

PEACE & SECURITY

PAIX ET SÉCURITÉ INTERNATIONALES



13

2025



**EUROMEDITERRANEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**



ISSN 2341-0868

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.25267/Paix_secur_int.2025.i13

Citation: GOUYEZ BEN ALLAL, A , “The bilateral relations of China with North African countries: Beyond the framework of soft power policy”, *Peace & Security – Paix et Sécurité Internationales*, No. 13, 2025.

Received: 11 April 2024.

Accepted: 22 October 2024.

THE BILATERAL RELATIONS OF CHINA WITH NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES: BEYOND THE FRAMEWORK OF SOFT POWER POLICY

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I. INTRODUCTION — II. THE BASIS OF CHINESE RELATIONS WITH NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES — III. CHINESE RELATIONS WITH MOROCCO, EGYPT, ALGERIA, AND LIBYA — IV. TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MUSCULAR CHINESE REGIONAL STRATEGY

ABSTRACT: North African countries occupy an important place in China's Grand Strategy. Commercial and investment opportunities are the main motivating factors for China. On their side, North African countries perceive China as an economic model and a strategic and political partner. However, China's inclination towards political and military influence could potentially reshape the geopolitical balances of the region. On the other hand, the escalation of Sino-American rivalry implies significant constraints on North African countries' foreign policy. That is why the relations between China and North African countries are at the same time pragmatic, deepened, and cautious.

KEYWORDS: China; Morocco; Algeria; Egypt; Libya.

LAS RELACIONES BILATERALES DE CHINA CON LOS ESTADOS DEL NORTE DE ÁFRICA: MÁS ALLÁ DEL MARCO DE LA POLÍTICA DE SOFT POWER

RESUMEN: Los países del norte de África ocupan un lugar destacado en la Gran Estrategia de China. Las oportunidades comerciales y de inversión son los principales factores de motivación para China. Por su parte, los países del Norte de África perciben a China como un modelo económico y un socio estratégico y político. Sin embargo, la inclinación de China hacia la influencia política y militar podría potencialmente remodelar los equilibrios geopolíticos de la región. Por otro lado, la escalada de la rivalidad chino-estadounidense implica restricciones significativas en la política exterior de los países del Norte de África. Es por eso que las relaciones entre China y los países del norte de África son a la vez pragmáticas, profundas y cautelosas.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: China; Marruecos; Argelia; Egipto; Libia.

LES RELATIONS BILATERALES DE LA CHINE AVEC LES PAYS D'AFRIQUE DU NORD : AU-DELA DE LA POLITIQUE DU SOFT POWER

RÉSUMÉ: Les pays d'Afrique du Nord occupent une place importante dans la Grande Stratégie de la Chine. Les opportunités commerciales et d'investissement constituent les principaux facteurs de motivations de la Chine. De leur côté, les pays d'Afrique du Nord perçoivent la Chine en tant qu'un modèle économique ainsi qu'un partenaire stratégique et politique. Toutefois, l'inclination de la Chine vers l'exercice d'une influence politique et militaire pourrait potentiellement altérer les rapports de forces dans la région. D'autre part, l'escalade de la rivalité entre la Chine et les États-Unis impose des contraintes significatives sur la politique étrangère des pays d'Afrique du Nord. C'est pourquoi les relations entre la Chine et les pays d'Afrique du Nord se caractérisent à la fois par leur pragmatisme, leur profondeur et leur prudence.

MOT CLES: Chine; Maroc; Algérie; Egypte; Libye.

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding international geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics, as well as the future trajectory of international relations, requires careful consideration of China's economic, military, diplomatic, and technological dimensions, along with its interactions with other major powers and regional actors. In response to both defensive and expansionist motivations, the Chinese "Big Dream"² materialized from the early 2000s through the implementation of two pragmatic policies: "Going West" and "Going Out", which aim mainly to secure strategic supplies essential for sustaining China's economic growth and ensuring the defense of strategic interests³.

The weakening of European influence in North Africa, following the 2008 financial crisis, opened up new opportunities for Chinese companies — both private and public—, seeking to diversify their supply chains by reducing dependence on Asian suppliers.

