

# China's Proposal for the Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Resolution: A "Developmental Peace"\*



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## ABSTRACT

The Eastern Mediterranean is one of the epicenters of Middle Eastern conflicts ranging from internal and bilateral to multilateral disputes. Outside powers adhere to diverse outlooks of peace initiatives. The western liberalists highlight "democratic peace", emphasizing that "democracy deficit" causes conflict. China favors the "developmental peace" proposal and argues that conflicting parties can achieve peace through domestic and regional development. China dispatched peacekeeping forces to Lebanon for humanitarian rescues for the Republic in 2020, offered developmental aid and economic assistance to Lebanon, Syria and Palestine to improve their capacity with key infrastructure and livelihood projects as the centerpiece, and participated in post-war reconstruction in the three war-torn countries as well. The "developmental peace" argument is based on China's four-decade-long Reform and Opening-up experience, a potentially new scenario for the Eastern Mediterranean conflict resolution.

**Keywords:** China's Middle East diplomacy, conflict resolution, democratic peace, developmental peace, Eastern Mediterranean

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## Introduction

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN, CONSISTING of Türkiye, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt, is trapped with prolonged and thorny issues related to security dilemmas and economic slowdowns, such as the decade-long Syrian crisis, the four-decade Lebanese political discords and the seven-decade Palestine-Israeli conflict. In recent years, the discovery of gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean has added a new layer of complexity to the region already marred with decades-old conflicts. Amid increasingly competitive gas markets, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) offers a platform to coordinate efforts among the various players in the region to lower costs and improve regional integration. However, Türkiye and Libya are excluded from the Forum, causing escalating rivalry (Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2021). The Eastern Mediterranean interwoven traditional and non-traditional conflicts are both local and international,

both endogenous and exogenous, and both internal and external with complex contexts.

The above conflicts were not created by China, a newcomer. However, Beijing is a stakeholder and an important player in the Eastern Mediterranean conflict resolution because it is the second-largest trading partner of the League of Arab States and the third-largest trading partner of Türkiye and Israel, respectively. Located at the cross-road of the Belt and the Road, the Eastern Mediterranean secures a predominant position in China's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean policy.

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2021, President Xi put forward the Global Development Initiative in the United Nations and in 2022, President Xi raised the Global Security Initiative. These initiatives are more than economic and development initiatives. Indeed, they are economic means for security in the Eastern Mediterranean and the developing world. This is a China-styled peace initiative of "developmental peace".

“Developmental peace” is an important proposition of China in its participation in the security governance in the Middle East by economic measures. In his speech made at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo in 2016, President Xi Jinping formulated the assumption of “developmental peace”: “The key to overcoming difficulties is to accelerate development. Turmoil in the Middle East stems from the lack of development, and the ultimate solution will depend on development, which bears on everyone’s well-being and dignity” (Xi, 2016). According to his remark, states may achieve economic development and social stability without changing their political system.

**Development is the common interest and universal value of all conflicting parties. Thus, it is easier to find a developmental solution to the political predicament step by step.**

Unlike the western liberalists’ assumption of the Middle Eastern conflict resolution, which highlights that “democratic deficit” is the root cause of regime failure, China emphasizes material factors of conflicts. The “development deficit” stems from the imbalance of development and income distribution brought about by globalization, resulting in the widening gap between the rich and the poor, insufficient resilience to economic and financial risks, and the intensification of global energy and food security problems (Wang & Han, 2022: 10). Based on its experience of the Reform and Opening-up since the late 1970s, China underlines that “development deficit” is the root cause of the upheaval in the Eastern Mediterranean and the

Middle East. The political systems of the Middle East are diverse, and their ideological divides are huge, which are hard for conflicting parties to compromise. However, development is the common interest and universal value of all conflicting parties. Thus, it is easier to find a developmental solution to the political predicament step by step.

What is China’s “developmental peace” hypothesis? What are the differences and similarities between this initiative and Western peace initiatives?

Indeed, existing literature has shed light on the conditions and advantages of implementing “developmental peace” in the Middle East, Africa and other regions. Wang Xuejun, a Chinese expert on African studies, stresses that China’s “development first” policy determines its approach to peace and security as “developmental peace,” which is different from the liberal peace idea based on Western countries’ experience (Wang, 2018: 67-82). In the area of UN peacekeeping, Richard Gueli and Sybert Liebenberg argue that the concept of “developmental peace missions” aims to challenge the traditional view that short-term military security is a necessary precondition for long-term development. They offer a first cut at substantiating this claim by exploring how initial civilian reconstruction efforts can enhance military peacekeeping and create the momentum needed for successful transitions” (Gueli & Liebenberg, 2007: Chapter 5).

Arguably, there have been more empirical than theoretical studies and more macro-level than micro-level studies concerning the topic in question. There is still a shortage of detailed clarification of the concept and connotation of “developmental peace”. Moreover, relevant theoretical and case studies of China’s “developmental peace” moves in the Eastern Mediterranean are insufficient.

Therefore, this article starts with the connotation of "developmental peace" and attempts to understand the internal dynamics and external roadmaps for China to put forward the peace initiative of "developmental peace" in the context of China's diplomacy towards the Eastern Mediterranean.

### **Democracy vis-à-vis Development: China's "Developmental Peace" Proposal**

In the post-Cold War era, peace and development remain the two themes of the world, the former being the foundation of the latter and the latter the driving force of the former. In its comprehensive cooperation between China on one side and African, Arab and Latin American countries on the other side, "developmental peace" is becoming an important diplomatic concept because peace and development have been a significant objective for the cooperation between China and other developing countries. In May 2017, when addressing the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, President Xi Jinping pointed out that peace deficit, development deficit and governance deficit are grave challenges to humankind and peace. Development and governance have become the targets of Chinese diplomacy in the new era. Facing up to the main hot issues of the world in the 21st century, the doctrine of "developmental peace" is of theoretical and practical significance regarding how to effectively alleviate regional conflicts and realize permanent peace and common development.

