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China's Political Influence in the South Mediterranean Region

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Introduction

China's unprecedented rise has made it a prominent global power and a consequential actor in the developing world. Beijing's foreign policy has prioritized strengthening ties with the developing world to build partners and cultivate friends in line with its national interests. This outreach has increasingly captured the attention of countries in the Southern Mediterranean (SoMed) region—which encompasses the ten countries from Morocco to Syria. So far, many governments in the region have welcomed Beijing's overtures and are pursuing deeper bilateral cooperation. As Beijing embeds itself as an important regional actor, the implications of its elevated role in the region are an important consideration for governments balancing a variety of local and regional security, stability, and governance challenges.

China's growing presence in the region is driven by economic and strategic interests. For Beijing, the region's natural resources, untapped export market access, and proximity to the European market make the region an attractive investment opportunity. Chinese leaders also see fertile ground for cultivating ideological and political ties and are building on interests from many nations, leaders, and political elites to learn about China's domestic successes, guided by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and derive examples or "models" of political and economic governance from China's experience.

In response, Beijing has employed a broad approach to cultivating influence among the region's political elite, driven by the CCP and a network of local, regional, and international institutions. These efforts, while not isolated to the SoMed region, have been well-received and reinforced Chinese efforts to strengthen bilateral ties with countries in the region by building a support base among local elites and decisionmakers favorable to China.

This paper explores and analyzes the theory and framework through which China actively cultivates political influence among local communities, the aims and approaches of these efforts, and the extent to which they have been successful in the SoMed region. It concludes with a discussion on the implications of these research on the broader policy implications of China's growing political influence in the SoMed region.

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Theory and Framework for Building Influence

At the highest level of political organization, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) guides the People's Republic of China's efforts to cultivate influence and international support through diplomacy with foreign countries. These efforts fall within the broader aim of building a "shared future for mankind," China's vision for a multipolar international system more suitable for China's rise and interests.² For Beijing, this approach hinges on building strong partnerships across key regions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—China's flagship foreign policy initiative—has been Beijing's primary vehicle realizing this vision.

Building Durable Partnerships

Building strong and durable ties with foreign countries is a cornerstone of Beijing's foreign policy. Globally, China has signed over 200 cooperation agreements with 140 countries and 30 international organizations.³ These partnerships range on a hierarchy from friendly cooperative partnerships to comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership agreements, the highest level of bilateral relations for China. Advanced stage partnerships are characterized, not only by comprehensive cooperation on bilateral issues, but also mutual support on regional and international challenges. These partners are important to China's security interests and have a distinct domestic need China can address, such as underdevelopment or nascent infrastructure.

In the SoMed region, Beijing has developed varying levels of partnerships with regional actors. The PRC enjoys its strongest political partnerships with Algeria and Egypt, following by a comprehensive innovative partnership with Israel, and strategic cooperation agreements with Jordan and Morocco. China has also bolstered its engagement with the remaining SoMed region—Tunisia, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Palestine—through selective economic, trade, technical, and COVID-19 cooperation, though bilateral relations with these countries have yet to reach the threshold of strategic partnerships.

Chinese Bilateral Diplomatic Relations in the SoMed Region		
Country	Level of Cooperation	Date
Algeria	Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership	2014, 2022
Egypt	Comprehensive Strategic Partnership	2014
Israel	Comprehensive Innovative Partnership	2017
Morocco	Strategic Partnership	2016
Jordan	Strategic Partnership	2015
Tunisia	Friendly Cooperative Relations	Varies
Lebanon	Selective Cooperation	Varies
Syria	Selective Cooperation	Varies
Libya	Selective Cooperation	Varies
Palestine	Selective Cooperation	Varies

² Andrew Nathan and Boshu Zhang, "A Shared Future for Mankind: Rhetoric and Reality in Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31, no. 133 (May 2021): 57-71.

³ Ye Feng Yu, "Study on China's Strategic Pivot Countries in the Context of Building a Belt and Road in the New Era [新时代共建一带一路背景下中国战略支点国家研究]," *Advances in Social Sciences*, 11, no. 2 (2022): 452-459.

