

# On the Strategic Relationship between China and Islamic Countries in the Middle East

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***Abstract:** The relationship between China and the Islamic countries has been of strategic significance; mutual understanding and mutual respect in their political ties has been the mainstream in the bilateral relationship. Since the founding of new China, their relationship has undergone two phases: from bilateral to multilateral relations and from mainly in the political field to comprehensive ties in the economic and trade, resources, security, culture and other fields. For future development of bilateral relationships, issues such as misjudgment and misunderstanding, trade imbalance and conflicts of interest must be resolved. To do so, strategic significance must be attached to bilateral relationships so as to uplift the strategic position of the Middle East in the overall Chinese diplomacy, establish a Middle East strategy with Chinese characteristics and strengthen China's cultural diplomacy including religious communication with the Islamic countries in the Middle East.*

***Key Words:** China's Diplomacy; Cultural Diplomacy; Islamic Middle Eastern Countries; Middle East Strategy; Strategic Relationship*

Today the Organization of the Islamic Conference groups 57 member states, about 1.5 billion people, mainly from the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia. As the core countries of the

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Islamic world are located in the Middle East, they are typical representatives in this area, which play an important role in international politics. For example, Egypt is recognized as an ancient civilization in North Africa, a regional political power with a large population; Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, a guardian of two holy places (Mecca and Medina), plays a key role among Sunni countries; Iran is the largest Shiite country. The rise of nuclear Iran has become a hot-spot issue in international relations, which has and will continue to impose an impact on the geographic politics in the Middle East and the international situation. Therefore, this article will focus on the Islamic Middle Eastern countries.

## **I. Characteristics of the Ties between China and Islamic Countries in the Middle East against the Changing International Situation**

### **A. Mutual Understanding and Respect in Political Ties Has Been the Mainstream in Bilateral Relations**

There are two reasons for the mutual understanding and respect shown in the relationship between China and Islamic countries. One is the deep, rich history and cultural heritage behind bilateral ties. In ancient times, the Silk Road laid the foundation for traditional and friendly exchanges between the two sides. The Chinese civilization with the Four Great Inventions as representatives spread to Europe through Muslims in West Asia and North Africa while the Islamic civilization, after entering into China in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, gradually integrated with the Chinese culture and has become an important part. In modern times, both sides went through tremendous changes and similar experiences because of the invasion, occupation and plundering by colonists and imperialists. In contemporary times, both sides, facing the same mission of development, have embarked on the road of national rejuvenation. The other is that, after the founding of new China, both sides have forged explicit strategic thinking in terms of international politics, i.e., supporting and relying

on each other to fight against pressure and challenges from Western powers and enhancing the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence and the spirit of seeking common ground while reserving differences as their common guideline for developing bilateral relations.

In the early days of its founding, P. R. China had to adopt the "leaning to one side" policy because of the US patterns of political isolation, military blockade and economic containment against China. As of the end of 1955 there were only 23 countries, mainly socialist countries, adjacent nationalist countries in Asia and some countries in Western Europe, which had established diplomatic relations with China (Shi, 2008). In his speech at the Conference of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad held on April 30, 1952, late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, when talking about Islamic countries, pointed out, "We haven't much contact with Islamic countries so far. Besides, they have little influence on us. We may develop relations with them step by step."(1984) Nevertheless, his guideline of "developing relations step by step" never meant taking a passive wait-and-see attitude. Instead, as a wise and insightful diplomat, he always kept a close eye on the changes of the international situation. He made great efforts to unite former colonial and semi-colonial countries, including the Islamic countries. At the Bandung Conference, Premier Zhou Enlai told Egyptian President Gamul Nasser, "In 1924 when I went by the Suez Canal on my way back to China from Europe, the British protectorate over Egypt had just ended and yet almost the whole African continent was still under the dark rule of imperialism. In 1954, when I went by Cairo during the Geneva Conference, the Egyptian people had overthrown King Farouk while the Algerian people were determined to engage in armed struggle against the colonial rule. The whole Africa was on the eve of a storm of revolution."(Zhan, 2006) It was during his stay in Cairo that Premier Zhou Enlai told the press, "The Chinese people have been sympathetic with the struggle of the Egyptian people. I would love to take this opportunity to pay high tribute to the Egyptian people."(Zhan, 2006) Later, in December 1954, Egypt inquired about the possibility of

sending diplomats to China through the Indian ambassador to China. Taking into account the fact that Egypt, under the pressure of USA, still wanted to maintain its official relationship with Taiwan, Premier Zhou Enlai responded with a policy of "waiting with patience and kindness, making more efforts till the right time," welcoming trade and economic relations and cultural exchanges while holding fast to the principles of establishing a diplomatic relationship.

