



Chinese Diplomacy in the Islamic World

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Abstract. Since China declared the BRI in 2013 it has increased its diplomacy in the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East. The Middle East is an area where China can develop cooperation. As Jonatan Fulton said that BRI can create more cooperations. My findings indicate that there is mutual economic interests between China and the Middle East. In the one hand, China need to expand its economic influence in the Middle East. On the other hand, the Middle East also need to diversify its decades long reliance on oil revenue. Such mutual interests created a mutually benefit partnership between China and the Muslim countries in the Middle East.

Keywords: Muslim world · Middle East · Oil · BRI projects

1 Introduction

The Middle East is an integral part of the BRI infrastructure project targets that China declared in 2013. The amount of funds allocated and the ease of obtaining funds from the BRI project certainly attracted the attention of the Islamic World, most of which require funds for the development of their respective countries. A few years later gradually these countries that are part of the Islamic World officially became part of the BRI. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and several other Arab countries are part of the BRI (Chang, 2022). Why did China and Muslim countries in the Middle East seems exited to cooperate each other?

The cooperation between China and the Muslim countries in the Middle East has been going on long before the BRI infrastructure project was launched by Xi Jinping. In fact, hundreds of years ago the two regions had collaborated in the context of the ancient Silk Road. Therefore it is not surprising that when Xi Jinping launched the BRI in 2013 many Muslim countries were very interested in participating in it. There are other reason why did the Middle East area is a strategic part of BRI. First, China is heavily dependent on the Middle East to meet its huge oil demand (Watanabe, 2019). Second, China also needs the Middle East to ship its goods to European countries. In addition, Chinese energy import also need a politically stable Middle East region in order to gain regular oil and gas supply from the area. (Ibid, Watanabe, 2019) As the world largest oil important China get half of its import from the Middle East. As its oil demand will increase commensurate with its economic development China dependent on the Middle East will reach 70% in the future (Ahmad, 2019). These facts is certainly an extraordinary

attraction for Muslim countries in the Middle East to increase cooperation with China. For them, China's presence in the Middle East is a guarantee for the continuity of oil and gas exports, which are their main export products.

The willingness of Muslim countries to participate in the BRI project was further strengthened by the July 2018 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) meeting which took place in Beijing. During the meeting, President Xi Jinping conveyed the importance of economic cooperation between China and Arab countries. Xi is also ready to support cooperation in infrastructure, energy, digital technology, and satellite technology (Petranek, 2019).

For China Islamic countries are interesting because in addition to their strategic location they also have energy sources that are indispensable for the future success of the BRI. Islamic countries, particularly in the Middle East, are in the region of major energy sources as well as at the center of the oil and natural gas pipelines that are indispensable for the BRI project. Therefore, China is very passionate in developing cooperation with Islamic countries. The relationship between China and the Islamic world is very much because the BRI project was first launched in Kazakhstan (September 2013) then in Indonesia (October 2030) which are both inseparable parts of the Islamic world. The initial location of the BRI (originally referred to as OBOR or One Belt One Road) launching was a symbol of how important the Islamic world is to China (Rabeya and Hossain, 2019). The main goal of BRI is the reach "mutual benefits and common security." (Ibid) In addition, China's foreign policy that prioritizes a "development approach" (emphasizing economic development and prosperity) is much more popular in the Middle East than the American's "democracy approach." (Vohra, 2022). The characteristics of Chinese diplomacy that are different from the American diplomacy is the main reason that make Muslim countries prefers to develop cooperation with China.

I would assume that China-Muslim Country relations is based on each own need to develop the future of its countries. China needed the Muslim Countries to promote its BRI projects and find access for its energy need. While the Muslim countries, on the other hand, also need new market for oil and gas. They also needed huge foreign investment. This need for reciprocity has spawned and developed good cooperations and has continued to increase in recent years.

2 Chinese Diplomacy in the Islamic World

Chinese Diplomacy in the Islamic world will be limited to Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East countries. Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East, especially in the post Mao era has special characteristics. The post-Mao China assumed the Middle East not only significant source of oil but also "huge market for Chinese goods and services and as a potential investments in Chinese infrastructure." (Sichor, 2010) Such special characteristics determined Chinese diplomacy until today. The Chinese government successfully navigated its economic diplomacy to gain more and more influences in the Muslim world.

3 The Islamic World

The Islamic World or *Al Alamul Islami* refers to the world Muslim community whether they live in Islamic or non-Islamic country. This world Muslim community is also called *ummah* or Islamic *ummah* (Tohari, 2021). Geopolitically, the Islamic World refer to the Muslim majority countries. (Ibid, Tohari) This Islamic World spread in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia and South East Asia. I will limit the discussion to the Islamic World of the Middle East area.