<https://www.hanspub.org/journal/PaperInformation.aspx?paperID=48684>

China's partnership approach enables Beijing to develop partnerships with foreign governments according to China's specific needs and those of individual SoMed states, without binding either side to specific commitments. By projecting a neutral stance on the region's geopolitics, Beijing has, so far, avoided many regional pitfalls which traditionally bog down other external actors in the region. This approach enables Beijing and partner countries to define their areas of shared priorities for cooperation, while managing divergent ones. For example, Beijing maintains varying degrees of partnership with both Algeria and Morocco, while avoiding geopolitical entanglement in their rivalry. China also has taken a similar approach to building ties simultaneously with Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine.

By defining Beijing's foreign relations with states as partnerships rather than as alliances, Beijing aims to project an image of itself as an equal partner pursuing mutual outcomes and "win, win" solutions with partner countries. This has been particularly relevant to its SoMed outreach where China's diplomacy consists of strategic messaging appealing to its historic role in the post-colonial and anti-imperialism movements in the global south, as well as its emphasis on equality, non-intervention, and mutual respect for national sovereignty. These narratives aim to paint China as the "equal partner" of choice, by differentiating China from Western counterparts, whose history in the SoMed region is linked to memories of violent colonialism and bloodshed.⁴

Cultivating Strategic Fulcrums

Overtime, Beijing aims to upgrade its partnerships as bilateral relations reach higher levels of cooperation with foreign countries. This process enables Beijing to shepherd partners toward more strategic forms of cooperation and, in return, cultivate partners more amenable and supportive of Chinese interests. In Chinese foreign policy, these partners have been defined by scholars as "strategic fulcrums" (战略支点)—a nation or region with sufficient capacity to shape regional and international stability, which can also function as a conduit for advancing the strategic ambitions and priorities of a great power regionally and globally.⁵ Fulcrum countries can be divided broadly into five types: military, economic, ideological (soft power), international, and political fulcrums. These fulcrums are interwoven together to create a comprehensive set of foreign policy tools used to advance China's foreign policy objectives.

⁴ Lina Benabdallah, "Guanxi in Public Diplomacy and Trainings for Journalists," in *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pg. 96-97.

⁵ Ye Feng Yu, "Study on China's Strategic Pivot Countries in the Context of Building a Belt and Road in the New Era [新时代共建一带一路背景下中国战略支点国家研究]," *Advances in Social Sciences*, 11, no. 2 (2022): 452-459.

<https://www.hanspub.org/journal/PaperInformation.aspx?paperID=48684>

 <p>Military Fulcrums</p>	<p>Enable Beijing to advance security, defense, and military cooperation while improving access and expanding power projection capabilities into strategic regions.</p>
 <p>Economic Fulcrums</p>	<p>Function as economic extensions of and key sources for China's domestic development. These countries can be both key import and export markets, investment centers, resource-rich regions, and energy producers.</p>
 <p>Ideological Fulcrums</p>	<p>Receptive to, students of, and conduits for the adoption and proliferation of Chinese soft power, ideology, and, in many cases, practice.</p>
 <p>International Fulcrums</p>	<p>Support and promote China's influence and positions in the international environment, including in international institutions, the United Nations, and in strategic international platforms, such as ASEAN, BRICS, and the G20.</p>
 <p>Political Fulcrums</p>	<p>Strongly influenced by and oriented toward China's model of political governance and emerging norms advanced by the CCP.</p>

Fulcrum states are typically medium powers, like Egypt and Algeria, whose actions and policies can shape both regional and global conditions in favor of a great power as a result of their large population size, economic strength, military capabilities, geostrategic locations, cultural influence, and resource/energy strength.⁶ And, these fulcrum states can leverage their favorable conditions as leverage or influence to build consensus among a group of states within a certain region or bloc.

People-to-People Diplomacy

Beijing has gradually recognized that cultivating strategic partnerships hinges on the support of local stakeholders—local officials, students, political elites, local media, think tanks, and more. Under President Xi Jinping's direction, CCP's International Liaison Department has strengthened its "foreign work" in building these local ties through sublevel diplomacy, dubbed "person-to-person diplomacy." The Party's approach relies on the "trinity approach" (三位一体), which outlines three lines of diplomatic outreach, including party diplomacy (政党外交), public diplomacy (公共外交), and non-government diplomacy (民间外交) to build support among foreign partners.⁷

⁶ Zheng Zhilai. "Research on the "Belt and Road" strategy and the development path of regional economic integration (一带一路"战略与区域经济发展路径研究)." *Modern Economic Discussion*, 2015,0(7):25-28; Robert Chase, Emily B. Hill, and Paul Kennedy, "Pivotal states and U.S. strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 75, no. 1 (1996): 33-51.

