



China's Balancing Act in the Western Sahara Conflict

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“Now there is only one country in Africa that has not established diplomatic relations with China. China sincerely hopes that this country can join the big family of China-Africa friendship at an early date,” China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi said during a signing ceremony establishing diplomatic relations between China and Burkina Faso in May 2018 (Chinese Embassy in the United States, 2018). The country to which Wang referred is Eswatini (former Swaziland), Taiwan’s only ally in the continent, not the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Western Sahara, which Beijing unlike the African Union (AU) has not recognised until today. Later that year in September, SADR was not in the list of invitees to the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing. Despite all the fanfare revolving around China-Africa relations since the new millennium, the Western Sahara conflict appears to be under the radar, in part precisely because of Beijing’s non-recognition of SADR. Very little has been written on China’s attitudes towards this currently one of the most neglected conflicts and there has been rare reference to it by Chinese foreign policy circles, except periodically during the debates within United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This article seeks to engage in a preliminary exploration of China’s position on this conflict. To begin with, I introduce the scholarly discussion within China on Western Sahara since 2000 and examine the main perspectives of Chinese international relations epistemic community on this issue. Then I look at China’s official statements during UNSC debates on the issue of Western Sahara and China’s current participation in the peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara. In the session following that, I outline the current relations Beijing maintains with Morocco and Algeria respectively and investigate how these two bilateral relations factor into China’s present position on Western Sahara. Finally, I explore the prospect of any changes in China’s position in the near future.

1. Chinese Scholarly Discussion on Western Sahara since 2000

I conducted a key word search of the term “Western Sahara (西撒/西撒哈拉/西撒哈拉问题)” among academic journals from 2000 to 2018 in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. Confining my search to the subject category of international relations, I was only able to identify 10 articles with relatively substantial analysis on Western Sahara. Against the background of the two-decades burgeoning China-Africa relations and a growing body of scholarship within China on African studies, this significantly low number of publication itself indicates Chinese scholars’ scant interest in this conflict.

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While many Chinese scholars tend to locate the early stage of the Western Sahara conflict within the discourse of decolonisation, they tend to prioritise the geopolitical realities in their analysis of the current conflict dynamics. For instance, Cao and Liu (2005: 27-28; 2006) assert that the resolution of this conflict depends primarily on the development of Morocco and Algeria's domestic politics and bilateral relations, because these two countries have appropriated the issue of Western Sahara to "meet the need of their domestic politics" and to "promote political coherence and national identity". In other words, Western Sahara has become an inseparable constituent of their respective domestic and foreign policy. Yang & Tian (2016: 14) attribute the conflict irresolution partly to Rabat's irredentist sentiment for a "Greater Morocco", but also notice that the balance of power is in strong favour of Morocco and Polisario is unable to rely solely on its military capabilities to achieve independence. Some scholars (Li and Li, 2004: 26) argue more bluntly that the resolution does not lie on "UN's resolutions or opinions", but "the capabilities and political willingness of concerned parties [Morocco and Polisario]".

It is with this primarily geopolitical and realist lens that the majority of Chinese scholars I survey appears to be pessimistic about the chance for Western Sahara to obtain independence. Cao and Liu (2005: 29) claim that a high degree of autonomy in Western Sahara might be the "second best result for Morocco", but "the best result given the current circumstances". Chen (2003: 3) goes further to question whether Morocco is willing or can be coerced to move its army and settlers out of Western Sahara in case of referendum – which he also deems highly unlikely to be held – with independence as the final result. Most recently, Sun Hong (2017), assistant research fellow at the Institute of African Studies in China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, in her analysis on Morocco's re-admission into the AU, states that the chance for independence is dim. Considering the decreasing urgency of the conflict and Rabat's de-facto control of the region for over 40 years, Morocco feels more comfortable in re-joining the AU and is likely to rally support for their case on Western Sahara within the organisation (Sun, 2017: 56-57).

The continued irresolution of the conflict is expected to further strengthen Morocco's de-facto control of the territory (Cao and Liu, 2005), but at the same time causes two main concerns among Chinese scholars: one is the strained Moroccan-Algerian relations leading to a slow and frustrating integration process in the Maghreb, particularly within the Arab Maghreb Union (Cao and Liu, 2005; Zhao, 2008; 2010), and the other is the further aggravation of this region's vulnerability to extremist militancy and terrorist activities (Chen, 2003: 9; Mu, 2016: 47; Wu, Xi and Wu, 2010; Zhao, 2008: 43).