Since the early 2010s, China's significant dependence on the rest of the world has prompted the authority to develop a policy involving substantial investments in sectors promoting connectivity such as railway infrastructure, airports/ports, telecommunications, energy, etc. This policy is known as the New Silk Roads or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

² DELIOS, R., *Modern Chinese Defence Strategy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1990, pp. 93-94. Coincides with the objectives set out in China's Strategic Intentions.

³ MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, "China's Arab Policy Paper", 2016, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml, accessed 22 May 2020.

Simultaneously, Beijing has been enhancing its military capabilities, particularly in the maritime domain, to safeguard communication lines with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Acknowledging the catastrophic outcomes of a direct confrontation with the United States, China has adopted a flexible influence strategy, engaging multiple levels: economic, normative, and diplomatic.

The absence of political conditionality towards partners, the policy of non-interference in internal affairs, and the establishment of relations with countries excluded by the international community have contributed to the appeal of China's proposed association formulas. These seemingly non-binding relationships, tailored to the parties' interests, are considered "win-win" and have attracted 149 countries by 2024⁴, with 28% located in sub-Saharan Africa and 12% in the MENA region.

Within this context, North African countries occupy a prominent place in China's Grand Strategy. The main factors attracting China include commercial and investment opportunities, as well as proximity to European and African markets. Additionally, the energy and natural resources of these regions are of great interest to Chinese companies. Moreover, North Africa offers logistical support points that could reduce exportation costs of Chinese products to Europe, while also providing alternatives to circumvent potential American blockades in East Asia⁵.

To achieve their goals, China is opting for what Joseph Nye has called a policy of Soft Power, which stands for the use of ingenuity to attract attention or achieve objectives through cultural features, political actions, and ideals rather than through coercion and payments, thereby creating a favorable image in the eyes of world opinion⁶. Nevertheless, the rapprochement between China and North African countries is more than just the result of unilateral Chinese policy and will. This rapprochement is also explained by the unwavering desire of North African countries to strengthen their cooperation with China, perceived by North African governments and societies as a strategic and

⁴ WANG, C.N., "China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023", *Greenfinance and Development Center*, 2023, <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/>

⁵ ABDEL GHAFAR, A., and JACOBS, L.A., "China in the Mediterranean: implications of expanding sino-North Africa Relations", *Global China*, 2020.

⁶ NYE, J., *Soft Power: The means to success in world politics*, PublicAffairs, 2004.

political partner, an economic model to emulate, and most importantly: a non-colonial power⁷.

This article seeks to demonstrate that North African countries occupy an important place in China's Grand Strategy. Commercial and investment opportunities are the main motivating factors for China. On their side, North African countries perceive China as an economic model and a strategic and political partner. Also, the research aims to argue that China's inclination towards political and military influence could potentially reshape the geopolitical balances of the region. On the other hand, the escalation of Sino-American rivalry implies significant constraints on North African countries' foreign policy. That is why the relations between China and North African countries are at the same time pragmatic, deepened, and cautious.

As a research methodology, we will analyze two perceptions: China's foreign policy towards North African countries and North African foreign policy towards China. To do this, we will focus on four significant case studies from our perspective: Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya.

In the first part, this article will examine China's relations with North African countries. We will argue that China's commitment in North Africa is both substantial and cautious. At present, it is less a question of developing a specific strategy than of utilizing the North African region for the internationalization and advancement of its interests. However, any inclination towards political and military influence could potentially reshape the geopolitical balances of the region and consequently exacerbate latent conflicts.

Following this, this article will analyze how China's influence strategy fuels the concerns of Western powers, and how the escalation of Sino-American rivalry implies significant constraints on North African foreign policy, potentially forcing them to make sacrifices regarding their privileges.