Most of the Islamic World countries were anti-communist country and were on the side of the West during the Cold War, except Egypt. In 1956 Egypt was the first Islamic World country that recognized People's Republic of China given Chinese friendly policy to the Palestine since 1960s. Other countries put off their recognition until after the 1972 Sino-US normalization. (Ergenc, 2018) This moment slowly changed the Islamic World's view on China. At the same time, Chinese growing oil demand gradually encouraged the Islamic World to open diplomatic relations. The launching of Belt and Road Initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013 speed up the process of more effective, more business-based interactions between China and The Islamic World in the Middle East.

4 China—Saudi Relations

China-Saudi Arabia started diplomatic relations in 1990. During the Cold War Saudi Arabia as a Muslim country determined not to have diplomatic relations with the People Republic of China which was a communist country. Saudi Arabia preferred to weave relations with the U.S. As an anti-communist country Saudi Arabia was worried about the expansion of communism in the Middle East (Jin, 2016). With the end of the Cold War in 1990 Saudi Arabia changes its attitude to China. Oil was the most attractive reason for the two countries to start diplomatic relations. President Jiang Zemin's visit to Saudi Arabia in 1999 was the beginning of China-Saudi Arabia Strategic Oil cooperation. (Ibid, Jin) Following the agreement both country also expand their relations to military sector. At least, Chinese Navy made a "goodwill" visit to Jeddah in 2010, while between 2008 and 2011 Chinese arm sales to Saudi Arabia has reached \$700 million. (Ibid, Jin) It was an early signal that both countries will widen their cooperations in the future.

The main goal of Chinese diplomacy toward Saudi Arabia was, therefore, to get access to oil source which is very important for its economic development. From the 1990 both countries have also developed cooperations in political, economic, cultural, educational, religious and other aspects. (Xinhuanet, 2009) Oil cooperation between the two countries started in 1999 and within ten years China has imported more oil than the U.S. (dailyreckoning, 2012) Chinese growing demand for oil made it the world largest oil importer surpassing the US in 2013. (washington bloc, 2013) The decline of world oil price in 2014 did not disturb Chinese's growing oil import from Saudi Arabia. The continuing oil cooperaton between China and Saudi Arabia finally supported Chinese's position as the largest oil and gas importer in 2019 (Clemente, 2019).

There are several other cooperation that successfully developed between China and Saudi Arabi other than oil cooperation. One of the most controvertial was the close cooperation in developing nuclear energy. Saudi ambition to develop nuclear energy

was drive, among other things, by revival of Iran's nuclear energy development after Trump left the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA) which strongly a forced Saudi Arabi to strengthen its own nuclear energy plant. China was too generous to support Saudi's nuclear plan given U.S. laziness to support Saudi's nuclear plan.

China also supported Saudi Arabia's monorail program to expedited millions of Muslim pilgrimage during the Hajj and Umrah seasons that needed fast and efficient transportation. The monorail was launched in 2015 which was able to transport 72.000 passenger every hour and successfully removed 12.000 buses which for years creating traffic jam in Makkah city (arabnews).

Both countries also engaged in the development of high technology cooperation that was inevitably important for Saudi's future. Saudi Arabia doesn't care about Trump's warnings about Huawei's dangers. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia warmly welcomes Huawei's presence because Saudi Arabia understands the strategic meaning of high technology which is not easily obtained from the United States. Considering the importance of mastering high technology, the Saudi government does not hesitate to collaborate with the Huawei company to improve the technological mastery of Saudi Arabian citizens, especially among the younger generation (ibid, arabnews).

5 China—UAE Cooperation

United Arab Emirates and China started diplomatic relations 1984. Five years later Chinese President, Yang Shangkun visited UAE in his efforts to cement both countries relationships. The following year in May 1990 Sheik Zayed visited Beijing to met with Yang Sangkun. In 2007 President Hu Jintao met with Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid in a stopover in Dubai. To balance such frequent visits by Chinese top leaders Mohammed Bin Sayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi also visited Beijing in 2009 and 2012 at the invitation of Vice President Xi Jinping at that time. (Hua, 2015) These reciprocal visits of both leaders is a testament how important UAE is to China's economic future.

Not only did their diplomatic relations developed well, but also their economic cooperations. At the start of their diplomatic relations the trade volume of both countries was only \$100 million. In 2014 their trade volume has reached \$54.8 billion (Ibid, Hua). In addition, in 1995 China started to import oil from UAE and in 2014 no less than 11.65 million tons oil has been imported from UAE (ibid, Hua). In terms of financial sector four Chinese biggest banks have also open branch offices in UAE. By contrast, UAE also supported Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as the founding member (Ibid, Hua).

