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# China's Non-interference Policy towards Western Sahara Conflict

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## 1. China's non-interference policy towards the Western Sahara conflict

Chinese leaders have long viewed their movement in global terms. Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the decision to reach out to Africa was a necessary part of a foreign policy dedicated to spreading Maoist ideology around the world and striking against American and Soviet expansionism. As such, China took as its mission the assistance of the oppressed and the exploited, as well as the provision of aid to developing nations in what Mao Zedong then called the "Third World".<sup>1</sup>

During the Bandung Conference of 1955, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had the opportunity of contacting with several liberation movements that attended the event as observers. The forum provided a platform for China to manifest its support for the independence movements of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (Shinn *et al.*, 2012: 33).<sup>2</sup> These countries were specifically mentioned by Zhou as ones of "dependent peoples who have been fighting for independence", and that "have never ceased to be suppressed with violence" ("Major Speech by Zhou Enlai", 1955). The solidarity of the Chinese leaders with the plight of northern African nations was thus evident.

Beijing's support for independence movements and revolutionary groups in North Africa was not only rhetorical. Another sign of China's anti-imperialist and supportive stance concerning northern Africa was its recognition of the *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne* merely three days after its proclamation in September 19, 1958 ("List of Recognitions of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic", 1959), followed by a credit for the purchase of arms and training of Algerian fighters in China (Larkin, 1971: 38). More tellingly, China has even praised the Algerian revolution as "a brilliant example" for the rest of Africa (Connelly, 2002: 274).

China's engagement with post-colonial Africa knew one early important diplomatic development in the form of Zhou Enlai's and Vice-Premier Chen Yi's visit to ten African countries at the end of 1963 and beginning of 1964, which included Morocco and Algeria. This diplomatic outreach heralded Beijing's assertion of ideological independence from the Soviet Union, as well as projected the Chinese vision of an international "third force" opposed to the American and Soviet blocks (Adie, 1964: 174). In Morocco, where

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Mao Zedong's "Theory on the Division of the Three Worlds", see [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18008.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18008.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> "In view of the unsettled situation in North Africa and of the persisting denial to the peoples of North Africa of their right to self-determination, the Asian-African Conference declared its support of the rights of the people of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to self-determination and independence and urged the French Government to bring about a peaceful settlement of the issue without delay." ("Asia-Africa Speak from Bandung", 1955).

Zhou stayed between December 21 and 30, discussions were mainly dominated by trade. In fact, by that time Morocco traded phosphate fertilizers, cobalt and other strategic resources with China despite American pressure. Although there was some lingering animosity due to China's support of the opposition to Moroccan King Hassan II in 1961, Zhou diplomatically "praised the successes achieved by His Majesty's Government and the Moroccan people in their efforts to consolidate national independence..." (Adie, 1964: 186). In return, Morocco supported the aspirations of the People's Republic to a place in the United Nations.

Bilateral relationships aside, it was also during this African tour that Zhou Enlai applied China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" to the African and Arab countries. These principles, which continue to be widely quoted by Chinese scholars and officials, were originally conceived by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Zhou himself, in 1954. They rose to fame at the Bandung Conference, which set the stage for the Non-Aligned Movement. They still form an essential part of China's foreign policy, especially towards Africa, and will be discussed later in this article.

Given the support initially offered by China to independence movements in North Africa during the 50s and 60s, as well as the ideological importance of building a non-aligned block of Third World countries against the imperialist United States and revisionist Soviet Union, we might assume that the Chinese government would adopt a similarly sympathetic stance towards the POLISARIO (*Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*) movement upon the beginning of the Western Sahara conflict. However, that did not happen. For example, China has refused the participation of the leaders of the POLISARIO front in its China-Africa Summits in both 2015 and 2018 ("Beijing Rejects Polisario's Participation", 2015; "Beijing Skips the Polisario", 2018). In the following sections, we intend to analyze the reasons for this lack of support.

The 70s were an unusually eventful decade for China. In 1971, the country gained admission to the United Nations and replaced the Republic of China on the Security Council. The next year, it started working towards a rapprochement with the United States, effectively adopting a degree of pragmatism as a result of deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations. More importantly, in 1976, one year after the beginning of the conflict in the Western Sahara, the Chinese leader Mao Zedong dies, opening the way, if not for a significant change in foreign policy, at least for a more pragmatic one.