1. The Basis of Chinese Relations with North African Countries

North Africa occupies a prominent place in China's Grand Strategy. The commercial and investment opportunities, as well as the proximity to European and African markets, are the main factors attracting China. The

⁷ SHINN, D. and EISENMAIS, J., *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2012, p. 228; PAIRAULT, TH., "La Chine au Maghreb: de l'esprit de Bandung à l'esprit du capitalisme [China in the Maghreb: From the Spirit of Bandung to the Spirit of Capitalism]", *Revue de la régulation*, first semester, 2017.

energy and natural resources of these regions are also of great interest to Chinese companies. Additionally, North Africa offers logistical support points that could reduce the exportation costs of their products to Europe, while also providing alternatives to circumvent possible American blockades in East Asia⁸.

China has strategically capitalized on the transformations brought about by the Arab Spring. By positioning itself as an alternative to Western powers⁹, criticized for their intervention in regional affairs and perceived inaction amidst escalating instability, China has managed to gain influence and attract more partners in the region.

The Covid-19 pandemic has indeed offered China a valuable chance to showcase its assistance and support to the people of the North African region. By effectively addressing the pandemic's challenges and offering aid, China has strengthened its credibility and relations with the governments in the area, further solidifying its presence and influence¹⁰.

Indeed, China's strategy towards North African countries is characterized by pragmatism and adaptability. Its policy is based on recognizing that each North African country has its own unique interests, priorities, and political dynamics. To foster strong partnerships, China tailors its policies and engagement strategies to accommodate the specific needs and preferences of each partner. This relationship can manifest in various forms, ranging from simple economic collaboration to the establishment of political and military relations. In some cases, the relationship evolves from simple economic cooperation to strategic and military links.

In order to preserve harmonious relationships with all partners, China employs a strategy that avoids conditioning relations, interfering in internal affairs, and maintaining neutrality in conflicts. This approach allows China to establish relations with countries experiencing rivalries or potential isolation

⁸ ABDELAZIZ, M., *Valuable dimensions of Chinese politics and its impact on the international system*, Democratic Arab Centre, Berlin, 2021. (Translation by author). In this article written in Arabic, the author argues the reasons behind some Arab governments' and peoples' consideration of China as a role model. NNQDEGE, R., "L'Afrique dans la stratégie chinoise", *Revue Défense Nationale*, No. 846, pp. 98-103

⁹ A survey carried out by the Arab Barometer, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/ar/media-news>.

¹⁰ NANTULYA, P., "China's Role in COVID-19 in Africa: Tuánjié (Solidarity) or Zhànlüè (Strategy)?", *ACCORD*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/chinas-role-in-covid-19-in-africa-tuanjie-solidarity-or-zhanlue-strategy/>

from the international community, thereby fostering a more inclusive and stable geopolitical environment.

Strengthening economic relations forms the cornerstone of China's strategy. The "win-win equation" is a central tenet of China's economic diplomacy, implemented through various means, including enhancing the production capacity of partner countries, transferring know-how, building low-cost infrastructure, and facilitating rapid industrialization.

The growing influence of China in North Africa can be partly attributed to the region's countries' interest in enhancing their cooperation with China. This political choice is gaining popularity among the North African population, who perceive China as a non-colonial power and a more suitable alternative to the West.

Facing considerable socio-economic challenges, for some North African countries, China represents a compelling economic development model to follow. Its attractiveness lies in two elements: it combines desired economic development with safeguarding sovereignty and political independence. On the other hand, cooperation with China allows these countries to accelerate economic development, which in turn helps remedy problems such as unemployment and poverty. These factors were directly responsible for the waves of protests during the Arab Spring, which had harmful consequences on the political regimes in place.

China also presents a political and strategic opportunity for North African countries, serving as an instrument to enhance their strategic assets and power. Additionally, cooperation with China enables the political regimes in place to bolster their legitimacy, ensure the survival of political systems amidst interventions by foreign powers in internal affairs, balance power dynamics in the region, and exert pressure on Western powers regarding strategic issues.

III. CHINESE RELATIONS WITH MOROCCO, EGYPT, ALGERIA, AND LIBYA

1. Morocco and China: A pragmatic relationship

Morocco is one of the key countries for China's policy in North Africa. Since 2010, economic relations between the two countries have been constantly evolving. Morocco was the first among the countries to explicitly support the Silk Road project.

