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Editorial

This edition of *Journal of China-Relations* touches on Luban Workshops in Kenya and China's policy regarding the South China Sea from 1990 to 2010.

One of the papers, in this issue, reveals that Luban workshops are a powerful soft power tool using education, vocational training and technical cooperation to build attraction, legitimacy and influence. It also finds that China's skills development and technology cooperation while largely aligns with Kenya's national digital development trajectory and technological development goals, also establishes strategic dependencies for China's political goals.

Another paper also argues that whilst there is a general understanding of the external motivations and internal drivers behind China's policy towards the South China Sea, these factors are often analyzed and examined in isolation. This paper therefore, addresses both factors simultaneously and draws conclusions regarding the likelihood of armed conflict in the region, particularly with regard to the claimant coastal states and the centrality of the US role.

This issue of *Journal of China-Africa Relations* features many empirical and theoretical based articles which can be of great benefit to every reader.

Professor Oyetola O. Oniwide

Nexus International University,
P.O. Box 70773,
Kampala, Uganda.

editor@niujournals.ac.ug

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Luban Workshops in Kenya: Soft Power, Technopolitics and China's Tech Leadership Ambitions

CLIFF MBOYA
Centre for Africa-China Studies (CACS) at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.
cliffmboya@gmail.com

Abstract. This article theoretically and empirically examines whether Luban Workshops in Kenya contribute to a positive image of China and advance its global tech leadership ambitions. It uses Soft Power theory combined with Critical Technopolitics to establish whether Luban workshops serve China's geopolitical tech interests or Kenya's national technological development and whether Kenyan students and instructors consider China a competent tech leader globally. The research employs a mixed-method qualitative design that includes theoretical analysis, semi-structured interviews with Luban students and faculty and case study observation of Kenya's two Luban workshops. It finds that Luban workshops are a powerful soft power tool using education, vocational training and technical cooperation to build attraction, legitimacy and influence. It also finds that China's skills development and technology cooperation while largely aligns with Kenya's national digital development trajectory and technological development goals, also establishes strategic dependencies for China's political goals.

Keywords: Luban Workshops. Soft Power. Technopolitics. Perception. Kenya. Skill Transfer.

1. Introduction

Since the first Luban workshop was established in 2016 in Ayutthaya, Thailand, many more have been opened across the globe with Africa reported to have at least 17 of them (Njoroge and Li, 2024). According to Yan (2021); Li and Xue (2022), China promotes its vocational training to the world as a big power responsibility and good gesture in order to aid global development. However, Luban workshops focus on Chinese technology and emphasize Chinese standards as part of its mission to globalize and promote Chinese technology (Yau and Van der Kley, 2021). They are soft power tools designed to influence other countries' vocational training by adapting them to Chinese companies' operational standards to support the companies' settlement abroad and boost its image as a competent tech and innovation power (d'Hooghe, 2021; Li and Xue, 2022).

Luban workshops in Kenya are presented as China's proposed intervention to the apparent human resource challenge in Africa. China depicts it as an altruistic and noble intervention to promote mutual development in Africa through vocational educational exchanges and talent cultivation (Opalinski, 2020). However, they are relatively new entrants in China-Africa engagements and understudied. There is scant theoretical and empirical knowledge on their influence locally and how it intersects with China's global tech strategy. In Kenya, China has set up two Luban Workshops at Machakos University and at Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST). A third one was to be set up at Taita Taveta University (TTU) but stalled. This study accords agency to the bilateral partners and recipients by amplifying their experiences, perceptions and impacts within China's broader engagement strategy and Kenya's technological advancement agenda.

1.1 Luban Workshops: Going Global

Luban Workshops were ostensibly established to promote China's vocational training to the world in order to aid global development (Yan, 2021; Li and Xue, 2022). Financial and material resources mostly from Tianjin provincial municipality has facilitated the establishment of such workshops in every continent across the globe. They are located in Thailand, India, United Kingdom, Indonesia, Portugal, Cambodia, Pakistan, Djibouti, Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Mali, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia and Rwanda among other countries. They offer vocational training in fields such as artificial intelligence, mechatronics, digital circuits, pneumatic and hydraulic systems and system control, railway operations and robotics to name a few (Johnston, 2023; The Economist, 2023).

Some observers believe that the international initiative by Tianjin authorities was a way to endear themselves to the central government and show their commitment to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under implementation globally. According to the Tianjin Municipal government, Luban workshops is based on the needs of the BRI to create a "new era of the Chinese model" through vocational education (Mahtani and Irwandi, 2023). Li & Xue (2022) and Zhao (2019) support this argument and contend that it actively responds to BRI's "going out" strategy of Chinese funded enterprises and enhances international cooperation to cultivate localization of technical personnel and capacity building in BRI countries. Therefore, they form part of the "going global" strategy that was ratified in Article 19 of "the decision of the Council of State Affairs on the acceleration of the development of the modern vocational education" that called on technical institutes in China to support Chinese companies' abroad in their operations by training locals (Opalinski, 2020).

Li & Xue (2022: 61) assert that 'Luban Workshop's original aspiration is to contribute to the BRI, promote international production capacity cooperation, and serve to build a community with a shared future for mankind'. They divulge that it was a result of deliberations on ways to improve cultural and people-to-people exchanges and formation of several international and influential brand projects. According to d'Hooghe, (2021: 42), in addition to expanding vocational training abroad, the Chinese government intends to further science and technology innovation with BRI countries and brand the BRI as 'a boulevard for innovation.'

While China's vocational training abroad is still in its early stages, it seems to be motivated by big power competition, intensifying tech wars with the U.S and its European allies, as well as its own growing technological prowess. Luban workshops focus on Chinese technology and emphasize Chinese standards as part of a mission to globalize Chinese tech (Yau and Van der Kley, 2021). According to Opalinski (2020), they are soft power tools designed to influence other countries' vocational training by adapting them to Chinese companies' operational standards to support the companies' settlement abroad and boost its image as an innovative country rather than a genuine attempt to increase locals' employment. Wang (2024) avers that indeed, Chinese companies abroad need a large number of human resources with core competencies to help them respond to the unbalanced economic development among regions.

The cost of training comes from China and Chinese companies with an emphasis on Chinese technology and merits that effectively serve ideological goals through generation and accumulation of goodwill (Ji et al., 2019: 493-494). They form part of Beijing's efforts to wield soft power through educational diplomacy by harnessing China's technological prowess to position China as an alternative development partner to the United States. According to Dirk van der Kley, a research fellow at the Australian National University, "China's overseas economic aim is to tie the emerging economies of the world more closely to China's industrial system." He added, "Xi Jinping is trying to create a new world order in which the U.S. role is reduced. In the case of Luban, which can provide genuine benefits for recipient states, the underlying goal of reshaping the world order does not go away."(Mahtani and Irwandi, 2023).

