

Cooperation Between China and Eastern Mediterranean Countries in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges*



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the current status of China's promotion of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in the Eastern Mediterranean region and selects some major countries to focus on the strengths and opportunities, as well as the external challenges and threats of China's efforts to promote the initiative in this region through Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. At present, China faces challenges and risks in the process of steadily advancing its cooperation with countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region. The "Great Game", regional turmoil, the COVID-19 epidemic and many other uncertain factors have impacted the stability of the regional situation and social and economic development. How China faces and resolves these crises is crucial to promoting the "Belt and Road" construction in the future.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Cooperation, Eastern Mediterranean.

Introduction

FOR A LONG TIME, CHINA HAS PLACED its strategic focus on China's surrounding areas, and there is no specific official Chinese policy on the Mediterranean. However, the BRI proposal has highlighted the Mediterranean region's geographical importance.

From the data of the past nine years, China has made many important achievements in building BRI with Türkiye, Israel and other Eastern Mediterranean countries. However, containment from the United States, the turbulence of the regional situation and the COVID-19

epidemic are still the major crises facing China in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Crisis is expressed as "Wei ji" in Chinese. "Wei" means dangerous, and "Ji" means opportunity. "Wei ji" is a sapiential word. It means where the danger is, there is an opportunity. It is a challenging task for China to seek opportunities in these crises.

This paper determines to conduct a strategic examination of cooperation between China and Eastern Mediterranean Countries through SWOT analysis. Often applied in a competitive business environment, there is utility in applying it geo-strategically to China's BRI in the Mediterranean region.

Table 1. A geostrategic SWOT Analysis for China’s BRI in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

STRENGTHS	OPPORTUNITIES	WEAKNESSES or THREATS (EXTERNAL)
(Israel, Türkiye, Greece, Egypt) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political mutual trust ● Economic and trade continued to grow ● Frequent cultural exchanges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Policy coordination ● Infrastructure connectivity ● Unimpeded trade ● Financial integration ● Closer people-to-people ties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foreign interference ● US-China competition ● Unstable regional situation ● COVID-19 epidemic

Source: Ye Zhangxu, 2023.

The Current Situation of Cooperation Between China and Eastern Mediterranean Countries

Since China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative, it has received positive responses from most countries worldwide. By the end of July 2022, China signed the BRI cooperation documents with more than 150 countries and international organizations, with direct non-financial investment in countries along the Belt and Road exceeding \$140 billion and trade volume with these countries of \$12 trillion. In addition, there are 94 shipping routes named after “Silk Road Maritime”, reaching 108 ports in 31 countries (Belt and Road Portal, 2022). As President Xi Jinping said at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, “From the Eurasian continent to Africa, the Americas and Oceania, Belt and Road cooperation has opened up new space for global economic growth, produced new platforms for international trade and investment and offered new ways for improving global economic governance. Indeed, this initiative has helped improve people’s lives in countries involved

and created more opportunities for common prosperity” (Xinhua News Agency, 2022).

The Mediterranean Sea represents a highly strategic intersection point between Asia, Africa, and Europe, which connects the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Adding to this is the fact that the Mediterranean Sea provides the shortest route that connects the Far East to Europe and the Atlantic (Gürcan, 2021). The Silk Road, which started during the Han Dynasty in China, brought Chinese silk and porcelain westward through the Western Region and the South China Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean region, from where they were sold to Europe and other regions. Today, with the development of ocean shipping, the Mediterranean Sea remains one of the busiest and most important sea lanes in the world.

First of all, from the perspective of “One Road”, under the trend of China’s continuous emphasis on maritime construction, the key construction direction of the “Maritime Silk Road” is from China’s eastern coastal ports to the Indian Ocean via the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, and then from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal. By radiating from the

Eastern Mediterranean, one could argue that it is possible to communicate with the Arab Islamic world to the east, the African continent to the south by Egypt, the developed EU economic sphere to the west, and the Black Sea to the north by the Bosphorus Strait of Türkiye.

