

# China's Naval Expansion: Decoding the Mediterranean Enigma

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*In the realm of geopolitics, where land meets sea, a new chapter is being written. China, a nation synonymous with ancient trade routes, now sets its sights on a modern maritime domain: the Mediterranean. Since May 2023, China's naval presence in the Middle East and the Eastern and Western Mediterranean has been an enigmatic force, drawing the gaze of global observers. Yet, this venture is not a sudden emergence but a culmination of decades-long aspirations, born in the era of Silk Roads and nurtured by contemporary strategic imperatives.*

*As we embark on this exploration, we navigate through the annals of history, tracing the genesis of China's Mediterranean odyssey. From the first whispers of maritime presence to the crescendo of strategic maneuvers, this narrative unravels the complex tapestry of interests, partnerships, and geopolitical implications that defined China's foray into these storied waters. Join us on a voyage that transcends time and borders as we decode the Mediterranean enigma that is China's naval expansion.*

## **I. Introduction: The Mediterranean Enigma: Unraveling China's Naval Expansion**

In the complex realm of geopolitics, where the boundaries of land and sea converge, a new chapter is being penned. China, a nation steeped in the legacy of ancient trade routes, now casts its gaze upon a modern maritime domain: the Mediterranean. Since May 2023, China's naval presence in the Middle East and the Eastern and Western Mediterranean has emerged as an enigmatic force, capturing the attention of global observers. Yet, this venture is not a sudden emergence but rather the culmination of decades-long aspirations, harkening back to the era of Silk Roads and nurtured by contemporary strategic imperatives.

As we embark on this exploratory journey, we navigate through the annals of history, tracing the genesis of China's Mediterranean odyssey. From the initial whispers of maritime presence to the crescendo of strategic maneuvers, this narrative unveils the intricate tapestry of interests, partnerships, and geopolitical implications that defined China's foray into these storied waters. Join us on a voyage that transcends time and borders as we decode the Mediterranean enigma that is China's naval expansion.

## **II. Historical Perspective of China's Naval Expansion**

China's maritime presence in the Mediterranean is not a recent phenomenon. It traces its roots back to a time long before the Silk Roads were explicitly defined in 2013 by its leader, Xi Jinping. The Mediterranean Sea, marking the final stretch of the Silk Road, serves as the gateway to Western countries by sea. This commercial sea route spans the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea before traversing the Suez Canal to reach the Mediterranean, with its markets extending to Western Europe and North Africa. The Mediterranean Sea, until the full operation of the Polar Silk Road, remains pivotal for China, potentially revolutionizing this crucial shipping route.

China's early naval presence in the region, though relatively discreet compared to its presence in neighboring seas, has been instrumental not only in safeguarding economic interests but also in extending the strategic reach of the Chinese superpower. This article delves into an in-depth analysis of China's naval assets in the Mediterranean, alongside Beijing's deepening security and defense cooperation with countries bordering the Mediterranean.

One significant milestone in China's Mediterranean engagement was the establishment of its first naval and military base outside its borders in Djibouti in August 2017, following an agreement with the African country signed two years prior. This move can be viewed as a precursor to maritime deployment in the Mediterranean. A notable early instance occurred in the spring of 2011, when Chinese naval units carried out a humanitarian mission, evacuating 35,800 citizens from the State of the Maghreb during the Arab uprisings. This initial display of China's naval presence in the Mediterranean and adjacent areas, driven by humanitarian concerns, was followed by subsequent events.

## **III. Geopolitical Context and Strategic Imperatives**

In China's approach to the Mediterranean region, several key stages stand out. It commenced with the establishment of China's first naval and military base in Djibouti in August 2017, a move that signaled China's intention to project its maritime influence beyond its immediate spheres of interest in the Western Pacific and adjacent seas. This strategic move aligns seamlessly with the ambitious strategy spearheaded by Xi Jinping.

The Mediterranean Sea holds critical importance in China's maritime strategy. It marks the confluence of ancient trade routes, serving as a gateway to Western markets. This sea route spans vast expanses of the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea before reaching the Mediterranean. Until the full operationalization of the Polar Silk Road, this maritime passage remains pivotal for China's economic interests.