Luban workshops provide instructional materials with Chinese technical standards and Chinese technical experimental equipment designed to facilitate integration of Chinese approaches into the local academic system and nurture technical and skilled personnel for the most preferred industries (Muratbekova, 2024). However, (Otieno *et al.*, 2022: 9) think that they are actually excellent platforms for cultural exchanges since Chinese instructors as well as tutors and trainees from partner countries have the opportunity to connect and enhance people to people ties. They are considered "Confucius Institutes" for technical education with the ambition to be as pervasive as CIs and loyal to China's overseas political interests.

While being promoted as an initiative of Tianjin Municipality, China's Ministry of education plays a supervisory role and the initiative is firmly implemented as part of the BRI's international strategy. Opalinski (2020) argues that Luban workshops are being used to reinforce Beijing's "win-win" rhetoric in response to criticism over Chinese labor in BRI projects, particularly in Africa. "It is a really smart way of both addressing a long-standing criticism around the use of Chinese labor and also finding a way to subtly ensure that there's a future orientation in these countries toward adopting Chinese technologies," (Mahtani and Irwandi, 2023). They are most likely to be set up in African countries with overlapping interests between Free Trade zones, Chinese manufacturing plants and BRI countries (Benabdallah, 2018).So far, 17 Luban workshops have been set up in 15 African countries within the framework of the BRI and FOCAC (Njoroge and Li, 2024).

According to Wang (2024) the Chinese government strives to facilitate Africa's self-reliance and promote capacity for sustainable development through Luban workshops. He argues that graduates from Luban workshops are highly accepted in the labor market, especially by Chinese companies. However, he also notes that despite provision of advanced equipment to help African countries leapfrog in certain areas, there is a general lack of enthusiasm for new technologies and equipment due to a social environment where innovation mechanisms are low and researchers and educators are poorly paid. Li & Xue (2022: 57) argue that they still face challenges with regards to branding and scale development as the entire system and operation mechanism is imperfect and yet to be standardized. Kassenova (2022) sees Luban workshops as part of China's gift giving culture. They form an essential part of China's foreign aid as instruments of soft power that come with certain expectations such as demands for gratitude, loyalty in international organizations and acknowledgment of its great power status (Shapiro and McNeish, 2021:149).

It is a decade since the first Luban workshop was established in Thailand in 2016 and half a decade since the first Luban workshop was established in Africa in Djibouti in March 2019. Scholars have explored their global narratives, operational models, and motivations. Previous research has focused on their origin, global expansion and their links to the BRI and FOCAC. Some scholars have attempted to compare them with CIs with emphasis on the 'going global' strategy. There is a lot of emphasis on the Chinese narrative of Luban workshops with much less focus on empirical feedback from the African partners, recipients and contexts. The objective of this research is to theoretically and empirically assess whether Luban workshops in Kenya enhance Kenya's technological capacity, China's soft power and its leadership ambitions in the global tech competition. It will also evaluate their value for Kenyan students and the national technological development goals.

The study integrates multiple qualitative research approaches to achieve an in-depth understanding of the subject. Preliminary desktop research was followed by fieldwork that was conducted between January 2025 and June 2025. A comparative multiple case study approach was employed where the two existing Luban workshops in Kenya were studied to capture diverse institutional contexts: Machakos University (cloud computing), Meru University of Science and Technology (e-commerce and vocational skills), and the stalled Taita Taveta University (petroleum engineering). Observation and document analysis were conducted to provide authentic insights in real time and analyze preexisting material to enhance data triangulation and increase data validity and depth. Documents included the Luban curriculum and brochures, speeches from state officials, diplomats and staff at Luban workshops. It was followed by semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of 21 students and 4 staff at the Luban workshops who were available during the fieldwork visit. The interview questions were designed to elicit rich, descriptive data on participants' perspectives, experiences, and perceptions related to the Luban workshops and China place in relation to Kenya's technological development agenda.

Analysis integrated a synthesis of Joseph Nye's Soft Power theory and Critical Technopolitics. Soft Power explains how China uses education, vocational training, and technical cooperation to build attraction, legitimacy, and influence without coercion. Luban Workshops function as soft power instruments in tech as Confucius Institutes with language and culture (Muratbekova, 2024). Critical Technopolitics examines how technology transfer, skills training, and digital infrastructure embed power relations, shape dependency, and influence national development trajectories (Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017). It helps interrogate whether the Luban workshops serve Kenya's interests or primarily China's strategic goals. Their synthesis combines Soft Power attraction with critical analysis of power asymmetries in tech transfer, enabling a nuanced assessment of both image-building and developmental impact.

1.2 Soft Power

Joseph S. Nye introduced the concept of "soft power," defining it as the ability to secure preferred outcomes in international relations through attraction rather than coercion (Nye 1990). He used the concept to explain U.S. leadership, arguing that global influence flowed from admiration for American values, economic success, and political openness (Cho and Jeong 2008; Herr 2019). Soft power goes beyond mere persuasion because it requires the ability to attract, shape preferences, and produce policy outcomes that are often assessed through recipient feedback and policy actions as well as polls or focus groups (Nye 2008). Central to the concept is agenda-setting and the ability to make others prefer your choices.

Although China's discourse on soft power largely conforms to Nye's conceptual framework, its scope goes beyond Nye's conceptualization to include unique Chinese philosophical ideas and internal realities (Mingjiang 2008, 288). The idea that

attraction can realize a state's aims have deep roots in Chinese thought. Classical strategists, Taoist texts, and Confucian writings emphasized morality, benevolent governance, and winning hearts and minds as sources of influence (Blanchard and Lu 2012). Where Nye emphasized culture, political values, and foreign policy, China has emphasized three strategic resources: its development model, a foreign policy framed around "peaceful rise/development," and the civilizational appeal of Chinese history and culture (Cho and Jeong 2008, 461).

Under Xi Jinping after 2013, China adopted a more assertive and nationalistic foreign policy that rests on national heritage and pride. Xi's reframing of soft power tied international ambitions more closely to domestic political and philosophical traditions, using soft power to bolster both internal stability and external stature. This approach prioritizes broader strategic soft-power assets that include China's development model, its political system, and civilization to cultivate trust, command respect, and expand its geopolitical influence (Herr 2019, 15). The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is the technological and digital component of the BRI. It integrates hardware exports with technological training deepening partner countries' integration into Chinese digital ecosystems (Thussu, 2025). The initiative is a formidable soft-power tool, particularly in Africa as it supplies much needed digital infrastructure. Its main attraction is offering accessible and affordable digital modernization, fostering goodwill by presenting an appealing model of digital modernization, distinct from governance restrictions that often accompany the West (Wiater, no date).

