

ONE BELT, DIFFERENT AIMS: BEYOND CHINA'S INCREASING LEVERAGE IN THE GRAND MAGHREB

Djallel Khechib*



To cite this article: Khechib, Djallel, One Belt, Different Aims: Beyond China's Increasing Leverage in The Grand Magreb, INSAMER, 2018. (link)

October 2018

Introduction

For more than a century, The Grand Maghreb region (North Africa) remained a purely French zone of influence that was made the policies and economies of its independent states closely linked to the grand interests of France. However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the French leverage has known a marked decline, since the 9/11 events, North Africa region has become the focus of great interest of the United States, especially at the security level with the American war on the so-called terrorism. Along with the United States, China's presence features in North Africa has become evident, especially in construction and

infrastructure projects. The economic revolution that China has been experiencing since the beginning of the new century has helped to project its commodities and projects to the far horizon of the world. China was present in the Grand Maghreb since the days of the French occupation, especially in Algeria, when it supported the Algerian liberation revolution and then stood by Algeria during the Cold War since Algeria adopted the socialist approach after its independence directly, which created a good memory in the political imagination of decision-makers in the two countries until now. The situation is somewhat similar in both Tunisia

* Algerian author and researcher living in Turkey. His works are concerned with the field of Geopolitics, The Geopolitics of the Great Powers, and IR theories. To contact the author: kh_dj@live.fr

and Morocco. However, over the last decade, the Chinese presence in North Africa generally took a more stable and growing form. By 2014, China has overtaken France for the first time in terms of investment volume in Algeria and has become its first supplier. China is the first trade partner of the African continent, the value of China-Africa trade was 128 billion dollars in 2016, down from a high of 215 billion dollars in 2014, a value that exceeds the investments of other major countries such as the United States and France.¹

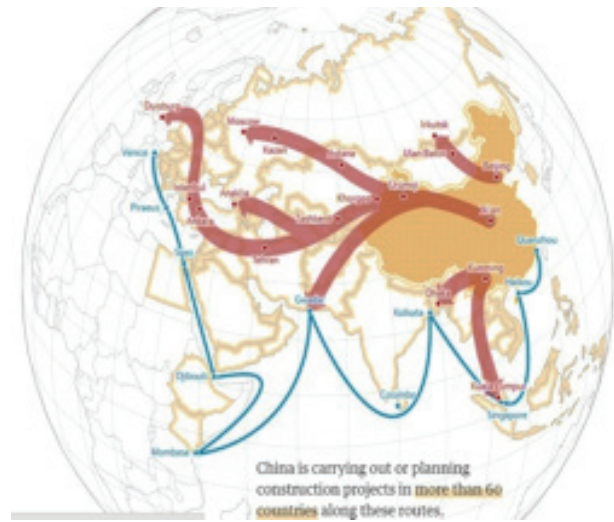
Since Chinese President Xi Jinping announced “The One Belt, One Road initiative” in 2013, the Maghreb countries have joined one by one to this initiative and signed memorandum of understanding and partnership agreements with China in this regard, in a way suggesting that the map of economic relations between China and these countries will greatly change the nature of power relations in the region, what makes us wonder -in this article- about the geopolitical and strategic dimensions of the Chinese growing presence in the Grand Maghreb, and how will affect the nature of power relations in the region?

The Belt and Road Initiative?

“The Silk Road” term dates back to the 2nd century BC, when the Chinese emperor sent General Zhang Qian to the West of China in 139 BC in a diplomatic mission in order to shape alliances with peoples in Central Asia which had been considered as an enemies of China, but General Qian was arrested for 13 years, then he succeeded to escape and return to China providing very attractive details about his journey for the Chinese Emperor which prompted the Emperor to send him again to explore the neighboring peoples of China. The Silk Road has consisted of a land routes and

sea routes, both of them facilitated the transfer of goods and ideas of South and East Asia to Europe, such as Chinese tea, inventions like papers, gunpowder, the compass, and silk, as well as cultural products such as Buddhist texts and Indian music.² After that, the Silk Road developed according to the transformations of history and geography.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the Asian continent has witnessed a new recovery led by China, the world’s largest economy. China has moved out of its territory towards the world, the trade and economic mechanisms are its means in this process. In 2013, in a speech in Kazakhstan, the Chinese President launched the idea of re-viving the ancient Silk Road in a new pattern, linking China’s economy and culture to the world. The initiative was called “One Belt, One Road initiative”, then the name was changed to “The Belt and Road Initiative”. The principle of this initiative is China’s creation of land and sea roads from its major industrial and commercial cities in the west of the country to the capitals of Western Europe, through Central Asia, Turkey,