So far, there are at least two competing doctrines concerning the root cause and solutions to international conflicts. The first doctrine is characterized by western liberalism. It advocates "democratic peace". That is, conflicts

derive from dictatorship and "democracy deficit", while the legal system in democracies means there is a whole set of beliefs which prevent military conflicts in advance (Owen, 1994: 87-125). The democratic peace theory states that countries with liberal democratic forms of government are less likely to go to war with one another than those with other forms of government. Proponents of the theory draw on the writings of German philosopher Immanuel Kant and, more recently, US President Woodrow Wilson, who, in his 1917 World War I message to Congress, stated, "The world must be made safe for democracy" (Longley, 2022).

The second doctrine is characterized by materialism. It advocates "developmental peace". That is, conflicts primarily derive from scarcity of material wealth, and "development deficit" is the main cause of conflicts. "Developmental peace" implies that the dividend brought about by development can benefit the whole community and help promote political stability and resolution of social contradictions and regional conflicts, turning the economic dividend produced by development into a security dividend at both the national and regional levels (Sun & Zhang, 2019: 116).

As Table 1 shows, "developmental peace" includes an open hypothesis: compared with democratic governance, economic governance has less risk but better effect. Under the precondition of domestic political and social stability, whatever political institution is chosen, it can achieve peace as long as it is capable of pursuing development with economic construction at the center and it can drive economic growth through state-dominated investment (as well as foreign investment) (He, 2017: 25-26).

**Table 1. Two Peace Initiatives in the Eastern Mediterranean**

	<b>Democratic Peace</b>	<b>Developmental Peace</b>
<b>Diplomacy Approaches</b>	Liberalism	Materialism
<b>Source of Threat</b>	Authoritarian Regimes	Backward Socio-economy
<b>Critical Problems</b>	Lack of Democracy	Underdevelopment
<b>Strategic Goals</b>	Establish Democracy	Enhance Domestic Economic Development
<b>Central Tasks</b>	Democratization	Economic Reconstruction
<b>Strategic Priorities</b>	Promotion of Democratization	Removal of Obstacles to Economic Development
<b>Governance</b>	Democratic Governance	Economic Governance
<b>Institutional Buildings</b>	Construction of Democracy and Rule of Law	Economic Development
<b>Trajectories</b>	Top-bottom	Bottom-top
<b>Risk Expectation</b>	Risk Acceptance Model	Risk Avoidance Model
<b>Type of Interference</b>	Reformation	Modification

Source: Degang Sun & Jieying Zhang, 2022.

China favors “developmental peace” because it believes that the major contradiction in the Middle East is under development. In other words, poverty is the root of the major Middle Eastern problems, as China’s development has told the leaders. Since 2012, China’s total economic output has increased from 11.3% to more than 18% of the world economy in 2021. Its GDP per capita rose from \$6,300 to more than \$12,000, forming the world’s largest middle-income group with more than 400 million people, and nearly 100 million rural poor people have been lifted out of poverty. To build a moderately prosperous society in all respects, China’s economic, scientific, technological, and comprehensive national strength has leapt to

a new level (People’s Daily, 2022). Thus China highlights that development and security are two wings of one body and two wheels of an economy.

In February 2019, during the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, an editorial in People’s Daily pointed out that “among the problems in the Middle East, only development is the master key to all the problems. More peaceful efforts should be made to create conditions for development. With more developmental cooperation activating peace, development and peace will form a cycle of mutual coordination and promotion. Therefore, more efforts should be made to explore a governance path of promoting developmental peace for the Middle East” (Zhong, 2019). Starting from the

dialectical relationship between development and peace, China highlights the fundamental role of development in resolving conflicts in the Middle East. Indeed, domestic and regional conflicts in developing countries and regions are primarily a result of the "development deficit" problem, which is embodied by sluggish economic growth, backward infrastructure, a high unemployment rate, and a high inflation rate.

### China's "Developmental Peace" Proposal in the Middle East

China's proposal of "developmental peace" in the Middle East is an experience that the Communist Party of China has learned from its domestic governance, including its domestic development and opening-up. The concept of "common development" with Chinese characteristics has broadened from domestic to international, benefiting the Chinese people to people worldwide (Guo & Gao, 2017: 60-65).

#### The proposal of "developmental peace" combines the agenda of economic development with conflict settlement.

As a rising economy among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China practices "developmental peace" to the best of its ability and promotes the peaceful development of the countries along the "Belt and Road". China advocates "developmental peace" in the Middle East for reasons as follows:

First, the "development deficit" problem in the Middle East demands prompt resolution. According to the International Monetary Fund, there are only 39 developed economies today but 154 emer-

ging markets and developing economies (IMF, 2022). The Middle East, with a relatively high natural birth rate, is one of the most populated areas among developing countries. The average unemployment rate of the Middle East amounted to 9.8%, two times higher than that of the world (International Labour Organization, 2022). The high birth and unemployment rates and low economic growth rates have triggered successive economic and social contradictions in the Middle East, posing an even more severe threat to the fragile peace in the region.

Second, democratic governance of the US and Europe faces hurdles. In the post-conflict era, Middle Eastern countries did not move towards stability or peace. Instead, many of them underwent a "second revolution". Worse, some old conflicts rolled back due to the new geopolitical gaming (Hudson, 2013: 37; 43). In light of the failures of "democratic peace", Middle Eastern countries turned to alternative means of realizing peace, that is, economic and social development. After the decade-long "Arab Spring", it seems that transitional Arab states have returned to their historical origin, and more Middle Eastern countries are showing interest in the Chinese initiative of "developmental peace".

