

CHINA'S RELATIONS WITH AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD: SHARED TRENDS, DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China–Africa relations do not relate to the African continent only, but also inform Chinese foreign policy conduct in other parts of the developing world. The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a plurilateral platform guiding China–Africa relations. A similar platform guides relations between China and the Arab states – the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF). Although these initiatives have much in common, they also have major differences. This policy insight examines China's foreign policy conduct with African and Arab states. It finds that while China–Arab state relations show robust economic exchange, they lag in terms of people-to-people exchanges and cultural diplomacy – two strong features of China–Africa relations. Both relationships offer the potential for collaboration, as well as possible challenges arising from competing interests in regions such as the Horn of Africa. Enhancing people-to-people relations and strengthening opportunities for mutual trust building is crucial for successful cooperation between China, Africa and the Arab world.

INTRODUCTION

Many African and Arab states share common histories of colonialism, imperialism and exploitation by powerful actors. They also share similar development goals, economic growth trajectories, and peace and security

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aspirations. At the intersection of these goals lies another big commonality: their growing economic, military and political ties to China.

China's relations with African and Arab states are not a product of recent developments. Stories of peaceful encounters during the maritime expeditions of Admiral Zheng He in the early 1400s, cultural and trade exchanges along the Ancient Silk Road, and South–South solidarity at the [Bandung Afro-Asian Conference](#) in 1955 all attest to a long history of interchange between China, Africa and Arab states.¹ Today, increasing transnational connectivity and complex flows of goods, people and capital, as well as state-planned initiatives such as the [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), carry the seeds for strengthening these South–South ties, but also bring serious challenges.

Despite the similarities between China's relationships with Africa and Arab states in the Middle East, Africa–China relations enjoy a unique place in Chinese foreign policy

Despite the similarities between China's relationships with Africa and Arab states in the Middle East, Africa–China relations enjoy a unique place in Chinese foreign policy. Besides the scale of China–Africa relations (involving more than 50 states at varying levels of development), Africa has been a launching pad for Chinese foreign policy initiatives expanding beyond the continent. For example, China's first overseas military base was built in Djibouti, its first international media hub was established in Nairobi, and the first Chinese combatant contingent involved in UN peacekeeping operations was dispatched to Sudan.

Simply put, China–Africa relations inform, to a large extent, China's foreign relations with developing countries.² Africa has provided a space where Chinese policymakers can experiment with innovative practices and initiatives. A concrete policy result has been the development of a form of forum diplomacy that is now the signature characteristic of China–Africa relations. The formation of FOCAC in 2000 established a creative diplomatic platform to negotiate multilateral relations between China and the entire continent of Africa.³ FOCAC has convened every three years since its launch, alternatingly hosted by China and an African country. China's forum diplomacy subsequently expanded to include similar platforms with other regional groups, such as the CASC (2004), the China–Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation Forum, also known as 16+1 (2012), and the China–Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum (2015).

This briefing presents a side-by-side examination of China–Arab state and China–Africa relations, identifying advantages and weaknesses in each case. It uses the analysis to inform policy recommendations to improve relations in both cases, as well as triangular relations between China, Arab states and Africa. China's relationship with Africa is more robust in terms of people-to-people exchanges, demonstrated by the prevalence of Confucius Institutes and Chinese-sponsored training for Africans, while relations between China and Arab states evince stronger economic ties. Because of China's energy dependence on Arab states, the asymmetry in Sino–Arab relations is less striking than in Sino–African relations. Additionally, Beijing's relationship with the Arab world reverberates domestically in a unique way, because of China's sizeable Muslim population.

FOCAC AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE CASC

China shares a rich history with several African countries. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) much-needed assistance during the continent's anti-colonial

struggles built its reputation as a key alternative to partnership with Western countries.⁴ African states in turn backed the PRC in its quest to gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.⁵ This history still informs the official rhetoric of China–Africa relations. Despite their geographic and geopolitical distance, African countries and China forged durable ties dating back to before independence. After the end of the Cold War this relationship rapidly broadened both politically and economically, and was formalised via FOCAC in 2000.

