

The Chinese Presence in the Mediterranean

Chinese Military Influence in the Mediterranean

Carlos Echeverría Jesús

Professor of International Relations
Universidad Nacional de Educación a
Distancia (UNED)

The People's Republic of China has been making itself visible in the Mediterranean region for decades, before and after its Silk Roads, both land and maritime, were clearly defined in 2013 by its leader Xi Jinping. The Mediterranean comprises the final stage for the Silk Road branch directed towards Western countries by sea, with its merchant marine having crossed the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, then taking the Suez Canal and accessing the Mare Nostrum to project itself from there to its markets in western Europe and North Africa. And the Mediterranean will remain central to China in this dimension until circulation along the Polar Silk Road is normalized, which will revolutionize this maritime transport route when it is fully operational.

The initial dimension of this maritime route, the merchant one, is being enriched by the growing visibility of its navy (albeit still discreet compared to its visibility in seas adjacent to China), a necessary companion to protect economic interests, but also to lend credibility to the strategic projection of the great Chinese power. The analysis of China's naval assets in the Mediterranean region, in addition to the growing links that Beijing is establishing with states bordering the Mare Nostrum in terms of security and defence cooperation, is the subject of this article.

Background

China has intensified its maritime connections and is increasingly projecting its military presence further and further from its immediate area of interest in the Western Pacific and adjacent seas, and it is doing so to complete the ambitious strategy spearheaded by Xi Jinping.

In the country's approach to our region of interest, we should highlight several stages. It began with the inauguration of China's first naval and military base outside its borders, in Djibouti in August 2017, in application of the agreement signed with the African country two years earlier (Expósito Guisado, 2021: p. 11), which can be seen as the prelude to naval deployment in the Mediterranean, although this had already become visible six years earlier, in the spring of 2011, with the operation to extract Chinese nationals from Libya in the context of the Arab revolts. On that occasion, the frigate Liuzhou escorted Chinese merchant ships that extracted 35,800 nationals from the Maghreb country (Expósito Guisado, 2021: p. 14). This early scenario of China's visible naval presence in the Mediterranean and adjacent areas, of a humanitarian nature and which Chinese naval units had to repeat in 2015 in Yemen, was followed by others at later dates.

From 11 to 21 May 2015, Chinese and Russian naval units conducted the "Joint Sea 2015" manoeuvres in eastern Mediterranean waters. Two Chinese frigates, the Linyi and the Weifang, and the tanker Weishanhu, which had travelled from the Gulf of Aden where they were carrying out anti-piracy missions, met in the Mediterranean Sea with six Russian ships led by the cruiser Moskva, to carry out

manoeuvres aimed, according to Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Geng Yansheng, at “maritime defence, escort and supply missions, safeguarding the security of international shipping, and live-fire exercises.”¹

In the summer of 2017, Chinese naval vessels would again be seen plying the Mediterranean, this time while headed to the Baltic Sea to participate in combined manoeuvres with the Russian Navy, and taking advantage of the voyage to carry out exercises that included live fire.² In 2018, similar manoeuvres were held again in the Baltic and again Chinese Navy ships passed through Mediterranean waters. (Carlos Izquierdo, 2019: p. 287).

In 2018, in the context of the civil war in Syria, which, as in Libya and Yemen, was also an effect of the Arab revolts, we once again find the deployment of Chinese Navy units. In coordination with the Russian Navy, they supported the extraction of 46 Chinese citizens from the country at war (Alam, 2018). In addition, in this same Syrian arena but no longer in the humanitarian dimension, Chinese military personnel participated in operations against Uyghur elements present in the ranks of the Islamic State (Rózsa & Peragovics, 2020: p. 68).

In the Mediterranean, we can consider that we are witnessing an initial stage of military deployment that could lead to a real projection in the coming years, given that Chinese interests are only growing

This naval projection in particular, but also its military projection in a broader sense, is not comparable today to that which Beijing has been carrying out for years in its immediate area of interest, in both the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, where Chinese naval units are often supported by means of the so-called Chinese Maritime Militia, an instrument that this major power uses to apply hybrid strategies

and create complex grey zones where it is in its interest to do so. But in the Mediterranean, we can consider that we are witnessing an initial stage of military deployment that could lead to a real projection in the coming years, given that Chinese interests are only growing. This is the application of one of the “strategic principles of active defence” included in China’s 2015 Military Strategy, which prioritizes defence in nearby seas and the protection of its interests of all kinds in distant seas (Baqueés Quesada, 2019: p. 67).