Among the 29 Asian and African countries that attended the Bandung Conference, Islamic countries and regions included Arab countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey and the Mufti of Jerusalem on behalf of the Palestine region, more than half of all the participating countries. However, there was a general lack of understanding or even misunderstanding among them about the ideology, social system and religious policies of new China. Therefore, after his keynote speech to the conference, Premier Zhou made a supplementary speech directed toward these aspects. Given the concerns of the Middle Eastern countries, this speech, in the spirit of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, elaborated China's theory of "seeking common ground while putting aside differences". As the speech immediately improved the atmosphere of the conference, it was believed to have "brought back the Bandung Conference on track"(Liu, 2008). Nasser told the press that "I love his speech"(Yu, 2006). Delegates from Islamic countries interacted with Premier Zhou one after another, which obviously increased mutual understanding and friendship. In the history of new China, the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence and the spirit of "seeking common ground while putting aside differences" has served not only as the most important groundwork of international relations theory and diplomacy with Chinese characteristics but also as a highly influential and lively common product that China contributed to the international community. For the development of China's ties with Islamic countries, the diplomatic theory of Premier Zhou Enlai and later his decision of importing

long-staple cotton from Egypt, an array of economic diplomacy practices and cultural diplomacy practices were all important. These included religious exchanges and opening a trade office in Cairo, inviting an Egyptian religious delegation to China, sending Chinese students including students of Hui minority to Egypt for further studies and checking the Beijing Opera program of singing plays and military plays to be performed in Egypt, are still precise resources that China should cherish and carry forward.

### **B. Strategic Implications in the Development of the Ties between China and Islamic countries**

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Islamic countries meant that China was breaking through the blockade and containment of Western countries. The development of the Sino-Egyptian relationship directly led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, typical of making full use of the experience in one country to promote the work in all surrounding countries. As for Egypt, President Nasser decided to establish a diplomatic relationship with China partly to alleviate the pressure that Europe and the USA imposed on the new Egyptian regime and partly, for the sake of geographic politics, to avoid leaning completely to the Soviet side. It became even more visible during the Cold War Era in the mid 1950s. The Middle Eastern Islamic countries became victims of the contest between the USA and the Soviet Union, both trying to exploit these countries against one another. In dealing with the confrontation between two superpowers, the Middle Eastern Islamic countries developed their own ways of thinking and behaving, that is, seeking survival and development in the game-playing between world powers and safeguarding their own interests. Being a regional power and a permanent member of the UNSC, China reached a consensus with Islamic countries in terms of the Palestine issue, Arab countries' opposition against foreign invasion, and occupation and intervention, namely, sticking to an unswerving principled stand and pursuing an

independent foreign policy. At that time, China was self-sufficient in resources but its economy was still underdeveloped. What the Islamic countries valued most about China was its persistent strategic support in the political field against the ever changing game-playing between world powers.

In 1989 when the Cold War came to an end, the international situation experienced significant changes and the political events in Beijing aroused wide concerns in the international community. The USA, the UK, France and some other Western countries imposed economic sanctions on China and their media reported rumors and slanders about the event, doing all they could to contain and isolate China. One breakthrough of China's diplomatic strategy to defeat the Western schemes was President Yang Shangkun's later visit to Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Oman in December 1989. President Yang informed the world, especially the developing countries, that China maintained its political stability and that China's policy of reform and opening up, independent foreign policy and the policy of carrying out friendly cooperation with the Third World all remained unchanged, in the hope of reinforcing its unity and cooperation with it strengthening mutual help and support and solidifying the basis of China's diplomacy. The visit proved to be reasonably successful. Leaders of these four countries not only showed their understanding, sympathy and support for China but they also reached a broad consensus with President Yang after exchanging views on the international and regional situations and the friendly relations and cooperation between the two sides(Liu,2006). Soon in March and May of 2007, Egyptian President Mubarak and President Zayed of the United Arab Emirates visited China. Then leaders of other countries in the Third World came to China one after another. In July 1990, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, then the most important country in the Islamic world, and China issued their joint communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations. The above diplomatic policies of China for Middle Eastern Islamic countries were both timely and effective for breaking up the blockade and sanctions

imposed by the USA and other Western countries. Apparently, these breakthroughs were strategic in nature.

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the 9/11 tragedy forced the Bush administration to transfer its focus of global strategy from "China as competitor" to the Middle East. China's President Jiang Zemin was the first world leader to offer the US its support in the war against terror in which the US saw China as a "strategic partner." The US national security policy of "anti-terrorism, non-proliferation of all weapons of mass destruction and anti-rogue states", in essence, regarded many of the Islamic countries in the Middle East as a target that the American "war of counterterrorism" must strike, control and transform. Due to the media hype and frenzy in the USA and Europe, the Western image of Islam was very badly twisted and vilified. As a result, Muslims were despised and discriminated against in many Western countries and the speculation of an "Islamic threat" filled the air. Even moderate countries in the Islamic world such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt felt unprecedented pressure, let alone Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya and other countries that had been added to the "blacklist" of the USA and Europe. Against such a situation, the Chinese government insisted that terrorism should not be linked with a certain religion or nation and opposed unilateral use of force. In addition, the Chinese government insisted that measures must be taken to eradicate both the causes and effects of terrorism. All this assured the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Islamic countries that China always respected and supported their sovereignty and dignity. On December 2, 2007 when King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met with the representatives from both sides who attended the second seminar on Sino-Arab relations and civilizations, I heard him point out: "China is a close and friendly country to us for she always stands on the side of truth and justice, always on the side of the just cause of the Palestinian people and the Arab people"(2007).

