutions, citing the Tnuva deal. In this deal, China acquired 56% of the shares of the Israeli dairy company Tnuva worth \$ 2.5 billion, knowing that the company’s share of Israel’s dairy market exceeds 70%. The deal faced fierce resistance in the Israeli Knesset, which saw great risks in it, in case it spread. There are reports that the Israeli government is



considering establishing a CFIUS [Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States]-like mechanism to assess risks to Israeli interests from foreign investors with a focus on Chinese entities.

This trend also reinforces its view by raising China's position on Arab issues, especially the Palestinian one. This means that the development of the Chinese-Israeli relations has not affected China's "political positions" on political issues that interest Israel. It cites the following indicators:

- ▶ 1. China's stated position on Palestinian rights, which is closer to the Palestinian side than the Israeli one.
- ▶ 2. China's voting pattern at the United Nations remains unchanged, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and China in 1992, and after the opening of the second consulate of Israel in China.
- ▶ 3. China's weak attention to Israeli concerns over China selling arms to Arab countries and Iran.
- ▶ 4. China continues to support the Iranian nuclear agreement, not to mention that the degree of its compliance with the sanctions on Iran remains below Israeli approval.
- ▶ 5. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation countries oppose the accession of Israel to the Asian Development Bank, in which China is a major force. They also oppose providing support to Israeli institutions seeking opportunities from this bank.

▶ Second Trend: The Pragmatic Trend

Contrary to the concerns of the first trend, this trend seems to be more inclined toward developing the relationship with China. It refers to the Chinese-Israeli relationship, especially in the commercial sphere, which is steadily and rapidly growing, where during 2012 to 2015, Chinese investments in Israel saw an increase of 100% each year. By the end of 2018, trade reached \$ 14 billion, and may make even greater leaps once Israeli participation in the Chinese project is enhanced. It is noted that the increasing Chinese investment in Israel is associated with a general trend of declining foreign investment in Israel. This means that China's investments offset the decline (albeit non-linearly) of investment in Israel. China is even involved in 50% of foreign investment projects in Israel. It should be noted that Israeli planning indicates that over the next 30 years, Israel needs an investment of over \$200 billion, and this reinforces relations with China.



With the increased Arab openness towards Israel, this trend believes that it is necessary to make Israel a transit point from the Levant to Europe. This requires the development of the Israeli infrastructure and connecting it to the branches of the Chinese project in the Arab countries. As Arab normalization with Israel is expanding, China's political positions towards the Arab issues would become on one hand less important, and on the other it would become less adhering to its traditional positions on these issues.

This trend notes that the Chinese companies are investing in various sectors in Israel, Thus, competing with the local counterparts. This is clear in the Chinese shares in Israeli companies such as: Tnuva, Makhteshim Agan, Shahal, and Nextec, etc. In this regard also, Israeli-Chinese cooperation in the field of water is highlighted, as it seeks to develop the Islamic Western provinces (Xinjiang), which are the home to the Uighurs Muslims, and China is seeking to have stability there. It has already witnessed some armed opposition by Islamic organizations targeting Chinese government facilities, mentioned above.



This trend also notes that in addition to the fact that Israel has joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (which provides banking facilities to the countries participating in the project), it has formed the Joint China-Israel Bilateral Task Force on Economic Relations headed by Eugene Kandel, which seeks to develop the Israeli role in the project linking the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean across the Gulf of Suez on the one hand, and on the other hand, it monitors the investment sectors between the two parties.



▶ **Third Trend: The Reconciling Trend**

This trend takes a middle position on Chinese-Israeli relations, trying to reconcile between the security and economic pragmatic perspectives as follows:

- ▶ 1. The Israeli-Chinese cooperation in the field of civilian technology would continue, with extreme caution in military-technological relations. That is moving away from the technology that provokes the US, and focus on other sectors such as new energy sources, agriculture, development of transport technologies, life sciences, etc.
- ▶ 2. Developing trade relations and mutual investment, without letting the Chinese reach deeply in sensitive sectors or to the extent that threatens strategic sectors in Israel.
- ▶ 3. This trend calls on Israel to abandon the caution policy in dealing with the Chinese project, engage in it, strengthen Israeli relations with China, and allow Beijing to become more involved in the Palestinian-Israeli and Gulf-Iranian conflicts.

