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Opportunities and Limits of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum

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The China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) celebrated the 20th year of its establishment and hosted its 10th ministerial meeting in Beijing on May 30, 2024. Leaders and ministers from China and Arab nations were present, and strategies for advancing cooperation and creating a China-Arab community with a shared future were discussed. Officials from 22 Arab states attended the meeting according to the Chinese Foreign Ministry. These included Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Tunisian President Kais Saied, and President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and Morocco were also in attendance.

Expanding relations with the People's Republic of China has become a priority in Arab diplomacy. The establishment of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum can be seen as an important framework that supports this initiative. The founding document of the Forum was signed in Cairo on September 14, 2004, following its announcement during the historic visit of former Chinese President Hu Jintao to the Secretariat General of the League of Arab States on January 30, 2004. The May 2024 forum yielded several outcomes. The adoption of the Beijing Declaration and the Action Implementation Plan for 2024-2026, along with a joint statement by China and the Arab states on the Gaza crisis, marked important steps towards promoting China-Arab community development and bilateral cooperation between the two sides. These documents not only highlighted the shared positions of China and the Arab countries on counterterrorism, human rights, climate change, and artificial intelligence but also paved the way for future collaborations. At the outset, President Xi Jinping outlined concrete steps to support and strengthen a China-Arab community with a shared future. Following a positive evaluation of the agreement and advances made from the China-Arab States Summit held in Riyadh in December 2022, President Xi put forward 'five cooperation frameworks' to continue to accelerate the development of a symbiotic China-Arab community: innovation, investment and finance cooperation, energy, economic and trade ties, and people-to-people exchanges. Specific proposals put forward include 10 joint laboratories in fields such as life, health, green development, agriculture and space technology, allowing Arab banks to join the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, and the establishment of a China-Arab Center for Global Civilization Initiative. President Xi also underscored China's commitment to accelerating the negotiations on bilateral and regional free trade agreements.

Amidst increased instability in the Middle East, the Forum addressed the critical issue of the war in Gaza. President Xi took a proactive stance, citing the US's increasingly divisive posture in maintaining its support for Israel. One of the key takeaways from the Forum in terms of Beijing's response to the Gaza crisis was President Xi calling for a peace conference and stating China's support for a two-state solution. His opening speech also reaffirmed China's commitment to strengthening its relations with the Arab states, positioning it as a 'model for maintaining world peace and stability.' His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, reiterated the importance of an international coalition towards the crisis in Gaza and appreciated China's position of continuous support for the initiatives to end the war in Gaza and push for the two-state solution.



Photo Source: [Saudi Gazette \(2024\)](#)

China's recent proposal for an international peace conference is relatively important because it signals the country's potential intent to position itself as a mediator, much like the role it played in the successful brokering of the Saudi-Iran deal. This move comes at a time when the US and most European capitals have tried to avoid being seen as impartial actors, creating a vacuum in global diplomacy. While China remains cautious about direct involvement and taking on a clear leadership role, the initiative reflects its strategic exploration of opportunities to enhance its standing as a reliable and neutral arbitrator in international affairs. By stepping into this role, China is testing the waters for further establishing itself as a player in resolving global disputes. While China's role in the region should not be exaggerated, Beijing assured that it will continue collaborating with other Security Council members and the global community in a relentless effort to support the end of the hostilities in Gaza and work towards an establishment of peace and stability in the region. In the long term, Beijing will find it challenging to help bring an acceptable resolution to all parties involved; however, China could increase its expanding presence in the region by marking its diplomatic footprint and launching its strategy to promote regional peace in response to the crisis in Gaza.

The GCC states are keeping a close eye on China's diplomatic role in the region. For example, there is an expectation that China will use its current ties with Iran not only to get Tehran's support for Beijing's security initiatives but also to limit its disruptive military activities that further inflame regional tensions. Beijing understands that any regional escalation between countries in the Middle East will not be beneficial to China, especially as it depends on regional stability, especially in terms of oil flow from the Gulf via the Hormuz Strait and other maritime chokepoints,



as a vital strategic interest. From the perspective of the GCC, expanding diplomatic relations with China is not intended to be a search for a replacement to the US as a main partner. Yet, the current growth in Beijing's diplomatic role is worthy of exploration for how it can support growth and stability in the region. Outside of the Gaza issue, CASCF resulted in new strategic partnerships being signed. In total, 14 Arab countries have now established comprehensive strategic partnerships with China, making the Arab region one of the biggest clusters of China's strategic partners. This includes Tunisia and Bahrain, which until now had been the only GCC country without a formal strategic partnership with China. Yet, despite China's numerous strategic partnerships, these agreements often lack tangible outcomes, reflecting a cautious and exploratory approach rather than solid commitments. China should build on its strategic partnerships by implementing concrete projects and initiatives that demonstrate real progress, thereby enhancing its bilateral strategic relations. By moving beyond merely signing Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), China can leave its footprint through tangible outcomes, solidifying its role as a reliable and influential partner on the global stage.



Photo Source: [CNN \(2024\)](#)

The 20th CASCF underscored the need for Arab nations and China to continue to invest in mechanisms through which a higher level of strategic mutual trust for one another on matters affecting their shared fundamental interests can be achieved. There were many statements for multifaceted cooperation in economic, cultural, and political fields, but the fact remains that the two sides are still getting to know one another. Therefore, continued efforts to implement agreements, address challenges, and explore new areas of collaboration will be essential for truly deepening the strategic partnership and achieving mutually beneficial outcomes.

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