



# The Chinese Alternative: Beijing's Evolving Role as Economic Partner and Model for Algeria

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## Abstract

The growth of Sino-Algerian economic relations since the early 2000s underscored China's successful global expansion and its rising importance as alternative partner for the North African country. Tighter economic partnership also signalled Algerian fascination for the China model of development which, unlike neoliberal recipes, put the state at the centre of its strategy. But while the authorities in both countries praised their *win-win* cooperation, Algerian scholars also highlighted its fault lines. In fact, trade exchanges and the impact of Chinese companies on Algerian industrial complex reflect an asymmetric relation rather than a mutually beneficial partnership.

**Keywords:** Algeria; China; development model; economic cooperation; strategic partnership.

## Introduction

Economic relations between Algeria and China grew exponentially since the early 2000s, as Algeria's need for economic recovery and its renewed hydrocarbon revenues met China's plans for global outreach. In two decades, trade exchanges multiplied, Chinese companies realized most of Algeria's publicly funded construction projects and more than 50,000 Chinese nationals settled in the country, forming the largest Chinese community in Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The Algerian authorities welcomed enthusiastically China's economic strategy which preached the pursuit of mutually beneficial policies, the absence of conditionalities and non-interference in its partners' political affairs. The possible replication of the China model of development as an alternative to Western neoliberalism while fascinating

government officials, also attracted the attention of other stakeholders in the academic community and the civil society. Except for some dedicated studies (Pairault and Talahite 2014; Adel, Pairault and Talahite 2017), most literature on Beijing economic outreach, focuses on Chinese goals neglecting local perspectives. However, to understand the impact and future outcomes of China's economic presence and development model it is important to look at how those are received and interpreted by stakeholders in partner countries. The academic community is an interesting starting point for such a survey given its focus on issues often overlooked by government officials such as long-term effects and the impact on longstanding economic problems. Academics shares some of the authorities' enthusiasm toward Chinese partnership, but as they do not pursue short-term political calculations, they are more likely to highlight controversial aspects. First a discussion of the literature on the so-called China model of development and its global outreach is provided. While attracting much academic attention, there is still no consensus on what constitutes the China model or if a coherent Chinese strategy of economic development even exists. However, certain principles became associated with China's economic rise and perceived by partners and competitors as the core features of its expanding economic presence and attractiveness.

Secondly, a historical overview of the Sino-Algerian economic relations highlights the main aspects and areas characterising the economic partnership between the two countries. Such overview underscores the early 2000s fundamental shift in Sino-Algerian relations and shows how Chinese economic outreach met the Algerian authorities' economic and political interests. By doing so, it provides the wider framework in which Algerian scholarly literature was produced. As partnership with China also served some of the Algerian authorities' short-term political goals, the overview of their evolving relations allows to better look at how Algerian scholars problematized such relations against the background of Algeria's long-standing socio-economic issues.

Finally, 26 articles by Algerian development economists and international relations scholars based in Algerian universities and research institutions are herein considered. The goal of this scrutiny is to detect the perspectives of the local academic community as it represents a specific social group within the Algerian civil society which also possesses an informed look on such a strategic issue. This focus on Algerian scholars, while fundamental to shifting attention from European and Chinese views, also aims at compensating for the neglect of academic production from Global South countries by scholars based in Europe or the USA. Academic interest in the subject is recent, hence the limited range of articles under scrutiny which were all published over the last six years and originally written in Arabic, French or English. While coming from different disciplinary framework, all articles address China's domestic, international and Algerian economic strategies over the last forty years. The selected literature discusses Beijing's economic impact on the country, potential lessons to be drawn from the China

model and problematic aspects of Sino-Algerian economic relations. Considering the perspectives outlined in the local scientific literature allows a more critical, bottom-up, understanding of Chinese economic presence in Algeria. Ultimately this analysis highlights the divergences and common views existing among Algerian stakeholders thus unveiling the significant diversity existing beyond mainstream narratives and positions.

### The China Model and its International Appeal

China's successful transformation of its economy, starting in the late 1970s, attracted the attention of international observers and captured the imagination of leaders and state officials throughout the developing world. The specificities of Chinese opening to capitalism and globalisation, the ability to maintain sustained growth and the preservation of one-party rule throughout such structural transformation prompted a debate about the existence of a peculiar Chinese recipe for development. The idea of a "Beijing Consensus" rivalling Western neoliberal hegemony and offering an alternative path to modernization for the Global South gained momentum, particularly as China itself benefitted from such narrative to expand its international presence. In this context, the actual existence of a specific Chinese model of development, or its *ex-post* definition, is secondary to the worldwide perception of a successful blueprint that Beijing followed to achieve impressive growth.

