



## Book Review: The New Silk Road Grand Strategy and the Maghreb – China and North Africa<sup>12</sup>

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Written by Mordechai Chaziza and published by Routledge in 2023 as part of the Routledge Studies of Middle Eastern Politics series, *The New Silk Road Grand Strategy and the Maghreb – China and North Africa* focus on the grand strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Africa's Maghreb region. The book provides a comprehensive analysis of China's expansion into the Northwest African region.

The book starts out with an introduction detailing the history of the Maghreb – a string of maritime economies serving as a strategic gateway to the rest of Africa –, and Beijing's policy in the region. Chaziza also explains the 5-tier hierarchy of partnerships within the Chinese diplomatic framework. Unlike Western countries who are bound by mutual defence and other, rather rigid treaties, China uses a more flexible and non-aligned, yet still well-defined approach to partnerships in order to better take advantage of opportunities, especially in a region that Beijing views as abundant therein.

The book asserts that, despite recent more favourable changes in perception towards Beijing, China cannot match the West's dominance in the region due to the long-running historical ties they have with France, the region's former colonial overlord, and the European Union as a whole. Nevertheless, the author argues that the Maghreb – comprising Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia – has, over the last decades, become a critical frontier for Beijing's "Grand Strategy".

While lacking an explicit, formally declared grand strategy, under Chinese President Xi Jinping, China has transitioned from a more passive international actor to one that actively seeks to engage with and reshape the global order. Xi's ambition is the "rejuvenation" of China, meaning to restore its historic superpower status, and thus to achieve the "Chinese Dream"; and to this end, the author identifies China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the employed Chinese grand strategy, supposedly to come to fruition by 2049.

According to Chaziza, the BRI strategy seeks to mobilise and integrate all – military, diplomatic, economic, financial, intellectual, cultural, and political – resources and instruments of its national power in order to ensure China's rise as a global superpower. As officially outlined in 2015, China seeks the enhancement of trade and investments, connectivity, financial integration, policy coordination, and people-to-people bond. In

<sup>1</sup> DOI: <https://10.12700/jceas.2026.6.1.468>

<sup>2</sup> Mordechai Chaziza, *The New Silk Road Grand Strategy and the Maghreb – China and North Africa*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023, 166 pp. paperback \$57.99 ISBN 9781032215389.

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addition to this, a key concept in the book is China's desire to become a "two oceans" power. By developing infrastructure across Eurasia and the Maghreb, China tries to secure access to both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans – and, by extension, the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean –, bypassing potential chokepoints.

The book categorises Chinese policies into five "connectivities" that define the BRI that apply depending on the level of partnership:

- Policy Coordination – high-level summits like FOCAC and CASCF to ensure that Maghreb leaders align their national development plans (e.g., Morocco's "Industrial Acceleration Plan") with the BRI;
- Facilities Connectivity – the tangible requirements of the BRI. This involves the construction of ports, industrial parks, and power plants;
- Unimpeded Trade – China has successfully positioned itself as a primary trade partner, though with a significant trade imbalance, with Maghreb countries importing far more than they export to China;
- Financial Integration – the use of the Chinese RMB in trade and the involvement of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to slowly challenge the hegemony of the USD and the EUR in regional finances;
- and People-to-People Bonds: This includes Confucius Institutes, academic exchanges, and tourism. Chaziza argues these are designed to create a China-friendly elite and good public perception of China.

Chaziza goes on to present the situation in each Maghreb country, showcasing how the BRI and Beijing's influence manifest differently in each Maghreb country, starting with Algeria. Algeria, having vast energy reserves, is the cornerstone of China's Maghreb policy and Beijing's closest political ally in the region and enjoys a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" status with China. The author explains the historical background of the two countries' relationship, dating back to the Algerian Republic's Provisional Government in 1958, which the PRC also recognised. Despite the early start, it was not until the early 2000s that relations started to develop much further between the two countries.

China is the largest exporter to Algeria, and in terms of security cooperation, Algiers is also the top purchaser of Chinese military weapons and equipment in the region. Despite the close partnership, a key feature of the Sino-Algerian partnership is that infrastructure projects are self-financed, as Algeria does not seek package deals of loans, aid, and services in exchange for Chinese projects and resources. Algiers also tends to limit China's influence in the construction sector, which is dominated by its traditional Western partners, however, they very much seek to take advantage of the partnership economically through projects. These projects include the Great Mosque of Algiers – the third largest in the world –, the El Hamdania Port, intended to be a major Mediterranean transshipment hub, and Huawei's contract for an eLTE broadband system for Algiers' Houari Boumediene Airport.

The book's next focus and China's second largest regional partner is Morocco, the second African country to recognise the PRC and the first Maghreb country to join the



BRI. Rabat enjoys the second highest tier of Strategic Partnership with Beijing. While Algeria is more politically invested in China, Morocco is the foremost economic partner in the region. As Chaziza points out, along with its free trade agreement with the EU, Morocco's position next to the Strait of Gibraltar as a bridge between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, serves to explain Beijing's main geopolitical and economic interests in the country.

