

Chinese partnerships: adaptive models of China-Lusophone cooperation

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Resumo

O Presidente Xi Jinping propôs pela primeira vez o conceito de “um novo tipo de relações internacionais pautado pela cooperação e benefício mútuo” durante sua intervenção no Instituto Estatal de Relações Internacionais de Moscovo, em março de 2013. Desde então, a China tem enriquecido continuamente a concepção deste novo tipo de relações internacionais, diversificando os seus instrumentos e abordagens diplomáticas. Entre essas abordagens, o desenvolvimento de parcerias globais destaca-se como uma das vias fundamentais para a promoção desse novo paradigma de relações internacionais.

Até dezembro de 2024, a China havia estabelecido diferentes tipos de parcerias com 145 países em todo o mundo. No âmbito da Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP), todos os nove Estados-membros formalizaram parcerias com a China. No entanto, os tipos dessas parcerias, bem como o grau de aprofundamento, fortalecimento e evolução subsequente, variam significativamente entre os Estados-membros.

Assim, este artigo propõe a seguinte pergunta de pesquisa central: que papel desempenham as parcerias da China com os países de língua portuguesa na configuração das trocas bilaterais? Adotando uma abordagem predominantemente qualitativa, analisa documentos e relatórios oficiais – como declarações conjuntas e comunicados de imprensa governamentais – para argumentar que essas parcerias continuam a constituir quadros diplomáticos essenciais no envolvimento da China com os países lusófonos.

Palavras-chave: Parcerias Chinesas; Países de Língua Portuguesa; Política Externa; Novo Tipo de Relações Internacionais; Parcerias Estratégicas

Abstract

President Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of “a new type of international relations featuring cooperation and mutual benefit” at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2013. Since then, China has continuously enriched the connotation of a new type of international relations and diversified its approaches. Among these approaches, developing global partnerships is one of the important pathways for promoting the new type of international relations. As of December 2024, China has established various types of partnerships with 145 countries around the world. Nine of the member states of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) have established partnerships with China, but their types of these partnerships, as well as the degree of subsequent upgrading, deepening and strengthening, vary among member states. Accordingly, this paper poses the central research question: **What role do Chinese partnerships with Portuguese-speaking**

countries play in shaping bilateral exchanges? Adopting a predominantly qualitative approach, it analyzes official documents and reports – such as joint statements and government press releases – to argue that these partnerships continue to serve as essential diplomatic frameworks in China’s engagement with Portuguese-speaking countries.

Keywords: Chinese Partnerships; Portuguese-speaking Countries; Foreign Policy; New Type of International Relations; Strategic Partnerships.

Introduction

In March 2013, President Xi Jinping first proposed the concept of “a new type of international relations featuring cooperation and mutual benefit” in a speech delivered at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MFA, 2013). Later, the report of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly defined its main diplomatic approach – diplomacy with Chinese characteristics – as aiming to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind (Xinhua, 2017, p. 17). Subsequently, the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly stated the need to improve China’s overall diplomatic agenda, work actively to build a global network of partnerships, and foster a new type of international relations (Xinhua, 2022a, p. 11). Unlike the international relations dominated by confrontation and conflict, the new type of international relations emphasizes peace, equality, and inclusivity among countries. It is designed to promote cooperation underpinned by shared interests, avoid conflicts and settle disputes or reach agreement through dialogue (Embassy of China in Philippines, 2016). Therefore, developing global partnerships is a significant innovation in China’s theory of foreign policy, as well as a key pathway for promoting and building this new type of international relations.

“Today’s China is a country closely linked with the world” (Xinhua, 2022b), and China continues to build a global network of partnerships to advance institutional and multilateral cooperation. Since 2013, when not only the concept of building a new type of international relations but also the Belt and Road Initiative were proposed, China has been establishing new partnerships with other countries, and, subsequently, many of these partnerships have been upgraded or deepened multiple times (Li & Vicente, 2020, p. 210). As of December 2024, the number of countries that have established various types of partnerships with China was 145,¹ and these Chinese partnerships are in significant ways distinct from classical, conventional alliances: whereas classical alliances once prevalent in international relations tend to be driven by military and/or hostile intents and necessitate some level of ideological and/or political alignment among the multiple states involved,

1. The authors updated this work based on their earlier publication (Li & Vicente, 2020).

China's approach to foreign relations is heavily influenced by traditional Chinese culture and by the landmark notion of non-alignment, with relationality being a significant guiding principle (Qin, 2009, p. 69). The partnerships that China builds are bilateral, and premised on equality, mutual respect (especially on the importance of political independence), mutual benefits, as well as harmonious development. They are non-antagonistic, characterised by non-alignment (The State Council, 2014), and are consensus-driven. Weber (2010) defines consensus as “something that exists when our expectations regarding the behavior of others are realistic”, and it is through consensus that partnerships turn such expectations into reality. As President Xi pointed out, “those who share the same ideals and follow the same path can be partners; those who seek common ground while shelving differences can also be partners” (Silk Road Fund, 2014).