The Cross-Impact Matrix in the Arab-Chinese Relations and its Future Repercussions

Thirteen indicators were identified based on mega-trends of Arab-Chinese relations, then the correlation coefficient between each indicator and the other 12 indicators was used to determine the following:

- ▶ 1. The most positively influential indicator.
- ▶ 2. The indicator that has the most negative influence.
- ▶ 3. The most positively affected indicator.
- ▶ 4. The most negatively affected indicator.

The future possibilities were analyzed on the basis of the interaction of these 6 indicators, by measuring their values and the acceleration of their change, then determining the situation in 2030 on the basis of the time series technique.³¹



Table 2: The Cross-Impact Between the Indicators of Arab-Chinese Relations

	Indicator	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total of impact
1	Chinese pragmatism	*	-1	+2	+3	-1	-1	+3	-2	-2	+2	+2	+2	-1	6
2	American Chinese competition	-2	*	+2	0	+2	+1	+1	+3	+1	+2	+1	-2	+1	10
3	Arab normalization with Israel	+3	-1	*	+3	+1	-3	+1	-3	+1	-2	+1	+1	-2	0
4	The acceleration of China-Israel relations	+2	+1	+2	*	-1	-2	+1	-1	-1	-1	+1	+3	-1	3
5	Russian role	-1	+1	+1	+1	*	-1	-1	+2	-1	-2	+1	0	-1	-1
6	Islamic movements	-1	+1	-1	+2	-1	*	-1	+2	-1	-1	0	0	+1	0
7	Expansion of Arab-Chinese trade relations	+2	+1	+1	+1	-1	-1	*	+1	-1	+2	+1	0	-1	5
8	Possibilities of China's militarization of the BRI	-2	+2	-2	-1	+1	+1	-2	*	-1	-2	+1	-1	+2	-4
9	European tendency to curb the Chinese role	-1	+1	-1	-1	-1	+1	+1	+2	*	-1	-1	-1	+1	<u>-1</u>



10	The decline of the strategic position of the Middle East in the US strategy	+2	-2	-1	+1	+1	-1	+1	-1	+2	*	0	-1	-1	<u>0</u>
11	Chinese need for Middle East energy	+1	+1	0	+1	-1	-1	+2	+2	-1	+1	*	0	+1	<u>6</u>
12	Chinese access to Western technology through Israel	+2	+2	+1	+3	0	-1	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	*	+1	<u>12</u>
13	Iranian-Israeli relations	+1	+1	+1	0	+1	+1	-1	+2	+1	+1	0	+1	*	<u>9</u>
Total of “affected”		6	7	5	13	0	-7	6	8	-2	-1	8	2	0	

Analysis of the Cross-Impact Matrix of Arab-Chinese Relations³²

After analyzing the correlation coefficient between the variables of the Arab-Chinese relationship based on the quantitative indicators expressing these relations, the cross-impact matrix of the Arab-Chinese relations revealed that the most influential indicators in determining the future of the Arab-Chinese relations are:

- ▶ 1. The level of US-Chinese competition in the region.
- ▶ 2. The Chinese tendency to deepen the relationship with Israel as a bridge to access advanced Western technology, and to employ the geostrategic position of Israel within the BRI.
- ▶ 3. The nature of Iranian-Israeli relations and China’s attempt to curb the effects of this relationship on the development of Chinese-Middle Eastern relations.