The launch of the Reform and Opening program in December 1978 fundamentally changed China's international and domestic priorities and, along with it, its Africa policy. The erosion of the government's ideological leanings due to the success of China's developmental progress has brought about a more practical and principle-oriented foreign policy, especially towards the Third World countries.

## 2. Underlying causes for China's non-interference policy towards Western Sahara

Four reasons can be found to explain the non-interference policy practiced by China towards the Western Sahara Conflict, which are the application of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", the similarity between the Taiwan issue and the Western Sahara conflict, China's pragmatic diplomatic policy with Morocco and Algeria and, last but not least, China's vested economic interests in the region.

### 2.1. The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”

Above we have mentioned China’s “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”. This group of principles remain an essential part of China’s policy towards Africa. They can be translated as follows<sup>3</sup>:

- China supports the African and Arab peoples in their struggle to oppose imperialism and old and new colonialism and to win and safeguard national independence;
- It supports the pursuance of a policy of peace, neutrality and non-alignment by the Governments of the African and Arab countries;
- It supports the desire of the African and Arab peoples to achieve unity and solidarity in the manner of their own choice;
- It supports the African and Arab countries in their efforts to settle their disputes through peaceful consultations;
- It holds that the sovereignty of the African and Arab countries should be respected by all other countries and that encroachment and interference from any quarter should be opposed.

The vagueness of these principles has allowed them to stand the test of time and still be applicable today. Of particular importance to our study are principles number 1 and 5, which can, to some extent, be contradictory in some cases. While the first principle pledges support to struggles for national independence, the fifth principle offers guarantees that China will never interfere in other countries’ internal affairs. Applying both these principles to the conflict on the Western Sahara, the first principle would, in theory, require China to pledge its support to the POLISARIO front as a national independence movement. The fifth principle, however, would forbid this same support, as that would mean interfering in what became, since 1975, a Moroccan domestic affair.

In practice, the increasingly close economic relations with African countries, as well as China’s own domestic situation, demand that the fifth principle become increasingly important and the most often cited by Chinese politicians. On one hand, it serves to assuage the African countries and the international community that China will not meddle in other countries’ internal affairs, nor attempt regime changes in these countries, as well as shed western accusations of “neocolonialism”.<sup>4</sup> On the other, and more importantly, this principle of non-interference is valid both ways, and China focuses on it in part because of its own concerns over sovereignty issues at home (Hanauer *et al.*, 2014: 22), as we will see more closely below.

### 2.2. The Taiwan issue

The Taiwan issue dates back to the late nineteenth century, when Taiwan was ceded by the Qing government (1644-1911) to the Empire of Japan. Following Japan’s surrender at the end of World War II, on August 14, 1945, Taiwan was taken back by the Chinese government. In 1949, with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the victory of the Communists in the civil war, the remnants of the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), retreated to Taiwan, where they maintain a separate government from the rest of the mainland. Since then, Taiwan has become one of the most sensitive

<sup>3</sup> These principles are listed in “Chinese Leaders on Sino-African Relations”, china.org.com, December 10, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> During the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Chinese President Xi Jinping has reinforced this idea by pledging to follow “five nos”: “[N]o interference in African countries’ pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries’ internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains (...).” (Tiezzi, 2018).

and complicated issues for the PRC, as well as for East Asian geopolitics in general. On one hand, an increasingly significant part of public opinion in Taiwan advocate its independence. On the other hand, the PRC adamantly insists on the “One-China policy”, which is the principle that dictates that there is only one China and Taiwan is an inalienable part of this China, being this “one China” open to interpretation by both sides. Furthermore, it is telling that the one precondition for diplomatic relations with Beijing is the recognition of the “One-China policy”, such is the importance Beijing gives to it.

To some extent, we can find some similarities between the Taiwan issue and the Western Sahara Conflict. First, both of them are historical issues, which means they originated in a relatively remote past and are, as a result, difficult to solve based on international law. Secondly, both Taiwan and the Western Sahara were occupied by other countries for decades (almost a century in the case of the Spanish colonization of the Western Sahara), which generates a cultural gap and a distinct identity that sets it apart from would-be “liberators”, thus complicating the reunification. Last but not least, the independence movements in these two regions are both supported by other foreign entities. Algeria keeps providing military, financial, logistic and moral support to the POLISARIO front, as it has been doing for more than thirty years. On the other hand, the American government also continuously sells weapons to the Taiwan government, much to Beijing’s dismay. As mentioned in an article by *The Diplomat* already cited above, “China’s relationship with Taiwan is complicated by geopolitical rivalry with the United States and China’s territorial ambitions; in a similar fashion, the fate of the Western Sahara is closely tied to Morocco’s longstanding icy relationship with Algeria. Algeria has long supported POLISARIO, a Socialist party that carried out a guerrilla campaign against Morocco until a ceasefire in 1991” (Hammond, 2017). Therefore, the Taiwan issue and the Western Sahara Conflict share common ground on some aspects.

