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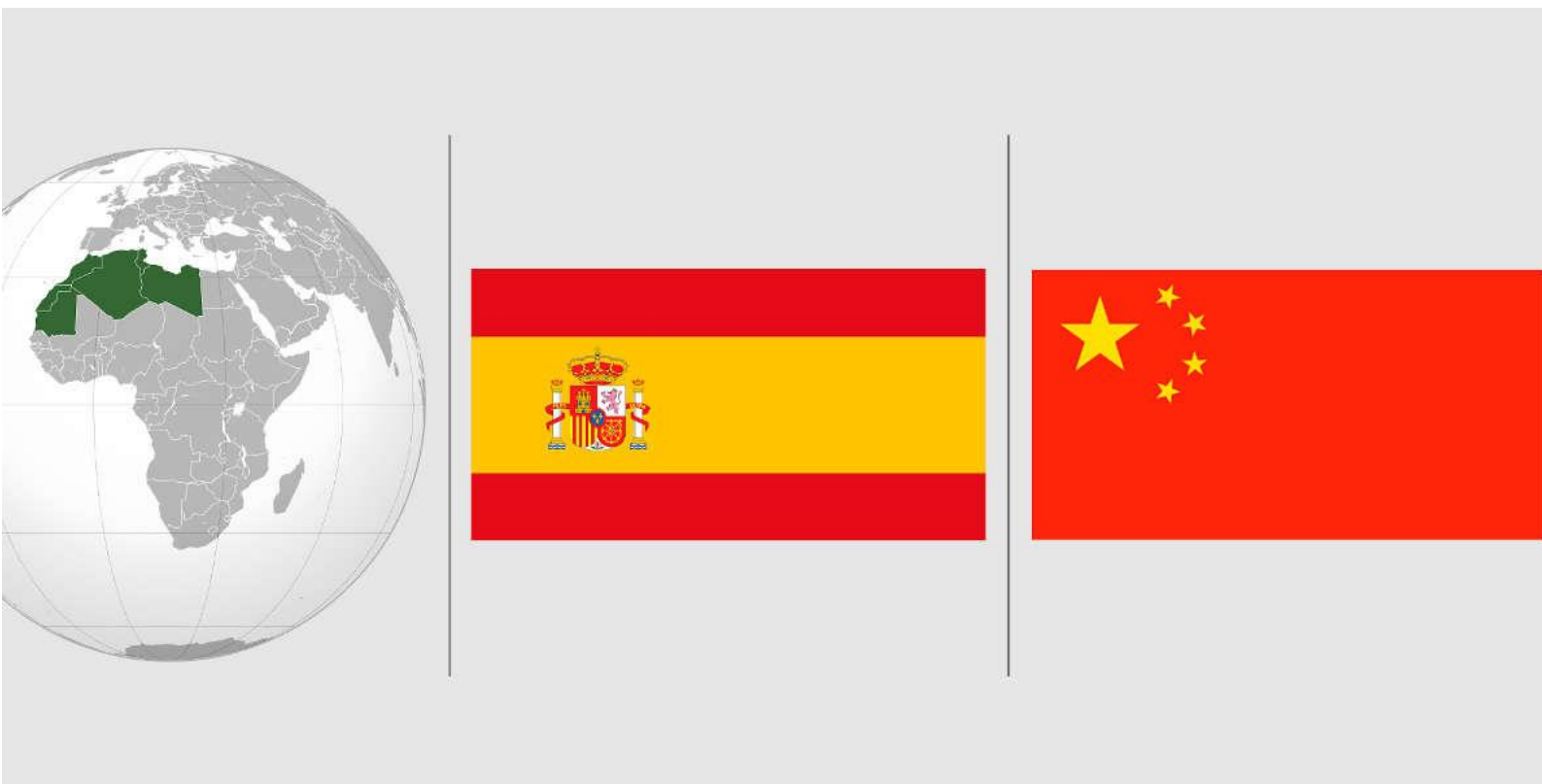


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WORKING PAPER

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Spain's foreign policy and security strategy towards the Maghreb. The increasing China's overlapping interests: challenge & opportunities



Jan Gallemí

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Spain's foreign policy and security strategy towards the Maghreb.
The increasing China's overlapping interests: challenge & opportunities

By Jan Gallemí Albàs
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Center for Global Affairs & Strategic Studies
University of Navarra
Law School - International Relations

Campus Pamplona: 31009 Pamplona
Campus Madrid: Marquesado Sta. Marta 3, 28027 Madrid
<https://www.unav.edu/en/web/global-affairs/>

ABSTRACT

This working paper aims to carry out an analysis of the impact of the People's Republic of China on the foreign and defense policy of the Kingdom of Spain in the Maghreb region. It must be considered that the Maghreb is a vital region for Spain, due to its proximity, and that China has the capacity of shaping it as it becomes a global power. For this, the potential areas of competence or collaboration of both states will be observed, based on the interests expressed in the Spanish National Security Strategy (ESN21) and in the Foreign Security Strategy 2021-2024. In this regard it can be found that China supposes a challenge for Spain's interest in the region, but at the same time there is opportunity for cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

States, as sovereign agents with the greatest capacity to shape the international field, give special relevance to their influence and impact on their spheres of influence. Thus, for Spain, the regions of Europe and the Maghreb (as other areas of Africa) are essential in the framework of its foreign affairs and security policy. However, other international agents also have a significant role in these regions. In the same way that Spain tries to be a relevant agent towards its peripheral areas¹ and those with which it has some kind of historical or cultural link (in reference to America), other agents also try to do so, creating a space of both competition and cooperation.