Map No:1, explains the lines of the new Silk Road

¹ China Africa Research Initiative, “Data: China-Africa Trade,” *Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies*, 2016, USA. <https://goo.gl/Mn2mci> (accessed September 27, 2018)

² 24/01/2017، ماذا تعرف عن طريق الحرير؟ موقع الجزيرة، <https://goo.gl/yWXjnL>

the Caucasus and the Mediterranean ports, as well as other maritime routes through the South China Sea, The Indian Ocean, the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, the Arabian Gulf, the Levant, the Mediterranean Sea, as well as other routes to the west of the African continent, to Nairobi, Djibouti capitals and elsewhere. The North African countries declaring its willingness to join this global initiative represent the Chinese leverage in the far reach places of the world, China created a huge commercial road stretching thousands of kilometers through which China will build huge infrastructure projects and huge investments in these countries. Statistics show that China spends about \$ 150 billion annually³ in the 71 countries which have agreed to join the initiative. China is expected to spend more than \$ 1 trillion on this initiative and has spent more than \$ 21 billion by 2018 as investments, most of them were in Asia. Also, the Chinese companies secured until 2018 many construc-

tion contracts along the new silk line worth \$ 34 billion.⁴

A Brief Description of The Nature of China-Maghreb Relations

Figures show that trade and economic relations between China and North Africa have been remarkably good, these relations have peaked in the last decade, and region of 170 million people (along with Egypt) is represented a fertile consumer market for China. The construction sector is the most important sector dominated by China in 2016. The construction and infrastructure markets in the region are worth about \$ 9 billion.⁵ Trade between China and North Africa in 2000 totaled approximately US\$1.6 billion, by 2012, it had grown 20 times to approximately US\$31 billion. During 2000-2012, the value of Chinese exports to North Africa increased from a merely US\$1.4 billion to \$20.5 billion while Chinese imports from the region increased from US\$213 million

to US\$10.7 billion during the same period. At present, China is ranking among the top ten sources of imports for the region's economy. This underscores the importance of North Africa as a vital market for China.⁶

Algeria is China's most important partner in the Grand Maghreb. In the past two decades, the value of China-Algeria trade has grown dramatically. Algeria has become China's largest

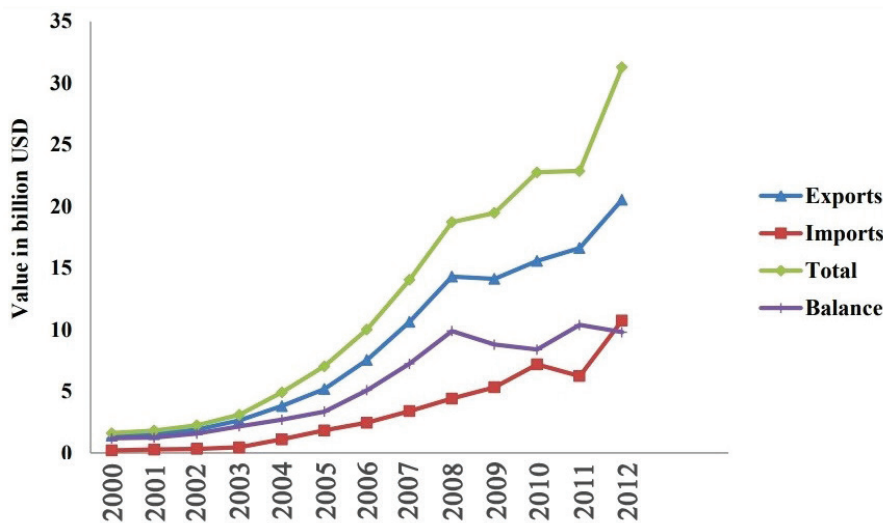


Figure 1: China and North Africa Bilateral Trade, 2000-2012 (in billion USD)