Another major focus by Chinese scholars is to explain the reasons behind the inability of United Nations (UN) in resolving the Western Sahara conflict. One frequently mentioned factor is the lack of coercive means by the UN and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to implement UN resolutions, which significantly damage UN's authority and credibility (Chen, 2003: 3; Li and Li, 2004: 26; Li, 2005: 18; Mu, 2016: 47). Mu, a former Chinese military observer in MINURSO raises concern over "MINURSO's marginalisation", because the mission has not made any progress in carrying out the referendum and limited itself to cease-fire monitoring and to talks with both parties on political and security situations, which could further reinforce Polisario's impression that the existence of MINURSO helps Morocco's de-facto control of Western Sahara. The interests of or interference by external powers, particularly the US, France, and the Soviet Union, is another factor. Li (2005: 18) argues that the Cold War competition between the US and the Soviet Union made the Western Sahara an "indirect battlefield" and prolonged the conflict, whereas the geostrategic importance of the Western Sahara has reduced in the post-Cold War period, leading to a lack of interest by external

powers in resolving the conflict or actively advancing the agenda within UN. Finally, the changing power balance between Morocco and Polisario is also claimed to limit UN's room for manoeuvre. Some scholars (Li and Li, 2004: 26) believe that when UN intervenes in a conflict, where the power balance is clearly tilted towards one party, UN's ability to influence is significantly conditioned by this party and this is precisely what has happened in the Western Sahara conflict, with Morocco currently at a clear advantage over Polisario and more able to influence UN's action.

2. Chinese Current Engagement in Western Sahara

The lack of interest in Western Sahara within Chinese epistemic community in international relations indicates that this conflict is of very low priority for Chinese foreign policy makers; and China's current engagement – if there is any – should also be understood with in mind this dormant scholarly discussion. The Polisario's proclamation of the SADR occurred in 1976, a time when China's policy towards Africa underwent significant changes. The end of Cultural Revolution, the improvement of Sino-Soviet Union and Sino-US relationship in the late 1970s, as well as the preoccupation with economic reform since the 1980s foresaw Beijing's gradual withdrawal of assistance to many African national liberation movements that it had previously supported since the mid-1950s. Beijing's foreign policy, particularly its aid program, has since then shifted to emphasize more on mutual benefits and economic cooperation. This coincidence of timing partly explains why Beijing provided Polisario with no support during the 1976-91 military confrontation with Morocco (Olimat, 2014: 124), and to a certain degree, lays the foundation for China's current engagement in the Western Sahara conflict, best characterised as being detached and distanced.

Beijing has limited its role primarily within the UN setting – a form of “indirect participation” of “China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA region (Sun and Zoubir, 2018)”. Sun Degang (2015: 88), deputy director of the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University, attributes Beijing's detachment to its lack of “real interest [现实利益]” in Western Sahara. In a more recent article he co-authors with Yahia Zoubir (2018: 233), a French expert in Western Sahara, they further argue that Beijing's need to balance its relationships with Morocco, an increasingly important business partner, and Algeria, a long-time friend, explains “China's balanced, guarded position on the conflict.” The intractability of the conflict with both parties unlikely to reach any breakthrough in the short term, as well as the declining sense of urgency towards the conflict by other great powers also appears to conducive to Beijing's limited role (Sun, 2015; Sun & Zoubi, 2018). Beijing's selective activism in conflict resolution should also be understood within the larger backdrop that China is still playing a catch-up in terms of its diplomatic, security, and military resources with its rising status as a global power.

The discussion within UNSC appears to the only major occasion we are able to glance at China's official position and language on Western Sahara. However, even looking through UNSC meeting records available online from 2006 to 2018, China did not make any substantial statements until 2016 on the resolution 2285, and most recently on the resolution 2414 and 2440 in 2018 – which itself may indicate a slow pick-up of interest in this issue. China has voted in favour of all the UN resolutions that aim to extend the mandate of MINURSO, except one abstention casted on the resolution 2414. China claims that its position remains “consistent”, and parsing through these three statements, we could get an initial sense of what this “consistent” position is composed of: accentuating the role of