Secondly, from the perspective of “One Belt”, although there are several routes of the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, the key route is still consistent with the direction of the ancient Silk Road, that is, from the western region of China through Central Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, the intersection of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road in the Eastern Mediterranean highlights the importance of the geostrategic location of this region.

In particular, Türkiye and China’s geographical location and conformation offer potential advantages for improving maritime cooperation along Maritime Silk Road (Gürcan, 2021). As Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said during his meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the SCO Summit, “Türkiye’s ‘Middle Corridor’ plan and the Belt and Road Initiative, it is hoped that intensified efforts can be made to build synergy between the development strategies of the two countries to boost common development and rejuvenation” (Xinhua News Agency, 2022).

The year 2022 marks the ninth anniversary of the BRI. In the past nine years, China has turned the BRI from ideas into actions and vision into reality. The outcomes between China and the countries along the route have been fruitful, especially in the following five aspects: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties.

Policy Coordination

The Belt and Road Initiative has won positive responses from numerous countries and international organizations, becoming a high-profile international cooperation platform. The cooperation documents signed by China and a wide range of countries to build BRI cover investment, trade, science and technology, humanities and other fields.

At the national level, the major countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Türkiye, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Greece, and Cyprus), except for Israel, have signed cooperation agreements with the Chinese government. Although Israel has not signed a cooperation document directly with China, it is also actively dovetailing with the “Belt and Road” construction. Additionally, Israel is a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, along with Türkiye and Egypt.

At the regional level, the Belt and Road Initiative effectively fits with Türkiye’s Middle Corridor initiative, the European Union’s EU-Asia connectivity strategy, and other regional development plans. In addition, China’s Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 and 2019 are the highest-profile international cooperation platform under the Belt and Road framework.

Infrastructure Connectivity

Infrastructure connectivity is also a high priority on the BRI agenda. Over the past nine years, the construction of efficient and smooth international corridors has been accelerated with the efforts of countries along the routes. In terms of railways, the China-Europe Railway

Express, as an effective carrier of interoperability and mutual interconnection between China and the countries along the BRI, further highlights the role of logistics in connecting the countries along the BRI. Up to July 2022, the China-Europe Railway Express has planned 82 routes that connect 200 cities in 24 European countries (He, 2022).

In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the southern route of the China-Europe train from China to Türkiye via Central Asia and then to Europe is developing rapidly. In terms of ports, China has built and invested in numerous overseas ports, helping host countries develop port industries and hinterland economies and realizing the development of large-scale and modernized ports. Among them, the representative projects in the Eastern Mediterranean region are the Ashdod South Port Project in Israel, Istanbul Port of Kuymak in Türkiye, Piraeus Port in Greece, and Damietta International Container Terminal in Egypt (PortSEurope, 2020; China Daily, 2017; Reuters, 2021).

Unimpeded Trade

The efforts invested in the initiative have liberalized and facilitated trade and investment in the participating countries and regions. Trade in services between China and other BRI countries have seen steady progress. China has become the largest trading partner of 25 countries along the Belt and Road, including Türkiye, Syria and Egypt in the Eastern Mediterranean region. At the same time, Greece and Cyprus are China's largest trading partners outside the EU. Several cooperation parks, such as China-Türkiye Photovoltaic Industrial Park, China-Egypt TEDA Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone

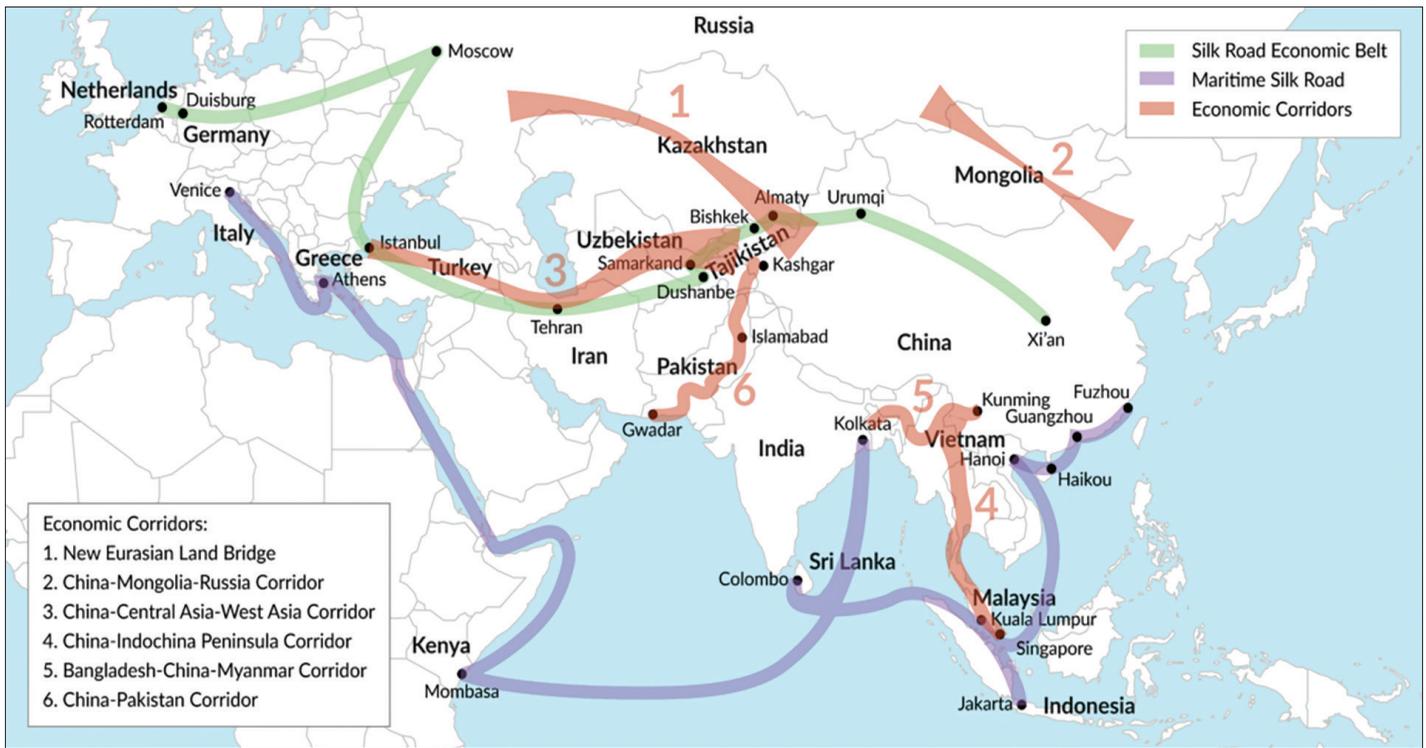
and China-Israel Changzhou Innovation Park, have also played an active role in undertaking cooperation between Chinese and foreign enterprises, employing local people and driving the economic development of the host country (HANFY Solar, 2020; SETC, 2017; China Daily, 2022).

Financial Integration

Financial integration is an important pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative. Up to July 2022, China has made bilateral currency swap arrangements with more than 20 BRI countries and Renminbi clearing arrangements with 10 BRI countries. One representative cross-border cooperation project is the establishment of ICBC Türkiye in 2015 based on the acquisition of shares of Türkiye's Tekstilbank by ICBC. In 2022, ICBC Türkiye was awarded "Best Corporate Bank" and "Fastest Growing Corporate Bank" this year (Hua, 2022). In addition, to provide better financing support to the countries along the BRI to achieve connectivity, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund have received extensive support from countries along the route. Headquartered in Beijing, the AIIB is another locomotive of economic cooperation as part of post-hegemonic multipolarity in Eurasia (Gürçan, 2020). Today, the number of AIIB members has increased from 57 in 2015 to 105, covering almost all countries in the Eastern Mediterranean (The Economic Times, 2022).

Closer People-to-People Ties

In recent years, the BRI countries have conducted diplomatic activities and cultural exchanges in wide fields, enhancing mutual understanding



Map of the BRI Economic Corridors. (Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2019)

and recognition and laying a solid cultural foundation for furthering the initiative.

