DOI: https://doi.org/10.23810/AEOXXV202212
When citing this article please include its DOI with a resolving link

Mediterranean Africa pivots towards China: The case of Egypt and Algeria[1]

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Abstract
The Chinese development model offers Mediterranean Africa countries an alternative to what they perceive as a discredited and distrusted Washington Consensus. In terms of economic growth, China is the most striking non-Western success story, which makes its development model alluring in the Global South. A case illustrative of this process is that of Egypt and Algeria. Despite its ambiguities and flaws, Algeria and Egypt view the Beijing Consensus as a useful model to achieve the highest rates of growth while retaining sovereignty.

Keywords: Algeria; Egypt; China; development model; strategic partnership

Introduction

China is subtly gaining more sway in Mediterranean Africa.[1] It has already invested in the Tangier port, Port Said, the Suez Canal in Egypt, and the el-Hamdania port in Algeria. As it seeks to protect marine navigation for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China established its first military outpost in Djibouti. Djibouti serves as a crucial link connecting the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal. This strategic location allows China smooth access to the European single market. The developmental approach of China, or Beijing Consensus, holds significant appeal for the majority of the Global South countries. Elsewhere, I argued that authoritarian regimes in the Global South disseminate compelling narratives about China and its

1 - This research was conducted during my Hillary Rodham Clinton Fellowship (2021-2022) at the department of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics (HAPP), Queen's University Belfast. The writing was completed at Lancaster University.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with its developmental accomplishments, to rhetorically strengthen their own authoritarian practices (Rasheed 2022). I termed this process Authoritarian Reinforcement (AR). In this article, I go beyond the authoritarian motives and provide a political economy account to unpack Global South's appeal to the Chinese development experience. I do so in the context of the Mediterranean Africa or North Africa.

The model of Chinese development, which involves a combination of state-led initiatives and partial economic liberalisation, has faced substantial criticism. Hurst (2009) considers it as a product of circumstances and a model that lacks self-consciousness. Mahran Kamrava (2018), and Yu-Wen Chen and Obert Hodzi (2021) question its replicability outside China since it lacks a clear definition and general consent on whether there is a Chinese model of development. In the words of Yu-Wen Chen and Obert Hodzi (*ibid.*: 79), the China model "eludes a concise definition - scholars, policymakers and journalists continue to disagree on the existence of the model, and those that agree there is a China model, there is no consensus on what it is. The conflicting signals from the government of China add to the complexity of conceptualising the China model, let alone its application beyond China". In addition, the Chinese model of development is associated with authoritarianism. Authoritarian regimes often lack the capacity to tackle emerging crises, such as increasing labour costs, budgetary problems, environmental deterioration, and related public health risks (Hurst 2009), as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rasheed *ibid.*). While China managed to respond to the pandemic using authoritarian measures, such policies are "counter-productive and self-defeating, as it could trigger an overall decline in public health in the long run and must not be added to the enormous social and economic costs already incurred, as yet with no end in sight" (Thomson and Ip 2020: 32). Finally, Emma Murphy (2009) has predicted that because of WANA's[2] weak financial markets and a lack of rule of law, innovation will stifle as corruption erodes the system's performance and legitimacy.

Despite criticism, I argue that Mediterranean Africa countries *perceive* China's model of development as the blueprint to achieve growth, boot domestic legitimacy, and preserve independence. I argue for the continuity of the hierarchical state of the international economic order in WANA, and that the economic policies of Mediterranean Africa countries are largely political and associated with the structural settings of the global economic order. This argument supports the findings of Anoushiravan Ehteshami (2007) who asserted that the economic policies adopted by WANA states are largely reactive to the global economy order - except for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region which is highly globalised (Ehteshami 2013). My argument also supports Henry and Springborg (2010: 3) findings too who stated that "politics drives economic development and [...] the principal obstacles to development in the region have been political rather than economic or cultural in nature. Political rather than economic factors have been the primary cause of the rate and method by which countries of the region have been incorporated into the globalized economy within the framework of the Washington Consensus".

To support my argument, I have chosen the cases of Egypt and Algeria to represent Mediterranean Africa based on the rationale of the "most different case studies" research design. The aim behind choosing these two different cases is to investigate *whether different countries in the WANA region perceive China differently*. As shown in Table 1, both Egypt and Algeria have distinct domestic and international settings. One could, therefore, predict that the two countries would possibly perceive China differently.

Table 1: Egypt vs. Algeria

Measurements	**Egypt**	**Algeria**
Colonial legacy	No European settlements	European settlements
US factor	Ally	Not an ally
Arab Uprisings	Disruptive (Regime change)	Not disruptive
GDP	Low	High
Trade Balance with China	Negative	Positive

Egypt and Algeria have signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with Beijing, while other countries in the region such as Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco have not. Hence, these two cases can shed light on how and why countries in Mediterranean Africa might be keen on establishing strong ties with Beijing. Therefore, I argue that Egypt and Algeria entered into a strategic partnership with China because the Beijing Consensus provides an alternative to the Washington Consensus. It promises economic growth without imposing political reforms or economic adjustments, thus representing a meaningful opportunity to achieve growth while retaining sovereignty and boosting legitimacy (see Table 2).

Table 2: Washington Consensus vs. Beijing Consensus

Themes	**Washington Consensus**	**Beijing Consensus**
Role of State in Economy	Minimal	Direct
International Trade	Free International Trade	Export Promotion
Foreign Investment	Liberalisation Foreign Direct Investment	Directive Foreign Direct Investment
Peace	Liberal economy	Poverty Alleviation
Policy Implementation	Strict and global model	Flexible model to meet local context
Prime Goal	Integration in World Economy	Industrialisation
Loans	Pre-requires conditions of structural adjustment to local economy	No prerequisites
Project Implementation	Local workers, local companies, and international companies	Chinese companies, Chinese workers
Political Requirement	Democratisation	Support China in the UN and its one-China policy

Sources: elaborated from Nyere (2015); Yağcı (2016)

The article consists of two parts. The first part provides an economic history analysis of Egypt and Algeria, paying particular attention to the colonial legacy and the structural forces of globalisation. The second part focuses on China's engagement with Mediterranean Africa and the perspectives and strategies of Cairo and Algiers towards China and its BRI.

From European Capitalism to US-led Globalisation

Due to its geopolitics at the crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe, the WANA region was highly relevant from a strategic perspective, making it impossible for European powers to disregard, especially during the peak of competition between the Ottoman Empire and European empires in the 19th century. Unlike West Asia, Mediterranean Africa experienced direct European domination, with Algeria and Egypt being colonised by France and Britain in different ways.