Chinese partnerships are an ad hoc, dynamic, consensual and non-legally binding political-diplomatic instrument designed to set a flexible, bilateral and pragmatic cooperation framework to advance stable sovereign interests, and to generate a reasonable level of mutual benefits, economic security and peaceful development. Indeed, they are political cooperative frameworks, as well as a model of bespoke cooperation that can translate different forms of consensus into “a wide vision for change” and achieve “common points [...] through understanding and negotiations” (Shehu, 2017, p. 159). They can be as elastic, adaptable and dynamic as the two sides wish them to be, especially in comparison with traditional, conventional alliances. For example, the number of projects within a partnership can increase or decrease; the overall scope, nature and terms of cooperation can be modified; and the implementation process can accelerate or decelerate, in order to better cater to the individual parties' national interests and/or domestic policies and priorities. Such flexibility allows Chinese partnerships to accommodate and facilitate a variety of constituent programmes, providing a versatile basis for the two parties to continue to achieve substantive cooperation. Such flexibility also means that no partnerships exactly replicate others, as each partnership is unique to the specific implementors. Mardell (2024) states that “many countries use the nomenclature of partnerships, but few have such an extensive, complex system of partnerships as China.” For China, Chinese partnerships provide a stable, balanced platform for expanding and coordinating its interests with other countries (China Daily, 2017), shaping “an international environment that is propitious to its rise as a global power” (Michalski & Pan, 2017, p. 14) as well as becoming a significant international actor and advancing its global vision – to build communities with a shared future for humankind.

From a bilateral perspective, the establishment of China's first-ever strategic partnership with Brazil in 1993 not only signalled a deepening of diplomatic

ties but also laid the groundwork for more comprehensive and diverse forms of cooperation. Since then, China has progressively broadened its bilateral commitments, transitioning from sector-specific engagements to more integrated and multidimensional partnerships. Currently, nine of the member states of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) have established partnerships with China, but their types of these partnerships, as well as the degree of subsequent upgrading, deepening and strengthening vary from state to state. Therefore, the main research question in this paper stands as: **what role do Chinese partnerships with Portuguese-speaking countries play in shaping bilateral exchanges?** The authors adopt a predominantly qualitative approach, primarily analysing official documents and reports related to partnerships (e.g., joint statements, official news release), arguing that partnerships remain an essential framework of diplomatic instruments between China and Portuguese-speaking countries.

Literature Review

The academic literature on Chinese partnerships remains relatively limited and has only gained momentum in recent years. Some academic literature focused on distinguishing strategic partnerships from traditional alliances, particularly within the context of its foreign policy strategy. These studies aimed to identify the geopolitical function of China's tailor-made, top-down agreements, which differ markedly from Western alliance models. Over time, Chinese partnerships have become a cornerstone of its approach to diplomacy; this increasing adoption of partnerships reflects a shift from ideological alignment to pragmatic cooperation. Since as early as the early 1990s, China has adopted this strategy of partnership diplomacy, favouring flexible, non-binding arrangements over formal alliances (Strüver, 2017). These partnerships are primarily designed to promote mutual economic interests, mitigate geopolitical uncertainties, and enhance China's global influence (Yuan, 2025). Scholarly analyses suggest that China's partnerships are often forged with countries that possess substantial market potential or strategic geopolitical relevance, irrespective of ideological alignment (Abu-Haltam, 2025). This pragmatic and adaptable approach has enabled China to engage with a diverse array of partners across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, thereby reinforcing its position as a global actor capable of navigating complex international landscapes.

Scholars have extensively studied China's partnership diplomacy, analysing its evolution, classification, strategic significance, and observing the series of transformations in scope and depth that many of them have undergone (Men & Liu, 2015; Dai, 2015; Tang, 2016; Sun & Ding, 2017; Zhang, 2025). Yue (2018) offers a detailed taxonomy, categorising partnerships into six hierarchical levels:

comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, strategic cooperative partnership, comprehensive strategic partnership, strategic partnership, and strategic cooperative relationship. As Yue explains, “The hierarchical differences among these partnerships can be very difficult to identify simply by judging them linguistically. Instead, one must analyse relevant government documents along with observing the reality of the countries concerned and their relations with China” (2018, p. 10). This framework highlights the contextual features – political, economic, and strategic – that shape each bilateral relationship. Complementing this, Abu-Haltam (2025) proposes a functional typology based on empirical analysis of over 100 partnerships, classifying them into regular partnerships (P), strategic partnerships (SP), and comprehensive strategic partnerships (CSP). Each type reflects varying degrees of influence across cultural, economic, and military domains. Together, these models underscore the complexity and adaptability of China’s partnership diplomacy, revealing how these arrangements serve as tailored instruments of foreign policy rather than uniform diplomatic templates.

In addition, some scholarship has shifted towards examining Chinese partnerships as adaptive models of bilateral cooperation, with greater emphasis on their content and functional dynamics. Rather than viewing these arrangements as symbolic gestures, researchers have begun to explore their operational mechanisms and strategic outcomes. LeBeau and Zhang (2022) underscore the role of higher education collaborations in sustaining diplomatic ties and fostering intercultural exchange, highlighting the educational dimension as a key pillar of China’s soft power strategy. Moreover, China’s partnerships increasingly incorporate substantive themes such as sustainable development, digital infrastructure, and regional security, reflecting evolving global priorities (Yuan, 2025). These thematic expansions suggest that China’s partnership diplomacy is not static but is responsive to global challenges and domestic strategic interests. Recent literature further argues that these partnerships yield tangible outcomes, influencing trade flows, cultural engagement, and political alignment (Strüver, 2017; Abu-Haltam, 2025). This growing body of work positions Chinese partnerships as dynamic instruments of global governance and South–South cooperation, rather than mere diplomatic formalities.