China has maintained normal diplomatic relations with all the key states in the Middle East⁶ and has managed not to alienate any of them. This counts as a big diplomatic win, given the tumultuous relations between long-time rivals such as Iraq and Iran, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Palestine and Israel. Yet despite this relatively stable relationship, China's relations with Middle Eastern states do not have the same historical foundation as its links with African states.

The PRC's relationships with many of its key allies in the region are surprisingly new. For example, its relationship with Saudi Arabia (a major oil supplier to China) only dates back to 1990 because prior to the 1980s Saudi Arabia had formal relations with Taiwan.⁷ Relations with Israel were only established in 1992, despite Israel's being the first Middle Eastern state to recognise the PRC as the legitimate government of China.⁸ Since 1992 Israel and China have intensified their economic and security relationships despite China's vocal and consistent support for the Palestinian cause since the Bandung Conference. This support was reiterated at the most recent CASCF in 2018, when China pledged \$15 million in humanitarian assistance to Palestine.⁹

While some of these relationships date back to the Bandung Conference and the [Non-Aligned Movement](#), which pre-dates the independence of many Arab and African states, formal relationships with Arab states generally lack the long state-to-state ties that have cemented China–Africa relations (of course, there is an overlap of several North African states in China–Arab and China–Africa relations). On the sub-Saharan African side, for example, relations with Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia predate independence. FOCAC has provided a platform for the further solidification of these relations, a model China has sought to replicate in the Middle East.

THE CASCF: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The CASCF was formally launched in 2004, during a visit by then Chinese president Hu Jintao to the Arab League headquarters in Egypt. It aimed to institutionalise cooperation and coordinate foreign policy between China and the Arab states. The forum meets every other year, in contrast to the triennial structure of FOCAC. The CASCF also does not draw as much international attention as FOCAC, although it has convened more often. Arguably, one of the main reasons for this lower profile is that, unlike FOCAC, it takes place at the ministerial rather than a summit level.¹⁰

The geographical delineation of the CASCF in relation to FOCAC is tricky, since some African states are officially members of both forums. On the Arab side, the forum includes the 22 countries of the Arab League.¹¹ Much like FOCAC, the CASCF has a set of established cooperation mechanisms besides the biennial ministerial meetings. These include senior officials' meetings, seminars on

entrepreneurship and investment, China–Arab civilization dialogue seminars, Sino–Arab friendship conferences, energy cooperation conferences, a press cooperation forum, senior officials’ conferences on health policy, and various cultural events.¹² Given the breadth and scope of plurilateral cooperation within the forums, these cooperation mechanisms are necessary to break down the often vague and broad announcements made during CASCF and FOCAC meetings.

During the seventh meeting of the CASCF in Beijing in 2016, leaders from China and the Arab states adopted a development plan for 2014–2024. This plan spelled out a three-pronged cooperation mechanism highlighting three priority areas in China–Arab state relations: ensuring energy cooperation; improving trade and investment; and improving cooperation in emerging sectors, including nuclear energy, aerospace technology and sustainable electricity.¹³

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Despite the relatively weightier political role of FOCAC in comparison to that of the CASCF, the latter’s economic relationship with China dwarfs that of Africa. The value of China–Africa trade in 2016 was \$128 billion. China–Arab state trade is predicted to jump from \$240 billion in 2013 to a massive \$6 trillion by 2023.¹⁴ At the eighth CASCF meeting in 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged a package of \$20 billion in credit lines to revive economic growth in the region, in addition to \$15 million in development assistance to Palestine and \$91 million for reconstruction projects in Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Lebanon.¹⁵ In comparison, at the last two FOCAC summits in 2015 and 2018 China pledged \$60 billion in financing packages to Africa. China’s financial ties to the Arab world are clearly deeper than its ties to African markets and their energy supplies.