### **C. The Relationship between China and Islamic Countries Developed from Bilateral Relations to Sub-regional Multilateral**

### **Relations Mainly in the Political Field to Comprehensive Ties in the Economic and Trade, Resources, Security, Culture and Other Fields**

During the first 30 years (1949-1979) of new China, the bilateral relationships were maintained primarily because the Middle Eastern Islamic countries and China needed mutual support in international politics. There were some exchanges and cooperation between the two sides in other fields as well; yet they remained quite limited in both amount and scale. They did not bring about noticeable common interests because there was not much demand. For instance, the trade volume between China and Arab countries in 1969 was 231.6 million dollars, which reached 789 million dollars in 1979 when China adopted the policy of reform and opening-up. As of the year 2000, China's import and export volume had amounted to 474.3 billion dollars but the trade volume between China and Islamic countries was only 16.3 billion dollars (Yang, 2002). According to their trade convention, both China and the Islamic countries had given trade priorities to the US and Europe so neither had enough understanding of the market potential of the other.

The turning point of the economic and trade relations between China and the Islamic countries appeared near the end of the Cold War when China suffered from Western sanctions. The inflow of American and European funds slowed down. What was worse, China became a net importer of petroleum in 1993. To meet with the multiple needs of politics, economy and resources, the Chinese government forged the policy of using both domestic and foreign resources. Now the resource and capital advantages of the Middle East became more visible. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs made even greater efforts for its diplomacy in the Middle East, participating in more and more Middle Eastern affairs. At the same time, Palestine and Israel signed the Oslo Accords in September 1993, which signified that the peace progress in the Middle East had achieved some preliminary success. When the Clinton administration implemented its Middle East policy of "dual containment toward Iran and Iraq in the East and promoting the peace talks in the West", Egypt,



Saudi Arabia and other member countries of GCC saw an interlude to adjust their policies. A sign of "looking to the East" emerged at this time, which meant that many countries preferred a relationship with East Asian countries when making their foreign policies. The relationship between China and the Islamic countries in the Middle East, valued and pushed forward by leaders from both sides, reached a new stage featuring rapid growth of economic, trade and resource cooperation.

In April 1999, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited China and the two countries signed a communiqué to set up strategic cooperative relations. The Egyptian senior officials and mainstream media that accompanied him witnessed the changes that had taken place in China on a first hand basis. Soon extensive media coverage on the changes occurred. Ibrahim Nafie, Egyptian presidential adviser and editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram* at that time, introduced a brand new China to the Middle Eastern countries in his book *China: Miracle in the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, with numerous figures and abundant, accurate data. Since then, the media of the Middle Eastern Islamic countries have emphasized in their reports about the development of China, especially the foreign trade volume, GDP growth rate, foreign currency reserves, and policies for the special economic zones. In addition, the Islamic Middle Eastern governments and enterprises made great efforts to promote their cooperation with China in fields like resources, trade and project items. With the increase of China's crude oil imports, the amount that oil producers in the Islamic world exported to China has accounted for more than half of China's total crude oil imports for many years. From 2004 to 2009, the trade volume between China and Arab countries jumped from \$36.7 billion to \$107.4 billion, mutual direct investment from \$1.1 billion to \$5.5 billion, the accomplished business revenue through contracted projects from \$13.5 billion to \$70 billion (Wen, 2010). For one thing, the rapid development of the trade and resource cooperation between the two sides was due to the increase of China's demand for oversea resources and markets. For another, Islamic countries and oil producers in

particular also need the stable Chinese market. The members of the League of Arab States all attach great importance to the strategic opportunity brought by China's peaceful rise. For years, summits of the League of Arab States and its ministerial meetings issued successive decisions on relations with China, calling on member states to enhance relations with China in all spheres. Given that this was in accord with the need of their present and future interests, both sides showed a much stronger desire for cooperation and exerted much more cooperative efforts in practice as well.

In respect to sovereignty and security issues, China faces "Taiwan secession", "Tibet secession" and "Xinjiang secession" issues and the mission of clamping down on the "three forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism" while the Islamic countries are confronted with the Palestine issue, anti-terrorism issue, the Iraq War, the post-war rebuilding in Iraq, the nuclear issue in Iran, and the Darfur issue in Sudan, among others. To resolve these issues of great core interests, both sides insisted on bilateral or multilateral talks and maintaining consistent close consultation, mutual support and cooperation in the international arena. In recent years, bilateral exchanges and cooperation in culture, education, science and technology, tourism and other humanities fields have been on the rise. For instance, when the Saudi Arabian minister of higher education, together with a delegation of university presidents, visited China in June, 2008, he signed more than 20 cooperation agreements with Chinese universities, concerning subjects such as science and technology and medicine and humanities. At present there are about 400 international students from Saudi Arabia studying in China, the number of whom is expected to reach about 1000 within two years. For religious reasons, Saudi Arabia did not accept China's suggestion of establishing a Confucius Institute in Saudi Arabia. However, it has decided to set up three departments of Chinese studies so as to speed up the training of well-read individuals in the Chinese language and China's national conditions.