The proposal of "developmental peace" combines the agenda of economic development with conflict settlement. Integrating the forces in the international community and regional actors allows all members to play the role of responsible stakeholders. Moreover, it combines strategic goals with operational and tactical goals, integrating peace, politics, humanitarianism, development and the process of human rights. It attempts to break away from the war economy by promoting the capacity building of the new government and economic growth to reduce the possibility of renewed conflicts (Olivier, 2013: 115; 118).



On September 21, 2022, the Second Middle East Security Forum was held in Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing. (Tengxun Net, 2022)

China argues that lack of development is the root cause of the Middle Eastern conflicts. In 2019, the global average unemployment rate was 5.4%, and the countries in the Middle East were twice that of the world, ranking first in all regions. In 2020, the unemployment rate in the Middle East soared to 11.7%, ranking the highest among all regions in the world. Development issues such as unemployment are the top priority for these countries. According to the 2021 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, launched by the UNDP, among 109 countries, Multidimensional Poverty Population is as large as 1.3 billion, representing 21.7% of these countries' total population, and about half are children under the age of 18 (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative and United Nations Development Program, 2021: 4-5).

China advocates that the easiest way to halt war and stop conflict is to eradicate poverty and fos-

ter development. In March 2021, Foreign Minister Wang Yi put forward a “five-point initiative” on achieving security and stability in the Middle East: 1. advocating mutual respect, 2. upholding equity and justice, 3. achieving non-proliferation, 4. jointly fostering collective security, and 5. accelerating developmental cooperation.

“Developmental cooperation” is actually an economic means for security ends, the same as “developmental peace”. Wang Yi stressed that long-term stability in the Middle East requires development, cooperation and accommodation. The international community should unite to overcome COVID-19 and achieve economic and social recovery as soon as possible. Efforts should be made to combine different resource endowments of Middle East countries, help post-conflict countries in reconstruction, support diversified economic growth of oil-producing countries, and help the Middle East countries develop and achieve re-

vitalization (China Daily, 2021). The China-Arab Reform and Development Forum and the Middle East Security Forum are two important mechanisms for China's "developmental peace" initiative.

On September 21, 2022, the Second Middle East Security Forum was held in Beijing. Vice Foreign Minister Deng Li attended the opening ceremony and delivered a keynote speech, proposing "promoting security through development", the essence being "developmental peace".

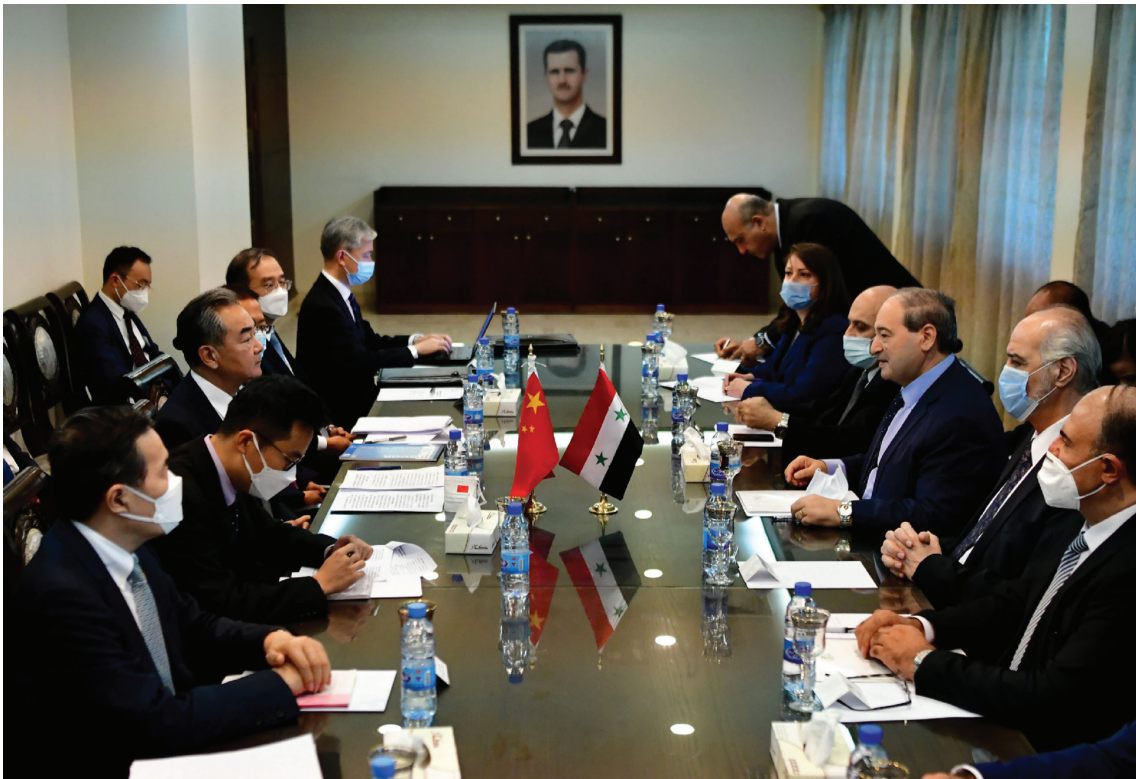
### **Achieving peace through development has become an important part of communication between China and Middle Eastern countries since the outbreak of "the Arab Spring".**