OVERLAPPING TRENDS IN SINO–AFRICAN AND SINO–ARAB RELATIONS

Rhetoric is important in China’s relationship with both Africa and the Arab states. However, the base of the rhetoric, its purpose and its usage differ in the two cases. In China–Africa relations, there is a strong solidarity rhetoric that harkens back to the Bandung spirit of the 1950s. Here, China–Africa discourse frequently alludes to the peaceful, anti-hegemonic and sovereignty-focused relations between China and African states since the Cold War. This rhetoric is rooted in Beijing’s goal to distinguish its contemporary policies in Africa from those of colonial powers such as France and the UK or hegemonic countries such as Russia and the US during and after the Cold War.

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In the case of the Arab states, the rhetoric frequently revolves around the friendship between ancient civilisations, cultural exchange, and the revival of the Chinese–Muslim relationship by invoking nostalgia for the Ancient Silk Road. Foregrounding an image of itself as a close friend of major Islamic religious centres such as Saudi Arabia helps China to manage outside concerns about the status of Islam within the PRC.¹⁶ Criticisms from Muslim leaders or negative public perceptions of the treatment of Muslim Uyghurs by the Chinese state could carry significant economic and reputational costs for China.

This Ancient Silk Road rhetoric has also gained policy relevance over the last few years, as the Xi administration has drawn explicitly on this history in the design of the BRI. In fact, many of the BRI slogans and logos include or allude to stereotypical images of camel caravans carrying spices and other merchandise.¹⁷ Many Middle

Eastern countries were central to these ancient trade routes and are now gaining new geopolitical importance for China because of the high-stakes rollout of the BRI through the region.

Beyond the rhetoric, three major sectors of engagement reveal some of the similarities and differences between these relationships: political and security considerations, trade and economic interests, and cultural and public diplomacy engagements.

Political and security considerations

In Sino–Arab relations, the most salient political interest is Beijing’s aim to develop close relations with the predominantly Muslim states of the Middle East. Politically, China’s interest in this region’s stability stems from two principal concerns: a domestic preoccupation with its Muslim populations in Xinjiang, and a regional focus on maintaining stability in the region for the sake of the BRI.

China’s north-western autonomous region of Xinjiang is home to 12 million Muslim Chinese (predominantly ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz). In 2014 the Chinese government started the ‘Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism’ in the territory of Xinjiang.¹⁸ Reports by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and human rights organisations indicate that as much as 10% of Xinjiang’s total population has been subjected to ‘re-education’ in various detention centres. A Human Rights Watch report from September 2018 details the treatment of Chinese Muslims both inside the mass detention centres and beyond (there is widespread state use of high-tech and biometric surveillance across Xinjiang).¹⁹ The detention reportedly includes ‘re-education’, ‘to eradicate from the mind thoughts about religious extremism and violent terrorism, and to cure ideological diseases’.²⁰

From China’s perspective, the last decade has been marked by a rising trend of opposition and protests by PRC-based Uyghurs and an increase in their connections to diaspora communities in Central and South Asia. Moreover, state authorities have claimed that ‘Uyghur radicals have reportedly been trained in Pakistan, fought with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and joined the ranks of Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria and Iraq’.²¹ Yet Human Rights Watch reports that the Strike Hard Campaign targets were not only citizens who had travelled to these countries or had direct ties to extremist organisations. Instead, anyone with familiar ties, connections or contacts (via social media platforms) to individuals in ‘26 sensitive countries’ –including Indonesia and Malaysia – was subject to detention.²²

Similarly, China has cooperated with Syrian authorities and intelligence agencies to monitor and gather information about Chinese Muslims potentially joining militant ranks in the Turkistan Islamic Party in Syria, as well as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly known as the Nusra Front), ISIL and other groups. These fears reportedly led Chinese authorities to hold monthly high-level meetings with Syrian intelligence.²³ Additionally, since the launch of the BRI in 2013, maintaining stability in volatile regions directly concerned with BRI investments has become a core concern for Xi.²⁴ These factors all reinforce the need for maintaining strong relations with Arab state leaders. They are linked to China’s overlapping national and regional security interests, which have the effect of putting the Muslim populations in western China at the heart of its security policy.