As for the indicators most affected by the trends of Arab-Chinese relations, these are:

- ▶ 1. The possibility of accelerating the development of Israeli-Chinese relations during the next 10 years.
- ▶ 2. The possibility of a relative militarization of the Chinese presence along the BRI stations, especially if the US-Chinese competition intensified further.
- ▶ 3. The continuing Chinese need for Arab energy sources at least in the next decade.

Accordingly, and based on the cross-impact matrix, the future picture of Arab-Chinese relations until 2030 will tend to be as follows:

- ▶ 1. China's continuing tendency towards the relative and slow militarization of some facilities of the Chinese BRI in the region, to ensure the security of Chinese interests without reaching confrontation with major international powers, bearing in mind that the project is destined to be completed in 2035, and that the project's geography expansion to 147 countries makes militarism all the more necessary.
- ▶ 2. Maintaining pragmatism in Chinese politics, and persistence in the strategy of not engaging China in bilateral conflicts between the Middle Eastern regional powers (Iran/ KSA, Iran/ Israel, Turkey/ Egypt, Palestine/Israel, etc.).
- ▶ 3. Relative involvement of Chinese diplomacy in working on the gradual transformation of Middle Eastern international relations from the level of the zero-sum game to the level of the non-zero game, and strengthening the management of competition with what William James called the moral equivalent of war.³³

Based on these results, the Arab countries, individually or collectively, should establish the strategy of their relations with China on the basis of these three rules, which we believe will become more stable in the Chinese strategy towards the region until 2030.



Endnotes

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Also see: Yoram Evron, "Israel's Response to China's Rise: A Dependent State's Dilemma," *Asian Survey* journal, vol.56, no.2, May 2015, pp.403–411, <https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article-abstract/56/2/392/24842/Israel-s-Response-to-China-s-Rise-A-Dependent-State?RedirectedFrom=fulltext>; Wang Jin, China's Middle East Dilemma: Israel or Palestine?, *The Diplomat*, 10/1/2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/chinas-middle-east-dilemma-israel-or-palestine/>; Ezra Friedman, Between the US and China: Israel's Foreign Policy Dilemma, site of The London Globalist, 14/10/2018, <https://thelondonglobalist.org/between-the-us-and-china-israels-foreign-policy-dilemma/>; Shira Efron et.al., The Evolving Israel–China Relationship, site of Rand Corporation, 2019, pp.142–145, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2641.html; and Camille Lons (ed.), China's Great Game in the Middle East, SITE OF European Council on Foreign Relations (ecfr.eu), 21/10/2019, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china_great_game_middle_east

³¹ Acceleration was measured on the basis of the formula: $a-d/t$ (acceleration - difference in speed at each stage divided by the time period). As for the correlation coefficient: it determines the degree of change in one indicator over the degree of change in another indicator (Pearson coefficient).

As for the time series: The elements of the time series in statistics are as follows:

- Secular trend.
- Seasonal variations.
- Cyclical variations.
- Irregular variations.

³² The cross-impact matrix was analyzed by measuring the correlation coefficient between each indicator and the rest of the 13 indicators, and later two issues were identified based on the levels of the correlation coefficient between the indicators:

- a. Determining the indicators that have the most negative or positive **impact** on the rest of the indicators.
- b. Determining the indicators most "**affected**" negatively or positively.

After that, the levels of the correlation coefficient are divided into four levels (high correlation 3 points, medium 2, weak 1, no effect 0). Then, the final result of the strength of each indicator is determined.

- c. Determining the highest indicators and placing each of them in the Futures Wheel, and tracking their repercussions until 2030.

Cross-impact matrix studies can be found in: Kenneth Chao, "A New Look at the Cross-Impact Matrix and its Application in Futures Studies," *Journal of Futures Studies*, May 2008, vol.12, no.4, pp.45–51, <https://jfsdigital.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/124-A04.pdf>

³³ William James, The Moral Equivalent of War, *Popular Science Monthly* journal, vol.77, Oct, 1910, pp. 406–409, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Popular_Science_Monthly/Volume_77/October_1910/The_Moral_Equivalent_of_War#cite_note-1