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The Beijing Consensus label was first coined by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004, who argued that China's development not only rested upon a peculiar strategy that made it distinctive from neoliberal blueprints for structural adjustment (Ramo 2004: 7-30). The Beijing Consensus underscored the shifting balances of global order as China's growth was laying the basis for the end of US economic hegemony. According to Ramo, three features distinguished the successful Chinese model of development: the pursuit of an "innovation-led growth" in different sectors, the concern for environmental and social sustainability as central indicators for successful development and the safeguard of self-determination in integrating the global economy (Ramo 2004: 4-5). The promotion of innovation allowed given sectors to spur the overall economic growth while also enabling China to experiment and adjust its strategy as new challenges emerged. The emphasis on environmental and social sustainability was for its part seen as key to preserve internal political stability, thus guaranteeing sustained growth amidst an unprecedented structural transformation. This also marked a stark difference with neoliberal reform agendas recommending a *shock therapy* approach that contributed to undermining national security in several countries. Finally, the Chinese ability to maintain its own political system while embracing globalisation proved that development could go hand in hand with sovereignty and a more equal integration in the world system, unlike what the US-led decade of neoliberal hegemony seemed to demonstrate (Ramo 2004: 7-30).

Ramo's definition of Chinese development strategy also met significant criticisms, particularly as it seemed to neglect major characteristics of China's growth contradicting the three pillars of his Beijing Consensus. While China did invest in innovation, it did so more prominently in the recent decade and the modernization of its industrial complex and its integration of global economy was mainly based on an *imitative* approach. Chinese enterprises started by realizing goods for foreign companies that relocated production in the country and in the bid to expand their market shares, they often resorted to joint ventures and even acquisitions (Kennedy 2010: 469-70). Furthermore, while China's impressive growth improved the lives of millions of people, major inequalities remain evident. The opening to market economy increased income differences between rural and urban areas or among different regions (Knight 2014: 5-7). Throughout its structural transformation process, China did avoid abiding to strict interpretation of the Washington Consensus orthodoxy as its gradualist approach demonstrated. Nonetheless, key neoliberal measures were endorsed such as the respect of macroeconomic stability or the liberalization of the exchange rate, while Beijing also ventured in significant privatizations of some State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

The Chinese strategy for economic reform and growth may not be defined a consensus as Beijing's policies were the result of compromise between state officials at different levels rather than widespread agreement (Kennedy 2010: 472). However, China did follow a peculiar path to modernization that could be interpreted as a model, notwithstanding its flexible and not necessarily universal prescriptions. The main feature distinguishing Chinese economic policies has constantly been pragmatism and abandonment of all ideological principles. This led Chinese planners to start reforming the economy gradually, addressing the most suitable sectors first, and to display an experimental approach in which liberalising measures were tested in limited geographical areas before being expanded. Equally important was the continued state control over the economic reform strategy and over strategic sectors of the economy. Chinese *developmental state bureaucrats* funnelled public resources towards key projects, for instance towards the rapid modernisation of the infrastructure network, while also forging national consensus over the collective goals of economic development and growth. China adjusted its orientations when needed as it occurred with the adoption of the *national champion* policy. After basing its industrial competitive edge on cheap labour, China tried to create brands that could be successful globally. As a result, the state secured its support for specific companies, mainly SOEs, to boost their world status, focusing on sectors such as information technology, communications and construction (Dickson 2011: 41-46).

The Chinese state never accepted a withdrawal from the economy to both shelter the country from external shocks and adapt existing institutional frameworks to the evolving economic priorities. The economic reform was accompanied by significant

changes in the Chinese governance structure which delivered a more efficient political leadership to the reforming effort. The decision-making process was institutionalised as several informal customs were suppressed while measures to ensure cadres accountability were also enforced, particularly between the 1990s and the 2000s. The role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself changed as it was transformed from a revolutionary party into a ruling entity aimed at ensuring stability and mobilising the collective, national effort in pursuit of the economic goals. Democratisation was interpreted as the improvement of communication between authorities and the people, the promotion of popular mobilisation towards the wider goal of economic development and the provision of an efficient public governance (Zhao 2010: 420-30).

Thanks to its sustained success, the China model has been gaining momentum worldwide over the last two decades, especially since Beijing pursued its global outreach more actively. Countries in the Global South started to look at China as a potential alternative to traditional Western partners whose development strategies scored a long record of disappointing results (Stiglitz 2008: 43-5). The combination of impressive economic transformation and authoritarian rule emerged as one of the most attractive aspect of the China model for the authorities of many developing countries. The Chinese experience seemed to confirm that economic reform and political liberalisation could be separated and that potential social upheaval resulting from political transformation could be avoided while integrating the global capitalist system (Trentin 2018: 205-7). Moreover, the Chinese pragmatic approach to international relations and economic cooperation meant the absence of conditionalities to the aid that Beijing offered. Chinese emphasis on self-determination and sovereignty marked a stark contrast with the *morality* that accompanied US and European cooperation which was used as leverage to influence domestic economic policies in developing countries. China ultimately offered the only model capable of challenging the neoliberal hegemony while proposing a partnership scheme that met the priorities of governments throughout the Global South (Zhao 2010: 432-34).