⁷ Song Tao, "The Party's foreign work is an important manifestation of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics [党的对外工作是中国特色大国外交的重要体现]" *International Liaison Department, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China*, January 1, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20047466>

Trinity Approach (三位一体) to Diplomacy	
Party Diplomacy (政党外交)	Building ties with foreign political elites, political organizations, and grassroots organizations.
Public diplomacy (公共外交)	Building popular support among local populations through “winning hearts and minds” campaigns.
Non-government diplomacy (民间外交)	Building ties with NGOs, civil society, and think tanks.

The three wings of this approach can be summarized as People-to-People (P2P) Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. These aim to reinforce the security of the CCP, its role in China, and core ideologies among an international audience and push back against international criticism of the CCP.⁸ P2P diplomacy, while supported by a broad range of institutions and actors, is primarily driven by Party-linked institutions, including the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) and the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC).

P2P diplomacy is carried out inside the framework of guiding CCP ideologies, including Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism and Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy, with the goal of cultivating “popular support” among partner states, their leaders, and their peoples for improved relations with China. Wang Chao, President of CPIFA, explains that people-to-people diplomacy is “more effective in presenting China’s political and economic standing and cultural appeal, thus fostering a more favorable public opinion of China across the world.”⁹

Under the umbrella of P2P diplomacy, state-sponsored exchanges in the SoMed region have been targeted at cultivating ties with politicians, parliaments and elected governing bodies, political elites, think tanks, new and traditional media, civil society, NGOs, education institutions, businesses, as well as a variety of youth organizations. These programs are integral to the promotion of Chinese soft power and are tailored to engender in participants a positive view of the Chinese state, its history, culture, and governance. These exchanges also allow Beijing to cultivate support for its priorities of national

sovereignty and mutual non-interference, to promote bilateral and multilateral solidarity for the national reunification of Taiwan and to curb criticism of the Chinese government’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Through exchanges organized through the CPAFFC and its local chapters in SoMed countries, participants are exposed to curated state-sponsored events in partner countries, as well as sponsored trips and engagements in China, which are accompanied by extensive propaganda around China’s meteoric rise and the role of the CCP in securing China’s development.

China’s United Front (统一战线工作) Work Department and its partners have taken a leading role cultivating influence overseas and bolstering China’s circle of friends globally. Dubbed by Xi as the party’s “magic weapon,” the United Front is a global network of organizations, institutions, individuals, and, in some cases, intelligence entities, whose work aims, more generally, to maintain and extend the power of the Chinese state through cultivating influence in and through overseas Chinese communities in areas of strategic importance, as well as to build influence among politicians, scholars, religious and business associations, and companies of various sorts and alignments in target countries and regions. In the former context,¹⁰ United Front activities aim to “guide” as opposed to “leading” overseas Chinese

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wang Chao, “People-to-People Diplomacy: A Propeller of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era,” Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs, December 24, 2019. <http://cpifa.org/en/article/1746>

¹⁰ Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “The Communist Party of China’s United Front Work in the Gulf: The ‘Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese’ of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study,” King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 34, March 2018.

communities to proactively participate in serving CCP agendas in the countries they reside and in activities which strengthens and supports China's foreign policy priorities.¹¹ In the latter, the Chinese leadership has revived Mao-era policies of "making the past serve the present, make the foreign serve China" (古为今用, 洋为中用), an approach of using multitrack engagements—people-to-people, party-to-party, and PRC enterprise-to-foreign enterprise—to cultivate influence among foreigners and promote China's foreign policy objectives.¹²

Under the Xi administration, the United Front has become a critical feature of Chinese foreign policy with the task of shaping foreign public opinion, building deeper support among local communities, and elevating the role of "friends" of China within partner nations. After a 10-year break, President Xi reinstated the Central United Front Work Department conference in 2015, a notable elevation in the status of the group's work within the framework of Xi Jinping's overhaul of Chinese domestic and foreign policy. The United Front has played a growing role in the organization of the CCP's public diplomacy through a network of organizations globally, including in the Middle East.