Of particular note, after the establishment of the Sino-Africa

Cooperation Forum in 2001, Arab countries started their work immediately for the establishment of the Sino-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2004. Later in July 2004, the joint delegation of six finance ministers of member states of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) and the GCC secretary general visited China. The two sides signed the Framework Agreement on Economic, Trade, Investment and Technological Cooperation between the PRC and the Member States of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC). Later the two sides launched negotiations on a China-GCC free trade area indicating that the development of the cooperative relationship between China and Islamic countries was being institutionalized. Under this cooperation framework recognized by both sides, issues concerning bilateral or multilateral, regional or international relations could be resolved in a well-coordinated manner through overall planning. In the aftermath of the 2007-2010 global financial crisis, the global governance mechanism encountered profound changes and the structure of the world economy was also bound to transform. Now China and Arab countries have a better understanding of the fact that economic globalization and the trend of world multi-polarization is irreversible; interdependence is growing and strengthening strategic cooperation has become an important and effective method to tackle new threats and challenges. During the Fourth Ministerial Conference of Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum held on May 13-14, 2010, the two sides agreed to establish a strategic partnership for comprehensive cooperation and common development under the framework of the Sino-Arab States Cooperation Forum. It suggested that the relationship between China and Arab countries and between China and the GCC has stepped into its best period. What is more, it also revealed in public that the relationship between China and core countries in the Islamic world is of multi-level, multi-field strategic significance.

## **II. Problems in Bilateral Relations**

When discussing the historic changes that occurred in the

relations between China and the outside world, the closer link between the fate of China and that of the whole world and the internationalization of issues in China, the issues in Islamic countries have long been internationalized. Many of these issues remain hot-spot issues which call for global governance. Although friendship and cooperation between China and Islamic countries keep growing, there are still some problems that cannot be ignored as the interdependence between the two sides' increases. Some of the problems only involve cognitive differences while some may involve conflicting interests.

#### **A.Cognitive Problems**

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed a series of significant achievements by China: the very successful 2008 Beijing Olympic Games; the whole country's amazing disaster relief work; China's launch of its third manned spacecraft Shenzhou-VII. Additionally, China played an important role at the G20 Toronto Summit and BRIC Summit after the financial crisis. Islamic countries have a stronger awareness that China is not only a large economy or a "factory of the world" but also a major global country with great influence in politics and international affairs. To break away from an isolated and marginalized situation to safeguard their interests in the political, security, cultural and ideological fields, the Islamic Middle Eastern countries must further their exchanges and cooperation with China. In local media, China is often called a "Superpower" which potentially will surpass the USA. Libyan leader Moammar Ghadafi in 2010 said, "the USA attempts to confront China by making regional trouble," "China has become a non-conventional competitor...which marches into every corner of the world in a gentle way instead of the American way of brutal military attacks"(2010). His remarks were typical of the mindset of some Arab or Islamic leaders which developed after the Cold War, i.e., China would replace the dissolved Soviet Union as another "superpower" to fight against the USA. Most officials and elites in these countries appreciate the development experience and mode of China. However, they also hold the view that China should become a power to balance the international situation and help them

to alleviate their pressures imposed by Western hegemonism and power politics; China should take on more responsibility, play a greater role and push forward the resolution of hot-spot issues in the Middle East toward a favorable direction; China should, like those Western powers, help them with their development by providing them with more fund, technology and aid programs. That is why sometimes criticism or complaints were seen or heard in local Middle Eastern publishing or during Chinese leaders' talks with them.

In China, although diplomatic, foreign trade and economic cooperation, cultural, media departments and other foreign-related departments of China are quite familiar with Islamic countries through long-term contact with them, many from the media or academic circles know little about the Sunnis and the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam or whether Iran is an Arab country, let alone the masses. Like the situation when Islamic countries study and comment on the policies and development situation of China, Chinese academics, more often than not, do not have first-hand materials when they study or introduce the development situation of Islamic countries. Most of the materials they rely on come from European countries or the USA and their research methods are often based on Western theoretical frameworks and systems. It is a small wonder that the so-called "China threat" Theory or "China responsibility" theories have some influence in Islamic countries while the "Islamic threat" theory is also talked about in China. For instance, when it concerns counterterrorism-related problems, terms habitually used by the West but repelled by Islamic countries such as "political Islam" or "Islamic fundamentalism" are heard from time to time also in China.

### **B. The Problem of Conflicts of Interest**

Considering the large number of Islamic countries with different national situations and bilateral relations with China, the following summary on this topic only focuses on major Islamic countries.

First, as some Islamic countries attach much importance to their pursuit of economic interests, they often request China to increase investment and provide advanced technology, management and aid to them, in the hope of benefiting from the rapid growth of the Chinese

economy. Occasionally, some countries even play the political card-game so as to seek immediate economic interests. For example, Jordan, Libya and the United Arab Emirates once played the Taiwan- card for such purposes; Egypt also planned to establish an office in Taiwan because it had failed to obtain the investment and programs from China; Turkey's attitude has been inconsistent in terms of the "East Turkistan" issue. Chinese leaders, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Chinese embassies have paid close attention to these issues concerning China's sovereignty and security and taking effective and timely measures.