European capitalism in the region manifested itself through trade, which began to flourish with the invention of steamships in the mid-18th century. Trade mainly focused on rain-fed agricultural products, taking advantage of the region's abundant land and labour resources in the agriculture sector, which required minimal capital, investment, or technological advancements (Issawi 1982).
The exchange of goods between the north and south of the Mediterranean Sea led to the construction of ports and rail routes. Consequently, the region underwent structural transformations in its gross domestic product. The development of the first ports in Egypt and Algeria, such as Alexandria, Algiers, and Oran, played a significant role in enhancing the economy of the area. Alexandria, for example, had already established itself as the most "cosmopolitan" city in the world, facilitating trade between Egyptians, Mediterranean Europe, and Asia in the East (Ehteshami 2007). Furthermore, the network of rivers and military roads in Algeria and Egypt facilitated the movement of steamships, people, and commodities at a much faster pace (Henry and Springborg 2010).
One crucial aspect of colonialism in Mediterranean Africa was European settlement. Before the Second World War, approximately two million European settlers resided in the sub-region, primarily originating from Mediterranean Europe. This included French (Corsica and Provence), Italians, Spanish, and Maltese settlers, mainly concentrated in urban areas (Issawi *ibid.*). These European settlers played a significant role in the region's economic activities, providing capital and skilled labour. Nonetheless, the settlers directly governed the region and perceived it as their territory. In the case of Algeria, European settlement was closely tied to land ownership. As described by Muriam Haleh Davis (2021: 169), the European settlement model aimed to establish "family farms that would encourage an abiding attachment to the soil".
The impact of colonialism on the region increased during the 1863 Phylloxera outbreak in France. European settlers replanted their vines in the colony because it offered ideal conditions for wine cultivation and production. Consequently, the economy of French Algeria was restructured to meet the demands of the French market. Additionally, the *Code de l'indigénat* (Code of the Indigenous People) introduced in 1887, based on the colonial ideals of "civilising others" and establishing "good colonial order," subjected both native and immigrant workers to discretionary measures of forced labour and unfair taxation. This code, accompanied by various prohibitions and punishments, deprived the majority of the native labour force of their freedom and political rights (McDougall 2017: 125-6).
The domination of Europeans on economic activities in Mediterranean Africa was facilitated by European ownership of land, trade firms, and banking activities. Since the economy of this region was based exclusively on agriculture, land played an essential role in shaping economic activities. Except in Egypt, a large portion of land in the rest of Mediterranean Africa "was acquired, mainly by expropriation or chicanery, by

European settlers" (Issawi *ibid.* 4), which led to the emergence of a new structure of landlord-tenant relationships, and vast landless peasants (*ibid.*).
Moreover, foreign trade firms worked as interlocutors between merchants and farmers. Their job was to regulate, register, and facilitate trade processes. Most of these trade firms were managed directly by the British and French or indirectly by non-Muslim minorities (*ibid.*). In addition, European powers had a monopoly over the banking system. By exporting banking systems into Mediterranean Africa and making them an integral part of trade activities, European bankers had the monopoly of finance, export and import of trade, movement of products, and making loans to consumers (*ibid.*: 6).
The two world wars undermined European control in Mediterranean Africa to a large extent. As a result, popular coups took place against the colonialist powers and their local clients in the 1950s and 1960s. These revolts successfully replaced the old political systems (often monarchies) with socialist republics such as in Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1956), Algeria (1962), and Libya (1969).
Since the legacy of European colonialism was a raw wound, the new political regimes lived in a state of paranoia and were obsessed with the notion of sovereignty. In addition, the consecutive wars against Israel and the CIA's involvement in plots and coups in WANA[3] generated great fear among the rulers in Mediterranean Africa. Equally important, post Second World War Americanisation of the world economic order through the dollarisation of the exchange market, or what was known as the Bretton Woods system, was seen as a continuity of Western domination by other means.[4] Though the Bretton Woods system was abolished in 1971, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) maintained the setting of the Anglo-American neoliberal order. Therefore, these new political regimes felt the need to control economic activities in order to finance regime survival as a way to protect the sovereignty of the newly established state.
As a result, a state-led economy became the foundation of the postcolonial order. The private sector was eliminated as it was associated with colonialism (Imlay 2013). Land reforms were implemented, and economic projects were nationalised to dismantle European enterprises. Ultimately, European settlers and non-Muslim minorities, who served as local trade intermediaries, were expelled from Mediterranean Africa. In Egypt, President Jamal Abdel Nasser implemented strict socialism and confiscated European properties, leading to the expulsion of a significant Jewish community to Israel and Europe. During the early years of the new republic, the public sector expanded rapidly at the expense of the private sector. The construction of the Aswan Dam and the nationalisation of the Suez Canal provided the country with electricity, a reliable water supply for agricultural lands, and enhanced economic power. However, the state lacked the financial capacity to fund mega projects and relied on loans from the Soviet Union. Following President Nasser's death in 1970, his successor, Anwar al-Sadat, opened up the country to foreign investment. Egypt also gained access to Western weapons and

foreign aid by signing the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty in March 1979. This policy continued under Sadat's successor, President Hosni Mubarak, until 1991 when Egypt signed a loan deal with the IMF.

In Algeria, decolonisation for the *Front de libération nationale* meant getting rid of land owners and colonial capitalism. As the first president of the Algerian republic, Ahmed Ben Bella said: "political power was in the hands of the Algerians; but economic power, including the land itself, was still in the hands of the Europeans. [...] As long as Algerian soil was still in the hands of the big land owners, whether French or Algerian, the words 'independence' and 'devolution' made no sense, and the Tripoli programme remained a dead letter" (Byrne 2009: 433). The *Front de libération nationale* became the sole owner of the state's economy, including underground minerals, agricultural and industrial sectors, and residential properties owned by European settlers. Foreign trade and the private sector were viewed as adversaries to the revolution and the state. Algeria collaborated with foreign companies based on contractual agreements, seeking technical and technological expertise (Evans and Philips 2007: 94).

The state-led economic policies in North African countries disconnected them from the neoliberal economic order. Even when these countries pursued growth through privatisation, they often lacked transparency and accountability measures, representing a defensive modernisation approach (Henry and Springborg 2010). The private sector in Egypt and Algeria mainly consisted of small and informal enterprises connected to the political elite, leading to crony capitalism (Cammett et al. 2015: 311). Consequently, Algeria relied heavily on oil revenues, while Egypt accumulated significant public and foreign debts (*ibid.*).

In the 1980s, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan advocated for further neoliberal policies to achieve growth. In Mediterranean Africa, the gradual adoption of new-liberal economies not only failed to bring prosperity but also exacerbated inequality following the debt crisis in 1989 (Spence 2021). This was partially due to corruption and the misapplication of neoliberalism but also because these countries mistrusted the Washington Consensus measures, which undermined their sovereignty.

The triumph of the Western Bloc in the Cold War accelerated the spread of neoliberal ideas to the Global South region. It led some Western thinkers to believe that with the end of the Cold War history would end. Francis Fukuyama (1989: 3), the champion of the end of history thesis, stated: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War [...] but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government".

Fukuyama was overwhelmed by the euphoria of the Western victory and depicted the liberal market as peaceful, equal, inclusive, and man's last wish, without considering any of its negative consequences. The Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida

(1993: 106) on the contrary criticised Fukuyama by saying that "no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth".