UN including its resolutions and special envoys, emphasizing consensus within UNSC, and emphasizing a mutually-acceptable political solution achieved through negotiations. Despite Beijing's claim on its impartiality and objectivity, some underlying tensions can still be detected within its position and statements. Although the issue of self-determination of the people of Western Sahara is confirmed by UN resolutions, which China has endorsed so far, its commitment in this regard remains precarious. It did not make any reference to "self-determination" in its statements reviewed here. Many analysts attribute this reticence to China's own domestic concerns over the issue of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Bennis, 2016; Leudi, 2017). Besides, the *political reality* on the ground in Western Sahara, particularly its regional dimension, factors quite heavily into China's consideration. For instance, after the abstention vote on the resolution 2414, China's representative to the UN states that "the priority is to maintain *regional stability* [*italic added*] and to create favourable conditions for the restart of the political process." The presence of these two considerations, one relating to international legal principles and another to *realpolitik*, should not come as a surprise, as Roussellier (2014: 120) points out, the concurrence of these two factors and the tension thereof has characterised UN's current handling of Western Sahara, leading to "a complex and conflicting dual track approach ... blending ... the self-determination paradigm and the political settlement option." However, it is reasonable to suspect that, among these two factors, the *realpolitik* lens might weigh more heavily in Beijing's calculations.

Beijing's more "active" posture in the conflict can be found in its continued support to MINURSO as troop contributor. China has sent military observers to MINURSO since its establishment in 1991. As of January 2019, China contributes 13 peacekeepers to MINURSO composed of 225 staff, making it 7th largest troop contributor in this mission. Peacekeeping diplomacy has become an integral part of Beijing's ambition to have stronger influence in international peace and security, particularly in regions such as Africa and the Arab world (Duchâtel, Gowan and Rapnouil, 2016; Sun, 2018). Currently as the largest troop contributor among the P-5 members in UN Security Council and the second largest financial contributor, Beijing actively uses its participation in peacekeeping to project a constructive and positive side of its rising and to show its commitment to peaceful development. Moreover, in conflict-ridden areas with significant China's economic or human presence (e.g. South Sudan), UN peacekeeping missions have become an ideal and internationally-acceptable platform to protect Beijing's ever-growing overseas interests. In areas with less strategic interests like the case of Western Sahara, participating in peacekeeping mission helps Beijing maintain a minimum presence on the ground and remain alerted about the on-going conflict dynamics, but also is used as evidence by China to fend off potential criticism that it stays aloof or unconcerned over the conflict. Moreover, MINURSO could be of particular symbolic value for China. In 2007, the UN appointed Major General Zhao Jingmin as the force commander of the MINURSO, the first time a Chinese force commander heading one of UN peacekeeping missions. In December 2016, Major General Wang Xiaojun was appointed to head MINURSO. UN Peacekeeping is not only just a significant channel for China to contribute to international peace and security, but equally importantly, is seen in itself as an existing platform and structure of global governance, which China should strive to shape and leave its own imprints commensurate with its rising status as a global power, particularly relating to the normative underpinnings of peacekeeping and personnel representation within different UN peacekeeping decision-making, operational, and consultative bodies (He, 2018). With this consideration in mind and the history of important positions assigned to China in MINURSO, China's commitment to this mission is expected to remain strong.

3. China' Delicate Balancing between Morocco and Algeria

It is not possible to discuss China's current position in Western Sahara without taking into account its relations with Morocco and Algeria. The aforementioned *realpolitik* factor, especially in economic terms, is of great importance to our understanding of Beijing's current detachment to Western Sahara, a region – particularly those controlled by Polisario – appears to be of little economic interests to Beijing. For instance, according to the data available in China Statistical Yearbooks, China's trade with Western Sahara, if not inexistent, is negligible (Table 01). Phosphate is one of the few strategic resources that the land of Western Sahara disposes. According to the latest United States Geological Survey (2019), Morocco with Western Sahara represents over 70 % of the global reserves of phosphate rock, while China ranks the second with approximately 5 %. Available statistics from UN Comtrade indicate that China remains itself a net exporter of phosphate ore.¹ One of the most important uses of phosphate rock is to produce fertilizers for agriculture, and China also remains a net exporter of phosphate fertilizers up to date.² Therefore, the strategic importance of the phosphate rock reserve in Western Sahara may be factored into China's position on this conflict in the long term, but not likely at the present time or in the short to medium term.