³ 15/05/2017 مشروع طريق الحرير الصيني، موقع بي بي سي للأخبار، <https://goo.gl/TirxRH>

⁴ Lily Kuo & Niko Kommenda, "What is China's Belt and Road Initiative?" *The Guardian*, 2018. <https://goo.gl/MXre97> (accessed September 27, 2018)

⁵ Mehdi Taje, "Les Nouvelles routes de la soie se L'afrique du Nord: Quelles synergies?" *Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung*, 2017, Tunis, p: 65. <https://goo.gl/yqKTeG> (accessed September 27, 2018)

⁶ Mohamed A. Elshehawy and Others, "China's Relations With North Africa: Trade and Investment," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, (2014) Vol. 2, Issue 3, p 188. <https://goo.gl/RsTgLV> (accessed September 27, 2018)

market in the Grand Maghreb. At the same time, China overtook France as the biggest source of Algerian imports. Now, the financial transactions between Algeria and China are settling in the Chinese Yuan instead of the US dollar. Also, China is embarking some giant projects in Algeria, such as the huge Opera House in the capital, the Grand Mosque of Algiers (It will be the biggest Mosque in Africa), the construction of a new airport in the capital, Olympic stadiums, the Foreign Ministry and Constitutional Court buildings, five-star hotels, car-assembling firms, a highway connecting the East and the West of the country at very long distances. Furthermore, China is investing in the oil and gas fields in the South of the country, and Algeria has become the first buyer of Chinese weapons in the African continent. By 2009, the number of Chinese workers in Algeria was around 50,000, making Algeria the first country which receives the largest Chinese community in North Africa and one of the largest receiving countries in the entire African continent.⁷ As part of the new Silk Road project, China has embarked on the development of vital ports along North Africa, including the port of Hamdania in the region of Charchal in Algeria, which the Chinese see as a vital port for the export of their goods to the northern shore of the Mediterranean (Along with the port of Enfidha in Tunisia, and Tanger Med in Morocco). “This \$ 3.3 billion project (Hamdania Port) aims to build a major distribution center for the Mediterranean with a capacity of 6.5 million containers and 30 million tons of huge cargo per year,” said Mr. Abigaël Vassalier.”⁸

As for Morocco, China is Morocco’s third trade partner after the European Union and the United States. The trade volume between the two countries reached \$ 3.23 billion.⁹ In May 2016, King Mohammed VI visited China, 15 cooperation agreements have been signed under which Morocco will benefit from Chinese investments, while China will benefit from the position of Morocco, which is close to Europe, in the export of its goods.¹⁰ Moreover, China’s investment in Morocco increased by 143% in 2017 to 855 million dirhams (about 90 million US dollars), compared to 351 million dirhams in 2017. This rise comes in the context of the construction of Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City, which will be dedicated to receiving Chinese investments in Morocco,¹¹ this project is one of the largest Chinese (and foreign projects) in Morocco and will be constructed over a period of 10 years. The Chinese investment is expected to reach \$ 10 billion in this project while providing employment for about 100,000 workers.¹² Morocco can also benefit from the new Silk Road project, which runs from the Iberian Peninsula to Morocco, passing through the Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, Mauritania and the Gulf of Guinea.¹³ Morocco also benefits from Chinese tourism revenues, the number of Chinese tourists to Morocco in 2017 was estimated at 120 thousand compared to 10 thousand in 2015, this came after Morocco canceled the visa on Chinese citizens.¹⁴

For Tunisia, China’s investment there was late compared to its neighbors until 2017 when the Chinese

⁷ John Calabrese, “Sino-Algerian Relations: On a Path to Realizing Their Full Potential?” *Middle East Institute*, American University, Oct 31, 2017, USA. <https://goo.gl/YXk73L> (accessed September 27, 2018)

⁸ Mehdi Taje, Op Cit, p: 65.

⁹ 11/05/2016، جسر اقتصادي مغربي بين الصين وكل من أوروبا وأفريقيا، صحيفة العرب.

¹⁰ Mehdi Taje, Op Cit, p: 69.