Furthermore, the Mediterranean venture is intricately linked with the broader "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, an ambitious framework aimed at enhancing connectivity and cooperation across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Since its announcement in 2013, the Mediterranean basin and its neighboring regions have become central to this expansion strategy. This evolution provides a key to understanding China's progressive military presence in the Mediterranean.

In addition to the economic imperative, China's naval presence in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean has been driven by the need to safeguard its merchant ships, as well as those chartered by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), from the threat of Somali pirate attacks. This deployment underscores the multifaceted nature of China's maritime strategy, which encompasses both economic and security considerations.

#### **IV. Strategic Partnerships and Alliances**

China's expanding presence in the Mediterranean is not isolated but rather part of a broader strategy that involves establishing strategic partnerships and alliances with key nations in the region. One significant milestone in this endeavor was the establishment of China's first naval and military base in Djibouti in August 2017. This move marked a pivotal moment in China's maritime strategy, projecting its influence beyond its immediate spheres of interest in the Western Pacific and adjacent seas.

China's evolving relations with Iran, Turkey, and Russia is central to its Mediterranean engagement. Iran, a crucial hydrocarbon supplier and a prominent Islamic nation with substantial interests in the Mediterranean, holds strategic significance. Turkey, in addition to its regional influence, is a coastal state in the Mediterranean. The burgeoning ties with both Iran and Russia can be attributed to national interest and diplomatic considerations, as China increasingly questions the prevailing international order centered on the American superpower and the broader Western sphere. This alignment with Moscow and Tehran was epitomized in December 2019 through joint naval exercises conducted by the three nations in the Gulf of Oman.

In addition to these pivotal partnerships, China entered into strategic partnership agreements with Algeria and Morocco in 2013 and 2016, respectively. Notably, the agreement with Algeria falls within a comprehensive category compared to the one with Morocco. Over the years, this has allowed the Asian powerhouse to establish a presence in critical sectors of these two Maghreb nations. This comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Algeria, one of the highest among China's agreements with third countries, also facilitates significant defense cooperation with the Maghreb nation.

Although on a more modest scale, China has also forged significant ties with Tunisia, where it recently established a diplomatic academy. These partnerships not only serve as economic and diplomatic anchors but also pave the way for enhanced military cooperation in the future.

## **V. Economic Rear and Logistical Foray**

China's military presence in the Mediterranean is intricately linked to its long-standing and increasingly robust economic, commercial, and logistical foray into the region. This expansion, which has gained momentum alongside the launch of the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiative, encompasses the ancient Silk Roads, with the Mediterranean basin playing a pivotal role. Since 2013, these waters and the neighboring states, regions, and subregions have become integral to China's expansion strategy.

This expansion is not only a strategic maneuver but also a practical necessity. The imperative for China, like other nations worldwide, to deploy naval units in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean since the late 2000s has been driven by the need to safeguard its merchant ships and those chartered by the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) from Somali pirate attacks. This deployment, in turn, lays the groundwork for China's expanding naval footprint in the Mediterranean.

One noteworthy aspect of China's economic engagement in the region is the deepening of relations with Iran and Turkey. Iran, as a crucial hydrocarbon supplier and a significant Islamic nation with substantial interests in the Mediterranean, holds strategic significance. Turkey, with its regional influence and coastal presence in the Mediterranean, is another key partner. These economic ties serve as a foundation for broader geopolitical and strategic alignments, underpinning China's expanding naval presence in the Mediterranean.

Additionally, China's contributions to critical infrastructure projects in Algeria, such as the new Houari Boumediene airport and the Grand Mosque, signify a new foothold for China in the region. These developments, ranging from completed projects in Algiers to nascent ventures like the deep-water port of Hamdania in Cherchell, not only serve China's merchant navy but also lay the groundwork for potential military interests.

## **VI. Case Studies and Regional Implications**

China's expanding naval presence in the Mediterranean is not merely a strategic maneuver; it is deeply rooted in the establishment of comprehensive partnerships with nations along the Mediterranean rim. Algeria and Morocco, for instance, serve as exemplars of economic collaboration. China's economic ties with these nations extend beyond trade, encompassing critical sectors and infrastructure development.