Firstly, cultural exchanges between China and countries along the route take various forms. China, CEE countries, Türkiye, Greece, Egypt, and South Africa have hosted activities to celebrate the cultures of BRI countries in different years and developed about a dozen cultural exchange brands such as the “Silk Road Tour” and “Chinese/African Cultures in Focus”. China also promotes the understanding of the Chinese language and culture by people from all over the world through the Confucius Institute program.

Secondly, China has also joined hands with countries along the route to fight the COVID-19 epidemic. As of the end of 2021, China has provided multiple batches of epidemic

prevention materials and vaccines to all countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region. China is also actively helping Syria and Libya to promote post-war reconstruction through aid materials (Global Times, 2022).

Opportunities for China and Eastern Mediterranean Countries' Cooperation

Notably, China's relations with the Mediterranean countries are framed by its official policy of non-interference in political affairs, in contrast to the policies of historical Western partners (Abdel & Jacobs, 2020). This has laid a stable foundation for China to promote the joint construction of BRI with Mediterranean countries. Specifically, China maintains good relations with all the major countries in this region, which can be seen mainly in the following aspects.



Sino-Israeli Relations

As a nation with splendid culture, a long history and many disasters, the Jewish people have had a very strong suffering consciousness since Israel was established last century. Being a direct participant in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and experiencing numerous Middle East wars, Israel has seized every opportunity to develop its national strength. Israel is not dominant in land area, population size and natural resources, yet it is a “technological power” and “innovative power” that has turned itself into a world leader in high-tech development. It is no surprise that China has established the “Innovative Comprehensive Partnership” with Israel, which is also the only such kind of relationship between China and other countries (Knowledge at Wharton Staff, 2015).

The diplomatic relations between China and Israel have undergone a long, tortuous and complicated process. Although Israel was the first country in the Middle East to recognize the People’s Republic of China, it was the last to establish diplomatic relations

with China until January 24, 1992 (Xiao, 2016). After then, China and Israel achieved fruitful cooperation in infrastructure construction, engineering contracting and high-tech industries (Bi, 2018). But since the dramatic changes in the Middle East in 2011, Israel’s “Look East” policy and China’s BRI have gone hand in hand, driving a breakthrough and transformation in relations between the two countries.

Firstly, China and Israel have a high degree of mutual political trust and frequent high-level diplomatic interactions. In 2017, the then-Israeli Transportation Minister Katz said in an interview with Chinese journalists, “Israel is willing to take an active part in the OBOR plan and become one of its crossroads” (GLOBES, 2018). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited China twice, in 2013 and 2017, and signed cooperation agreements with China. Data show that Israel has increased its budget for China-related staffing in the two years following the BRI. The year 2022 marks the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between China and Israel. President Xi Jinping exchanged messages

with Israeli President Isaac Herzog, saying that he hopes to work with Herzog and take the anniversary as an opportunity to strengthen political mutual trust, deepen mutually beneficial cooperation, expand people-to-people exchanges and promote the steady development of the two countries' innovative comprehensive partnership (Xinhua News Agency, 2022).

According to Chinese statistics, bilateral trade increased from about \$50 million when diplomatic relations were established in 1992 to \$22.8 billion by 2021.

Secondly, China-Israel economic and trade exchanges are widely diversified, and science and technology innovation cooperation continues to make new developments. According to Chinese statistics, bilateral trade increased from about \$50 million when diplomatic relations were established in 1992 to \$22.8 billion by 2021. In terms of science and technology cooperation, China and Israel formally established the "Comprehensive Partnership for Innovation" in 2017. China has a huge market and strong industrial capacities. Israeli technology could easily be industrialized in China. In addition, as an Eastern Mediterranean coastal country, Israel's port construction coincides with the development of infrastructure projects in the BRI. In 2015, the Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) won the tender to build and operate the Haifa Bayport Terminal, which is of great significance to the construction of the "Maritime Silk Road" (ASIA TIMES, 2022).