Within the context of the transformation of the world order in the 1990s, North African countries faced another form of systemic pressure in the form of economic globalisation rooted in Anglo-American neoliberalism. Globalisation further exposed nations in the Global South to exploitation by major economic powers. In Egypt, although the country's macroeconomics improved with a stabilisation program in 1991 and massive debt relief as a result of its position in the Kuwait crisis, the country experienced a slow growth rate. Despite eliminating protectionist policies upon entering the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 and signing the Barcelona Accord of 1995, Egypt failed to implement significant structural adjustments. Additionally, a sharp decline in energy prices starting in 1998 resulted in a lost decade of development for the country (Henry and Springborg 2010: 169). By the beginning of the new millennium, the Egyptian economy collapsed. The state adopted liberalisation policies as a means to revive the struggling economy. These policies included regulating corporate activities, strengthening the central bank's authority, devaluing the Egyptian pound, and reforming the tax system to encourage capital flow. While the economy experienced a brief recovery (*ibid.*: 170), it remained vulnerable to economic shocks and was unable to meet domestic needs

In Algeria, the oil-dependent economy eventually led to civil war. The decline in oil prices in the late 1980s had a significant impact on the economy, leading to high unemployment rates and soaring commodity prices. Corruption within the government and crony capitalism persisted due to the lack of accountability and transparency measures in economic structures. In October 1988, a wave of riots erupted across the country, demanding change. The military responded with a heavy-handed crackdown, involving acts of torture and killings within a week. To address public discontent, the *Front de libération nationale* allowed other political parties to participate in the political process. However, this openness had unintended consequences. The Islamic group *Front islamique du salut* achieved a decisive victory in the municipal elections in 1990, triggering a major political crisis. The *Front de libération nationale*, bolstered by its revolutionary legitimacy from the war of independence, perceived the *Front islamique du salut* as a threat to their rule. They believed that the dominance of the latter in the People's National Assembly could lead to constitutional changes and turn the republic into an Islamic state (Evans and Phillips 2007). As a result, the election results were annulled by the military, eventually leading to a devastating civil war (*ibid.*).

The *Front de libération nationale* emerged victorious in the war, but the latter left a lasting scar on Algerian society and severely damaged the country's economy. Foreign trade and investments that existed prior to the war came to a halt. The government heavily relied on oil revenues to attract foreign funds (Davis 2021). Currency exchange

rates were adjusted to stabilise the currency, price controls were tightened, and subsidies on essential consumer goods were maintained. These limited liberalisation policies not only failed to alleviate unemployment, inflation, and commodity prices but also fueled crony capitalism and corruption (*ibid.*).
The fragility of the economies of Egypt and Algeria made them less resilient to the impact of the 2008 global recession. Consequently, economic growth decelerated, and energy subsidies soared, reducing the state's capacity to fund public investments and salaries and hindering efforts for economic reforms. As a result, these countries completely lost trust in the Washington Consensus measures, as they proved ineffective in addressing declining growth rates and youth unemployment. Amid political and economic crises, the Arab uprisings occurred largely as a response to economic and political failures (Cammett and Diwan 2018; Kienle and Sika 2015).

The Challenge of Post-2011 Arab Uprisings and the Beijing Consensus as an Alternative

The uprisings in Tunisia quickly spread throughout the WANA region. In Egypt, the waves of protests in Tahrir Square and other locations exerted immense pressure on the establishment. Unlike Algeria, the regime lacked the financial capacity to meet the protesters' high demands and de-escalate the crisis. Eventually, President Mubarak resigned after thirty years in power. The protests in Egypt, however, did not result in a state collapse as seen in Libya or Yemen due to the presence of strong and professional military institutions. In the words of F. Gregory Gause (2011: 84) "[b]oth the Egyptian and the Tunisian armies are relatively professional, with neither serving as the personal instrument of the ruler. Army leaders in both nations realised that their institutions could play an important role under new regimes and thus were willing to risk ushering out the old".
In Algeria, thousands of riots took place across the country, demanding socio-economic reforms. The protests were structurally disruptive as was in the case of Egypt. The ruling party, the *Front de libération nationale*, distributed oil revenues from hydrocarbon sales among the Algerian population to contain the crisis. While these temporary measures kept the state intact, they did not address the underlying structural issues in the country. Consequently, in 2019, a new wave of protests emerged on the streets. As Yahia Zoubir rightly points out, "Rather than addressing the most important political grievances through genuine reforms, the regime has consistently sought to quell the protests in all the sectors by using its redistributive capacity thanks to the revenues from sales of hydrocarbons. This has become the regime's main pattern: distribute part of the profits to subdue the protests".[5]
Amid the Arab predicament of democratic versus authoritarian post-2011 order, China announced its BRI, and it seems to have provided a life jacket for countries of Mediterranean Africa to weather the storm. For more than seven decades, the

Washington Consensus had been the prevailing model for growth and development. However, the global recessions of the late 1980s, 2008, and 2014 undermined the credibility of neoliberalism. In addition, China disproved the notion that growth was solely dependent on privatisation. Remarkably, through its state-led control of a partially liberalised economy, China rapidly emerged as the world's second-largest economic power after the USA. While the rest of the world experienced negative growth rates during the post-2008 recession, China's growth rates continued to rise. It was only in 2022 that China recorded a negative growth rate, largely due to the impact of COVID-19.[6]

While the replicability of the Chinese growth model remains uncertain, countries of Mediterranean Africa perceive the Chinese experience as a magical formula to achieve both economic growth and maintain authoritarian order. The Chinese model of growth and development is particularly appealing because it represents a successful case from the Global South (Ehteshami and Horesh 2020).

In contrast to the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus, China, along with institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) associated with the BRI, provides loans without imposing strict structural adjustments on borrowing countries. In addition, China believes in "developmental peace" which has freed the Global South from Western sanctions whenever a disagreement occurs (Ehteshami and Horesh 2020). This new development paradigm not only offers North African countries access to loans, Chinese technology and expertise but also provides an alternative to what they perceive as impractical policies dictated by the Washington Consensus and frees them from what they view as the dominance of the Western-led world economy. Furthermore, the BRI provides a unique opportunity for countries in Mediterranean Africa to construct connectivity projects that would help facilitate mobility and production processes. As a connectivity project, the BRI aims to: "promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the BRI, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realise diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries. The connectivity projects of the initiative will help align and coordinate the development strategies of the countries, tap market potential in this region, promote investment and consumption, create demands and job opportunities, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and mutual learning among the peoples of the relevant countries, and enable them to understand, trust and respect each other and live in harmony, peace and prosperity".[7]

North Africa is one of the most de-regionalised among the subregions of WANA (Ehteshami, Rasheed and Beaujouan 2020) due to a lack of trust and animosity among the countries in the sub-region. The Arab uprisings caused further de-integration. For example, during the fight against the Islamic State (IS), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) lacked a shared policy to fight the group (*ibid.*).[8] AMU member states, therefore, adopted national strategies to combat terrorism which restricted cross-border flows of goods and people and further disintegrated the area (*ibid.*). COVID-19 and the confinement measures added another layer of de-regionalisation in Mediterranean Africa.[9] Against this background, North African countries have established relations with external powers on the bilateral level. Therefore, these countries interact with China and its BRI individually. This means that China has a special strategy and diplomatic relations with each country. From the North African countries' side, de-regionalisation frees them from regional constraints and provides them with the opportunity to establish strong relations with China to serve their own national interests.

