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## **Multilateral Regionalism with Chinese Characteristics: A Case Study of the Macau Forum**

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**Multilateral Regionalism with Chinese Characteristics:  
A Case Study of the Macau Forum**



Samuel Wejchert

*14,981 words*

## **ABSTRACT**

Since the early 2000s, China has experimented with a range of development-oriented diplomatic initiatives based on multilateral regionalism. One of these initiatives is the Macau Forum, a grouping created in 2003 that brings China together with nine lusophone countries to promote economic and trade exchanges. This case study investigates China's motives for creating and maintaining this multilateral project and examines perceptions from its lusophone participants. The significance of this analysis is that it provides a more granular understanding of the rationale and results of China's ever-increasing promotion of alternative international development cooperation frameworks in the Global South.

To research this topic, I relied primarily on historically-contextualised discourse analysis of primary material from diplomatic and academic sources. Results of this analysis reveal that China was motivated (1) to promote and test out a Chinese vision of development cooperation, (2) to strengthen Macau's integration with mainland China and (3) to secure Beijing's diplomatic recognition among lusophone countries. Commentary from lusophone diplomats, however, highlights the lack of perceived concrete benefits for the Macau Forum's participant members. On this basis, the Macau Forum can be likened to other China-led multilateral regional initiatives, such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), that are balanced asymmetrically in China's favour.

*Note: The cover page image shows the official logo of the Macau Forum (Permanent Secretariat, 2021a).*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2003, China launched the Macau Forum, a multilateral regional initiative that aims to promote economic and trade exchanges between China and nine Portuguese-speaking countries. Based in the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR), the multilateral forum consists of an international permanent secretariat that organises triennial Ministerial Conferences between its various members. It is one of China's first self-created multilateral groupings, alongside the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) created three years earlier.

China's multilateral diplomacy in the Portuguese-speaking regions of the world, collectively known as the Lusosphere, comes amid a time of intense interest in Chinese approaches to global economic governance—especially vis-à-vis developing nations in the Global South. Indeed, the rise of China as a development actor within the context of South-South relations has drawn much attention in the academic circles of international relations specialists, political economists and China watchers. A salient topic is that of China's regional forum diplomacy. One of the key questions animating debates in this area is to what degree China reaps the rewards of such multilateral initiatives and whether they produce tangible results for developing countries.

One puzzling question concerning China's regional forum diplomacy relates to the benefits for China and developing countries of managing their relations through a multilateral approach. After all, to create and maintain an international organisation requires considerable diplomatic costs in terms of time and money—so why bother? In other words, what does a multilateral regional project provide that multiple bilateral frameworks cannot? And are views on the benefits of such an approach shared equally among all participants? Exploring China's collective diplomatic outreach in the Lusosphere is a useful way to approach this issue. As one of China's very first self-created intergovernmental organisations, the Macau Forum provides a unique case study to better understand the rationale and results of China's emerging multilateral regionalism.

The two-part question guiding my research is thus: **Why has China created and maintained the Macau Forum (despite associated costs); how is this multilateral regional project perceived by participant states?** I seek to answer this question by using an analytical approach based primarily on historically-contextualised discourse analysis of primary material, which comes mainly from official diplomatic communications and academic debates from both China and key lusophone countries.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that China was motivated to create the Macau Forum for three reasons: (1) to promote and test out a Chinese vision of development cooperation, (2) to strengthen Macau's integration with mainland China and (3) to secure Beijing's diplomatic recognition among lusophone countries. As for reactions toward China's multilateral regional diplomacy in the Lusosphere, key players in the region perceive few concrete benefits from the Macau Forum. In light of these findings, I argue that the Macau Forum has served China's interests more than those of the lusophone countries.