From its strategic position to its political stability and the significance of its industry, coupled with the association agreement between Morocco and the European Union, as well as the free trade agreement between Morocco and the United States, Beijing views Rabat as a strategic partner. A gateway bridging East and West, North and South. Additionally, for China, Morocco is an important logistics center and a crucial intermediary for China's interests in Africa. These assets allow China to ensure a legitimate presence in southern Europe at a strategic level¹¹.

China's presence in Morocco is concentrated in industrial zones, free trade zones, financial centers, and regional logistics centers. In March 2017, King Mohammed VI announced plans for the new "Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City", which is expected to become the largest Chinese investment project in North Africa¹².

Building a strong and sustainable relationship between China and Morocco requires addressing political issues, particularly the Western Sahara issue and the situations in Taiwan and Tibet. China maintains a neutral stance on the Western Sahara, refraining from officially recognizing "the Polisario", abstaining from voting on the issue in the Security Council, and not participating in relevant United Nations committee meetings.

Instead, China encourages political negotiations between the parties involved, emphasizing international legitimacy as the primary means of resolving the conflict. China also positions itself as an intermediary to facilitate negotiations. Furthermore, to maintain relations with both Morocco and Algeria, China adopts a policy of balance. In return, Morocco's position on Taiwan and Tibet aligns with its adherence to the "One China" policy, recognizing Taiwan and Tibet as integral parts of China's territory¹³.

¹¹ زكفر المصايسي، *على داصر تقالا ةيولوا: ةين يصرلا ةيبر غملا تا قال عل دحاولا دب ع يري ديبل*، 2020. EL BAYDRI, A., *Les relations sino-marocaines : la priorité économique sur le politique*, Democratic Arabe Center, 2020.

¹² "Tangier: King Mohammed VI Launches \$1 Billion Chinese Investment Project", *Morocco World News*, 2017, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/03/211612/tangier-king-mohammed-vi-launch-largest-chinese-investment-project-north-africa/>. KEMBOI, L., "Morocco begins construction of new tech city in Tangier", *Construction Review Online*, No. 9, 2019.

¹³ FABIANI, R., "Morocco's Difficult Path to ECOWAS Membership," *Carnegie Endowment for International*. SAIDI, N. and PARASAD, A., "Trends in trade and investment policies in the MENA Region", *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/mena/competitiveness/WGTI2018-Trends-Trade-Investment-Policies-MENA-Nasser-Saidi.pdf>.

The political understanding and convergence of economic interests were key factors behind the visit of the King of Morocco to China in 2016. This visit resulted in the signing of several agreements, which elevated the relations between the two countries to a strategic partnership. Currently, both nations are endeavoring to define an industrial collaboration model.

For Morocco as well, strengthening relations with China is a strategic choice. Accelerating economic growth, technological advancement, and industrial development are top priorities. Additionally, Morocco seeks to bolster its regional positioning and balance of power. In terms of military cooperation, the partnership between Morocco and China encompasses various forms, including the purchase of strategic weapons, training cycles, and exchanges of high-level visits.

2. China-Egypt Relations: A Strategic Partnership

Relations between Egypt and China are not new. As a strategic crossroads between Europe, the East, and Africa, Egypt occupies a unique status in Chinese policy. Egypt is one of the important security guarantors of the Middle East; it controls the Suez Canal, which is one of the most important shipping routes in the world, and it is a major gas hub in the Mediterranean Basin.

Relations between China and Egypt have experienced an important turning point since the arrival of President Sisi in power in 2014. Over these years, the Egyptian President has visited China six times. During these visits, Egypt signed twenty-five agreements covering various sectors such as industry, infrastructure, and services projects.

The cooperation between the two countries has strengthened in recent years due to Cairo's active participation in the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum. Additionally, the establishment of a cooperation zone in the economic and commercial fields in Suez, which is considered one of the most important maritime routes globally, further solidifies their partnership. Egypt also stands as one of the first African nations to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a key component of Beijing's economic system supporting the revival of the Silk Road project.

Egypt has offered China the construction of several major national projects, such as the administrative capital, the economic zone of the Suez Canal, and various other industrial zones in the country. China is also showing

a growing interest in the construction and financing of other major projects that are currently under preparation. These projects have transformed Egypt into China's third-largest trading partner¹⁴.