1.3 Critical Technopolitics

The term "technopolitics" derives from the history of technology tradition to "account for the ability of competing actors to envision and enact political goals through the support of technical artefacts" (Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017, pg. 6). Edwards and Hecht (2010) consider technopolitics as a dynamic, co-constitutive interplay between technology and politics, in which power is central and outcomes are never singular but shaped by multiple, contested positions. They see technology and politics as mutually shaping because political processes influence how technologies are designed and used, while technologies in turn reconfigure political relations and possibilities. Because different actors can deploy the same technology for different ends, technopolitical situations always involve multiple positions rather than one fixed response. They put power at the heart of their analysis arguing that technology does not automatically dominate politics, but it plays a constitutive role in how political power is produced, distributed, and contested. This multiplicity means technology can either diffuse power across several actors or concentrate it in one actor against others, depending on how it is mobilized. Therefore, an actor's motivations, strategies, and framing of technology therefore matter crucially for how political power is constituted and transformed (Edwards and Hecht in (Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017).

Treré et al in (Jeppesen, 2021) define technopolitics as "a sophisticated form of communicative action that is a complex blend of technological knowledge and digital expertise used for radical political purposes with the technology itself seen as a site of contestation". Kirkpatrick (2017) focuses on Andrew Feenberg's idea of a technical code, with the key concept being that technology design and use are always political. The concept of the "technical code" shows how non-technical meanings and values become embedded in technologies, shaping how they are used and how they are positioned within social and cultural imagination. It works by assigning influence at two levels: first, by strongly shaping possible actions already at the design stage; and second, by assigning technologies a specific symbolic role in social life, distinguishing them from other kinds of artifacts. These meanings and symbolic placements are not fixed and they differ across historical and cultural contexts. Therefore, as Feenberg argues, the technical code is part of a contested process in which diverse social networks comprising actors with often sharply opposed interests struggle over how a technology is designed, interpreted, and deployed (Kirkpatrick, 2017). According to Brey in (Bantwal Rao *et al.*, 2015), in the context of Fay's general categorization of five systematic power relations, "technology can enhance and transform the manner in which *coercion*, *seduction*, *force*, *manipulation*, and *leadership* are exercised".

Understanding technopolitics requires examining how actors frame technologies and advance "contesting claims" in policy debates, since these frames shape which uses and impacts become politically salient. As Edwards and Hecht emphasize, technologies themselves are not technopolitics but rather, technopolitics emerges from the practices of using technologies within political processes and toward political aims. It analyzes how actors (states, firms, social groups, experts) use technical systems to pursue political aims such as nation-building, security, development, control, or resistance. The focus can be descriptive or analytical with the aim of mapping how technical artifacts, infrastructures, and expertise

become sites of political struggle and governance (Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017).

In sum therefore, technopolitics can be defined as "the strategic practice of designing or using technology to constitute, embody, or enact political goals. It treats technology and politics as intertwined with technologies being more than mere tools, but embodiments of power. In this sense, technopolitics can be used in a relatively neutral way to study *how* technology and politics co-produce each other, without necessarily taking a stance on whether those arrangements are just or oppressive (Bantwal Rao *et al.*, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2017; Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017).

This research takes a critical approach to "technopolitics" by interrogating the power relations, ideologies and normative assumptions behind the role of Luban workshops in Kenya. Critical technopolitics takes the basic insight of technopolitics, that technology and politics are co-constitutive and adds an explicitly critical theoretical lens. It does not only ask *how* technologies enact political goals, but whose interests they serve, what forms of domination or exclusion they enable, and what alternatives might be more democratic or just. It treats technical systems as sites of ideological struggle, examining how narratives of progress, efficiency, security, or "smartness" can mask inequalities or depoliticize decisions.

2. Case Studies:

2.1 Luban Workshop at Machakos University

The first Luban workshop in Kenya was established at Machakos University on 14th December 2019 with the support of the Tianjin City Vocational College (TCVC) and Huawei Technologies (Machakos University, n.d; Otieno et al., 2022). It offers correlated courses such as Bachelor of science in Cloud Computing and Information Security, Bachelor of science in Computer Science, Bachelor of science in Information technology, Huawei Certified ICT Associate (HCIA) in Cloud computing (Professional Training), Huawei Certified ICT Associate (HCIA) in Artificial Intelligence (Professional Training), and Huawei Certified ICT Associate (HCIA) in Datacom (Professional Training) (VC's Desk, n.d).

The Luban workshop at Machakos University is also referred to as "Cloud Computing and Information Security Training Centre" because it focuses on these two courses. It has several sub-sections that deal with Big Data Analytics, Intelligent Internet of Things (IoT) Learning sub-section, Data Centre services and Server virtualization, Data Backup and restoration, Long-range Wireless Communication Technologies including (3G, 4G and 5G Networks), Short-range wireless Communication Technologies, Block-Chain etc. It works closely with the department of Computing and Information Technology (CIT) as well as the Google Developer Club, Innovation Club and Science club that utilize the workshop's resources, suggesting that there is no lock in in terms of Chinese tech and standards (VC's Desk, n.d). The workshop plays a lead facilitating role in curriculum development, training and innovation, equipment and learning materials. It has a capacity of 100 students and can run two classes concurrently (Belt and Road Portal, 2024).

According to the former Vice-chancellor, Prof. Lucy Irungu, who was present during its launch, the Luban Workshop provides 'an opportunity for Kenyan students to partake in world-class and innovative cloud computing courses that will stimulate original research in the field of ICT'. In the same event, Mr. Zhao Xiyuan, Minister counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Kenya explained that the Luban workshop is aimed at providing high-end professional and technical skills training to help college students meet requirements of the emerging global market. He hoped the Luban workshop at Machakos University will become a successful model of cooperation between China and Kenya in educational innovation (Belt and Road Portal, 2024; Machakos University, n.d).

