




Article

Morocco's Assets: A Strategic Hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract – Morocco is important in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its political stability and strategic position as a gateway into Africa and Europe are the main motivating factors for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Meanwhile, Morocco capitalizes on China's advanced technological and industrial expertise to bolster its economic development. As China seeks to expand its global influence and Morocco aims to position itself as a regional hub, their bilateral relationship continues to evolve, marked by significant trade agreements, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic initiatives. This article examines political, economic, and cultural relations between Morocco and China, analyzing key developments and strategic interests, particularly within the framework of the BRI.

Keywords: Morocco; China; Bilateral cooperation; Strategic partnership; Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

Over the last two decades, China has reinvigorated its longstanding ties to African countries, placing the continent at the center of its ambitions to become a global leader. China, the first emerging power in the world without a colonial past in Africa, tried to gradually extend its African policy in several areas through political and ideological considerations in the period between 1950-1970, which was concretized first through the Bandung Conference, before moving on to a stage of seeking confirmation of power through Zhou Enlai's trip to the African continent. Once past this period, it has given itself the means to achieve the major objectives of its return to Africa by setting up its economic and commercial diplomacy focused on natural resources and raw materials by implementing a "going out" policy, positioning itself to achieve the primary objectives of its return to the African continent and secure strategic interests essential for sustaining its economic growth. A policy of development aid, economic cooperation relations, institutional and political instruments have accompanied the Chinese economic mechanism. The launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 is the core of this mechanism (Onnis, 2022).

China established official relations with most African countries at the end of the 1970s, but it was not until the 1990s, with increased openness and a strong growth in Chinese exports, that the country

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deepened diplomatic relations with the Maghreb and North Africa due to their strategic position in the region, as they make up the main part of Africa and the Arab World. Geographically, all the Maghreb states are maritime economies strategically located at the intersection of three key regions: The Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean. However, as the United States slowly disengages from the African continent and Europe faces internal challenges, a new actor is quietly wielding greater influence across the region. Beijing's growing footprint in these countries is not limited to trade or infrastructure development but also ports, shipping, financial cooperation, tourism, and manufacturing. This conjuncture receives confirmation through the signing of a strategic partnership between China and Morocco during the official visit of the King Mohammed VI to Pekin on May 2016.

Although direct interactions between China and Morocco were limited in ancient times, a notable early interaction between the two countries was the journey of the medieval Moroccan scholar and explorer Ibn Battuta to China in the 14th century (Madhoun, 2020). The seeds of friendship planted by Ibn Battuta have given Moroccans an infinite imagination of the distant country of the East, and they were very curious and eager to discover the Chinese history of five thousand years of civilization and its brilliant culture (Bouchiba., 2018). The modern era of Chinese Moroccan interaction began in the mid-20th century when Morocco established diplomatic relations with China in 1958 (Jackson, 2024). It was quickly followed by the inauguration of diplomatic representation in Beijing in 1960, which made it the second African and Arab country to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The close partnership between the two countries has strengthened political, economic, and cultural ties, especially within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Launched in 2013 by the Chinese president Xi Jinping, the New Silk Road aims to enhance China's commercial connectivity with the rest of the world, establish its influence and secure its supplies. Currently, there are 151 countries affiliated with the BRI across all continents: Western Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and some of Latin America. The BRI is targeted specifically developing states in need of infrastructure improvement and economic development (Cohen, C., 2025). For this reason, the BRI has been particularly popular in African countries. As of March 2025, 53 African countries have joined the initiative. Morocco was the first North African country to sign the MoU to promote China's BRI, supporting the cooperation initiative proposed by China within the framework of the FOCAC to advance PRC-Morocco and Sino-Africa cooperation (Xinhua., 2018).

Given its political stability and strategic location, the Moroccan Kingdom appears to support the PRC's engagement with the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean region and make it an important participant in China's BRI. However, the method of implementing the BRI in Morocco differs from China's traditional approach in Africa and, particularly in the Maghreb and North Africa. The action plan integrates existing infrastructure rather than launching new projects, as well as maintaining a cautious stance toward Chinese concessional loans and the associated aid model (Neary., 2022). The last notable instance of such financing dates back to 2014 with the construction of the Jerada coal-fired power plant by Shandong Electric Power Construction Corporation III (SEPCO III). From the first glance, this position may give the impression that Morocco has a limited access to the initiative opportunities. In fact, it highly strengthens the kingdom's commitment to transparent governance and respect for international standards.