According to Egypt's Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics, the volume of trade between Egypt and China increased from \$11.9 billion in early 2022 to \$13 billion in early 2023, an increase of 9.8 per cent in just one year. According to China's Ambassador to Egypt Liao Liqiang, Egypt is the largest recipient of Chinese investments in the Arab world. "China's investments in Egypt have reached nearly \$7 billion, 90 per cent of which were pumped over the past five years, providing around 40,000 job opportunities", the ambassador said¹⁵.

The relations between China and Egypt are also characterized by a strong diplomatic and military relationship, based on a security and defense cooperation agreement. This agreement includes the sale of weapons, military assistance, the conduct of naval exercises, joint efforts against terrorism, and intelligence cooperation.

Cairo's strengthening of relations with Beijing is driven by economic, political, and strategic factors. Egypt sees China primarily as a model of economic development, given that both regimes are characterized by their entrepreneurial states. Moreover, Egypt views China as the future global political and security superpower. Consequently, aligning with China as an ally is perceived as a means for Egypt to position itself as a central player in the Middle East and North Africa.

In strategic terms, the support of the United States and Europe for the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring, along with their opposition to Sisi's rise to power, have prompted the regime to reconsider its foreign policy orientation. This distrust was further intensified by the NATO intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya.

The shift in Egypt's foreign policy reflects the divergence between Cairo and Washington on various political issues in the region. The heightened focus of the United States on the Pacific region has further strengthened Egypt's

¹⁴ STEPHEN, C., "Egypt's gas gold rush", *Petroleum Economist*, 28 February 2019, <https://www.petroleumeconomist.com/articles/upstream/exploration-production/2019/egypts-gas-gold-rush>

¹⁵ ESSAM EL DIN, G., "Egypt and China: Strategic partnership", *Abramonline*, 16 January 2024, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/50/515892/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt-and-China-Strategic-partnership.aspx>

decision not to solely rely on Washington as the primary actor in the Middle East and North Africa. Consequently, Egypt is seeking to establish balanced relations with other major powers such as China and Russia.

Adhering to a pragmatic approach, Egypt acknowledges that its growing rapprochement with China and Russia is an integral part of its diversification strategy. The goal of this strategy is to minimize reliance on a single country or bloc. At the same time, Cairo emphasizes that this rapprochement does not intend to replace the United States but rather represents a political choice demonstrating Egypt's willingness to engage in discussions with all partners on various issues without imposing specific policies or requesting countermeasures. These discussions can encompass internal affairs, as well as measures aimed at supporting or containing states while considering their interests¹⁶.

The latest sign of the strong relations between Egypt and China was the launch of the MisrSat 2 satellite, developed and assembled jointly by the two countries. The satellite will be used to monitor climate change, desertification, and land degradation, as well as to support the sustainable development goals of the Egyptian state in various fields such as agriculture, mining, water management, and environmental protection¹⁷.

3. The deepening relations between China and Algeria

The relationship between China and Algeria continues to strengthen in recent years across multiple sectors. Both countries share similar views on many international issues and frequently collaborate in multilateral forums. Algeria's decision to pivot towards China could be explained —further to the research on economic development—¹⁸ by the protection of the regime's legitimacy against internal political pressure and to balance Western influence.

¹⁶ "Egypt Military Strength", *Global Firepower Database*, https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-militarystrength-detail.asp?country_id=egypt.

¹⁷ DAREK, L., "La Chine et l'Égypte lance leur premier projet de satellite commun", *Military Africa*, 12 December 2023, <https://www.military.africa/2023/12/china-egypt-launch-first-joint-satellite-project/>

¹⁸ ZIANI, S., "The Algerian Chinese Relations: A Comprehensive and Promising Strategic Partnership Project Under the New Silk Road Initiative", *Algerian Journal for Security and Development*, Vol. 12, No. 01, 2023.