As for the structure of this thesis, I begin with a broad historical overview of both China's multilateral regional diplomacy and the Macau Forum itself, after which I provide a critical survey of key debates related to these topics. I then delve into the analytical components of my research, which are preceded by a brief introduction to my methodological approach. Finally, I conclude by relating the findings of this case study analysis to the broader themes of China's distinct approach to multilateral regionalism.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. China-Led Multilateral Regionalism**

Before delving directly into the Macau Forum, it is first necessary to address how China has asserted itself in shaping the architecture of global economic governance, particularly in relation to international trade and development finance. In recent decades, China has not only increased its engagement with existing international and regional organisations like the United Nations (UN) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Kent, 2013), it has also been extremely active in establishing its own international organisations and fora. This multilateral regionalist drive can be traced to the turn of the century with the founding in 2000 of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a ministerial-level summit that seeks to promote diplomatic, investment and trade relations between China and African countries; it is hosted on a rotating basis between Beijing and various African cities.

China launched similar regional forum-based groupings in ensuing years, such as the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2004, a formal dialogue initiative between China and the League of Arab States. In 2012, China established a similar initiative with Central and Eastern European countries (known as China-CEE or 16+1) based on promoting business and investment relations. Most recently, China established the Forum of China and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC) in 2014 structured around a “cooperative partnership based on equality, mutual benefit and common development” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2016).

Around the same time, China began creating more full-fledged international organisations with permanent secretariats. The most notable examples include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a permanent intergovernmental international organisation announced in 2001 and based on political and economic cooperation between China, Russia and various Central Asian states. As one of China’s first self-founded multilateral groupings, and given its security-related connotations, it drew much Western media attention at the time. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),



launched by China in 2016, elicited a similar response. Unlike the security-focused SCO, the AIIB is a multilateral development bank focused on developing Asia. It is headquartered in Beijing and seen as an alternative to the US-dominated World Bank and Japanese-controlled Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Beeson and Xu, 2019).

## **2.2. Macau Forum**

The Macau Forum, officially known as the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries, was launched in 2003 as part of this turn-of-the-century multilateral regionalist drive. Despite its name, the Macau Forum is not merely a summit-based regional forum like FOCAC or the China-CELAC Forum. Nor, however, is it a full-scale international organisation like the SCO or the AIIB. Rather, the Macau Forum is a “multilateral, intergovernmental cooperation mechanism aimed at promoting economic and trade exchanges between China and Portuguese-speaking countries” with a small Macau-based permanent secretariat staffed by diplomats from China and the Lusosphere (Permanent Secretariat, 2021a).

Established by China’s Ministry of Commerce in cooperation with the Macanese government, the Macau Forum consists of ten members—the nine lusophone countries plus China. In total, the lusophone countries include Angola, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor-Leste. The newest of these members is Equatorial Guinea, which joined recently in April 2022 (Permanent Secretariat, 2022). The map below (Figure 1) shows the geographical location and population of Macau and the nine Lusophone nations participating in the Macau Forum. As evidenced below, the Lusophone ‘region’ is based on linguistic affiliation rather than geographical location:

**Figure 1: Map of Lusophone World with Population Sizes**

(Universidade de Coimbra, 2022)



Macau's long history as a former Portuguese colony has provided the foundation for these modern-day connections with the Portuguese-speaking world. The territory of Macau was first leased to Portugal as a trading post by the Ming Dynasty in 1557 before eventually being returned to mainland China in 1999. As the last European colony in Asia, the 442 years of Portuguese rule in Macau have given the territory a unique historical and cultural connection to the Portuguese-speaking world, an oft-overlooked linguistic community of countries that includes an estimated 300 million speakers spread across four continents, including Latin America, Europe, Africa and Southeast Asia (UN, 2021). Although Portuguese is spoken natively by less than one percent of Macau's population (Wheeler, 2019, p. 77), it remains an official language of the SAR and plays an important role in Macau's legal system, which is broadly based on Portugal's code-based civil law (Cheng, 2020).

