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AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS  
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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS  
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AND COMPARISON WITH THE EU

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# CHINESE OFFICIAL GEOPOLITICAL CARTOGRAPHIES AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF OFFICIAL NARRATIVES AND COMPARISON WITH THE EU

Jordi Quero<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In recent years, a proliferation of foreign policy analysis scholarship on decision-makers' mental maps and similar notions has reintroduced the topic into the core of the broader IR research agenda. This literature has generally focused on broader theoretical advancements in how mental maps are constructed and consolidated, and it generally uses Western countries as bottom-line case studies. This paper aims at contributing to this academic discussion by examining the mental maps of the major Chinese foreign policy decision-makers in relation to the Mediterranean region, also alternatively referred as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through critical discourse analysis techniques, it analyses 54 different primary sources by the Chinese government (official policy documents, public speeches and interviews by the Presidency of the People's Republic of China and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs) dealing with the reality labelled by the European Union as the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries – or simply, the Mediterranean. All documents correspond to the period of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013 onwards) and therefore the conclusions reached should be valid for current Chinese foreign policy.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a proliferation of foreign policy analysis scholarship on decision-makers' mental maps and similar notions has reintroduced the topic into the core of the broader IR research agenda (Battersby and Montello 2009, Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, Casey and Wright 2011, Crikemans and Duran 2011, O'Loughlin and Grant 1990, Thomas 2011). This literature has generally focused on broader theoretical advancements in how mental maps are constructed and consolidated, and it generally uses Western countries as bottom-line case studies. This paper aims at contributing to this academic discussion by examining the mental maps of the major Chinese foreign policy decision-makers in relation to the Mediterranean region, also alternatively referred as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Through critical discourse analysis techniques, it analyses 54 different primary sources by the Chinese government (official policy documents, public speeches and interviews by the Presidency of the People's Republic of China and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs) dealing with the reality labelled by the European Union as the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries – or simply,

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the Mediterranean. All documents correspond to the period of Xi Jinping's presidency (2013 onwards) and therefore the conclusions reached should be valid for current Chinese foreign policy. The intention is to incorporate the analysis of non-Western realities into the debate on mental maps as a necessary step to nuance theoretical endeavours.<sup>2</sup>

This paper argues that the People's Republic of China uses a polysemy of labels to refer to the Mediterranean region as categorized by the European Union.<sup>3</sup> There is no single mental map or geopolitical cartography used by Chinese officials to refer to the focus region. Rather, the paper identifies at least four major geopolitical maps used by the Chinese officials to approach the MENA region, namely the "Arab countries/states", the "Middle East", the "Eurasian continent" and the broader category of "developing countries". None of these mental maps is constrained by topographical concerns and some of them include different states not linked by geographical elements. It additionally claims that each of these mental maps has a specific narrative associated with it, with concrete repeated signifiers and interdiscursive as well as intertextual elements. While the geopolitical cartographies "Arab countries/states" and the "Eurasian continent" are generally associated with cooperation, development and a common future, notions like "the Middle East" have been securitized by stressing conflictual elements in associated speech acts.

## APPROACHING MENTAL MAPS THROUGH CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: THEORETICAL STARTING POINT

The study of mental maps in the IR discipline is not new. The most significant initial effort in defining and grasping the importance of the concept in foreign policy, still greatly influencing contemporary research, was Harold and Margaret Sprout's notion of psycho milieu. Defined as a "human individual's perceived image of a situation, an image that may or may not correspond to reality" (Sprout and Sprout 1968: 33), the notion includes policy-makers' perceived images on geography.

It was in the 1980s, amid the cognitive behaviouralism revolution in IR<sup>4</sup> and as a response to some related ideas raised by Jervis (1976), that the notion gained some centrality in foreign policy analysis and major efforts to "operationalize" were carried out (da Vinha 2012: 5, Crikemans 2009). In this context, the publication of Alan Henrikson's (1980) "The Geographical 'Mental Maps' of American Foreign Policy Makers", still echoing in contemporary research endeavours, represented a key step forward. Henrikson concluded that mental maps should be defined as:

an ordered but continually adapting structure of the mind – alternatively conceivable as a process – by reference to which a person acquires, codes, stores, recalls, reorganizes, and applies, in thought or action, information about his or her large-scale

2 As far as the author is aware, the only scholarship published in English covering the case of China does not analyse the Chinese leadership's mental maps but rather the American leadership's mental map on China (Latham 2001).

3 This paper uses the notion of Middle East and North Africa as it has generally been used by the Anglo-Saxon and French scholarship, while acknowledging its condition of socially constructed "geopolitical invention" as well (Bilgin 2004).

4 According to da Vinha (2012: 11), "the cognitive dimension of [Foreign Policy Analysis] opened up space for analysing geographic representations, namely foreign policy decision-makers' cognition of geographic space".

geographical environment, in part or in its entirety. (Henrikson 1980: 498)<sup>5</sup>

However, up until today there is no agreement on how to term this reality. As outlined by da Vinha (2012: 13), the polysemy of labels includes notions like geopolitical images (O'Loughlin and Grant 1990), metageographies (Lewis and Wigen 1997), geopolitical codes (Dijkink 1998), geopolitical imaginary (Latham 2001), geopolitical imagination (Agnew 2003), imaginative geographies (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007) or cognitive geopolitics (Crickemans 2009). Some of these definitions are associated with subconscious structures in place in the minds of human beings while others emphasize conscious construction resulting from societal interactions or instrumentalized narratives. Still, despite the fact that the terminological and definitional debate cannot be considered closed, scholarship incorporating these notions into foreign policy analysis has recently mushroomed (Battersby and Montello 2009, Casey and Wright 2011, Crickemans and Duran 2011, O'Loughlin and Grant 1990, Thomas 2011).

This paper, drawing on the scholarship outlined above, conceives mental maps – also referred here as geopolitical cartographies – as socially constructed spatial imaginaries, which are generally associated with specific sets of codes and ideas. Beyond the individual cognitive process, the creation of the mental maps, their consolidation and their association with some concrete repeated codes occur through social representational practices like public discourses and other speech acts.

To grasp the mental maps of Chinese leadership this paper draws on some techniques associated with critical discourse analysis, mainly some of the contributions by Milliken (1999), Wodak (2015) and Hansen (2006). Discourses might be understood as "structures of signification which construct social realities" and they are "productive (or reproductive) of things defined by the discourse" (Milliken 1999: 229), in our case, geographical imaginaries. This paper makes use of nominalization techniques to understand how the topographical and social realities are referred to (Wodak 2015: 12). It incorporates elements of predicative analysis – i.e., focusing on adjectives and adverbs attached to nouns and notions<sup>6</sup> – as this is key to understanding how "[p]redications of a noun construct the thing(s) named as a particular sort of thing, with particular features and capacities" (Milliken 1999: 232). Finally, it also highlights intertextuality and interdiscursivity elements to arrive at a more precise definition of the mental maps thus constructed.