Finally, China and Israel have a long history of cultural exchanges with rich and diverse content. During World War II, Shanghai and other places received tens of thousands of Jewish refugees. This

precious historical friendship became a bond of friendship and exchange between China and Israel. From the exchange of international students in 1993 to the establishment of Confucius Institutes in Israeli universities and Hebrew language programs in Chinese universities in 2007, the two sides have continued to promote in-depth cooperation in the field of education. In addition, China and Israel have formed 24 pairs of friendship cities and provinces and have held many large-scale cultural exchange activities.

Overall, the complementary nature of the two countries is clear. For China, Tel Aviv's deep ties with the US and the EU can help China expand its ties in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. And for Israel, Sino-Israeli ties can enhance Israel's role in trade between Asia and Europe (Harutyunyan, 2020). More importantly, Israel also hopes to use the BRI to advance its relations with Arab countries, thus further changing its development and security in the Middle East.

Sino-Turkish Relations

Although geographically distant, China and Türkiye, located at the eastern and western ends of the Asian continent, have maintained close relations throughout their history (Xiao, 2011). Both countries have a glorious history and a splendid civilization, and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Türkiye in 1971 has led to a new stage of relations between the two countries. Since the new century, as the comprehensive strength of both countries has been increasing, China and Türkiye have paid more and more attention to developing relations. For China, Türkiye is an important regional power that connects Europe, Asia and Africa, and it also holds the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. The famous strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski described it as a pivotal country in the geostrategy of Eurasia (Brzezinski, 1997).



Since the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) came to power in 2002, Türkiye has made remarkable economic and social development achievements. The attempted military coup in 2016 significantly impacted the political situation in Türkiye (Yang, 2020). At the same time, in the face of the changing international situation and the rise of China and the Asia-Pacific region, the Erdogan government has also actively adjusted its foreign policy and shown a strong interest in the BRI proposed by China. At the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Samarkand, President Erdogan, as a special guest, also expressed his willingness to join the SCO,

which is a strategic fit for the two sides to build BRI (Reuters, 2022).

As two developing regional powers, China and Türkiye are looking to the future. They want to play a role in the international arena commensurate with their political, economic and military power. Since 2013, when China proposed the BRI, it has been of interest to all sectors in Türkiye. In October 2010, China and Türkiye announced establishing and developing strategic cooperation to enhance the level of friendship and cooperation in various fields. By 2015, when President Erdogan met with Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, he expressed Türkiye's willingness to participate in cooperation

within the framework of the BRI actively. After the meeting, the two sides also signed a memorandum of understanding to promote the construction of “B&R” (The Official Website of Turkish Presidency, 2015).

The construction of high-speed railroads and ports will strengthen Türkiye’s position as a “pivotal state”, which Erdogan has highly praised as historic projects.

China and Türkiye both put the promotion of bilateral strategic and economic interests in the first place, which is a realistic motivation for the development of bilateral relations between the two countries in the new situation. In terms of economic and trade cooperation, bilateral trade between China and Türkiye reached \$34.2 billion in 2021, up 42.2% year-on-year, and China has remained Türkiye’s top trading partner for ten consecutive years since 2011 (MFA of PRC, 2022). In terms of infrastructure construction, the two sides have been steadily promoting large-scale projects such as railroads and ports under the framework of BRI. Türkiye’s “Middle Corridor” plan aims to strengthen economic cooperation between Asia and Europe, which has a high strategic fit with the construction of BRI.

From the perspective of the Overland Silk Road, opening the Ankara-Istanbul high-speed railway project in 2014 by a Chinese company is a milestone for both sides in terms of infrastructure connectivity. Currently, the fastest China-European Railway Express from Xi’an, China, can reach Istanbul in about two weeks, promoting more convenient overland trade between China and Türkiye. From the perspective of the “Maritime Silk

Road”, Türkiye is keen to occupy a more prominent position in the construction of the BRI by virtue of its advantages of being surrounded by the sea on three sides, having many ports and connecting Europe and Asia (Zou, 2018). A representative project of Sino-Turkish cooperation in ports is the acquisition of a 65% stake in Türkiye’s 3rd largest container terminal, Kumport, by China Merchants International Technology Co., Ltd. (CMIT) in 2015. The construction of high-speed railroads and ports will strengthen Türkiye’s position as a “pivotal state”, which Erdogan has highly praised as historic projects (Li, 2017).