Table 01 – China-Western Sahara Trade (2010-2017)

Year	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Volume (million US\$)	1.79	0.19	0.4	0.32	0.02	0.29	0.02	0.03

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2012-2017.

Morocco is the second African country to recognise People's Republic of China in 1958, only after Egypt. Recent years, particularly after Morocco's King Mohammed VI's state visit to China in 2016, witnessed a boost to bilateral ties. During this visit, the two countries established a "strategic partnership" (Xinhua, 2016). 15 government documents were signed to reinforce cooperation over areas ranging from economic, judicial, cultural to energy, tourism, infrastructure, and consular (Challenge, 2016). Soon after this visit, Rabat announced the removal of visas for Chinese nationals, contributing to a quadruple increase of Chinese tourists to Morocco within three years, from 43 000 in 2016 to nearly 200 000 in 2018. This massive growth of tourists had not yet led to a significant presence of Chinese community in Morocco. According to the country report issued by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce (2017: 4), Morocco hosts a Chinese community of about 2000 people, with more than half of them in Casablanca. In November 2017, Morocco also became the first country in the Maghreb to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's cultural diplomacy has also made its way into Morocco. It hosts three Confucius Institutes only behind South Africa (6) and Kenya (4) in the continent and inaugurated the China Cultural Centre in December 2018, the second of its kind in the Arab world. Institutionalised mechanisms are either renewed or created to further invigorate this bilateral relationship, for instance, the first meeting of the Morocco-China Energy

¹ For instance, in 2017, the value of China's export of phosphate ore was about US\$45.2 million while that of its import stood at US\$9 million. Data (HS Code 2510) was accessed through UN Comtrade Database via <https://comtrade.un.org/data>.

² For instance, according to the latest data from UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, the value of China's import of phosphate fertilizers stood at about US\$13.5 million while that of its export was about US\$479.4 million. Data was accessed via <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#search/Phosphate%20fertilizers>.

Cooperation Committee was held in 2017; and the Morocco-China Trade Economic and Technical Cooperation Joint Committee was reinitiated to have its 6th session in 2018 after an 11-years interrupt.

However, despite this recent boost in bilateral political ties, the economic relationship between Beijing and Rabat still has much to develop when we look at more specifically three indicators: the bilateral trade, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), and the turnover of China's construction projects in Morocco. In terms of trade, as the 6th largest economy in Africa, Morocco is China's 10th trading partner in the continent with a bilateral trade volume of US\$3.83 billion in 2017, representing about 2.2 % of China-Africa trade.³ While this trade volume is almost insignificant in China's total foreign trade – less than 0.09 %, it occupies more importance in Morocco's trade, occupying 5.44 % of Morocco's foreign trade and 7% of its total import. China also gains a trade surplus of US\$2.5 billion. When it comes to investment, despite a continuous upward trend, the stock of Chinese FDI in Morocco stands at US\$318 million, far behind Morocco's top three foreign investors: France (US\$21.8 billion), Emirates (US\$13.2 billion), and Spain (US\$5.24 billion) by the end of 2017, only comparable to countries like Ireland (US\$383 million) and accounting for only a negligible 0.05 % of Morocco's total FDI stock received by 2017. This stock also represents merely 0.073 % of Chinese FDI stock in Africa and is only comparable to other African countries with much smaller economic sizes that receive Chinese FDI, like Liberia (US\$319 million). As Pairault (2018) succinctly points out, China in Africa is primarily not an investor, but a service provider. However, China's role as a service provider in Morocco also appears to be largely marginal. Considering the turnover of overseas construction contracts as a proxy for the value of services provided by China, Chinese construction companies in 2017 finished works worthy of US\$37.6 in Morocco, accounting for only 0.7 % of these companies' turnover in Africa, similar to their business in Djibouti (US\$36.6).