Sino-Egyptian Relations: From Ideological to Strategic Partnership

Egypt and China have enjoyed friendly relations for a significant period of time. These relations have been built on shared political and strategic goals, fostering mutual understanding in global politics (Selim 2021). This partnership was exemplified by Egypt's consistent support for the one-China policy and opposition to Taiwan's independence. Given Egypt's Arab, African, and Islamic identity, this recognition played a crucial role in China's diplomatic relationships with Arab and African states (Chaziza 2019). In return, Beijing supported Egypt's position on the Palestinian peace process and provided military aid during the 1956 war (Zhu 2019). The relations between the two countries deteriorated when President Nasser sided with the Soviet Union in its rivalry with China. Nonetheless, China kept its embassy in Cairo when it closed itself to the external world following the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Besides, China supported Egypt's efforts to claim the Sinai region in 1973. The 1979 Israel-Egypt peace agreement led Egypt to politically disengage with China and the Soviet Union and side with the USA. As a result, Sino-Egyptian relations were limited to economy and energy. In the late 1980s, Sino-Egyptian cooperation increased beyond economy and energy. Egypt signed arms deals with China and became the largest market for Chinese arms sales on the whole African continent.[10] The deal included jets and tanks.

Moreover, in 2002, Egypt opened lines of communication with both Moscow and Beijing to establish a nuclear reactor. The two deals were stopped because of Washington's objection. Of course, the USA was unhappy about Egypt's increasing relations with China, especially when Cairo allowed a Chinese delegation to visit an Egyptian base containing American F-16 planes without Washington's knowledge.[11] However, Cairo kept its relations with Beijing at a time when the public and the government's resentment towards the USA was steadily increasing following the 2003 war on Iraq and the Lebanon war in 2006.

The Sino-Egyptian relations witnessed a strategic shift after the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Contrary to Egyptian expectations, Chinese companies remained in Egypt during the period of unrest during the uprisings. The Chinese ambassador to Egypt, Song Aiguo, publicly stated that Chinese companies, numbering 65 at the time,[12] would support any political change in Egypt. When Mohammed Morsi was elected as president of Egypt in 2012, he received a formal invitation from President Hu Jintao to visit China. President Morsi promptly accepted the invitation and was accompanied by several ministers and a significant number of Egyptian businessmen. During his three-day visit, Egypt and China worked towards enhancing economic cooperation (Zambelis 2012).

Interestingly, President Morsi, who represented the Muslim Brotherhood, did not raise the issue of Uyghurs and China's repressive policies against this Muslim minority in China. Ehteshami and Horesh (2020) argue that Morsi's positive perception of China was driven more by the Muslim Brotherhood's resentment of Western powers rather than a focus on the state of Muslims in China.

The Muslim Brotherhood's rule faced challenges to balance its Islamic ideology with democratisation demands. In the words of Ashraf el-Sherif, "the group failed to rise to the occasion and ended up failing both as 'conservative democrats' and as Islamists. Its only real success was the preservation of organisational unity, but this came at the cost of perpetuating the movement's lack of a sustainable ideology and political project".[13]

As a result, a second wave of mass demonstrations took place in Egypt demanding Morsi's departure. As a response to the demonstrations, the army forced President Morsi to step down. General Abdul Fatah el-Sisi was later elected to become the sixth president of the country.

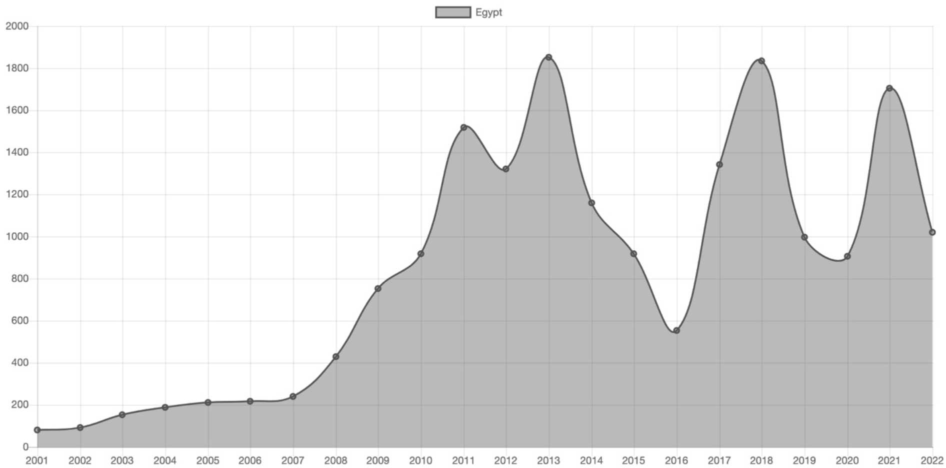
As a president, el-Sisi's first foreign visit was to Beijing in 2014, not Washington, Egypt's first security ally. The visit was described by some as a sign of Egypt's look-east policy.[14] The Egyptian elite was furious about the USA as the latter rejected el-Sisi's request to visit the White House because of the 2013 coup. The Egyptian establishment was outraged with what they saw as Obama's administration attempts to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs. Since then, el-Sisi has been attracting Chinese investment and considering China an alternative to the West. He has been betting on Chinese money and investment as a lever to achieve economic growth and create job opportunities.

While trade is imbalanced (see Figure 5) in China's favour, the strategic value of Sino-Egyptian relations outbid trade.

The new elite in Egypt perceives the Chinese model of semi-liberal policies as a potential means to achieve economic growth without necessitating political reforms or major adjustments to the country's economic structure. They believe that strategic cooperation with the world's second-largest economy could position Egypt favourably in the post-liberal order (Rasheed 2022). Under President el-Sisi, there appears to be a reorientation of Egypt's foreign policy towards the Mediterranean basin, which involves a focus on development initiatives aligned with Egypt's 2030 vision for development. This process of "Egyptianisation of Egypt" aims to restore Egypt's ancient pharaonic identity and prioritise economic development. The political establishment in Egypt sees the comprehensive partnership with China as a means to address economic challenges while maintaining its existing system of governance.

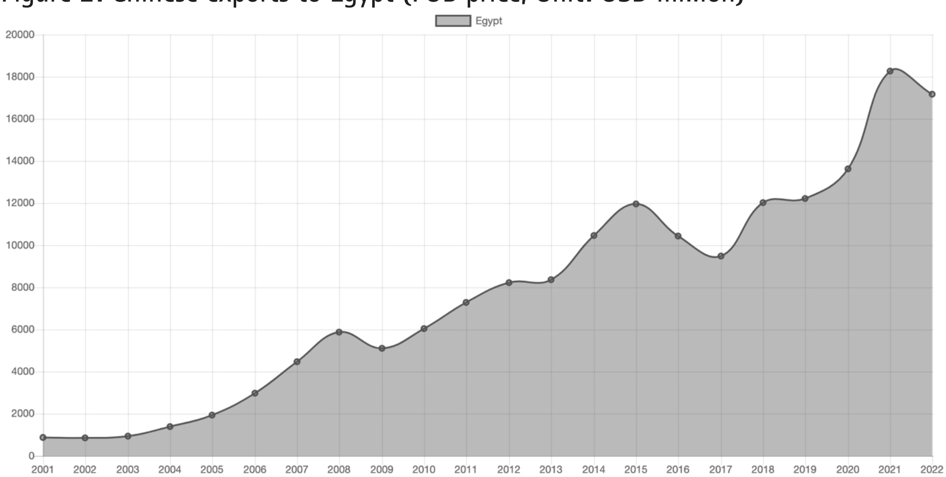
In addition, the value of imported Chinese products reached to 18 billion USD, and over the last two decades, the value of the Chinese exported products to Egypt, mostly broadcasting equipment, increased at a yearly rate of more than 15 per cent (see Figure 2). As the figures show, trade is unbalanced between China and Egypt. Moreover, China is Egypt's largest top economic partner (import) (see Figure 3).

