

China-Arab strategic cooperation boosts modernization of Arab States

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Short Paper</p> <p>Main Object: Politics Scope: Arab States and China</p> <p>Received: 24 October 2025 Revised: 10 November 2025 Accepted: 10 November 2025 Published online: 25 November 2025</p> <p>Keywords: autonomous development, China-Arab cooperation, modernization, path exploration.</p>	<p>In the recent past, the focus of the Arab nations toward the East has led to a more pronounced strategic cooperation with China. In contrast to prior initiatives taken by Arab nations to mitigate the effects of economic dependence, the West has, more recently, sought to influence the political climate within Arab nations. China has been a target revisionist state to the development narrative of the West. Western dominance that seeks to control economic and political influence within the Arab world through means that are highly charged politically has the potential to be mitigated with China-initiated projects. BRI has sought to politically create avenues for cooperation that transcend mere economic integration, through collaborative governance frameworks within the energy, technology, and infrastructure sectors. In addition to the development of a politically stable and secure environment geared toward the advancement of industry, the collaboration also fosters economic resilience. The potential offered by the partnership to serve as a case study in sustainable development for the global South in addition to practical models grounded in Arab realities is profound. The qualitative research drew on inductive reasoning focusing on three primary themes such economic diversification, governance of security, and strategic alignment.</p>

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1. Introduction

In the last few decades, Arab nations in the Middle East have focused on establishing strategic partnerships with China. This shift has been driven by changes in the global political order and the growing need for these countries to prioritize sustainable development. For the Middle East, the first modern political development initiatives were labeled as ‘administrative’ in order to detach them from the politics of colonialism, specifically the ‘civilizing mission’ discourse. Regrettably, these nations’ modernization activities were systematic interruptions from the western order characterized by integration of the political hegemony of the West. This order was exacerbated by regional strife. The absence of sophisticated self-sustaining developmental strategies, as borne from the historical and economic legacies of the nations, resulted in Arab states risk falling prey to dominance from global powers (The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, 2025).

In this context, Arab states have strategically sought to develop their partnerships with China; first with the BRI initiatives, and now with the vision of ‘modern Silk Road corridors’ to facilitate digital trade. The extent to which these nations focus on their economic relationships with China will be driven by the instrumentalist perspective on BRI and will be ‘merely’ the first stop of many on each Arab nations individualized vision. The BRI will serve as the zenith to the Arab states strategic initiatives china. Instead of undermining their self-original plan, these states will build trade and economic partnerships with china that will use the lessons from China to build self-sustaining economic resilience china will use its ‘bureaucratic capitalism’ to build capital. The Persian Gulf countries and their BRI partnerships, predominantly with China, will formulate their economic resilience to the global order (Nedopil, 2025; Chen, 2021).

In addition to fostering economic ties, China and Arab nations have enhanced security governance, cultural exchanges, and, most importantly, modern governance. All of these are elements which will help to uniquely position the nations under Arab governance. China has proposed a new model of “promoting security through development” which reduces dependence on an external military security guarantor. This shift reinforces regional autonomy while enhancing the prospects of continuous development. These developments combine to mark a new phase in the relationship between China and the Arab world. This new phase is characterized by aspirations for modernization based on mutual respect and strategic proximity (Elshehaby, 2025).

2. Methodology

A qualitative approach in this case focuses on the interactions and relationships between Arab states and China and how each aspect might influence the modernization efforts of each state. In this context, qualitative studies seem to capture the meaning of complex social

phenomena by examining their natural settings, primarily grounded in the experiences of the people. In this instance, literature and document reviews provided the data, focusing on the China-Arab relations and the Belt and Road Initiative. Academic journals, governmental speeches and reports, and policy papers constituted the corpus.

The qualitative research drew on inductive reasoning focusing on three primary themes such economic diversification, governance of security, and strategic alignment. This is essential in describing the complete picture of the cooperation and how it affects the development of Arab states. Then, the data is contextualized, and the depth provided personal experience and sensitivity in interpretation. This is the explanation of rich and descriptive data on how the development of China provides model for Arab states and how it impacts the process of modernization to be documented.

3. Result and Discussions

3.1. Context of cooperation: Alignment between Arab countries' development aspirations and China's modernization experience

Like most developing nations, Arab countries embarked on their modernization based on the pursuit of national liberation and independence. However, their journey towards modernization has been long and with the twists and turns. Barrington Moore, an American political sociologist, pointed out that reforms following different modernization paths can fail either by intensifying social contradictions or by causing a loss of economic sovereignty through excessive reliance on Western capital and technology. Arab scholar Samir Amin also noted that most Arab countries, by emulating the West, not only failed to achieve economic revival but also were unable to realize an autonomous modernization transformation. This process has been deeply influenced by the Western-dominated political and economic system (Daher, 2021; GIS, 2022).