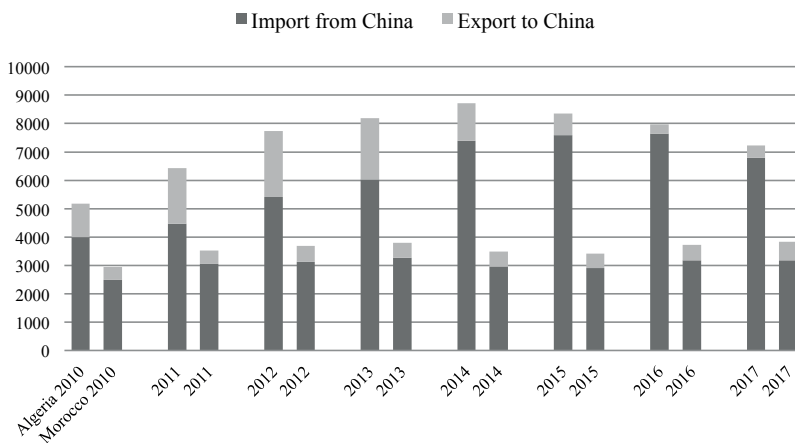
The bilateral political relationship between China and Algeria is a notch stronger than that of China-Morocco, as indicated by both sides' decision to establish a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2014, making Algeria the first Arab country to enter this partnership category with China. In fact, the two capitals traditionally enjoy strong relations deeply rooted in their respective prominent roles in the Non-Aligned Movement and their support for anti-colonial movements. China was also the first country to recognise the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic in September 1958 and the first non-Arab country to recognise Algeria's independence in 1962. Algeria also co-sponsored with Albania for Resolution 2758, which was passed and allowed Beijing's admission to the UN in 1971; and China's first ever overseas medical team was dispatched to Algeria back in 1963.

However, this strong political tie has not been translated into a closer economic relationship between them until the last decade and China overtook France to become Algeria's largest supplier in 2013 (Pairault, 2015: 3). Despite a two-year drop since 2015, the bilateral trade reaches US\$7.23 million, still double larger than the China-Morocco trade in 2017. It is currently China's fifth largest trading partner in the African continent and accounts for 4.2 % of China-Africa trade, but only occupies a marginal place in China's total foreign trade (0.18 %). This trade volume, however, takes up 8 % of Algeria's foreign

³ Data on China-Morocco bilateral trade, China-Africa trade, Chinese FDI in Morocco and selected countries, and the turnover of China's overseas project is obtained from China Statistical Yearbooks and Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment; Data on the total FDI in Morocco and the FDI of selective countries in Morocco is obtained from Office Des Changes of the Moroccan government [Consult. 7.Mar.2019]. Available at: <https://www.oc.gov.ma/fr/etudes-et-statistiques/series-statistiques>; Data on Morocco's total foreign trade and its import volume is obtained from UNCATD Country Profile. [Consult. 7.Mar.2019]. Available at: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/Country-Profile/GeneralProfile/en-GB/504/index.html>.

trade, representing 15 % of Algeria's import, but only 1.3 % of its export, which leads to a US\$6.3 billion trade surplus in favour of China (Table 02). Although oil and petroleum products dominate Algeria's export to China (Pairault, 2015: 4), the majority of Algeria's oil exports in fact goes to Western Europe, not China. In terms of investment, Algeria ranks sixth among the African countries receiving China's FDI proxied by the stock. Despite the occurrence of divestment in 2017, China's FDI stock in Algeria still stands at US\$1.83 billion, almost 6 times larger than that in Morocco by 2017, representing 4.2 % of Chinese FDI stock in Africa. This stock of investment, however, only takes up 0.63 % of Algeria's total FDI stock, just as the case of Morocco, relatively insignificant.⁴ And Chinese FDI in Algeria's energy and mining, a sector crucial to the economy of Algeria, remains unimpressive (Pairault, 2017: 51). Contrary to Morocco, Algeria currently is the largest market for Chinese construction companies in Africa. In 2017, their turnover of overseas construction projects in Algeria reaches US\$7.85 billion, accounting for over 15 % of their business in the African continent and 21-fold larger than that in Morocco. It comes with a human presence – according to the data published by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, there is a Chinese workforce of 61 491 in Algeria in the end of 2017 (627 in Morocco...). In fact, Algeria is the only African country that has seen a continuous and large presence of Chinese workforce, which has never been inferior to 20 % of the total Chinese workforce present in the continent since 2005 (Pairault, 2017: 43). This workforce, mobile yet continuously abundant, constitutes the majority of Chinese living in Algeria (Ministry of Commerce, 2017b).