## MENTAL MAPS OF THE LEADERSHIP OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: OVERLAPPING GEOPOLITICAL CARTOGRAPHIES

This paper claims that there is no single mental map or geopolitical cartography used by Chinese officials<sup>7</sup> to refer to the focus region. Rather, it identifies at least four major geopolitical

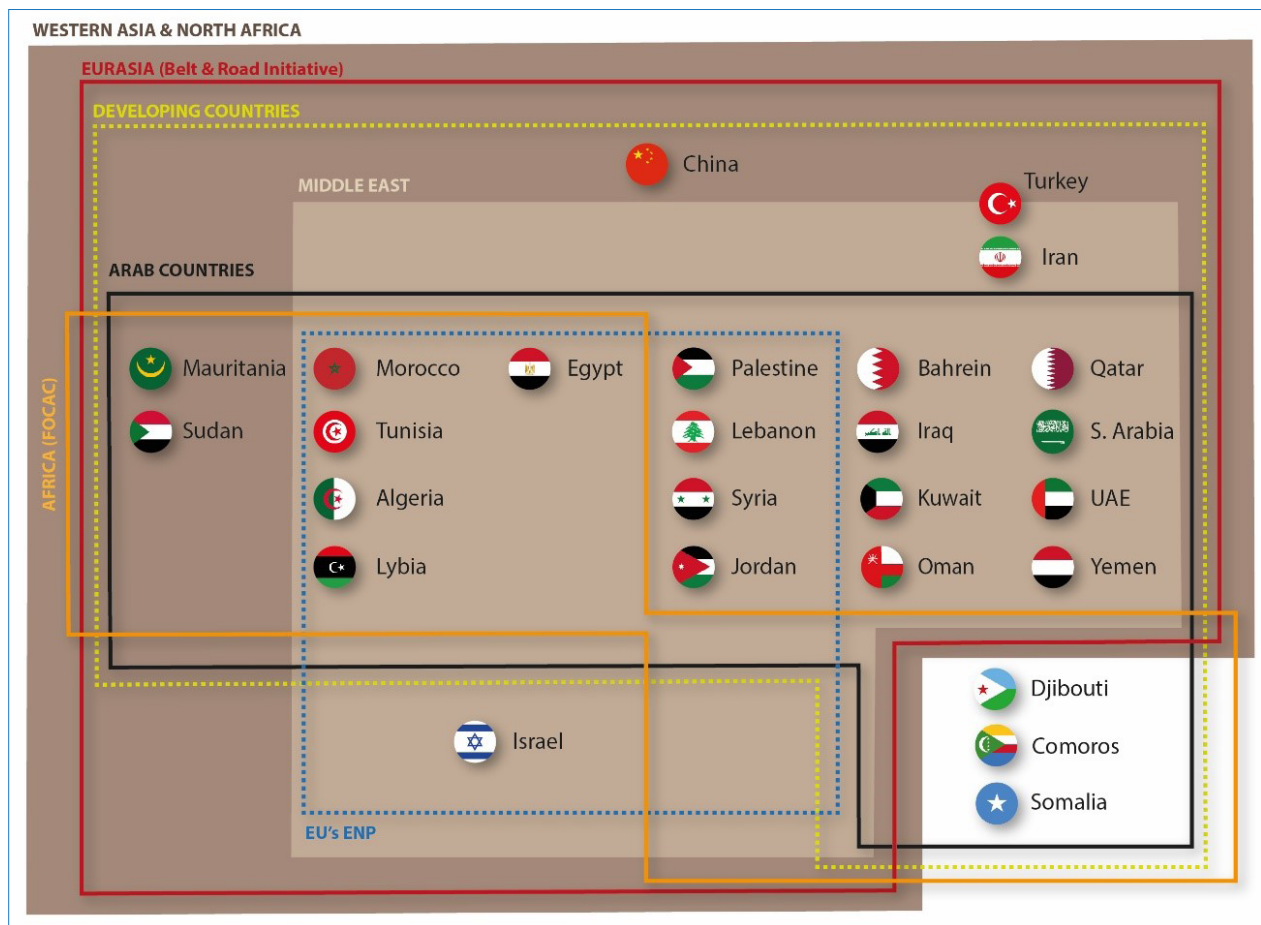
5 Henrikson's definition seems to echo Downs and Stea (1973: 9) who defined cognitive mapping as "a process composed of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his everyday spatial environment".

6 Throughout the paper italics have been used to stress the predicative dimension of the analysis carried out.

7 It is out of the scope of this paper to examine how different Chinese political actors are socialized in these cognitive geopolitical imaginaries, and how different mental maps gain prevalence in front of other alternatives in

maps used by the Chinese officials to approach the MENA region, namely the "Arab countries/states", the "Middle East", the "Eurasian continent" and the broader category of "developing countries" (see Figure 1).

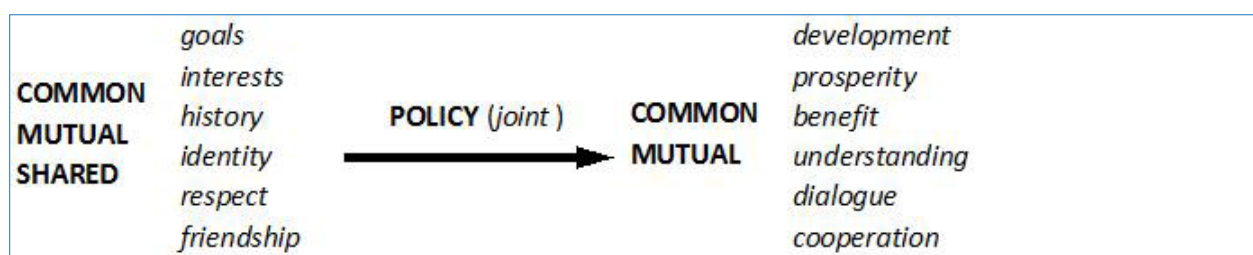
**Figure 1** | Countries associated with each of the Chinese geopolitical cartographies towards the MENA region



As can be observed through the labels alone, these mental maps are not necessarily constrained by topographical concerns as some of them encompass units not linked by geographical elements. Rather, the paper demonstrates that Chinese official mental maps are far more based on an encounter-of-peoples approach than on pure Cartesian delimitations of geographical spaces. Each of these mental maps has a specific narrative associated with it, with concrete repeated signifiers and interdiscursive as well as intertextual elements. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity are quite strong in the cases examined. Chinese officials repeatedly use the same formulas, producing what might be labelled as an "intertextuality cascade". Top-level decision-makers (the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs) fix the nominative and predicative elements of the speech (its main signifiers) and the lower levels of the Chinese

Government receive and repeat these formulas.<sup>8</sup> All this enables the paper to described the main features associated with each one of these geopolitical mental categories (see Table 1).