While many, notably in the West, have emphasized the wide range of potential actors linked to United Front work, there is no central database or criteria for identifying such organizations. Some scholars have noted that United Front groups work openly utilizing names referencing "peaceful reunification" or "friendship association"¹³. For example, the link can be drawn between Sun Chanlan, who previously led both the United Front Working Department and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)—which has linkages in many SoMed countries through a sub-organ, the China-Arab Friendship Association.¹⁴ Other scholars posit that United Front outreach is facilitated by party-state actors operating within PRC overseas embassies and consulates, while also operating under diplomatic cover within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a means of guiding influence operation activities outside of China.¹⁵

Aims and Approaches in the SoMed Region

SoMed Friendship Associations

The Chinese government has utilized several channels to bolster P2P engagement. The primary institution for advancing Chinese interests bilaterally has been through the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), which is chaired by Lin Songtian and subsidized by the Chinese government.¹⁶ CPAFFC is responsible for managing China's numerous P2P exchanges in other regions and states, such as bilateral friendship committees in the SoMed region, as well as China's sister-city relationships between major SoMed cities and those in China. The CPAFFC currently convenes friendship associations with every SoMed country. These associations are typically co-chaired by a selected in-country CPAFFC representative and a host-nation local representative. These organizations are entrusted by the Chinese government with managing sub-diplomacy efforts, under the guidance of CPAFFC leadership. These efforts range from language programs and non-government organization (NGO) exchanges to cultural exhibits and university partnerships.

¹¹ Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," The Wilson Center, September 18, 2017. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Brady, "Magic Weapons."

¹⁴ See Marcel Angliviel de la Beaumelle, "The United Front Work Department: "Magic Weapon" at Home and Abroad," Jamestown Foundation, *China Brief* 17, no.9: July 6, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/united-front-work-department-magic-weapon-home-abroad/>

¹⁵ Brady, "Magic Weapons," De le Beaumelle, "The United Front Work Department," Sudairi, "The Communist Party of China's United Front Work in the Gulf."

¹⁶ Statutes of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Chapter 5, Article 3, https://cpaffc.org.cn/index/xiehui/xiehui_list/cate/13/lang/2.html

Chinese Friendship Associations in the SoMed Region since 2015	
Country	Examples of Official Engagement
The Chinese-Arab Friendship Association	President Xi Jinping's participated in Chinese-Arab Cooperation Forum in 2016.
China-Egypt Friendship Association	Sun Chunlan, Minister of the United Front Work Department, met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi in April 2017. ¹⁷
China-Syria Friendship Association	Residual visits and senior-level engagements from FM Wang Yi and China's Envoy to Syria.
China-Turkey Friendship Association	Cheng Guoping, External Security Commissioner at the Chinese Foreign Ministry's External Affairs Department and Deputy Chair of the China Association for International Friendly Contact (the PLA Political Work Department Liaison Bureau). ¹⁸
China-Lebanon Friendship Association	Song Tao, Minister of the International Liaison Department of the CPC, met with General Secretary of the Lebanese Future Front, Ahmed Hariri in 2019, with a follow-on video call between the ministry and the Future Front party in 2022. ¹⁹
China-Israel Friendship Association	Chinese Ambassador to Israel Cai Run met with the friendship society in June 2021. ²⁰
China-Jordan Friendship Association	Chen Xiaoguang, Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese Consultative Conference (CPPCC), a UF organization, in September 2018. ²¹
China-Morocco Friendship Association	You Quan, former director of the United Front Work Department, met with Prime Minister Saadeddine El Othmani, the Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party in July 2018. ²²
China-Algeria Friendship Association	Wang Yang, outgoing Chairman of the CPPCC met with Algerian Speaker of the National Assembly Saleh Goujil on May 31, 2022. ²³
China-Tunisia Friendship Association	CPAFFC Vice President Lin Yi met with Tunisian Ambassador to China Dhia Khaled in 2019.

¹⁷ Xinhuanet, "China, Egypt seeks to promote Belt and Road Initiative," April 13, 2017.

http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/13/c_136206645.htm

¹⁸ Ondřej Klimeš, "China's Xinjiang propaganda and united front work in Turkey: Actors and content," Sinopsis, May 3, 2021.