Table 02 – China's Trade with Algeria and Morocco (million US\$)



⁴ Data on China-Algeria bilateral trade, China-Africa trade, Chinese FDI in Algeria and selected countries, and the turnover of China's overseas project is obtained from China Statistical Yearbooks and Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment. Data on the total FDI in Algeria is obtained from the online data platform of UNCTAD; Data on Algeria's total foreign trade and its import and export volume is obtained from UNCATD Country Profile. [Consult. 7.Mar.2019]. Available at: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/GeneralProfile/en-GB/012/index.html>.

This brief overview suggests that the Sino-Algerian relation is more prominent than the Sino-Moroccan relation both in terms of political and economic ties, and it would therefore be reasonable to suspect that China would align its foreign policy more in line with Algiers' interests, for instance, to support Polisario on the issue of Western Sahara. However, this is not what has happened in reality. China stays "neutral ... a position perceived as 'disappointing' by Algerians who argue that 'we do support China on Tibet and Taiwan, while China remains neutral on Western Sahara even if the question of Tibet and Taiwan is totally different from Western Sahara' (Sun and Zoubir, 2018: 233)." Moreover, Algiers has not conditioned its relations with China on the latter's support to its position on Western Sahara, neither has Rabat (Sun and Zoubir, 2018: 233).

China's current stronger economic presence in Algeria should also be put into perspective with Beijing's growing interest in titling its economic cooperation towards Morocco. China views Morocco as a strategic launchpad for its companies to enter Europe and Africa, a strategic importance that Algeria does not occupy – or a position that Algeria fails in proving itself – in China's economic manoeuvre in the region. The current Chinese Ambassador to Morocco has repeatedly stipulated this vision by actively calling for efforts to reinforce "a new model of tripartite cooperation between China, Morocco and Africa (Ambassade de la République populaire de Chine au Maroc, 2018)" and make Morocco "become the bridge for Chinese companies to enter Africa (Iraqi, 2019)" and the pivot in the implementation of BRI initiative in Africa and the Mediterranean region (Lahrache, 2018). It also meshes nicely with Rabat's own vision of national economic and industrial transformation (Chen, 2016). This economic affinity between Beijing and Rabat contrasts with China's relatively painful investment experience in Algeria, as Pairault argues, both sides "have never spoken the same language" and Algiers has confined Chinese companies to the role of a contracted service provider, while China wants to invest and establish economic special zones (Bassine, 2019). In this sense, from a long-term strategic and geo-economic perspective, Algeria holds much less appeal than Morocco to China and Chinese companies, which have been longing, yet confronted with arduous challenges, to move beyond its role as a mere service provider in Africa and to become a truly international investor with long-term presence and rooted influence in host countries.

In other words, the status-quo in the region actually benefits China, which continues to reap benefits from its economic presence – trade surplus with both Morocco and Algeria, and a huge turnover of contracted projects in Algeria. Beijing's preference for Morocco as a launchpad for Chinese capital depends not only on Morocco's strategic location and economic policies, but equally importantly its political stability, which Beijing greatly appreciates, as commented by China's former ambassador to Rabat Sun Shuzhong (Ambassade de la République populaire de Chine au Maroc, 2016).

"In recent years, despite the instability in West Asia and North Africa, under the clear-sighted leadership of his Majesty the King Mohammed VI, Morocco has maintained its commendable stability and prosperity ... Morocco has become an indispensable partner in international security cooperation. China also needs a friend like Morocco with stability and trustworthiness."

The political stability of Morocco is therefore not only crucial to China's pursuit of economic expansion in and beyond the country, but also regarded as a stabilising factor in North and West Africa, an area strewn with tumultuous security challenges since the past decade, where China, compared to other powers like the US and France, still has much less leverage to influence. Given that the legitimacy of the Moroccan monarchy is still dependent on its de-facto occupation of Western Sahara (Isidoros, 2012: 124), it is

unlikely that China will dramatically change its detached position or sides with Algiers to support Polisario, which may alter the status-quo and potentially be detrimental to the stability of the Moroccan monarchy and therefore also to Beijing's current economic, geopolitical, and security interest in that wider region. Seeing from a realpolitik, interest-driven perspective, China does not see its current position on Western Sahara cause any problems for its relations with either Morocco or Algeria.