The fundamental similarity between the two regional issues drives the Chinese and Moroccan governments closer to a consensus, in which both sides remain neutral and do not interfere in each other’s domestic issues. From another perspective, the Chinese government’s neutrality towards the Western Sahara conflict is in line with its stance on its own Taiwan issue, opposing regional separatism. In addition, in the 1950s, when the young Chinese Communist government tried to reestablish diplomatic relationships with other countries, Morocco was the second African country to formalize official contacts with the new China and accept the “One-China policy”. Therefore, since the 1950s, China and Morocco have reached a consensus and shared concordant opinions regarding each other’s territorial issues. This constitutes one of the major drivers of Chinese neutrality towards the Western Sahara conflict.

### 2.3. China’s pragmatism in Sino-Moroccan and Sino-Algerian relations

Despite what was said above, in international relations, what determines the positions of states is not only their political doctrine, but also, and most importantly, their economic interests. This is especially true for China, whose cooperation with Africa is increasingly an economic and commercial one, especially since the launch of the Belt and Road initiative. This highlights the need to analyze the Chinese partnership both with Morocco and Algeria and see the way it relates with China’s position on the territorial dispute.

Generally speaking, China has maintained stable and smooth relations with both Morocco and Algeria since the 1950s. As we already noted, Morocco was the second African country to establish relations with the new Chinese government in 1949. Meanwhile, the PRC was the first non-Arabic country to recognize the independent Algeria, also sharing long and

healthy bilateral relations with this country. In return, Algeria was one of the first African countries to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1958. Maybe more significantly, in 1971, Algeria, along with Albania, was one of the sponsors of the recognition of the Government of the People's Republic of China as the only lawful representative of China in the United Nations and the Security Council, which resulted, as we have seen, in the restoration of all its rights in the international community and the expelling of Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China from the United Nations.

In 1982, then Premier of the PRC Zhao Ziyang visited 11 African countries for the first time since the aforementioned visit of Zhou Enlai in 1950s. The visited countries included, once again, Morocco and Algeria. As we can see, every major political overture China makes in Africa always involves Algeria and Morocco, be it visits of important leaders or the participation in international organizations like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which will be mentioned in more detail below. For one thing, these two countries are geographical neighbors, sharing a similar natural environment and similar resources, which naturally fosters their competitive relations. Moreover, existing border conflicts between the two also enhance the competition. On the other hand, as mentioned, Zhao Ziyang, who visited both countries in 1982, analyzed the special roles played by them in the region in his speech. China had strongly supported Algeria in its seven-year independence war against France, although Algeria then maintained good relations with the Soviet Union, being influential in the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement. Morocco kept intimate relations with America, being its representative in Africa and among Islamic "moderate" countries (Editorial team of *The Collected Works of Zhao Ziyang*, 2016: 38). Therefore, China, who had practiced a principle of non-aggressive diplomacy and had been prioritizing domestic and economic development since the Reform and Opening-up policy, kept a balance in the region. However, after a first intensifying of Sino-Moroccan and Sino-Algerian relations, they entered a cooldown period in the late 1980s which lasted until the arrival of the new millennium, following the more and more intense arms race and strife between the United States and the Soviet Union for hegemony and the disintegration of the Soviet Union later on.