China's interactions with African countries do not reveal similar national security priorities. Whereas China's soft power sometimes suffers owing to international reporting on the Uyghur issue, its African engagement gives it the chance to highlight its active contribution to global peace and security.²⁵ The issue of peace and security in the Middle East has political urgency for China, but in Africa it provides a broader range of opportunities. China has established a strong and increasingly visible military engagement on the African continent.²⁶ This includes peacekeepers and police units deployed in several countries, military equipment pledged to help the AU's Standby Force, joint drills and high-level military officer exchanges. In addition, China's first overseas military base was inaugurated in Djibouti in 2017. The base was originally described as a logistical hub or refuelling station for Chinese ships on anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, and authorities have only gradually begun to acknowledge that it is a full naval facility. One of the base's main advantages is its strategic location, which ensures the security of China's maritime lines of communication and shipping routes across the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb. The base is also strategic in facilitating China's capacity for rapid response deployments in regional security crises (especially in light of the 2011 evacuations from Libya)²⁷ and for peacekeeping troop deployments as part of UN operations.²⁸ China's security engagements with African states are more visible than its security cooperation with Middle Eastern states, which is more at the level of intelligence gathering related to Chinese Uyghurs and the Chinese Muslim diaspora in the region.

Economic interests

China is an important trading partner and investor in both Africa and the Middle East. By 2010 China was Africa's largest trading partner, with a total trade value of \$128 billion in 2016.²⁹ The top three exports from Africa to China are fuels, raw minerals and manufactured goods, while the top three exports to Africa from China are machinery, consumer goods, and chemicals and related goods.³⁰ In 2016 China became the largest investor in the Middle East, and in 2017 the trade value between China and Arab states reached \$191 billion, an increase of 11.9% from 2016.³¹ The bulk of China's imports from Arab states is crude oil. Its exports to the region consist of various consumer goods, weapons and cars.

China surpassed the US as the world's top importer of crude oil in 2017, importing 8.4 million barrels per day with preliminary estimates showing 9 million barrels per day in 2018.³² Over half of China's total crude oil imports come from members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).³³ Ongoing infrastructure construction and BRI projects are likely contributors to China's accelerating rate of crude oil imports.

According to China's National Bureau of Statistics, its energy consumption in 2017 totalled the equivalent of 4.48 billion metric tonnes of standard coal, a 2.9% increase from 2016.³⁴ Its growing energy demand is making it more dependent on supplies from Arab states. In 2017 China overtook the US as Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner, mostly because of crude oil imports, which has caused China–Saudi relations to draw closer on investments as well. During Xi's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017, the two governments signed close to \$70 billion in investment deals and joint ventures between Chinese and Saudi firms in energy sectors, petrochemicals, renewables and technology transfers.³⁵ Although there are similar patterns in

China's relations with major African oil producers such as Nigeria, Angola and South Sudan, the Middle East (and especially the region's OPEC members) retains more significant leverage over China and has been using that leverage to strike more investment deals, as the case of Saudi–China relations shows.³⁶

Despite this uptake in China–Arab state trade and investment relations, there are also important risks attached to China's energy investments in the region. The often-referenced evacuation of over 35 000 PRC nationals from Libya and the loss of massive investments there owing to the conflict in 2011 are reminders to Chinese foreign policymakers of the volatility of some of China's closest trading partners. In Syria, China is an important stakeholder in the country's two major oil companies and has many investments in the country. So far China has managed to navigate rather impressively strong ties with both anti-Syrian-regime Arab leaders and the Syrian regime, all while many Chinese firms are eyeing post-conflict reconstruction contracts in the country. The volatility and risk levels of China's energy investments are another similarity between China–Africa and China–Arab state relations.