However, when examining scholarly work specifically focused on partnerships between China and Portuguese-speaking countries (PSC), a significant gap becomes evident. Despite China’s growing engagement with PSC nations – particularly through platforms such as Forum Macao and the Belt and Road Initiative – academic analysis remains limited. With few exceptions, such as Horta’s (2012) foundational study on the strategic evolution of Sino-Lusophone

relations, which highlights both the complexity and the overlooked nature of these ties, and Leandro and Li's (2023) work on spatial development initiatives in PSC, which emphasises the flexible, consensus-driven nature of China's bilateral cooperation, most literature tends to generalise China's partnership diplomacy without addressing the unique dynamics of PSC engagement. Another notable contribution is the edited volume by Leandro, Santos and Li (2021), which explores China's relations with Portuguese-speaking Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), focusing on Macau's role as a multilateral platform and the opportunities for deeper cooperation.

Chinese Partnerships with Portuguese-speaking Countries

Regarding the relationship between strategic partnerships and alliances, Wilkins (2012, p. 54) argues that “strategic partnerships”, together with “coalitions of the willing” and “security communities”, are new forms of alignment. However, China has consistently adhered to a policy of partnership rather than alliance. Chinese partnerships are based on equality, peace, and accommodation, are not targeted at any third party or any imagined enemy, and transcend traditional military alliances (Yang, 2015, p. 16). **Among all Chinese partnerships, less than 10% are not designated as “strategic”.**² Meanwhile, the presence of other descriptors, such as “comprehensive”, “cooperative”, “all-weather”, “all-round”, “friendly”, indicate the scope of cooperation and/or bilateral relations.

China and the Portuguese-speaking countries have been consistently reinforcing their mutual relations through partnerships. **Table 1** illustrates the dynamics underpinning the establishment and evolution of partnerships between China and the nine Portuguese-speaking countries, categorised by partnership type. It also highlights their integration into regional economic frameworks and their positioning within the broader context of the interregional Belt and Road Initiative. As of September 2025, all nine Portuguese-speaking countries have formally established partnerships with China, and each has attained at least the status of a *strategic partnership*. This broad adoption underlines the significance attributed to these bilateral arrangements within China's foreign policy framework. The designation of “strategic” is not merely symbolic; it reflects a deeper alignment of long-term national interests and a commitment to sustained cooperation. Strategic partnerships are understood as instruments that contribute directly to shared developmental and geopolitical objectives, serving as platforms for dialogue, investment, and policy coordination. Yue (2018) offers a comprehensive interpretation of the term, noting that “by emphasizing the feature

2. The author updated this work based on their earlier publication (Li & Vicente, 2020).

Table 1. Portuguese-speaking Countries, B&RI and Regional Economic Integration

PSC	Partnerships with China		B&RI Agreement (Signed)	AfCFTA ³	Regional Economic Integration	
	Date	Types				
Portugal ⁴	2005	Comprehensive strategic partnership (全面战略伙伴关系)	2018	Not applicable	European Union (EU)	
	2018	Further strengthened				
Brazil	1993	Strategic Partnership (战略伙伴关系)	2024 ⁵	Not applicable	Southern Common Market (Mercosur)	
	2009	Further strengthened				
	2012	Comprehensive strategic partnership (全面战略伙伴关系)				
	2014	Further deepened				
	2019	Strengthened and deepened				
	2023	Deepened				
	2024	A community with a shared future for a more just world and a more sustainable planet.				
	2025	Strengthened				
Timor-Leste	2014	Comprehensive cooperative partnership (全面合作伙伴关系)	2017	Not applicable	Observer to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	
	2023	Comprehensive strategic partnership (全面战略合作伙伴关系)				
	2024	Deepened				

3. African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a landmark initiative launched by the African Union (AU) to create a single continental market for goods and services, with free movement of businesspersons and investments. Negotiations for the establishment of the AfCFTA began in June 2015 in Johannesburg, South Africa. In March 2018, 44 of the 55 African Union Member States signed the Agreement of establishing the AfCFTA in Kigali, Rwanda. It officially came into force on May 30, 2019, and trading under the AfCFTA commenced on January 1, 2021.

4. Portugal and China were the first countries to formally establish a Blue Partnership, signing the agreement in 2017, following a memorandum of understanding on maritime cooperation in 2016. This pioneering partnership marked a significant step in bilateral maritime collaboration, making Portugal the first European Union member to enter such an agreement with China. The Blue Partnership aims to promote cooperation in areas such as marine governance, ocean ecology, renewable energy, aquaculture, port infrastructure, and maritime culture, involving governments, research institutions, businesses, and civil society.