The international appeal of the China model also demonstrated some limits and some of its key perks could also represent obstacles to its diffusion. If the non-interference in domestic affairs, particularly in terms of human rights violations, has been appreciated by local authorities, the same cannot be said for civil society and the general population. China's *neutral* cooperation with countries such as Zimbabwe and Sudan was accused of ensuring vital economic support to the repressive regimes of Robert Mugabe and Omar al-Bashir before their recent removals. Furthermore, while emphasizing its adherence to equality in economic partnership, Beijing's trade relations with many developing countries rather reproduced a North-South asymmetry. While lucrative for local authorities, the Chinese imports of raw materials from Africa or Latin America and its exports of finished products, renew centre-periphery relation and contribute to worsen existing problems (Taylor and Zajontz 2020: 277-295; Carmody,

Taylor and Zajonts 2022: 57-77). The wide imports of low cost products from China, has threatened local production and favoured deindustrialization in countries as diverse as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Mexico while also contributing to fuel tensions between locals and Chinese expatriates (Lanxin 2008: 44-58; Rupp 2008: 65-84).

In its expansion throughout Africa, China and its development model could not neglect Algeria. The history of Sino-Algerian relations, Algeria's strategic location, its potential market and its economic problems all represented strong incentives for the two parties to renew and widen their cooperation.

### **Algeria-China Economic Cooperation, 1955-2000: Ideological Affinity but Modest Relations**

The establishment of Sino-Algerian economic relations predates Algeria's independence as Beijing started to offer its support to the Front de Libération National (FLN) following the Afro-Asian Bandung conference in 1955. China aimed at laying the basis for a strong relationship with the North African country, key to forging ties with other post-colonial African states (Haddad-Fonda 2014: 340-51).

According to some estimates, Chinese assistance to the FLN during the independence war exceeded 10 million dollars (Chau 2014: 46-7). Beijing continued its economic support to Algeria after independence and in 1963 it accorded a 50 million dollars loan to the newly established Algerian Republic (Chau 2014: 56). By 1964, the two countries had also signed several cooperation agreements and in particular a document regulating trade and payments.<sup>2</sup> As Algiers became a major hub for activists and movements fighting for *Third World* liberation, China could reap the benefit of its relations with Algeria founded on shared anti-imperialism. The North African country became a gateway for the expansion of diplomatic ties with African governments which would eventually allow Beijing to gain access to the United Nations (UN) in 1971 also thanks to African support (Pairault 2017).<sup>3</sup>

Despite strong ideological ties, economic relations remained good but were outmatched by Algeria's exchanges with European countries, notably France, Italy, and the Soviet Union. For instance, Moscow could guarantee larger amounts of financial aid and its technological capabilities resonated with Algeria's ambitions of quick industrialisation. Concerned about kickstarting economic development, the Algerian authorities opted for the so-called "industries industrialisantes" model of development as elaborated by French economist Gérard de Bernis (1971: 545-63). Capitals earned through hydrocarbon export were invested on heavy industries meant to stimulate growth in connected sectors. Such strategy, which was sanctioned by the 1976 National Charter, aimed at creating a more integrated economy and ultimately emancipate the Algerian economy from the capitalist centre.

The Chinese paradigm advocating for greater attention on agricultural development did not meet Algerian priorities and in fact, Beijing did not possess the technology to

assist Algeria in its path to industrialisation (Byrne 2016: 263–65). On these premises, Sino-Algerian economic relations never really flourished throughout the 1960s and the 1970s especially as Algeria's industrial policies fatefully neglected the agricultural sector. Unlike what the Algerian authorities expected, agriculture was unable to absorb the production of the newly created industries, evidencing a main contradiction in the development strategy as well as keeping the country dependent on food import (Tlemçani 1986: 111–13).

In the late 1970s, both countries went through major changes in the state leadership with Chadli Benjedid succeeding Boumedienne and Deng Xiaoping taking over control of the CCP. Both Chadli and Deng heralded an era of economic reforms meant to open Algeria and China to market economy and revise the development path followed until then. In Algeria, Chadli promised to bring a "better life" by liberalising some sectors of the economy and making giant SOEs more efficient by downsizing their scale and encouraging autonomy from government (Lowi 2009: 105). Deng for his part, launched his plan of reforms introducing "socialism with Chinese characteristics", opening the country to foreign investments, allowing private enterprises, and gradually integrating China into the world economy (Brandt and Rawski 2008: 8–23).

However, while China's economy entered a long trajectory of outstanding growth in the 1980s and 1990s, Algeria experienced one of the most critical phases in its history. The Chinese process of economic transformation was far from being a smooth transition to market economy. The authorities adopted a cautious experimental approach which entailed several shifts in the reform strategy as obstacles emerged. The ensuing gradualism also served the need to preserve the political establishment from the potential threats linked to the liberalisation of the economy. Indeed, the Tiananmen square protests represented a crucial expression of the societal changes that the economic reforms had set in motion. However, the Chinese authorities, while repressing dissent, were also able to renew their patronage system by both including new social groups emerged as a result of reforms and reorganising the distribution of political and economic rent within the Communist Party and state administration (Naughton 2008: 91–135).

Conversely, while the first Algerian attempt at economic liberalisation and industrial reorganisation failed to kickstart a meaningful transformation of the economy, the mid-1980s oil countershock hit the hydrocarbon dependent country very hard. In 1988, Algeria started a ten-year relation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) meant to further liberalise the economy and help the country overcome its debt servicing problem (Leopardi 2019: 158–64). Chadli matched economic reforms with full political liberalisation, ending one-party rule and opening to parliamentary elections. When legislative elections took place in December 1991, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) scored a landslide victory prompting the reaction of the Algerian military establishment. Afraid of losing state control, the military staged a coup and put an



end to both Chadli's presidency and political reform. The military takeover and the end of Algeria's opening to party politics provided a strong pretext to those arguing for armed struggle within the Islamist camp. Organisations such as the Groupe Islamique Armé, launched a full-scale insurgency which was met by the harsh counter-insurgency measures of the regime security apparatus. The country precipitated in a decade-long civil war that would pass down to history as the "dirty war" (McDougall 2017: 299-302).