Since the outbreak of waves of protests in Algeria in 2011, the regime in power has mobilized all its tools to protect its legitimacy. The NATO intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya indeed had significant implications for regional dynamics. Algeria, which shares a border with Libya, likely perceived the intervention as a destabilizing factor in the region and a direct threat to the regime in power. In this context, Algeria has recognized the need to strengthen its political and military relations with Russia and China. This has resulted in the modernization of its military force through the purchase of strategic weapons and the conduct of military exercises with Russia¹⁹.

Moreover, the United States' recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel, leading to the conclusion of a military cooperation agreement, have reinforced Algeria's strategic decision to restructure its foreign policy and seek to reposition itself in the region.

Algeria's support for China's interests in Africa is part of this strategy. The Algerian regime in power perceives maintaining a certain level of tension with Morocco and supporting the "Polisario" as crucial for safeguarding its strategic interests and maintaining its influence in the region²⁰.

The consolidation of relations with China is also part of the regime's objective to accelerate economic growth, a key demand of the protest movement in Algeria. Chinese companies have secured significant public contracts in Algeria, including the construction of the port of Cherchell, the exploitation of phosphate deposits in Tébessa and the Gara Djebilet iron mine, the launch of the Alcomsat 1 satellite, photovoltaic power plant projects, and the construction of the Great Mosque of Algiers.

For Beijing, Algeria is a strategic and key partner in its grand strategy. Algeria could potentially serve as a strategic and military ally for China and Russia. The cooperation between the two partners is also based on the establishment of reinforced military and security agreements, which include the sale of strategic weapons and technology transfer. In response to the

¹⁹ BOUKHARS, A., "Reassessing the power of regional security providers: the case of Algeria and Morocco", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2019, pp. 242-260, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1538968>.

²⁰ JACKSON, S., "China in the Maghreb: Threading the Needle of Algeria and Morocco", *Wilson Center*, 5 February 2024.

reinforced military relations between Morocco and U.S., Algeria participate in military exercises with China and Russia²¹. The last demonstration took place in April 2023, as a demonstration of the military alliance between the two states, two warships of the Chinese naval escort made a four-day friendly visit to Algiers as part of a four-month circuit²².

The construction of the new port of El Hamdania in CherChell, which officials claim will be the largest in Africa and the Mediterranean upon its completion in 2024, is part of China's vision to establish strategic bases in the region, akin to the military base built in Djibouti. The possibility of China or Russia using this base for military objectives cannot be ruled out, particularly in light of rumors about the United States constructing a military base in the Moroccan Sahara.

To ensure the credibility of this strategic orientation and to exercise a policy of deterrence towards Europe and the United States, Algerian officials consistently emphasize that their relations with China are of "diplomatic priority". They also highlight that the signed agreements are deemed "important and strategic"²³.

In November 2022, Algeria and China signed the second 5-year Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Plan for the period 2022-2026, as stated by the Algerian Ministry. The primary objective of this plan is to bolster bilateral cooperation across various sectors, such as economy, industry, energy, space, and culture²⁴.

4. The cautious relations between China and Libya

The Libyan situation poses a complex dilemma for China's policy of neutrality and non-interference in the affairs of other nations. As the internal

²¹ VAN STADEN, C., "La Chine et la Russie participent à une compétition militaire en Algérie", *Le Projet Afrique Chine*, 22 August 2022.

²² L'EXPRESSION, "Accostage de 2 frégates et un bâtiment pétrolier ravitailleur chinois au port d'Alger", 24 April 2024, <https://www.lexpressiondz.com/info-en-continuu/accostage-de-2-fregates-et-un-batiment-petrolier-ravitailleur-chinois-au-port-dalger-171646>

²³ MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES ET DE LA COMMUNAUTÉ NATIONALE À L'ÉTRANGER, "Algérie-Chine: signature du deuxième Plan quinquennal de coopération stratégique globale 2022-2026", <https://www.mfa.gov.dz/fr/press-and-information/news-and-press-releases/algeria-china-sign-2nd-five-year-comprehensive-strategic-cooperation-plan-2022-2026>

²⁴ "Algeria and China sign a Strategic Cooperation Plan", *Asbarq Al Ansar*, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3977101/algeria-china-sign-strategic-cooperation-plan>

power struggle among factions intensifies, it becomes increasingly challenging for Beijing to maintain its neutral stance, much like other international powers have been compelled to take sides due to the prolonged conflict.