In this sense, the United States is no longer the only state whose influence is relevant in all areas of the globe. In the last decade, the People's Republic of China has become one of the most important agents in this, projecting itself not only as the most relevant state in the Indo Pacific, but also on the global scenario². Something that is visible, for example, through projects such as the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). As it is mentioned in an article of the Chinese Journal of International Politics: “Chinese foreign policy is no longer focused on keeping a low profile, but is based on beginning to show (and use) its capabilities by aspiring to leadership”³

The objective of this essay is to study the impact that China has or could have on Spanish foreign affairs and security policy towards the Maghreb, finding those possible spaces for cooperation (emphasizing common objectives), but also the competence (due to incompatibility of achieving those objectives). In this way, the first step would be to identify which are the interests, threats, and challenges of Spain in the region. Then to analyze how China is present or relevant so that the common and divergent grounds may be found and determine how they are shaping Spain's strategy.

1. Spanish foreign affairs and security policy towards Maghreb

Both in the National Security Strategy (ESN21) and in the Foreign Security Strategy 2021-2024, Spain accentuates the regional framework of the Maghreb and the Middle East, differentiating the two regions due to the geographical proximity of the Maghreb to the Iberian Peninsula. Spain defines the Maghreb to include the states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania, as well as the unrecognized Republic of Western Sahara. Thus, in the foreign security strategy 2021-2024, Spain's priorities are specified in this region with which it shares an important political dialogue.

The first priority for Spain is the promotion of a space of security and political stability to prevent threats such as terrorism or organized crime. Secondly it also intends to build

¹ Ministerio de la Presidencia de España. Departamento de Seguridad Nacional oficial website. <https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/dsn/files/ESN2021%20Capítulo%202.pdf>.

²Kristof, Nicholas D. 1993. “The rise of China”. Foreign affairs (Council on Foreign Relations) 72 (5): 59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045814>.

³ Yan, X. 2014. “From keeping a low profile to striving for achievement”. The Chinese journal of international politics 7 (2): 153–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027>.

an area of shared prosperity by strengthening economic and trade ties, while at the same time fostering democratic values and human rights. Importance is also placed on the promotion of both cultural-human contacts and regional integration through already existing formats such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UPM) and the 5+5 Forum. Being a ratifier of the UN Refugee convention, the management of increasing migratory flows through the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic route is also important for Spain. In the context of the Green Deal and REPowerEU, the strengthening of energy and climate dialogue becomes also relevant. Considering the recent Covid-19 crisis, priority is also placed on reorienting, in the short term, the cooperation policy towards the challenges brought by the pandemic. Finally, the last vital interest and purpose of Spain in the region would be contribute to UN efforts to reach a political solution to disputes in the region in accordance with international standards, including Western Sahara and Libya.⁴

Spain's foreign policy, as a member of the European Union and NATO, is coordinated and defined in conjunction with that of these organizations. In the case of the EU, it can be seen how the priorities of Spain's Foreign Security Strategy are already set out and are similar to those indicated by the European Parliament through the 'Report on relations between the European Union and the Arab Maghreb Union: a privileged association (2001/2027(INI)).'⁵ However, the European Union tends to give an approach to the Maghreb not so much as an independent region but within the larger context of Africa.

On March 9, 2020, Josep Borrell proposed the 'Strategy with Africa' (or Africa-EU partnership), noting a difference with what a 'Strategy for Africa' would entail. In this way, the bilateral relations between Africa and the EU are one of the main points of consensus among the 27 MS due to their importance and the common challenge that they represent.⁶ Similarly, according to Art. 8 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), "The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation".⁷ That is why, excluding Mauritania and Western Sahara, the rest of the Maghreb states are part of the European neighborhood policy. Also, all the members of the Maghreb (except Western Sahara) are part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euromed) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UFM). With regard to NATO, Spain has enjoyed, under the mandate of Pedro Sanchez, an important diplomatic role that can be seen both at the Madrid Summit and in its involvement in the event of a possible application of Art 4. at the G20 summit. At the Madrid Summit, he managed to address an issue regarding the

⁴ Estrategia de acción exterior 2021-2024.

https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/consejodeministros/resumenes/Documents/2021/270421-estrategia_de_accion_exterior_2021-2024.pdf.

⁵ Cohn-Bendit, Daniel, y Philippe Morillon. 2002. "Report on Relations between the European Union and the Arab Maghreb Union: A Privileged Partnership - Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence Policy". Europa.Eu. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-5-2002-0175_EN.html.

⁶ Soler i Lecha, Eduardo. 2020 "CIDOB - The Maghreb and the european bid for Africa". CIDOB. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_228/the_maghreb_and_the_european_bid_for_africa.

⁷ Smith, Rhona. 2015. "Consolidated version of the treaty on European union". En Core EU Legislation, 1–14. London: Macmillan Education UK.

Maghreb, which is whether the Spanish sovereignty of Ceuta and Melilla can be considered valid within the framework of Art. 5 despite being enclaves. On the other hand, he also extended his concern about instability in the Sahel, a region adjacent to the Maghreb where French forces had a notorious presence and which they have recently left, as in the case of Mali (the region's unstable governments have hire Wagner units instead).

2. The way China works

Although the first priority of the Spanish Foreign Security Strategy 2021-2024 was the promotion of an area of security and political stability in the Maghreb, it is first necessary to understand Chinese interests in the region from an economic perspective. This is because, as an article from the Spanish Institute of Foreign Affairs indicates, one of the main tools that China uses to shape the international field in its own favor is its strong economic capacity⁸. Added to this is the fact that, unlike Deng Xiaoping's *Tao Guang Yan Hui* (policy of peaceful development), Xi Jinping has opted for a foreign policy based on *Fen Fa You Wei* (aiming for success). Something that Xi has been able to do both due to great Chinese political, economic and military capabilities, as well as his growing power and leadership. It is necessary to understand that this way of acting in China is directly related to smart power.