Figure 1: Chinese imports from Egypt (CIF price, Unit: USD million)



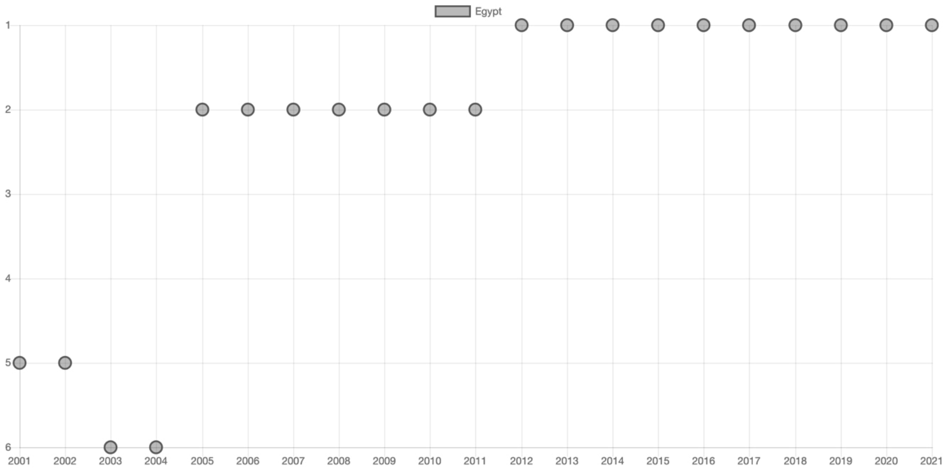
Source: ChinaMed

Figure 2: Chinese exports to Egypt (FOB price, Unit: USD million)



Source: ChinaMed

Figure 3: China's rank as a trade partner of Egypt (Import)



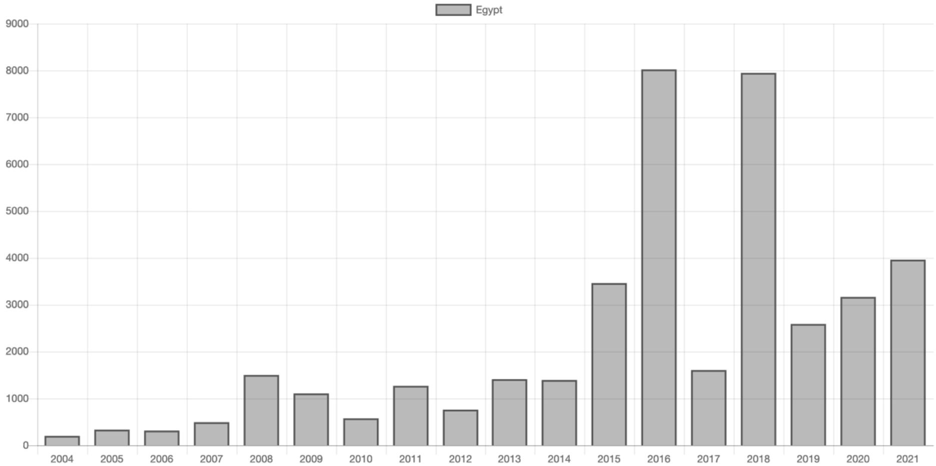
Source: ChinaMed

The cooperation between Egypt and China within the framework of the BRI is significant. China is Egypt's top trade partner since 2012 (see Figure 2). Moreover, Egypt, with its strategic location and the Suez Canal, offers valuable connectivity and trade opportunities to the BRI. The Suez Canal, a vital maritime route, underwent an extension in 2015 at a cost of 8 billion USD. Furthermore, in January 2022, it was announced that another extension of the canal would be completed by July 2023 to enhance ship navigation. Such cooperation within the BRI has also facilitated arms deals with China. More recently, Egypt expressed its interest in obtaining Chinese drones and submarines.[15]

The BRI's focus on constructing supply chains, including railways, roads, ports, airports, and other infrastructure, presents Egypt with substantial construction projects. Satellite images depict high population density on both banks of the Nile, while the western region has a lower population density. Through participation in the BRI, Egypt can undertake mega projects to link the two sides of the river and connect rural areas to major cities, fostering economic development and improving connectivity within the country.

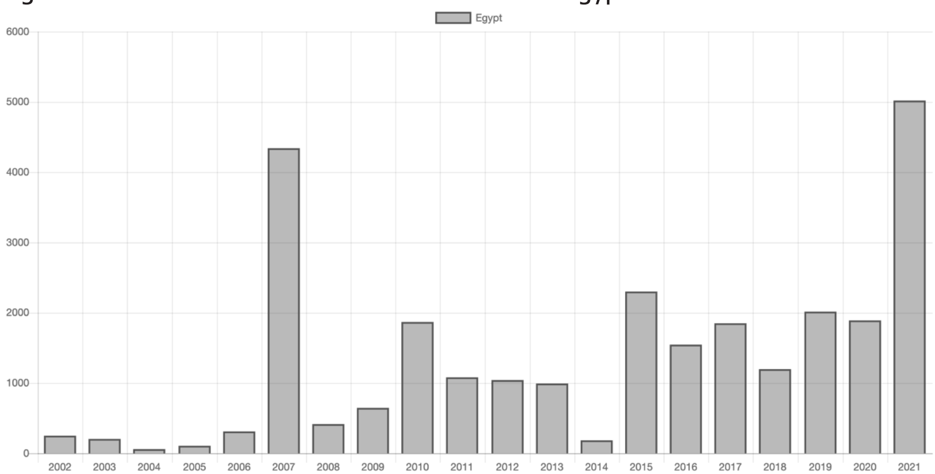
Below is a list of figures from the ChinaMed Project which is a research platform promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Torino.[16]

Figure 4: Value of the contracts awarded to Chinese companies in Egypt (USD Million)



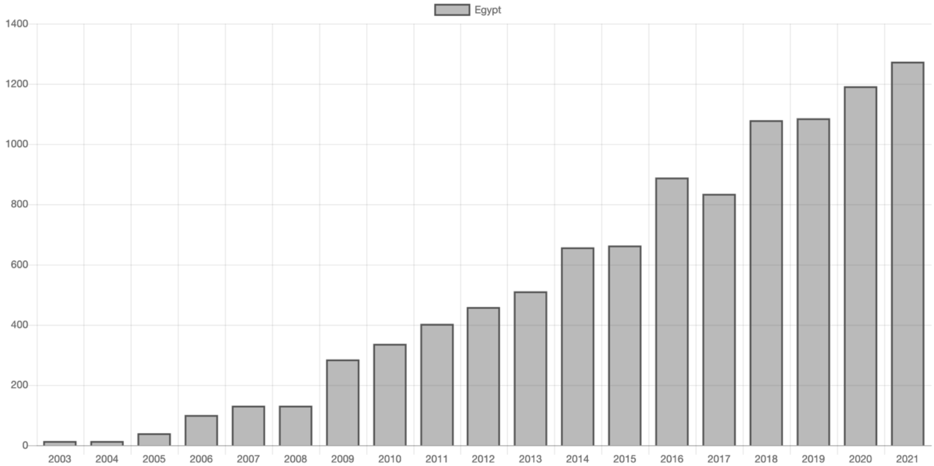
Source: Source: ChinaMed

Figure 5: Number of Chinese contract workers in Egypt



Source: ChinaMed

Figure 6: Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Egypt (USD million)