By 2000, China had built and constructed a platform around the world to further its "Go global" strategy (*zou chu qu zhan lue*). China began to organize and hold a variety of international and high-level summits to gain support, reach consensus and sign agreements on all aspects, such as the FOCAC and CASCF. Algeria and Morocco participate in both forums. Moreover, by the end of 2001, China successfully joined the World Trade Organization after fifteen years of efforts, and began to expand its trade relations. In 2003, the volume of bilateral trade between China and Morocco achieved 552.9 million dollars, an 185.1 million dollars or 33.4 % increase comparing to 2002. According to the UN Comtrade database, during the same time, bilateral trade between China and Algeria increased by 45.1 %, (almost 185.1 million dollars), achieving 608.2 million dollars (Algeria's exports of goods in 2002). In 2017, China was the 13<sup>th</sup> largest export market and the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest import market for Morocco. The bilateral relations with Algeria are similar: in 2017, China was the 14<sup>th</sup> largest export market for Algeria and its 1<sup>st</sup> import market. As we can see, the bilateral trade relations for Morocco and Algeria are quite a bit unbalanced, but China still depends on its strong economic power and prosperous economy to influence the economic balance in the Western Sahara region. In fact, as far as China is concerned, there does not exist a very direct interest in the Western Sahara conflict, which at most adds potential instability to the commercial relations and does not deeply influence diplomatic relations between China and the other two countries,

Morocco and Algeria. Even so, China, as one of the most prosperous and emerging leading powers in the world, is influential. As reported by *Morocco World News*, King Mohammed VI's second visit to China in 2016 was related to then Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's controversial statement that describes Morocco's *status quo* in the Western Sahara as an "occupation" and called for the renewal of the mandate of the UN mission (discussed later on) in the territory. The ambiguous and seemingly unsupportive attitude of the United States towards Morocco in the Security Council also contributed to Morocco's outreach to China (Bennis, 2016). During this visit, the King of Morocco and the President of the PRC, Xi Jinping, signed a strategic partnership called *Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Morocco on Establishing a Strategic Partnership between the Two Countries*<sup>5</sup>, which mentions cooperation in various fields including politics; economy, trade and investment; culture, education, hygiene, tourism, sports and news; technology; military and communications. In addition, China and Morocco achieved great progress in tourism. As mentioned by the *Oxford Business Group*, the Moroccan government, facing a decrease in visitors from its traditional source market in Europe, intends to diversify its tourism industry, including China. During the aforementioned visit, a memorandum of understanding on the growing economic partnership between the two nations was signed in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The visa exemption for Chinese citizens to Morocco tremendously stimulates the number of Chinese tourists. In the first 11 months of 2017, the number of Chinese tourists registered an increase of 173 % and the consumption per person achieved an average of Dh867 (≈\$90.4) per night, higher than the average of Dh 696.4 (≈\$72.6) per night in the same year (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

In the meantime, while Morocco looks up to China as a market target, Sino-Algerian bilateral relations were elevated to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" and have further developed since 2014, as John Calabrese commented (Calabrese, 2017). In fields like construction, telecommunications, astronomy and joint ventures, China and Algeria continue to cooperate and attain great success in recent years. Kamal Kheffache, an Algerian economic analyst, suggested that the government should encourage more Chinese investment and the establishment of joint ventures in the manufacturing sector to turn the trade imbalance around (Lu (ed.), 2017).

Through sorting out the Sino-Moroccan and Sino-Algerian relations, we can find that China seems to intend to maintain the balance in the area, as well as its neutrality in this region. In fact, most of the Western Sahara is actually controlled by Morocco and only a small portion is open to contention. One of the reasons why the conflict has lasted for over four decades is the military and financial support of Algeria. Therefore, the Western Sahara conflict is of course related to the history and the struggle for independence of the local people, but it is also a contest between Algeria and Morocco themselves. China has expanded the volume of bilateral trade with both countries and also signed various agreements to further the cooperation in recent years. China kept the regional balance all along, avoiding biases and preferences, whether in national visits or in the economic domain. For one thing, the balance and equality for two similar countries kept by China conforms to its non-interference diplomatic policy and "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence". In other words, if China were partial to or in favor of one of them, exerting influence on Western Sahara conflict, it would amount to regional hegemonism. For another, from a long-term perspective, a neutral attitude can better maintain good relations with these two countries.

<sup>5</sup> Original in Chinese: 《中华人民共和国和摩洛哥王国关于建立两国战略合作伙伴关系的联合声明》.

#### 2.4. China's invested interests in Western Sahara

Generally speaking, China does not have too many invested interests and relations with the Western Sahara conflict, which is the main reason why China can remain comparatively neutral in the conflict, as well as maintain a healthy and profitable relationship with the contending actors. However, be that as it may, as more and more profound and comprehensive relations are being established with Morocco and Algeria in recent years, the invested interests of China in the region have undoubtedly increased.