“For the foreign audience, the Chinese dream has the mission of creating an image of China as a responsible actor within the international community that, thanks to its economic (and military) power, is capable of presenting itself as a leader that can and wants to maintain stability without fall into the defects of the great powers and without losing its benign character”⁹

Currently one of China's greatest ambitions in the international arena is to reform existing international law. Although this new perspective that China wants to provide covers all areas of international law, it places special emphasis on democracy and human rights. China believes that the current vision is not representative of a global vision, but rather a Western one. To address this, China organized the first South-South Human Rights Forum in 2017, in which 50 states participated. Xi Jinping emphasized that human rights have a duality of universality and particularity, and that they must be promoted in light of specific national conditions.¹⁰ What this implies is that states should be able to exercise their sovereign authority freely so as to be able to put other more relevant priorities before compliance with human rights. Especially when it comes to defense, security and stability. In the same way, another aspect that China defends is the principle of non-intervention in other states. This was seen in Libya when China abstained in the security council resolution regarding an intervention over the Gaddafi regime¹¹.

⁸ Llandres Cuesta, Borja. 2021. *La política exterior de China y la comunidad de futuro compartido*. Documento de Opinión IEEE 01/2021. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEE001_2021BORLLA_exteriorChina.pdf

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ Gao, C. 2017. “China Promotes Human Rights ‘With Chinese Characteristics’”. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/china-promotes-human-rights-with-chinese-characteristics/>

¹¹ Gallemí, Jan. 2021. “The EU and China: Two competing perspectives on the future of human rights”. *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*. 2021. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/the-eu-and-china-two-competing-perspectives-on-the-future-of-human-rights>.

In light of this approach taken by China, one of the main purposes of the EU is precisely to try to defend its values—among the universality of human rights—through its bilateral and multilateral relations. To do this, it tends to create relationships of economic interdependence through which to promote a relationship also based on those same values. One of the main instruments used for this was the neighborhood policy, the Union of the Mediterranean or the 5+5... However, China has become a competitor in this area by providing foreign investment and being an important importer. China's vision is that as long as it does not affect its interests, it will never intervene in the internal affairs of states. This actually leads to the promotion of authoritarian states and weakens any possibility for the EU to use sanctions mechanisms as a coercive element to enforce respect for human rights, the rule of law and democracy. That is why the expansion of Chinese influence in the Maghreb comes into direct competition with the third objective of the foreign security strategy 2021-2024.

It is also necessary to take into account the common ideological grounds between China and the Maghreb states, which was the starting point for the promotion of mutual cooperation.

Relations between China and the Maghreb date back to 1955 with the Bandung Conference where China supported the *Front de Libération Nationale* (Algeria), *Destour* (Tunisia) and *Mouvement National Marocain* (Morocco). All these movements had a common goal, namely French decolonization. This was the result of a collaborative strategy through which China obtained recognition from Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia in 1965, as well as a common ideological front against the Western powers. However, over time, the only state that has firmly maintained the anti-colonial narrative has been Algeria, which has had some diplomatic clashes with France (which have been resolved thanks to the economic interdependence between these two states).¹²

In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese companies were more likely to enter the manufacturing industry through mergers and acquisitions, rather than by starting their own factories, through a process of “socialisation through learning”, by which a technological transfer is made from foreign countries towards China. As part of Jiang Zemin's *Zouchuqu* (go global) policy, implemented in 2000, several bilateral investment treaties were signed between China and Maghreb countries. China's economic expansion was based, as a contrast with the West, on a model relying on commercial delegations that accompanied visits of important figures. All this was in the context of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) created in 2003 by the Ministry of Commerce.¹³

3. Algeria

Among the Maghreb countries, Algeria has the strongest economic and political ties with China¹⁴. In the case of Spain, however, relations with Algeria have deteriorated in recent

¹² “Algeria - France and the Mediterranean countries”. U.S. Library of Congress CountryStudies.us. <https://countrystudies.us/algeria/153.htm>.

¹³ Manero, Elizabeth. 2017. “China’s Investment in Africa: The New Colonialism?” Harvard Political Review, el 3 de febrero de 2017. <https://harvardpolitics.com/chinas-investment-in-africa-the-new-colonialism/>.

¹⁴ Del Panta, Gianni. 2018 “China’s Growing Economic Role in Algeria”. Reset DOC. <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/chinas-growing-economic-role-algeria>.

years. During the Franco regime, relations between the two states were not good (Algeria even going so far as to train members of the terrorist group ETA); this worsened when in 1975 Algeria was excluded from the Madrid agreements. Tensions reached such a point that Algeria came to support the Movement for Self-Determination and Independence of the Canary Islands.¹⁵ With the time, in 2002 the tensions had already subsided, which allowed the ratification of the “Treaty of friendship, good neighborliness and cooperation between the Kingdom of Spain and the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria”, signed in Madrid on 8 October from 2002.¹⁶ This treaty, however, was suspended, and all business ties with Spain were put on hold, when Pedro Sánchez's decision to reject the Sahara's right to self-determination was ratified by the Spanish Parliament on 8 June of 2022.

The current Algerian government legitimizes itself through post-colonial rhetoric, and this situation can serve as an example of how China is having an impact on Spanish foreign affairs. In this sense, as mentioned before, the ideological ties between Algeria and China are mainly based on this rhetoric that makes good relations and cooperation with Algeria and other African states difficult for Europeans.

However, not all is rosy for China. China is also facing the wrath of Algerian public opinion. China is present in Algeria through its construction and public works companies such the China State Construction & Engineering Corporation (CSCEC). These companies have been criticized for hiring Chinese labor instead of Algerians, and for the poor working conditions.¹⁷

Because of the tensions, the Chinese government had to apologize to Algeria and proceeded to repatriate the workers.¹⁸ The Algerian government considers Chinese labor essential as it is cheaper and better prepared for jobs, but at the same time there are cultural clashes¹⁹. Violence towards the Chinese has been progressively decreasing. Currently, the unemployment rate in Algeria is 12.7%, but if it rises, mistrust of Chinese workers could also increase.

While the European states must confront the anti-colonial discourse, China has to do the same with an anti-immigrant discourse. Despite this, China appears to be a much more favorable partner for these countries. Algeria is currently at a point of political instability that has pushed it to seek greater international cooperation. Based on this, Josep Borrell expressed “a firm intention to step up relations.”²⁰ However, from the Algerian perspective the relationship with Europe is one of “structural asymmetry.” Algerians are

¹⁵ Bustos, Rafael. “Vista de Las relaciones España-Argelia, una mirada desde España” en “Anuario Internacional CIDOB 2006 edición 2007” Raco.cat.. <https://www.raco.cat/index.php/AnuarioCIDOB/article/view/73494/83973>.