"To achieve long-term stability in the region, China is willing to assist the Middle East countries within its capacity in terms of post-COVID-19 economic recovery and food and energy security, and support countries in the region to improve people's livelihood and maintain stability. China is willing to strengthen the docking of development strategies with the Middle East countries, integrate their respective production capacity technology and resource market advantages, jointly build the 'Belt and Road' with high quality, and promote free trade negotiations. China is willing to strengthen cooperation in such fields as green innovation, food and energy, health, investment and finance based on traditional cooperation in trade, energy and infrastructure to promote sustainable security with sustainable development and lay a solid foundation for Middle East security" (China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

It is common sense that security and development are two sides of a coin, and the former is the basis of the latter. However, "developmental peace" may reverse the relations, for it argues that "development" may be potentially a precondition for security. From theory to practice, "developmental peace" has become an important approach to China's participation in the peace initiative in the Middle East. In July 2018, during his visit to the United Arab Emirates, President Xi Jinping pointed out, when meeting with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, then Vice President and Prime Minister of UAE, and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, that "at present, the peoples in West Asia and Northern Africa all long for security and stability. Apparently, it is an unstoppable trend to pursue peace, reform and development. China would like to deepen its bilateral strategic cooperation and seek a governance path featuring developmental peace in the Middle East" (People's Daily, 2018). It was the first time the Chinese government has spoken of "developmental peace" in terms of a peace initiative in the Middle East, which was echoed by the UAE counterparts.

In February 2019, when meeting Mohammed bin Salman, the visiting Crown Prince of the UAE, President Xi pointed out, "China is ready to work with Saudi Arabia to jointly explore a governance path in the Middle East featuring the moves of promoting "developmental peace" and working toward a solid foundation for peace and stability in the region through jointly building the Belt and Road and strengthening regional development cooperation" (Xinhuanet, 2019). Achieving "peace" through "development" has become an important part of communication between China and Middle Eastern countries since the outbreak of "the Arab Spring".





Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad in Damascus, Syria, July 17, 2021. (Xinhua, 2021)

The Eastern Mediterranean is an important arena for China to put its “developmental peace” into practice. The paper chooses Syria, Palestine and Lebanon and sees how China implements its “developmental peace” proposal. The three countries are all oil-poor, war-torn and regime-fragile Arab countries located in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, it is easier to have a comparative study.

### China’s “Developmental Peace” Proposal in Syria

Syria is experiencing a protracted political and socio-economic crisis that has severely deteriorated living conditions. Outside powers are involved in Syria’s civil war through proxy means. The civil war in Syria is regarded as the most brutal conflict in the world,

which started in 2011 and is still ongoing (ClearIAS, 2017). The already fragile health system is overstretched with additional strain from the COVID-19 pandemic. As the crisis enters its twelfth year, 6.9 million people remain internally displaced, and 5.6 million have fled the country as refugees, the vast majority to neighbouring countries (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Unlike other permanent members of the UN Security Council, China does not have troops in Syria, nor does it seek geopolitical interest or sphere of influence in the war-torn country. Chinese government nominated a special envoy for the Syrian issue in 2016 who has been exploring peace proposals through joint international efforts. China’s special envoy to Syria, Xie Xiaoyan, explained China’s

position on the Syrian issue at the point of the 10th anniversary of the Syrian proxy war. Xie said China calls for a comprehensive approach from political, security, humanitarian and reconstruction aspects to help settle the Syrian crisis once and for all (Liu, 2021). Unlike Russia, the US and European powers, China emphasizes economic reconstruction for political reconciliation, arguing that the international community should seek common ground while putting aside differences. Economic recovery might be the breakthrough for the Syrian political deadlock.

**China's "developmental peace" is initiated by the Chinese government but is implemented by Chinese state-owned and private enterprises, a model of "the government setting the stage while the enterprises are acting".**

In the past decade, China has been calling for peace, protecting the Syrian people's interests, and lifting sanctions on Syria imposed by the United States and Europe for the sake of the country's humanitarian situations, such as tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, China's "developmental peace" initiative is down-top, starting from the grass-root level of economic and social reconstruction. China's funding and announcement of giving humanitarian aid to Syrians is a case in point. Since it does not have proxies, China cooperates with the United Nations and the Syrian central government for emergency humanitarian assistance and economic cooperation (Ding & Sun, 2021: 57).

The Syrian conflict is divided into two stages. In the first stage of military hostility, China adhered to its principle of non-interference in Syrian internal affairs and sought conflict resolution through the

UN framework. In the second stage of political reconciliation and economic reconstruction, China attempts to play a bigger role. In the field of post-war reconstruction, China steadily carries out various exchanges in which Chinese enterprises participate in the reconstruction of Syria, and Chinese enterprises also hold an active attitude of participation.

China encourages its enterprises to participate in the implementation of its "developmental peace" proposal in Syria. As early as May 2017, the China-Arab Exchange Association hosted a seminar titled "Security Situation and Reconstruction Opportunities in Syria - Briefing on the China-Arab Exchange Association's Visit to Syria", which released various reconstruction projects in Syria, such as food, water, infrastructure reconstruction, electricity, building materials, and agriculture, which were positively responded to and supported by the participating enterprises. In May 2017, the China-Syria Enterprises Matchmaking and Exchange Conference, organized by the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, was held in Beijing. More than 150 Chinese and Syrian enterprises from the infrastructure, energy, manufacturing and other fields of China and Syria attended the conference, which was the first time for China-Syria enterprises to communicate with each other.

In August 2017, more than 20 Chinese enterprises participated in the 59th Damascus International Expo, and the products on display covered energy, building materials, automobiles, furniture, mechanical equipment, household appliances and other fields (Economic and Business Department of the People's Republic of China Embassy in Syria, 2017). From September 6 to 15, 2018, the 60th Damascus International Fair, the largest and oldest trade and industrial exhibition in the Middle East, was held. As many as 1,722 enterprises from 48 countries participated in the fair.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad holds talks with Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Damascus, the capital of Syria on July 17, 2021. (CGTN, 2021)

Chinese and other entrepreneurs from all over the world saw important business opportunities in Syria (Wang & Zheng, 2018). China’s “developmental peace” is initiated by the Chinese government but is implemented by Chinese state-owned and private enterprises, a model of “the government setting the stage while the enterprises are acting”.