As has been mentioned above, in 1950s, President Mao Zedong of the young People's Republic of China showed his positive and supportive attitude towards the struggle for independence of North African countries. At that time, China's invested interests in Africa mostly reflected its political leanings in supporting independence movements. Entering the 1970s, the People's Republic of China, the government in mainland China, sought to replace the representatives of the Republic of China, the government in Taiwan, on the Security Council in the United Nation. The PRC's success in the United Nations was due to the support of 26 African countries, including Morocco and Algeria, especially the latter, who proposed to recognize mainland China in the United Nations. At that time, China's invested interest in the Sahara were simply to try and gain ideological support and to be recognized in the United Nations.

In 1995, when WTO succeeded its predecessor General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), China and Morocco signed an *Agreement Between the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco and the Government of the People's Republic of China, Regarding Reciprocal Encouragement and Protection*.<sup>6</sup> However, the agreement did not come into effect until 1999. Similarly, China signed a bilateral investment treaty with Algeria in 1996, but only in 2003 did the treaty enter into force.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's invested interests in the Western Sahara can be divided into two aspects: politics and economy, the latter also divided into investment and trade. The political interest in Algeria, Morocco and the Western Sahara is due to their geographic advantage. Algeria and Morocco are located in the intersection zone of the European, Asian and African cultures, being members of the African Union and the League of Arab States. Both of them participated in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum established by China, which means they carry weigh and are influential in both Africa and the Arab world. It is important to mention that of the 21 members of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, 10 are African countries. Therefore, we can see the value of these Arab-African countries. Furthermore, their political influence also translates into economic power. According to statistics taken from the World Bank database, in 2017, the nominal GDP in Algeria was 167 555 billion dollars, ranking fourth in Africa; the nominal GDP in Morocco was 109 709, ranking the sixth in a total of 54 African countries. In the same year, Morocco ranked second among African countries for FDI in sub-Saharan Africa, only after Southern Africa, from which we can see the economic ambition of Morocco in Africa (Masaiti, 2017).

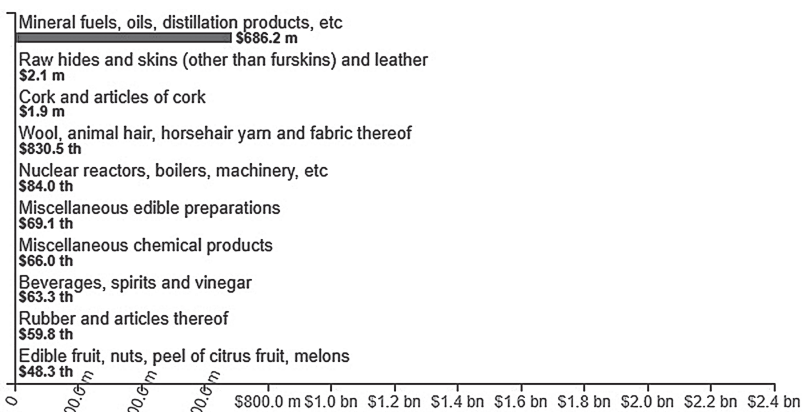
Since 2013, China began to implement the Belt and Road Initiative, which is an abbreviation of "The Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road". In other words, it is an international macro-economic strategy that encompasses both the domestic and international communities. Concretely, the strategy's main vectors are policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people communication (Demissie *et al.*, 2016: 6). As far as the place of Morocco

<sup>6</sup> Original in French: *Accord Entre le Gouvernement du Royaume du Maroc et le Gouvernement de la Republique Populaire de Chine, Concernant L'encouragement et la Protection Reciproques des Investissements*.