In Algeria, Huawei has assumed a significant role in the development of digital infrastructure, while China's Exim Bank has contributed to financing pivotal projects, including the new Houari Boumediene airport and the Grand Mosque. These investments not only strengthen

China's economic ties with Algeria but also lay the groundwork for potential military interests, underscoring the multifaceted nature of China's engagement.

Similarly, in Morocco, China's economic collaboration spans various sectors. While the partnership with Morocco may not fall under the same comprehensive category as that with Algeria, it is nonetheless significant. These economic ties provide a foundation for potential military cooperation in the future, further solidifying China's presence in the region.

Furthermore, in the Eastern Mediterranean, China has entered into a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with Egypt, mirroring its agreement with Algeria. Conceptually, China's focus appears to center primarily on the burgeoning Suez Canal Economic Zone and the port city of Port Said. Egypt's pivotal geostrategic location, coupled with Beijing's longstanding relations with Cairo, positions China to explore multiple opportunities in various domains.

These case studies illuminate the depth and breadth of China's engagement with Mediterranean nations, encompassing economic, diplomatic, and potentially military dimensions. They serve as critical examples of how China is actively forging partnerships and solidifying its presence in the region.

## **VII. Naval Exercises and Military Activities**

China's expanding naval presence in the Mediterranean has been complemented by a series of naval exercises and military activities, reflecting its evolving strategic interests in the region.

From May 11 to 21, 2015, Chinese and Russian naval units conducted the "Common Sea 2015" exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean. This joint exercise involved the Chinese frigates Linny and Weifang, along with the tanker Weshanhu, alongside six Russian ships led by the cruiser Moskva. The exercise focused on maritime defense, escort and supply missions, protection of international shipping security, and live-fire exercises. This collaborative effort between China and Russia signifies a recalibration of power dynamics in the Mediterranean, highlighting the region's growing importance on the global stage.

Furthermore, in the summer of 2017, Chinese naval vessels were once again observed sailing in the Mediterranean, this time en route to the Baltic Sea for joint exercises with the Russian navy. These maneuvers included live ammunition exercises, underscoring the depth of military cooperation between China and Russia in maritime contexts.

Additionally, in 2018, amid the civil war in Syria, China's naval deployment emerged as a significant factor. In coordination with the Russian Navy, they aided in the evacuation of 46 Chinese citizens from the country during the conflict. This joint effort demonstrates the ability of

China to operate effectively alongside established naval powers in complex geopolitical environments.

These naval exercises and military activities in the Mediterranean region signify a substantial phase of military deployment for China. They underscore the nation's growing interests in the region and its willingness to collaborate with other major powers in maritime contexts.

### **VIII. Current Escalations and Tensions**

In 2018, amid the civil war in Syria, another instance of Chinese naval deployment emerged. In coordination with the Russian Navy, they aided in the evacuation of 46 Chinese citizens from the country during the conflict. Additionally, in the same Syrian theater, Chinese military personnel took part in operations against Uyghur operatives within ISIS ranks. These operations not only underscore China's commitment to safeguarding its citizens abroad but also highlight its willingness to actively engage in complex geopolitical environments.

Furthermore, recent developments have brought heightened attention to China's naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean. For a week, China has been relocating its ships between the Gulf region and the eastern Mediterranean amid escalating tensions stemming from the conflict between Israel and Gaza. Russian and Arab media have speculated about the significance of this move, suggesting that the naval vessels are en route from the South China Sea to the eastern Mediterranean, potentially signaling a significant shift in China's strategic posture.

The deployment of an alternative escort group to the Gulf region has led to the positioning of two forward-looking 052D destroyers in the Eastern Mediterranean. China's Naval Task Force 44, engaged in routine operations in the region since May, spent several days visiting Oman last week, including participating in a joint exercise with the country's navy, according to information on the Chinese Defense Ministry website. Naval Task Force 44 is set to return to the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its original mission, which encompasses visiting the shores of friendly nations.

These recent developments reflect the dynamic nature of China's naval presence in the Mediterranean and its responsiveness to evolving geopolitical circumstances. They underscore the region's strategic significance in the context of China's global maritime strategy.