Throughout this period, China supplied \$100 million worth military aid to the Algerian regime but arms transfer remained virtually the only area of significant trade exchanges between the two countries.<sup>4</sup> Beside the war effort, the Algerian authorities had to face a deteriorating economy, especially as servicing foreign debt became increasingly burdensome. In that context, economic reforms were stalled until the external financial situation forced the government to accept structural adjustment plans sponsored by the IMF and the WB to obtain major debt rescheduling from its creditors in 1994. Following the rescheduling, Algeria's finances improved but the overall economic situation remained dire: the continued civil strife and the austerity packages needed to meet macroeconomic objective contributed to a decline of social indicators, notably unemployment, while also the industrial output appeared on a downward spiral (Dahmani 1999: 163-93).

Nonetheless, the Algerian authorities managed to survive civil war which gradually ended in the early 2000s as a steady rise in oil prices renewed Algeria's reserve of hard currency.<sup>5</sup> This coincided with a renewal of Sino-Algerian economic cooperation: in the following two decades, Algiers and Beijing would forge a stronger relation which while not disavowing its third-worldist beginnings, primarily grew on the primacy of economic calculations.

### The Asymmetric Take-off of Sino-Algerian Relations (2000–2020)

The revival of Sino-Algerian relations in the early 2000s fitted in the wider framework of China's approach toward Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chinese foreign policy was increasingly driven by the search for energy supplies and for new markets for its exceeding industrial output. Downplaying ideology in its bilateral relations, China now favoured the achievement of mutual economic gains and proposed a *win-win* cooperation to its partners. Chinese diplomacy served economic priorities and Beijing resorted to both bilateral channels and multilateral fora, such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), to pursue its interests in the African continent. Non-interference in its partners' domestic affairs and pragmatism in front of political reversals, also emerged as major features of China's strategy in Africa (Anshan 2008: 21-49).

China's new African policy met Algeria as the country emerged from civil war in need of reconstruction. Following his election to the presidency in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika oversaw a process of political settlement that effectively stabilised the regime after years of civil conflict. After granting a general amnesty and preventing all national debate on the civil conflict, Bouteflika managed to mobilise support from different key social actors, from political parties to the main Algerian trade union and intelligence services. Moreover, rising oil prices in the 2000s, allowed Bouteflika to renew and enlarge the patrimonial structure over which power in post-colonial Algeria had been based. Although some further measures were taken to open Algeria to market economy, the State retained its dominant position. The emerging private sector remained either dependent on public financing or was used to funnel wealth to individuals and groups associated with the regime (McDougall 2017: 317-28). In this context, the hydrocarbon rent was also invested in extensive public constructions plans aiming at renewing local infrastructures and housing, and ensuring social peace by creating much needed jobs. China emerged as a suitable partner in the realisation of these projects while Beijing valued Algeria as a potential market as well as for its strategic ties with both Europe and the rest of Africa (Zoubir 2019: 94-5).

In 2000, Algeria launched its first "Programme in support of economic relaunch" entailing a 7 billion dollars investment to improve the country's basic infrastructures and popular housing. Such economic stimulus coupled with a push to liberalise and develop international trade: between 2000 and 2002, Algeria enhanced its economic and political dialogue with the United States (US), signed an association agreement with the European Union and renewed talks to access the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Mezouaghi 2015: 21).

Both constructions and trade also represented the main areas marking Algeria and China's renewed relations as the two countries laid the basis for a strategic economic partnership. In 1999 Algeria signed a "trade cooperation agreement" with Beijing which came twenty years after a first such agreement was ratified. The agreement encouraged long-term cooperation between Chinese and Algerian enterprises, to be pursued through the establishment of delocalised branches.<sup>6</sup> Three years later, President Bouteflika ratified an agreement on "mutual encouragement and protection" of investments which had already been signed in 1996.<sup>7</sup> Other bilateral agreements would follow conforming the rules for enterprises operating within each other's territory. In 2006, Algeria and China signed an agreement to avoid double taxing and fight tax evasion, specifically targeting taxes on revenues and properties "to promote economic partnership between the two countries".<sup>8</sup> In 2010, Beijing and Algiers also agreed to a shared framework for mutual judiciary assistance on civil and commercial matters which granted to "each party's nationals located in the other's party territory, the same status of its own nationals".<sup>9</sup> Economic and legal cooperation agreements were not matched by similar efforts in the cultural sphere. Unlike in other African

countries, China was not allowed to open a Confucius Institute or Chinese cultural centres in Algeria. It is not clear why the relevant Algerian ministries refused to open these institutes, but official opposition might stem from a misplaced perception of Confucius Institutes as religious institutions. It might also be linked to the resistances of some sectors of the Algerian establishment willing to maintain the status of French as the first foreign language in the country (Zoubir 2020: 219–20).