As for the main functions of the Macau Forum, it hosts triennial Ministerial Conferences, which end with the approval of a strategic plan for intergovernmental economic and trade cooperation. Areas of cooperation typically include "trade,

investment and entrepreneurship, production capacity, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock, infrastructure, energy and natural resources, education and human resources, finance, development co-operation, tourism, transport and communication, culture, media, sports, health, maritime affairs, and co-operation among provinces and municipalities (Tu, 2022). A total of five official Ministerial Conferences have been held, with the latest taking place on 10 April 2022.

As for financing, the Macau Forum is backed by funding from the Chinese government, which announced the China Portuguese-Speaking Countries Cooperation and Development Fund (CPDFund) during the third Ministerial Conference in 2010. The fund, with its one billion US dollars' worth of financing, has already approved various initiatives, including an agricultural project in Mozambique, an electrical project in Angola and a solar power project in Brazil (Gonçalves et al., 2017).

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Literature relevant to China's multilateral regionalism in the Lusosphere can be grouped into three areas. First, broad debates exist regarding Chinese attempts to construct alternative forms of global governance. Another significant area of scholarship relates to regionalism and China's approach to it. Finally, there is a small body of literature dealing directly with China's multilateral lusophone diplomacy via the Macau Forum.

#### **3.1. Chinese Global Governance**

Global governance can be understood as the process of coordinating the behaviour of transnational actors, facilitating cooperation and resolving disputes, typically through the creation of international organisations. Literature addressing China's specific approaches to global governance is vast and diverse, but one prominent theme is that of a uniquely Chinese approach to international leadership. This has been conceptualised by some as "International Leadership with Chinese Characteristics" (Bo, 2021). Some of these highlighted "Chinese characteristics" in the domain of global governance relate to Beijing's insistence on the respect for sovereignty and an emphasis on win-win cooperation and joint development in the economic sphere (Beeson and Li, 2016, p. 493). A related idea raised in the literature is that China has, until recently, under-participated in global governance; that is, major multilateral institutions have typically not reflected China's emphasis on the right to economic development over political and civil rights (Wang and French, 2013).

Another body of literature on the topic focuses on how China's international engagement is shaped by national self-interest rather than a genuine desire to develop global governance systems that serve the interests of all states. Amitav Acharya argues, for instance, that China's leaders, "while seeking global leadership, seem to be more concerned with developing and legitimising their national power aspirations (using the traditional notions and means of international relations) than with contributing to global

governance” (Acharya, 2011). In a similar fashion, other scholars raise the limitation of China’s global governance strategies in relation to the “gap between its rhetoric and its practice” (Wang and Rosenau, 2009, p. 36).

Other studies on China’s approach to global governance highlight the role of so-called Chinese exceptionalism. Feng Zhang (2011, p. 322), for example, argues that “China has not displayed a consistent type of exceptionalism. Rather, imperial, Maoist, and today’s China each displays its own type of exceptionalism, related in certain principles but distinctive in form” (Ibid., p. 322). China’s contemporary emerging exceptionalism is one based on regaining its great power status, at least in economic terms, that will “redefine the meaning of being a great power, and reform world politics through the development and practice of its unique international relations principles and ideals” (Ibid., p. 311). A renewed emphasis on Chinese exceptionalism in global norm-shaping behaviour has been linked with Xi Jinping’s rise to power and recent efforts to consolidate China as a pivotal actor in regional political-economy (Beeson and Li, 2016, p. 491).

### **3.2. China-Led Regionalism**

The Macau Forum can also be connected to scholarship on regionalism. An important distinction in the literature is made between regionalism and regionalisation; the former can be understood as the state-led process of international integration and economic interconnectedness. Regionalisation, meanwhile, is more of a bottom-up process led by individuals through spontaneous people-to-people contacts and interactions, rather than state-led initiatives (Kim, 2004).