¹⁶ “Tratado de amistad, buena vecindad y cooperación entre el Reino de España y la República Argelina Democrática y Popular”. *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (270): 39752-39755. 11 de noviembre de 2003.

¹⁷ “Desempleo, total (% de la población activa total) (estimación modelado OIT) - Algeria”. World Bank. <https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=DZ>

¹⁸ Abid, Zohra. “China asalta el Magreb”. *Iemed.org*. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/china-asalta-el-magreb/>.

¹⁹ Chikhi, Lamine. 2009. Reuters. “Argelinos e inmigrantes chinos se enfrentan en Argel: Testigos”. <https://www.reuters.com/article/internacional-argelia-china-enfrentamien-idLTASIE57326420090804>.

²⁰ “Rapport Sur l'état Des Relations UE-Algérie Dans Le Cadre de La PEV Renouvelée Avril 2018 – Août 2020”. Europa.Eu. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/89563/rapport-sur-l%C3%A9tat-des-relations-ue-arg%C3%A9rie-dans-le-cadre-de-la-pev-renouvel%C3%A9e-avril-2018-%E2%80%93-ao%C3%BCt-2020_fr.

dissatisfied with the “unbalanced terms” of the 2005 Association Agreement; and the long-awaited Algeria-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA), due to have entered force last September, has again been postponed.”²¹ In 2014 Algeria signed its first strategic cooperation agreement with China and in 2018 a memorandum was ratified through which Algeria joined the BRI. Most significant is Tebboune's request of Algeria to become part of the BRICS group, expressed in 2022 with an initial welcome by both Russia and China. According to its plan diversifying its economy, Algeria maintains certain ties with Europe but tries to avoid becoming too dependent on it, betting on other economies such as in the Middle East and China.²²

One of the main reasons why Algeria has maintained strong bilateral relations with the European states that border the Mediterranean has been the export of oil and natural gas. Currently, 45.5% of the natural gas imported into Spain arrived through gas pipelines, while the remaining 54.5% was LNG.²³ The reason why liquefied gas has gained so much relevance is due to the energy diversification that Spain has had to carry out due to the sanctions regime imposed on the Russian Federation.²⁴ Algerian gas was exported to Spain through the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline (connecting Morocco with Cádiz). But the break in relations announced on April 24 between Morocco and Algeria has meant that instead of this, the gas pipeline used is the Medgaz gas pipeline (which directly connects Algeria with Almería). In recent years Spain has invested in natural gas, especially due to the fact that the European Union came to consider it clean energy and its supply falls within the ecological transition plan of the European Commission. Spain plans to increase its natural gas export capacity to Europe by 18% with the Irun gas pipeline, which is believed to supply 6% of the natural gas in France.²⁵ Germany is interested in making this project a reality, despite France's disagreement,²⁶ as it is one of the most vulnerable EU countries in the face of the energy crisis. This suggests that natural gas has become one of the main geopolitical challenges in the Maghreb.

China is also interested in the exploitation of natural gas in the region, specially through three large Chinese oil companies: Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC) and the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC). However, they do not have a direct concession and cooperate with Sonatrach (the largest hydrocarbons company in Algeria). Special mention should be made of Sinopec Oil & Gas Limited (SOOGL), which is dedicated to the natural gas exploitation.

²¹ Calabrese, John. “‘The New Algeria’ and China”. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/new-algeria-and-china>.

²² Amuedo, Antonio Navarro. 2022. “Argelia y China, más cerca: nuevo acuerdo estratégico y candidatura a los BRICS”. *niusdiario*. https://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/africa/20221114/argelia-china-estrategico-candidatura-brics_18_07970778.html.

²³ EpData. 2022. “Evolución de las existencias a último día de mes de gas en España”. *EpData - La actualidad informativa en datos estadísticos de Europa Press*. <https://www.epdata.es/evolucion-existencias-ultimo-dia-mes-gas-espana/eecee36d-dd62-4a36-86d4-af96c022b592>

²⁴ Picula, Tonino, Pedro Marques, Frédérique Ries, Nicolae Ștefănuță, Michal Šimečka, Dita Charanzová, Petras Auštrevičius “Joint Motion for a Resolution on Russia's Escalation of Its War of Aggression against Ukraine”. *Europa.Eu*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2022-0430_EN.html.

²⁵ Civieta, Óscar F. 2022. “España incrementará su capacidad de exportación de gas natural a Europa en un 18% con las obras del gasoducto de Irún”. *Business Insider España*. <https://www.businessinsider.es/espana-enviara-18-gas-natural-europa-1128803>

²⁶ Walstad, Andreas. 2022. “France, Spain Gas Link in Limbo, Poses Stranded Asset Risk”. *Gas Outlook*. https://gasoutlook.com/analysis/france-spain-gas-link-in-limbo-poses-stranded-asset-risk?utm_source=Search&utm_medium=p&utm_campaign=all.

Until now the Algerian energy market was very restrictive to foreign investment. In addition, although Algeria would be a closer liquefied natural gas port for China than other points of interest in Africa such as Nigeria, it has the drawback that it would have to go through the Suez Canal, with all the risks that this implies. But now China has ventured to increase this investment, and so Mohamed Slimani (Algerian minister of Energy), Mohamed Arkab (Sonatrach vice president) and Wu Xiuli (SOOGL general manager) have signed an agreement for the distribution of the production of oil for 25 years in eastern Algeria, worth more than 450 million Euros.²⁷ Therefore, although for China the import of oil and natural gas from the Maghreb is not of vital interest, since it only represents around 1% of its energy supply, it does have major implications for Spanish foreign policy. Chinese investment in the region allows for greater economic growth in Algeria, which is beneficial for Spain, taking into account that one of the objectives of the European neighborhood policy is the economic stability of the Mediterranean. In addition, as they are investments in natural gas, they act in parallel with the objectives of the European Green Policy. However, the increase in demand for natural gas from China may also lead to an increase in its price. Therefore, it would entail significant costs for Spain.²⁸ According to an article from the Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique China-Algeria, cooperation in terms of hydrocarbon resources could grow due to the following aspects:

“The European Union which is the destination of $\frac{3}{4}$ of Algeria’s petroleum exports, is experiencing a decline in its consumption (due to the efforts lead in favor of renewable energy, and the decline of industrial activity). Since 2015, Algeria’s petroleum exports to the European Union have already declined by a quarter, a trend that should be persistent.