China also strengthens humanitarian assistance to implement its “developmental peace” proposal. On May 15, 2017, the Chinese Ambassador to Syria, Qi Qianjin and the Director of the Syrian Plan and the International Cooperation Agency signed, on behalf of the Chinese and Syrian governments, an economic and technical cooperation agreement on providing emergency assistance to Syria (for humanitarian purposes). China offered emergency food aid to Syria as well. On February 14, 2018, Ambassador Qi Qianjin and the representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Syria inked an

agreement on the transfer of assistance on behalf of the Chinese government and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Per the agreement, on May 15, 2017, the Chinese government provided assistance to support the International Committee of the Red Cross in providing water, food, temporary shelter and medical services to displaced persons and returning refugees in Syria.

At present, the relevant assistance projects have been successfully implemented. On November 20, 2017, the Chinese Ambassador to Syria and Syrian representatives jointly attended the handover ceremony of China’s emergency food aid to Syria at the port of Latakia (The Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Syria, 2017). Humanitarian assistance is important in China’s “developmental peace” proposal in Syria.

On August 16, 2018, the Chinese Ambassador to Syria and the Director of the Syrian Plan and

the International Cooperation Agency signed two exchanges of letters on humanitarian assistance cooperation on behalf of the two governments, involving public transport, food, housing and other fields. On October 10, 2018, the Chargé d'affaires ad interim of the Chinese Embassy in Syria and the Deputy Minister of the Syrian Ministry of Electricity jointly attended the handover ceremony of China's assistance to Syria's power equipment project held in Syria and signed the handover certificates on behalf of the Chinese and Syrian governments (Sina News, 2018).

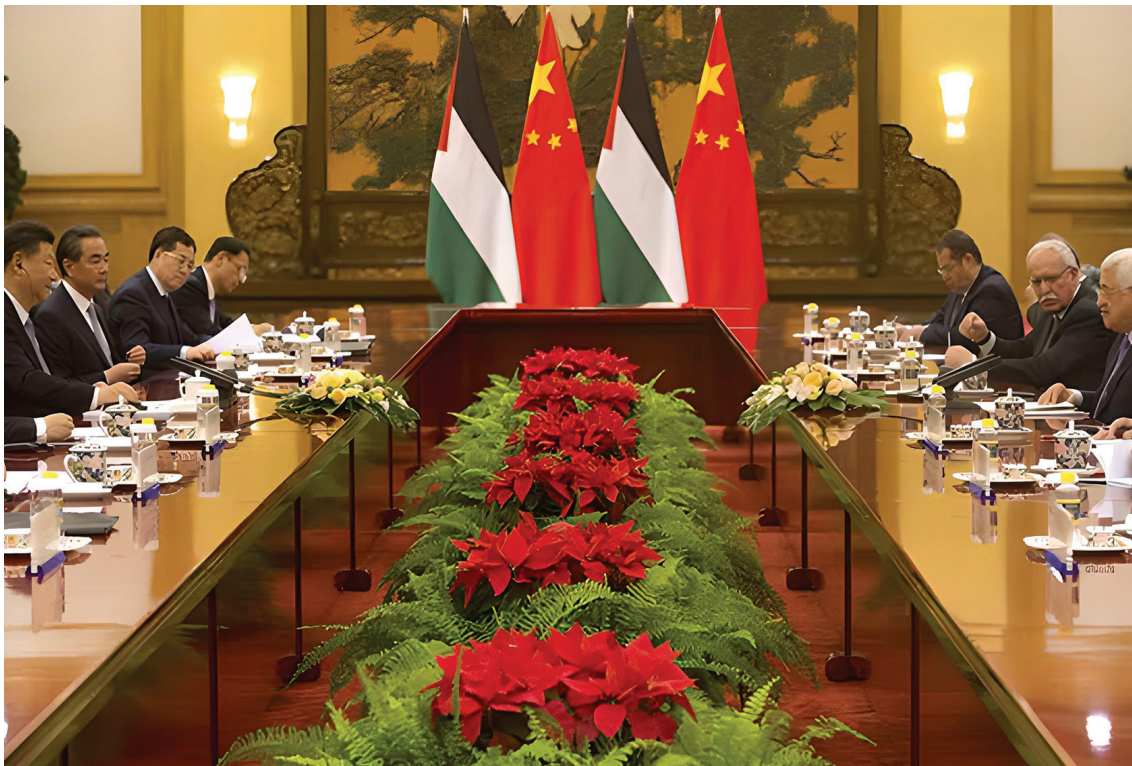
### **Chinese enterprises' economic engagement in Syria is also conducive to Syrian political reconciliation.**

Economic and technological assistance is important to China's "developmental peace" proposal in Syria. In March 2020, the Chinese Ambassador to Syria, Feng Biao, and the Director of the Syrian Plan and the International Cooperation Agency, Imad Sabni, signed an Agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between China and Syria. Feng said that China attaches great importance to and actively promotes the development of China-Syria friendly relations. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, China has actively provided humanitarian assistance to the Republic and carried out technical training for its personnel, which is a concrete manifestation of their friendship. China is willing to continue to provide assistance and support to Syria within its capabilities, actively participate in the reconstruction, and strive to promote the steady development of China-Syria friendly cooperation (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in

Syria, 2020).