A relevant concept raised in the literature on regionalism is that of the politics of exclusion of certain regionalist projects. Michael Wesley (1997), for instance, highlights the dynamic in which “definitions of regional bloc membership—be they economic interdependence, geographic contiguity or cultural affinity—are used by their advocates to advance definite agendas of national and regional activism, and that the criteria of membership or exclusion are determined by competing political visions for the region”

(Ibid., p. 1). This academic study, however, is somewhat limited as it was only conducted using the case studies of Australia and Turkey.

Another related concept raised in the literature is that of so-called rhetorical regionalism. Such forms of regionalism are criticised as being “high on the rhetoric of good [...] relations, common interests and cooperation, but in practice their impact on relations between their members or member’s domestic policies is minimal at best, while (sub-)regional activities are often very limited in scope and substance” (Cottey, 2009, p. 15). This form of ‘rhetorical regionalism’ is closely linked with the idea of ‘diplomatic tourism’, which can be defined as “opportunities for diplomats (and other participants) to travel, but [for which] the substantive output of their many summits, meetings, working groups and the like may be viewed as distinctly limited” (Ibid., p. 16). In other words, the literature emphasises that state-led, top-down regionalism is often more superficial than more concrete processes of regionalisation.

Various themes emerge when this regionalist literature is connected to China specifically. Baogang He (2019, p. 93) highlights that China has developed a “malleable form of state-centric regionalism”. The “fundamental limits to China-led regionalism”, he argues, “stem from its hierarchical and state-centric form. China has developed this form of regionalism due to its instrumental value, as a means of attaining great-power status rather than of instituting regional governance and organisation” (Ibid., p. 93). His analysis, however, is limited in that he only considers the cases of China-led regionalism in the context of the SCO and relations with ASEAN.

This notion of China’s state-centric and hierarchical regionalism has been applied in studies of China’s multilateral diplomacy with African countries via FOCAC. Ian Taylor (2010, p. 100), for instance, highlights the “asymmetry” of FOCAC, in which “China is very much in control of the whole process and it is Beijing that sets the agenda and the declarations and outcomes”. Likewise, other academics emphasise the “deeply asymmetrical” relationship in FOCAC, in which there is “a widespread perception that China still benefits more from the relationship than its African partners” (Nantulya, 2021).

As for the configuration of China’s multilateral regionalism, Degang Sun points out that Chinese diplomacy with developing states often adopts a ‘1 + n’ formula, in which

China creates a new regional forum by attaching itself to an already existing regional organisation (Sun, 2019, p. 52). Sun maintains that China's whole-of-region diplomacy represents an “effective approach to strengthen its partnerships with other developing countries” (Ibid., p. 49). He frames China's whole-of-region diplomacy as an attempt to counter American and European dominance in certain regions by “[breaking] up the Western monopoly on institutions and the supply of regional public goods” (Ibid., p. 62). In other words, China's whole-of-region diplomacy is viewed as more than a limited and localised diplomatic technique. Instead, it is presented as part of China's grand strategy to create alternatives to pre-existing international institutions.

Other scholars highlight the particularities of China's trade-oriented approach to multilateral regional projects. In his analysis of Beijing's ‘new type multilateralism’ (新型多边主义 *xīnxíng duōbiān zhǔyì*), Srikanth Kondapalli (2020, p. 135) argues that “rather than being security-oriented alliances like most Western institutions, the new China-initiated regional institutions would focus primarily on various dimensions of socioeconomic development.” Unfortunately, however, scholars like Kondapalli, He and Sun make no reference to the Macau Forum in their analyses of examples of Chinese multilateral regionalism. This is an unfortunate omission given that the Macau Forum was one of the very first multilateral regional bodies created by China (after FOCAC and the SCO). These academics thus overlook a rich source of empirical data on Chinese multilateral regionalism associated with the Macau Forum.

### **3.3. Macau Forum**

Scholarship dealing with the Macau Forum, meanwhile, is mostly disconnected from the broader topics of China's global governance and multilateral regional strategies. In general, scholarship on the Macau Forum is few and far between. Despite it having existed for almost two decades, there is relatively little academic literature on the Macau Forum specifically. (The lack of even a Wikipedia page for the Macau Forum suggests its understudied nature.) Overall, evaluations of China's multilateral lusophone strategy are focused merely on the narrow issue of Sino-Lusophone trade relations.