In Algeria, the discovery of non-conventional gas deposits (derived from the fracture of schist rocks), whose reserves are considered number three globally, open new perspectives.

This gas could be exported by methane tankers to the Asian countries.”²⁹

On the other hand, another very significant aspect would be Chinese investment in Algerian ports. In 2016, China began investing in the construction of the Cherchell port through an agreement between China Port Engineering Company (CHEC), China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) and the Algerian Ministry of Transport. In addition to finding new markets for its goods, Algeria is aiming to establish itself as a hub port (connection node) for maritime trade in the Western Mediterranean. Mega-ships, which dominate transoceanic routes but cannot call at every port, will be able to dock at the new facility when they are ready. This is not the interest of Spain, since the new port

²⁷ Europa Press. 2022. “Argelia y China firman un acuerdo para la explotación conjunta de hidrocarburos en territorio argelino”. <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-argelia-china-firman-acuerdo-explotacion-conjunta-hidrocarburos-territorio-argelino-20220529023323.html>.

²⁸ Fernández-Cuesta, Nemesio. 2023. “China, Rusia y los factores que definirán la energía en Europa”. El Confidencial. el 2 de enero de 2023. https://www.elconfidencial.com/economia/2023-01-02/china-rusia-factores-definiran-energia-europa_3550254/.

²⁹ Lafargue, François. “The Economic Presence of China in the Maghreb: Ambitions and Limits”. FRS. <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/economic-presence-china-maghreb-ambitions-and-limits-2018>.

of Cherchell would enter into direct competition with that of Valencia, which is the leader in merchandise traffic in the Western Mediterranean.³⁰ On the other hand, the think tank Jane's IntelTrak has highlighted that these projects will pave the way for a greater Chinese military presence in the region, in addition to the economic and commercial benefits they will bring. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has recently made a number of port calls in the Mediterranean and taken part in naval drills there with Russia. In 2018, two Chinese navy ships paid a four-day visit to the Port of Algiers.³¹

Although the port of Cherchell is the closest Chinese port to the Spanish EEZ, it is not the only one in the Mediterranean. In the case of the Maghreb, the only other Chinese port would be Bizerte, in Tunisia. The rest are in the Eastern Mediterranean. These ports are Ei Dekheila/Alexandria/Abu Qir/East Port Said (Egypt), Ahsdod/Haifa (Israel), Beirut/Tripoli (Lebanon) and Piraeus (Greece). Something remarkable is that most of these ports are in the vicinity of the Suez Canal, which is understandable considering that China requires this canal for its ships to reach the Mediterranean through the Red Sea. The set of ports built in the Mediterranean by China is directly connected to the ports in the Indian Ocean. These ports are the materialization of China's geopolitical strategy commonly referred to as “Pearl of Strings” and the economic crossing of the “Blue Sea”. These concepts are framed within the BRI program. The Mediterranean extension is essential for China, considering that 80% of its energy consumption derives from there (most of it through the Persian Gulf).

4. Morocco

Despite the fact of Algeria being the main partner, China still invests a lot on infrastructure on more western-proxy states of the Maghreb such as Morocco. China is present in Morocco through its large companies that have been awarded public infrastructure contracts (highways, bridges, railways, telecommunications, hydraulic works, sports facilities...). In this way, China's soft power has greatly increased in the region. According to the Observatoire du Monde Arabomusulman et du Sahel, the interest of the Maghreb countries in engaging China in infrastructure projects (in the case of Algeria despite having public opinion against it) is due to several reasons. First and foremost, because of China's ability to quickly execute the task on a building site by deploying thousands of personnel. Second, because of the advantages of economies of scale brought about by the number of initiatives that have started (discounts granted by the suppliers, amortized research costs). Finally, because the construction is undeniably of higher caliber than that of local or regional companies³². The Chinese building and public work groups can readily collaborate with western partners and now offer services

³⁰ Moret, Xavi. 2016. “La inversión china en un nuevo superpuerto en Argelia amenaza el liderazgo de Valencia” Valenciaplaza.com. <https://valenciaplaza.com/la-inversion-china-en-el-nuevo-superpuerto-de-argelia-amenaza-el-liderazgo-de-valencia>

³¹ Davenport, Andrew. 2021. “Construction to Commence on \$3.3 Billion Deep-Water Port in Algeria, Backed by Chinese Financing and Chinese State-Owned Contractors”. Janes IntelTrak. el 26 de marzo de 2021. <https://www.rwradvisory.com/construction-to-commence-on-3-3-billion-deep-water-port-in-algeria-backed-by-chinese-financing-and-chinese-state-owned-contractors/>.

³² Lafargue, François. 2018. “The economic presence of China in the Maghreb: Ambitions and limits” Observatoire du Monde Arabomusulman et du Sahel <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/publications/en/294.pdf>

that are more competitive with those offered by their competitors overseas thanks to the expertise they have gained on their own marketplaces.