China's "developmental peace" proposal is successful. It encourages Chinese enterprises to get involved because they can get economic benefits, and more importantly, these enterprises' economic engagement in Syria is also conducive to Syrian political reconciliation. In July 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the Middle East, and Syria was his first stop. In Damascus, Wang summarized a "four-point proposal" for the Syrian issue: first, persisting in respecting Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, letting the Syrian people decide their future and destiny. Third, adhering to the principle of putting people's livelihood first, accelerating reconstruction, and immediately lifting all unilateral sanctions and economic blockades against Syria. Fourth, persisting in effectively combating terrorism (Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Among the "four-point proposal", the third point reflects China's "developmental peace" ideation.

In "Joint Statement of the Consultations of Deputy Foreign Ministers/Special Envoys of BRICS Countries on the Middle East and North Africa," May 2022, China and other BRICS members stressed that the key to solving the Syrian issue is to follow the "Syrian-led, Syrian-owned, UN-facilitated political process" steered by the UN Security Council, respect Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to support the role of the UN as the main channel of mediation. China and other developing countries emphasized the importance of prioritizing people's livelihoods and accelerating early recovery projects (Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In implementing its "developmental peace" initiative, China proposes to "give priority to people's livelihoods and economic recovery".



Xi Jinping and Mahmoud Abbas exchanged views on the bilateral relationship and other issues of common concern on July 18, 2017. The two sides signed a range of agreements following the presidents' meeting. (CGTN, 2017)

### **China's "Developmental Peace" Proposal in the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict**

The Chinese government argues that the Palestinian issue is the most fundamental in the Middle Eastern conflict resolution; the "Two-State Solution" is the only realistic way to solve the issue. The parties concerned in the Palestinian question and the international community should make practical efforts to promote the "Two-State Solution" based on United Nations resolutions and the Arab peace initiative.

As for the solution to the Palestine-Israeli issue, China also suggests seeking common ground while reserving differences, enhancing political mutual trust and ultimately advancing the peace process

in the Middle East by proceeding from economic cooperation. In July 2017, President Xi Jinping met with Mahmoud Abbas, President of Palestine, during which President Xi put forward a "four-point proposal" on the solution to the Palestine-Israeli issue: efforts should be made to advance political settlement based on the "Two-State Solution" steadfastly and to restart peace talks as early as possible. Further attention must be paid to development to promote cooperation between Palestine and Israel. To China, both Palestine and Israel are important partners along the "Belt and Road". China stands ready to carry out mutually beneficial collaboration following the idea of developmental peace and continue to support Palestine's cause to accelerate its development. China proposed to launch a tripartite dialogue mechanism

with Palestine and Israel to advance major projects to assist the Palestinian side (People's Daily, 2017). Arguably the Chinese initiative of "developmental peace" puts forward new thoughts and ideas for solving the Palestine-Israeli conflicts.

**To achieve "developmental peace", the Palestine authority should be empowered and consolidate its capacity building.**

In 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi had a new proposal for a solution to the issue. He raised the following three ideas: first, the Palestinian National Authority should be strengthened, and it should be empowered to exercise its sovereign functions in security, finance and other fields to achieve effective control over autonomy and the occupied territories. Second, the international community should support the Palestinian government to strengthen unity, achieve internal reconciliation through consultation and dialogue, and form a unified negotiating position on resolving the Palestinian issue. Third, Palestine and Israel should be encouraged to restart peace talks based on the "Two-State Solution" (Sohu, 2021). Judging by the "three-point proposal", it is apparent that a weak government of Palestine is not conducive to the peace process. To achieve "developmental peace", the Palestine authority should be empowered and consolidate its capacity building.

Palestinian refugees are the central consideration of China in implementing its "developmental peace" initiative. On January 13, 2021, Ambassador Feng Biao attended the handover ceremony of anti-COVID-19 materials provided by the Chinese Government to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near

East and signed the handover memorandum with the Agency's representative in Syria. Feng said that since the outbreak of the epidemic, China has provided many batches of medical materials to Palestinian refugees in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan and other countries through the Agency and has also sent medical groups to Palestine to share China's anti-Covid-19 experience. Feng stressed that in the future, China was willing to strengthen cooperation with the Agency further and make greater contributions to improving the well-being of the Palestinian people (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Syria, 2021). After the outbreak of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in May 2021, China, as the rotating President of the Security Council, actively promoted the Security Council to issue a strong voice for cease-fire and cessation. China provided \$1 million in humanitarian assistance to Palestine and contributed \$1 million more to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

China nominated Ambassador Wang Shijie as the Middle East special envoy of China in 2002, the first one in China's Foreign Ministry. As one of its efforts for diplomatic mediation, on July 15, 2021, the Chinese government held an online seminar for Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. Representatives from the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the People's Struggle Front, the Israeli Minister of Justice and initiator of the "Geneva Initiative", and activists from both Palestinian and Israeli non-governmental organizations attended the meeting. In his speech at the Seminar of Palestinian Israeli Peacekeepers, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi pointed out that the Palestinian humanitarian situation was worrying and seriously eroding the social foundation of peace.



Palestinian Health Minister Mai al-Kaila meets with the Chinese medical expert team in the West Bank city of Ramallah, on June 10, 2020. (Nobani, A./Xinhua, 2020)

China would continue to provide humanitarian assistance to Palestine and support the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). China is not a member of the Middle East Quartet (the US, Russia, Europe Union and the United Nations). Thus, it prefers to play a role in humanitarian and economic assistance in its mediation endeavors.

On November 29, 2021, the United Nations held the commemoration conference of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. President Xi sent a congratulatory message to the conference, as the Chinese leader has done for the past ten consecutive years. President Xi pointed out that the international community should adhere to objectivity and impartiality, advocate inclusiveness and mutual understanding, and take the 30th anniversary of the Madrid Peace Conference as an opportunity to provide more help for the Palestinian and Israeli sides to restart

equal dialogue based on the “Two-State Solution”. In his congratulatory message, Xi appeals that the international community should continue to help the Palestinian people fight against COVID-19 and effectively improve the Palestinian economy, people’s livelihood and humanitarian conditions (The Office of the People’s Republic of China in the State of Palestine, 2021). That is a reflection of Beijing’s “developmental peace” as well.