5. In November 2024, the Plan of Cooperation between the China and Brazil on Synergizing the Belt and Road Initiative with the Growth Acceleration Program, the New Industry Brazil, the Ecological Transformation Plan, and the Program on South American Integration Routes has been signed.

PSC	Partnerships with China		B&RI Agreement (Signed)	AfCFTA	Regional Economic Integration
	Date	Types			
Angola	2010	Strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系)	2018	Ratified 4/11/2020	Angola is also a member of ECCAS. South African Development Community (SADC).
	2024	Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (全面战略合作伙伴关系)			
Mozambique	2016	Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (全面战略合作伙伴关系)	2018	Ratified 05/07/2023	
Cabo Verde	2024	Strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系)	2018	Ratified 05/02/2022	Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Guinea-Bissau is also a member of the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN-SAD).
Guinea-Bissau	2024	Strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系)	2021	Ratified 27/09/2022	
Equatorial Guinea	2015	Comprehensive cooperative partnership (全面合作伙伴关系)	2019	Ratified 2/07/2019	Economic Community Central African States (ECCAS)
	2024	Comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (全面战略合作伙伴关系)			
São Tomé and Príncipe	2017	Comprehensive cooperative partnership (全面合作伙伴关系)	2021	Ratified 27/06/2019	
	2024	Strategic partnership (战略伙伴关系)			

Source: Authors' compilation. Last updated on 16 September 2025, retrieved from (1) <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/>; (2) <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/country/>; (3) <https://www.tralac.org/resources/infographic/13795-status-of-afcfta-ratification.html>.

reflects a deeper alignment of long-term national interests and a commitment to sustained cooperation. Strategic partnerships are understood as instruments that contribute directly to shared developmental and geopolitical objectives, serving as platforms for dialogue, investment, and policy coordination. Yue (2018) offers a comprehensive interpretation of the term, noting that “by emphasizing the feature of ‘strategic’, China wants to indicate that these partnerships should be long-term

and forward-looking and reflect its strategic concerns. These include, but are not limited to, China’s core national interests; (...) security issues, including national security, regional stability and global peace; economic issues and international affairs in general” (p. 10). This perspective highlights the multidimensional nature of strategic partnerships, which encompasses not only economic cooperation but also political alignment, regional stability, and global governance. In the context of China–PSC relations, the strategic label signals a deliberate and enduring commitment to mutual development and diplomatic engagement.

1. Portugal

The bilateral relation between China and Portugal is unique. It stems from their early historical ties and cultural bonds via Macau, and continues to be reflected through cooperation based on mutual trust since the retrocession of Macau to China in 1999. Earlier political diplomacy between China and Portugal opened the doors for subsequent economic diplomacy, which has been intensified since 2005 when China and Portugal established a comprehensive strategic partnership (Leandro & Li, 2024, p. 127). The joint statement issued by both sides in 2005 emphasized Macau’s special role in China-Portugal relations and proposed strengthening exchanges and cooperation in high-level visits, economic and trade investment, language education, scientific and technological innovation, justice, and health (MFA, 2005).

In December 2018, before the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Portugal, the heads of the two countries agreed to further strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership. Both sides reaffirmed their mutual support on issues concerning one another’s core interests and major concerns, and affirmed the role of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Forum Macao) as an important bridge for promoting bilateral relations and cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, which it had assumed since its establishment in 2003. To further expand the areas of cooperation, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Belt and Road Cooperation, proposing to strengthen practical cooperation in a wide range of areas, including trade, finance, energy, digital economy, scientific and technological innovation, maritime affairs, education and culture, and judicial security (MFA, 2018).

President Xi (2018) stated that Portugal is an important link between the Overland Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, and that Sino-Portuguese cooperation under the Belt and Road framework has its natural advantages. In 2018, Portugal became the first Western European country to sign a Belt and Road MoU with China, demonstrating its proactive and open stance to bilateral

cooperation. Indeed, Portugal has also played a positive role within cooperation frameworks: in 2015, it became a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; in 2017, it established the first Blue Partnership with China (Costa & Li, 2023, p. 28); and in 2019, it became the first country in the Eurozone to issue RMB-denominated bonds (Panda Bonds) (People’s Daily, 2023). Furthermore, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and open world economy, showed support for the core role of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization in the global governance system, and agreed to strengthen strategic synergy between China and Europe to jointly promote sustainable development.

This series of achievements not only highlights the complementary and multifaceted nature of China-Portugal relations but also reflects the two sides’ shared strategic aspirations and practical approaches to promoting global connectivity, ocean governance, and financial cooperation, which inject new strategic connotations into bilateral cooperation. The year 2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Portugal and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the EU. As a bridge connecting the EU and the Lusophone world, Portugal plays a key role under the frameworks of Forum Macao and the Belt and Road Initiative. In September 2025, Portuguese Prime Minister Luís Montenegro visited China and expressed his endorsement for the important concepts embodied in the Global Governance Initiative proposed by President Xi. Both sides are willing to jointly uphold multilateralism and continuously improve the global governance system (The State Council, 2025a).