Through BRI, both countries intend to promote cooperation in trade, investment, infrastructure, agriculture, energy, finance, education, technology, security, research and development, health, and industry. In this regard, the BRI will be instrumental in expansion and investment in Morocco's emphasis on e-commerce, high-tech automotive, aeronautics, and textiles. Inevitably, each partner addresses the BRI framework through its perspective status. Therefore, in realizing the shared vision, the two countries have very different attitudes (Chaziza., 2022). The key questions raised include: What a role does Morocco have in China's Belt and Road Initiative? Furthermore, what does the Moroccan Kingdom want out of this relationship with China and what is China seeking in its partnership with Morocco? This article aims to analyze the political and security, economic, and

cultural dimensions as the main axes of the Morocco-China Strategic Partnership in the era of the BRI.

Political and security cooperation

Over the past 67 years, Morocco – China political ties have deepened steadily and smoothly, marked by high-level visits and bilateral cooperation covering various fields. Both countries share close and mutual alignment in their views on many international and regional issues (Chaziza, 2022). Like Beijing, Rabat coordinates critical global challenges at multilateral levels, including human rights, climate change, and Middle East affairs (Al-Razawi, 2023, p. 4).

This partnership is further bolstered by their shared commitment to principles such as respect for national sovereignty and opposition to separatist movements, territorial integrity, multilateralism, and non-interference in the Internal Affairs of other countries. By these principles, Moroccan diplomacy supports the One-China policy, meaning that Rabat recognizes Taiwan only as an integral part of China's territory. In contrast, China's position on the Sahara question is generally considered positive, given its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power. China maintains a neutral stance on the conflict by refraining from officially recognizing the "Polisario Front" as the latter has never been among the invitees to the FOCAC.

Additionally, China abstained from voting on the issue in the Security Council or not participating in relevant United Nations Committee meetings (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025). This neutral position can be explained by China's long-standing and close relationship with Algeria, which places Beijing in a diplomatic quandary. Recognizing the Moroccan proposals alienate Algeria, a key regional ally to China, but recognizing the Sahwari Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) could break Sino-Moroccan relations (Jackson, S., 2024). To navigate this delicate balance, China encourages political negotiations between the parties involved, emphasizing international legitimacy as the primary means of resolving the conflict and positioning itself as an intermediary to maintaining its relationship with Algeria and Morocco.

From Morocco's perspective, China's neutrality on the Sahara dispute issue works in its favor as it ensures that China will neither challenge Morocco's territorial claims nor support the independence of the SADR. This neutrality allows Morocco to maintain its cooperation with China and approach the issue confidently in international forums. This confidence grew more assertive with the position of two other permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States in 2020, followed by France in 2024, which have effectively recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. Morocco carefully avoids antagonizing its traditional partners and continues cooperating with its new ones. In this context, while Morocco maintains strong ties with the USA and France, it also seeks to balance its relationship with China. In addition to the political aspects discussed above, the security aspect is crucial to the partnership.

China's military power is constantly increasing. In addition to quickly implementing this policy on the African continent, China is trying to race towards modernizing this system by employing the latest advanced technologies and allocating significant financial budgets for its development, even though Africa is not a critical part of China's security policy. For China, Africa is a security issue only in terms of its effort to secure the energy, mineral, and timber resources used to fuel its economy, as Angola, Sudan, Libya, Nigeria, Algeria (especially for oil), Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Gabon, Cameroon, the DRC (for oil, timber, base metals, iron ore, manganese), Namibia (for copper) (Rotberg., 2008) or Djibouti, while the China's military base, located near the strategic Bab El-Mandeb Strait, plays a crucial role in securing maritime routes for oil and gas as a logistical hub under the BRI.