Meanwhile, in 2005 less than 20 companies operated in Dubai but in 2015 the number bubbled into 4000 Chinese companies. Dubai Mart, for instance, is the largest mega-mall built by China outside the mainland. Every day no less than 50.000 people go shopping to buy everything they need. More than 15 Chinese companies using the Jebel Ali Port Free Zone Authority to develop markets in Africa (CNN, 2016).

In addition, like Saudi Arabia, The UAE government also ignored President Trump's warning that Huawei technology contains a weakness in the possibility of theft of intelligence data for countries that use the technology. Trump's other threat that UAE's order of F-35 jets will be cancelled if it keep on using Huawei technology was also disregarded. (inf.news, 2022) UAE considered relations with China is much more strategic in the future.

6 China-Qatar Cooperation

Since the opening diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1988 Qatar has develop three stages of relationships. The first stage was signed by the visit of Hamad Bin Khalifa al Tani to Beijing in 1999. At this early state both countries tried to find what kind of cooperation that can be developed in energy and petrochemical sectors. (Qatar Embassy, 2020) On the second stage, the two countries entered a more complex relations by signing cooperations on economic, politics, cultural and other cooperations (Ibid, Qatar Embassy). On the third stage, China and Qatar agree upon the signature of several comprehensive cooperations. These cooperation consist of the BRI programs, educational and cultural cooperations, financial services, and cooperation on sports (Ibid, Qatar Embassy). This visit of Tamim Bin Hamad al Tani, Emir of Qatar in November 2014 basically to convince Chinese government about Qatar serious participation in the BRI projects. According to Qatar Ambassador to China, Sultan bin Salmeen Al Mansouri, the visit Emir of Qatar is an evidence that Qatar recognized the rise of Chinese global economic, political and technological position. (Said and Chao, 2018) Mansouri also said that BRI projects basically in line with Qatari Vision 2030 (Ibid, Said and Chao).

China and Qatar followed up this third stage of cooperation developing several outstanding projects with Qatar. As the third largest natural gas reserve Qatar certainly a very attractive country for energy hungry China. Chinese growing demand for gas, even in the post pandemic, makes it the largest LNG importer in 2022. (Evans, 2021) China also strongly committed to build Hamad port as to make it able to increase connection with other ports in South Asia and East Africa. (Oxford Business Group, 2022) Another Chinese's major commitment was to build the Lusail City stadium which be used as the opening and final matches of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. (Construction Week Online 2016) This project raises the status of Qatar as a non-Western country that has a global stage. And like any other Muslim country in the Middle East, Qatar also develop closed relation with Chinese Huawei telecom company.

7 China-Kuwait Cooperation

Kuwait is the Muslim country that developed the longest relationship with China since the two countries officially opened diplomatic relations in 1971. (Chinese Embassy) Since then Kuwait and China have signed no less than 38 cooperations between the two countries. (Niazi, 2009) Several years before Xi Jinping launched the BRI Kuwait had smelled that China would become the world's most acclaimed economic power. Based on this calculation started to think about Look East Policy. Ambassador Al Meghamis said that Kuwait has decided to widen cooperation with Asian countries. Dr. Abdullah Al Ghanem, commenting Ambassador's statement on Look East Policy, said that cooperation with China will create vast mutual benefits for both Kuwait and China (Ibid). Meanwhile, Kuwait Foreign Minister, Shaykh Dr. Muhammad Sabah al-Salim Al Sabah, said that "the dragon economy" will be the backbone of global economy in 21st century (Ibid).

Kuwait was the first country in the Gulf that recognized China and the Chinese government always proud of it (Ibid). Kuwait has consistently supported the One China

Policy, so that until now there are no Kuwaiti diplomats in Taiwan. Both Kuwait and China try to keep enhancing their cooperation through the BRI infrastructure projects. Kuwait, therefore, uses the BRI project to increase investment and increase employment. (SCIO, 2018) Moreover, it can be said that actually the BRI project is in line with Kuwait Vision 2035. This grand plan is aimed to reduce Kuwait's heavy reliance on oil income. By implementing this program Kuwait hope it will transformed the country into a trade and financial hub in 2035 (SCIO, 2018).

To reach that grand plan in 2015 Kuwait started, among other things, to develop several free zones. Kuwait's government chose five Islands in the east coast of the country as the target area for the zone. (SCIS, 2018) Kuwait's Defense Minister, Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, said that China is the right partner to develop the Silk City and free zones projects (Ibid). The Silk City project supported by China was one of the most outstanding BRI project in Kuwait. This project comprise of international airport, an Olympic standard stadium, housings, workplaces, retail outlets and entertainment facilities for hundred thousands of people plus a 1000 m high-rise building (Freitas, 2019).