If the construction sector received the lion share of Algerian public investments, Chinese enterprises obtained around 80% of contracts since the early 2000s. Algerian Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) did not have the capacity to realise large projects in housing and infrastructural renewal as envisioned by the government (Pairault 2015: 8). Big public and private Chinese enterprises, such as the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSEC), stepped in, offering low-cost projects and ensuring fast completion thanks to the import of cheaper Chinese workforce. As a result, the Algerian authorities could boast a fast and successful reconstruction and modernisation of national infrastructures and housing. Over the last twenty years, the CSEC completed dozens of major projects, ranging from housing units to schools and from penitentiaries to roads and luxury hotels. CSEC oversaw the construction of two flagship projects of the Bouteflika era namely, the Grand Mosquée El Djazair, the third biggest mosque in the world and the new terminal of the Houari Boumedienne International Airport (CSEC Algérie: 2020).<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, the choice of Chinese contractors contradicted one of the fundamental goals of Algeria's investment plans, namely the promotion of employment among the local workforce. The Algerian authorities ultimately prioritised a rapid completion of works over their commitment to secure job opportunities for their citizens. For instance, although the contract for the construction of the El Djazair mosque dictated that Algerians should take up to 10,000 of the 17,000 jobs envisaged, most workers employed were in fact Chinese nationals. Chinese presence in the construction sector not only had negligible impact on Algeria's unemployment, but also did not enable significant scientific and technological transfer (Souiah 2011; Zouikri 2017: 69–84). Chinese enterprises were also implicated in corruption cases that have been plaguing the Algerian construction sector, particularly since the 1990s liberalisations. In 2019, managers of the public China Railway Construction Corporation, who won the tender for the construction of two of the three segments that make up the East-West Motorway, were exposed for bribing several Algerian officials to speed up administrative procedures.<sup>11</sup>

The windfall hydrocarbon revenues also prompted renewed import expenses and China quickly emerged as a central supplier to Algeria's demand. Trade exchange surged following the China-Algeria trade agreements signed in the early 2000s: while in 2000 Algeria's imports from China amounted to around 212 million dollars, in 2010 they surpassed four billion dollars and doubled again by 2014. Similarly, Algerian exports to

China grew exponentially: in 1999 Algeria exported 53 million dollars worth goods but in 2012 exports value peaked at 2.5 billion dollars although they later followed a more fluctuant trend. China became Algeria's main trading partner, a position that France had occupied since independence in 1962 and lost in the early 2010s.<sup>12</sup> Given the size and importance of the military establishment in Algeria, arms trade with China should not be neglected. Algeria purchased its military hardware from several state suppliers throughout its history but the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, remained consistently its main partner. However, today Beijing represents its second supplier, a position that it obtained thanks to the 814 million dollars worth exchanges occurred between 2014 and 2016.<sup>13</sup>

Despite such impressive growth, and the emphasis on equality and mutual benefit that surrounded Sino-Algerian economic cooperation, trade exchange revealed a rather asymmetric relation. Algeria came to import a diverse basket of Chinese products and particularly capital and intermediate goods which evidenced how the Algerian industrial sector never emancipated from imports for its functioning. Algeria's import of low-cost Chinese goods was key to avoid rises in the cost of labour and of the overall productive process, thus facilitating the financing of labour-intensive industries (Talahite 2014: 9-30). Conversely, Algeria exported almost exclusively hydrocarbon raw materials to China, in line with both Beijing's global hunt for energy and Algeria's dependence on oil and gas.

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That is why the energy sector saw the most significant efforts at industrial and technological cooperation, reflecting the strategic importance that both Algeria and China ascribe to it. Chinese petroleum companies still play a marginal role in Algeria compared to their Western counterparts, nonetheless their presence expanded starting from scratch. China's interests in carving out a niche in the Algerian hydrocarbon sector fit into its strategy to diversify energy suppliers, especially in light of the turmoil that some of its traditional partners have been experiencing (Zoubir 2019: 98-9). In 2005, the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) was entrusted with the construction of a gas refinery in Skikda while it also won a tender for the exploration and development of the Adrar oil field, and was charged with the construction of a refinery and with the marketisation of refined products.<sup>14</sup>

In the 2010s, Algeria and China further upgraded their relations, notably as they signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2014, making Algeria the first Arab state to achieve such level of close ties with Beijing.<sup>15</sup> A CSP is China's highest form of bilateral relationship and it requires several conditions to be met. China subscribes CSPs only with countries that enjoy high political trust and have developed deep economic and cultural bonds. Once established, a CSP entails a framework of direct and regular communication channels between high level state officials, thus cementing a relation built around shared, long-term development goals. Such close communication ensures the stability of the bilateral relations as well as determining coordination within

international fora and summits when major issues are addressed (Struver 2017: 43–6). After the establishment of the CSP, Algeria and China launched new shared projects. In particular, the Algerian authorities announced the construction of the El Hamdania commercial port, eighty kilometres west of Algiers, set to be among the thirty biggest ports in the world. Chinese public companies, namely the CSEC and the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) would realise the project alongside an Algerian society. The project also received 3.3 billion dollars funding from China, marking a shift in the financing patterns of public works in Algeria.<sup>16</sup> However, the project immediately met opposition from civil society due to the opaque decision-making, the perceived loss of sovereignty due to the 35 years long concession to China and the anticipated environmental impact. The project was even suspended in early 2019 due to the outbreak of popular protests and, despite the announcement of its resumption, it still appears stalled.<sup>17</sup>