2. Brazil

As mentioned previously, the origins of Sino-Brazilian strategic partnership trace back to May 1993 when then Chinese Vice Premier Zhu Rongji went on a state visit to Brazil. It was during a flight from Foz do Iguaçu to São Paulo that Brazilian Ambassador Rubens Ricupero proposed the term “strategic partnership” to characterize the evolving bilateral relationship. Zhu approved of the expression and began adopting it in his own speeches – first to business leaders at the São Paulo Federation of Industries (FIESP), and later in meetings with Interim Foreign Minister Luiz Fernando Lampreia and President Itamar Franco in Brasília. The proposal was well received by all parties, marking a significant turning point in the diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

Brazil thus became the first country to establish a strategic partnership with China. This occurred at a time when the concept was still unfamiliar in Chinese

foreign policy. Between March and November 1993, several high-level Chinese delegations visited Brazil, reflecting growing interest in elevating bilateral ties to a more structured and forward-looking level (Li & Frogeri, forthcoming). Although China had not yet developed a clear framework for implementing such partnerships, the adoption of the term signaled a commitment to deepening cooperation across multiple sectors. As Biato (2010, pp. 71–72) noted, for China, a strategic partnership implies a comprehensive strengthening of bilateral relations in all fields. This reclassification of the relationship occurred within the broader context of efforts to advance the China–Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) program, initially launched in 1988. Under President Itamar Franco’s administration (1992–1994), bilateral cooperation expanded significantly in trade, technology, and development. The CBERS initiative became a cornerstone of this new phase, symbolizing the technological and scientific ambitions of both nations.

In addition to space cooperation, China expressed strong interest in Brazil’s vast iron ore reserves, aiming to support its steel industry through joint ventures and improved logistics for ore extraction and transport (Biato, 2010, p. 69). Brazil, in turn, sought to enhance collaboration in areas such as telecommunications, health, information technology, and banking automation (de Sousa, 2024, p. 25). These developments illustrate how the strategic partnership framework provided a platform for diversified and mutually beneficial engagement, laying the groundwork for the robust and multifaceted relationship that continues to evolve today.

Since then, bilateral relations have continued to strengthen and deepen. In 2004, the two heads of state exchanged visits, the first China-Brazil High-Level Coordination and Cooperation Committee (COSBAN) meeting was held in 2006, and the two sides launched a strategic dialogue in 2007 (MFA, 2009). In 2009, the two countries further strengthened their strategic partnership (MFA, 2009) and decided to formulate the 2010–2014 Joint Action Plan, which was officially signed in 2010 (MFA, 2010a). This plan clearly outlined cooperation in the areas of politics, economy, trade, energy, mining, finance, agriculture, industry, information technology, aerospace, scientific and technological innovation, culture, and education (Embassy of China in Sri Lanka, 2010). The motivation of this plan was to strengthen and organize the integration and cooperation model between Brazil and China, and to provide strategic and comprehensive guidelines for the development of the strategic partnership and cooperation in relevant areas given the interests of both nations (Leite, 2013, p. 75; de Sousa, 2024, p. 32). In 2012, China-Brazil relations were upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership (MFA, 2012), making Brazil the first Latin American country to upgrade its

bilateral relationship with China to this level. The two sides further signed the China-Brazil Ten-Year Cooperation Plan, which complemented the 2010–2014 Joint Action Plan and jointly promoted substantial progress in practical cooperation and deepened the strategic connotation of bilateral relations. This was particularly significant for promoting cooperation in scientific and technological innovation (MFA, 2012). China-Brazil comprehensive strategic partnership further deepened in 2014 (MFA, 2014a).

In 2015, the two sides signed the 2015–2021 Joint Action Plan, which updated the strategic goals and tasks of cooperation and dialogue in light of new developments in bilateral and multilateral relations (Defesanet, 2015). This plan complemented the Ten-Year Cooperation Plan and promoted the further expansion of China-Brazil relations in the new era (MFA, 2015a). In 2019 and 2023, both sides reaffirmed and strengthened their comprehensive strategic partnership (MFA, 2019; MFA, 2023). In 2019, the two sides decided to update the 2015–2021 Joint Action Plan and the 2012–2021 Ten-Year Cooperation Plan (MFA, 2019). In 2023, the two countries committed themselves to the full implementation of the Strategic Plan 2022–2031 and the Executive Plan 2022–2026, both adopted at the sixth Plenary Session of COSBAN (MFA, 2023). Through these institutional documents, China and Brazil have continuously refined their cooperation framework, highlighted key areas, and improved implementation mechanisms, providing long-term institutional guarantees for technology transfer and innovation cooperation.

Nowadays, China and Brazil are the largest developing countries in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres respectively, as well as both being emerging powers with global influence. Although the inauguration of the strongly pro-American Jair Bolsonaro as Brazilian president in 2019 brought some fluctuations to the long-term stability of Brazil-China bilateral relations (Trinkunas, 2020; Jesus, 2022), President Lula's successful visit to China on the occasion of his 100th day in office in 2023 marked the restart of the comprehensive, multi-dimensional and friendly partnership between the two countries (MFA, 2024a). In 2024, China and Brazil jointly proposed building the China-Brazil community with a shared future for a more just world and a more sustainable planet, and this concept was strengthened in 2025 (The State Council, 2025b). These developments demonstrate the continuous improvement of the China-Brazil bilateral dialogue mechanism and the growing closeness of the relationship. Moreover, 2025 marks the tenth anniversary of the China–CELAC Forum. China and Brazil continue to deepen collaboration within multilateral frameworks such as China and Latin America Cooperation, the BRICS, and the United Nations, which not only serve as models for South-South cooperation but also significantly enhance the voice of the Global South in regional and international affairs.