For this, military relations remain generally weak between China and Morocco, compared to the latter's ties with France and the United States of America. Thus, it was logical for Morocco to think with the framework of diversifying its partnership about opening more to strengthening military cooperation with China and benefiting from the capabilities and expertise it provides in this field. The

Moroccan Armed Forces recently purchased advanced anti-tank weapons, TB-001K Combat Drone, training cycles and exchanged high-level visits (Gouyez Ben Allal, 2025). These arms contracts with China are part of a Strategic Partnership between the two nations, alongside Morocco's ongoing collaboration with other key allies such as the USA and France as well as relations with Gulf countries which play a role in shaping regional influence.

Economic cooperation

A decade ago, Morocco was barely a consideration in China's African strategy (Abdel Ghafar, 2022). Similarly, China was not central to Morocco's national economic development strategy or its calculations to attract foreign investors. Unsurprisingly, Chinese investment and business activity in the Kingdom were negligible, especially compared to the significant level of Chinese engagement in other African economies. Today, economic relations between the two countries have become pivotal. The economic factor is one of the key drivers for China's orientation towards Morocco, strengthening their ties and ensuring their continuity.

During King Mohammed VI's visit to China in 2016, the two heads of state signed the Strategic Partnership, representing the cooperation's legal framework. It aligns with the evolution of their economic relations, moving beyond simple bilateral trade cooperation, as defined by the 1995 trade agreement. It came into force in 1999, addressing the large trade imbalance in favor of China and exploring promising areas for economic cooperation between the two parties. To strengthen the Strategic Partnership framework, Morocco signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the BRI on November 17th, 2017. On January 5th, 2022, Morocco signed the implementation as the first North African country to adhere to the initiative. These two events marked a new era of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. However, what strategic factors drive this economic rapprochement between Morocco and China, and what role does Morocco play in China's BRI?

First, this rapprochement derives its importance from the international context and the economic situation that requires greater openness to the world and the South-South partnership as well as the. Inevitably, each partner addresses the BRI framework through its perspective status in accordance with the "win-win" ideology of the initiative. For China, this partnership represents a geo-economic strategy rather than a geopolitical one, positioning Morocco as a key partner. In contrast, Morocco needs Chinese expertise in infrastructure development, manufacturing, and the information sector to enhance its economic standing and industrial position in Africa and the world (Laadam., 2024) while benefiting from the Chinese economic model. It can also reward a huge domestic market of more than a billion consumers who could, in the future, constitute an opportunity for Moroccan products and companies.

After the BRI, Morocco and China have enjoyed relatively smooth trade and economic cooperation, opening new opportunities for imports and exports. The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries has steadily increased, as was one of the goals of the Chinese initiative from the beginning. According to the China Customs Database, bilateral trade between Beijing and Rabat continued to grow in 2024, with imports and exports totaling \$ 8.82 billion compared to \$ 3.63 billion in 2016, as highlighted in the data below:

Table 1: Trade volume development between Morocco and China (2016-2024) in USD

Year	Trade value	Exports	Imports
2016	3,632	553,456	3,079
2017	3,826	650,597	3,176
2018	4,387	706,900	3,680
2019	4,667	633,346	4,034
2020	4,769	595,611	4,173
2021	6,416	826,419	5,590
2022	6,598	909,015	5,689

2023	7,464	981,422	6,483
2024	8,820	1,298,495	7,521
Total	54,003	7,676,787	46,326

Source: China Customs database compiled by Nasser Bouchiba, created with https://www.datawrapper.de/_/Wd53S/

Although Spain is still the leading source of Moroccan imports, China and France compete for second place. The trendline is decidedly in China's favor: Morocco imported approximately USD 9 billion in Chinese products in 2024 (Bouchiba., 2025). Moroccan exports to China, on the other hand, are a low percentage of Moroccan foreign trade, between 1 and 1.3 billion of its exports, and consisted of \$600 million in electronic products, and base metals and their products ranked second with \$330 million and minerals ore, totaling \$250 Million, placing third (Bouchiba., 2025). On the investment side, Chinese investments in Morocco add up to around \$56 million (AI-Monitor, 2024). However, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's "China Going Global Investment Index 2023," Morocco was Africa's third most attractive country for Chinese investment after Egypt and South Africa (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023).