¹⁹ People's Daily Online, "Song Tao meets with the delegation of the cadres of the Lebanese Future Front," July 17, 2019;

International Department of the Communist Party of China, "朱锐同黎巴嫩未来阵线总书记艾哈迈德举行视频会晤 [Zhu Rui held a video meeting with General Secretary of the Lebanese Future Front Ahmed]," March 11, 2022.

https://www.idcpc.org.cn/lldt/202203/t20220315_148532.html

²⁰ Israel-China Friendship Society, "Meeting with H.E. Ambassador Cai Run," June 14, 2021.

<https://israelchinafriendship.org/language/en/2021/06/30/2021-06-14-meeting-with-h-e-ambassador-cai-run/>

²¹ Petra News Agency, "Deputy Prime Minister meets Vice Chairman of CPPCC National Committee," September 9, 2018.

https://www.petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=10212&lang=ar&name=en_news

²² China Daily, "Morocco, China vow to promote strategic partnership," July 11, 2018.

<https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201807/11/WS5b45c2e4a310796df4df5d3b.html>

²³ Xinhua, "وانغ يانغ يلتقي رئيس الجمعية الوطنية الجزائرية" [China's top political advisor meets Algerian National Assembly Speaker via video," Yi Dai Yi Lu Arabic, <https://ara.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/noticia/world/248552.htm>

The CPAFFC has a mixed reputation due to the scope of its role in the PRC's foreign diplomacy and cultivation of pro-China sentiment. On several occasions, the CPAFFC leveraged ties with pro-PRC leaders, cultivated through friendship association activities, to generate support for PRC political positions during period of sensitive geopolitical developments. For example, in August 2022, the CPAFFC featured statements from 61 "friends of China"—pro-China foreign organizations and individuals—criticizing the U.S. Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's controversial visit to Taiwan. Among those included were the Federation of Arab-Chinese Friendship Associations, as well as public statements of support issued by friendship association leaders from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt.²⁴ Ismail Debes, Chair of the Algeria-China Friendship Association, in his official statement went as far as to say that China had a "right to make any response to stop" Pelosi's visit.²⁵

Similar examples of CPAFFC activities in 2020 provoked criticism from western governments, and, in one case, resulted in U.S. government action to restrict CPAFFC activities.²⁶ U.S. scholars have described the CPAFFC as the "public face" of the UF Work Department. And, in 2022, the U.S. National Counterintelligence and Security Center and the U.S. Department of State identified the CPAFFC as part of the "united front bureaucratic structure" tasked with "coopting subnational governments..." and "malignly influencing state and local leaders to promote the PRC's global agenda."²⁷

So far, P2P programs under the purview of the CPAFFC in the SoMed are, in practice, focused on the cultivation of Chinese soft-power and socializing local communities to Chinese history, culture, and language, such as Confucius institutes. Almost every country in the SoMed region hosts at least one Confucius Institute, with several having as many as three. These programs provide local communities a general exposure to PRC diplomatic messaging, but often are likely insufficient to motivate local actors to take an active, vocal stance in favor of China's positions. However, the cultivation of "friends of China"—emerging leaders, politicians, political parties, businesses, media, NGOs, and civil society—through platforms like the China friendship associations have proven to be successful in building vocal supporters of Chinese broader foreign policy objectives.

Party-to-Party Engagement

Beijing has also made tangible gains in the SoMed region through political outreach. The CCP actively cultivates ideological and political supporters in the SoMed region in support of the state's evolving approach to political governance. These occur through a variety of direct political party-to-party exchanges and trainings with political elites in the region. Such programs include the China-Arab Political Parties Dialogue (CAPPD) and other platforms for engaging and influencing young and rising political leaders.

The China-Arab Political Parties Dialogue (CAPPD) platform, launched in 2016 and held every two years, has become the principal platform for political exchanges between the CCP and Arab political parties. Each year, the CAPPD convenes China's CCP Central Committee representatives with leaders of Arab political parties from across the region. In previous events, Arab political leaders received hands-on CCP leadership training and education in core CCP theory, including Xi Jinping Thought on Governance, China

²⁴ CPAFFC, "Foreign friendly organizations and individuals continue to strongly condemn Pelosi's irresponsible act of visiting the Taiwan region of China," August 5, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-pompeo-idUSKBN27D305>