Some authors consider, and rightly so, that Morocco is seeking a “triangular association” with China, in such a way that it would become the connecting link at the commercial level between China (through the BRI), Africa and Europe. One of Morocco's greatest interests towards China is also the export of phosphates, chemical derivatives, agricultural and fishing products. Behind Spain and France, China is Morocco's third largest provider.³³

Morocco is also affected by the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and this has led it to different conflicts with Spain. Mainly, the most striking aspects are illegal immigration, trade agreements on the use of EEZ, the independence of Western Sahara and the sovereignty of the two cities of Ceuta and Melilla. One of the most serious conflicts occurred on May 17, 2021, when Morocco lifted its border control of access to the Spanish enclaves, allowing thousands of illegal immigrants to enter Spain. It is noteworthy that approximately 1,500 of them were unaccompanied minors. This is considered an act of revenge by Morocco since Spanish government previously allowed the leader of the Polisario Front to enter Spain for medical reasons. The EU's response was united, alleging that Morocco had attacked the borders of Europe. However, although relations between Spain and Morocco have been compromised at times, they are good enough to feed the economic interdependence between both countries. Thus, the main importers of products to Morocco are France and Spain. On the other hand, on March 14, 2022, Pedro Sánchez sent Mohamed VI a letter in which he considered that a special autonomy for Western Sahara within Morocco would be “the most serious, credible and realistic basis for resolving this dispute.”³⁴ Although, as mentioned before, this was disastrous for relations between Spain and Algeria, it allowed relations with Morocco to improve.

Since the BRI is something vital for China, it is necessary to emphasize that all the Maghreb states have ratified the project. The first of them was Morocco, and China has invested a lot of money in the ports of Tangier-Med and Casablanca. In this regard, the Chinese Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC) considers the port of Tangier-Med as a much more beneficial bet than the port of Cherchell due to its greater connectivity (3rd at the world level).³⁵

Within this scope, one of China's greatest interests in the region would be the creation of a route to connect its Maghreb ports with sub-Saharan Africa. This can be done in two ways. The first one would be connecting the Algerian ports such as Cherchell crossing the Sahara Desert in order to reach the port of Lagos in Nigeria. But this operation entails multiple risks since it would also mean crossing the Sahel region, which entails depending on areas of great political instability such as northern Nigeria (where Boko Haram

³³ Abid, Zohra. “China asalta el Magreb”. Iemed.org. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/china-asalta-el-magreb/>.

³⁴ González, Miguel. 2022. “La carta de Pedro Sánchez a Mohamed VI: ‘Debemos construir una nueva relación que evite futuras crisis’”. Ediciones EL PAÍS S.L. el 23 de marzo de 2022. <https://elpais.com/espana/2022-03-23/la-carta-de-pedro-sanchez-a-mohamed-vi-debemos-construir-una-nueva-relacion-que-evite-futuras-crisis.html>.

³⁵ Edouard, Jules “Les investissements chinois au maghreb”. Ecole de Guerre Economique. <https://www.egc.fr/infoguerre/2020/11/investissements-chinois-maghreb>.

operates) or Niger. Some authors even consider that due to the attacks on the Nigerian oil pipelines it would be even better to consider finishing the route in Benin instead of Lagos. The second option is equally more viable. In both cases, the Chinese route would pass from the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, but in the second it would not depend so much on a land route through the Sahel but would extend through the water to be able to continue there by land. In this sense, the Tangier Med port would be used, which would allow the route to diverge in two opposite directions. On the one hand, it could go from Morocco to Mauritania and from there continue to the rest of the Gulf of Guinea states. An emphasis has to be made on the modernization by CRBC of the port of Nouakchott in Mauritania. In the same way, the second divergence would extend towards Europe through the Iberian Peninsula.³⁶ Although the route also passes through the conflict zone of Western Sahara, the United Nations peacekeeping missions allow for greater stability.

Therefore, it is observed that Morocco is essential in the Chinese strategy towards the Maghreb, something that benefits Spain. This is due to the fact that although Spain and Morocco have had conflicts recently, the parliamentary declaration of the Spanish government on Western Sahara has allowed a greater space for cooperation with Morocco. Furthermore, while Algeria maintains its anti-colonial rhetoric, Morocco maintains very good diplomatic relations with NATO states, especially the United States (this being the case that Donald Trump recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2021). In this sense, Spain should take advantage of its good relations with Morocco to try to close the pearl necklace in the Mediterranean, ensuring a block of the passage through the Strait of Gibraltar as it represents an advance towards possible ports in the Atlantic. Especially in Latin America, another vital space for Spain. Although the relations between Morocco and China are also good, Morocco also considers China as an economic competitor in the European market (competition does not mean lack of cooperation). The massive influx of Chinese textile products at prices that defied any competition, first on the EU market, the traditional destination of Moroccan textile industries, then on the local market, had a direct impact on Morocco, a country that produces and exports textile products and that in 2005 saw the dismantling of the multi-fiber agreements with the EU. Official Moroccan sources claim that this upheaval in the Chinese textile industries resulted in the loss of nearly half of the sector's jobs in Morocco in just one year (95,000 out of a total of 200,000). Morocco had to enact certain stringent regulations to stop it.³⁷

Another of China's main interests in the region are rare earths and phosphates, of which 70% of the world's reserves would be located in Morocco. Precisely a good part of these phosphates is found in the territory of Western Sahara. China has always declared itself in the Western Sahara conflict as a neutral agent and has openly supported United Nations decisions regarding the territory. Rather, it supports the idea of a long-term Sahrawi

³⁶ "Algeria - France and the Mediterranean countries". U.S. Library of Congress Country Studies.us. <https://countrystudies.us/algeria/153.htm>.

Navarro Amuedo, Antonio 2022. "Argelia y China, más cerca: nuevo acuerdo estratégico y candidatura a los BRICS". *niusdiario*. https://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/afrika/20221114/argelia-china-estrategico-candidatura-brics_18_07970778.html.

Marcos, González Barastegui. 2021. "Chinese Presence in the Maghreb". *European Guanxi* (blog). <https://www.europeanguanxi.com/post/chinese-presence-in-the-maghreb>.