**Table 1** | Chinese discursive construction around the "Arab countries/states" (Substrate Matrix)



## 1. THE "ARAB COUNTRIES/STATES": HISTORICAL FRIENDSHIP, SHARED INTERESTS AND COMMON PROSPERITY

The primordial geopolitical cartography used by Chinese officials to refer to the reality labelled by the EU as the "Mediterranean" or "South and East Mediterranean Countries" is related to the notions of "Arab countries" or "Arab states". On some few occasions expressions like "the Arab people(s)" or "the Arab World" are alternatively used as synonyms (for instance, see Documents 4, 35 and 52).

The primary sources analysed demonstrate how all these concepts encompass "all 22 Arab countries" (Document 29), equating them with the list of member-states of the League of Arab States.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the list of who is in and who is out of this imaginary is confirmed by the fact that the notions of "Arab countries" and "Arab states" are commonly used in public speeches and official documents taking shape in the framework the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASF) and its parallel initiatives<sup>10</sup> whose membership/participation is restricted to China plus the Arab League members.

By focusing on Arabness, or the condition of being Arab, the boundaries of these imagined cartographies are not geographical in essence. Rather, the "Arab countries/states" construction revolves around two different cognitive processes: firstly, a manufacture of the counterpart in identity base lines ("the Arab people"); and secondly, a characterization of international political subjects (i.e., the states) according to the demographic majority and the self-defined nature of the ruling institutions ("the Arab countries" as the states where the majority of the population considers itself Arab and where the government labels the state as such). Consequently, this mental map is not made up of contiguous territories nor is it founded on Cartesian

<sup>8</sup> As some of the examples demonstrate below, this cascade effect can even be observed between the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, where the latter constantly includes intertextual elements from speech acts of the former.

<sup>9</sup> Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Djibouti, Comoros and Somalia.

<sup>10</sup> Namely, the China-Arab City Forum, the China-Arab Joint Chamber of Commerce, the China-Arab States Expo, and the China-Arab States Economic and Trade Forum among others.



considerations, unlike the EU's "Mediterranean" or "South and East Mediterranean Countries". From a Chinese perspective this is instead concomitant with mental human geographies that put at the centre the encounter of two different peoples/civilizations notwithstanding physical-terrestrial concerns (see below Section 4).

It is also worth noting that, despite recognizing the plurality of the 22 different realities, "the Arab countries/states" construction is treated as one single, mainly uniform, unit with its own all-embracing common features such as one "culture" or "people" (Document 29). The space for inner differences within the countries composing the imaginary is narrowed down and a single characterization of the totality is indiscriminately applied to all the units. China's discourse presents the relation of China with the "Arab countries" in bilateral terms, using expressions as "*bilateral* friendship between China and Arab and Middle East countries" (Document 35) or "*both sides*" (see for instance the repetition of this formula in Document 29), denoting an understanding of the others as one entity. Albeit not continuously, the discourses occasionally show some essentialist approaches towards the "Arab countries/states" as a whole. The Chinese imaginary presents them as "characterized by *religious* and *cultural diversities*, *time-honored culture* and *history*, *unique* resource endowment and great potentials for development" (Document 29) and "the Arabs" as "industrious and resourceful people, who created brilliant *civilizations* and contributed greatly to the advancement of mankind" (Document 35).

A critical discourse analysis reveals three major ideas which are generally linked with the notion. The first feature to underline in relation with this unitary discursive construction of the "Arab countries/states" mental map is the importance of history, and more precisely, of a common friendly history with China, as a justification for current cooperative relations. Generally, the idea that China is "a friend of the Arab people" (Document 35)<sup>11</sup> is repeated and stressed a great deal, even reaching the use of labels like "brothers, friends and partners no matter what happens on the world arena" (Document 29). From a predicate analysis perspective, it is interesting to see how discourses make constant use of phrases like "*close friends*", "*strong*" and "*ideal* partners" (Document 35) or "*traditional* friendship" (Documents 29 and 35). In their imaginary, this is presented as "time-honored ties of friendship, forged by the two-thousand-year old Silk Road" (Document 4) which: "dates back to ancient times [...]. In the long stretches of history, peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, learning from each other, mutual benefit and win-win results have always been the main theme of exchanges between China and Arab countries" (Document 29).

Obviously, as with any other policy reasoning based in historical records, this presentation only spotlights positive, cooperative and peaceful historical encounters between China and the focus region while neglecting past controversies, conflict and violence.

A second idea recurrently associated with the "Arab countries" is that they occupy a special place in Chinese foreign policy, as a consequence not only of their traditional friendly relations but also of their current converging interests and approaches towards the world. For China, the "Arab countries/states" enjoy a "unique", "important", "strategic place" and "rising status" in Chinese foreign policy (Document 35) after "cooperation in all fields has been *constantly*

11 Similar phrases are used in Documents 4 and 12.

deepened" in the last 60 years (Document 29). At its core, the discourse situates the existence of "*common* interests" (Documents 29 and 35), "*common* aspiration[s]", (Document 35) "*mutual* understanding" (Documents 29 and 35), "*mutual* respect" (Document 29) and "*mutual* need for cooperation" (Document 35). Understanding and respect are associated with parallel conceptualizations of sovereign equality and the principle of non-interference. The discourse stresses not only how "both sides have *broad consensus* on safeguarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity [and] defending *national dignity*" (Document 29)<sup>12</sup> but also how they have "always *respected* each other's social system and development path no matter what differences exist in ideology", how "*both* sides *respect* each other's core interests and major concerns, support each other's *justifiable* demand[s] and *reasonable* propositions" and ultimately how they share an aspiration of "building a *new* type of international relations" based on state sovereign independence and territorial integrity (Document 29). All these ideas can be resumed in how Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi justified in an interview in Al Jazeera the "very promising future" of China–Arab relations:

first, we enjoy traditional friendship; second, we are all developing countries with broad common interests; and third, we do not have any geopolitical conflict. As one of my Arab friends once said, China is the only major country that has never interfered in the Arab world. This is exactly our policy and our diplomatic philosophy, which we take pride in. (Document 35)

Thirdly, the ideas of non-interference and respect for internal issues shape the Chinese representation on the ongoing changes in the focus region. Even if few sources dealing with the "Arab countries/states" actually address the issue,<sup>13</sup> the ones that do are clearly willing to underline China's non-interference position. Chinese officials start by acknowledging that "Arab states know this region the best" (Document 35) before advancing any examination of the events taking place since 2011. They express their confidence that "the *people* of Arab states will surmount the *current difficulties* and usher in a new future for the region" (Document 35), thus directly mentioning the existence of "difficulties" (without providing any further detail of what they precisely mean) and strangely enough distancing from a purely state-centric approach. Any solution requires "Arab states [to] come together and help and support each other to *jointly revitalize* the Arab world" where China "will be your best friend and most reliable partner" (Document 35). The idea of revitalization seems to appeal to superficial cosmetic transformations to be implemented while neglecting any space in the discourse for profound political, economic and social changes or indeed for justice. Following a Derridian approach, in this case absences in the discourse might be more important than presences.

