



PERSPECTIVES

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The New Silk Road and the Maghreb Region

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ever since the launch of the BRI in 2013, Beijing has shown great interest in the Maghreb region as an entry point to European and African markets. Beijing has prioritized commercial relations over political influence in the Maghreb. While the current BRI map does not officially include the Maghreb region (by design, as the BRI is more a loose brand than a strict program), Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed between China and every country in the Maghreb, demonstrating that China is [expanding its foothold](#) in the region.

China's most significant 21st century diplomatic and economic activity is the launching of the new Silk Road project, dubbed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, a sprawling network of trade and commercial ties between China and various world regions, is the flagship foreign policy of the Xi Jinping administration and the Chinese Communist Party. The BRI seeks to open up new markets and secure global supply chains to help generate sustained Chinese economic growth, thereby contributing to [social stability at home](#).

The BRI has both a maritime and a land-based component: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The sub-branches of the SREB (a series of land-based infrastructure projects including roads, railways, and pipelines) and the MSRI (ports and coastal development) would create a multinational network connecting China to Europe and Africa via the Middle East. This is intended to facilitate trade, improve access to foreign energy resources, and give China access to new [markets](#).

The geographic scope of the BRI is continually expanding, covering more than 123 countries and 29 international organizations along six economic corridors. The BRI covers two-thirds of the world's population, 40% of global GNP, and an estimated

75% of known [energy reserves](#). The total cost of the initiative is not yet known, but according to some estimates, \$8 trillion will eventually be invested.

Over the past two decades, Beijing has gradually consolidated its economic presence in the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania) in terms of trade, investment, and infrastructure projects. China has become active in these countries, focusing on bilateral relations while also working within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF).

In 2018, the Maghreb [accounted](#) for 7.6% of China's imports from Africa, while Chinese exports to the Maghreb amounted to 14.7% of its overall exports to Africa. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, trade between China and the five Maghreb countries reached nearly \$23.5 billion in 2019. China's investments and contracts in the Maghreb region between 2005 and 2019 [stood](#) at \$29.6 billion, with Algeria (the most crucial partner) receiving the lion's share of \$23.6 billion.

Beijing's growing economic cooperation with the Maghreb region is driven mainly by the BRI, although its political, financial, and cultural connections to the region remain relatively shallow. China's footprint in the Maghreb encompasses, but is not limited to, trade, infrastructure development, ports, shipping, financial cooperation, tourism, and manufacturing. China can be expected to [expand](#) and deepen these connections in the coming years, given the Maghreb's strategic geographical location.

While China is gaining a foothold in the Maghreb, it cannot match US or European dominance in the region. The Maghreb countries have historically had close relations with France, the former colonial power, and the EU, and remain dependent on both. France and the EU continue to exert significant political, economic, security, and cultural influence in the region. China—unlike the US and Russia, which tend to see the Maghreb region as an extension of the Middle East—views it as a discrete group with its own characteristics. When dealing with the Maghreb, Beijing [considers](#) each country's relations with its neighbors.

In strategically ramping up engagement with Maghreb countries like Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, Beijing is setting up the region to play an integral role in its Silk Road strategy. Thus, most BRI engagement in the Maghreb is tied to economic and commercial relations, allowing the affected countries to increase trade volume, foreign investment, tourism revenues, and manufacturing bases. China is also showcasing its development model, which seeks to combine authoritarianism with economic growth. Beijing's growing role in the Maghreb is likely to have far-reaching economic and geopolitical [consequences](#) for countries in the region.

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