After the establishment of the Sino-Arab States Cooperation Forum, most Arab countries gave up playing the Taiwan card or receiving the Dalai Lama. The bilateral relations between China and Turkey once became tense after the July 5, 2009 incident in Xinjiang. Although tension subsided after the work of leaders of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Chinese Embassy in Turkey, the aftermath is still felt by both sides. Without common interests and cognitive communication, Turkey could not fully understand China's core concerns and possibly some policies of Turkey may be unacceptable to China. At present, in order to mend the bilateral relationship, more attention must be paid to economic cooperation and cultural exchanges between the two sides apart from the efforts of both governments. After all, Turkey is a major country in the Islamic world. As chances are presently slim for Turkey to join the European Union, it has determined to give full play of its identity of an Islamic country, but with a continuing secular government. As one of the two Middle Eastern countries in G20 plus the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey is not only playing a more and more important role in tackling regional hot-spot issues like the nuclear issue in Iran and the Palestine-Israel conflict but also directly related to the external environment for striking the "East Turkistan" terrorist forces, a long-term task for China.

Second, the confrontation between Iran, Syria, Sudan and other so-called radical Islamic countries by Western countries and the USA and Israel has existed for years. They feel ignored by China because

they believe that only the relations between large countries are a key to China and China takes the Sino-US relationship to be the most important. Chinese leaders, some Iranians have commented, have not visited Iran over the past six or seven years. There is much criticism in Iranian media about China's 'yes vote' to the UN Security Council's Resolution 1929, which imposed another round of sanctions on Iran. Ali Akbar Salehi, Chief of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, even said, "China is gradually losing its respectable position in the Islamic world"(2010). Iran still bears a grudge against China because neither the Chinese government nor the Chinese academics have any contact with Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon, two organizations backed by Iran. In recent years, Sudanese opposition parties and other anti-government factions often accused China in Sudanese media of favoring Bashir's government for the sake of oil.

Third, the Central Asian countries (except Turkmenistan) in the Islamic world and China are both member states of Shanghai Cooperation Organization and economic and resource cooperation between the two sides has entered a new chapter. Despite their great expectations on China, they are also uneasy with China's rise. To sum up, about five things worry them most: they fear a stronger China may become a threat because of the so-called "China threat" theory in their country; they fear they might become an "economic appendage" of China with the growth of the Chinese economy; they fear China's economic growth might bring about ecological changes harmful to neighboring countries; they fear a large number of undocumented Chinese migrants might rush to their countries and they also fear being affected in case of possible hostility between China and the USA or Russia(Zhao, 2007).

Besides, some Islamic countries proposed anti-dumping actions against Chinese merchandise because they have had an unfavorable balance of trade with China for too long. However, issues of this kind are never the mainstream in the relationship between Islamic countries and China but are some problems that occurred in the development of the two sides under the background of globalization. Apart from the careful and appropriate measures in the Chinese

diplomatic service, resources and forces from academic fields, enterprises, and local institutions must be integrated to square contradictions, reduce conflicts and push forward the development of bilateral relations further through economic, cultural - and public diplomacy under the win-win principle.

### **III. Tendency of the Development of the Bilateral Strategic Relationship**

There is a popular theory in the West about Middle Eastern Islamic countries i.e., the rise of any large country would be impossible without the Middle East but the Middle East could also be a tomb to bury large countries. The first half of the sentence suggests the strategic geographic position of the Middle East, the abundant strategic resources there, oil and gas, and its historical position as one cradle of human civilization (especially a source of the culture and civilization with the three major religions of the world as representatives). The second half seems to be kind of exaggeration with words like "bury" and "tomb". As a matter of fact, it means to say that any large country, if with malicious intent, would get stuck, dragged down or severely defeated in the Middle East because of its complex religious, national and territorial conflicts.

A review of the experiences of the UK, France, the Soviet Union and the USA in the Middle East after World War II may bring out the significance of the warning. In respect of the position of the Middle East in the international situation, the USA and the Soviet Union both aimed at Europe during the Cold War but the arena on which they competed or fought against each other was located in the Middle East. After the Cold War, a transitional situation featuring "one superpower and multi powers" took place of the old world political architecture. Most hot-spot issues happened in or were related to the Middle East. For instance, the Gulf Crisis, the 1991 Gulf War, the peace process of the Middle East, the 9/11 attacks, the Afghanistan War triggered by the US, the Iraq War, the Darfur Issue in Sudan, and the nuclear issue in Iran were all major concerns of large countries and important



events that promoted the interaction and development of relations between big powers. In 1993, Samuel P. Huntington, an American scholar forwarded a theory called "the clash of civilizations", splitting the world into eight big cultures and "the conflicts between Islam and the West are a clash of civilizations"(1993: Summer). This article does not intend to discuss the theory of "the clash of civilizations", yet it is reasonable to regard cultures as actors in the present international relations so as to propose a model "which helps us to understand the global politics from late 20<sup>th</sup> century to early 21<sup>st</sup> century". At present, China and Arab countries have established strategic cooperative relationship for comprehensive cooperation and common development, which means China has already accepted this unique group of countries in the Islamic civilization system of the Middle East as a strategic cooperation partner. Although they are no big powers in the international system, they represent a important actors in major civilization systems or a "strategic plate". In China's contact with these countries, attention must be paid to the bilateral relationships as well as their development tendencies under the background of the transition of the international system.