³⁷ Abid, Zohra. "China asalta el Magreb". *imed.org*. <https://www.imed.org/publication/china-asalta-el-magreb/>.

referendum. China is currently the sixth largest military contributor to the peacekeeping operation MINURSO.³⁸ In a way, China's interests in stability in the region are mainly economic. On the one hand, to be able to have safe access to the exploitation of rare earths such as phosphorus, but on the other hand also to be able to maintain a trade route between the port of Tangier and sub-Saharan Africa. This for Spain has an impact on benefits but also on costs. In 2020 the Polisario Front (an organization supported by Algeria), ended a ceasefire of more than 39 years after President Donald Trump officially recognized Western Sahara as part of Moroccan sovereignty. It is quite possible that this is due to an attempt by the Polisario Front to re-emphasize the legitimacy of an independent Western Sahara. But it is also necessary to consider that Algeria also aspires to maintain the balance of power in the region, whereas if the Sahara were recognized as Moroccan territory, Algeria would lose one of its greatest allies in the region. An independent Sahara would give Algeria the chance to open-up to the Atlantic. Thus, it can be seen that the Sahrawi conflict is one of the major sources of conflict in the region. Therefore, it must be remembered that Spain's main interest in the region is to promote an area of security and political stability. China, in this sense, can thus be a stabilizing agent. According to researcher Micheal Tanchum:

“Beijing, in its new and advantageous strategic position between the disputants, could promote bridging proposals that would benefit all sides. Now is the time for China to facilitate constructive interaction between Rabat and Algiers. Its diplomatic efforts could determine whether the Western Maghreb’s trajectory will be toward cooperation or conflict.”³⁹

However, while on the one hand the presence of China is positive for Spain, there is also the fact that China's position may also undermine Spain's influence in the region. On the one hand, Spain must defend, as a member of the European Union, the principle of fair competition. And it is not clear that China intends to respect it in its phosphate exploitation. Rather, according to the Western Sahara Resource Watch advocacy group, China has been involved in illegal purchases of phosphates in Western Sahara. On the other hand, China knew how to take advantage of the change in strategy made by Pedro Sanchez to Western Sahara. Thus, his letter to Mohamed VI supporting an autonomous regime over the Sahara was answered indirectly by China. In the meeting between Ramtane Lamamra and Wang Yi (foreign ministers of Algeria and China respectively), several comments were made in this regard. Wang Yi claimed that there are “certain countries that are concerned with geographical games” (referring to Spain) while Algeria and China “have a long history and support peace and justice.”⁴⁰

Therefore, China tries to expand its influence in the region while trying to undermine the credibility and confidence of the European countries. Something remarkable is that this can really be considered as an exception to the rule of Chinese foreign policy, one of its main principles being non-intervention. However, this can be explained based on the good

³⁸ Lagdaf, Souadou, y Yahia H. Zoubir. 2022. “MINURSO”. *Conflict and Peace in Western Sahara*, 308–27. London: Routledge.

³⁹ Tanchum, Michaël. 2021. “China’s Chance to Bridge the Algeria–Morocco Divide”. *East Asia Forum*. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/12/chinas-chance-to-bridge-the-algeria-morocco-divide/>.

⁴⁰ De La Cal, Lucas. 2022. “China respalda a Argelia y acusa a Sánchez de dedicarse a ‘juegos estratégicos’ en el Shara”. *El mundo*. <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2022/03/21/6238412ffc6c83767e8b45b1.html>.

relations between Algeria and China in the context of the BRI. But that is not why China loses its friendship with a Morocco that intends to get as close to Beijing as possible. According to an article in 'The New Arab', even if commerce between China and Morocco's rivals is highly valued, it is not as high as trade between Beijing and the GCC. In spite of the fact that Algeria, Nigeria, and Angola are regarded as some of the oil suppliers for the Chinese market, these nations (along with South Africa) are seen more as markets for Chinese investments and goods than as major sources of energy.⁴¹ On the other hand, although in rhetoric China defends an independent Sahara, in practice its interest in the Europe-Africa route that the al-Boraq high-speed rail line could allow gives contrary feelings. Therefore, for Spain it is good that China acts as a stabilizing agent, however it will generate multiple problems for Madrid due to Chinese growing influence in the region. On the other hand, it is also necessary to highlight that the other agent that supports the Chinese perspective in the conflict is Russia and an expansion of Chinese influence in the region could also mean an increase in Russian influence.⁴²

5. Libya

One of the main aims included in the Spanish Foreign Security Strategy 2021-2024 is to “contribute to UN efforts to reach a political solution to disputes in the region in accordance with international standards, including Western Sahara and Libya.” Among all the actors involved in Libya, China is generally forgotten. Its presence is not visible in the military field, but this does not mean that it is not there, a country where China has its own interests. Even before the conflict arose, China had many investments in the region. This could be one of the reasons why it abstained in the resolution of the Security Council on the intervention in Libya against the Gaddafi regime. In the same way as in Algeria or Morocco, China invested in public infrastructures (hydropower, railways, telecommunications) and hydrocarbons.

China maintained its policy of non-intervention and has always stayed away from the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine because it frustrated a large part of its interests. If one looks at the map of Chinese ports derived from the pearl necklace policy in the Mediterranean, one will quickly realize that there is a vacuum between Egypt and Tunisia resulting from the civil conflict in Libya. The foreign affairs minister of the Tripoli government, Mohamed Taha Siala, within the framework of FOCAC, signed an agreement with Wang Yi to bring the BRI to Libya. Around 2018, China saw the opportunity to get closer to Libya again, investing again in infrastructure given the needs of the country after the conflict, and resuming hydrocarbon imports. In such a way that the trade between both states was \$6.21 billion. Similarly, China has not been shy about continuing to cooperate with the Haftar government in eastern Libya. China is currently following the same mechanism that it has followed with other states with internal conflicts in the MENA region such as Syria, Iraq or Yemen. It tries to compete for economic contracts in areas that need to be revitalized, without having to align with a

⁴¹ Bennis, Samir. 2016. “The Morocco-China Partnership and Its Impact on Western Sahara”. The New Arab. <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/morocco-china-partnership-and-its-impact-western-sahara>.