¹¹ 04/09/2018، الحسن مقتن، العثماني يطّلع في بكين على مشاريع الاستثمار الصيني بالمغرب، صحيفة الشرق الأوسط، <https://goo.gl/Wz2Dei> (accessed September 27, 2018)

¹² Mehdi Taje, Op Cit, p: 70.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ مشاركة المغرب في الاجتماع الوزاري الثامن لمنندى التعاون الصيني-العربي، ميديا 1، 09 يوليو 2018 <https://goo.gl/Y5tXTn> (accessed September 27, 2018)

became aware of Tunisia's importance. Despite its small size, China sees Tunisia as an important starting sea point to Europe. Tunisia plays the ideal mediator role for China which interested in controlling the waterways between North Africa and Europe as part of the "New Silk Road" initiative, China seems to be interested in the port of Bizerte in Tunisia, which has easy access to Europe and is located in an important sea center for fiber optic cables networks. In his official visit to China in July 2017, Foreign Minister Khamis El-Jahnawi said that Tunisia "fully supports" the Belt and Road initiative and is ready to participate in the projects. A month ago, the two countries signed three agreements that would increase trade cooperation, the agreements included the construction of a 200 thousand square-meter commercial center worth \$ 65 million in the capital Tunis.¹⁵

Tunisia's tourism sector (which is one of the country's economic pillars) is benefiting from Chinese projects. "The future of Tunisian tourism is in the hands of the Chinese market," said Leila Tekia, director of public relations and communications at the Tunisian National Tourist Office. In 2016, Tunisia launched a visa-free travel program for Chinese citizens, and in 2017, ten thousand Chinese citizens visited Tunisia, which shows the increase in the cultural exchange between the two countries.¹⁶ However, the volume of trade between the two countries remains modest. In 2017, it was estimated at \$ 1.5 billion. Tunisia's accession to the "Belt and Road Initiative" is expected to increase the volume of trade relations between the two countries more and more widely than it is today.¹⁷

As for Libya, the oil-rich country with a geostrategic position in the Mediterranean and close to Italy, which makes it the focus of any outside power, it was a place for promising Chinese projects before the war. In 2009, China's Ministry of Commerce estimated the volume of Chinese investment in Libya at about \$ 426.9 billion. With the outbreak of the war in 2011, there were about 75 Chinese companies investing in Libya, participating in 50 contracts worth \$ 18.8 billion. Also, 36,000 Chinese workers have been evacuated because of the war.¹⁸ China lost many of its projects there after the intervention of NATO. After nearly six years of the war, Libya's National Transitional Council has been established, which saw the country need about 100 billion dollars of investments in the war-torn infrastructure, what was seen by China as a new opportunity to restore the Libyan market.¹⁹ In the Mid-July 2018, Libya signed a memorandum of understanding with China to join the "Belt and Road Initiative" soon, which will make China get a huge share of investment and many infrastructure projects, especially as Libya is about to get out of a war destroyed everything.

All this increasing Chinese presence in the Grand Maghreb, makes us wonder about the geostrategic importance of this region in China's global strategy and what it can offer to China in this regard. In other words, what exactly China wants in the Grand Maghreb?

The Grand Maghreb and China Rivalry for Global Primacy

There is a controversial debate among scholars about the question of the Chinese rise, is will be a peaceful rise or not? Is China consider as a re-

¹⁵ Sarah Souli, "Tunisia hopes boost in Chinese investment can ease economic woes," *al-Monitor*, March 19, 2018. <https://goo.gl/m1k1dp> (accessed September 27, 2018)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Xinhua, "Tunisia to enhance partnership with China in expanding markets: official," *China Daily*, 17/05/2018. <https://goo.gl/thrFo1> (accessed September 27, 2018)

¹⁸ <https://goo.gl/PWSjk3> (accessed September 27, 2018) China's Engagement in the Libyan Civil War as a Case Study, *Lse Global South Unit*, Working Paper No. 5. 2015, p: 04. <https://goo.gl/PWSjk3> (accessed September 27, 2018)