²⁵ CPAFFC, "Friends of China from various countries continue to strongly criticize Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, firmly support the one-China principle and China's necessary countermeasures," August 7, 2022. <https://cpaffc.org.cn/index/news/detail/id/7744/lang/1.html>

²⁶ Reuters, "U.S. designates Chinese body a foreign mission, quits local cooperation agreement," October 20,

²⁷ Michael R. Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of State, "Designation of the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU) as a Foreign Mission of the PRC," October 28, 2020: Designation of the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification (NACPU) as a Foreign Mission of the PRC - United States Department of State. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-the-national-association-for-chinas-peaceful-unification-nacpu-as-a-foreign-mission-of-the-prc/index.html>

in the New Era, Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, and more.²⁸ The dialogue enables Beijing to directly cultivate influence with emerging political leaders across the region and align their priorities with Chinese global and regional interests. The first two dialogues (2016, 2018) were hosted by the International Department of the CCP's Central Committee in China. And, as a result of COVID-19, the latter two (2020, 2022) were hosted as hybrid events with large-scale online participation from a broader range of Arab political parties.

At the most recent session entitled, "Working Together to Build a Sino-Arab Society with a Shared Future in the New Era: Responsibility of Political Parties," hosted on November 8, 2022, more than 80 political parties from 17 Arab countries participated, including Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, and Palestine.²⁹ This meeting, occurring shortly following the 20th CCP Plenary, enabled party officials to preview outcomes from the 20th Plenary and priorities for the next five years directly to Arab political elites. Meanwhile, representatives of Arab political parties in attendance praised China and the CCP for their governance of China and expressed an interest in strengthening political dialogue and training with the Chinese government and the CCP.

Those in attendance included Arab officials, including Algerian Ambassador to China Hassane Rabehi and Speaker of the Algerian Assembly Salah Goudjil, as well as a broad range of Arab parties, including the Algerian National Liberation front, the Egyptian Communist Party, the Egyptian Republican People's Party, the Egyptian Social Democrat Party, the Egyptian Coordination Committee of Party's Youth Leaders and Politicians, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Lebanese-Chinese Dialogue Association, Yemen's General People's Congress (Aden), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Palestine's Fatah party, and many more.³⁰

Youth Exchanges and Outreach

The Chinese government prioritizes outreach to youth leaders across the SoMed region as a means of building support among the region's future decisionmakers and influencers. Wang Chao, president of the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, notes, "As China's door opens wider to the outside world...We...pay much attention to the younger generation, and have, in recent engaged with global youth elites."³¹ Outreach has focused intensively on local engagement through a number of soft-power organizations, including China's Confucius Institutes, cultural centers, bilateral friendship associations, universities, and media exchanges. In 2016, the PRC committed to an expanding P2P diplomacy through P2P exchanges with the Arab League, including the SoMed region through the "Hundred, Thousand, Ten Thousand" program. This program outlined cultural, academic, and political initiatives, including the annual exchange of 100 scholars and experts, training for 1000 young Arab leaders drawn from across the MENA region, and delegation visits for 1,500 leaders from Arab political parties, 10,000 training opportunities for Arab states, and plans to open as many as 100 cultural institutions in the region.³²

The COVID-19 pandemic has impeded the full implementation of this goal, but Beijing has made strides in expanding its soft-power influence through its existing cultural institutions and programs, as well as

²⁸ Xinhuanet, "Xi sends congratulatory letter to extraordinary meeting of China-Arab states political parties dialogue," June 22, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/22/c_139158974.htm

²⁹ CGTN, "انعقاد الدورة الثالثة من مؤتمر الحوار بين الحزب الشيوعي الصيني وأحزاب الدول العربية" [The Third Session of the Dialogue Conference between the Communist Party of China and Parties of Arab Countries], CGTN, November 9, 2022. <https://arabic.cgtn.com/news/2022-11-09/1590347088260112385/index.html>

³⁰ Qilu Net, "The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China is of great historical significance——Voices from political parties and dignitaries in Arab countries [中共二十大具有重大历史意义——来自阿拉伯国家政党政要的声音]," November 11, 2022. <http://news.iqilu.com/guojij/20221110/5278270.shtml>

³¹ Wang Chao, "People-to-People Diplomacy: A Propeller of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era," Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, December 24, 2019. <http://cpifa.org/en/article/1746>