In terms of infrastructure, China has played an important role in extending Morocco's bullet-train service. According to Sabbena Sddiqui (2024), the Chinese infrastructure firm Railway Shanhaiguan Bridge and leading German railway technology company Vossloh Gogifer won contracts worth \$56.2 million from October 2024 to supply critical components for Morocco's high-speed rail (LGV) expansion. After the efficient operation of Africa's fastest train Al-Boraq with the Tangier-Casablanca line launched in November 2018, Morocco has taken a new step in the modernization of its transportation infrastructure by launching the LGV line between Kénitra and Marrakech awarded to the Chinese Gezhouba Group. The high-speed rails scheduled for commercial operation in November 2029, aim to enhance intercity mobility as a part of the preparation for the 2030 World Cup, co-hosted by Morocco, Spain, and Portugal (TelQuel, 2024) by facilitating the movement of goods, making Morocco the main logistics hub of trade between Africa and Europe (AI-Monitor., 2024). For Chinese companies, the implementation of such high-speed rail projects implicitly contributes to the realization of an important aspects of the BRI in terms of infrastructure, aiming to enhance connectivity through infrastructure development.

Morocco's free trade agreement (FTA) with the US, The EU, France, Italy, Turkey and its alignment with European standards, coupled with its participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area, member for the African Union as well as Arab League with a strong tie to the Gulf countries make it an attractive destination for Chinese companies seeking to expand their presence to a vast market. The Moroccan motor vehicle sector has, in particular, taken advantage of the opportunities provided and now has the largest and most advanced plants in North Africa (Jackson, 2024, p. 205). In 2023, nearly 10 billion euros have been announced by Chinese investors in their intention to invest in the manufacture of electric batteries and their items in Morocco (Le monde Afrique, 2024). BTR New Material, CNGR Advanced Material, Gotion, Hailiang, Shinzoom, and Tinci share the same focus. They are specialized in producing batteries or components for electric vehicles.

Most of these investment companies are centered in the industrial Zones of Tangier Tech City, also referred to as Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City. This intelligent industrial city constitutes China's most prominent industrial and technological hub in Africa, with around 200 Chinese companies operating in high-value-added sectors such as aeronautics, automobiles, and ICT innovations. Recognizing the importance of its geostrategic location, located across the Strait of Gibraltar, Chinese companies have expressed growing interest in the area for export to African and European markets through Morocco, especially after western accusations of dumping against China and the subsequent increase in taxes on its imports of electric vehicles and batteries. CNGR, a notable exception, has chosen to build a battery component production and recycling complex, in partnership with the Al Mada Royal Investment Fund, in Jorf Lasfar. This latter is home to the largest petrochemical port in

Africa and the site of OCP, one of the world's largest phosphate producers, a key component of electric batteries manufacturing.

However, growing tensions between China and the United States as well as China and Europe have recently undermined Morocco's status as tariff free zone. The 10% tariff imposed on Moroccan imports by the Trump administration as well as the significant countervailing duties imposed on Moroccan export of aluminum wheels (TelQuel, 2025) would make this status increasingly precarious and call into question the stability and reliability of free trade agreements that Morocco has long leveraged in its foreign economic policy, placing Morocco at the intersection of strategic competition between its main major partners (Cohen, P., 2025).

For the renewable energy sector, the North African country has decided to switch to renewable energy sources to secure its production needs and support the Paris Agreement for a clean environment. Besides their collaboration on the Noor solar Complex, the world's largest concentrated solar power station under construction, Morocco and China took a significant step by opening a joint green energy Lab in El Jadida (China Daily, 2025). This ambitious project launched in February 2025 aims to promote the research and innovation sector in the field of renewable energy. A crucial sector for Morocco and China's energy future and for the fight against global climate change.