¹⁹ Michael Kan, "China's Investment in Libya," *The African Business Journal*, August 2014. <https://goo.gl/QXtF8e> (accessed September 27, 2018)

visionist power in the international system or a power aimed to maintain the status quo? Here, we tend to the Neo-realists agreements like of John Mearsheimer, Robert Kaplan, and Stephen Walt. The Neo-realists argue that it is impossible for China's rise to be peaceful, and they have many arguments for that. China does not want to be the weakest party in an environment full of powerful competitors. When China was weak before, it was suffered by the occupation of others. Thus, in an Anarchic international system, the goal of any power is to be the hegemon unit over the rest of the units, and given to the impossibility of achieving global hegemony (Due to the stopping power of huge seas and oceans) the ambition of any power is to dominate its regional sphere in exchange for the expulsion of any external power which tries to penetrate this sphere or dominate it. And if a country can gain control over its territory, it means that it is ready to expand its sphere of influence out of its region, driven by its search for power until it reaches the borders of another strong country or an area belong to the influence of another strong country. That is exactly what China is doing today. The South China Sea is the most important regional sphere in which China seeks to dominate and expel the American presence from it, through various means such as shaping a network of alliances in the region, linking the economies of the region with its economy through the establishment of regional economic institutions, increasing the pace of armaments and maritime presence there, and even establishing industrial islands in this disputed sea, used often for military purposes. Finally, the Neo-realists argue that China will exploit the economic and financial gains which have got over decades to use them on its military aims in the foreseeable future. Thus, China's rise will never be peaceful.

Some of the New Silk Road lines pass through the South China Sea and the vital Strait of Malacca, this region is full of intense disputes and tensions between China and its neighbors on the one hand,

and China and the United States, on the other hand, China's insistence on passing the New Silk Road from there - as it was centuries ago - is an expression of its determination to dominate the South China Sea region as its most important regional sphere. In order to avoid any problems maybe exposed to goods and resources which passing from there, China established a land road to avoid this tensed region, passing through Kazakhstan to Europe where goods and resources going to Europe spend far less time than they spend by sea. All the land and sea routes pass through very vital straits and corridors, for today's China are trade corridors but tomorrow may turn into military corridors and areas hosting military bases for China, this is exactly what China's partners are fear from, as well as its Western rivals. In this regard, last year China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti. Analysts say, most of the ports and infrastructure set up by China may have dual use, for both commercial and military purposes. "If it can carry goods, it can carry troops,"²⁰ says Jonathan Hillman, director of the Reconnecting Asia project at CSIS.

The arrival of the New Silk Road to the coast of the Grand Maghreb countries means the arrival of Chinese influence to the gateway of the rich continent of Africa, also means that China is locating on the southern borders of Europe. China has become the first investor in these countries and has the largest infrastructure projects there, that sound the end of the Western economic hegemony over this region. In the foreseeable future, these countries will be linked to China's economy and will have huge debts to pay, which can be used by China as a means of pressure to obtain some military privileges, such as building military bases or the like. China may also benefit from its good historical relations with the countries of the region, such as Algeria, in attracting these countries to become a geopolitical pivot in its grand strategy. Needless to say, China has become a major supplier of arms in the countries of the region and the entire African continent.

²⁰ Lily Kuo and Niko Kommenda, Op Cit.

Algeria, for example, has become China's number one arms customer in Africa, China has broken into the Algerian market in several weapons categories. In May of this year, the Algerian military publicly released imagery showing Chinese-made LZ45 155 mm self-propelled howitzers (delivered in 2014) being used in tactical exercises. According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), over the past five years, Algeria has also acquired from China 50 C-802/CSS-N-8 anti-ship missiles and 50 FM90 surface-to-air missile systems from China. This past July, the Algerian Navy took delivery of the third and final C28A corvette ordered from China in March 2012.²¹

China, along with other emerging powers such as Russia, India, and Brazil, aims to contribute to the establishment of a more multipolar international order in which the West and the United States stop to monopolize the areas of influence, global responsibilities, and Global major decisions. China presents itself to the Grand Maghreb countries as their historical backer in their revolutions against Western imperialism, who have been there for more than a century, and therefore as the global power today facing global imperialist projects, this point will contribute to find common political ground between China and the Grand Maghreb countries. In 2011, China has stood against the intervention of NATO in Libya, which caused later many security problems in the region, this position is very compatible with the policies of some important countries in the Grand Maghreb, like Algeria, whose adopt in its foreign policy the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, as well as not supporting such military interventions by major foreign powers. Such consensus would contribute to the shaping of a common security ground between China and the countries of the region, which will

serve as a platform for engineering a common security perception, and identifying the friend from the enemy. China's policy, which is not interested in inter-state disputes, will help to promote this trend. China, for example, never talk at all about the Western Sahara dispute between Morocco, the Polisario, and Algeria, however, China focuses on its economic projects there away from any political differences that would impede the New Silk Road project that extends to that region.