All in all, the Chinese discursive construction around the "Arab countries/states" emphasizes the convergence of "goals", "interests", "history", "identity",<sup>14</sup> "respect" and "friendship" as a base to justify joint policies aiming at "common development and prosperity" (Documents 4, 29 and 35) and "mutually beneficial cooperation for win-win results" (Document 29) (see Table 1). From a predicative analysis standpoint, the stress and constant repetition of the adjectives

<sup>12</sup> Similar formulas are used in Document 4.

<sup>13</sup> The only major exception to this general principle has to do with the narrative put forward to analyse the so-called "*hotspot issues*", many of them having their origins in the post-2011 context (see Section 2).

<sup>14</sup> This precise point is complemented by the description below of parallelisms and analogies in the Chinese discourse towards the *developing countries*, which include the "Arab countries/states".



"common", "mutual" and "shared" might signal an intention to silence divergences and disputes and reinforce a highly positive narrative towards the region.<sup>15</sup> This characterization represents a sort of broad and common substrate for any official Chinese approximation towards the EU's so-called "Mediterranean". Hence, many of its predicative elements and signifiers permeate into the alternative and largely overlapping Chinese geopolitical imagination notions analysed below. In other words, there is a high level of interdiscursivity of this group of signifiers among the discourses of different geopolitical maps.

## 2. THE "MIDDLE EAST" AND ITS "HOTSPOTS": THE CENTRALITY OF SECURITY, PEACE AND STABILITY

The notion "Middle East" is also used by Chinese authorities, yet this geopolitical cartography is importantly characterized in a different manner than the former "Arab countries/states". As a starting point it is important to underline how the geographical/ membership boundaries of this notion are far more blurred. While on some occasions different primary sources used this notion as synonym of "Arab countries" (see, for instance, Documents 35 and 52), generally any discursive analysis would demonstrate how the concept seems to go beyond these limits. It clearly encompasses novel countries like the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel. Some primary sources include Morocco and Algeria in this notion (Document 4), forcing us to think that there is room to include Tunisia and Libya as well. It is difficult to fully clarify whether this geopolitical imaginary includes countries like Mauritania, Sudan or even Turkey, while it seems out of order to consider Djibouti, Somalia and Comoros. Hence, the Chinese "Middle East" construction might get closer in terms of membership to what mainly American scholars and policy-makers call the Middle East and North Africa region.

There are two clear features associated with this geopolitical imaginary. Firstly, the notion of the "Middle East" is permanently linked with peace, security and stability considerations.<sup>16</sup> The precise notion has gone under a severe *securitization* process in the Chinese imaginary.<sup>17</sup> Expressions like the "conflicts in the Middle East" (Documents 13 and 22), "regional instability" (see, for instance, Document 22), "the turmoils of the Middle East", "the gunsmoke in the Middle East" (Document 22), "the Middle East is mired in aggravating tension" (Document 49) or "the *vicious* cycle of *incessant* turbulenc[es] in the Middle East" (predicatively stressing the continuity of violence) (Document 22) are just some of the clearest examples in that respect. The notion is also the one preferred when talking about nuclearization (specially the "Iranian nuclear issue"<sup>18</sup>) and the need for creating a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone

15 There might be room to explore to what extent this is common in the Chinese approaches towards other states, especially those characterized as *developing countries*. We can perhaps see emerging a global narrative of China towards the international system whereby they claim their "hope that all countries are our partners" (Document 35).

16 See, for instance, Documents 14, 17, 22, 25 and 29.

17 This is not to say that the discursive practices used by the Chinese authorities are necessarily originated by themselves. There might be room to argue that China replicates in many ways a discursive construction put forward by many alternative international actors when dealing with the focus region. It is difficult to reach any conclusion on whether *securitization* is a fully endogenous process or if it responds to many exogenous conditioners and the existence of preeminent signifiers used for instance in multilateral organizations that China might have been socialized into.

18 Documents 3, 9, 15, 17, 25, 30, 31, 39, 41, 46, 48 and 49.

(Documents 12 and 29), international and regional terrorism (Documents 13 and 22), or the negotiations between Israel and Palestine categorized as the "Middle East peace process" (see, for instance, Documents 14, 22 and 29).

This is coupled with the second element integrating the Chinese "Middle East" imaginary: a strong essentialist discursive construction that situates in the centre of the notion ethnic, religious, sectarian and cultural groups/identities. These notions are repeatedly used in the Chinese analysis of violence in the region. In doing so such discourses reduce all political and socioeconomic problems at the core of some of the historical and contemporary conflicts unfolding in the Middle East, as well as terrorism, to mere primary identities-related disputes. Their discursive construction emphasizes that "Regional instability and development gaps breed terrorism, while *ethnic disunity* and *religious conflicts* allow radical ideologies to *resurface*" ("resurface" appeals to inherent conditions that have always been there) (Document 22), hence providing an essentialist explanation for violence. Furthermore, such differences are categorized as the "root causes" of the conflicts and distinguished from alternative, purportedly more superficial (political) explanations (Document 22 and 47).<sup>19</sup> Here, the ever-present state-centric approach is abandoned in favour of analysis integrating subnational identities of the individuals. A good example of how these elements are brought together is the following:

The situation in the Middle East region is serious and disturbing. Differences among nations, religious sects and ethnic groups aggravate one another. Wars and conflicts, humanitarian disasters and terrorist threats are interwoven. [...] The Middle East region, once a cradle of human civilization, boasts a glorious history with major contribution[s] to human progress. Its flourishing civilization and cultural confidence has made this region an important platform for exchanges and integration of Eastern and Western civilizations. In the 21st century, co-existence of civilizations requires the spirit of harmony without uniformity more than before and progress of the society calls for inclusiveness and broad-mindedness. Different religions should tolerate and learn from each other and various ethnicities should live in harmony. (Document 22)

This analysis cannot be untangled from a different but highly connected discursive construction around the notion of hotspots. *Hotspot* is the label used to characterize international conflictual junctures including Ukraine, Sudan, the South China Sea, Syria, Yemen, Libya or the nuclear issues of Iran and the Korean Peninsula. A common narrative, with repeated signifiers, is used by the Chinese officials in all these cases, with limited space for nuances depending on the conflict discussed. The initial element to highlight is the fact that conflictual circumstances are dealt with under a separated independent discursive construction. The rest of the constructions analysed in this paper stress to a greater extent cooperative and friendly elements of inter-state relations (see Table 1) and, in general, there is an important absence of room for recognizing the potentiality of conflict as this would go against the largely affirmative and constructive Chinese macro-narrative. Articulating a separate discursive construction makes it possible to tackle conflictive issues in an ad hoc manner without fully making obvious any paradox this might represent for its generally positive macro-narrative.

<sup>19</sup> See also the discussion on the "hotspot narrative" below.