Signalling Algeria's interests in attracting Chinese direct investments and production relocation in 2016, Algiers and Beijing signed an agreement to enhance productive capacities and established an inter-governmental framework to coordinate new industrial projects and expand the areas of joint intervention.<sup>18</sup> In September 2018, Algeria and China signed a memorandum of understanding through which the North African country joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the text of the memorandum, references to the encouragement of Algerian entrepreneurial presence in China was noteworthy as it reflected Algiers' expectations from this relation.<sup>19</sup> Algeria's decision to join the initiative underscored the long-term vision that the authorities ascribed to economic ties with Beijing, highlighting their favour for China's approach to bilateral cooperation and possibly to China's model of development. As evidenced, Sino-Algerian economic relations have been serving the agenda of the Algerian authorities and, on those basis, a deeper partnership was built. However, such agenda did not necessarily address long-standing issues which, as noted by Algerian observers, risked remaining ignored under the shadow of growing Sino-Algerian cooperation.

### **Algerian Academic Perspectives on the China Model: Between Fascination and Scepticism**

Much like in other developing countries, the expanding Chinese economic presence in Algeria was seen as offering new opportunities for growth and industrialisation, particularly among state officials but also within the academic community. Algerian scholars noted how, against the backdrop of Algeria's own history of changing development strategies and long-term socio-economic problems, China ostensibly presented an effective blueprint to modify Algeria's position within the global economic hierarchy. China could also support Algeria in addressing its chronic issues, both as a source of learning and active economic partner. However, the academic community balanced the authorities' enthusiasm toward Chinese cooperation with more cautious

evaluations. Scholars stressed on potential obstacles, stemming from Algeria's own political and economic specificities and from the characteristics of Chinese economic intervention in partner countries.

### *Discussing the Chinese Blueprint for Development*

To some extent, Algerian scholars looked at the China Model as a possible alternative to the dominant neoliberal development strategy. The Chinese rise to second world economic power demonstrated that overall state planning and a balance between public and private actors was the right path to development. Algerian scholars emphasised the central role played by the Chinese state both in terms of strategy formulation and financial support to enterprises in key areas, from agriculture to export promotion. Academics also appreciated Chinese gradual reforms as opposed to the neoliberal *shock therapies* since they allowed the required flexibility on the timing and targets of liberalisations. China even demonstrated that the coexistence of double regimes, for instance in terms of price, was advisable to accompany society and the enterprises themselves towards open market and globalisation (Huwas 2017: 15; Mancer 2016: 18-30; Qarayn and Boufenneche 2020: 212-13).

Gradualism stroke a chord in Algeria when considered against the backdrop of parallel economic and political liberalisations. In terms of economic liberal reforms, during Algeria's period of collaboration with international financial institutions, all Algerian governments resisted pressures for sweeping and comprehensive neoliberal adjustment.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, when Chadli decided to bring a multi-party system to the country in the early 1990s many, even among dedicated reformers, considered the move premature since economic reforms were still in their early phase, far from delivering the promised results. The quick descent towards social turmoil and later civil war, apparently confirmed that all-out liberalisations could have overwhelming destabilising effects on developing countries (McDougall 2017: 285-89). Similarly to Algerian authorities, scholars too appreciated China's separation of economic and political reforms and its rejection of the neoliberal integrated approach. This allowed the country to formulate an effective development strategy, while also ensuring social stability following the late 1980s turmoil. China did reform governance but did not embrace multi-party democracy. Institutional transformation happened on a slower pace and consistently aimed at ameliorating the governance of economic planning and development (Ben Sania 2016: 105-6).

The Algerian regime appreciated how the Chinese authorities maintained their authoritarian governance by invoking the principle of sovereignty as they implemented economic liberalisations. However, outside governing circles fascination with the ability to maintain local institutions did not necessarily mean justifying authoritarianism. In fact, some argued that it would ultimately be up to China to adapt to the demand for democratisation raised by "Arab peoples" over the last decade which have been

increasingly rejecting "authoritarian stability" (Qawadira 2018: 35). The attractiveness of the China model for the Algerian post-colonial society also lay in a successful integration into the world economic system that preserved Chinese institutional and cultural values. Algerian scholars not only admired China's protection of its economic sovereignty but also linked Chinese success to the long-lasting permeation of Chinese society with Confucianism. Moral integrity, individual sacrifice for the sake of collective welfare or the respect of authority were pointed out as essential factors in allowing China to mobilise popular support in the reform effort but also to continue to prioritise human development criteria in its strategy (Ben Sania 2015: 805-6). Such stress on the *civilisational* side of the China model displays some culturalist leanings while do not consider China's own problem with corruption and disparities resulting from the economic transformation. Nonetheless, it hints to the Algerian concern for cultural and political self-determination in its full embrace of globalised economy.