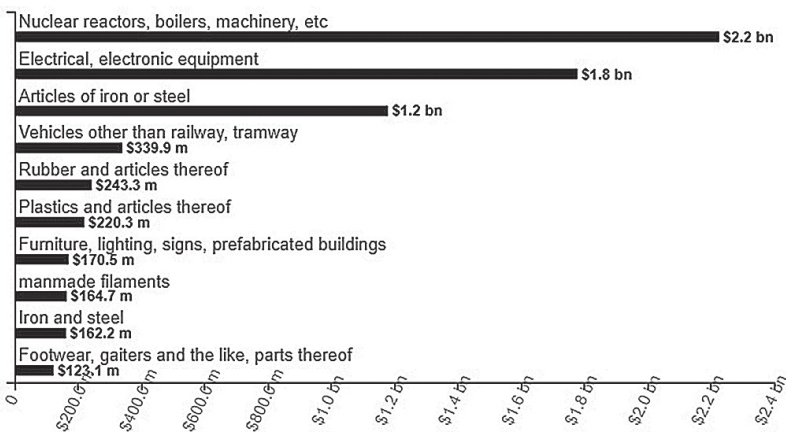
and Algeria in the Belt and Road initiative is concerned, the biggest cooperation is in the area of infrastructure. Algeria and China have agreed to a project for the construction of a trans-shipment port at Cherchell, which is 60 km far from the capital city of Algeria, worth about 3,3 billion dollars. Moreover, in Algeria there is a 233 Mw photovoltaic project including 16 solar power stations, as well as an implement of the Noor solar power plants project in Morocco, with a predicted capacity of generating 510 Mw, plus the contract for the expansion of the Jerada coal-fired power plant. On the other hand, as for the bilateral trade between China and Algeria, we can find that the later has a continuous trade deficit for 25 years, aggravated in recent years. In 2017, the volume of imports for Algeria from China is 8.3 billion dollars and the volume of exports only 691.6 million dollars. In terms of the variety of goods, we can see the graphs below:

Gráfico 01 – Algeria-Top-10 Exports of Goods to China in 2017



Fonte: International Trade in Goods and Services based on UN Comtrade data, <https://comtrade.un.org/labs/dit-trade-vis/?reporter=12&partner=156&type=C&year=2017&flow=2>.

Gráfico 02 – Algeria-Top-10 imports of goods from China in 2017



Fonte: International Trade in Goods and Services based on UN Comtrade data, <https://comtrade.un.org/labs/dit-trade-vis/?reporter=12&partner=156&type=C&year=2017&flow=2>.

As shown above, it is not difficult to notice the great imbalance in bilateral trade, dominated by raw material exports from Algeria, as well as the import of mainly industrial and advanced technology from China. The situation of bilateral trade between China and Morocco is similar, with a huge trade gap and structural imbalance in the imports and exports of goods.

In conclusion, as mentioned above, China has little invested interests in the Western Sahara region, especially political interest. China has been longing for support and cooperation in the region, and as such maintains neutrality in the regional conflict and looks forward to friendly and harmonious diplomatic relations, that reduce conflicts and hostility. In terms of economic interest, even though Chinese investment and bilateral trade greatly improved in recent years, there exists structural imbalance and trade deficit, leaving huge room for improvement in bilateral economic relations. On the other hand, in fact, China may consider Africa as a region to which it can not only transfer technology but also Chinese standards, which is beneficial for both sides. As mentioned by Tina Hahn and Georgeta Vidican-Auktor, Morocco is trying to adjust its industrial policy to establish an ecosystem for different parts of the value chain (Hahn *et al.*, 2017). In the meantime, China also needs to improve its industrial structure from labor- and material-intensive to technology-and skill-intensive. Facing the vast and promising economic cooperation and prosperous economic interest, Chinese involvement in the Western Sahara conflict seems obviously unnecessary and unwise.

### **3. An instance of Chinese involvement in the Western Sahara – Peacekeeping missions**

As we have seen above, China has a no-intervention policy concerning the Western Sahara issue. However, that does not mean it doesn't get involved in the region, namely through international organizations. Below we will analyze the way China participates in United Nations mediation in the area, as well as the reasons why it does so.

China's belief that the sovereignty of nations gives them an inherent right to control their own internal affairs without third-party interference has caused it to be initially reluctant to contribute to UN peacekeeping missions (Rogers, 2007: 75). After a first exploratory foray into UN peacekeeping in 1989, however, China became increasingly involved, to the point that today it sends more peacekeepers to more UN missions than any other permanent member of the Security Council besides France.

China is currently involved in all seven UN missions in Africa, among which is the MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara), established by Security Council Resolution 690 of April 29, 1991. Since 1991, MINURSO has been monitoring the cease-fire between the belligerents Morocco and the POLISARIO front. However, despite China's increasing involvement in peacekeeping missions in Africa, the number of Chinese operational in MINURSO is relatively small. United Nations figures from August 2016, cited by *The Diplomat*, show that just 10 of the 2639 Chinese soldiers deployed on United Nations missions abroad were in the Western Sahara region (Hammond, 2017). As of November 2018, although the MINURSO Force Commander is a Chinese national (Major General Wang Xiaojun), the number of Chinese troops involved is 13, less than Russia (16 personnel) and significantly less than the biggest contributor Bangladesh (26 personnel) (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2018).