In addition, the construction of BRI also promotes in-depth cooperation between China and Türkiye at the security level. For many years, both China and Türkiye have been seriously endangered by terrorism, and Türkiye is also on the front line of the Middle East turmoil. Therefore, strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation is, on the one hand, conducive to maintaining regional security and stability and, on the other hand, can provide a stable external environment for cooperation between the two sides in various fields. In August 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi signed a counter-terrorism cooperation agreement with Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu following foreign minister-level talks in Beijing. During Erdogan’s visit to China in 2019, he said, “Türkiye is firmly against extremism and is willing to enhance political mutual trust and strengthen security cooperation with China” (CGTN, 2019). It is worth mentioning that in 2011, China used Istanbul, Türkiye, as a transit point for the evacuation of Chinese citizens back from Libya.

China and Türkiye have their own “Chinese Dream” and “Turkish Dream”, respectively, and despite some conflicts in the past, they still have good prospects for cooperation. By strengthening communication, setting aside disputes and finding common interests, the two countries can avoid risks in concrete cooperation.

Sino-Greek Relations

Both China and Greece are the birthplaces of world civilizations, and both have a long history, which has shaped the wisdom of their dealings in reality (Shi & You, 2020). China and Greece have a good foundation for cooperation. Since the BRI was launched in 2013, under the strategic leadership of the top echelons of China and Greece, mutual political trust has been deepened, economic and trade relations have become closer, and cooperation in various fields has gradually increased.

In recent years, economic and trade cooperation between China and Greece has increased. Bilateral trade volume has jumped from less than \$100 million in the early 1990s to \$12.15 billion in 2021.

More than 2,000 years ago, the ancient Silk Road linked the two ancient civilizations of China and Greece. Greece, located at the important intersection of the Land and Sea Silk Road, is both a natural partner for the construction of the Belt and Road and the first developed European country to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with China on cooperation in the construction of the BRI. In 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Greece to promote cooperation in trade and investment between the two countries. In 2019, Xi Jinping and Greek President Pavlopoulos exchanged visits and reached several agreements on BRI cooperation. Maintaining regular interaction between the top leaders of China and Greece will not only deepen their friendship but also help deepen mutual political trust between the two countries

and play an important role in guiding them to develop practical cooperation in various fields (SHINE, 2022).

In recent years, economic and trade cooperation between China and Greece has also progressed well. Bilateral trade volume has jumped from less than \$100 million in the early 1990s to \$12.15 billion in 2021. Sino-Greek economic and trade cooperation in the BRI construction of successful cooperation in the flagship project is COSCO Group's investment in the Greek port of Piraeus (Financial Times, 2016). The purchase of the port laid the groundwork for China to transform it into a major hub in the Mediterranean. Large companies like Huawei, ZTE, Samsung, HP, and Sony already use the port to enter the European market. The Piraeus Port project has not only made substantial contributions to the economic development of Greece but also created a large number of local jobs. More broadly, as a member of the EU and the eurozone, Greece offers China a gateway to Northern, Eastern, and Western Europe as well as the highly promising market of southeast Europe and the Black Sea (Chaziza, 2018).

The year 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Greece, and China and Greece should take this as an opportunity to promote deeper cooperation in various fields under the framework of BRI. As Wang Yi said to Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias on the phone, "The amicable relations between China and Greece over the past 50 years are a true reflection of mutual understanding and affinity between ancient civilizations, and a vivid epitome of the trend of the times for peace, development and win-win cooperation, setting a good example for the development of relations between China and European countries" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Hellenic Republic, 2022).