3. Timor-Leste

China has supported and recognized Timor-Leste since its initial declaration of independence in November 1975 and continued to advocate for it at the United Nations and provide financial aid even after Indonesia’s annexation (Leandro, Leandro & Branco, 2019, p. 94). After Timor-Leste regained its independence in 2002, not only was China the first country to recognize it as a sovereign state, but it was also one of the first countries to establish an embassy in Timor-Leste (Horta, 2024). In 2014, China and Timor-Leste established a comprehensive cooperative partnership, which aimed to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries in political, economic, trade, energy, agricultural, defense and security areas (Government of Dili, 2014; MFA, 2014b). “One grid, one road, one port” – which refers to the national power grid, the Suai Highway Phase I, and the Tiba Bay Port – is considered China’s most representative infrastructure cooperation project in Timor-Leste (Lye, 2025). Construction of the national power grid, which began in 2009, now provides stable power supply nationwide (CNNC, 2025). The first phase of the Suai Highway, approximately 30 kilometers long, completed in 2018, aims to promote the development of the oil and gas industry in the southern coast of the country (Sim, 2019). The Tiba Bay Port, which opened in 2022, is the first Public-Private Partnership (PPP) project in the country, and significantly enhances Dili’s maritime connectivity, supporting Timor-Leste’s energy exports and regional trade (Government of Dili, 2022).

In 2023, the two sides agreed to upgrade their bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, through which they explicitly committed to further concrete cooperation in four key areas: industrial revitalization (e.g., fishery, coffee), infrastructure development (e.g., roads, bridges, ports, flights), food self-sufficiency (e.g., hybrid rice breeding cooperation, granary and food processing, corn whole mechanism technical cooperation), and livelihood improvement (medical support, digital TV Project, scholarships) (The State Council, 2023). In 2024, the comprehensive strategic partnership was deepened further, with closer alignment of the two countries’ development strategies and further implementation of cooperation plans (MFA, 2024b). While the recent high-level visits have certainly signalled hope for the bilateral relations between China and Timor-Leste, the ultimate goal is to make these agreements into tangible results that benefit the people. For China, in addition to Timor-Leste’s abundant natural resources and geographical advantages, investing in Timor-Leste also opens the door to a larger market – ASEAN, which it formally joined as the 11th Member State on 26 October 2025 (ASEAN, 2025). For Timor-Leste, maintaining good relations with China can also foster stable and balanced relations with Indonesia and Australia (Leandro, Leandro & Branco, 2019, p. 97).

4. Angola

Although China and Angola formally established diplomatic relations in 1983, Angola had been embroiled in civil war since gaining independence in 1975. It was not until April 2002 that a peace agreement, signed between Angola’s army and the leaders of the so-called “UNITA rebel”, heralded a new era for Angolan development and Sino-Angolan relations (Leandro, Li & Costa, 2025, p. 485). Since 2002, bilateral exchanges between China and Angola have increased across various governmental levels, all aiming to accelerate Angola’s national reconstruction, enhance the MPLA’s political legitimacy with China’s support, and expand bilateral trade (Leandro, Li & Costa, 2025, p. 499).

In 2010, China and Angola issued a joint statement announcing the establishment of a strategic partnership. The two countries agreed to deepen cooperation in the fields of politics, trade, infrastructure, energy, education, and health, and to improve cooperation mechanisms to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their collaboration (MFA, 2010b). For the past more than 20 years, Angola has consistently ranked among China’s top ten crude oil suppliers. The proportion of crude oil imports from Angola peaked around 2010 and has since declined annually (Voronoï, 2025). Clearly, the traditional Angolan model, in which the Government of Angola “uses Chinese credit facilities backed by petroleum-based guarantees to finance investments” (Leandro, Li & Costa, 2025, p. 500), is no longer sustainable in the long term, and the two sides need to expand cooperation in other areas.

In 2024, China and Angola upgraded their strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Both sides pledged to deepen political mutual trust, consolidate friendly cooperation, and jointly promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind. The two countries prioritized high-quality joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative and the implementation of the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative, which emphasise the expansion of practical cooperation in areas such as energy, mining, agriculture, green transformation, education, health, and people-to-people exchanges (MFA, 2024c). Since 2025, Angola has assumed the rotating Presidency of the African Union and is willing to strengthen multilateral cooperation with China to enhance the representation and voice of the Global South in the international community.

5. Mozambique

Mozambique gained independence on June 25, 1975, and China established diplomatic relations with the country on the same day. Therefore, 2025 marks the 50th anniversary of Mozambique’s independence and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Bilateral relations

between China and Mozambique date back to the 1960s, during Mozambique’s independence war, when China provided support to Mozambique’s struggle for independence (Jackson, 1995, p. 396). The former Mozambican Prime Minister Aires Ali said that “China helped us lay a solid foundation for development, not out of ideology, but out of strategic friendship” (Xinhua, 2025).