Over the past century, Islamic countries in the Middle East have been striving for an ideal, that is, rebuilding the splendor of the Arab Empire through "Arab Unity", "Arab Renaissance" or "Islamic Renaissance." Nevertheless, it is no easy job to resolve the intertwined conflicts in this region. What is worse, foreign invasions and interventions, along with conflicts and even wars, have been haunting this area. Both their actual situations and the objective environment have hindered the reform or transition of these countries. This unique group of countries is called a "plate" instead of a "polar" in future international situation because these countries can hardly develop into actors of international relations with great overall strength and unified willpower, global strategic goals and action programs within a rather long period of time. However, any large country must not ignore the strategic values of this "plate": geographic position, oil and gas, great cultural influence, political and economic roles in international and regional organizations, and its containment against other larger

countries. The problem is the way and purposes that large countries deal with this "plate:" invasion, occupation, control and intervention or mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit.

After 30 years of construction and development through reform and opening up, China still remains mostly a developing country but its national situation and international environment have undergone tremendous changes. The whole world is in transition after the global financial crisis, entering an important stage of great development, reform and adjustment. China has harvested its own development experiences and modes. With the increase of its overall national strength, China has become an important global actor in the international and regional multilateral mechanisms and a responsible member in global governance in the international arena. Today, the mission of the Chinese modernization drive has gone beyond the economic field to more fields proposed by the 2007 17<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Communist Party of China, namely, socialist economic construction, political construction, cultural construction, social construction and ecological construction with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, China is faced with another transition, i.e., China should not expect the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation simply by relying on economic growth; instead, it should make safeguarding and developing strategic interests its guideline and hopefully take the initiative to identify and grasp possible opportunities and cope with possible challenges within the ten to fifteen years to come.

To sum up, to meet the need for further development, China should hold fast to the rational and objective judgement about its relationships with Islamic countries. China should seek opportunities of development and carefully tailor its Middle East strategy in accordance with the strength changes of large countries during the transition of the international system and the ongoing policy adjustment of the international situation. In this respect, several points can be made as follows:

First, big powers have an opportunity for strategic adjustments in the Middle East. President Obama's Middle East diplomacy since his inauguration in January, 2009 was different from that of the Bush

administration (2001-2009). In fact, the Bush administration attempted to seek hegemony in the Middle East by launching the Iraq War in 2003 and later a "Greater Middle East Initiative" to transform the Islamic countries. Currently, the USA has moved its counterterrorism focus from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan in South Asia. In his speech delivered at Cairo University in June 2009, Obama declared his government's intention to "seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and common respect", in the hope of easing the anti-Americanism in Arab countries and the Islamic world and mending the US image in the Middle East. As to Iran, the Obama administration has tried to force Iran to give up its nuclear aims while imposing sanctions and pressure on Iran. In other words, the US policy for Iran has shifted from confrontation and containment of the Bush administration to potential contact and sanctions by the Obama administration. However, the US government goal of dominating Middle East affairs, like the double standard in its Middle East policy, remains unchanged. In the eyes of several of the Islamic countries in the Middle East, the Obama administration is not reliable because it simply makes empty promises. The report of a national survey by Pew Research Center published on June 17, 2010 showed that "the image of the USA slipped in the past year, especially in the Islamic world". In Egypt, America's favorability rating dropped from 27% to 17%. In other Muslim countries, America's favorability rating is also below 20%" (2010). Nevertheless, although the Middle East policy of the Obama administration is not working as well as expected, it has shown some restraint instead of self-inflation, nothing like the Bush administration's unilateral military aggression and arrogant goal of "democratic transformation" of the Middle East. The days when the US superpower enjoyed hegemony in the Middle East are gone. On June 30, 2010, all US troops, except 50,000 have withdrawn from Iraq. As the USA has adopted a withdrawal strategy in the Middle East, other large countries and rising countries now have an opportunity to adjust their strategy in this area.

Second, the strategic position of the Middle East in the overall

diplomacy of China is on the rise. During the transition of the international system and the restructuring of the international political and economic order, although big powers are still the leading force of the world, close attention must be paid to the trend of values in core Islamic countries, which represent one of the major cultures worldwide. Will they stick to the fighting spirit of "Jihad" or turn to Al-wasatiyah (moderatism), which advocates resolving contradiction or conflicts through dialogue and negotiation? Taking the resource strategy into consideration. A report written by the National Intelligence Council last year, when discussing new energy technology to replace traditional fossil fuels, said, "mass production or popularization of the new energy will still be impossible in 2025", "a recent survey shows that on average it takes 25 years for a new type of production technology to be widely used"(2009). It suggested that oil and gas will remain the most important strategic resources within a long time to come, which means that China must pay attention to the policy changes of the Gulf countries in the Middle East such as their view of new energy and their reaction to China's diversified oil and gas cooperation. Regarding non-conventional security, China should also pay attention to the development of the nuclear arms race and terrorist threats in the Middle East. Unlike the relations often between the Middle East with large countries like the USA, Europe, Russia and Japan, the relationship between China and the Middle East over the past half century has been based on mutual respect and equal treatment, which is an advantage in China's overall foreign relations. Most of these countries in the Middle East are good friends and partners who will provide China with support an cooperation when it comes to significant international or regional affairs.