Egypt's president inaugurates trial run of China-made LRT, on July 3, 2022.
(Egyptian Presidency, 2022)

Sino-Egyptian Relations

The friendly relations between the two ancient civilizations have a long history, and the Chinese and Egyptian people shared the hardships during the national liberation struggle in the 20th century, which laid a solid historical foundation for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the new China and Egypt in 1956 (Yu, 2016). Egypt's unique historical identity and geographic location make it one of the most influential countries in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region and an important hub for the construction of the BRI. For a long time, China and Egypt have had a strong foundation of strategic cooperation, close economic contacts and frequent cultural exchanges.

Firstly, good political relations lay a solid foundation for cooperation. In modern times,

China and Egypt have suffered from the invasion of Western colonizers together. After national independence, they encountered many similar difficulties, giving rise to the strategic sentiment of mutual support and common prosperity. In particular, at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai and Nasser advocated the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". They jointly forged the spirit of Bandung, which raised the voice of the third world during the Cold War and enhanced the status and reputation of the two countries in the international arena. Since entering the 21st century, from establishing the "China-Africa Cooperation Forum" in 2000 to establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two sides in 2014, China-Egypt relations have withstood the stormy changes in the international situation and kept moving forward.

Secondly, China-Egypt trade and economic exchanges have grown steadily in recent years. In 2012, China surpassed the United States to become Egypt's largest trading partner and the largest source of imports. The Suez Canal in Egypt is an important route for constructing the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", the most convenient route for China's maritime trade cooperation with Europe and Africa. In addition, the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, established in 2008, is the second batch of national-level overseas economic and trade cooperation zones approved by the Chinese government. During President Xi Jinping's visit to Egypt in January 2016, he inaugurated the cooperation park together with President Abdel Fattah al Sisi (Wang, 2017).

Finally, China and Egypt have many civilizational commonalities in their long history, and both sides have various and rich forms of cultural exchanges. The Chinese government attaches great importance to the dialogue of civilizations with Egypt and has opened embassy cultural offices and cultural centers in Egypt, and has now opened four Confucius Institutes in Egypt. In addition, the China-Arab Forum and the China-Africa Forum are important platforms for the contact between China and Egypt and countries in the wider Arab world.

Threats and Challenges of BRI Construction in the Eastern Mediterranean

The BRI is a landmark initiative for the revival of China and the rise of China. It is not only an extension of the commercial road but also an extension of the border of national interests and security (Chu & Gao, 2015). Since China launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, it has aroused many misinterpretations for the following reasons. First, China's long-standing reform and opening-up policy still have not changed the suspicion of capitalist countries represented by the United

States and the West. Second, China's peaceful rise has caused the United States to be on high alert since the beginning of this century, and the Obama administration to the current Biden administration have tried their best to contain China's development. Third, the BRI proposed by China is deeply integrated into regional development in the context of globalization and is also deeply influenced by the regional situation (Gürcan, 2021).

As a key region in constructing the BRI, the Eastern Mediterranean connects three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, and has great geo-economic significance in promoting regional economic cooperation. However, the imbalance of regional economic development, the instability of the regional situation and the strategic game of the extra-territorial powers are the real problems that need to be faced in constructing the BRI.

Firstly, the game of major powers is intensifying in the East Mediterranean region. Although the United States shifted its strategic focus to the Asia-Pacific region since the Obama administration, it does not intend to withdraw from its commitments in this region completely. For the US, the rise of emerging countries represented by China has threatened its "global hegemony". Therefore, the US tries its best to keep the regional powers in check, striving to prevent any single local actor from becoming dominant (Yegin, 2022). It is admitted that the US and its alliance system can still play a somewhat dominant role in global and regional affairs. For example, the U.S.-China trade war launched during the Trump administration continued into the Biden administration and has intensified in the technology sector. This will seriously impact China's economic cooperation with countries along the route.

