

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

CHINA AND MOROCCO: IMPROBABLE PARTNERS?

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If Chinese foreign policy acumen in the Middle East is manifest in China's ability to bypass Shi'a-Sunni rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia, then in North Africa this policy is surely paralleled by China's ability to remain neutral in the Western Sahara conflict, with a slight tilt in favour of Morocco¹. Moreover, China has always kept a balanced foreign policy between rivals Algeria and more pro-Western Morocco even though the latter did not possess large oil reserves and had less of an anti-colonial legacy to boast. Morocco despite its deep seated ties with France, and more recently with the US, established diplomatic ties with China at the height of the Cold War, as early as 1958. It was only second to Egypt in doing so within Africa as a whole, yet Egypt challenged the West, fostering a strategic alliance with Moscow under Gamal 'Abdel Nasser

And China today is already the third largest trading partner of Morocco². Since 2018, China's footprint in the Moroccan market includes trade, infrastructure development, finance and banking, tourism and manufacturing. As a trade partner, China sets itself apart from Western competitors by casting itself as an advocate of non-interference in

¹ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/02/expanding-sino-maghreb-relations/3-morocco-and-china-pragmatic-relationship> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

² This paragraph is based on Olimat, Muhamad S. (2016). *China and North Africa Since World War II: A Bilateral Approach*, Chapter 6. Lexington



the internal affairs of its partners whereas the human-rights record often blights Western trade relations with various Africa countries³.

The turning point in bilateral relations occurred following King Mohammed VI's 2016 three-day visit to Beijing which saw the signing of some 30 agreements. Thereafter, relations were upgraded to "strategic partnership". Relations principally bore fruit, when the Chinese-invested Tangier Med Port complex became the largest container port in Africa, and Huawei began setting up 5G facilities there and elsewhere in the country. Then, it was announced that Rabat would see the establishment of the Tangier Tech City, which would bring in two hundred Chinese-owned factories in the next ten years⁴. To boot, a Chinese cultural centre was opened in Rabat as early as 2018, and in the same year three Confucius Institutes were set up in Rabat, Casablanca and Tangier⁵.

Few reports in the Moroccan press have dealt with concerns that Morocco's newfound strategic ties with China might harm relations with Washington. In January 2022, commentator Mohammed Mamouni Al-'Alawi published for example an article in the online platform of *Al-Arab*, in which he suggested ties with Beijing were designed to attract new diversified investment to Morocco. 'Alawi argued that Morocco still granted the US the title of its most important ally while Washington valued the vital role Morocco played for example in the area of economic growth in Africa, the Middle East peace process, the fight against global terror and inter-faith dialogue⁶.

Another anonymous leader article of the same month was published in the US-based *Al-Hurra* headlined "Will the rapprochement with China affect relations with the US?". It opined that Rabat must prioritize its relations with Washington, which included not just an economic but a military dimension as well. Relations with China were merely seen as a diversification of Rabat's foreign policy portfolio⁷.

Yet the ties between China and Morocco go back to fabled traveler Ibn Battuta (1304-1368 CE), a fact that is not lost on promoters of these relations⁸. Otherwise, there is much more scholarly material about Sino-Algerian ties perhaps partly as a result of the Cold War legacy when Algeria was ideologically much more left wing⁹. This Research Note is aimed at closing part of the gap. In general terms, it has to be understood in this context that even though Morocco lacks oil it has a strategic location for Chinese supply

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/beijing-strengthens-its-presence-in-the-maghreb/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

⁴ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/beijing-strengthens-its-presence-in-the-maghreb/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

⁵ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/10/c_137595617.htm [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

⁶ <https://alarab.news/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

⁷ <https://www.alhurra.com/morocco/2022/01/07/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%A4%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9%D8%9F> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

⁸ Mackintosh-Smith, Tim (2016). *The travels of Ibn Battutah*. Macmillan.

⁹ Bouchiba, Nasser (2021). *Taariikh Al-'Alakat Al-Maghrebiya Al-Siniya (2018-1958)*. Dar Al-Aman.



chains, straddled as it is between Europe and Africa. Thus, pragmatism typifies Sino-Moroccan relations due to the latter tilt to the West¹⁰.

Covid set back people-to-people relations. Indeed, in 2022 Morocco imposed a complete ban on arrivals from China¹¹. Yet two years earlier Royal Air Maroc inaugurated direct regular flights between Casablanca and Beijing, which were poised to increase the number of Chinese tourists visiting Morocco. Moreover, since King Mohammed VI's 2016 visit to Beijing, Morocco has been trialing a visa waiver scheme for Chinese tourists¹².