Oil export is another element that shape the relations between China and Kuwait. Kuwait oil export to China fastly increased in the post 2008 global economic crisis as global investment shifted from Europe and North America to Asia. (Kafiero, 2018) Since then, more and more oil was being exported to China. In 2019 alone the volume of oil export to China reached 600.000 barrels per day. China also imported 49% of Kuwait gas export. (Arab Times Online, 2019) The cooperation between Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) and China Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec Group) has widen to several area such as oil extraction and refinery, in addition to exporting oil derivatives, marketing, business development, investment, and joint operations, said the Kuwaiti official (Ibid).

8 China-Oman Cooperation

China and Oman has a long history of relations. But during the Cold War and China was on the Russian side, Oman was judged by China as part of Western allies. The new, more pragmatic Chinese foreign policy in the 1970s changed Oman-China relations. In 1978 Oman and China officially open diplomatic relations. (Han and Chen, 2018) As an oil and gas producing country Oman certainly was the country to meet Chinese oil demand. In fact Oman was the first Arab country that sell oil to China. In 1996 Oman was the third largest oil exporting county for China and the same year Oman also exported LNG to China (Ibid).

Moreover, Oman is one of the Muslim countries that signed the establishment of the AIIB, a China-backed bank aimed to fund the BRI. (Zambelis, 2016) Oman decision to join AIIB was part of its policy of maintaining economic cooperation with China. Oman has been supplying Chinese's oil demand long before the establishment of AIIB. Gradually, Chinese oil import from Oman increased and in 2020 China imported 95% of Oman's oil export, although it is only 6,87% from total Chinese crude oil import (Ibid).

Not only did China exported most of Oman oil but also supported Oman's economic development especially the development of what the so called Sino Oman Industrial

city. It is such a huge complex comprise of port, oil refinery, methanol plant, giant solar energy, automobile assembly plant, oil and gas production site and also education and entertainment facilities. (Shepard, 2017) Oman that ignored president Trump's warnings also invited and cooperated with Huawei. The Chinese company supported Oman's policy to increase the ICT capability of its people.

9 China—Bahrain Cooperation

Bahrain is the latest country in the Middle East that finally opened diplomatic relations in 1989. Although Bahrain is a small country in the Middle East it has a strategic position as the bridge between Asian, African and European markets. Bahrain is also an open and liberal society, world class environment, competitive tax system, and technologically literate population. Such natures are suitable for Chinese business and investment. (Chaziza, 2020) Given Bahrain's position at the center of the Gulf area it provides easy and fast access for China to enter the larger Middle East market. In 2004 Bank of China open branch office in Bahrain which offered business opportunity for both countries. In 2010 Bahrain China Investment Forum (BCIF) was established to smooth economic relations of the two countries (Ibid). In 2014 China established the Confucious Institute to further increase the understanding of China and Bahrain. In addition, Chinese government also offerer scholarship for Bahraini student to study in China.

The government of Bahrain trusted China to build thousand of houses for the Bahraini people. China was also given approval to build giant mall or "Dragon City." (fair observer) China maximally utilised this cooperation to expand its presence in the Gulf area. Bahrain also has such a potential as a springboard for China to widen its future business activities in Africa.

10 China—Iran Cooperation

China—Iran diplomatic relations started in 1971, since then both countries continued old historical economic and cultural relations. The 1979 Iranian revolution failed to hinder their relationship, by contrary it strengthen the relationships. China was the only country in the world that ignored US sanction in the post 1979 Iran Islamic revolution. The Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 was the strategic point for China-Iran relations today. The war gave China opportunities to raise its position as the fourth largest arms supplier after the Soviet Union, the United States and France. (Hamrah and Eliassen, 2021) This war also enabled China to sent "fighters, tanks, heavy artillery, multiple rocket launchers, and surface-to-air-missiles" which were badly needed by Iran in its war against Iraq. This war also made Iran the main trading partner of China in the Middle East amid Western sanctions on Iran.

China developed oil cooperation to help Iran overcoming economic downturn as a result of American economic sanctions. China kept buying Iran's oil export and in 2012, Iran was China's fourth-largest oil supplier which than made China the top destination for Iran's oil export. (alarabiya, 2013) The 2015 JCPOA that erased US sanctions on Iran encouraged Iran to increase its oil export to China. Even when Trump resimposed sanction on Iran a few Muslim countries help Iran to export oil to China. China also helped Iran building rail-way system both high speed and non-high speed system.