Initially, during the Libyan conflict, China deviated from its traditional policy of non-interference in internal affairs by supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1970. This resolution referred Muammar Gaddafi and other leaders to the International Criminal Court for their actions against protesters. However, China adopted a more pragmatic stance by abstaining from voting on Resolution 1973, which authorized military intervention in Libya. This approach allowed China to safeguard its interests, maintain flexibility, and avoid unnecessary conflicts without directly opposing the resolution²⁵.

Since then, China has reverted to its long-standing policy of non-interference, neutrality, and discreet diplomacy. In this context, Beijing has been cautious to maintain relations with all key actors in Libya. Although China officially supports the Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, which is backed by the United Nations and controls the Central Bank of Libya, it also maintains relations with the forces led by General Khalifa Haftar, who holds significant control over parts of the country. This approach demonstrates China's commitment to fostering balanced relationships and avoiding direct involvement in the ongoing power struggle²⁶.

Before 2011, Chinese business interests in Libya were significant. 75 Chinese companies held more than \$18 billion in business interests and employed 36,000 Chinese workers for the construction of over 50 projects in the fields of infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications. The outbreak of the civil war in Libya in 2011 forced Chinese companies to halt their activities. In a display of force, Beijing dispatched a frigate along with several ships and aircraft to Libya to evacuate more than 1,700 nationals. This marked the largest operation conducted by China outside its borders since 1949²⁷.

²⁵ WALSH, D., "By Air and Sea, Mercenaries Landed in Libya. Then the Plan Went South", *The New York Times*, 25 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/world/middleeast/libya-mercenaries-arms-embargo.html>

²⁶ XINHUA, "Libya welcomes return of Chinese companies, PM says ahead of FOCAC Beijing summit," *China Daily*, 1 September 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/01/WS5b8a2b1aa310add14f389061.html>.

²⁷ ALOUTAMI, S. and WEHREY, F., "China's Balancing Act in Libya", *Lawfare*, 10 May 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/chinas-balancing-act-libya>.

In July 2018, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the GNA, Mohamed Sayala, signed a memorandum with his Chinese counterpart, declaring that Chinese companies are welcome to return.

The cautious policy and emphasis on economic and commercial relations were well received by various actors and the people. This policy may grant China privileged treatment in the future compared to other international powers and actors involved in the Libyan conflict, many of whom have chosen to take sides and support one faction against another.

IV. TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MUSCULAR CHINESE REGIONAL STRATEGY

China's commitment in North Africa is both substantial and cautious. At the moment, the question is less about developing a specific strategy, but rather about utilizing North Africa for the internationalization and development of their interests.

Aware of the disastrous consequences of a direct confrontation with the United States, China has developed an agile influence strategy, operating on several levels: economic, as well as cultural, normative, and diplomatic.

As we have seen, China advocates a policy of non-interference in political affairs and maintains a balance between major actors while encouraging diplomatic negotiations, even offering its intermediation. Nevertheless, any shift towards political and military influence could fuel latent conflicts and restructure the geopolitical balances of the region.

On one hand, the internationalization of conflicts makes it increasingly complex for China to decouple politico-military issues from economic and commercial relations. Additionally, China's growing interests in the region could compel it to intervene in political affairs to safeguard its expanding interests²⁸.

A clear example of this first scenario is the conflict in Libya. As we have seen, the power struggle between various internal actors and the increasing influence of external actors could compel China to become involved in this conflict and decide to support one faction over another in order to protect its economic interests.

²⁸ ABOURABI, Y., "La Chine au Moyen-Orient et en Afrique du Nord: un nouveau partenaire en matière de sécurité?", *Middle East Eye*, 2020.

China's involvement in the conflict could take various forms, including diplomatic support for certain factions, providing economic assistance or investment to favored groups, or even military support if its interests are sufficiently threatened or if it sees an opportunity to advance its strategic objectives.