Source: ChinaMed

Sino-Algerian Relations: South-South Cooperation Model

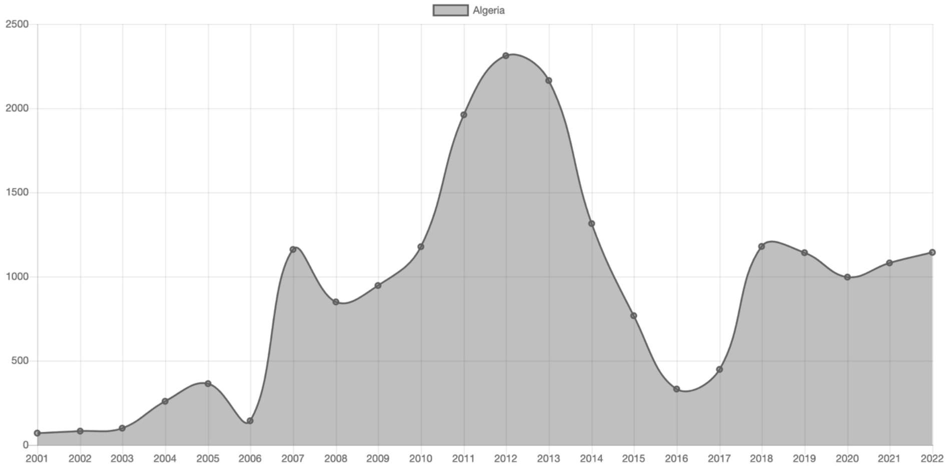
Similar to Sino-Egyptian relations, the Sino-Algerian relations have deep historical roots, dating back to the post Second World War period when both countries shared anti-imperialist foreign policies and one-party rule political systems. China was the first non-Arab country to recognise the *Front de libération nationale* and its interim government during the Algerian revolution. China provided support to the Algerian revolutionaries in the form of weapons, medical assistance, and loans (Zoubir 2022: 1). In return, Algeria supported China's "one China" policy and its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

The military cooperation between the two sides was one of the most important aspects of Sino-Algerian relations. While Mediterranean Africa was a primary destination for Chinese weapons with a share of 49 per cent of the Asian giant's exports, Algeria was the first buyer among those countries. With the development of Chinese defence industries in recent years, Algeria continued its military cooperation with Beijing - though the main military partner of the Algerian army is Russia.[17]

In addition, Algeria currently has one of the largest Chinese resident communities in Mediterranean Africa. It is reported that about 70,000 Chinese live in Algeria, which provides funding and labour for infrastructure development.[18]

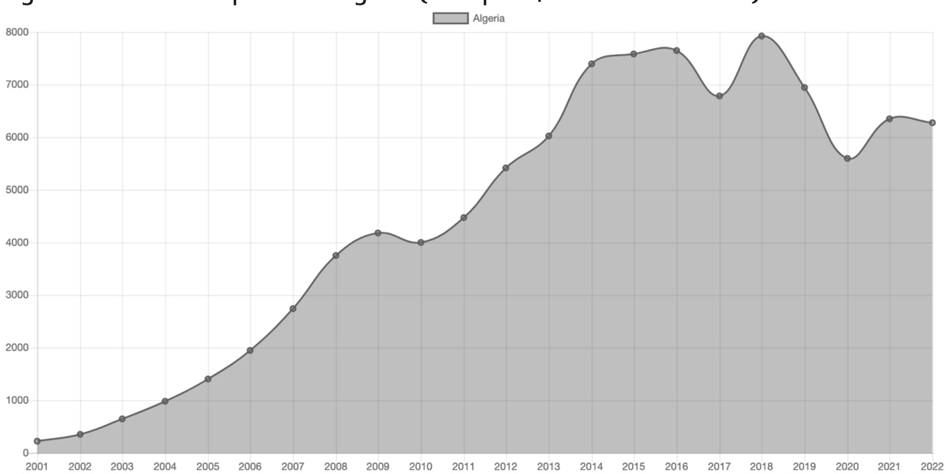
Trade between the two countries is balanced. This makes Algeria one of the few countries not only in North Africa but in WANA to have such balanced value trade with China (see Figures 7 and 8). Indeed, China is ranked Algeria's top economic partner (import) (see Figure 9). By 2021, the Chinese exports to Algeria exceeded six billion USD. The exports included primarily iron pipes. In the last two decades, and similar to the case of Egypt, China's exports to Algeria have increased nearly 15 per cent annually (see Figure 8).

Figure 7: Chinese imports from Algeria (CIF price, Unit: USD million)



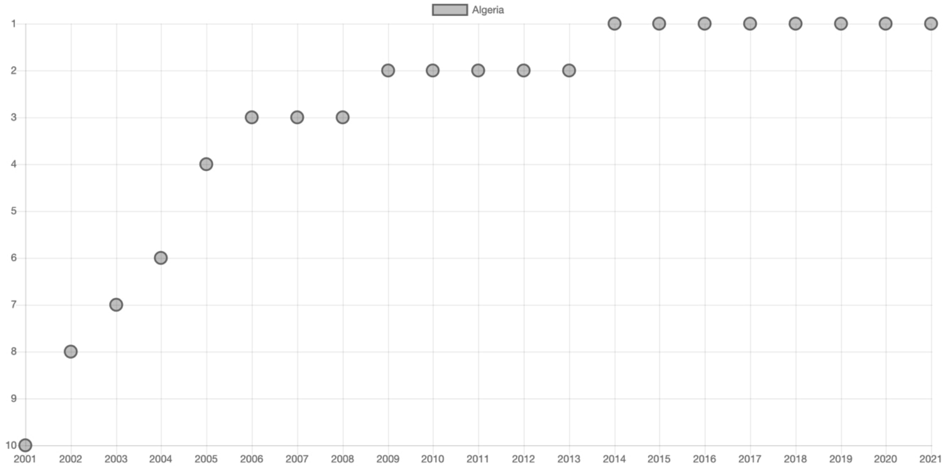
Source: ChinaMed

Figure 8: Chinese exports to Algeria (FOB price, Unit: USD million)



Source: ChinaMed

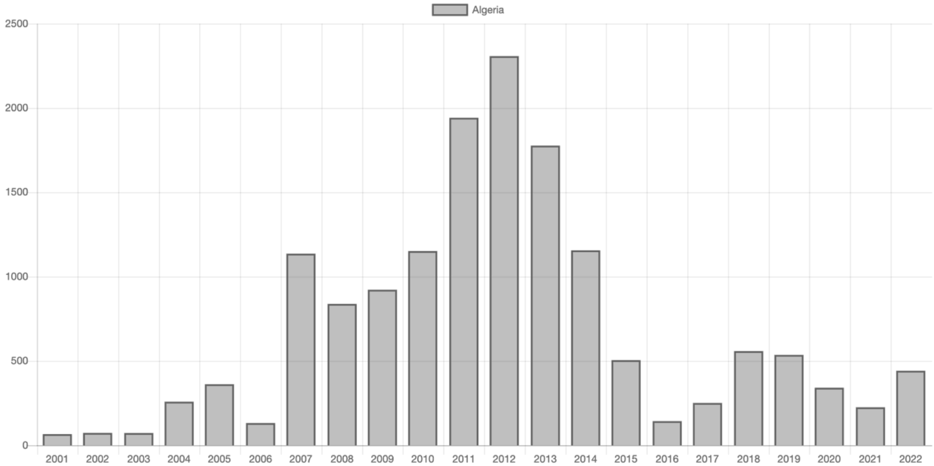
Figure 9: China's rank as a trade partner of Algeria (Import)