The Luban Workshop is touted as an important hub for practical training in advanced technologies and fostering student innovation at Machakos University. Since its establishment, it has equipped over 600 students with practical skills meant to foster innovation relevant to the Kenyan context. Examples include the development of an AI-powered cloud-integrated safari system to help tourists select wildlife destinations in Kenya by a fourth-year student, Mark Omaiko, specializing in cloud computing and information security. Michael Mugambi, a Computer Science student at the University credits the Luban workshop for inspiring and actualizing a hotspot billing system that facilitates access to high-speed internet to low income households through pay as you use model. He partnered with three other students to develop an electronic device that can purchase internet in bulk and then share WI-FI in public spaces using pay as you use system at affordable rates. Dickson Esamai, a fifth-year electrical and electronics engineering student, leads a team to develop an innovative agricultural device. The hand-held tool is designed to assist farmers in selecting suitable crops for cultivation based on soil nutrient content and

features sensors to measure soil moisture and determine the right amount of water for their crops. The device can transmit essential farming information via text messages to basic mobile phones. Additionally, Ian Omwenga Ombaki is utilizing the workshop's resources to develop an automated hydroponics system, with the goal of encouraging urban farming to enhance household food security. These innovative success stories have been attributed to the advanced resources available at the Luban workshop that include substantial data storage capabilities provided by Huawei cloud storage (Njoroge and Li, 2024).

In December 2024, Machakos University conducted the 'Luban workshop evaluation conference' and signed a three-year cooperation agreement with TCVC to enhance the impact of the workshop with an aim to promote the transfer of practical skills and expand opportunities for vocational training in the East African region. During the conference, Dr. Christopher Gatama Gakahu, the Chair of the Council at Machakos University, noted that the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application is being bridged and students are equipped to excel in an increasingly globalized and technologically advanced world contributing to the national development agenda. Cloud data centers, cloud computing and IoT systems, urban communication and fiber-optic networks, urban safety monitoring systems, and intelligent transportation systems were identified as the key projects supported by the workshop at Machakos University (Admin, 2011; Abbas, 2024).

Field visit on June 6, 2025 helped identify further details about the Luban workshop at Machakos university. The workshop is established under the 5-in-Readiness SSETT concept. The concept is basically a standardized quality assessment measure for the establishment of the Luban workshop. Learning is guided by the EPIP (Engineering, Practice, Innovation, Project) model, described as a new way of talent cultivation, which is "guided by practical projects, oriented by practical application and aimed at the cultivation of innovation ability." During the evaluation conference in December 2024, the Kenya EPIP Teaching, Research and Application Promotion Demonstration Center and the Digital Talent Training Center were unveiled at the Luban workshop in Machakos University. Several Chinese companies in the technological sector working closely with the TCVC were represented. They include; Shenzhen Wuxin Zhidao Technology Co., Ltd., Tianjin Qicheng Weiye Technology Co., Ltd., Beijing Beiyou Future Education Technology Co., Ltd., and Tianjin City Ruibang Digital Technology Co., Ltd. The partnerships are supported by both the regional and national authorities that include both the Ministries of education in China and Kenya, the Hebei district of Tianjin City and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Kenya that formed part of the evaluation team.

2.2 Luban Workshop at Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST)

The Luban workshop at Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST) was established on 4th September 2023 in collaboration with Tianjin City Vocational College (TCVC). It consist of vocational education and Silk Road e-commerce centers, designed to equip students and professionals with practical skills and knowledge relevant for emerging industries and today's job market (Belt and Road Portal, 2024). According to the Vice-chancellor at MUST, Romanus Odhiambo, experts from TCVC will provide training on e-commerce and ICT and foster exchange of knowledge and cultural values between the two institutions. He added that TCVC will cooperate with MUST to develop and operationalize a four-year undergraduate course in e-commerce and computer science (The Star, 2023; Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

Zhao Xiyuan, Minister counsellor of the Chinese Embassy in Kenya during the launch ceremony, said that China will work closely with African countries to establish 10 Luban workshops in Africa to fulfil the pledge by president Xi Jinping (The Star, 2023). Chinese and Kenyan state representatives emphasized the establishment of the Luban workshop at MUST as a symbolic gesture highlighting friendship and cooperation between China and Kenya and a commitment to advancing education, technology and innovation (Meru University of Science and Technology, 2023). Chinese tech giant Huawei supported the set-up of Luban workshop and promised to provide advanced equipment having already worked with MUST since 2019 and trained five lecturers in artificial intelligence and cyber security (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

In December 2024, MUST hosted a delegation from China for an assessment ceremony at its Luban Workshop. A shared vision of advancing education through the Engineering, Practice, Innovation, Project (EPIP) model that aligns with Kenya's new competency-based curriculum was highlighted. While it was noted that teacher training on EPIP has already equipped MUST faculty to deliver cutting-edge education, additional support for training was requested to ensure the model's success. Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Romanus Odhiambo noted that

Luban workshop has revolutionized technical education at MUST with state-of the art equipment and a focus on hands-on learning that was limited before its inauguration. He revealed that it set the stage for programs like the E-commerce curriculum at MUST (MUST, 2024).

Field visit at MUST main campus on January 22, 2025 revealed further details about the Luban workshop. It is hosted at the 'innovation and entrepreneurship center'. It is dotted with murals displaying Luban workshops across the globe and their dates of establishment highlighting its global role and reach. There are several other murals displaying key events and important dates as the initiation ceremony, visits by officials from TCVC, exchange programs and instructional exchanges between teachers and staff of the two institutions. Chinese Red lanterns dangle from the ceiling of several rooms that serve different learning functions including; Innovation hub hosting the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Institute, the Aerial Class and meeting area, Air Class, ICT learning center, Technical and skill exchange area, enterprise Sand Table Training Center and Cloud computing lab.

Four key guiding values at the Luban workshop are displayed in one of the common rooms. The first is 'One brand, two features'; conceptualized as 'an exchange brand between China and foreign countries' and 'high-end technical talents diploma education skills training for economic development.' The second one is 'Three modes'; An intercollegiate and international cooperation mode, A school-enterprise cooperation mode and A national cooperation mode. The third is 'Four services'; Serving the "one Belt and One Road" Initiative, Serving the economic and social development of the cooperative countries, serving the international cooperation of Chinese enterprises and serving the international exchange of vocational education. The fourth is 'Five principles'; equal cooperation, adaptation to local conditions, high quality first, ability and skills cultivation stressed and Integration of enterprises and vocational education.

The ICT learning center contains a large mural on a global map with three key guiding principles in bold font namely; International perspective, depth of specialization and cross border integration and innovation. Under them the motto is written in Chinese and in English. The English version reads "Taking 'digital skills', 'cross-border e-commerce', and talent cultivation' as the main line, focusing on new points of convergence and growth in China-Africa cooperation such as digital commodity trade, cross-border e-commerce, and vocational skill talent cultivation, sharing cross-border e-commerce, live streaming courses, and platform resources in Meru County, further helping African countries and regions bridge the 'digital divide' and improve the convenience and balance of skill acquisition; promote the value of skills and enhance the value and space of the development of skilled talents".