### **IX. Geopolitical Implications and Power Dynamics**

China's expanding footprint in the Mediterranean, notably through strategic ports like the Greek port of Piraeus, sets the stage for a potentially transformative scenario. This development suggests that Russian naval units, which have faced a shortage of support bases in the region (excluding those in Syria), could find valuable logistical support from China. The possibility of

extending commercial facilities into joint military use adds a new dimension to a region that was already characterized by a "tense calm" prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This event, in which Russian-Chinese naval cooperation played a contributing role, has the potential to further shape the dynamics in the Mediterranean.

Despite Algeria not having a formal alliance with either China or Russia, it is noteworthy that Algeria actively participated in multinational military exercises involving China. This engagement should be considered within the broader context of this article. The Panamax 2022 exercise, conducted from August 12 to 27, 2022, in Venezuela, provided a platform for military personnel from both China and Russia, along with units from several other nations, to collaborate and learn together.

These activities exemplify the competition between major powers that currently defines the geopolitical landscape. The waters of the Mediterranean, both today and in the future, will continue to serve as a stage for conveying strategic messages. A recent exercise, "Juniper Oak 2023," held in January 2023, involved twelve ships sailing in the Eastern Mediterranean, accompanied by one hundred and forty-two aircraft flying over the region. Coordinated by U.S. Central Command, this exercise featured 6,400 U.S. and 1,100 Israeli troops over a span of four days.

Recent developments have seen China strategically relocate its naval assets between the Gulf region and the eastern Mediterranean. This maneuver comes amidst escalating tensions stemming from the conflict between Israel and Gaza. Interestingly, Russian, and Arab media outlets, for reasons not entirely clear, have speculated about the purpose behind the movement of six Chinese naval vessels from the South China Sea to the eastern Mediterranean. This potential shift by China carries significant implications.

The status of Chinese naval vessels is as follows:

- a. China's Naval Task Force 44 departed Muscat on Saturday after participating in a joint exercise with the Omani Navy. This force, engaged in routine operations in the region since May, spent several days in Oman last week, including their involvement in a joint exercise with the country's navy. Information from the Chinese Defense Ministry website indicates that Naval Task Force 44 is slated to return to the Eastern Mediterranean as part of its original mission, which encompasses visiting the shores of friendly nations.
- b. The deployment of an alternative escort group to the Gulf region has resulted in the positioning of two forward 052D destroyers in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The evolving movements and strategic positioning of naval assets by China underscore its increasing involvement in the Mediterranean and surrounding regions, underscoring the complex

geopolitical dynamics at play. These developments warrant close observation, as they may have far-reaching implications for regional and global security.

## **X. Concluding Remarks: Navigating the Mediterranean Enigma**

China's expanding naval presence in the Mediterranean stands as a testament to its evolving global posture. This maritime endeavor, rooted in the historical legacy of ancient trade routes, now symbolizes a strategic shift towards maritime dominance. The Mediterranean, once a crossroads of civilizations for millennia, has now become a crucible of geopolitical maneuvering in the 21st century.

This journey began with humanitarian missions, a clear demonstration of China's commitment to safeguarding its citizens in times of crisis. However, this initial phase has now blossomed into a multifaceted engagement, blending economic partnerships, military cooperation, and strategic alignments. The Mediterranean is no longer just a theater of commercial interests; it is a canvas where great powers vie for influence and assert their presence.

The depth of China's engagement is mirrored in its comprehensive partnerships with nations along the Mediterranean rim. Algeria and Morocco serve as prime examples of economic collaboration, while Egypt and Tunisia signify geopolitical and strategic alignments. Iran and Turkey emerge as linchpins in China's broader ambitions, anchoring its interests in the region.

China's maritime endeavors also have far-reaching implications for regional powers. Collaboration with Russia, exemplified in joint naval exercises, signals a recalibration of power dynamics. The Mediterranean has, in this context, become a stage for the strategic interplay between global actors. Moreover, the potential symbiosis between Chinese commercial ventures and Russian naval requirements adds a new layer of complexity.

As we analyze the evolving landscape, we must also consider the potential for unintended consequences. The Mediterranean's historical resonance as a nexus of civilizations is interwoven with its potential for friction. The delicate balance of power, the intersection of diverse cultures, and the confluence of economic interests demand nuanced navigation.