Furthermore, China's aim behind deepening economic relations with the Grand Maghreb countries is to achieve some diplomatic purposes, such as expanding its supporters on the issue of Taiwan and Tibet,²² the huge investments in the region is a way to buy their votes in the international forums and organizations on the political issues which China considers as a sovereign issues.

In order to protect its commercial investments along the New Silk Line in general and in the Grand Maghreb region in particular, China will make great diplomatic efforts with international organizations and the countries of the region to convince them of the need to provide security protection for these investments and enterprises. China has succeeded before in achieving something like that in 2008 when she got the approval of the United Nations Security Council (Decisions No: 1816, 1838, 1846 and 1851) regarding the possibility of providing security protection for its ships and foreign vessels in the Gulf of Aden, especially with the poor security situation in Somalia and the high rate of piracy in the Gulf. Since then, China has deployed 16 protection ships to protect about 5300 Chinese and foreign ships, and the mission is still activated.²³ It would not be unlikely if China would try to do the same in the Western Mediterranean on the pretext of

²¹ John Calabrese, Op Cit.

²² Yun Sun, "Africa in China's Foreign Policy, John L. Thornton China Center and Africa Growth Initiative," *Brookings Center*, April 2014, P: 05. <https://goo.gl/59Whm7>

²³ Yun Sun, Africa in China's Foreign Policy, Op Cit, p: 11. For more informations see: Jérôme Henry, "China's Military Deployments in the Gulf of Aden: Anti-Piracy and Beyond, *Asie.Visions*," IFRI, No 89, November 2016. <https://goo.gl/8YWPLF>

protecting trade routes and investment zones in North Africa, especially in situations of security chaos that threaten its interests there, as happened in Libya years ago. This behavior will not be difficult for China due to the large geographical distance between it and the Maghreb region, in this regard, The Soviet Union gave us before a good example of the ability of the great powers to extend their influence to the far Geographical distances and even closer to the borders of their antagonists, as occurred in Cuba in 1962.

However, this will not be possible at the present time, as long as China is a “Partial Power”, as Professor David Shambaugh described it, and as long as the United States and Western Europe countries, in particular, still consider the Western Mediterranean region as an important part of its immediate national security.

Conclusion

Accordingly, “The Belt and Road Initiative” is the largest trade and economic initiative carried out by a single state throughout history, this project is still in its beginning, so it is too early to judge its success or failure from now, but what can be said about this project is “ambitious and promising project”, but it will not have an “innocent” commercial purposes as it has been promoted. According to Neo-realist analysis, the project may begin with purely trade-economic aims and end up with an ambitious geopolitical and military objectives. The Neo-realist analysis will not be

surprising, as long as it is based primarily on its deep understanding of the great powers logic. Therefore, China’s future aims are likely not to differ from those of the imperialist West in the past, but with different means and methods, this is what they so-called the logic of the great power, and this is what the Anarchic international system is leading to, which based on competition, hegemony and the lack of security among nations. The Grand Maghreb region is only a front of the fierce rivalry among the rising East and the dominant West, and maybe the region’s proximity to Western Europe put it in a hot front between the two sides in the foreseeable future. NATO will not accept a Chinese presence close to its territory as it did during the Cold War when it found itself on the verge of nuclear war in Egypt in 1956 and Cuba in 1962. Thus it would be forced to maintain political influence in North Africa by supporting its existing political systems and trying to contain Chinese leverage there. As for the Grand Maghreb countries, they should learn how to exploit the Global rivalry there, especially among China and the United States, in order to achieve various gains, and they should avoid the dangers of involvement on it, as it is happening to many countries in the Middle East which are exhausted by the clash of axes and strategies. In short, the Grand Maghreb countries must construct a sound perspective and a clear strategy to deal with this fierce global rivalry or they will find themselves as part of its major powers’ strategies.