There is also a mutual interest in the financial sector. During King Mohammed VI's official visit to Beijing in 2016, Attijariwafa Bank, Morocco's leading Bank, signed six agreements with the China Africa Development Fund (CADF). These agreements aimed to support and promote Chinese investment and trade across the African continent by complementing existing credit offerings and opening new opportunities for Moroccan Chinese investments in Africa (TelQuel., 2016). To further strengthen economic relations between Morocco, Africa, and China, the Bank of Africa has also actively participated in the China-Morocco Economic Forum, during which several Memorandums of Understanding were signed with Chinese industrial and financial operators (Bank of Africa, 2016). Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) was not to be outdone. In partnership with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), the leading Chinese and global bank, BCP agreed to expand their cooperation to finance Chinese investment projects both in Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, this agreement enabled the first payment transactions denominated in the Chinese currency, Renminbi (RMB), for companies conducting business with China (TelQuel, 2016).

During the second Chinese Arab health forum in Beijing in 2019, Morocco and China expressed their willingness to establish a center for traditional Chinese medicine in Casablanca, part of the projects planned under the BRI for African countries. The center will specialize in traditional medicine, digital health, mobile health, and telemedicine to provide Chinese medicine treatments, train Moroccan and African doctors, and promote scientific research (Med Africa Times, 2019). Morocco and China strengthened their relationship in health by sending a Chinese medical mission, which was made up of 8 teams and 79 specialist doctors operating in different provinces in the kingdom. An editorial in China's Xinhua news agency noted, "China and Morocco have strengthened relations through joint efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic" (Xinhua Net, 2020). Sino-Moroccan cooperation in the field of health has also been manifested by the holding of a series of virtual seminars and meetings between medical experts from the two countries to exchange information and experiences on the fight against the epidemic, methods of diagnosis and treatment, as well as the management of hospitals and the protection of medical personnel. The strengthening of the bilateral partnership was also reflected in signing two cooperation agreements on August 20, 2019, in the clinical trials of the anti-COVID-19 vaccine.

Cultural cooperation

Morocco is often regarded as a country of dialogue and openness, mainly due to its historical role as a bridge between different cultures, religions, and regions. Conversely, Cultural connectivity has always been a focal point of President Xi Jinping's BRI and establishment of Chinese cultural education

facilities to normalize Chinese presence abroad. Beijing's strategic partnership with Morocco, enabling the two countries' people to bond along the Silk Road, is vital to integrating the Kingdom within the BRI framework. One of the critical elements of people-to-people exchanges has been expanding Chinese Culture and academic institutions in the Kingdom (Chaziza, 2022, p. 60). With 48 Confucius Institutes installed in Africa, there are 7 Confucius Institutes and 4 Confucius Classrooms in the Maghreb region. Morocco has hosted three of these institutes, in Rabat since 2009, in Casablanca since 2013, and in Tangier in 2017, while the cities of Agadir and Kénitra have two sub-centers (Xinhua, 2019). In January 2018, the PRC and Morocco agreed to establish an academic institute in the Kingdom devoted explicitly to studying Beijing's BRI. China's Ningxia University and Morocco's Hassan, I University will build the joint institute. It will serve China–Morocco trade and cooperation and enhance higher education between the two sides (The North Africa Post, 2018). The Confucius Institute has become an essential platform for learning the Chinese language and discovering the Chinese culture in Morocco. De facto, China offers scholarships yearly to benefit Moroccan students to pursue higher education in Chinese institutes and universities (Chaziza, 2022, p. 61). This cooperation emphasizes the role of culture in strengthening the economic and political bonds between the two nations.

Nevertheless, the tourism sector is the most explosive growth in people-to-people exchanges. The significant drop in French and German tourists, historically bringing the market to Morocco, is pushing the latter to turn to newly rich countries such as Russia and China (Jeune Afrique, 2016). Morocco saw a record 180,000 Chinese tourist arrivals in 2019 after hosting 170,000 in 2018, especially after a visa requirement was lifted in June 2016. The closure of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic drop, reducing the number of Chinese visitors in 2022. However, data from 2023 shows a promising recovery, with 59,719 Chinese tourists recorded, indicating a positive momentum towards sector revival (China Daily, 2024). By the beginning of 2025, China Eastern Airlines, through its subsidiary Shanghai Airlines, inaugurated a new air route between Shanghai and Casablanca on January 19, 2025. Simultaneously, Royal Air Maroc (RAM) restored the direct link between Casablanca and the Beijing route (Morocco World News, 2025). Launching this direct connection should strengthen Morocco's attractiveness as a tourist destination while opening new opportunities for trade and economic cooperation with China.