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Cultural relations and public diplomacy

Cultural relations and public diplomacy in China–Africa relations are far more developed and elaborate than in China–Arab state relations. The combination of the growing number of Chinese state-owned media offices in Africa, the rapid spread of Confucius Institutes and the increasing number of African students studying at Chinese universities is weaving a complex fabric of intercultural exchange. Cultural exchange and public diplomacy initiatives help promote a positive image of China and market its development model to young African leaders – students who receive training and immersion in Chinese institutions.³⁷

By contrast, China's sizeable Muslim population is at the core of its interest in strengthening cultural ties with Arab states. During his opening speech at the eighth CASCF ministerial meeting, Xi emphasised the importance of continuing the China–Arab inter-civilization dialogue and roundtable on eradicating extremism. The roundtable aims to bring together government officials from Arab states and their Chinese counterparts to promote intercultural communication and religious discussions.³⁸ He expressed the 'need to delve deeper into different religions for inspiration of greater harmony and positivity and interpret religious teachings in light of the progressing times'.³⁹ Establishing cultural links with Muslim state elites has been a defining characteristic of the discourse of 'friendship between ancient civilizations' dominant in China–Arab state relations. The establishment of the China–Arab Research Centre on Reform and Development at the Shanghai International Studies University in 2017 is an example of a platform meant to encourage joint work between researchers and academics in China and the Arab world.⁴⁰

Since 2013 many of these cultural and people-to-people outreach platforms have become tied to BRI initiatives. For example, there is a project to cross-translate 100 Arabic and Chinese books. There are also many educational exchange programmes for Chinese students to learn Arabic at universities in the Middle East and Arab scholars to study Mandarin in China. At the same CASCF meeting, Xi pledged to 'invite 100 young leaders in innovation, 200 young scientists and 300 science professionals to workshops in China; invite 100 religious leaders and 600 party

leaders to China; and provide 10 000 training opportunities'.⁴¹ By comparison, China–Africa cultural exchanges and training opportunities for young African leaders and students are far more expansive. The seventh FOCAC meeting promised 50 000 training opportunities and 2 000 exchange scholarships for African students, among other pledges.

There are plans to increase the number of Confucius Institutes in Arab countries. So far there are 12 Confucius Institutes in the region, six of which are in Africa (three in Morocco, two in Egypt and one in Sudan). The other six are in Bahrain (one), Lebanon (one), the United Arab Emirates (UAE, two) and Jordan (two).⁴² In contrast, Kenya alone is home to four Confucius Institutes and two Confucius Classrooms, while South Africa has five of each.⁴³ This again shows that cultural diplomacy ties between China and African states are deeper and more elaborate.

In addition, China's media presence is more advanced and sophisticated in Africa than in Arab states. The establishment in 2012 of a media hub in Nairobi, housing the headquarters of China's Global Television Network in Africa, and the earlier move of Xinhua's African office from Paris to Nairobi have facilitated the production of news content aimed at African audiences.⁴⁴ There is a more robust investment in improving China's image and in providing positive narratives of China–Africa relations. Exchange and training programmes for African journalists sponsored by the Chinese government are also an important part of China–Africa public diplomacy. Every year, hundreds of African journalists travel to China for 'professionalisation' training, during which they are exposed to Chinese culture, attend seminars on Chinese history, and learn about the country through first-hand exposure.⁴⁵

From this perspective, China–Arab state relations seem to lack a focus on people-to-people communication, a situation that can be ameliorated through more advanced media and public diplomacy relations.

TRIANGULAR CHINA–AFRICA–MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

North African countries sit at the intersection of Arab and African relations with China. This is also true for the Horn of Africa, where both China and several Gulf states have significant interests and investments. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey all have deep connections with and strong investment legacies in the Horn of Africa. The UAE has port-related investments in Somaliland, Djibouti and Eritrea, and has an accumulated total of \$5.1 billion of investments in the subregion.⁴⁶ By 2017 Saudi Arabia had \$4.9 billion of investments in the Horn of Africa, and Qatar has strategic investments in Eritrea.⁴⁷ With the recent increase in Chinese engagement in the area, the issue of competing interests has become more salient.