China’s Military Visibility in the Mediterranean, Just a Step behind its Economic Visibility

China’s military projection in the Mediterranean should not be studied in isolation, but should be connected to its previous and increasingly intense economic, commercial and logistic projection in the Basin.

These are long-standing, but have accelerated in parallel to the launch of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, i.e., the Silk Roads referred to above. Since 2013, the Mediterranean Basin and adjacent countries, regions and sub-regions have been increasingly included in its expansionary strategy, and an exposition of this will serve as a backdrop to better understand China’s progressive military presence in the Mediterranean. It is important to note that a contributing factor to this presence is the fact that China has been obliged, like other countries in various parts of the world, to station naval units in the waters of the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean since the late 2000s to protect its merchant ships and those chartered by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) from attacks by Somali pirates. Indeed, it was a warship deployed in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea on a counter-piracy mission that provided protection for the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya in the spring of 2011 (Echeverría Jesús, 2021: 645).

An early stage in the projection towards the Mediterranean could be considered the deepening of relations with both Iran and Türkiye, the former being in-

¹ “Geopolítica. Rusia y China en el Mediterráneo.” *Informe Semanal de Política Exterior*, 25 May 2015, p. 5

² The group of navy ships consisted of the destroyer “Changshu,” the frigate “Yuncheng” and the support ship “Lomahu.” See “La Armada china realiza pruebas de tiro en el Mediterráneo.” *Sputnik News*. 11 July 2017.

fluent and the latter, in addition to influential, also a coastal state in our region.³ The rapprochement with Iran is not only significant in the country's dimension as an important supplier of hydrocarbons that China needs, but also as a state belonging to the Islamic world, with important interests in the Mediterranean as well and a growing presence in that sea, including, albeit exceptionally, some warships, but above all, and like China, it is also forging links of collaboration with coastal countries that include a security and defence dimension. Moreover, the relationship with Iran, like that with Russia, can be explained both in terms of national interest and in its diplomatic dimension, where China is increasingly questioning the prevailing international order in which the US superpower and the West in general are the central axis. This harmony with both Moscow and Tehran was reflected in December 2019 in the combined naval manoeuvres that the three countries held in the Gulf of Oman.

In the Mediterranean, it is significant that China signed Strategic Partnership Agreements with Algeria and Morocco in 2013 and 2016, respectively, although it should be noted that the one with Algeria belongs to a higher category (Comprehensive) than the one signed with Morocco. These have allowed the Asian giant to gain a presence in strategic sectors in these two Maghreb countries over the years. Of particular note is the presence of Huawei, which has acquired a central position in Morocco's digital infrastructure, and that of China's Exim Bank, which has contributed to financing important infrastructure in Algeria, some of which – the new Houari Boumediene Airport and the Grand Mosque, both in Algiers – has already been completed, or the El Hamdania deep-water port that Algeria will be equipped with, to be located in the strategic city of Cherchell. The latter project is still at an embryonic stage, but its evocation already makes it possible to visualize a new foothold for China in the Basin, a priori for its merchant marine, but also for its navy – and why not, since the commercial usually gives way to military? (O'Dea, 2019). The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership established between China and Algeria, of

the highest category among those established between China and third countries, also enables the Maghreb country to engage in significant cooperation in the field of defence.⁴ Although its projection is more modest, China has also established important links with Tunisia, the Maghreb country where it has recently built its Diplomatic Academy. (Ghanem, 2023: 2 y 4).

China's military projection in the Mediterranean should be connected to its previous economic, commercial and logistic projection in the Basin

In the eastern Mediterranean, China has signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement with Egypt similar to the one with Algeria, and although in terms of visualization, its focus seems to be mainly on the emerging Suez Canal Economic Zone and the port city of Port Said, Egypt's key geostrategic position and Beijing's long-standing ties with Cairo allow China to delve into multiple possibilities in other areas. China has always placed Egypt in a central position, both in its approach to the Arab and African worlds, as was shown recently, in January 2023, during the tour of these areas by the new Foreign Minister Qin Gang. All the Middle East actors joined the OBOR initiative early, in 2014 – Egypt, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian National Authority and Türkiye – and it is worth noting that in the port of Haifa, in northern Israel, where the US 6th Fleet has long had important facilities, there is a curious situation in which a Chinese logistics company shares the management of such a strategic complex with an Israeli one (Rózsa, 2020).

