



TRAN, Emilie, and Yahia H. ZOUBIR (eds.). 2024.
China in the Mediterranean: An Arena of Strategic Competition?
 London: Routledge.

I JEAN-PIERRE CABESTAN

is Emeritus Professor of political science at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong (cabestan@hkbu.edu.hk).

There are very few scholarly works on China in the Mediterranean region as such; Tran and Zoubir's book may be a first. Studies either focus on Southern Europe, the Near and Middle East, North Africa, or MENA (Middle East and North Africa). This is one of the major interests of this volume, a collection of chapters written by a very diverse group of experts from China, France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The two editors are already well known in their field. In 2022, they published together an informative article on China's so-called Health Silk Road in the Middle East and North Africa (Zoubir and Tran 2022).

China in the Mediterranean's ambition is to look at the Mediterranean as a whole. Divided into six chapters and an introduction, it does not pretend to be exhaustive and include all the countries of the region. Instead, it is a collection of six well-chosen case studies that provide a good understanding of China's objectives, inroads, and growing influence in the nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Of course, Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) looms large in all the contributions.

Chapter One, by Chuchu Zhang and Chaowei Xiao, analyses China's infrastructure footprint in the region: while Chinese infrastructure projects in Algeria or in Morocco predate the BRI, the BRI has boosted both their number and the financial envelope attached to them. In Chapter Two, Yahia H. Zoubir focuses on the difficulties of integrating the Greater Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia), despite the new role played by this initiative: political tensions, in particular between Morocco and Algeria, have prevented the Maghreb from becoming a zone of free trade and common development. As a result, China needs to deal with each country bilaterally. Chapter Three, by Degang Sun and Ruikun Xu, is devoted to the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between China and Egypt, a key player in the region. While Al-Sisi has remained close to the United States and the West in general, he has deepened his country's relationship with China, both on the economic front, for example with the establishment of a China-Egypt trade and development zone (TEDA) in the Suez

Canal economic zone in 2008, and on the military front, having decided for the first time ever to buy fighters from China in 2024. Chapter Four deals with China-France cooperation: as the author Emilie Tran highlights, the countries' respective roles have changed over the years, and the level of trust in the relationship has declined somewhat; however, for Beijing, Paris is an important Mediterranean actor that cannot be neglected, particularly in the context of growing strategic competition between the US and China. Chapter Five, by Mario Esteban and Ugo Armanini, develops a similar theme: the limits of China's engagement in Spain as well as the "role conflict" and the "emerging mistrust" between the two countries. Finally, in Chapter Six, Anna Katharina Stahl expands on the book's major theme presented in its introduction and its subtitle, namely the Mediterranean as "an arena of strategic competition": China's expanding presence and influence in North Africa has directly contributed to a geopolitical awakening in the European Union (EU).

One can debate the approach chosen by the editors and the contributors and their actual added value: the use of role theory and the notion of trust (and distrust). However, this volume clearly underscores the inroads China has made in the "Mediterranean space" by overtaking the US and France in this region, first as a trading partner and then as a diplomatic actor. One can also point out the obvious differences, recognised by the authors, between China's policy towards the Northern Mediterranean area, which is made of EU member-states or nations that aspire to join it, and the Southern Mediterranean area. Towards the former, Beijing has implemented its usual EU policy, officially supporting integration while taking advantage of the differences among member-states to push its own interests: the now quasi-defunct 17 + 1 forum between China and Central and Eastern European countries (some of them outside of the EU) illustrated this strategy. Towards the later (and Turkey), the Chinese government has leveraged its proximity to the Global South to drive a wedge between these countries and the EU, resulting in the growing geostrategic competition between China and the EU. The question is obviously what the EU can propose to North Africa in a context of budgetary constraints and increasing anti-immigration sentiment. Brussels launched in 2021 the Global Gateway initiative, a plan to invest up to 300 billion euros in infrastructure in the developing world between 2021 and 2027. This is a direct response to China's BRI, but what has materialised since then? Has the EU been able to regain its lost influence in the Southern or the Eastern parts of the Mediterranean? This remains to be seen. In any event, this book offers a set of preliminary answers regarding a competition that is more likely to intensify than to lessen.

References

ZOUBIR, Yahia H., and Emilie TRAN. 2022. "China's Health Silk Road in the Middle East and North Africa amidst Covid-19 and a Contested World Order." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31(135): 335-50.