In the future, China will rely on the Middle East as more than ever for natural resources and maritime transport security. To meet global challenges such as non-conventional security threats and climate change, China must join hands with Islamic countries in the Middle East. Therefore, the traditional definition of the relationship between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East as an "extension of the peripheral strategy and part of the greater peripheral

strategy" can no longer reflect the nature of the bilateral relationships between China and the Middle Eastern countries. Given the broad global interests of China, it is advisable to define the bilateral relationships as "Islamic Countries in the Middle East are important strategic resources and support of China", which may better suit the needs of present and future development of the bilateral relationship.

The expansion of the strategic connotation of the bilateral relationship is reflected by China's expectation for Islamic countries to play a greater role in the global governance issue during the transition of the international system. In his keynote speech "Deepening All-round Cooperation for Common Development" at the opening session of the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum held in May 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao analyzed the Sino-Arab relationship against the background of the international system in transition. He said that both sides should work actively to foster a peaceful and stable international environment, and lay a solid political foundation for the full and stable recovery of the world economy; both sides should advance the reform of the international economic and financial systems, and expedite the building of a just and equitable new international economic and financial order; both sides should speed up efforts to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals and narrow the gap between the North and the South; and both sides should safeguard energy security, actively meet the climate challenge, and promote sustainable world economic growth. Wen manifested that China not only cares about the development of bilateral relationships but also admits and values the position and role of Islamic countries in the Middle East in dealing with the common tasks of the international community. China regards them as a strategic force with great potential and hopes that they will play an active role in promoting global reform.

Third, China should attach more importance to establishing its Middle East strategy. If both the Chinese government and academics appreciate the above-mentioned "reality-oriented" paradigm, more support is a must for the establishment of the strategy. According to the overall plans and coordination of the diplomatic service, China

should take the initiative to design and develop its Middle East strategy, including identifying core countries or important sub-regional organizations, the establishment of various cooperational mechanisms, and the arrangement of the agenda. So far, the G20 has not decided on its principles or policies while the international system is faced with numerous unknown factors in its transition. For the West, the Islamic countries in the Middle East are the most troublesome countries but with great influence across the world. Therefore, more communication and coordination with Islamic countries will not only help China to create a complementary and win-win relation between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East but also will help it to tackle the constant provocations and pressure that Western countries are unwilling to end and will not abandon against China. Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the global strategy of the USA has been made by its "imaginary enemies". Over the past 30 years, China and some Islamic countries were referred to in almost every quadrennial defense review of the USA as "opponents" or "potential opponents" that posed a threat to the national interests of the USA. The *Clash of Civilizations*, published by Huntington in 1996, even asserted "those countries that for reason of culture and power do not wish to, or cannot, join the West compete with the West by developing their own economic, military and political power. They do this by promoting their internal development and by cooperating with other non-Western countries. The most prominent form of this cooperation is the Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power", which served as a theoretical support for this "imaginary enemies" policy of the USA (Huntington,1996). As a matter of fact, what China and other developing countries, including the Islamic countries in the Middle East, are trying to safeguard is nothing but their own sovereignty, security and developmental interests, their culture and civilization and their right to choose their own social systems and paths of development. Therefore, only by enhancing unity can developing countries safeguard their own interests in the current international system dominated by the USA and European

countries. Developing countries must support and cooperate with each other so as to cope with any reckless challenges and pressure posed by the West. No doubt a relationship of mutual assistance between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East, the "strategic plate" would benefit both sides.

Fourth, more efforts should be made to strengthen China's cultural diplomacy including religious diplomacy. On November 7, 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao delivered an address named "Respect Diversity of Civilizations". It was the second time that Chinese leaders expressed their concerns about the core activities of China and Islamic countries in two different cultural systems in accordance with the spirit of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai at the 1955 Bandung Conference. It was also a speech on China's basic principles of consolidating political mutual trust and strategic cooperation between China and Arab countries and a programmatical speech which guides China's cultural and public diplomacy with Islamic countries in the Middle East. Judging by the current situation and in the near future for both sides, it is a common and urgent task for both sides to stick to the spirit of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" and carry forward civilization dialogues. Besides, it is also an important basis for China to develop its ties with this "strategic plate."