Sources: ChinaMed

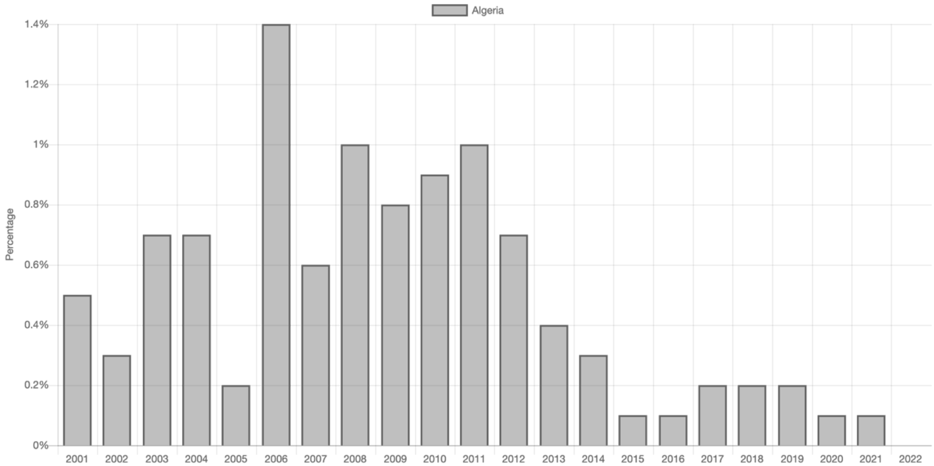
The Algerian oil industry has advanced steadily in China's economy since the early 2000s. In 2002 Sinopec became the first Chinese company to cooperate with Sonatrach, Algeria's state-owned company, in order to develop the Zarzaitine oil field in the southeast of the country.[19] In 2022, the two oil companies signed a 490 million USD production-sharing agreement for Zarzaitine.[20] Based on the agreement, the two sides "will cooperate in the drilling of new wells, the replenishment of existing wells, the revamping of oil facilities, and the reduction of carbon emissions. Under the contract, 95 million barrels of oil are expected to be produced".[21]

Figure 10: Value of Chinese energy imports from Algeria (Unit: USD million)



Sources: ChinaMed

Figure 11: Chinese dependence on energy imports from Algeria



Source: ChinaMed

The Sino-Algerian cooperation in the context of the BRI is a cherry on the cake and a supportive force to their admirable relations. Since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, Algeria was among the first to express its interest in being part of it (Zhang & Xiao 2022). In terms of trade, unlike in the case of Egypt, Sino-Algerian trade is fairly balanced and the annual trade exchange between the two countries reached 3.5 billion USD in 2021 (see Figures 7 and 8).

As part of their BRI partnership, China has made significant investments in strategic projects in Algeria. One of the most important projects is the el-Hamdania port in Cherchell, located in the Mediterranean Sea. The construction of the port is estimated to cost around 6 billion USD and is expected to take seven years to complete. Commenting on the strategic value of the project, Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune said that the port is the "lung of local development" in the country and the project of the century, as it will "break the isolation from African countries that do not have seaports".[22] The port consists of 23 berths and is expected to have the capacity to receive 25.7 million tons of goods per year and accommodate large ships. The project is expected to provide 150,000 jobs by the end of the work in 2024.[23]

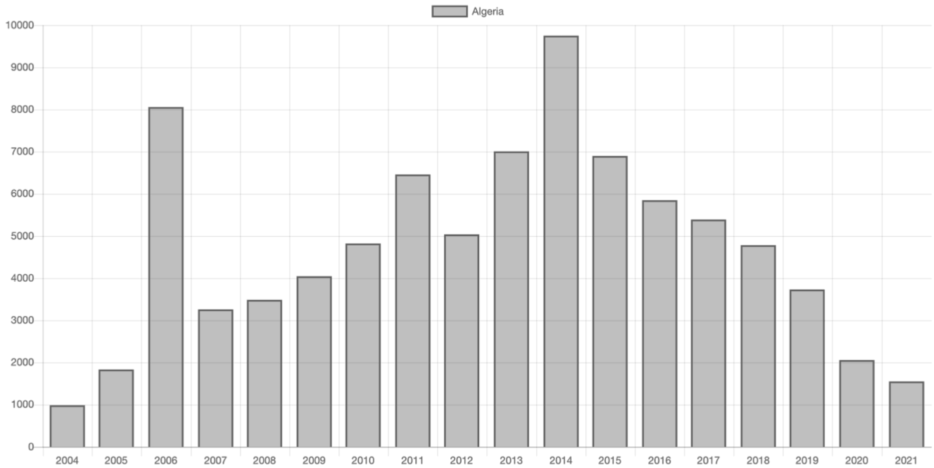
Another mega project to be built by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) is the new terminal of Houari Boumediene International Airport. Estimated to cost about 674 million USD, the new terminal can receive 12 million passengers, making the airport one of the largest in Africa. Hence, it is expected to become "a real hub between Africa and Europe".[24]

Therefore, the BRI provides a historical opportunity for Algeria to carry out mega projects that could transform the country and revolutionise its economy. Similar to

Egypt, Algeria's population is concentrated in the big cities on the Mediterranean shore. The middle and the southern parts of the country are deserts. These deserted areas contain natural resources and vast land that can be used for construction projects such as inhabitation which could ease pressure in the north and help the country achieve further growth. In doing so, Algeria could address the challenge of population growth which is expected to reach 72.4 million in 2050.[25]

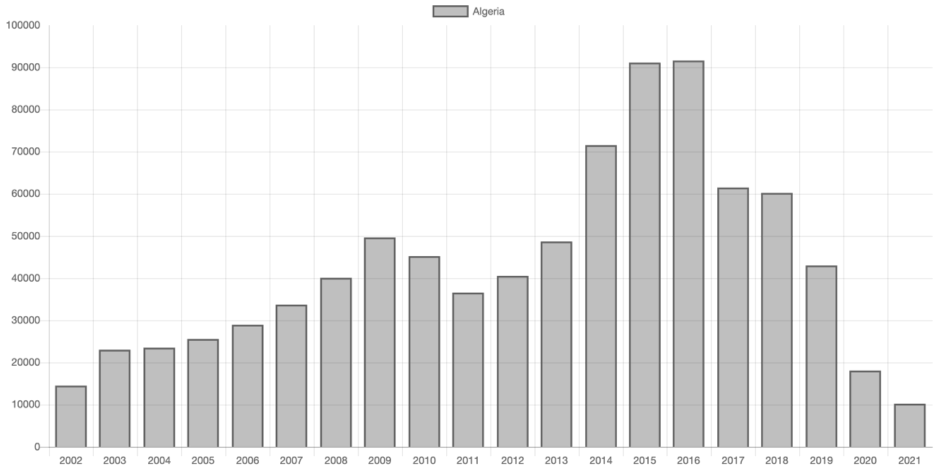
Besides construction and oil contracts, China and Algeria signed several agreements in minerals and non-energy extractive industries. For example, in 2018 both sides signed a six billion USD agreement to build a phosphate plant in Tebessa in which the Chinese state company CITIC Group Corporation owns 49 per cent of the project. The project is expected to provide revenues of up to 1.9 billion USD annually. The Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia described the project as "the largest and most important industrial project" that will "strengthen the Algerian economy".[26] Similarly, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), China International Water & Electric Corporation (CWE), and a few other Chinese companies specialised in mining and exploration have invested two billion USD to exploit the Gâra Djebilet mine located in the southwest of the country. Like other investment projects, Algeria retains 51 per cent of the project, while the rest of the Chinese companies share 49 per cent of it.[27]