Evaluation of the partnership

Sino-Moroccan Cooperation is producing concrete and admirable results that follow effectively China's BRI policy. Moroccan and Chinese leaders have advanced the cooperation process between the two countries with great wisdom. The bilateral relations established in respect, equality, consultation, mutual benefit, and diplomatic solidarity have been considered a model in international relations. Contact is always regular between the two heads of state, and visits by several high-level officials marked the last three years, whether in Morocco or China. These contacts have contributed to strengthening mutual diplomatic, political, economic and cultural relations. Due to its strategic geographical positioning, a crossroads between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, Morocco has become an ideal place for building logistics and production platforms for Chinese companies wishing to open to international markets and reduce their transportation costs. Morocco strengthens this position by signing more than 56 free trade agreements with several countries and regions in the world (Rboub., 2022).

Morocco's attachment to the Chinese project is a good opportunity for the Kingdom. China's collaboration with Morocco on strategic sectors such as the automobile industry and renewable energies, will undoubtedly allow for strengthening and attracting foreign investment from China and Europe and boost its exports to Africa. Under the BRI, Sino-Moroccan relations should take advantage of the strategic position, attachment to Africa, and advanced European association to attract some of these relocated industries. The tree blocs will benefit from their complementarity in

terms of innovation for Europe, Know-how and skilled labor for Morocco, and outlets and access to raw materials for Africa. The recently operated Casablanca – Beijing direct flight will resume service and strengthen existing contacts.

Furthermore, a real economic development strategy is necessary to prevent Morocco from becoming a simple logistic and commercial platform. It is also important to be vigilant about creating local jobs by relying on a genuine vocational training strategy that meets the needs of Chinese companies. Finally, establishing free trade agreements between Morocco and China and Morocco and Africa would be highly desirable to sustain this ambitious project. However, with continued and likely growing Chinese investment, addressing the obstacles and challenges confronting the Morocco-China partnership will become necessary.

Even if trade between Rabat and Beijing approached \$9 billion in 2024, economic relations remain unbalanced. China exports 13 times more goods to Morocco than it imports. This is due to China's strong economic growth and status as the world's second economic power and first exporter. As a growing country, Morocco can only offer a limited range of products, resulting in modest engagement from China compared to its engagement in the rest of the African continent. China has become Africa's largest economic partner, FDI's most significant contributor, an infrastructure donor, and one of the largest aid donors in Africa. With the inauguration of the BRI, China has expanded its international reach to work with other governments in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to create new transnational economic corridors. Compared to Algeria, an amount close to \$10 billion in a transaction carried out in 2023 with this neighboring country and the Chinese investments with Morocco remain low: less than \$3 billion between 2005 and 2020, compared to nearly \$24 billion for the same period in Algeria according to the data collected by Yahya Zoubir, affiliated with the Middle East Council on Global Affairs research center in Doha which can pose certain competitiveness between the two countries to attract Chinese investments (Le monde Afrique, 2024).

Environmental risk constitutes another challenge to environmental degradation and its effects on biodiversity, and gas emissions (Zreik., 2024). Theoretically, the BRI has always been associated with supporting green and sustainable infrastructure projects to address this concern, but there is still a long way to go in addressing environmental concerns related to it given the poor reputation of Chinese companies among global environmentalists. Morocco's membership in this project will constitute a contradiction with its environmental policy, based on which it has launched several projects, such as the Green Morocco plan and energy efficiency in the buildings of the Kingdom. To this end, Morocco must also consider the potential environmental impacts of infrastructure development under the BRI on its ecosystems and natural resources.

From their side, Chinese companies face many obstacles in both subjective and objective aspects when investing in Morocco as the academic Dong Liu pointed out (Zoubir., 2020):

While 100 Chinese companies are anticipated to move to Tangier Tech City, only a few Chinese enterprises are active in Morocco. Protectionism has discouraged Chinese companies from investing in the country. Morocco has imposed strict restrictions on the domestic sale of free-trade-zone products and high tariffs on intermediate products needed for industrial production. With these measures in place, Chinese enterprises struggle to reduce the cost of exports to Morocco through the traditional model of setting up assembly plants in a host country.