In another scenario, given Morocco's increasing power in Africa, its confirmed leadership in the region, and strengthened relations with the United States, Algeria perceives Morocco's growing influence as a challenge to its own interests and regional influence. Consequently, Algeria could turn to China for political and military support to counterbalance Morocco's influence. Algeria might seek military training programs or engage in joint military exercises with China to bolster its capabilities and strategic position.

In the case of Egypt, while its relationship with the United States remains significant, its ties with China are playing an increasingly important role in its foreign policy and economic strategy. China, along with Russia, has played a significant role in supporting President Sisi and the military in the face of criticism and pressure from the United States and Europe over what they have considered as a Putsch. In return, China's support for Sisi can be understood as part of its broader strategy to expand its influence in the Middle East and Africa, as well as to counterbalance Western influence in the region.

On the other hand, to safeguard its interests and vital communication channels for economic prosperity, China could adopt a more interventionist posture regarding regional crises. Control over a significant portion of submarine cables and commercial port infrastructures in the region could facilitate the deployment of Chinese troops, a more assertive policy in intelligence collection, or the undertaking of hostile operations towards other powers present in the region.

Also, considering the imperative to protect the "New Silk Roads", China may opt to enhance its military intervention capabilities. China consistently reinforces its strategic presence in the region. It ranks as the second-largest arms seller in Africa, spearheads the construction and management of major maritime projects, conducts joint military exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean, and has established a military base in Djibouti.

The Libyan crisis indeed provided Beijing with the opportunity to deploy several warships in the Mediterranean to evacuate its nationals. Similarly, in the

early 2010s, piracy served as a pretext for Chinese authorities to deploy their first naval vessels off the Horn of Africa.

The proliferation risks could present an opportunity for China to increase its military presence by supporting both peacekeeping and development efforts. Additionally, China may participate in international stabilization operations or support regional defense mechanisms and multilateral dialogue platforms.

On this note, the worst-case scenario, which could have disastrous consequences for regional stability, is the Chinese deployment of private security groups or paramilitaries, similar to what Russia does in many parts of Africa²⁹.

Another scenario is related to the rivalry between China and the West and its impact on North Africa. The development of Chinese cooperation programs in the field of security and defense, coupled with the increasing deployment of Chinese military resources in Africa (such as Djibouti and the Central African Republic) and in the Mediterranean, is a cause for concern for Western powers. This fuels fears among Western powers that China is utilizing a broad spectrum of political, economic, and military tools to enhance its global influence and project its power, potentially shaping the international order to its advantage at the expense of Western interests.

Given this, the exacerbation of the Sino-American rivalry could impose significant limitations on the foreign policy options of North African countries. They would be confronted with the difficult choice of sacrificing privileges and/or having to choose between economic or strategic interests³⁰.

The Chinese-Russian alliance could represent another destabilizing scenario that may upset the balance of power. In recent years, China has consistently bolstered its ties with Russia, a country that has not hesitated to employ a gunboat policy in the Mediterranean. The collaboration between the two nations has led to the sale of military equipment and technology, as well as the execution of joint military exercises in the Baltic and Mediterranean regions, both considered strategically important for the two powers³¹.

²⁹ ABDEL GHAFAR, A. and JACOBS, A., “Pékin conforte son implantation au Maghreb”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2019, https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2019/09/ABDEL_GHAFAR/60397, accessed 23 May 2021.

³⁰ NATO, *Brussels Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels*, 14 June 2021.

³¹ EKMAN, A., “La Chine en Méditerranée : une présence émergente”, *L’IFRI*, 2018.

If this convergence has not yet resulted in the formalization of a strategic partnership, the coordination of Russian and Chinese positions on certain regional issues at the United Nations Security Council nonetheless remains a reality³². However, while the Russian and Chinese approaches are currently somewhat complementary, they could diverge in the medium term. Russia is leveraging regional instability while inflating Chinese supply costs, potentially jeopardizing the country's political stability.

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³² La Russie a déjà fourni la Chine des systèmes d'armement avancé pour renforcer sa défense aérienne, contre navire, et des sous-marins.

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