

China's non-interventionist approach wins Arab hearts

Kamilia Lahrichi says it offers a growth path that's an alternative to the West's

Arab activists called for a one-day boycott of Chinese and Russian goods following the two countries' veto of a UN draft resolution calling for an end to the crackdown in Syria. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood issued a communiqué that said any Arab citizen who consumed a Russian or Chinese product was "dipping his hand in the blood of the Syrian people".

Yet, the activists' call for the boycott last Sunday went largely unheeded; Chinese goods are, after all, the most affordable products. And China's standing in the Middle East has been largely unaffected by the veto. Even though ambassador Li Baodong's (李保東) veto has put China at odds with the Arab League and earned the opprobrium of the West, Beijing has benefited from the widespread anti-Americanism following the overthrow of Western-backed, corrupt regimes.

In the minds of many, China is the rising power in the Arab world. According to a Pew survey last July, most respondents in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian territories believe China has or will supplant the US as the world's dominant power.

China has earned greater acceptance in the Middle East mainly due to its policy of non-interference. Many Arabs oppose any form of Western intervention in the region as they have yet to overcome their history of colonial domination and exploitation by the West. Most are highly disappointed by Nato's operation in Libya.

Instead of freeing the country, foreign military intervention has put it on the brink of civil war.

Empowered by the Arab spring, Arabs now turn to a non-threatening state that does not coerce leaders to step down and respects countries' sovereignty. After undergoing "imperialistic" military interventions by the West, Arabs now favour China's "soft power" which relies on mediation.

Despite the Chinese veto, a Syrian opposition delegation, the National Co-ordination Body for Democratic Change, travelled to China and met a deputy foreign minister, Zhai Jun (翟雋), a few days after the UN vote. The Syrian representatives reiterated their opposition to foreign intervention in the crisis, thus emphasising rising acceptance of China's stance in the Arab world.

Positive attitudes towards China are also growing because Beijing is seen as a non-ideological power. This aspect of Chinese foreign policy is important to traditional societies in the Middle East that value their culture and do not aim to imitate the West.

The recent electoral victory of Islamist parties in North Africa has stressed the importance of religion for Arabs. Most importantly, it has highlighted the need to shift away from a Western style of governance and reassert values that are consistent with their culture. In this regard, China is seen as a rising force that does not impose its own type of regime or lambast rights abuses.

The Arab world also looks to China as a successful development model that has charted a unique path towards modernisation. As Arab countries have to rebuild themselves after the ravages of revolutions and civil wars, they perceive China as a source of lucrative investment. They are keen to take advantage of the world's fastest growing market.

In the end, the co-operation between China and the Middle East and North Africa region is a win-win relationship. On the one hand, Arabs are aware of China's need to secure vital energy resources in order to sustain its economic growth. On the other hand, Arabs benefit from Chinese investment in large-scale infrastructure and economic development programmes that other foreign investors consider too risky.

As the Sino-Arab relationship blossoms, it remains to be seen whether the Islamisation of the Arab world will threaten its ties with communist Beijing, due to the Chinese government's ongoing battle with Muslim Uyghur separatists in the Western provinces.

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