Language and cultural differences also hinder investments according to Anouar Boukhares (2022):

As the Chinese ambassador to Morocco, Li Li, put it, both Chinese and Moroccan actors must leave their comfort zones to take advantage of the various business opportunities. Chinese companies must adapt to work in an investment environment that differs from those in the African countries where they are active. In most economic sectors, French and European legal, fiscal, and normative standards prevail. As for Moroccan companies,

Li Li, said, they are certainly used to working with their traditional partners, but they do not know or are not very motivated to explore the Chinese market. African countries, such as Ethiopia, that have made a concerted effort to learn the Chinese business landscape and language have had better success in attracting Chinese investments.

Conclusion

The China–Morocco partnership perfectly embodies China's ambitious BRI, and relations have gradually strengthened at all levels within the initiative framework over the years. This partnership is beneficial not only to Morocco's economy and infrastructure but also to China's commercial and political interests. The choice of Morocco' as a key partner for China is not random. Thanks to its attractiveness, geographical location, economic strategy, and political stability, Morocco has become an ideal member of the BRI. That is why, political analysts have praised the pragmatism of this relationship since the ultimate goal of the BRI is to expand China's international image as a responsible power and Morocco is a means by which China will reach this goal.

The respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two countries has always been a fundamental principle of political exchange within the Morocco-China partnership. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1958, Morocco has always provided support on issues involving China's core interests and major concerns and always maintained its position on the "One China" principle. Regarding the Sahara issue, China has always insisted on finding a solution within the framework of the United Nations by supporting its resolutions and emphasizing dialogue and peaceful negotiations between the parties involved. During the unexpected landing in Casablanca by the end of November 2024, Chinese President Xi-Jinping and Crown Prince Moulay Hassan confirmed mutual support in safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and stability. In this context, could we witness a clear-cut position of the Chinese government on the Sahara issue following the USA and France's position?

Since the launch of the BRI, Morocco was one of the first countries to join this innovative project in 2017. The BRI is mutually beneficial for both states not only Morocco's economy as the BRI develops Morocco's industry and enhances its economy. However, the geographic position of the Moroccan Kingdom, well situated as an intersection of Europe, Africa, and the Arab world, represents a geostrategic location for China's project to build connections to the rest of the world. Today, the Sino-Moroccan exchange has been substantially improved, and China has become Morocco's third largest trading partner worldwide which explains the growing interest of Chinese companies in the Moroccan Market particularly with investment in infrastructure, automotive, technology, and renewable energy sectors. The objective of these companies is to access the US and European markets with which Morocco has free trade agreements. Projects such as Tangier Tech City emphasize what was previously mentioned. However, the trade deficit remains a significant challenge for both Morocco and China, making it essential to ensure a more balanced and sustainable economic partnership.

Beyond the economic exchanges, Human and cultural interactions helped Morocco and China to strengthen mutual understanding and promoted the development of bilateral relations. The three Confucius Institutes in Morocco and the Chinese Cultural Center highlight the mutual fascination for the intangible treasures of each country. De facto, the number of scholarships for Moroccan students from the Chinese government and universities is also increasing to better serve the future cooperation between the two countries in various fields. The two countries also called for more tourist exchanges. The visa exemption for Chinese citizens, as announced in June 2016, reflects Morocco's willingness to attract a large number of tourists and promote Morocco–China cultural exchanges. Despite Morocco's visa exemption for Chinese citizens, China has not reciprocated the policy for Moroccan citizens, who still face visa barriers hindering business mobility, educational exchange, and investment flows.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Imane Ezzehouany's research interests focus on the implication of China's Belt and Road Initiative in North Africa. Selected among the first 1,000 graduates from Italian universities in 2023, Ezzehouany holds a Master's degree in Diplomatic Studies from the Mohammed V University of Rabat, and a second Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Cagliari, where she was subsequently involved in various academic projects as a researcher.

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