From a Chinese perspective, hotspot circumstances are regional in nature, emanating fundamentally from domestic conflicts which harm potential development. By stressing this regional scope, without negating international impact, the speakers might want to differentiate from the geopolitical controversies of "major countries".<sup>20</sup> The hotspots discursive construction includes, and it is focused on, repeated formulas about how to come to a solution to these situations. This is the self-defined "*uniquely* Chinese approach [for] settling hot-spot issues [...] drawing wisdom and inspiration from China's traditional culture" (Document 17), the "Chinese wisdom" (Document 48) or the "Chinese Way" (based on "*sustainable, incremental and fundamental*" solutions) (Document 8). On some occasions the construction is also linked with the "*profound* traditional Chinese medicine" and its focus on a "multi-pronged approach", analysis, impartiality and stressing "root cause[s]" (Documents 17). Fundamentally, the discourse revolves around three principles for settling hotspot issues:

no country should interfere in other countries' internal affairs or impose its own will on others; countries concerned should act in an impartial and objective manner and refrain from seeking selfish interests; and political solutions, not the use of force, should be sought in addressing hotspot issues. (Document 18)<sup>21</sup>

Thus, firstly, we observe a reiteration of the principle of non-interference. The discourse construction always includes formulas accentuating that China "respect[s] the views and aspirations of the people in the countries concerned" (Document 8) as hotspot issues are "their [own] problems" (Document 35). Secondly, conflictive issues can be only solved by "*political* solutions"<sup>22</sup> and "*political* dialogue process" (Document 20), as any "military solution [...], even if it may appear to work at one point, [...] cannot fundamentally resolve the problem" (Document 26). Additionally, the discursive construction emphasizes the need to "go beyond the *selfish* interests of their own party or group" (Document 35)<sup>23</sup> and have "*serious* talks [as] there will be no grievance that cannot be resolved" (Document 35).<sup>24</sup> The accent on the political nature of any solution, based on sincere and concrete actions (Document 7), contrasts with the generally depoliticized nature of the Chinese macro-narrative presented above.

A central element in the hotspots discursive construction is the self-representation of China as a responsible global actor. Repeatedly, the primary sources underline, with different formulations, the idea stated by President Xi Jinping that "the international community wants to hear China's voice and see China's solutions" (Document 27) – we can see here an example of strong intertextuality. China, together with other "major countries" like the United States and the rest of the members of the United Nations Security Council (Documents 38, 39 and 41), needs to collaborate in solving regional hotspot issues as it is a responsible and constructive member of the international community, actively involved in its well-functioning.<sup>25</sup> Besides accepting that "the resolution of hot-spot issues can create a more enabling environment for China's development" (Document 31), in this case Chinese framing practice is highly related to its self-perceived identity as responsible superpower and its self-representation as a

20 See, for instance, Documents 3, 8, 9, 17, 29 and 52.

21 Similar formulations can be found in Documents 2, 6, 7, 8, 22, 25, 26, 40, 46 and 48.

22 Documents 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 17, 22, 25, 26, 29, 46, 48 and 52.

23 Similar formulations can be found in Documents 2 and 7.

24 A similar formulation can be found in Documents 7 and 46.

25 See, for instance, Documents 1, 3, 4, 5 and 47.

constructive and just global actor, showing a clear connection between foreign policy and identity construction (Hansen 2006).

A quick review of the Syrian, Iranian and Palestinian–Israeli examples will further clarify some of the points made. On Syria, the Chinese narrative fulfils most of the elements pointed out for hotspot and the "Middle East". The "Syrian issue" or the "Syrian crisis"<sup>26</sup> is presented as a "highly complex issue" (Documents 2 and 26) or an issue of "*intricate* complexity" (Document 8) dividing "the Syrian *people*" (Documents 7, 35 and 46) or the "*local* people" (Document 35) between the government and the opposition. Essentialist elements are present as on occasion the discourse appeals to the need for "a balance [...] between the interests of various *ethnicities, religions* and *sects*" (hence clouding political demands into primary identity clashes),<sup>27</sup> as they "are brothers and sisters in the first place" (Document 7). Any solution must necessarily be achieved through a Syrian-led political transition process,<sup>28</sup> which is "*inclusive* [...]" and involves all parties to the conflict" (Document 22) including "all those that do not engage in violent extremist and terrorist activities [...] and are willing to lay down their arms" (Document 26). In this political process, "all parties [must] act in the *overall* interests of the *future* and *destiny* of their country and of their people" (Document 14),<sup>29</sup> "going] beyond the *selfish* interests of their own party or group" (Document 35),<sup>30</sup> skipping "*intransigence*" (Document 26), with no "preconditions or pre-determined results" (Document 22) but acknowledging the Syrian people's "aspiration for *change* and at the same time ensur[ing] stability and order [...] as well as [the] relative continuity and effectiveness of Syria's governmental institutions" (Document 7). The international community "should not stand by and do nothing, nor should it intervene arbitrarily" (Document 22).<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, China will continue to "play a constructive role in facilitating peace talks" (Document 26) resulting in "*objective* and *balanced*" solutions (an example of self-representation of their own global responsible identity) (Document 25) that could render Syria a "*stable, prosperous* and *dignified* member of the international community" (Document 7).

As for the "Iranian nuclear issue" hotspot, the problem is conceptualized as an "issue of political security [whose] primary cause is the lack of *mutual trust* between parties concerned" (Document 30). With this representation, the logical solution is a diplomatic and political one<sup>32</sup> based on "*perseverance*", "*reciprocity*", "*fairness*" and "*balance*" (Documents 14 and 30).<sup>33</sup> China, emphasizing this time its long-lasting "state-to-state relations" with Tehran based on the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence (Document 35), is willing to act as a responsible international actor in brokering peace between the parties.<sup>34</sup>

26 Documents 6, 7, 8, 9, 19, 22, 25, 26, 31 and 35.

27 See also Document 6.

28 Documents 2, 6, 7, 8, 22, 25, 26, 35, 46 and 48.

29 A similar formulation is used in Document 7.

30 Similar formulations are used in Documents 2 and 7.

31 Similar formulations are used in Documents 7 and 8.

32 Documents 3, 9, 14, 15, 17, 25, 30, 31, 39, 41, 46, 48 and 49.

33 A similar formulation is used in Document 48. Similar notions are used when discussing the Syrian peace negotiations in Document 7.

34 Documents 3, 9, 14, 15, 17, 25, 30, 31, 39, 41, 46, 48 and 49.

Finally, the "conflict between Israel and Palestine" (Document 22 and 46) (also repeatedly labelled as "the Middle East peace process"<sup>35</sup> or the "Palestinian issue"<sup>36</sup>) is treated like any other hotspot. The problem and the solution are accepted to be political in nature. For China, the "root cause of the conflict between Israel and Palestine is the prolonged absence of a *just* and *reasonable* settlement of the Palestinian issue" (Document 46). It is true, however, that unlike what we saw in the previous examples, China discourse towards the issue integrates a strong focus on the unbalanced situation of one of the parties in conflict. The Palestinians are occasionally mentioned as "our brothers and sisters" (Document 35) whose suffering is a "wound [in] human conscience" (Document 14). This becomes clearer when conducting a predicative analysis of the primary sources and realizing the constant appeal to notions like "*legitimate* demand" (Document 14), "*unfair* and *unreasonable* phenomenon", "*just* cause" or "*just* propositions and national aspirations" (Document 35). China's responsibility is to "exert positive influence" (Document 11) over the political negotiations while giving "support and help [for] the local people who are suffering" (Document 35).