In the history of the diplomacy between China and Middle Eastern Islamic countries, religious communication has been playing a more significant role in China's cultural diplomacy. At the Bandung Conference, the Chinese delegation led by Premier Zhou Enlai included Imam Da Pusheng (*Hui*), a religious advisor to Premier Zhou, and Professor Liu Linrui (*Hui*) from Peking University, who worked as interpreter for Premier Zhou. Egyptian President Nasser was deeply moved by such an arrangement. "He regarded Premier Zhou's careful arrangement of an Arabic interpreter as a token of respect of the Chinese government for him, the Egyptian people, the Arab people, their Islamic religion and the Arab Islamic culture and a token of the wishes and active attitude of the Chinese government to start friendly and cooperative relations with Egypt"(Liu, 2008). Soon after

the Bandung Conference, the first delegation Egypt sent to China on May 15, 1955 was headed by Ahmed Bakrui, Egyptian Minister of Awqaf (religious endowment). When meeting the Egyptian delegation, Chairman Mao Zedong said, "I'm very grateful to President Nasser for sending a Muslim minister and scholar from Al-Azhar University to China for a visit; Chinese Muslims cherish a feeling of great reverence for Al-Azhar University"(Liu, 2008). It was during this visit that the two sides exchanged views on relevant political, trade, culture and religious issues and discussed sending trade delegations to each other, signing trade agreements, setting up official offices of trade representatives, and taking part in the Cairo International Exposition. All this proved that religious communication obviously helped to pave the way for the diplomacy between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East.

To make religious communication an indispensable channel and part of the cultural diplomacy between China and Islamic countries in the Middle East, the prerequisite is adhering to the coordination of overall domestic and international political situations. On the one hand, China should continue to respect the Islamic civilization and Islamic countries' choices for their own social systems and paths of development; increase practical cooperation with these countries in various fields and establish a solid and robust partnership with them. On the other hand, it is of great importance to properly solve domestic ethnic and religious problems, especially the Chinese government's relations with ten internal Islamic ethnic groups and 20 million Muslims. Over the past 30 years of reform and opening up, the contact between Muslims in Northwest China and Islamic countries in the Middle East increased considerably and doctrines of different sects, including extremist religious thoughts, also spread to China. Local governments often had to make a policy choice of suppressing or guiding these extremist religious thoughts. Improper management of this problem is bound to have a bad influence on the Islamic world. The point is that China should insist on an objective and dialectic perspective. For one thing, China should be aware of the fact that the Islamic area in the Middle East is a birthplace of Islamic extremism



and terrorism. For another, China should not forget that these Islamic countries and their people are also the major victims of these extremist religious forces. Religious extremism and terrorism are a common enemy of mankind. As long as China holds on to the counterterrorism outlook with Chinese characteristics, namely, that China opposes terrorism in any form; terrorism must be treated by both looking its root cause and symptoms which should not be linked with a certain religion or nation, and if China carries out timely communication with these countries, it will certainly obtain their understanding and support. At the same time, China should note that the Islamic civilization has its own path of development.

Entering the new century, there has been a trend of Islamic moderatism in Islamic countries in the Middle East. Apart from leaders and bases for teaching, studying and promoting this trend of thought, there are also relevant research centers and forums in many Islamic countries. Their governments also advocate moderatism in their polices, considering it to be the same as other Islamic doctrines such as peace, justice and tolerance. Objectively, this should be deemed the fundamental solution of Islamic countries to terrorism, i.e., eradicating religious extremism or the source of terrorism through changes in their religious beliefs. The rising trend of thought is growing to be the mainstream ideology of Islamic countries. On the one hand, it is extremely helpful for these countries to adapt to, take part in the transition of the international system and to speed up their modernization drive. On the other hand, it cooperates with China's efforts for religious communication and civilization dialogues with them and further development of strategic bilateral relations. Along with the "interpretation of the Qu'ran " being conducted by the Islamic Association of China, the Islamic doctrine of moderatism and tolerance can also help promote religious harmony and national harmony in China.

In regard to trade and cross-cultural communication, Chinese enterprises doing business in Islamic countries should learn and respect local laws, regulations and tradition, balancing "giving" and "taking". Chinese people staying there should also pay attention to

their words and deeds, which is also of great importance. All in all, China should take the initiative to start a research on the relationship between China and the Islamic countries in the Middle East instead of waiting for them to learn about the national situation and policies of China. China should go out actively to conduct cultural and public diplomacy with these countries. Although the Islamic countries in the Middle East are a "strategic plate" for China, I am afraid that its passivity will continue during the transition of the international system. As the internal and external contradictions of these countries are still troublesome, it is really difficult for them to develop identical interests within a short period of time. It is also difficult for them to deal with regional or international issues with concerted efforts. To tackle specific issues, big powers and the international community will have to exert more efforts to obtain support or cooperation from these countries. When China's diplomacy with Egypt first started, Premier Zhou Enlai made it clear that "One must respect others first before he can gain a foothold. We must be sincere if we want to win others' trust. Although respect should be mutual, we should take the initiative because we are a large country"(Li, 2010). Today, the overall national strength of China has increased considerably and its position and influence in the world are on the rise. However, the Chinese philosophical thinking that one should be strict with oneself but tolerant with others, valued by Premier Zhou Enlai, should never be forgotten.

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