China’s “developmental peace” initiative is welcomed by the special envoys of BRICS. In May 2022, China and other BRICS countries’ Middle Eastern special envoys issued a joint declaration encouraging Palestine and Israel to resume peace talks based on a negotiated “Two-State Solution”. These special envoys called on the international community to intensify its efforts in support of UN-led international peace conferences to achieve a comprehensive, lasting and just settlement that allows Israel and Palestine to live side by side in peace and

security (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

In the joint declaration, China, in particular, stressed "developmental peace" and underscored that efforts should be made to leverage respective strengths, actively promote peace talks, and help Palestine contain the COVID pandemic, develop its economy, ease its humanitarian situation and improve its people's welfare. China commended the extensive work carried out by UNRWA to alleviate the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people and called on the international community to provide developmental assistance to support UNRWA activities to enable it to increase its reach amongst the Palestinian community (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). From the text, we can find that in "developmental peace", capacity building is key to the peace process. The weak regime of Palestine, like that of Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Lebanon, may not be able to propel economic development, thus hindering political reconciliation as well.

On March 10, 2022, the Chinese Special Envoy for the Middle East, Zhai Jun, visited Palestine. President Abbas of Palestine met Zhai and his delegation at the Presidential Palace in Ramallah. The two sides exchanged views on bilateral relations, the Palestinian question and other international and regional hotspot issues (The Office of the People's Republic of China in the State of Palestine, 2022). The China-proposed "three-point" on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict centers on "developmental peace", with development and capacity building as the crux, was welcomed by the Palestinian counterpart.

### **China's "Developmental Peace" Proposal in Lebanon**

Lebanon was stable and prosperous in the 1950s and 1960s, but the brutal civil war lasting from 1975 to 1990 caused a heavy loss of a quarter million. Since

then, Lebanese politics has been polarized, and society has been divided. Affected by sectarian discord, the Lebanese economy is almost at a standstill with high inflation, serious currency devaluation and soaring unemployment. From October 2019 to June 2021, food prices in Lebanon increased by 404% (The Geopolitics, 2021). Facing such a security and economic predicament, China does not launch political mediation among Lebanese political parties; instead, it seeks to play a positive role through "developmental peace".

As Chinese Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Chen Weiqing wrote in an article titled "China's Commitment to its People Behind Remarkable Development," China's argument for "development and peace" at home is based on its contemporary development (Chen, 2021). As the theme of the times and the orientation of national policies have changed, China has experienced three stages in dealing with the relationship between development and security, namely, survival-oriented development (from the founding of the PRC to the dawn of the Reform and Opening-up), development-oriented security (from the Reform and Opening-up to the start of 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012), equal emphasis on development and security (since the 18th National Congress of the CPC), and promoting high-quality development (Zhong, 2022: 74). Before China's Reform and Opening-up was launched in 1979, China was politically divided and ideologically controversial at home. Deng Xiaoping's proposal for "economic development first" finally became the consensus of all factions. This has become the historical legacy for China to carry out its "developmental peace" proposal in less developed countries.

Economic cooperation and humanitarian assistance are China's tools to promote Lebanese peace. On the one hand, China is the major trading partner of Lebanon, and it accounts for 40% of Lebanon's imports, amounting to \$2 billion per year (The Geopolitics, 2021).





China's military donated to the Lebanese Army medical supplies needed in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. (Xinhua, 2020)

China has recently begun investing in the Republic's power grids and highways. Railways are an essential part of the country's infrastructure as well. China began operating railways linking Beirut with Tripoli in 2019. It was further linked to Damascus in Syria, which has created jobs and reduced unemployment. Promoted by "developmental peace", China can connect roads and railways to realize its BRI vision. Hariri's government showed signs of cooperation and FDI inflows in this region, with China being the best choice (The Geopolitics, 2021).

As a poverty-stricken regime, Lebanon is proactive in cooperating with China on the Belt and Road, expecting to achieve economic takeoff. In August 2022, China exported \$261 million and imported \$5.59 million from Lebanon, resulting in a positive trade balance of \$255 million. Between August 2021 and August 2022 the exports of China have increased

by \$123 million (89.6%) from \$137 million to \$261 million, while imports decreased by \$-1.76 million (-23.9%) from \$7.35 million to \$5.59 million (The OEC World, 2022). China's business activities are market-oriented but are encouraged by the Chinese government to expand its political influence.

On the other hand, China provides humanitarian assistance to Lebanon. In August 2020, Beirut was struck by a deadly chemical explosion that displaced approximately 300,000 inhabitants and killed over 150 civilians. The one-thousand Chinese UN peacekeepers quickly organized themselves and began rescue operations. China offered \$1 million in emergency aid as well. At the video conference on international assistance to Lebanon held on August 9, 2020, Zhai Jun, Special Envoy of the Chinese Government for the Middle East, announced that China would provide further assistance to Lebanon to support the

Republic in treating the injured people in the explosion, and provide assistance to families suffering huge losses or displacement (Guangming Net, 2020).

The Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music, funded by China, is a token of China's "developmental peace" as well. The conservatory began its construction in December 2020 and will take three years to finish. With an expected cost of \$62 milli-

**China's "developmental peace" proposal, starting from improving people's well-being and the government's capacity, might provide a new trajectory for Lebanese political reconciliation.**

on, the conservatory covers an area of 39,000 square meters with a capacity of 1,200 people. The conservatory, near Lebanon's capital Beirut, will be a center of attraction for the Middle East region, said Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati (Global Times, 2022).