Covid affected tourism everywhere but, critically, Chinese state-owned behemoth Sinopharm allowed Morocco to use its knowhow to develop its own local vaccine¹³. And trade features are about to change too; traditionally Morocco exported citrus to China, while China exported tea to Morocco yet the flows have since become much more technological and infrastructural on the Chinese side. The main products that Morocco exports to China nowadays are Raw Copper, Calcium Phosphates, and Zinc Ore¹⁴. There is also growing Moroccan interest in Chinese military hardware¹⁵.

Tangier aside, the infrastructural "trophy" projects for China in Morocco are the construction of Africa's tallest skyscraper in Rabat, which will feature an ecological design; a grand theater as well as the national archives building and the archaeological museum. Moreover, as mentioned, the Chinese company Haite is constructing an industrial city near Tangier. Yangtze automobile has invested in the Tangier industrial city to produce electric cars for export to Europe, amid the advanced nearby port. And generally there is a flow of car manufacturers from Algeria to Morocco¹⁶. The Chint Group is otherwise engaged in building the Noor 2 and Noor 3 solar parks near Marrakesh, which are projected to be the largest in the world. Completed projects include the China Railway Engineering Group 950-meter bridge between Rabat and Sale¹⁷.

A growing number of Chinese auto-parts companies are investing in Morocco, given its proximity to French automakers' supply chain, including China's Nanjing Xiezhong Group, and CITIC Dicastal. And in 2017, BYD which is backed by Warren Buffett became the largest Chinese automaker to set up shop in the Tangier industrial city, promising to create 2500 jobs¹⁸. The King Mohammed VI Tangier tech city project will include some 200 Chinese firms in all sectors as well as Moroccan government and private companies,

¹⁰ <https://www.ankasam.org/china-morocco-relations/?lang=en> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/morocco-ban-arrivals-china-over-covid-surge-2022-12-31/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹² <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/09/282388/royal-air-maroc-to-inaugurate-casablanca-beijing-direct-flight-january-16> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹³ <https://atalayar.com/en/content/morocco-and-china-strengthen-their-relations-strategic-policies>; <https://www.zawya.com/en/projects/bri/moroccos-laprophan-chinas-sinopharm-sign-healthcare-cooperation-pact-f4e9fe2r> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹⁴ <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/01/10/morocco-upgrades-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-financing-investment-agreements/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹⁵ <https://www.theafricareport.com/268839/morocco-china-why-rabat-is-buying-arms-from-beijing/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹⁶ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2017/03/morocco-chinas-gateway-to-africa>; <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/focac/183433.htm> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]; Pairault, Thierry (2018). "La Chine dans la mondialisation: l'insertion de la filière automobile chinoise en Algérie et au Maroc". *Revue internationale des économistes de langue française*, pp. 133-150.

¹⁷ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/07/china-has-quietly-carved-out-a-foothold-in-north-africa/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

¹⁸ <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/12/235934/renault-peugeot-chinese-car-byd-morocco> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]



led by China Communications Construction Company LTD, with expected completion of the city in 2027. The complex will host ultimately companies in automotive, aerospace, textile, electronics, and machinery on the 2000-hectare site¹⁹.

The treatment of Morocco in the Chinese official press is usually positive, and there is hardly any provocative reporting on the crisis in Western Sahara²⁰. Instead, there is emphasis on Morocco as a South-South economic partner, and island of stability in the Maghreb region. On its part, the Moroccan media rarely reports on issues sensitive to China like the plight of Uighurs, Taiwan independence, or Tibet²¹. It should also be added in this context that Morocco has arrested Uighur activists on its soil at PRC request²².

In another piece for Al-Arab, Alawi opined that the world was ruled by more “brutal” (*kaswah*) powers than Morocco or China, and that the strategic partnership between the two countries will help maximize the available opportunities as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and fulfill its lasting progress; China and Morocco were keen to bridge the economic gap between them, and China will encourage its big companies to invest in the region which has seen growth in recent years²³.

Moroccan opposition online newspaper *Lakome* (“To You”) is a sole voice publishing articles critical of China like that of Tarek Lisawi, in the context of the muslim minority in China²⁴:

“It is worth noting that most of the small national minorities are concentrated in the periphery provinces of China and its borders near the borders with neighboring countries. These minorities have suffered through historical periods from “chauvinist policies”

by the “Han” majority, until some of them came to extinction...