The ICT learning center also hosts the Huawei ICT Academy with its own introductory mural in Chinese and in English. The English version states that "Huawei ICT Academy is a global school-enterprise cooperative project led by Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. It aims to disseminate Huawei ICT technology and product knowledge to college students worldwide, encouraging them to participate in Huawei Vocational and Technical Certification and cultivating innovative and applied technical talents for society and the ICT industry chain worldwide. It carries out professional construction and reform in artificial intelligence, big data and the Internet of Things, cultivates new ICT talents that meet industry needs, and supports the cultivation of new ICT talents in AI, Harmony OS, Big Data, IoT, Gauss DB, Kunpeng computing industry and other fields".

The main classroom consists of desks and chairs labelled 'Kenya Luban workshop' next to the logo and can host 30-50 students at a time. Notable books on display include, 'The Interpretation of Engineering Practice Innovation Project (EPIP)', 'Luban workshop: Luban workshop construction and development,' and the book 'Xi Jinping; The governance of China'. According to the fieldwork guide, the Luban workshop at MUST is still at its early stages and emphasis is on curriculum development and teacher development.

A brochure for the Kenya Luban workshop Teacher training at MUST is available as a guide to the activities of the institution with the EPIP concept at its core. EPIP is described as a kind of thought plays a guiding role in the development of vocational education; as a kind of path focused on "serving regional economic and social development;" as a kind of method "to pursue education, do college management, do practical projects, be a teacher and be a student;" and as a kind of exploration that "combines practice of running schools, the practice of education, the practice of reform and innovation in China." It frames EPIP as a Chinese localized teaching mode with a 'secret' anchored in engineering and practice. Engineering is the foundation and prioritizes real project, real world and real life based on reality. It aims to make students work and live with high proficiency in the real world and solve problems in real and practical conditions.

2.3 Luban Workshop at Taita-Taveta University (TTU)

On August 8, 2021, Taita Taveta University (TTU) and China's Dongying Vocational Institute signed an agreement to establish a Luban Workshop at TTU, focusing on enhancing vocational and technical training between Kenya and China. The event was graced by government officials from both countries and a representative of the multinational technology company, Lenovo. The Workshop is intended to provide advanced training in petroleum engineering, petrochemical engineering, and the new generation of information technology. According to Simon Nabukwesi, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Education, it will support workforce development in sectors related to Kenya's Blue Economy ambitions such as the prospective petroleum production, especially in offshore areas like the Lamu Basin, which geological studies have identified as rich in oil and gas reserves. The partnership also includes setting up a China-Kenya vocational and technical training center in China, which will serve as a training base for TTU lecturers. Several TTU lecturers have already completed training at Dongying Vocational Institute in readiness to roll out the workshop at TTU. A comprehensive syllabus tailored to oil and gas specialization has also been developed (Muingi, 2021; Africa Surveyors Online News, 2021).

Fieldwork and preliminary interviews with staff and students at TTU revealed that the Luban workshop was non-operational and did not set off in the first place. Three students initially interviewed were not aware of its existence. A phone interview with (Dean-School of Mines and Engineering) confirmed that indeed, the workshop did not take off as anticipated and discussions are ongoing to bring it back on track.

2.4 Soft-power, technopolitics and perceptions of Luban workshops in Kenya

Observation revealed several specific insights about the establishment of Luban workshops in Kenya, their goals, influence, outcomes and perceptions. TCVC is the leading player and acts a focal point for establishment, strategy, partnerships, curriculum development and implementation of Luban workshops. Key partners include China's diplomatic missions and Chinese companies leading in key sectors relevant to the specific Luban workshop and area of specialization. The strategy involves implementing a unique incubation hub through a teaching model that promotes solution-oriented innovation through Chinese technology and support in Kenya.

Teaching at Luban Workshops follows the Engineering Practice Innovation Project (EPIP) model, touted as an efficient and superior model for individual skill development and collaboration to complete larger projects, an approach that promotes cooperative learning and peer support. It supports the perception of China as a leading country in training and innovation by encouraging Kenyan students to explore their curious minds to solve every-day real-world problems through innovation. The highly publicized successful innovations at the Luban workshop at Machakos University attests to this. State-of-the-art resources such as data centers and AI labs introduce students to emerging technologies like cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things (IoT), all attributed to Chinese big power responsibility, generosity and tech leadership.

The Luban workshops in Kenya are relatively new and therefore, a lot of emphasis has been placed on curriculum development. A concrete model referred to as "5-in-Readiness SSETT concept" has been established as a quality assessment measure for details such as site construction, specialty syllabuses, practical training equipment, school-enterprise, teacher training and teaching materials to maintain and regulate Chinese standards across all Luban workshops. The network approach to Luban workshops globally ensures mutual exchange between Luban workshops specializing in various sectors and contexts through cooperative training involving universities, Chinese companies, local industries and the immediate communities creating an ecosystem supported and influenced by China.

Analysis of documents and speeches at Luban workshops in Kenya suggest a wider partnership and support by the Government of China through Tianjin municipality officials, diplomats from the Chinese embassy in Kenya and Chinese companies both in China and in Kenya. Chinese companies associated with the Luban workshops in Kenya include Huawei Technologies, Lenovo group, Shenzhen Wuxin Zhidao Technology Co., Ltd., Tianjin Qicheng Weiye Technology Co., Ltd., Beijing Beiyou Future Education Technology Co., Ltd., and Tianjin City Ruibang Digital Technology Co., Ltd. These companies support technological innovation and incubators such as the Google Developer Club, Innovation Club and Science clubs in the same institutions. Huawei, the most visible partner through its equipment support disseminates unique Huawei ICT technology and product knowledge to the

students, encouraging them to participate in Huawei Vocational and Technical Certification.

National branding was also observed during fieldwork and corroborated by document analysis and speeches made by officials. Diplomatic officials note that they represent a promise made by President Xi Jinping to support vocational training in Africa. This is evident in the classrooms where the guiding principles describe the Luban workshop as "One brand, two features" conceptualized as 'an exchange brand between China and foreign countries' and 'high-end technical talents diploma education skills training for economic development.' It also states that the Luban workshop serves the BRI, linked with China's geopolitical strategy and soft-power tool globally.
Kenyan state officials and management of the universities hosting Luban workshops, speak highly of the institution and tout it as a good model for skills development and key to Kenya's national digital and technological development goals. The extensive use of Chinese/mandarin texts with English translations in the branding, murals, instructional materials and the presence of books such as "Xi Jinping thought" suggest a link between vocational training and Chinese branding and influence at the institutions. The equipment is either Chinese brands or branded Luban workshop in Kenya or Huawei to reflect their origin or source. The presence of red Chinese lanterns in some of the rooms reflect China's cultural brand.