### 3. THE "BELT AND ROAD" INITIATIVE: SIGNIFIERS AROUND THE EURASIAN MENTAL MAP

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiatives, jointly known as the Belt and Road Initiative (B&R), is the major policy framework put forward in September 2013 through which China encounters many of the countries analysed in this paper. Even if officially the Initiative will be open to all nations and not limited by geography (Mu 2015), at this stage it includes among our targeted countries Iran, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

This policy is based on the mental geopolitical cartography labelled by the Chinese authorities as the "Eurasian continent". This cartography is approached by using the same substrate matrix as the one in the case of the "Arab countries/states" (see Table 1). Hence, ideas like "*joint* endeavor" (Documents 29 and 35), "*win-win* cooperation",<sup>37</sup> "*mutual* understanding" (Document 35), "*mutual* learning and *mutual* respect" (Document 35),<sup>38</sup> "*common* development and prosperity",<sup>39</sup> "*common* interests" (Document 35) and "*mutual* beneficial projects" (Documents 30 and 40)<sup>40</sup> are highly present. Chinese officials' preferred – and extensively repeated – formula defines the B&R after three axioms, namely "*extensive* consultation, *joint* contribution and *shared* benefits".<sup>41</sup> Relations among the states involved are recurrently described as friendly,<sup>42</sup> to the point that Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed that "the Belt and Road has seen an *ever-expanding* 'circle of friends'" (Document 53) in light of President Xi Jinping's policy approach on

35 Documents 1, 10, 46 and 48. Document 46 states that "The Palestinian issue is at the crux of the Middle East issue".

36 See, for instance, Documents 14, 15, 22, 29 and 46.

37 Documents 17, 20, 21, 25, 35 and 53.

38 Similar formulas are used in Documents 15 and 34.

39 Documents 7, 34, 35, 36, 42 and 53. Similar formulas are used in Documents 29 and 45.

40 Similarly, see Documents 25, 29 and 34.

41 Documents 15, 17, 20, 25, 30, 34, 40, 49 and 53.

42 See, for instance, Documents 9, 34 and 35.



"let our *circle of friends* grow bigger and bigger" (note the intertextuality here) (Document 27).

Besides these elements which are also used in relation to alternative geopolitical cartographies, the B&R has four distinctive narrative elements. The first of these continuously stresses the historical elements underpinning the B&R, and draws connections between the contemporary scenario and the traditional Silk Road, whose spirit needs to be renewed and brought up to date: "it embodies the spirit of the ancient Silk Road, which has a history of over 2,000 years and was used by the *peoples of many countries* for friendly exchange and commerce" (Document 17).<sup>43</sup> According to this narrative, the Silk Road historically "brought *peace, tranquillity and prosperity* to *both sides*" (Document 35) and this is the reason why it must be updated (Document 9). Ultimately, it will contribute to "building a *community of common destiny*" (Document 20), as the B&R "will surely bring *new, historic* development opportunities to countries in the region" (Document 35).

The second innovative narrative is associated with the need to *revitalize* the "Eurasian continent". The B&R-related speeches frequently refer to the need for "revitalization of countries along the routes" (Document 28) and "rejuvenation of Asia as a whole" (Document 9). A critical discourse analysis might point out that it seems the Chinese officials perceive the "Eurasian continent" to be suffering from certain problems which ultimately affect its development. Even if there is no clear verbalization on what those problems are (silenced element in the narrative),<sup>44</sup> the solution to any such problem is the B&R which will "catalyze the *revitalization* of the Eurasian continent as a whole" (Documents 17) by "[bringing] *new hope, new prospects and new impetus* to the economic development of the region and beyond" (Document 34).

Thirdly, the B&R narrative draws on the idea of sovereign equality among the members included in the project. The narrative associated with this public policy initiative cites the co-ownership of the project by all the countries along the route. Thus, "[t]he Initiative was put forward by China, but its benefits will flow across the world" (Document 53); China "does not intend to seek dominance over regional affairs [with the B&R], but to offer more development opportunities to other countries" (Document 21). In light of this reasoning the B&R is presented as a "public good China provides to the world" (Documents 18)<sup>45</sup> and "not [as] a tool of geopolitics [which] must not be viewed with the outdated Cold War mentality" (Document 17)<sup>46</sup> nor as China's construction of its "sphere of influence" or its "backyard garden" (Document 45), as stated by the President Xi Jinping. The importance accorded to sovereign equality is also tangible in the Chinese emphasis on how the Initiative intends in no way to impose any specific economic (or political) model on the participants, but is instead based on "*equal-footed and friendly* exchanges on governance issues" (Document 35) and "self-development capacity" (see most notably Document 34).

43 A similar construction is used in Document 9.

44 One conjecture might be the lack of stability in the region, which could be seen to pose a risk to potential development.

45 A similar formulation is used in Document 34.

46 Curiously enough, the B&R is also presented "not [as] China's solo, but a symphony performed by all relevant countries" (Document 17).



Finally, the idea of *connectivity* is constantly repeated.<sup>47</sup> According to the official narrative, there are three key areas in which the B&R Initiative will have an impact: connectivity, production capacity cooperation and people-to-people exchanges (Documents 9, 30 and 40). The B&R is presented as a peaceful initiative which will increase *synergies* among the country members<sup>48</sup> in general, but in particular between China's development strategy and that of countries along the route (Document 25) which might become more "*complementary*" (see for instance Documents 34, 49 and 53).

Associated with the "Belt and Road" Initiative, China also boosts the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) based on a parallel geopolitical category, namely the "Asian countries" – similar to the "Eurasian continent" category just described. The CICA integrates 26 different countries,<sup>49</sup> including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Qatar, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. The League of Arab States is an observer.

