



Anas Khaled Nassar, *al-Istrātījiyya al-Šīniyya Tijāh al-Duwal al-‘Arabiyya: al-Ahdāf wa-l-Āthār al-Mustaqbaliyya, Dirāsa Istishrāfiyya* [Chinese Strategy Toward Arab States: Goals and Implications for the Future, an Exploration] (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), pp. 275.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a shift from a bipolar to a multipolar system. Although the US briefly emerged as the sole superpower this unipolar moment soon gave way to the rise of new Asian powers such as China and India. China’s ascent has been driven by rapid economic growth, sustained military modernization, and the expansion of its diplomatic influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. It has also strengthened its presence in international institutions and established new multilateral forums, raising questions

about future global leadership and the trajectory of Sino-American competition.

With these shifts in the global system, there has been for studies on China’s strategies toward Arab states. One such contribution is *Chinese Strategy Toward Arab States: Goals and Implications for the Future, an Exploration*, authored by Anas Khaled Nassar.

Nassar presents a comprehensive, in-depth analysis, focusing on the core elements shaping Sino-Arab relations within their geopolitical and strategic context. He employs diverse research techniques, including interviews and content analysis. While his adoption of a qualitative methodology allows for greater analytical depth, a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, would have strengthened the robustness of the findings and reduced the risk of analytical bias, thus enhancing the overall rigour and methodological soundness.

The author interviewed 20 experts, carefully selected based on nationality, academic qualifications, field of specialization, professional position, years of experience, and age.¹ Having established these methodological foundations, he then develops a theoretical framework based on four analytical approaches outlined in the second chapter.

The first approach is game theory, specifically the concept of non-zero-sum games, which suggests the possibility of mutual benefit between China and Arab states rather than a purely competitive relationship.² The second draws on structural realism, particularly the work of Kenneth Waltz, which holds that the anarchic structure of the international system drives states to accumulate power. Nassar acknowledges that this theory explains the behaviour of the US more effectively than that of China, yet he employs it to illuminate China’s ambition for great power status.³

¹ Anas Khaled Nassar, *al-Istrātījiyya al-Šīniyya Tijāh al-Duwal al-‘Arabiyya: al-Ahdāf wa-l-Āthār al-Mustaqbaliyya, Dirāsa Istishrāfiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2020), p. 36.

² Ibid., pp. 64-65.

³ Ibid., pp. 65-67.

The third approach is power transition theory, developed by A.F.K. Organski, which posits a hierarchical international order. From this perspective China occupies a complex position, exhibiting characteristics of both satisfied and dissatisfied strong states. This framework allows Nassar to interpret Sino-Arab alliance as a strategy to counterbalance US influence.⁴ Finally, he explores Friedrich Ratzel's notion of Lebensraum. Arguing that its direct application to China is problematic given the absence of overt expansionist tendencies, the author instead proposes interpreting China's conduct from the perspective of positive geopolitical engagement.⁵ Nassar also surveys the views of Chinese thinkers who believe that Western theories of international relations are incompatible with their reality and therefore inadequate for analysing China's behaviour toward other countries.

The author traces the evolution of China's foreign policy in relation to domestic developments, beginning with its historical experience as an isolated empire guided by Confucian principles, moving through the revolutions of the 19th century and then the Japanese occupation, then to the post-1949 reconstruction under Mao Zedong, and culminating in the gradual opening and the articulation of the "Chinese Dream".⁶ Nassar analyses China's internal advantages as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Geographically, China occupies a strategic location and possesses abundant resources; economically, it ranks second globally while striving to reach first place and to secure stable energy supplies; socially, it prioritizes investment in human capital and education; culturally, it mobilizes Confucianism as a form of soft power; and militarily, it strengthens its capabilities while emphasizing a doctrine of non-expansion.⁷

The author then turns to the external dimension, examining China's sensitive relationship with the US, marked by both cooperation and competition; its strategic and energy-based cooperation with Russia and the dynamics of global polarization, including China's role within international organizations such as the UN Security Council and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁸

The book discusses China's reliance on a dual strategy combining soft power, embodied in the strategies of "peaceful rise" and "peaceful coexistence", with hard power, manifested in the development of military capabilities accompanied by guarantees against offensive use, alongside a sustained effort to project a moral, peaceful image and to avoid imposing its ideological model on other states.⁹

The author deepens his analysis by examining the concrete manifestations of China's strategy toward Arab states, which reflect a multidimensional approach encompassing economic, political, cultural, and security dimensions. Economically, this strategy is exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative; politically, it is reflected in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, mutual respect, and non-interference; culturally, it entails the promotion of people-to-people exchanges and the expansion of academic and media cooperation; and in security-terms, it prioritizes stability and counterterrorism. This approach is geared to the challenges facing Arab states (political instability, development needs, and security concerns), while simultaneously strengthening China's influence and advancing its strategic interests.