4. Looking forward: Slim likelihood for changes in China's Position

If there is any other conflict in the African continent, which testifies Beijing's significant changes in its foreign and security policy, it is the conflict in South Sudan. This is considered as a test case and a "real-world laboratory", where Beijing experimented the limit of its sacrosanct policy of non-interference to engage in a more proactive posture (Duchâtel, Bräuner and Zhou, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2017). The crucial factor encouraging China's unprecedented engagement in Darfur, Sudan-South Sudan war, and the current conflicts within South Sudan is the rapid expansion of China's overseas interests since its embrace into globalisation – in South Sudan specifically, China's oil investment and the security of its citizens there (ibid). If the case of South Sudan can be of any use of reference point for Western Sahara, China is unlikely to change its detached and distanced position vis-à-vis this conflict. China's direct economic interests in Western Sahara appears to be largely insignificant. It presents itself as an "impartial" party to the conflict through its reticence and discreetness, enabling it to continue its economic cooperation with both Morocco and Algeria. China may be in quite fair agreement with Morocco's traditional ally, such as the US regarding the importance of a stable Moroccan monarchy, which might not only be crucial geopolitically given the region's current volatile security situation, but also economically to China's vision of Morocco as a geo-economic node of its continued global economic expansion. In this sense, a continued status-quo without either significant conflict escalation and spill-over effect or exposing Rabat to the risk of internal instability seems to cater to China's current economic and geopolitical interest in the region, especially when there is no available alternative imaginable in a near future. The two concerns over the conflict irresolution in Western Sahara we identify within the Chinese scholarly discussion – the strained Morocco-Algeria relations and the risk of increased terrorism in the region – do not appear to be pressing enough to change Beijing's calculations. China's skilful balancing between Morocco and Algeria allows it to maintain good relationships with both countries. When it comes to the fight against terrorism, China may perceive itself already making fair contribution considering its troop contribution to both MINURSO and the mission in Mali. Moreover, the resumption of diplomatic relationship between China and Burkina Faso in 2018 also opens another framework – Sahel G5 – for China to contribute to the fight against cross-border crimes and terrorism, and China has since not wasted time in promising its financial backing to this joint force.

There is also little reputational cost at stake if Beijing remains its reticence, meaning that China will not be confronted with the same level of international pressure calling to boycott the Beijing Olympics due to its support to Khartoum during the Darfur crisis back in 2008. It was out of concerns over its economic interests but also global image that prompted Beijing's shifting from aloofness to taking actions to persuade Khartoum to accept the joint AU-UN peacekeeping mission. However, similar scenario is highly unlikely to occur in Western Sahara, a conflict risking being "frozen" and "neglected" subject to decreasing attention from great powers and the international community in general.

Placing this conflict within the broader trend of China's strengthened cooperation with Africa on peace and security, the issue of West Sahara remains unlikely to attract much attention. Peace and security issue has been included as an integral part of the triennial FOCAC meetings since 2012. The 2018 FOCAC witnessed even stronger willingness from both parties, such as the call for establishment of a China-Africa peace and security forum. In February 2019, following the 2018 FOCAC, a Ministerial-level Dialogue on the implementation of China-Africa Peace and Security Initiative was held in Ethiopia to reach further consensus on the concrete content of this Initiative. However, the re-entry of Morocco into AU, the persistent division among AU members on Western Sahara, as well as AU's most recent decision to limit its peace efforts in Western Sahara in order to support the UN process (Ani and Louw-Vaudran, 2019), all seems to suggest that a common African position on this conflict or an "African solution" be unlikely to reach in a near future. Without a greater consensus achieved among African states, AU might miss an opportunity within the FOCAC framework to stimulate Beijing's interest in this conflict and Beijing could find itself unmotivated to take a more proactive posture given its continued emphasis on "African solutions to African problems". In this case, China's engagement in Western Sahara will continue to focus on – and be confined to – peacekeeping, an area that has already been recognised as one of the top priorities by both China and Africa within the FOCAC setting. Lastly, the appointment of Xu Jinghu in 2016 as China's Special Representative on African Affairs could potentially present an opportunity for Western powers or AU member states to engage China in Western Sahara. A seasoned diplomat, Xu has a broad array of experiences in the continent and should be well informed about the conflict, given her position as Chinese Ambassador to Morocco (2009-2013) and Director-General of African Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2004-2009).

Acronyms

AU – African Union
 BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
 CNKI – China National Knowledge Infrastructure
 FDI – Foreign Direct Investment
 FOCAC – Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
 MINURSO – United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
 SADR – Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
 UN – United Nations
 UNSC – United Nations Security Council

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