The "Asian countries" imaginary, and its associated discursive construction, draws even more clearly on history. The official narrative states that the "tradition of *mutual* learning and *mutual* respect between different *civilizations*" (Document 35) within Asia needs to be the starting point to prevent conflict from arising. Along these lines, the narrative also stresses that: "The peoples of the Asian countries should never become enemies], and should enhance mutual trust to create good conditions for the development of all countries and people's living in *peace* and *contentment*" (Document 23). In order to achieve this, China presents itself as a responsible actor that is in the position to "make [an] indelible contribution to the *historical* process of maintaining peace and security and advancing cooperation and development" (Document 15) by "work[ing] together to build a new Asia of *peace, stability* and *cooperation*" (Document 9). The formula is coherent with the broader Chinese foreign policy: revolving always around "*cultural and people-to-people exchanges*]",<sup>50</sup> the narrative states that: "we should [...] stick to settling *contradictions* and *differences* through *friendly* consultations in *peaceful* ways, and *jointly* seek a mode of getting along with neighbors featuring *mutual* respect, *mutual* trust, aggregating common ground while defusing *differences* and *win-win* cooperation" (Document 23).<sup>51</sup>

## 4. ALTERNATIVE GEOPOLITICAL CARTOGRAPHIES: DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND CIVILIZATIONS

Besides the three major geopolitical cartographies used by the Chinese officials to refer to the reality alternatively known as the Mediterranean/ MENA region, there are at least three others that need to be analysed: "developing countries", "African countries" and "civilizations". For the sake of this paper's objective, these alternative mental maps suffer from either being so broad

47 Documents 9, 17, 25, 30, 31, 34, 40, 49, 51, 52, 53 and 54.

48 Documents 17, 25, 34, 35, 49 and 52.

49 Namely, China, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, South Korea Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.

50 Documents 9, 17, 29, 31, 34, 35, 40, 51 and 52.

51 Partially similar formulations might be found in Documents 25, 29 and 33.

that they extend beyond our focus countries (i.e., "developing countries" narratives are used not only when talking about the targeted region) or include part of our focus region in larger geopolitical cartographies (i.e., when the Southern Mediterranean countries are approached as "African countries").

All the countries – with the sole exception of Israel – covered in this paper are considered as "developing countries" in light of Chinese official narrative. China's primary sources consistently present China as part of the developing world: "China remains a member of the developing world" (Document 53), "the *rest* of the developing world" (Documents 44 and 53)<sup>52</sup> or "*other* developing countries" (Document 43). Additionally, the "developing countries" are presented as the core of Chinese foreign policy: for instance, with claims like "the developing world is the foundation of China's diplomacy" (Document 53)<sup>53</sup> or "developing countries constitute the basis of China's overall diplomacy" (Document 24). Besides such nuances in terms of self-presentation of a shared identity, China's narrative towards these countries follows the dialectical pattern presented in the substrate matrix (see Table 1), stressing *common/shared/mutual* history, respect, goals and interests, and the aim of achieving *common/mutual* self-path development, prosperity, understanding and cooperation.

Far more interesting is the narrative associated with geopolitical mental cartography labelled as "Africa/African countries". Obviously, this geopolitical imaginary only encompasses those focus countries in the African continent, thus overlapping with alternative imaginaries presented above. Broadly speaking, the narrative and its signifiers associated with this imaginary are quite similar to the ones used for the "developing countries", including the use of the substrate matrix.<sup>54</sup> A "long-standing *traditional* friendship" (Document 24)<sup>55</sup> allows China to talk about its "African brothers" (Documents 24). Through cooperation – "win-win cooperation", "people-to-people and cultural exchanges" (Documents 16 and 44) and "equal-footed" cooperation (Document 24) – China cooperates with the development of "African countries". Accordingly, "The Chinese Dream and the African Dream very well synergize with each other" (Document 24) and they have a "shared destiny" (Document 17).<sup>56</sup>

The most significant distinctive element has to do with how China, through different speech acts, differentiates itself from Western powers and historical Western attitudes and policies in the African continent. China stresses its historical commitment to African countries in their "just struggle to oppose hegemonism, colonialism and to gain national independence and liberation" (Document 24). Alternatively, they claim that "China will never follow the same path traveled by traditional powers in its cooperation with Africa" (Document 24), but:

We should uphold *justice* in politics for Africa and help it speed up development and *rejuvenation*. We will neither follow the old path of Western *colonists* nor sacrifice the ecological environment and long-term interests of African countries, but rather to seek for *mutual* benefits, *reciprocity* and *win-win cooperation*. (Document 16)

<sup>52</sup> Similarly see for instance Documents 40 and 50.

<sup>53</sup> A similar formulation is used in Document 49.

<sup>54</sup> This is even clearly stated: "Africa, being home to the biggest number of developing countries" (Document 24).

<sup>55</sup> Similarly, see Documents 25 and 44.

<sup>56</sup> Similarly, see Document 16.

In this way, again, there is a clear connection between self-representation narratives and the construction of the identity of an actor through foreign policy (Hansen 2006).

Finally, on some occasions the official Chinese discourse appeals to ideas associated with a civilizational approach in dealing with the focus countries. Other times the notion of Arab countries is presented as a civilization in and of itself (rather than the Middle East as a whole), especially in those cases where the issue under discussion has a cultural and/or religious dimension. The clearest example can be found in *China's Arab Policy Paper* where a whole section is entitled "Exchanges among Civilizations and Religions" (Document 29). The starting point of the narratives associated with this geopolitical cartography is presenting China itself as a "rich civilization of 5,000 years" (Document 32). This leads to a promotion of "inter-civilization exchanges" approach (Document 37)<sup>57</sup> based on "mutual learning among civilizations" (Documents 20, 29 and 40) to "jointly contribute to the progress of human civilization" (Document 29).<sup>58</sup> In summary, the aim is dialogue among civilizations to achieve harmonious coexistence:

Diverse civilizations, through *harmonious* coexistence and *mutual* learning, may become a bridge of friendship among peoples, a driving force for social progress and a bond for world peace. Only with such attitude toward civilization can different civilizations flourish together and *jointly* promote harmony and progress of human society. (Document 37)

**Table 2** | Main Chinese geopolitical cartographies towards the MENA region and their associated narratives

Geopolitical Cartography	Associated Policy	Centre of the Discursive Construction	Key Signifiers
1. "Arab countries/states"	CASF and parallel framework	Cooperation, Development	Substrate Matrix
2. "Middle East"	Hotspots Policy	Peace, Security and Stability	a. Securitization-like signifiers b. Essentialist elements c. Hotspots discourse d. International Responsibility
3. "Eurasian Continent"	"Belt and Road" Initiative and CICA	Cooperation, Prosperity, Stability	a. Common history, identity b. Connectivity c. Revitalization d. Equality (Sovereign)
4. "Developing Countries"	FOCAC ["Belt and Road" Initiative (?)]	Cooperation, Development	a. Shared Identity b. Self-path development c. Non-colonial identity self-construction
[Alternative minority cartographies: "civilizational" approach; "Western Asia and North Africa"]			

<sup>57</sup> Similarly see Document 20.

<sup>58</sup> Hence, humanity is presented as a civilization made up of different civilizations.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS: CONFRONTING CHINA'S AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S GEOPOLITICAL CARTOGRAPHIES AND DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

In this final section this paper aims at helping to answer the broader MEDRESET research questions by comparing the findings detailed above on Chinese imaginary cartographies with the European Union's constructions of the Mediterranean space. According to previous scholarship produced in the framework of the MEDRESET project (Cebeci and Schumacher 2017, Isaac and Kares 2017, Morillas and Soler 2017), the Mediterranean is generally constructed by the European Union through three different discursive practices: "the Mediterranean as a diverse geopolitical space", "the Mediterranean as a dangerous space" and "the Mediterranean as a space crucial for EU interests". These visions have triggered a range of policies that are in essence technocratic, depoliticized and securitized.