In its relations with Arab countries bordering the Mediterranean, China is Algeria and Libya's largest trading partner and Morocco and Tunisia's third largest.⁵ China has been strategically present in Algeria

³ "La ruta de la Seda llega al Golfo." *Informe Semanal de Política Exterior*, 22 February 2016.

⁴ "Argelia mira más allá de Rusia y negocia con China la compra de misiles SY-400." *Infodefensa*, 22 May 2023.

⁵ And although it does not border the Mediterranean, it is worth mentioning another Maghreb state, Mauritania, which in 2019 received 6.3 million euros in military assistance from China for the fight against terrorism (Rico Reche, 2023).

for a long time, and not only in the strategic hydro-carbon sector with the deep relationship between Sonatrach and Sinopec (Makedhi, 2023). It has also made technological contributions to the Maghreb giant's second nuclear facility, in Ain Oussera, since the 1990s, and has been supplying the Algerian armed forces with various types of materials that, without eclipsing the importance of the Soviet Union and thereafter Russia and some former Soviet countries, is starting to be significant in certain spheres.⁶ And with regard to China's export of its BeiDou (BDS) satellite navigation system, an alternative tool to the American GPS with which China is proposing a Digital Silk Road, Algeria and Tunisia have been using it – in a civilian dimension but of interest in terms of security – to support the monitoring of environmental challenges and natural disasters, agricultural development and various types of logistic support. (Rico Reche, 2023).

The relationship with Iran can be explained both in terms of national interest and in its diplomatic dimension, where China is increasingly questioning the prevailing international order

China's growing presence in the Mediterranean, in ports such as Greece's Piraeus, allows for a scenario in which Russian naval units suffering from a lack of support bases in the Basin beyond those in Syria consolidated in recent years, could in the future take advantage of Chinese support in the form of commercial facilities, but which could be extended to shared military use, and this in an arena that was already one of "tense calm" before the Russian invasion of Ukraine – and to whose definition the Russian-Chinese reciprocal naval support activities contributed – but which could deteriorate in the future (Carlos Izquierdo, 2019: p. 292). Although Algeria does not have an allied relationship with either China or Russia, in contrast to Russia

and Syria, it is important to note that Algeria has participated in multinational military manoeuvres in which China has also taken part, and hence said activity should be listed in this article. The Panamax 2022 manoeuvres, held from 12 to 27 August 2022 in Venezuela, allowed military personnel from both countries, as well as contingents from Russia, Belarus, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Uzbekistan and Venezuela to share resources and procedures and become familiar with one another. (Echeverría Jesús, 2022: p. 971).

The competition between major powers that defines the current geopolitical framework has one of its most visible reflections in these activities, and the waters of the Mediterranean are today and will be more and more often the stage for these activities as a strategic message. The most recent one sent by Western countries to China and also to Iran was the "Juniper Oak 2023" manoeuvres, which in January 2023 saw 12 ships sail in the waters of the eastern Mediterranean and one hundred and forty-two aircraft fly overhead (F-35, B-52, F-15, F-16, Apache helicopters and MQ-9 Reaper drones), coordinated by the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and involving 6,400 US troops and 1,100 Israel soldiers over four days of exercises (Fernández, 2023).

Conclusion

China has spent years building a navy that will be the first with a global scope since that distant moment, around the turn of the 14th to the 15th century, when Admiral Zheng He managed to project his navy, with the means of his time, into the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Arabian Sea. Although it did not reach Mediterranean waters then, today's Chinese navy has taken advantage of both the Suez Canal and, above all, the country's growing global interests to make its presence felt in the Mare Nostrum, and has been doing so for years, as we have discussed in this article.

While in the seas and oceans adjacent to China hard power is increasingly visible, and this after years of soft power measures, in the Mediterranean we are still in the soft power phase in terms of

⁶ It is important in terms of current affairs to note that Algeria has acquired Chinese drones.

Beijing's projection. In the Mediterranean and connected seas such as the Red and Arabian Seas, we observe China building or gaining a growing foothold in ports as facilities for its merchant vessels, but which may be a prelude to future naval facilities; exporting military material to countries eager to strengthen their arsenals (Algeria and Morocco are good examples of this, and close to Spain, moreover); taking advantage of humanitarian situations to strengthen its presence (in Libya, Syria, Yemen and now Sudan); and weaving structures of collaboration with neighbouring powers, such as Russia and Iran, that are revisionist with respect to the Western order, which has been called into question.

In the Mediterranean we are still in the soft power phase in terms of Beijing's projection

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