Qualitative interview data gathered from instructors at Machakos University and Meru University of Science and Technology and a cohort of undergraduate students participating in these programs elucidate the perceived impacts and how technology is framed to pursue political aims such as nation building, security, development, control, or resistance (Kurban, Peña-López and Haberer, 2017). Two instructors, both self-identified as Technologists from the Luban Workshops at Machakos and Meru Universities, articulated the primary goals of these programs as equipping students and professionals with contemporary, practical skills that correspond closely to industry and labor market needs. Some students have gained employment at Huawei and other Chinese companies in Kenya, while others work with other local and global tech companies other than Chinese with a majority engaging in self-employment tech related business in Kenya.

Key anticipated outcomes extend beyond skill acquisition to include fostering international academic collaboration, notably between Kenya and China through student and staff exchange programs. The instructors aim to contribute to advancing Kenya's technical education landscape to better align with industrial innovation and competitiveness on both local and global stages. Success indicators include feedback mechanisms from industry partners, innovation outputs from students, and graduate employment rates. There is evidence, particularly from the Luban workshop at Machakos University of the innovative products that serve the community. The main challenge for the instructors is language barriers with Chinese technical experts, particularly in equipment maintenance and support, reflecting a need for closer cultural and linguistic integration. This scenario creates a demand and an incentive for Chinese language proficiency.

A total of 21 Kenyan undergraduate students, aged between 19 and 29 years, from disciplines including ICT, machine learning, information security, and engineering, provided feedback on their experiences with the Luban Workshops. The students reported that their main motivations at Luban workshops was access to unique courses, including AI and cloud computing (78.9%), practical and vocational training opportunities (68.4%), partnerships with Chinese companies (52.6%), exposure to Chinese standards in vocational education (36.8%), and interest in Chinese language and culture (31.6%).

The student cohort expressed a strong alignment between the workshop curriculum and their career aspirations, including roles as cybersecurity experts, automation engineers, entrepreneurs, and high-tech innovators. All respondents acknowledged the program's relevance in building Kenya's technological capacity and recognized China as a global technology leader whose standards and practices the program helped them understand and adopt. They identified hands-on training, networking with peers and professionals, and relevance to job market demands as the most valuable components of the workshops. They also attributed the establishment of Luban Workshops in Kenya to China's aims of technological collaboration, vocational skill-building, and deeper bilateral ties through educational diplomacy and capacity development. Regarding Chinese language and culture, the majority (57.9%) found it important for their studies, with 73% having engaged with these aspects in some capacity. Most students reported positive impressions of China and its technology, with 79% expressing agreement or strong agreement. These perceptions represent a positive soft power gain for China in Kenya.

3. Conclusions

The Luban Workshops in Kenya represent a distinctive model of vocational education born out of Sino-Kenyan and FOCAC cooperation. Embedded within the curriculum is a clear strategic dimension reflecting China's geopolitical and soft power objectives. National branding manifested through Chinese/mandarin texts, instructional materials with Chinese values, philosophy and international vision and the presence of political and diplomatic books such as "Xi Jinping; the Governance of China" and cultural symbols such as red Chinese lanterns, exemplifies the workshops' role in advancing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as broad diplomatic and geopolitical goals. The widespread presence of Chinese-branded equipment and technologies and the curriculum focus on new points of convergence and growth in China-Africa cooperation such as digital commodity trade and cross-border e-commerce further illustrates the power dynamics and China's expansive influence.

From the perspective of state officials, instructors and students, these workshops have significantly impacted technical education by equipping learners with competencies pertinent to evolving global and regional market demands and relevant to Kenya's national technological development. They have raised the profile of China as a competent tech and innovation hub with ongoing efforts to expand practical training models and collaborative frameworks with Chinese tech companies. Huawei's prominent role as an equipment provider and technology disseminator reinforces the vocational training's link to China's industry standards and supports the "technopolitical" argument that Luban workshops is based on the needs of the BRI to create a "new era of the Chinese model" through vocational education as part of a mission to globalize Chinese tech (Mahtani and Irwandi, 2023) (Yau and Van der Kley, 2021).

Through such arrangements, China is cultivating technical dependencies that pull partner countries' digital and tech systems, expertise policies closer to its own interests. Luban workshops are more that mere vocational centers for human resource development; by embedding China's digital infrastructure within the social and institutional fabric of other states, China is positioning itself to influence expanded domains ranging from digital global governance, e-commerce, railways and petroleum engineering, urban communication and fiber-optic networks, urban safety monitoring systems, and intelligent transportation systems thereby generating enduring political and economic dependencies.

Despite significant progress, challenges exist. The Luban Workshop at Taita-Taveta University illustrates operational difficulties, having not commenced effectively despite formal agreements, highlighting potential coordination and resource mobilization issues. Language barrier between Kenyan instructors and Chinese technical partners also pose challenges, particularly in equipment maintenance and technical support.

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China's Policy in the South China Sea, 1990–2010

SALIMA SHAMKHI JABER HAMMOUD
Presidency of Al-Mustansiriya University, Iraq
salmasssalma666755@gmail.com

Abstract. China's policy regarding the South China Sea has been characterized by strategic ambiguity, manifested at times in a conciliatory approach and at other times in the brandishing of force, with the aim of undermining bilateral relations between the littoral states on the one hand and competing with them on the other, and with the aim of building bilateral alliances with other states bordering the South China Sea, The aim of this policy is to ward off foreign interference, specifically US intervention in the conflict and competition over this region; yet, at the same time, Chinese leaders are conducting assertive activities in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. In this context, the study explores the history of China's policies in the South China Sea. Furthermore, whilst there is a general understanding of the external motivations and internal drivers behind China's policy towards the South China Sea, these factors are often analyzed and examined in isolation. In this research, we will address both factors simultaneously and draw conclusions regarding the likelihood of armed conflict in the region, particularly with regard to the claimant coastal states and the centrality of the US role.

1. Introduction

China is an emerging global power, with an economy ranked second only to that of the United States of America, As for the geographical location of the South China Sea, China has a coastline stretching 14,500 km, extending from the Bohai Sea in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. The countries bordering the sea are China – the subject of our research – as well as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan. Consequently, the sea holds immense geopolitical and geo-economic significance. It controls the international shipping routes leading to China and thus serves as China's lifeline and economic breathing space for international trade, not to mention the economic importance of the sea's untapped natural resources on the one hand, and its as yet undiscovered riches on the other. Consequently, all the states bordering the sea are attempting to assert their dominance over it and control as much of its area as possible, which has turned the sea into a zone of conflict, particularly between China – with its military might and rising economy – and the other states bordering it, The sea has thus become a disputed area, with tensions dating back to the mid-twentieth century, when China's policies towards the sea began to reflect a drive to assert hegemony and control over it.