The evolving dynamics in the Mediterranean, driven by China's expanding naval footprint, necessitate a recalibration of global strategic thinking. It beckons a reevaluation of alliances, an assessment of regional power dynamics, and an understanding of the fluidity of modern geopolitics.

As we witness this maritime renaissance, it is imperative to decipher not only the strategic implications but also the broader narrative of global interconnectivity. The Mediterranean, once



the cradle of empires, now assumes a new role in the symphony of nations. Its waters, infused with centuries of history, now echo with the aspirations and ambitions of the 21st century.

In charting the course ahead, it is incumbent upon global powers to navigate these waters with discernment, recognizing that the currents of history, though ancient, are inexorably linked to the tides of the present. The Mediterranean, with its indelible imprint on human civilization, now calls upon us to script a new chapter in the annals of geopolitics, where cooperation and competition dance in a delicate ballet on the azure stage of history.

China has devoted considerable effort over the years to building a naval force with unprecedented global reach, a feat not seen since the remarkable voyages of Admiral Zheng around the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries. While Zheng's navy, with its limited technology, ventured into the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Arabian Sea, it did not reach Mediterranean waters. Today, China's modern navy capitalizes on advancements such as the Suez Canal and the nation's expanding global interests to establish a noticeable presence in the Mare Nostrum. This presence has been growing steadily over the years, a trend that we will delve into in this article.

In regions contiguous to China, particularly in seas adjacent to its shores, the manifestation of hard power has become increasingly conspicuous. This shift towards overt displays of military strength comes after years of employing soft power tactics. In contrast, in the Mediterranean, we are witnessing a continuation of China's soft power phase in terms of its projections. Specifically, in the Mediterranean and the surrounding seas, including the Red and Arabian Seas, China is strategically establishing or acquiring footholds in ports to serve as facilities for its merchant vessels. This move could potentially serve as a prelude to the development of future naval installations. Additionally, China is actively engaged in exporting military equipment to nations eager to bolster their arsenals. Algeria and Morocco serve as noteworthy examples of countries near Spain that have deepened their military ties with China.

Furthermore, China is adroitly leveraging humanitarian situations to strengthen its presence in key locations. This approach has been notably observed in conflict-ridden areas like Libya, Syria, Yemen, and, more recently, Sudan. By providing aid and support in times of crisis, China not only demonstrates its commitment to global stability but also establishes a foundation for broader strategic interests in these regions.

In parallel with these efforts, China is actively cultivating collaborative structures with neighboring powers, particularly Russia and Iran. These nations, characterized by their revisionist stance towards the prevailing Western order, are natural allies for China's evolving global strategy. The convergence of interests between China and these revisionist powers is particularly evident in the Mediterranean region. Through strategic partnerships and shared objectives, China is further solidifying its presence and influence in this crucial geopolitical theater.

Russia emerged as a significant partner for China in the Mediterranean. The historical backdrop of Sino-Russian cooperation, combined with their mutual interest in challenging established Western norms, lays the foundation for a robust strategic alignment. This partnership extends beyond mere rhetoric, as evidenced by joint military exercises and collaborative initiatives in the region.

Likewise, China's growing collaboration with Iran underscores its strategic maneuvering in the Mediterranean. Iran's pivotal position in the region, coupled with its willingness to challenge the existing order, align closely with China's objectives. This alignment has manifested itself in joint exercises and cooperative ventures that serve to strengthen both nations' foothold in the Mediterranean.

In conclusion, China's expanding presence in the Mediterranean represents a strategic shift of monumental proportions. Through a nuanced combination of soft power measures and strategic partnerships, China is steadily establishing itself as a significant player in this pivotal geopolitical theater. While its naval presence in adjacent seas to China is characterized by the overt projection of hard power, in the Mediterranean, China is tactfully employing soft power tactics to build a foundation for its future strategic interests. This comprehensive approach, coupled with collaboration with like-minded revisionist powers like Russia and Iran, positions China as a formidable force in the Mare Nostrum. As China continues to navigate the complex web of global geopolitics, its presence in the Mediterranean stands as a testament to its evolving role as a major player on the world stage.

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