In January 2022 Morocco has become the first country in North Africa to sign the Implementation Plan of Jointly Building the BRI with China²⁵.

¹⁹ <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2022/07/350464/morocco-signs-agreement-to-start-mohammed-vi-tangier-tech-city-project> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁰ Liu Dongning 刘东宁 and Ma Lirong 马立蓉 >> 中国主流媒体对摩洛哥报道研究 >> 北方工业大学学报, 第32 卷第6 期 2020 年12 月, pp. 39-44

²¹ <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/morocco-chinas-gateway-to-africa> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/28/morocco-authorities-arrest-uyghur-activist-at-chinas-request> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²³ <https://alarab.news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%8C-%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AB%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁴ <https://lakome2.com/opinion/256586/> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁵ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1245226.shtml> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]



Tarek Lisawi has also opined on China's grand Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framing it as a debt trap²⁶:

China is looking to enhance access to its exports to various countries of the world, by pumping investments in infrastructure and transportation sectors, through the Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the "Silk Road" for the twenty-first century...

Although more than 8 years have passed since the launch of the initiative, its details still suffer from severe ambiguity, at the theoretical and operational levels, as most of its news is dominated by propaganda and promotional character... This obscurity and ambiguity has increased with the outbreak of the "Corona" epidemic, which has affected economic and moral damage to China. Without a doubt, China's soft power is at stake, and China is required to restore its damaged image, as a result of Western propaganda in general and America in particular, which made the virus linked to China, namely the "Chinese virus."...Therefore, we believe that partnership with China under the circumstances and the current conditions do not serve the development of the developing countries participating in the "Belt and Road" project....

The total volume of trade between China and Morocco was worth about US\$ 5 billion in 2020, a 2% increase year-on-year despite Covid, while Chinese investment stock in Morocco was worth around 400 million US\$ the same year²⁷. Most investment is in infrastructure, mobile parts, telecommunications and fisheries²⁸. But opposition to BRI is also driven by the fact that Morocco runs a gaping trade deficit with China.

In the Moroccan press, pieces on trade and investment competition between France and China in Africa rarely appear. But this anonymous piece in Al-Arab strikes precisely that note²⁹:

At a time when China has succeeded in devoting itself as a partner to most of the Arab countries in the Middle East, Beijing is still strongly competing with the European Union countries in the Maghreb region...China is a first trading partner for Algeria, Mauritania and Libya, but it lags behind to third place in Morocco and Tunisia...Unlike Algeria and Mauritania, and to a lesser extent Libya, China has not yet been able to overtake France and Spain in their trade with Morocco, and France and Italy with regard to Tunisia, as it ranks third in the level of transactions, but the growth of its trade with the two countries is increasing...China is trying to consolidate its economic and political presence

²⁶ <https://lakome2.com/opinion/258270> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁷ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246500.shtml> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁸ <https://www.maroc.ma/en/news/belt-and-road-initiative-opens-new-era-cooperation-between-morocco-and-china-chinese-official-0> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]

²⁹ <https://alarab.news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%8F%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AB%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]



in the Maghreb through the Belt and Road Initiative, and through strategic partnership and comprehensive strategic partnership...And if the United States and Russia dominate the arms market in the Maghreb countries, Chinese weapons are beginning to find their way to the region, albeit modestly, as Algeria is the largest importer of Chinese weapons in the region, especially drones, naval vessels and electronic warfare systems.

Lakome also published a leader article in praise of the Chinese development model³⁰:

And a nation that cancels its past harms its present and its future, and the Chinese lesson is truly a clear-cut remedy for getting out of the state of non-development and instability...

In summary, China and Morocco seem to be forging strategic partnership in the face of Morocco's alliance with France and the United States. But the partnership is shaped by global supply chains which hanker after Morocco as a cheap labour hub in close proximity to Europe, via superior port links, and typified by relative political stability. There seems to be less Chinese interest in Morocco as a gateway to French speaking Africa although this proposition is moot. That BYD is invested by Buffett shows the complexity of transnational manufacturing chains in the automotive industry. And that Huawei has not been ousted from participating in Morocco's 5G infrastructure shows Morocco is willing to risk the wrath of its traditional Western friends to maintain the partnership with China. It even begun considering the purchase of Chinese-made weapons. The question is whether this newfound partnership will last if US-China relations deteriorate. Ultimately, for Morocco, this is a partnership based on pragmatism, not one designed to replace warm relations with the West.

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³⁰ <https://lakome2.com/opinion/234231> [Viewed 19 Feb 2023]