There are five central elements to pay specific attention to. The first and central difference between Brussels' and Beijing's geopolitical mental maps has to do with the absence of any consideration of the Mediterranean as such by Chinese officials. Chinese mental maps on the focus region are dissociated from any notion of the Mediterranean, and the maritime dimension is not central in any of its multiple mental imaginaries about the region. The Mediterranean region as such does not exist according to the discourse analysis exposed above. Consequently, in light of the Chinese experience, it might be difficult to sustain the notion that the European Union has any normative power in the conceptualization of the focus region at a global level.

A second element of contrast is the level of precision concerning the boundaries of the region, as well as the rest of the idiosyncratic elements associated with the construction of the Mediterranean. While it seems clear that the EU's construction is well-structured and mostly clearly defined, the analysis carried out shows how different mental maps live side by side in the case of China, each one with its own constructions and verbal signifiers. An ongoing lively construction of the Mediterranean space is taking shape, which is by no means finalized. This plurality encapsulates a more nebulous, imprecise approach towards the Mediterranean than that of the EU, yet it might consequently provide China with a broader range of policy options. The interesting element to pay attention to at this point is whether any of the main mental maps described above is likely to gain pre-eminence over the others in the upcoming years and decades.

Thirdly, vis-à-vis the depoliticizing and technocratic approach of the EU, the Chinese approach seems quite similar. Political issues, and especially sensitive ones, are generally silenced in the discourses. The stress on commonalities as well as the focus on cooperation among actors neglects potentially conflictual political elements (not only between China and the Mediterranean countries but also among the latter). The only significant exception might be what this paper has labelled the hotspots discourse, associated with the Middle East mental map. This highly securitized narrative, applied selectively to some realities in the broader Mediterranean region, encompasses an acceptance of the political nature of many of the conflicts at stake. On the technocratic dimension, the "intertextuality cascade" might be a good example of parallelism between the EU and China.

The fourth element to discuss concerns the four focus policy areas identified by the MEDRESET project as central to the EU's construction of the Mediterranean: political ideas, water and agriculture, energy and industry, and migration and mobility. On the whole, these four policy areas are treated only occasionally in the Chinese official primary sources. When they are addressed, they seem to be associated with general goodwill statements of intent that might, however, be in the process of gaining more substance. The major document to pay attention to in this respect is *China's Arab Policy Paper* (Document 29) which, in January 2016, established the range of fields in which China was willing to cooperate with the "Arab countries". The underlying principle of the Chinese cooperation – especially under the Belt and Road Initiative – vis-à-vis the region is encapsulated in what China has labelled as the "1+2+3" cooperation pattern: to "take energy cooperation as the core, infrastructure construction and trade and investment facilitation as the two wings, and high and new technologies in the fields of nuclear energy, space satellite and new energy as the three breakthroughs".<sup>59</sup> Besides this general statement with energy at its core, the document identifies five major fields of potential cooperation (i.e., political cooperation, investment and trade cooperation, social development, culture and people-to-people exchanges and cooperation in the field of peace and security) which, in turn, includes 29 minor concrete areas for cooperation. Among these minor areas of cooperation, energy cooperation, agriculture cooperation and cooperation on production capacity are listed. On energy, China accepts the centrality of this issue in its bilateral relations with the Arab countries, as clearly stated by the 1+2+3 formula, especially in the fields of oil prospecting, extraction, transportation and refining as well as solar and wind energy and hydropower. Moreover, any cooperation in this field must respect "reciprocity and mutual benefit" (Document 29). On agriculture cooperation, the statements are even more imprecise: they set broader priorities like "arid zone agriculture, water-saving irrigation, Muslim food, food security, animal husbandry and veterinary medicine" (Document 29) as well as some minor comments on information sharing on environmental protection on water-related issues. On production capacity, China merely commits to support "Arab states in their efforts to realize industrialization", combining China's "advantage of production capacity" with the concrete demands of the states of the region (Document 29). All in all, as stated above, all these formulations are rather vague especially if compared with the EU's treatment of these policy areas in its relation with the Southern Mediterranean countries. In the last year and a half, China and the countries of the region seem to be conducting efforts towards finding and deciding on concrete cooperation formulas to bridge the gap between narrative and actual policies, yet this is still an ongoing process.

Fifth and finally, this paper has shown a big gap between China and the EU in those circumstances when Brussels incorporates in its construction a presentation of the region as weak, imperfect, backwards or poorly governed. As it has been stressed above, the principle of non-interference is central in the Chinese discourse, leaving room for no such assessments. Alternatively, China's geopolitical cartographies emphasize the potential of the region (especially in terms of development) which can be only achieved by *self-path* development. They also stress the commonalities between the focus region's societies and China itself (common colonial past, common history of Western interventionism, etc.) to provide reassurance that Beijing will at no point base its policies in the region on any of these misconceptions.

<sup>59</sup> This formula is repeated over most of the documents analyzed in this paper, but Document 29 seems to be the point of origin for this formula that was later replicated in the others (intertextuality cascade).



Additionally, and to sum up, it might be reasonable to trace some commonalities between current Chinese comprehension of the Mediterranean space and the European situation in the transitional period between the 1970–1989 and the 1990–2002 phases described by the MEDRESET project. According to Isaac and Fares (2017), in the former period the European Community's mental map was rather incoherent and compartmentalized – the Mediterranean was not a coherent region – and its economic interests in the region were at the centre of any conceptualization of the Mediterranean. Concerning the latter phase between 1990–2002, Morillas and Soler (2017) argue that the post-Maastricht European Union included in its cognitive geography of the region a more securitized conceptualization of the Mediterranean which was clearly linked with a strong feeling of self-imposed responsibility vis-à-vis the reality of the southern shore of the Mediterranean. It might be argued, according to the elements analysed in previous sections, that the People's Republic of China's mental map of the Mediterranean space is somehow in a transitional period where both these elements of the EU's stance can be observed. Currently, we can see that China does not conceive of the region as a coherent unit, hence the multiple geopolitical cartographies existing side by side. Most of them seem triggered by Beijing's economic interest in the region and are used alternatively only depending on finalist considerations. However, it is also true that China's constructions might be starting to move towards something comparable to the EU's 1990–1992 approach. The increasing popularity of the Middle East mental map, which includes China's self-representation as a responsible global power vis-à-vis this convulsed region, shares some commonalities with the EU's transformation in the 1990s. At this point it is still difficult to assert that this geopolitical cartography will replace the alternative ones in the near future. Yet, some sort of socialization process whereby China is increasingly distancing itself from its traditional constructions of the Mediterranean and embracing the highly securitized conceptions repeatedly used by global actors – not only the EU but most significantly the US – might be in the process of materializing.



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