³² Chinese State Council, "China, Arab League agree to enhance cultural, technological cooperation," March 28, 2016. http://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/vice_premiers/2016/03/28/content_281475316210595.htm

through medical diplomacy to bolster the region's governments more effectively address COVID-19-linked impacts.³³

Party School Training

Over the last few years, the CCP has sought to cultivate ideological partners among political elites in Africa and the Middle East through the establishment and implementation of CCP-funded political training schools focused on educating the next generation of political elite through a CCP co-developed curriculum. For decades, the Chinese government has provided political party trainings and education in Africa as a means of cultivating structural influence among political elites in key regions of Africa.³⁴ However, in 2022, the Chinese government opened its first permanent party school in Tanzania in partnership with six ruling political parties in Africa. The launch of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School (MJNLS) supported the education of some 130 cadres from African ruling parties, providing emerging leaders with direct and indirect training in CCP-influenced pedagogy.

The timing of the launch has turned observers' attention to Tunisia which also celebrated the handover of the China-funded Tunisian Diplomatic Academy (TDA) in April 2022.³⁵ The new center, which will be operated by the Tunisian government, is the first of its kind in the SoMed region, and could become a conduit for CCP political education to Tunisian and Arab political parties. In a 2019 interview, the Director General of the Diplomatic Academy Munther Zarif noted the school would include a "scientific council open to foreign trainers and diplomats from friendly countries, mainly from China..."³⁶ While the extent to which China's involvement in the Academy's political and diplomatic pedagogy is not yet clear, Chinese officials have expressed hope that the Diplomatic Academy would "enhance the exchange of experiences and expertise between Tunisia and China, but also between China and all countries in Africa."³⁷

It is still early to assess the extent to which Tunisia will welcome CCP-linked training to the academy. The MJNLS, however, offers a glimpse into the role the Tunisian academy could play in the region as a potential access point for Arab political parties seeking training in CCP governance. In the future, the TDA could be linked with existing regional political dialogues—such as the CAPPD—to provide direct political training to Arab parties in the region. This, however, would require greater cooperation from the Tunisian government, which while grateful for the gift of a new academy, has not embraced China's political influence as deeply as its neighbors in Morocco and Algeria.

Success or Failure?

Overall, Beijing's influence efforts in the region have been, to some extent, productive in achieving the desired outcome of improving its image among local populations and cultivating greater support from political elites.

Data from the Afro Barometer, which also covers Morocco and Tunisia, suggests that China's perceived influence in Africa as-a-whole has decreased over the past five years, with the exception of Morocco, where positive perceptions of Chinese influence have increased drastically since 2014.³⁸ The 2022 Arab

³³ Gong Xiaosheng, "Hotspot in the middle East and China's Middle East Diplomacy," Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.cpiifa.org/en/cms/book/230>; Xi Chen, "China in the Post-Hegemonic Middle East: A Wary Dragon." *E-International Relations*, November 22, 2018.

³⁴ Raphael Chan, "Political Training Under the Belt and Road Initiative: A Look at the Chinese Communist Party's First Party School in Africa," Foreign Policy Research Institute, August 29, 2022.

³⁵ Xinhua, "Tunisia, China celebrate handover of China-aided diplomatic academy," April 29, 2022. <http://english.news.cn/africa/20220429/d4605bf702564146aa5ca6276da3bc9e/c.html>

³⁶ Xinhua Arabic, "مقابلة خاصة: مسؤول حكومي: سيكون للصين 'بصمة استثنائية' في الأكاديمية الدبلوماسية بتونس" [Government official: China will have an "exceptional footprint" at the Diplomatic Academy in Tunisia], February 9, 2019.

³⁷ Xinhua, "Tunisia, China celebrate handover of China-aided diplomatic academy," April 29, 2022.

³⁸ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations," *Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 489*, November 15, 2021. https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Dispatches/ad489-pap3-africans_welcome_chinas_influence_maintain_democratic_aspirations-afrobarometer_dispatch-15nov21.pdf.