First: The Importance of the China Sea

The South China Sea is the maritime region situated between latitudes 3° south and 23.27° north, and longitudes 122.10° east and 99.10° west, with a total area of approximately 3.5 million km².

The South China Sea is of great political, economic and military importance to China. The South China Sea is linked to China's living space and its long-term development. It is also vital to China's security. Between 1840 and 1949, Japan, Britain, France, Russia, Germany and other countries invaded China more than 470 times by sea, including 84 large-scale invasions (Jerome, 2011, p. 3).

By controlling the South China Sea, China is able to increase its strategic defensive depth by 500–600 nautical miles and gain a privileged position from which to contain and control its adversaries. The China Sea also represents a key chokepoint for maritime transport; from an economic perspective, some American scholars believe that the economic dependence of China, Japan and South Korea on the

South China Sea route amounts to 85–90 per cent. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990, p. 40)

Furthermore, the South China Sea is a treasure trove of resources, including coastal territories, ports, oil and gas, marine life, minerals, seawater, marine energy, tourism and other resources yet to be discovered (Zou Keyuan, 2005, p. 70).

Secondly: The South China Sea in the 20th Century

Prior to the 1930s, the Parcel and Spratly Islands were under the jurisdiction and control of successive Chinese governments. On 25 July 1933, France occupied nine islands of the Spratly Archipelago, and on 3 July 1938, it occupied the Parcel Islands. (Qichen, 1955)

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, Japan had occupied the main islands in the South China Sea and established naval bases there. After the Second World War and until the end of the Cold War, in accordance with international agreements such as the 'Treaty of San Francisco with Japan', the 'Japan–Taiwan Agreement' and the 'Potsdam Declaration', Japan recognized that the islands in the South China Sea belonged to China, as was the case in 1972. (Edward Wong, 2010, p. 2)

In 1968, studies revealed that the South China Sea contained the largest reserves of oil and natural gas fields, and in 1982 the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea was adopted. Under that Convention, those islands came under Philippine control, which included, amongst others, islands belonging to Taiwan and others that came under Vietnamese control. This is where the historical area of conflict between China and the states bordering the South China Sea originated, and China began to lay claim to those islands through the United Nations, particularly as those states began investing and contracting with more than 200 companies from over 30 countries, including the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada, and drilled more than 1,000 oil wells within a disputed area over which China claims sovereignty. (Swaine, 2011, p. 3)

Furthermore, these states have begun to increase their military spending, particularly on their navies, whilst entering into agreements and alliances with major powers—notably the United States of America—and threatening to escalate the issue at the United Nations and the UN Security Council in order to counter China's claims to those islands. (Ramsey al-Rikabi, 2011)

Following the end of the Cold War, Japan aligned itself with US policy and became involved in the South China Sea. This was for strategic purposes that coincided with those of the United States, such as containing China, safeguarding the security of maritime corridors in the South China Sea, and protecting its substantial economic interests in the region. However, Japan also has its own agenda, which focuses primarily on joining the club of economic powers (Jerome, 2011, p. 25).

Thirdly: Clashes with the interests of the great powers

China's claims to sovereignty over the waters of the South China Sea have contributed to the escalation of the dispute and conflict, transforming it from a regional conflict into an international one, due to the international interests at stake, particularly those of the United States of America, which holds substantial commercial assets and investments in the region, It has also used the South China Sea issue as a means of exerting pressure on China, with a view to containing it and curbing its growing influence. (Thayer, 2011, p. 3)

On 16 August 2004, US President George W. Bush announced that he would complete the refurbishment and construction of 20 US military bases in the region, and the United States began shifting its strategic focus from Europe to Asia in general and the South China Sea in particular. The United States also provided support to both Japan and India – which represent China's traditional and historical adversaries – in order to jointly contain China. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

The United States has sought to cooperate with countries bordering the South China Sea with a view to collectively encircling China, ensuring a US military presence on the front lines, building bilateral alliances with those countries, strengthening multilateral security and regional mechanisms, and providing military aid to countries historically hostile to China, such as India and Japan. (Swaine, 2011)

Fourth: The South China Sea in the Post-Cold War Era

Following the Cold War, India adopted a 'Look East' policy to achieve its goal of becoming a superpower. A former Indian Defense Minister stated: "India's interests extend from the South China Sea in the east to the Arabian Sea in the west; therefore, India has prioritized the development of its naval fleet and has continued to strengthen its capacity for long-range naval operations. India joined the ASEAN Regional

Forum (ARF) in 1996, a multilateral security arrangement in the Asia-Pacific region, and signed military cooperation agreements with countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. India actively cooperates with the United States and Japan in its operations in the South China Sea (Huaqing, 2004, p. 538).

Examples include siding with the United States in the mid-air collision between Chinese and US aircraft; supporting the US-led war on terror; and exchanging intelligence with the United States and Japan.

The United States has also conducted joint military exercises with its allied countries in the region, whilst both Russia and Australia have become involved in the Chinese dispute over the South China Sea. Since the 1990s, Russia has sold aircraft that were state-of-the-art at the time, such as the MiG-29 and Su-27, as well as missiles and warships, to these countries, It has also participated in investments in the resources of the South China Sea, whilst Australia focuses its role on security and intelligence, aiming to safeguard security in the South China Sea region as well as conducting numerous joint military exercises with countries in the region. (Huaqing, 2004, p. 538).

Fifth: The Impact of Foreign Interventions in the South China Sea on China

Intervention by major powers from outside the region poses a potential threat to the Chinese economy and national security, as their intervention not only causes China to lose its deep-water strategic maritime defense barrier extending 500 to 600 nautical miles from the mainland in southern China, and to lose control of the sea lanes in the South China Sea that enable it to deter rivals, but also, due to the tightening of the 'chain of islands', China's energy import routes, foreign trade transport, and naval movements in and out of the region come under surveillance, and China is unable to make full and effective use of the maritime and other economic resources in the South China Sea. (Thayer, 2011)

Furthermore, the intervention of major powers from outside the region poses a significant obstacle to China in its dealings with its immediate neighbors and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The significant influence of the United States and Japan on the development of ASEAN countries has become a 'bargaining chip' that affects ASEAN's domestic and foreign policies; the support provided by the United States and Japan to certain countries enables them to 'act without fear'. In short, China will remain in an unfavorable position on the South China Sea issue, in that it 'cannot fight, cannot reach an agreement, and cannot postpone the matter'.