Besides the guiding principles of the China model, also single measures attracted the attention of Algerian scholars, particularly as far as they seemed apt to respond to local economic problems. The Chinese government's investment in a wide array of infrastructural projects over its territory was seen as a strategy ensuring both short and long-term benefits. Although Algeria did not reap such positive results despite its significant infrastructural renewal plans, Algerian scholars praised Chinese investment in both transport and energy infrastructures. This policy allowed Beijing to create new jobs while paving the way for further industrial development thanks to the new services established (Al-Zahra ben Zaydan and Ratoul 2017: 190). Algerian academics also appreciated the China's *technocratic* governance in different strategic sectors, such as banking. While in Algeria appointments at economic ministries are not necessarily based on educational and professional curricula, China selects economic decision-makers out of their degree of specialisation who enable an effective governance of the strategic banking sector (Ghayat and Musa'adiyya 2018: 82-6).

China's policies to promote exports as driver of economic transformation appeared as a blueprint that Algeria might follow to emancipate from hydrocarbon dependency and to diversify its industrial apparatus. China's establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and, specifically, Export Processing Zones (EPZs) was seen as the cornerstone measure which not only sustained growth over the years but also favoured development in other fundamental sectors. By creating such SEZs, Chinese authorities at all levels provided public funding, enhanced infrastructural framework and fiscal exemption for both local and foreign operators. This attracted foreign investments and while Chinese enterprises integrated the global market, the presence of foreign companies favoured technological transfer. After an export strategy based on low production costs, China was able to invest in more sophisticated manufacturing areas that ensured higher added value. This strategy ensured impressive capital accumulation and a high degree of industrial diversification, a long, sought-after goal of Algerian modernisers (Al-Abed

Bernice 2016: 173-8; Ben Atallah 2016: 56-9; Djouadi 2016: 396-400; Mellab 2019: 46; Qarayn and Boufenneche 2020: 216; Shahrazad 2015: 394-8).

However, a replication of the Chinese export-led growth in Algeria, as noted in the literature, would necessarily face some major obstacles. The virtual absence of significant industries besides the hydrocarbons sector in Algeria represents a sizable handicap to the reproduction of export-led growth as the country lacks the minimum productive capacities to start such a process. The attempts to establish SEZs in Algeria failed for several reasons related to the shortcomings of local authorities. The lack of a suitable regulatory framework prevented foreign operators from transferring their activities in the country. Moreover, unlike China, Algeria does not possess a comparable institutional framework to support local enterprises in their integration into global markets. Although many investment plans targeted its renovation, the Algerian infrastructure network is still inadequate for the creation of SEZs (Al-Abed Bernice 2016: 171; Benbraham 2019: 65; Rahmani and Tchiko 2019: 332).

### *Evaluating Sino-Algerian Partnership*

Algerian scholars focused much of their analyses on the potential advantages and the impact of tight Sino-Algerian relations. China apparently offered a more favourable model of economic partnership and the chance to challenge traditional schemes of North-South relations. However, the evaluation of the actual impact of Chinese economic presence in Algeria could not neglect the asymmetry between the two countries.

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Like elsewhere in the MENA region and across Africa, the lack of conditionalities to China's financial aid and trade agreements was the most appreciated feature of Algiers' partnership with Beijing, and the academic community was no exception. Chinese unwillingness to impose economic or political reforms has been greeted enthusiastically in Algeria after experiencing the harsh consequences of IMF and WB Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s. China's *soft penetration* in the African continent appeared as an alternative model of globalisation which put mutual benefit at the top of its economic agenda. Although China never presented itself as explicitly alternative to the US, by nurturing their partnership, Algeria could participate in the restructuring of global balances. A multipolar global order was seen as favourable to the developing world, especially if one of its rising powers was a post-colonial country adhering to the principle of peaceful cooperation and non-interference (Qarush 2020: 295-6; Qawadira 2018: 19, 36; Tawil 2017: 625; Tayeb 2018: 5, 8-10).

Scholars also looked at Chinese economic policies in Algeria as an opportunity to attract investments and achieve industrial diversification. The no-strings policy allowed China to start joint projects in sectors that were traditionally neglected by Western investors whose activities remained mostly focused on hydrocarbon exploration, extraction, and marketisation. Before the economic lockdowns imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the



expansion of China's BRI and Algeria's inclusion in it, seemed to herald the possibility of relocating Chinese industrial activities on the Algerian soil. This could not only help Algeria to reduce unemployment but also contribute to a much-needed infrastructural renewal (Belkacem and Bellache 2020: 96; Madouni 2020: 359; Zellagui and Boutora 2020: 233–6; Zemouri and Belkacemi 2017: 506–7).

Besides the potential benefits that the Algerian economy could draw from China's partnership, local academics also pointed to the problematic aspects of this relations. Concern has been first expressed at the clear asymmetry that has characterised Sino-Algerian economic relations since the early 2000s. Despite the official emphasis on mutually beneficial cooperation and similarly to China's relations with other developing countries, Sino-Algerian relations rather reflect traditional *centre-periphery relations*. As Algerian scholars noted, while Chinese expanding presence in the Maghreb did not have any impact on regional integration, China did become Algeria's main trading partner, but the nature of their exchanges underscored the asymmetry of their relations. Algeria's export of raw hydrocarbon materials to China and its import of finished products as well as services, fuelled a 6.7 billion dollars annual trade deficit (Belkacem and Bellache 2020: 92). China not only capitalised on the sale of higher added-value goods on the Algerian market, but its public companies also intercepted Algerian government funding as they obtained lucrative contracts for public works. As a result, Algeria imported fifty billion dollars worth services from China while Chinese direct investment amounted to only 12.4 billion dollars between 2003 and 2015, further underscoring the asymmetry of their relation (Shattab and Hamza 2017: 121–5).