Taking into account its neutrality towards the Western Saharan conflict and its close relations with both Morocco and POLISARIO-supportive Algeria, the fact that China sends relatively few personnel to collaborate in MINURSO should not surprise us. But

then we may ask ourselves why does China send any troops at all. What is the strategic value of Chinese participation in peacekeeping missions in the region?

These strategic gains can be summarized in three points: protecting its citizens and assets in the region, gaining much-needed “on-the-ground” experience for its army<sup>7</sup> and performing the security duties incumbent upon an emerging power (Thrall, 2015: 52).

First of all, it is necessary to notice that China’s increasing number of overseas citizens and assets, namely those under the Belt and Road initiative, have outgrown the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) power projection capabilities. A stable political environment is one of the most basic preconditions for the security of Chinese nationals and investments. As such, and as we have seen above, China’s increasing economic ties with Morocco and Algeria require that the region retains a certain degree of stability.

Moreover, at least for the moment, peacekeeping missions continue to be one of the most important ways China’s military can gain distant operational experience, as well as exposure to the operational practices and methods of foreign military forces (Rogers, 2007: 88). Operating in an austere environment like the one in the Sahara is also challenging, and the experience of being “on the ground” in a foreign territory for an extended period of time is invaluable. Chinese military can only rely on this kind of training should the necessity arise to actively protect Chinese citizens and assets in regions that correspond with its strategic vision.

Lastly, China’s involvement in the Western Saharan conflict as a peacekeeper is in line with its affirmation as a responsible stakeholder in international affairs, as well as part of its security cooperation with African nations. A bigger participation in the mediation of international conflicts helps paint the picture of China as a global power and an active participant in the international system. Since UN peacekeeping operations are carried out under the authority of a multilateral institution (i.e., the UN) and in most cases with the consent of the hosting state, UN peacekeeping operations are viewed as legitimate means for China to contribute to peace and stability in Africa (Hanauer *et al.*, 2014: 44).

To conclude, it can be seen that Chinese contribution in the mediation of the Western Sahara conflict can be seen not only from an international perspective of security cooperation and responsibility as a global power, but also as an extension of economic policies, in order to maintain the security of Chinese assets and accessibility of its strategic resources. Such involvement is not seen as an infringement of the non-intervention policy because it is inserted in the UN framework, but it has undeniable geo-strategic and geo-economic advantages for China.

#### 4. Conclusion

From this brief article we have managed to ascertain the stance and policies of the People’s Republic of China towards the still unresolved Western Sahara conflict. Faced with a neutral and non-interventive posture by the Chinese government, which seems to betray the ideological fervor and active support for oppressed countries showed in its first decades, we have tried to analyze the reasons for this lack of policy in the Western Sahara. We did so by looking at various dimensions of world governance. Looking at the political one, we have noted that China’s “Non-Intervention policy”, namely its fifth principle, as well as the issues with Taiwan independentism it faces at home create solidarity between China and Morocco, with both countries refusing to comment the other’s internal

<sup>7</sup> China’s national army, the People’s Liberation Army, hasn’t fought a major conflict in nearly 40 years, the last being the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979.

problems. As far as the economic aspect is concerned, Chinese involvement in the Western Sahara conflict would result in a potential cooling down of its relations with Morocco and Algeria. Furthermore, considering the balance China maintains with both countries, it is unexpected that Beijing would place one above the other by taking sides in the conflict. Finally, despite its official neutrality, Chinese presence is still felt in the Western Sahara through its contribution, although a subtle one, to the UN peacekeeping mission in the region. By so doing, China also manages to extract some advantages, namely the projection of its image as a responsible emerging global power, as well as the training of its military personnel in the harsh Saharan regions, useful if an emergency arises and endangers Chinese assets and citizens.

## Acronyms

CASCF – China-Arab States Cooperation Forum  
 FDI – Foreign Direct Investment  
 FOCAC – Forum on China-Africa Cooperation  
 GATT – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade  
 GDP – Gross Domestic Product  
 GPRA – Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic  
 KMT – Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party  
 MINURSO – United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara  
 PLA – People's Liberation Army  
 PRC – People's Republic of China  
 POLISARIO – Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro  
 UN – United Nations  
 WTO – World Trade Organization

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**Ilustração 01** – Exploração de fosfatos 1973. Fonte: Arquivo RASD.