The United States has also sought to create the 'Chinese threat' narrative in order to blackmail countries in the region into purchasing various weapons and defense systems, as well as granting the United States permission to establish naval and air bases on their territory, with the resulting trade concessions for US companies and their goods. The United States has also sought to support Japan's return as a significant military power in the region and to maintain the status quo regarding the Taiwan issue. Furthermore, the United States has utilized economic leverage to put pressure on China by closing the US and Japanese markets to Chinese goods through the imposition of higher customs tariffs on them. (Thayer, 2011)

Sixth: China's stance towards ASEAN and the United States

During the tenure of Chinese President Jiang Zemin, China pursued peaceful means and avoided military escalation in its efforts to reclaim the islands in the South China Sea, consistently adopting a policy of peaceful diplomacy. This is particularly so given that economic relations between China and ASEAN are extremely close; trade between China and ASEAN amounted to approximately US$8 billion in 1991, US$130.4 billion in 2005, US$160.8 billion in 2006, and US$202.5 billion in 2007. In 2010, the establishment of the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area led to the formation of a vast regional market comprising 1.7 billion consumers, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of nearly US$2 trillion and a total trade volume equivalent to US$1.2 trillion. These enormous economic interests compel the Chinese government to proceed with caution when considering how to deal with the South China Sea dispute. (Zou Keyuan, 2005)

VII. China's Diplomatic Efforts with ASEAN

China and ASEAN have established relations based on trust and cooperation. In 1991, China resumed diplomatic relations with all ASEAN member states, and since then has participated in the talks held amongst those states, holding a total of 17 sessions up to 2007. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

In July 1992, when the Chinese Foreign Minister attended the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, he proposed that 'we must move beyond disputes and pursue common development'. Following the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the

Law of the Sea in August 1995, the Chinese Foreign Minister proposed at the second meeting of the African Maritime Assembly that "China is prepared to settle relevant disputes through peaceful negotiations with the states concerned in accordance with generally accepted international law and modern maritime law, including the fundamental principles and legal framework established by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea." In November 2002, China and ASEAN signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the Declaration on Strengthening Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security Areas. (Qichen, 1955)

In 1996 and 1997, the (10+1) and (10+3) mechanisms were established for ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea respectively. In 2002, the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN was signed, and it was decided to establish the China–ASEAN Free Trade Area in 2010. (Huaqing, 2004)
In 2003, China and ASEAN signed a joint declaration announcing the establishment of a 'Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity'. At the China–ASEAN Business and Investment Summit held in early October of the same year, the Chinese Prime Minister delivered a speech entitled 'China's Development and the Revival of Asia', in which he outlined policy proposals relating to 'good-neighborliness', 'secure neighborhoods' and 'prosperous neighbors', He then attended the signing ceremony for China's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia on 8 October. In 2004, China and ASEAN signed an agreement on trade in goods, an agreement on a dispute settlement mechanism, and a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of transport; and in early 2007, an agreement on trade in services was signed. (Edward Wong, 2010)

Eighth: The People's Republic of China's Policy towards Vietnam

Since its founding in 1949, China has established relations based on trust and cooperation with its neighboring countries, in its relations with Vietnam, China provided support during the war against the United States in the 1960s and made an effective contribution to the reunification of Vietnam, despite the Vietnamese position on the Xisha Islands, which are under Vietnamese sovereignty but over which China claims sovereignty. (Zou Keyuan, 2005)

However, China remains committed to reconciliation with Vietnam, as demonstrated by President Jiang Zemin's visit to Vietnam in November 1994 following his attendance at the APEC (APEC) – the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, founded in 1989 to promote free trade and economic growth in the region and comprising 21 members – where the two sides agreed to establish a joint working group to resolve disputes between the two countries. In 2000, China and Vietnam issued a joint statement stipulating that they would 'continue to maintain the existing mechanism for negotiating maritime issues. Pending the resolution of these issues, maritime policies are implemented in the spirit of 'starting with the easy issues and moving on to the difficult ones' (Huaqing, 2004).

China has also cooperated with Vietnam in the fields of environmental protection and meteorology, with the aim of mitigating and preventing natural disasters; China and Vietnam have also signed an agreement demarcating the territorial waters and exclusive economic zones of both countries in the South China Sea and the continental shelf of the Beibu Gulf, as well as an agreement on cooperation in the field of fisheries in the Beibu Gulf, during Chinese President Jiang Zemin's term in 2000. The agreement came into force in 2004, following ratification by the Vietnamese National Assembly and the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China. (Thayer, 2011)

Ninth: The Republic of China's Policy towards Malaysia

Malaysia's sovereignty claims over the Spratly Islands began in February 1992, bringing it into the dispute over sovereignty of those islands with Taiwan, the Philippines and Brunei, and Vietnam, particularly after China declared its sovereignty over them, which provoked the ire of the aforementioned states. However, during Jiang Zemin's tenure, China managed to reach an agreement with Malaysia through bilateral consultations, culminating in May 1999 with a joint declaration by the two states to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea. (Zhou & Waijiao, 1990)

Tenth: China's Position and Perspective on the South China Sea.

Major non-regional powers are paying attention to their interests in the South China Sea. In 2004, China reaffirmed its 'peaceful China' ideology, stating that China's peaceful rise cannot take place without the world, and that China's rise will not harm anyone, will not threaten anyone, and will not sacrifice anyone. China does not seek hegemony, either now or in the future. China has also pointed out that non-regional states have interests in the South China Sea; for

instance, the United States and Japan have interests in the region, and we must pay close attention to this. This includes ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Sea; the United States, Japan and others wish to maintain stability in the South China Sea in order to safeguard their political and economic interests, and China shares this desire and these interests.

Conclusion:

Between 1990 and 2010, China's policy in the South China Sea underwent a notable evolution, reflecting a gradual shift from a phase focused on confidence-building and regional cooperation to one of more assertive promotion of its sovereignty claims, whilst maintaining a strategy of postponing the resolution of substantive disputes.
In the 1990s, China enacted the Law on Territorial Waters and Adjacent Areas in 1992, which affirmed its historical claims to most of the South China Sea based on the Nine-Dash Line; this included the occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995, which sparked tensions with the Philippines and other countries.

Despite these bold moves, Beijing simultaneously sought to improve its relations with ASEAN countries, particularly after the end of the Cold War, through multilateral dialogue and confidence-building measures.

This policy reached a relative high point with the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, in which China and the ASEAN countries committed to peaceful resolution and the avoidance of the use of force, alongside limited joint exploration agreements.

However, the period 2007–2010 began to see a shift towards a more assertive approach, as China increased the pressure on foreign oil companies, took steps to strengthen its administrative and military control, and declared (particularly around 2010) that the South China Sea was a core interest of its own.

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