A typical example is Israel. Western forces have argued that China's port construction in the Eastern Mediterranean challenges US maritime dominance and pressured Israel to revisit its port agreement with China's SIPG because it threatens

the safe navigation of the Sixth Fleet. China's seaport investment projects in the Mediterranean exhibit distinctive commercial features without involving any military seaports. Another example is Greece. China's cooperation treaty with Greece alone has deepened the EU's perception that China's actions are aimed at undermining EU economic integration. For instance, the EU heavyweights perceive China as a potential order disrupter and a formidable rival with an attempt to expand its geo-economic and geo-political outreach towards the Mediterranean Sea and reshape the existing norms and order in the region.

As the intersection of Europe and Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean has a very important strategic role in constructing the BRI.

Secondly, the unstable regional situation and frequent internal crises of the countries in the region brought many security challenges to the BRI. Due to historical and practical reasons, uneven economic development, religious conflicts and ethnic conflicts have long plagued the regional development of the East Mediterranean. In 2011, the Arab Spring largely overturned the landscape of the Middle East region, leading to the outbreak of regional conflicts and hotspots and the persistence of unresolved issues (Zou, 2018). For example, on April 14, 2018, without a thorough investigation of the suspected chemical attack in Eastern Ghouta, Syria, the United States, together with Britain and France, launched more than 100 missiles at Syrian facilities, complicating the situation in Syria and the Middle East and causing great damage to the peaceful environment needed for the construction of the Belt and Road (The International Rescue Committee, 2018).

The Russia-Ukraine conflict that erupted in early

2022 has worsened the regional situation again and further led to a worldwide energy and food crisis. Russia and the Middle East have long been China's most important sources of energy and occupy a key position in China's energy security system. This has also led China to face problems in energy imports, such as over-concentration of import regions and over-reliance on maritime transport routes, which the volatile situation in the region will accentuate. Therefore, China hopes to advocate the concept of "development for security" through the construction of the "Belt and Road" and promote the establishment of a mutually beneficial community of energy interests in the Middle East by adhering to the strategy of non-alignment and non-selection of sides.

Thirdly, economic recovery and development under the impact of the pandemic epidemic have become major issues facing the world. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 swept almost the entire world, and countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region were not spared. China is also experiencing increasing downward pressure on its economic development due to the epidemic, with GDP at only 2.5% in the first half of 2022, the smallest half-year economic growth since the reform and opening up. This made the international economic environment facing the BRI construction not optimistic. Specifically, the decline in bilateral trade, slow progress in production capacity cooperation, and stagnation in cross-border tourism in the countries along the route.

At present, with the increase in vaccination rate and the change of policies in the countries along the route, various cooperation between China and the countries along the route is gradually resumed. The COVID-19 outbreak shows that the primary task of quality cooperative development with countries along the route is to improve the resilience of the countries along the route and enhance their ability to survive, not just develop (Zhang, 2021).

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative is an international platform for China to deepen reform and opening up under new historical conditions and promote mutual benefit and a win-win situation. At one end is the highly dynamic Asian economic circle, and at the other is the developed European economic circle. As the intersection of Europe and Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean has a very important strategic role in constructing the BRI. There is not only Türkiye with its multiple identities but also countries such as Greece and Egypt with close ties to Europe and Africa. From a practical point of view, China's strengthening of cooperation with these countries under the framework of the BRI will not only have an important impact on promoting regional development in Asia and Europe but will also have special significance in maintaining the international political and economic order in the right direction.

This article analyzes the good relations between China and major countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, including political, economic and cultural aspects, which are important advantages for China to promote the BRI construction in this region. But on the other hand, the competition between China and the US may reach its peak in the next few years, and the internal situation in the Eastern Mediterranean region is not completely stable. These are all external challenges that China needs to face.

The BRI, from the proposal to the construction, has gone through nine years, the internal and external environment has undergone many changes, and the promotion

mode is also constantly adjusted. However, no matter how it is adjusted, the Chinese government has always emphasized the need to promote the BRI construction with high quality, balance various conflicts, coordinate resources from all sides, and integrate development and security. Undoubtedly, as time moves on, Belt and Road cooperation will show greater vitality and creativity. In the post-epidemic era, China and countries in the Eastern Mediterranean region should stand on a strategic and developmental level and deepen their understanding of each other in a mutually beneficial manner. 

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