11 China—Turkey Cooperation

China-Turkey started their diplomatic relations in 1971. But there was no outstanding event for the next ten years. During this period Turkey expected to gain benefits from maintaining relations with the large country in Asia. (Konusu, 2013) Turkey's difficulties in dealing with Europe make relations with China much more promising for the future. Gradually the political and economic relations of the two countries developed according to their respective needs. One of the most fruitful result of their diplomatic relations between the two countries was China's willingness to build a high-speed railway in Turkey in 2005. (Lo, 2014) Turkey was infact also the first country in the world that was chosen by China to build its first high-speed rail system abroad. This high-speed railway reduced the time spent from east Turkey to west Turkey. Turkey is the first country in developing world that enjoyed the high-speed rail.

China expanded its cooperation to military cooperation. China-Turkey military cooperation benefited both countries as they can avoid the negative impacts caused by Xinjiang question. This military cooperation finally also decreased Turkey's reliance on military supply from the US and Israel. (combaha.com) Both countries keep elevating their military and diplomatic relations by producing missile based on Chinese missile model. (Institute of New Europe, 2021) Overall, Chinese economic and military supports augmented Turkish's credibility as a country that was not recognized by Europe (as a NATO member) and has difficult relations with the US.

12 China—Egypt Cooperation

Egypt is another Muslim country in the Middle East that needs foreign invest to develop the country. Egyptian President, General El Sisi, who took office in 2014, has several times visited China as part of his effort to develop economic development with China (Freitas, 2019). As a result of these frequent visit to China, Egypt's government plan to build the new capital city was responded by positively by China. Two Chinese Companies promised to provide \$35 billion commitment to build the new capital city (Monk, 2016). Both countries also successfully built an economic zone in the desert area near the Red Sea. This project has generated thousands of job for the Egyptian (Xinhuanet, 2021).

13 From Cooperation to Cooptation

Since the launching of the BRI infrastructure projects in the Middle East a sort of partnership relationship developed between China and the Muslim countries in the area. In such partnership context both sides agree to work in the perspective of common interests. (Kayani, 2021) China and the Muslim countries in the Middle East exploited such relationship to develop cooperations in energy, infrastructure, technology and military sector. Almost all Muslim countries in the Middle East receive Chinese assistance in various forms. Until today cooperation between China and the Middle East still keep growing.

This friendly relationship opens the door for political considerations to enter into it. in particular, the large number of projects China has built in the Middle East and the large

amount of oil and gas that China has imported in the past ten years fosters a respectful attitude towards China's internal affairs. This condition makes these Muslim countries also respect China's policies towards Xinjiang.

According to Haisam Hassanein, there are several reasons why Muslim countries tend to be silent about Beijing's treatment of the Muslim population in Xinjiang (Uyghur). First, both China and Muslim countries are currently led by authoritarian governments that generally do not like to be meddled in their internal affairs by foreign countries. Second, they both do not like the existence of terrorist groups that have grown rapidly since 2001. China's statement about the existence of elements of terrorism in the Xinjiang case is another reason why Muslim countries choose to remain silent about Western accusations against the Xinjiang case. Third, Muslim countries also feel comfortable dealing with China because of the many BRI projects that benefit them economically. This is why the Organization of Islamic Cooperation expressed its respect to China's human right efforts and even hope for a better cooperation with China in the future. (Lammon, 2020).

China's Diplomacy in the Muslim world began with the search for energy (oil and gas), which was vital for the continuation of Chinese development. As time goes by, China that declared the BRI infrastructure project in 2013 gradually moved to contribute development programs for the Islamic state in the Middle East through BRI projects. The more BRI projects received by the Islamic states, the more political influences China gained in the Middle East. As a consequence China took advantage this political influence to persuade the Middle East to support its policy on Xinjiang. In fact, China successfully transformed its cooperative diplomacy into cooptative diplomacy when the Islamic states generally supported Chinese policy on Xinjiang.

14 Conclusion

Chinese diplomacy in the Muslim world is basically a reciprocal diplomatic relations between China and the Muslim world. Both sides have fundamental needs that should be met. Both sides also prioritized pragmatism as the means to reach its goal. Both sides, therefore, set aside ideological consideration in their foreign policy making. Both Chinese government and the Muslim world prioritized more on how to get benefits from the cooperations. China skillfully exploited such situation to promote its controversial Xinjiang policy. Chinese ability to meet the expectations of the Muslim world's goal enable it to move from cooperation to cooptation. China, therefore, successfully transformed its cooperation foreign policy into cooptative foreign policy.

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