In fact, the Western-led international order has adversely affected the Arab world's exploration of modernization paths. For a long time, the unequal, dependent economic relationship between Arab states and Western countries placed them in an unfavorable socio-economic environment during the early stages of modernization. Furthermore, military interventions by external powers in some Arab countries severely disrupted their modernization development (Tagharobi & Zarei, 2016).

In recent years, after experiencing setbacks in their modernization efforts, Arab countries have begun exploring paths of autonomous development. They are actively "looking East" and focusing on deepening strategic cooperation with China (*People's Daily Online*, 2025).

President Xi Jinping has pointed out that "a country needs to follow the general rules of modernization, but also base its efforts on its

national conditions and give them distinctive national features. The people are the best judges of what kind of modernization best suits their country." Currently, Arab countries universally face the pressing need for economic restructuring and sustainable development. Particularly, the Persian Gulf states are committed to promoting economic diversification and reducing their reliance on oil and gas resources. Concurrently, the region experiences frequent conflicts and prominent security governance issues. (*People's Daily*, 2023).

The Arab countries' pursuit of development and stability highly aligns with the governance concept of "promoting peace through development" proposed by China. The success of the Chinese path to modernization lies in its simultaneous emphasis on both development and stability, focusing on the improvement of people's livelihoods and social order. This provides a reference experience for Arab nations. Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are actively aligning their national development visions with China's Belt and Road Initiative, laying the groundwork for deepened bilateral cooperation and the joint advancement of modernization goals (Wang, 2023).

3.2. Cooperation measures: Emphasizing both experience sharing and concrete actions

China and Arab states are providing substantive support for the exploration of modernization in Arab countries through experience exchange and deepening cooperation in specific fields. Relying on strategic cooperation mechanisms and platforms such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, and leveraging the increasingly deepened cooperation in energy, information technology, and infrastructure, both sides are enhancing the internal drivers for economic diversification and sustainable development in Arab nations (CIDCA, 2025).

3.2.1. Chinese modernization provides a demonstrative effect and development confidence

Chinese modernization, focusing on comprehensive social development and common prosperity, offers significant insights for Arab countries facing similar development tasks. Public opinion polls show that over 75% of citizens in Arab countries believe China can provide valuable reference for governance in the Middle East, and more than 76% of respondents are confident that China's development will bring important opportunities to Arab states. China's developmental achievements and growing international influence have significantly bolstered Arab countries' confidence in drawing lessons from China's experience and exploring modernization paths suited to their own national conditions. This confidence is translating into concrete actions to "look East," prompting Arab countries to prioritize the transformation towards non-oil industries such as the digital economy and clean energy. These areas happen to align closely with China's

strengths, creating new opportunities for deepened bilateral cooperation (CFR, 2025).

3.2.2. Deepening strategic alignment and cooperation across multiple fields

The continuous deepening of China-Arab strategic mutual trust and their strong economic complementarity provide broad space for enhanced cooperation. Arab countries are actively seeking to strengthen cooperation with China in key fields representing future development directions, such as information technology, the digital economy, space technology, artificial intelligence, and new energy. Cooperation in these areas not only meets the urgent needs of Arab countries for economic diversification and technological innovation but also constitutes key measures for them to seize the strategic high ground in future development and achieve sustainable modernization. Through deepened strategic alignment, specific projects under the Belt and Road Initiative framework are being implemented, laying a solid foundation for the modernization development of Arab countries (Kader, 2025).

3.3. Cooperation outcomes: Promoting economic transformation and improved security environment

The breadth and depth of China-Arab cooperation continue to expand, achieving remarkable results in promoting the optimization and upgrading of the economic structure in Arab countries and enhancing their capacity for security autonomy.

3.3.1. Trade and investment driving industrial upgrading and economic diversification

China has remained the largest trading partner of Arab countries for ten consecutive years. In 2024, the trade volume between China and Arab nations reached \$407.4 billion, a year-on-year increase of 2.3%. The structure of China's investment in Arab countries continues to optimize, expanding extensively from the traditional oil and gas sectors to new energy, high-tech industries, and areas related to people's livelihoods. In the petroleum sector, China invested over \$8 billion in the Yanbu Refinery project in Saudi Arabia (Kumar, 2025).