In cooperation with other developing powers, China attempts to carry out its "developmental peace" initiative in Lebanon through a multilateral arena. In May 2022, China and other BRICS members echoed their support for Lebanon's efforts to safeguard stability, security, sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity, and the Lebanese people's rights to pursue a development path suited to their national conditions. The BRICS special envoys for Middle Eastern Affairs unanimously called upon the international community to continuously assist Lebanon without political conditions to help the Mediterranean Republic restore political, social and economic stability as soon as possible. They welcome the staff-level agreement signed between the Government of Lebanon and the IMF to take all necessary measures

and undertake long overdue economic reforms to address the severe economic challenges faced by the people of Lebanon (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). China's "developmental peace" proposal, starting from improving people's well-being and the government's capacity building, might provide a new trajectory for Lebanese political reconciliation.

### **Eastern Mediterranean and China's "Developmental Peace" Proposal in Prospect**

As the only country in the world that has enshrined "adhering to the path of peaceful development" in its Constitution, China has never been actively involved in the Middle East war, occupied an inch of the Middle East, nor engaged in proxy wars. Up to now, China has solved the land border issue with 12 of its 14 neighboring countries by peaceful means (Wu & Zhang, 2022: 54). President Xi Jinping asked during his visit to Egypt in 2016: "The Middle East is a fertile land. We are saddened that so far there has been no escape from war and conflict. Where is the Middle East headed?" (Liu, 2022: 19). Chinese answer to the question is: "developmental peace" might be one of the solutions.

Since the Eastern Mediterranean is a conflict-prone region, it is a key area for the practice of "developmental peace". The rivalry between the US and Russia in Syria, the Cold War between Israel and Iran, the disputes between Palestine and Israel and the security deficit facing other transitional Arab countries in the region are all closely related to the "development deficit". In January 2016, "improving people's livelihood" was mentioned three times in China's Arab Policy Paper, which also promised that "China is willing to cooperate with Arab states to promote the new type of cooperation mechanism featuring openness and reciprocity, mutual benefit and win-win results.



Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, Culture Minister Mohammad Mortada and the Chinese ambassador to Lebanon Qian Minjian visit the construction site of the China-funded National Higher Conservatory of Music in Dbayeh near Beirut on October 6, 2022. (Xinhua, 2022)

According to Arab states' needs, China will continue to assist Arab states through bilateral and multilateral channels, to help them improve self-development capability and people's livelihood" (Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China, 2016).

In terms of mechanism, China and the Eastern Mediterranean countries are strengthening their communication on governance, making "developmental peace" a common vision and ideation. The spirit of "developmental peace" can be seen in the "Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum" and various documents concerning the joint building of

the "Belt and Road" by China and Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

First, to the best of its ability, the Chinese government provides development aid to unstable countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, which helps alleviate the tension in the region. The political factions in the countries are short of consensus in terms of national development paths, and their enduring economic and social problems also aggravate their upheaval and that of the region. China's developmental aid to these countries, which is conducive to alleviating regional conflicts, is a manifestation of "developmental peace".


Second, China actively participates in the capacity building of the governments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Chinese idea of "developmental peace" insists that government laxity often leads to chaos and conflicts, and the enhancement of capacity building of the governments of middle and small countries contributes to their internal cohesion and stability. China's support to the capacity building of Eastern Mediterranean countries includes support to the capacity building. It includes the target countries' capacity for law enforcement, police training and stability maintenance.

Third, China offers humanitarian aid to Eastern Mediterranean countries. After the outbreak of the "Arab Spring", the traditional and new hotspot issues in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine remain more or less unsolved. After ten years of chaos, the situations are still full of uncertainties. The assistance that China provided to the conflicted countries under the frameworks of the UN, the Arab League and the African Union and through the platform of bilateral cooperation promoted peace and development in the region and helped to de-escalate the hotspot issues in the region.

Finally, efforts are needed to improve the idea of "developmental peace" in practice. In implementing the idea of "developmental peace", China will be more open and inclusive. Apart from China, other actors, such as the United States Agency for International Development, the Official Development Assistance of Japan, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Official Development Assistance of the European Union are also cooperative partners of China in fulfilling "developmental peace" in practice (Sun & Zhang, 2019: 128-129). Only when outside powers can complement and coordinate can peace and stability be realized in the Eastern Mediterranean.

## Conclusion

China and the Eastern Mediterranean countries all belong to the developing world, sharing similarities in national conditions. Unlike developed countries, which tend to define security by external threats, the main task of developing countries is development, and their domestic socio-economic challenges are enormous. Therefore, the latter's security is defined by development (Zhong, 2013: 16). In the context that the idea of "democratic peace", driven by Western powers, has failed to achieve substantive headway, the idea of "developmental peace" is expected by Eastern Mediterranean countries. Based on its experience of reform and opening up, the China-proposed idea of "developmental peace" is a product of thinking over possible solutions to regional conflicts. Although this idea has not taken shape and remains to be tested and enhanced in practice, it at least functions as an alternative for transitional countries to restore peace. It is more inclusive, for it embraces plural values and competitive peace initiatives, arguing that each country can choose its political and economic institutions according to its national situation (He, 2017: 28).

The Eastern Mediterranean countries are confronted with "growing pains". The security and development problems in the Eastern Mediterranean cannot be solved immediately. The economic governance advocated by "developmental peace" and the West-led "democratic peace" are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Although underdevelopment is a major cause of the complex and accumulated security problem in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is never the sole one. Thus it is imperative for the international community, acting from the perspective of "taking comprehensive measures", to apply economic, political and military means to build a community of shared interests and a shared future in the region. 

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