⁴² “The Strategic Caution of Russia and China in Western Sahara”. 2022. Med-Or. <https://www.med-or.org/en/news/la-prudenza-strategica-di-russia-e-cina-nel-sahara-occidentale>

particular faction⁴³. In this sense, there is a great possibility of cooperation between Spain and China in order to achieve stability in the region, but once again there is the possibility that the possible ports that China builds will be used by the PLAN, that it spreads anti-colonial rhetoric or that exercise a predatory economic relationship with Libya.

6. Islamist terrorist movements approach

One of the main focuses of Spanish security policy has been the fight against terrorism. Although first terrorism manifested in Spain through secessionist movements, in 2001 Spain had to start fighting against Islamic terrorism, together with the rest of NATO allies. Spain has suffered Islamic terrorist attacks on its territory since then. The first one being in Madrid in 2003 and the second one in Barcelona in 2017. Moreover, Spain sees terrorism as a global matter which requires multilateral cooperation to be resolved. China has also similar concerns regarding terrorism. Seeking for an independent Xinjiang, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has long engaged in low-level violence against China. The CCP has implemented regulations controlling, and in some cases banning, expressions of Islamic and Turkic identity in order to combat the ETIM and other separatist Uighur. In addition to the usual oppressive means, in order to monitor the citizens of Xinjiang, the CCP has also made use of technology breakthroughs. China has started exporting its brand of counterterrorism techniques abroad as it develops its domestic counterterrorism strategies. This new global vision of anti-terrorism by China is accompanied by its economic, political and military growth. Being so that its strong use of hard power against terrorism has led it to be involved in a rhetoric in which other Islamist movements try to boycott the interests of China. Especially with respect to the BRI.⁴⁴

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) since 2009 has sought confrontation against China's interests in the region, considering it an enemy due to multiple rights violations against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. This has materialized, for example, in the attack on Chinese workers in construction companies in Algeria and in 2010 the terrorist group called for the murder of Han Chinese who were in the territory. This same targeting has been observed in the Sahel zone, which is relevant for China if it wants to connect its ports in the Mediterranean with Sub-Saharan Africa. Some terrorist groups that have directly attacked Chinese citizens and infrastructure include the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, the Justice and Equality Movement in Sudan or the Ogaden National Liberation Front in Ethiopia. Generally, the target were infrastructures for the exploitation of hydrocarbons and their workers. Because of this, China has tried to promote action based on multilateralism. Thus, one of the main topics discussed in the framework of the China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has been the fight against terrorism. According to He Wenping, senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, "extremist organizations know no borders, and countries must work together and strengthen their cooperation to combat terrorism."⁴⁵

⁴³ Wehrey, Frederic, y Sandy Alkoutami. 2020. "China's Balancing Act in Libya". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/10/china-s-balancing-act-in-libya-pub-81757>.

⁴⁴ L. Byman, Daniel. Saber, Israa. 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/is-china-prepared-for-global-terrorism/>

⁴⁵ Shinn, David. 2013. "China confronts terrorism in Africa". China-US Focus. <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/china-confronts-terrorism-in-africa>.

In this sense, it is true that Spain and China could establish a cooperation dialogue for the fight against terrorism. However, although both have a common objective, they differ in terms of methodology. Thus, China's fight against terrorism has been considered to be heavily violating to human rights. The best example is found with the extradition of Uyghurs from the Maghreb. Many Uyghurs accused of terrorism in China flee to other states where Islam is the most widespread religion. The example of Yidiresi Aishan being a case in point. He was a Uyghur who was accused by the Chinese authorities of belonging to ETIM, which is why he decided to go into exile in Morocco. He was detained by INTERPOL in 2017 and eventually released in 2021. But Morocco returned Aishan to China due to a bilateral agreement. This created a huge human rights uproar across the world including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁴⁶

Although one of Spain's main objectives is the fight against terrorism in the Maghreb, it is above all a member of the European Union and in accordance with the TEU it must defend international law and human rights. In the same way, the Rome Statute, of which Spain is ratifying, condemns any individual for the crime of ethnic cleansing. In this way, Spain cannot (and does not want to, according to the Foreign Security Strategy 2021-2024), support the measures that China proposes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the growing presence of the People's Republic of China in the region may favor Spanish interests, fostering cooperation between both states. However, there are also conditions for competitiveness derived mainly from the principles that both defend. Some cooperation opportunities would be the promotion of order and stability in the region, both in the fight against terrorism and territorial struggles for the balance of powers between Morocco and Algeria as well as civil conflicts such as the one in Libya. Even so, the BRI could become a method of ensuring economic prosperity and commercial competitiveness in the region by promoting the diversification of supply channels. This is also the case for the EU plans on the Green Deal and REPowerEU, which encourage the use of clean energy such as natural gas. Europe could also take advantage of the corridors that China plans in the region. However, despite these benefits, the growing influence of the PRC also means significant competitiveness.

The PRC, through its principle of non-intervention in internal affairs, allows the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes and policies contrary to the current UN charter due to the universality of human rights. Even so, it is not certain that the competitiveness that China brings is fair, as has been observed in the phosphate explosion in Western Sahara. In the context of Western Sahara, China has known how to take advantage of the opportunity to show itself as a mediating state and protector of international law in the states of the Global South.

⁴⁶ "Morocco: UN Experts Say Extradition of Uyghur Asylum Seeker to China Violates Principle of Non-Refoulement". 2021. s/f. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/12/morocco-un-experts-say-extradition-uyghur-asylum-seeker-china-violates>.

Finally, it is also necessary to mention the threat posed by Chinese ports in the Mediterranean. Not so much because of the competitiveness it entails for European ports, less like Valencia, but above all because of the use of these ports by the PLAN. In the same way, taking into account the bilateral relations between Russia and China, both navies could carry out joint naval exercises very close to the Spanish EEZ. Therefore, even though China is a favorable agent for cooperation in this region of vital interest to Spain, it must be taken into account that the growth of its presence poses a threat both to Spain and to its allies in NATO and the EU.

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