Algerian scholars highlighted the wider and indirect negative effects of this unbalanced trade relation. As Chinese low-cost products flooded the Algerian market, local investors found imports from China lucrative. This diverted investment opportunities away from local firms to the advantage of foreign companies. Chinese public companies, as reflected in their dominance of Algerian public funding and tenders, dwarfed local SMEs, further disincentivising local productivity and contributing to deindustrialisation. The scarce employment opportunities that Chinese companies have been offering to Algerian workers and the low level of technological transfer, contributed to critical assessments of China's economic presence in Algeria (Belkacem and Bellache 2020: 97; Saidi and Derbal 2017: 98; Smadi A., Abrika B. and Sadoudi T. 2017: 84–5).

The evaluations of Sino-Algerian partnership by Algerian scholars resembled that of their colleagues in other countries across Africa and elsewhere. Chinese economic cooperation seemed to have offered new opportunities to local authorities, in terms of alternative development models, favourable vision of bilateral relations and shared economic priorities. However, if China's economic presence in Algeria served some of the regime's goals over the last two decades, it did not necessarily have a positive impact on its developmental trajectory: Algeria's historical socio-economic problems remain mostly untouched as China's footprint in the country expands.

## Conclusions

Setting aside all ideological connotation, since the early 2000s Algeria and China seemed to respond efficiently to each other's economic priorities. Beijing made further inroads in the African continent for both its low-cost goods and its largest companies while Algiers took advantage of Chinese services to rebuild the country after a ten-year civil war. In around a decade, China became Algeria's main trading partner while Chinese constructions companies obtained most of government contracts for public works all over the country. Algerian hydrocarbon revenues lubricated this cooperation but even when oil prices started to decline in the mid-2010s, the Sino-Algerian partnership did not stop. Conversely, the two countries upgraded their relations as Algeria launched co-financed, major infrastructural projects and joined China's BRI.

The impressive growth of China's presence in Algeria was also the result of the increasing popularity that the Chinese model of development gained all over the Global South and particularly across Africa. The China model proved the viability of economic transformation based on a paradigm disavowing neoliberal shock therapies and parallel political reforms. China demonstrated that only the State could effectively coordinate economic modernisation and that a gradual, experimental approach was the right way forward for post-colonial countries.

Beijing's way to development resonated with the Algerian authorities and, although less convincingly, also with its academic community. The Algerian regime espoused the China model and its non-interference policy in bilateral relations after struggling to mitigate the effects of Structural Adjustment Programmes during the 1990s. For their part, Algerian economists and international relations scholars never abandoned the paradigm of the modernising state and found in Chinese actual policies measures that could be experimented in Algeria too. Such positions toward the China model demonstrate the readiness of different Algerian stakeholders to reject the strict neoliberal orthodoxy as sponsored by its traditional Western partners. Their preference for state planning and experimental gradualism reflects a widespread orientation throughout the Global South. As for Algerian scholars, such orientation is further highlighted by their view of economic and political reforms as separate spheres. While academics are concerned with improving economic governance and overall democratisation, they see gradualism as the best approach to avoid social unrest and ensure that political reforms respect national priorities and sensibilities.

The Algerian authorities also found in Chinese assistance a response for their economic priorities both in the wake of the *Black Decade* and after the fall of oil prices. While throughout the 2000s Chinese companies represented the mean to deliver Algeria's goals of infrastructural renewal, in the 2010s the upgraded Sino-Algerian partnership offered, according to the official narrative, the opportunities for real industrial diversification. However, as several within Algerian academia noted, the actual impact of such bilateral relations has been far from ideal, nor a reproduction of the China

model in the country is at an easy reach. Algeria accumulated a significant trade deficit with China and the availability of Chinese low-cost goods favoured deindustrialisation in Algeria as happened in other African countries. Chinese giant companies have marginalised Algerian enterprises while did not offer employment opportunities for local workers nor facilitated technological transfer. Rather than the much-touted *win-win* cooperation, Sino-Algerian relations seemed to have reproduced North-South asymmetry and while the Algerian authorities reaped most of the benefits, the fate of Algeria's economy remains tied to its unresolved, long-standing problems.

The different positions that the authorities and parts of the civil society, such as academics, hold toward the asymmetric Sino-Algerian relations underscore the importance of considering multiple perspectives. The study of the Algerian scholarly literature on the China model highlighted the existence of diverse standpoints which tend to be neglected due to the attention granted to official positions. However, the scrutiny of local perspectives is key to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Chinese economic expansion in the Global South. Thus, it is paramount to assess the different views within the societies of China's junior partners to grasp the edges, the challenges and the consequences of Beijing's growing presence.

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