Recently, China opened a naval base in Djibouti, inaugurated the Djibouti–Ethiopian Railway, and launched an international free trade zone along with a multi-purpose port in Djibouti.⁴⁸ When these projects were inaugurated, the UAE claimed this was in violation of its concession rights to Djibouti's Doraleh container terminal.⁴⁹ The UAE-based port operating company DP World entered into a dispute with Djibouti's government over an alleged agreement giving the latter the right to run the terminal for 30 years. The Djiboutian government seized the

port in February 2018 and by July had declared mediation efforts over, despite the London Court of International Arbitration's ruling in favour of DP World. Given that the Chinese-funded Multipurpose Port was built at the expense of the UAE's management rights, the confrontation between the government of Djibouti and the UAE directly involved China. This incident shows that the business interests of China and Middle Eastern states can become confrontational in areas such as the Horn of Africa. The Chinese naval base in Djibouti could not have been constructed in its present location without the Djibouti government's breaking its lease contract with the UAE. Similarly, the new multi-purpose port built by the China Merchants Group and the Dalian Port Authority is located close to the Doraleh container terminal, which could cause friction in the future.

Although there was no direct confrontation between China and the UAE over the port in Djibouti, the issue shows the potential for increasing tensions and conflicting interests between traditional powers in the Horn and the rising presence of China. More recently, with the end of the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, experts say Djibouti's ports (which funnelled over 85% of Ethiopia's trade volumes) may run the risk of losing their strategic position and may not be able to achieve full capacity, given the potential shipping routes that Eritrean ports will acquire.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

China's African relations are more wide-ranging than its relations with Arab states. In comparison with the CASCE, FOCAC action plans are generally more detailed, and boast more areas of engagement and more deals signed. For example, the eighth FOCAC summit renewed past initiatives on agricultural cooperation and high-level party-to-party exchanges, and saw new initiatives such as anti-corruption training and a peace and security forum.⁵¹ Africa, in this sense, occupies a unique position in China's foreign policy because it represents a low-risk area for Chinese foreign policy experimentation. By contrast, the Middle East is more difficult for the PRC to navigate – both because of the geopolitics of the area and because most countries in the region are developed enough that China's competitive advantage (for example, its ability to offer concessional infrastructure loans) is not as effective a policy tool as in many African countries.

Africa and in the Middle East have a shared distrust of big power politics: in Africa because of centuries of colonial history, and in the Middle East because of the perception that US interventionism has crippled the region politically and economically for decades. Some world leaders are also wary of China's continued ascent to global leadership. Although they see many opportunities in the BRI, they also see threats of China's becoming interventionist, especially in light of a Chinese firm's taking over management of the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota for 99 years.⁵² Such suspicions are grounded in the continuing impact of big power competition and Cold War realpolitik on the region. To address this, the Chinese government should enhance its soft power measures by strengthening people-to-people exchanges in China–Arab state relations.

In China's security and military engagements in the Middle East, its domestic politics regarding Muslim minorities overlap with its regional interests relating to the rollout of the BRI into potentially high-risk conflict zones. Continued reports

by human rights organisations on the situation in Xinjiang could weaken China's soft power in predominantly Muslim states. Even if state elites in the Middle East do not make public statements denouncing the treatment of Chinese Muslims, wider popular opinion could still harm China–Arab public relations. By contrast, Africa has largely been an opportunity for China to gain soft power points by showing strong and practical leadership in promoting peace and security.

Lastly, in addition to its role in China's projecting a positive image as a global peace provider, Africa plays an important role in China's foreign policymaking in the realm of public diplomacy and people-to-people exchange (vis-à-vis the Chinese media headquarters, student exchange, journalist training, and civil servant professionalisation mentioned earlier). For a more efficient inter-civilization dialogue, China and the Arab states need to intensify similar meaningful exchanges and people-to-people relations in order to create more opportunities for trust building between Chinese and Arab elites and citizens.

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