Figure 12: Value of the contracts awarded to Chinese companies in Algeria



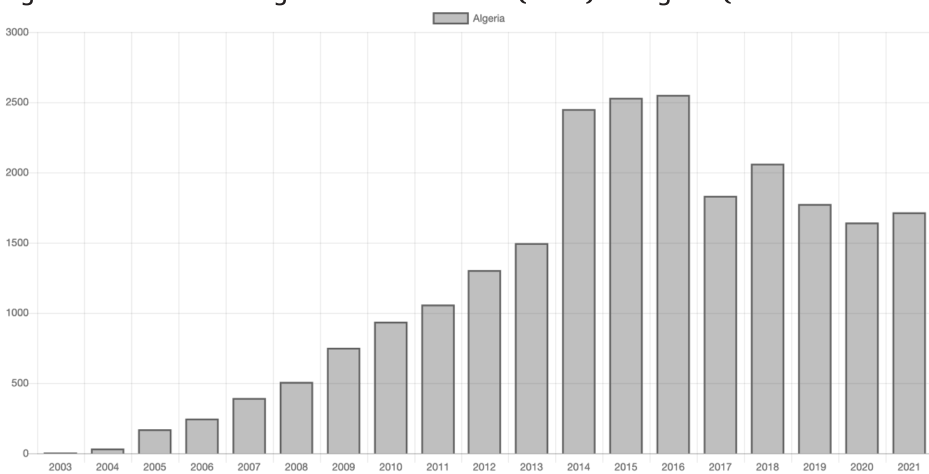
Source: ChinaMed

Figure 13: Number of Chinese contract workers in Algeria



Source: ChinaMed

Figure 14: Chinese foreign direct investment (stock) in Algeria (Unit: USD million)



Source: ChinaMed

There are concerns in Algeria about the perceived asymmetry in Sino-Algerian relations, suggesting that Chinese companies have marginalised Algerian businesses, provided limited job opportunities for locals, and been reluctant to transfer technology (Leopardi 2021). This view highlights the potential challenges and criticisms that can arise in the implementation of large-scale projects involving foreign investment. In this regard, Leopardi (*ibid.*: 199) suggests that rather "than the much-touted *win-win* cooperation, Sino-Algerian relations seemed to have reproduced North-South asymmetry and while the Algerian authorities reaped most of the benefits, the fate of Algeria's economy remains tied to its unresolved, long-standing problems".

The Sino-Algerian relations have indeed raised concerns and posed challenges to the Franco-Algerian relations. As China becomes a major investor and buyer of Algerian resources, it can impact the economic and strategic interests of other countries, including France. Algeria's decision to cut off imports to the European Union in 2016 in order to maintain foreign currency reserves created tensions with its traditional trade partners, including France.[28] In this regard, EU Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmstrom said, "Algeria is encouraging trade with China [...]. We must find solutions to this issue. Otherwise, we will resort to the clauses of the settlement of disputes".[29] The Algerian response was bold. The spokesperson for the Presidency of the Algerian Republic, Mohamed Oussaid Belaid, told the media that "Algeria does not care who is upset about this relationship (with China), and Algeria's foreign policy and strategy are clear in this area".[30] Mustafa Mekideche, Algerian deputy chairman of the government-appointed Social and Economic National Council was less diplomatic: "We are in a process of industrial development that the European Union must encourage and help instead of attempting to derail it".[31]

Sino-Algerian relations are expected to remain strong in light of the world order shift and China's increasing dependency on energy. President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020 in exchange for Morocco's normalisation of relations with Israel will potentially buttress Algeria's disengagement with the West.[32] While France and Algeria have recently "renewed partnership" and have established a Franco-Algerian historians commission to study the colonial past,[33] time will show how Algeria will balance its relations with China, France, and the Western powers in general.

Conclusion

The adoption of economic policies in Mediterranean Africa is often, if not always, related to structural pressures of the international system. For years, countries in Mediterranean Africa resisted neo-liberal economies because they were associated with colonialism. Hence, in the post Second World War political order, Egypt and Algeria adopted socialism.

The dollarisation of the world's economy further isolated the two countries in the international economic system as it clashed with socialism. As a result, the economies of Egypt and Algeria depended on foreign loans and oil prices. Since the two were desperate to carry out mega construction projects as part of state consolidation efforts, they had no choice but to hesitantly accept IMF and World Bank requirements of privatisation and openness, especially after the Cold War. Nevertheless, these privatisation policies were associated with regime survival incentives and business interests, which led to a civil war in the case of Algeria, cronyism in the case of Egypt, and an economic system that lacked basic transparency and accountability.

China's good relations with all North African countries make the BRI an opportunity for strategic infrastructure projects that can boost the national economy and contribute to political consolidation. Therefore, Egypt and Algeria see China's development model as an appealing formula for achieving high levels of growth and progression while maintaining sovereignty.

Given China's position as Egypt's and Algeria's top economic partner, bilateral relations are expected to remain strong. Existing research show that countries that are part of the Group of 77 (G-77), including Egypt and Algeria, are more inclined to support China and Russia, in contrast to nations not affiliated with the group (Nurullayev and Papa 2023).

However, the increasing Chinese presence in Mediterranean Africa raises questions about the response of Western powers such as France (Tran and Zoubir 2022) and the USA.[34] It remains to be seen how these powers will navigate the growing Chinese influence in the region and whether it will impact the scope of the BRI in Egypt and Algeria.

Overall, the economic policies adopted by the countries in Mediterranean Africa reflect their search for alternative development models and strategic infrastructure projects. The dynamics between China, Western powers, and North African countries will continue to shape the region's economic landscape and geopolitical relations.

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Notes

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2 - WANA is an abbreviation that refers to what is commonly known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). While the first part of the latter may be political in nature as it symbolises a European perspective on the region, the second part of it is neutral. For the sake of decoloniality and accuracy, I opted to use the term WANA instead.

3 - For example, the 1953 coup of Iran against Mosaddeq (1953), the coup against Shukri al-Quwatli in Syria (1949), the coup against Sabri al-Asali in Syria (1957).

4 - Before Bretton Woods, the gold exchange rule - the most important between 1876 and the First World War - governed the international economic system. Under the gold exchange rule, currencies enjoyed a new era of stability due to the support of the gold price. However, the gold exchange rule had a weak point in the boom-bust patterns. As the economy strengthens, more may be imported before the stockpile of gold that is needed to support the currency stability. As a result, money flows decrease, interest rates rise, and economic activity slows to a recession point. In the end, commodity prices are affected. Bretton Woods regulated foreign currencies with a fixed rate against the dollar, as the dollar was set at 35 USD for an ounce of gold. As a result, while it aimed to establish international financial stability, the Bretton Woods system dollarised the market economy and imposed structural constraints not only on global south countries but the rest of the world.

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