In 2016, China and Mozambique established a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Mozambique is one of the first few African countries to establish this level of partnership with China. The two sides emphasised mutual political trust and economic mutual benefit, and decided to deepen cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, energy and mining, agriculture, finance, and people-to-people exchanges (MFA, 2016). In fact, over the past five decades, the two countries have made significant progress in agriculture (e.g., the China-Mozambique Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center), infrastructure (e.g., the Maputo-Katembe Bridge, Africa’s biggest twin-tower suspension bridge), and education (e.g., scholarships) (CGTN, 2025). China has become Mozambique’s second-largest trading partner. In 2024, the volume of bilateral trade between Mozambique and China reached 5.18 billion US dollars (Agência de Informação de Moçambique, 2025).

6. Cabo Verde

In 2025, Cabo Verde, driven by its tourism, agriculture, and other service sectors, have successfully achieved upper-middle income status (World bank, 2025a). Since gaining independence, this small island developing state in West Africa has achieved great progress in development due to political stability, strong institutions, and sustained investment in human capital. Despite the geographical distance between China and Cabo Verde, cooperation in trade, infrastructure, science and technology, and health has continued since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. In 2024, China and Cabo Verde formally established a strategic partnership and agreed to deepen cooperation in infrastructure, blue economy, green development, digital economy, tourism, and agriculture (MFA, 2024d). As stated by Nuno Furtado, Cabo Verde’s delegate to Forum Macao, this “solid and practical” strategic partnership “demonstrates an intent to expand current levels of cooperation and explore new areas of common interest” (Fei, 2025).

7. Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau is one of the world’s poorest and most fragile countries (World bank, 2025b), and its post-independence development path stands in stark contrast to Cabo Verde. As Leandro and Gonçalves (2022, p. 354) mentioned, “from

[Guinea-Bissau's] first head of state, Luis Cabral (1974-1980), to 2022, we can see that the country has experienced 16 heads of state, 30 heads of government, and numerous ministers, countless failed national economic development plans, a year-long civil war, two constitutional suspensions, and at least four successful coups (and numerous failed coup attempts).” Such turmoil hardly lays the foundation for long-term stability and development in the country.

Nevertheless, the deep friendship between China and Guinea-Bissau can be reflected by the fact that the national anthem of Guinea-Bissau was written by founding father Amilcar Cabral and composed by Chinese composer Xiao He (晓河) (People's daily, 2024). The two countries formally established a strategic partnership in 2024, and have agreed to further expand practical cooperation in various fields. While deepening cooperation in traditional areas such as agriculture, fisheries, and infrastructure, they have also steadily expanded cooperation in new areas such as mineral development, energy, blue economy, and digital economy (MFA, 2024e). Moreover, the two sides have agreed to accelerate the export of high-quality agricultural products from Guinea-Bissau such as cashews (Guinea-Bissau's economic development relies heavily on exporting cashew, which has accounted for around 95% of annual total export (IMF, 2025, p. 17)) to China, while also exploring local processing (MFA, 2024e).

8. Equatorial Guinea

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1970, relations between China and Equatorial Guinea have steadily developed, with political trust between the two sides deepening. In 2015, on the 45th anniversary of diplomatic ties, the two countries established a comprehensive cooperative partnership, focusing on promoting cooperation in areas such as infrastructure, agriculture, education, and human resources development (MFA, 2015b). In particular, Equatorial Guinea donated a school in Jinping County, Yunnan Province, China. When faced with epidemics, the two countries have shown solidarity and mutual support. At the outset of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Equatorial Guinea donated US\$2 million to China. In 2021, the Chinese government donated COVID-19 vaccines to Equatorial Guinea, which was the first batch of vaccines provided by the Chinese government to Africa (Xinhua, 2024). In the past years, whether through economic and trade cooperation or training of technical talents, China has promoted Equatorial Guinea's development in numerous areas and significantly transforming the country. In 2024, the two heads of state decided to elevate their relationship to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, particularly responding to the Belt and Road Initiative and the three major global initiatives (MFA, 2024f).

9. São Tomé and Príncipe

China and São Tomé and Príncipe established diplomatic relations on July 12, 1975. The two countries severed ties in 1997 because of Taiwan, but diplomatic relations were restored in 2016. Since then, São Tomé and Príncipe has joined the Forum Macao and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), furthering cooperation with China within multilateral frameworks. In 2017, China and São Tomé and Príncipe established a comprehensive cooperative partnership, focusing on cooperation in tourism, fisheries, and agriculture (MFA, 2017). In 2024, both sides agreed to upgrade their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership, with the goal of expanding cooperation into new areas such as digital economy, green development, and blue economy (MFA, 2024g).

In short, as of 2025, among all Portuguese-speaking countries, except Brazil which established a community with a shared future for a more just world and a more sustainable planet with China in 2024, currently there are three types of partnerships with Portuguese-speaking countries: (1) comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership – Angola, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea; (2) comprehensive strategic partnership – Portugal, Timor-Leste; (3) strategic partnership – Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe. Generally speaking, the higher the level of partnership, the deeper the bilateral political mutual trust, the closer the economic cooperation and connections, and the broader the areas of cooperation, whether bilateral or multilateral, regional or international.