In contrast, the proportion of non-oil trade between China and Arab countries has been steadily increasing. This is particularly evident in China's significant investment achievements in new infrastructure projects— such as large-scale photovoltaic power stations, 5G networks, and data centers— as well as in the financial sector. Solar energy cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia stems from the strategic alignment of Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and China's "Dual Carbon" goals. In 2023, China exported photovoltaic modules worth RMB 13.4 billion to Saudi Arabia and completed the construction of a 2.6 GW photovoltaic power station there, the world's largest single-site solar project. In 2024, bilateral cooperation entered a new stage

characterized by technology transfer and collaborative industrial chain building, further evolving into a tripartite synergistic model of "technology transfer + production capacity localization + talent cultivation". Concurrently, projects such as the Al Dhafra PV project in Abu Dhabi, UAE, which involved Chinese investment and construction, and the 800 MW PV project in Qatar, contracted by China, have already been connected to the grid. Presently, Chinese enterprises have become major investors in clean energy projects, including solar and wind power, in Arab nations. For instance, the non-oil trade volume between China and the UAE reached \$81 billion in 2023, a year-on-year increase of 4.2%. In the financial sector, new progress has been made in China-Arab local currency swap agreements, thereby facilitating trade and investment between the two sides (Feigenbaum, 2025).

Overall, China-Arab cooperation has effectively driven the optimization of industrial structures, the enhancement of value chains, and the process of economic diversification in Arab countries, injecting strong momentum into their modern development.

3.3.2. *The "promoting security through development" governance model aids in improving the security environment*

Maintaining a long-term and stable security environment is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving modernization. President Xi Jinping pointed out in a speech at the Arab League Headquarters, "To solve these issues, the key is to accelerate development. The turbulence in the Middle East stems from the lack of development, and the ultimate solution also hinges on development." Arab countries have recognized the limitations of relying on external military guarantees for instance, the "oil for security" model employed by Persian Gulf states has proven difficult to sustain effectively and have consequently turned their efforts towards strengthening their own independent security capacity building (*People's Daily*, 2018).

The concept of "promoting security through development", proposed by China, emphasizes eliminating security threats through economic development, improving people's livelihoods, and enhancing comprehensive strength. This provides a new approach for Arab countries to resolve their security dilemmas. In recent years, China-Arab cooperation in the security field has grown increasingly close. China actively participates in mediating regional hotspot issues, advocates for the political settlement of disputes, supports Arab countries in safeguarding their national sovereignty and regional stability, and promotes the extension of China-Arab cooperation projects into security-vulnerable areas. This cooperative model of "promoting security through development" helps gradually improve the regional security environment, creating more favorable conditions for Arab countries to focus on their modernization endeavors (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025).

3.4. Cooperation prospects: Jointly writing new chapter in modernization development

Looking ahead, China-Arab strategic cooperation will continue to develop at a higher level, in broader fields, and at a deeper depth, injecting stronger momentum into the modernization process of Arab countries. China's experience, solutions, technology, and market, combined with the development needs, resource endowments, and geographical advantages of Arab nations, will create powerful synergies. Through practical cooperation in areas such as industrial upgrading, technological innovation, the green economy, and security governance, China and Arab states will work together to help Arab countries achieve sustainable economic and social development based on preserving their own advantages and cultural traditions, thereby propelling their modernization to a new level.

4. Conclusions

There has been strategic collaboration between China and Arab States which centered within the Belt and Road Initiative and focused on joint practical engagements in energy, technology, and infrastructure, merging experience with cooperation on intersectoral investments. These initiatives have contributed to notable economic change in the forms of diversification and upgrading of the industrial structure, as well as the provision of improved security within the framed construct of "security through development".

The findings indicate that despite each Arab state having its own peculiar national circumstances and historical backgrounds, the common objective of sustainable development creates the possibility of a pragmatic relationship with China. This kind of cooperation could be used as a model by other developing nations in attempting to modernize outside the bounds of conventional hegemonic control. Future research might examine the potential social and political ramifications of this relationship as well as the implications of aggressive development on the geopolitical equilibrium in the region. The partnership between China and the Arab world is a strategic alliance of mutual advantage which allows the Arab world to benefit from China's experience while adapting to modernity, all without losing their culture and national identity.

Lastly, the differences of civilisations, histories and national conditions point to the fact that each country has different models of modernisation. The Arab world has been struggling to pursue a form of self-directed modernisation, largely due to the political and economic world order that is dominated by the West. The inter-state relations under the Belt and Road Initiative prove to be practically beneficial and offer new opportunities for Arab states to pursue self-directed

modernisation. This will be a case for other developing states to learn from.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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