Barometer survey also reflects a broad level of support for China among SoMed states, again particularly in Tunisia and Morocco.³⁹ In some countries, such as Tunisia and Morocco, survey data suggests a high degree of favorability of China and stronger demand signals from local populations for increased economic activity with China.⁴⁰ While data on Algeria is notably lacking in prominent surveys, Beijing's relationship with Algiers is, arguably, its most successful case of influence-building. Algeria was one of the first two SoMed region nations to sign a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with China, and, most recently, signed a second agreement in November 2022, outlining plans to further deepen ties with China and Algeria's official request to join the BRICS countries.⁴¹ Furthermore, in official Sino-Arab engagements, such the CPC-Arab political parties dialogue, Algerian officials played leading roles as speakers and organizers. Like Algeria, Beijing has also found a willing partner in Egypt, who hosted President Xi Jinping at the 2016 China-Arab Summit for the unveiling of China's Arab policy. Sino-Egyptian ties are currently at an all-time high, with Cairo serving as a strategic fulcrum for Chinese influence in Africa, the Arab World, and with developing countries.

Other measures are helpful in measuring Beijing's tangible gains, such as the number of attendees at political dialogues, major CCP-related engagements, and political projects—including the Tunisia Diplomatic Academy. Through this lens, Beijing has successfully scaled its party-to-party diplomacy, utilizing mechanisms as the CAPPD to directly engage Arab political parties, political organizations, leaders, and youth to build trust among Arab countries and China. These have also resulted in public statements of support from a number of political parties in the region, most notably from leading Algerian officials. What is hard to gauge, however, is the extent to which those attendees, while "political elites", also hold salient roles and positions effective to shape national policies? This would require a broader scope of study to identify the full list of attendees and affiliated political parties, as no such list has been identified in Arabic, Mandarin, or English. Meanwhile, with COVID-19 and China's Zero-COVID policies at home, China's ability to physically host exchanges in China, a core mechanism for cultivating influence, has been diminished. State institutions have since shifted to online and hybrid engagements, but these often lack the same degree of impact as in-person exchanges. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats have had to balance China's strict COVID-19 policies, both at home and in embassies, as they seek to fill the gap with local events and outreach programs.

Conclusion

It is hard to fully measure the extent to which China's influence efforts have been "successful" since many of these approaches are newly implemented and have not yet gained significant traction. Any such success identified should be contextualized to China's efforts in the broader Africa and MENA regions. Namely, the SoMed region, while important, has not yielded Beijing the same strategic benefits as ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, specifically Saudi Arabia and the UAE. With the exception of Egypt and Algeria, China's efforts to cultivate political influence in SoMed are still in their infancy. Incremental progress in some areas—Morocco and Tunisia—is counterbalanced by limited progress in others, such as Jordan and Lebanon.⁴²

Ultimately, The PRC's political influence efforts seemed to be largely at an experimental stage, lacking significant cohesion across the region. In CCP think tanks and institutions, significant thought has been paid to developing an overarching theory of diplomacy, which encapsulates political influence activities—building partnerships, cultivating fulcrum states, people-to-people diplomacy, and CCP "foreign work" to

³⁹ Michael Robbins, "Public Views of the U.S.-China Competition in MENA," Arab Barometer, July 2022, pg.12. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/report/us-china-competition-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-2021-2022/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Sanny and Selormey, "Africans welcome China's influence but maintain democratic aspirations," pg. 9.

⁴¹ Asharq Al-Awsat, "Algeria, China sign a strategic cooperation plan," November 9, 2022. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3977101/algeria-china-sign-strategic-cooperation-plan>.

⁴² Jesse Marks, "Jordan-China Relations: Taking Stock of Bilateral Relations at 45 Years," Stimson Center, Middle East in China Project, August 24, 2022. <https://www.stimson.org/2022/jordan-chinese-relations-taking-stock-of-bilateral-relations-at-45-years/>.

bolster party-to-party ties. However, implementation is overall lacking. This is, in part, because the Chinese government is a learning institution, which utilizes practice to reshape and guide future implementation. Thus, Chinese political influence efforts are an evolving process. It is clear from the degree of CCP involvement and the overarching top-down emphasis placed on building political ties with the Arab world that building Chinese-Arab relations is high on the CCP's agenda. These efforts are likely to intensify in 2023 following the China-Arab Dialogue Summit in December 2022. This capstone event in Sino-Arab ties is expected to serve as a catalyst for rapidly deepening ties with the Arab world. If Beijing is successful, this could usher in a new era for Chinese ties with the SoMed region.

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