Apart from steadily growing trade, China also plays an important role in Morocco's industrialisation efforts, as one of the largest Chinese investment projects in the Maghreb, the Tangier Tech City project aims to become China's base in the region, planning to host 200 Chinese companies operating in the automobile, aeronautic, and textile sectors.

The next case study is Tunisia. Despite a negligible and underdeveloped relationship due to a general lack of resources or opportunities for large-scale projects, Chaziza writes, the country's relationship with China is growing, particularly in the tech sector. The author notes that while Tunisia lacks the vast energy reserves of Algeria, its skilled workforce and proximity to Europe make it an ideal partner for the Digital Silk Road. As such, Huawei and ZTE have already become dominant players in Tunisia's telecommunications infrastructure. Another opportunity for China is the port of Bizerte, which could serve as a distribution point for Chinese goods in the Mediterranean region and a would provide more access to Europe – for this, however, China is in competition with the country's old colonial overlord, France and its oldest ally, the US.

The fourth item on the list is Mauritania. The relations between Beijing and Nouakchott are underdeveloped, more so than with Tunisia. According to Chaziza, China's investments in Mauritania flatlined after 2010, and these investments were largely for infrastructure and transportation. However, he simultaneously writes about these projects as still ongoing – more clarification would have been beneficial from the author. Still, Chaziza argues, Mauritania could be important for its fisheries and mineral wealth (especially iron ore and gold).

The last country examined is the still fractured and war-torn Libya. As the author points out, China employs a “wait and see” approach towards Libya and trusts mainly in its post-conflict potential. Before the 2011 revolution, China had 75 companies and 36,000 workers in Libya. When the civil war broke out, Beijing had to evacuate its citizens, effectively marking the end of all investment from China up to this day. As the author explains, Beijing is currently positioning itself for the reconstruction phase, maintaining neutrality in the civil war to ensure that China remains the preferred partner for rebuilding infrastructure and oil facilities, regardless of which side wins in the end.

Chaziza then moves on to compare the three major players in the region: the EU, the US, and China, with the EU being China's biggest competitor in the region. Europe has long been prioritising North Africa. Despite this, Chaziza argues that Europe's fragmented policy and its tendency to lecture Maghreb countries on human rights and democracy have pushed them towards Beijing. As opposed to the Western method of tying investment to political reforms, China's non-political approach to investments is

highly attractive to these countries. The author also points out that a large negative factor in EU-Maghreb relations is its solely bilateral nature, lacking an effective regional organisation.

For the United States, the Maghreb, despite not having been of importance for many decades, now is seen as increasingly more important through the lens of counterterrorism and containing Russian – and, newly, Chinese – influence. However, Chaziza points out that the US has been slow to recognise the strategic depth of China’s economic encroachment. The Maghreb is now a key theatre in the “New Cold War” between these two, where economic projects carry heavy strategic weight. However, since the Maghreb countries deem it preferable to have alternatives to simply switching from one regional hegemon to another, China taking over the region is not likely anytime soon, argues Chaziza, and rather pushes the region towards multipolarity.

Finally, the author points out significant obstacles for China regarding BRI:

- The Maghreb is prone to social unrest and regional conflicts, demonstrating the lack of stability. Chaziza notes that China’s non-interference policy will be really put to test when its investments and citizens are threatened by local instability, like it was the case with Libya.
- While not as pronounced as in some Sub-Saharan African countries, the risk of unsustainable debt remains a potential problem for smaller economies.
- Cultural differences between the Chinese workers and the Maghrebi locals also pose a problem. Differences in language, general labour practices and ethics as well as social norms tend to lead to friction and hostilities, as seen in local protests against Chinese workers.
- The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively affected the BRI. Chaziza explains how China pivoted to “Mask Diplomacy” and the “Health Silk Road” to try to maintain its influence, however, the economic slowdown forced Beijing a rethink many large-scale infrastructures loans.

Chaziza concludes that the BRI has altered the geopolitical landscape of the Maghreb region by introducing China as a competitor to the EU and the US. As such, China is no longer just a trade partner, but a strategic actor with a long-term vision, in which the BRI plays an integral role. The question is how China will react to regional instability, as it will inevitably require Beijing to rethink its traditional non-interventionist approach, Chaziza argues. The Maghreb countries are trying to use China as leverage to diversify their foreign dependencies away from the West. For the EU and the US, the Maghreb is no longer exclusive to the Western sphere of influence. To compete, the West must offer a more compelling economic and strategic alternative than the current narrative presented by Beijing.

Completing the book’s comprehensive approach, in addition to a wide palette of sources used, the author also provides the differing opinions and viewpoints of international as well as Chinese scholars on the theoretical frameworks of the subject matter. While the book does contain some minor typographic errors and occasional Chinese mistranslations, both are probably attributable to simple editorial oversights.



The book is easy to understand and draws a complete picture of the Sino-Maghreb policy and relations, making it very valuable to students, scholars and anyone interested in China's expansion into the region.