Table 2. Key cooperation sectors in the context of the existing partnerships

	Infras- structure	Regional Integration	Energy	Tourism Health	Blue Economy	Agriculture Fishing	Mining & Raw Materials	Science Education
Angola	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Brazil	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cabo Verde	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Equatorial Guinea	X	X	X	X				X
Guinea-Bissau	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mozambique	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Portugal	X	X	X	X	X			X
São Tomé and Príncipe	X	X		X	X	X		X
Timor Leste	X	X	X	X		X		X

Source: Authors

Over the past two years (2023 and 2024), China's partnerships with PSC have undergone significant and substantive development, particularly with Timor-Leste and the African PSC. These strengthened ties have facilitated bilateral cooperation and contributed to regional integration, notably through enhanced access to emerging markets and production hubs. As illustrated in **Table 2**, several cooperation domains – infrastructure development, regional integration, tourism, public health, science, and education – are consistently shared across all PSC, reflecting a convergence of strategic interests and development priorities.

Infrastructure projects, such as transport corridors and energy networks, have played a pivotal role in connecting PSC to regional and global value chains. Regional integration efforts, often supported through multilateral platforms and bilateral agreements, aim to harmonize trade regulations and foster cross-border collaboration. Tourism and health cooperation have expanded through initiatives promoting cultural exchange, medical training, and quality healthcare. Meanwhile, science and education partnerships have included joint research programs, scholarships, and institutional capacity-building, reinforcing knowledge transfer and innovation.

In parallel with the deepening bilateral relations between Portugal, Brazil, Timor-Leste, and China, the 2024 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) marked a turning point in the evolution of South–South cooperation, which also included African PSC. The summit underscored the strategic value of Chinese partnerships as a political-diplomatic instrument, offering a consensual, pragmatic, and cooperative framework for fostering mutually beneficial, win-win relationships. This approach reflects China's broader diplomatic ethos – prioritizing inclusivity, non-interference, and shared development goals – while positioning PSC as key interlocutors in the Global South's modernization agenda.

Conclusion

Chinese partnerships, as tailor-made cooperation models, operating individually or in conjunction with the Belt and Road Initiative, not only support the national development plans of each of the Portuguese-speaking countries, but also function as mechanisms of economic integration, contributing to strengthening each country's regional role. International relations have never been static, and any bilateral relationships (including partnerships) will evolve. These partnerships remain essential framework diplomatic instruments between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Therefore, the main research question in this paper stands as: **What role do Chinese partnerships with Portuguese-speaking countries play in shaping bilateral exchanges?**

Structured around the alignment of national core interests, identification of flexible cooperation mechanisms, and prioritization of key sectors, Chinese partnerships with Portuguese-speaking countries serve as strategic roadmaps for bilateral exchanges. These frameworks are programmatic in nature. They establish shared priorities that guide the engagement of both public and private actors. Moreover, they reflect China’s strategic objectives, including securing access to maritime routes, natural resources, markets, and diplomatic support. In turn, PSC benefit from infrastructure investment, technology transfer, access to Chinese markets, and development financing.

As illustrated in Table 2, cooperation across the nine PSC is most intense in sectors such as infrastructure, regional integration support, tourism, health, science, and education. These areas not only correspond to the developmental priorities of PSC but also align with China’s long-term interest in cultivating influence and fostering sustainable partnerships. The sectoral focus underscores the multidimensional nature of these engagements, which go beyond economic transactions to encompass institutional capacity building and knowledge exchange.

China’s approach to PSC is notably adaptive, which enables the development of tailored frameworks for each of the nine PSC, even when sectoral priorities overlap. This adaptability allows for differentiated rhythms of implementation and transformation, accommodating the unique political, economic, and institutional contexts of each partner country. In this study, we observe that some PSC, such as Brazil, frequently revise and update their cooperation frameworks, reflecting dynamic bilateral agendas and evolving strategic interests. In contrast, countries like Angola and Mozambique tend to maintain consistent frameworks over extended periods of time, suggesting a preference for stability and continuity in their engagement with China.

This variation highlights the flexibility of China’s partnership model, which is capable of responding to both rapid changes and long-term development trajectories. It also highlights the importance of institutional capacity and domestic policy orientation in shaping the pace and scope of bilateral cooperation. Ultimately, the adaptive nature of these partnerships reinforces China’s broader strategic objective of fostering a “community of shared destiny,” while allowing PSC to pursue context-specific development goals within a cooperative framework.

Furthermore, these bilateral cooperation roadmaps contribute to broader regional integration, positioning PSC as gateways to regional economic communities such as the EU, SADC, and ASEAN. This aligns with China’s long-term vision of building a “community of shared destiny” with every country and region (Mardell, 2024), a concept increasingly embedded in its diplomatic discourse alongside other high-level frameworks like the four Global Initiatives

(Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and Global Governance Initiative). Chinese partnerships with PSC are not merely economic or technical; they represent a blend of pragmatic cooperation and normative ambition in China's engagement with the Global South.

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