The third chapter highlights the marked advancement in Sino-Arab relations through key events, including the launch of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum (2004), the Belt and Road Initiative (2013), President Xi Jinping's "1+2+3" strategy (2014), and Xi's visit to Cairo University (2016), where he announced the first official document outlining China's policy toward Arab states.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., pp. 67-69.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 72-76.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 76-90.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 90-96.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 105-111.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 115-116.

Nassar further analyses the contemporary realities of Arab states across several dimensions. On the agricultural front, he observes a decline in sustainability and reliance on imports. In industry, he highlights heavy reliance on imported goods and the limited scope of research and development. Socially, he draws attention to persistent poverty, unemployment, conflicts, and terrorism, in addition to intra-Arab rivalries and a cautious stance toward projects advanced by Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Internationally, he notes the continued Western support for Israel coupled with an inability to resolve pivotal issues such as in Palestine and Syria.¹¹

The author dedicates part of his analysis to the Belt and Road Initiative, a major strategy launched in 2013 to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through mutually beneficial cooperation rather than domination. The strategy is supported by institutions established in 2014, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund. Nassar underscores the strategic importance of Arab states within this framework, given their control over vital trade corridors like the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal.¹²

The fourth chapter addresses China's strategic objectives toward the Arab world, its tools, and its implications. First, China seeks to expand its international influence, a goal consistent with structural realism and power transition theory. Second, it aims to rectify and reform the international system. Third, it pursues mutual support on strategic issues such as Palestine and Taiwan. Finally, the chapter argues that China also seeks to promote elements of its communist system abroad.¹³

With respect to the economic dimension, the principal objective is to secure access to energy resources, followed by promotion of free trade and investment and the pursuit of shared sustainability through the development of Arab industrial capacities. The Belt and Road Initiative is thus presented as an instrument for improving relations rather than an end in itself.¹⁴

In the cultural sphere, three objectives were identified: fostering cultural interaction, disseminating Chinese culture, and promoting communist values, although the Chinese experts deny any intention to export communism.¹⁵ In the social sphere, the objectives include developing human resources, expanding joint research centres, achieving shared social development, and advancing science and technology in accordance with the principle of mutual benefit.¹⁶

In the security and military realm, China's earlier policy of distancing itself from Arab security issues has shifted. Its objectives now encompass strengthening security cooperation, exporting weapons, achieving strategic military parity with regional powers, and pursuing geopolitical expansion, including the establishment of military bases. The chapter further explores the tools through which China seeks to implement its strategy, particularly economic diplomacy (investments, loans, and sustainable projects), cultural tools, political tools such as intervention to resolve regional issues, and, finally, media tools.

The author concludes by offering strategic recommendations to three main groups. To the Arab League, he recommends establishing a centre for Chinese strategic studies and integrating an analysis of Sino-Arab relations into the unified Arab economic report. To Arab governments, he suggests creating specialized research centres to analyse relations with China across all sectors, with particular emphasis on the economic and cultural ones. To universities and researchers, he encourages them to pursue in-depth

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 116-122.

¹² Ibid., pp. 143-154.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 158-160.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 163-168.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 168-172.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 172-176.

studies on relations with China, with a focus on the Belt and Road Initiative. Nassar emphasizes the need for Arab governmental strategic planning to leverage the relationship with China and support it on issues such as Taiwan to ensure its support for Arab causes, while maintaining balanced relations with all major international powers.¹⁷

This book represents a valuable addition to the Arabic-language literature on the rise of China and the repercussions for the Arab region. Nassar successfully presents a comprehensive vision of intersecting political, economic, cultural, and security dimensions of Sino-Arab relations, drawing on interviews with both Arab and Chinese experts. This comparative perspective illuminates important divergences in perceptions and interpretations. Nevertheless, the exclusive reliance on qualitative methods, without complementary quantitative tools, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further, the book occasionally reproduces official Chinese discourse without subjecting it to sufficient critical scrutiny, which underscores the need for more balanced readings incorporating alternative perspectives. Despite these limitations, the study remains of considerable value to researchers and policymakers seeking a deeper understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Arab relations and their prospects.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 209-216.