Analysis of the Macau Forum from Loro Horta, an East Timorese scholar and diplomat, is an example. He calls China's Macau Forum a “diplomatic success”, arguing that “it is bringing China tremendous economic [...] gains” and has “certainly played a crucial role in accelerating” the “impressive expansion in Sino-Lusophone relations” (Horta, 2012*b*). He attempts to back up his claims with trade data showing how “in 2003–06, trade between China and the lusophone countries more than tripled, growing from US\$10 billion to US\$34 billion, and in 2011, it reached an impressive US\$117 billion” (Ibid.). No causal link is presented, however, between the Forum’s creation and subsequent trade increases.

A third-party assessment report from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences also focuses almost exclusively on the trade-specific outcomes of the Macau Forum. The report argues that the organisation has “created a new model of multi-governmental cooperation, giving full play to Macau's role as a platform linking China and Portuguese-speaking countries, and significantly enhanced the level of economic and trade cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries” (Xinhua, 2020). Whether China’s “new model of multi-governmental cooperation” has brought political benefits in addition to increased trade is not discussed, however.

William Vogt’s exploration of the compatibility of China and the Lusosphere as an ‘alliance network’ is another example of this almost purely trade-focused analysis. He claims that China’s “overall international political strategy” aimed at lusophone countries “serves to benefit China for continued trade and economic growth” (Vogt, 2017, p. 551). Vogt’s claims, however, are not supported by much empirical data. Nor is there much discussion on how the Macau Forum serves to benefit its lusophone members.

Only some literature on the Macau Forum explores the topic in relation to China’s overall multilateral regional diplomacy. Carmen Mendes provides critical viewpoints in her recent work on the Macau Forum by taking issue with the idea of the Forum being an innovative multilateral initiative at all, considering it instead merely an “institutionalisation of China’s bilateral relations with the other member states” (Mendes, 2014, p. 238). Mendes further argues that the Macau Forum suffers from an “absence of clear strategy” and has yet to present “undeniable results” in terms of Sino-Lusophone relations (Ibid., p. 239). This critical assessment of the Macau Forum is echoed by Chris



Alden and Ana Alves who argue that China's "forum diplomacy" in the developing world displays a "disjuncture between Beijing's presentation of regional forums and their actual features" (Alden and Alves, 2016, p. 165). In other words, it appears the Macau Forum is not advancing Chinese interests as much as is claimed.

### **3.4. Literature Gap**

As the above literature review shows, much academic debate exists on broad topics related to China's global governance and its region-driven diplomacy. Finer analysis on the political motivations behind China's multilateral regional initiative in the Lusosphere, however, is more limited. This presents an opportunity to connect the big-picture issues of Chinese global economic governance approaches and multilateral regional strategies with the specific case study of the Macau Forum. In addition, most academic debate on Macau Forum focuses exclusively on China's motives. An exploration of the lusophone perspective is therefore needed for a fuller understanding of the Macau Forum.

A reassessment of China's diplomacy with the Lusosphere is also worthwhile because of new developments related to the Macau Forum. Little of the existing academic literature, for instance, analyses the impact of the recently-created CPDFund. The development projects that have arisen (or not) from this fund provide concrete evidence to further explore China's global governance approaches in the realm of international development.

Finally, very little of the literature on the Macau Forum explicitly addresses the underlying benefits of this multilateral arrangement *above and in addition* to China's individual multilateral relations with lusophone countries. Indeed, much of the literature on the Macau Forum argues that one of Beijing's motivations for creating the Macau Forum was to boost trade between China and emerging lusophone markets. However, such an aim can be pursued bilaterally between Beijing and representatives of key lusophone states in Brasília or Luanda without the need to create an entire institutionalised multilateral grouping with permanent headquarters in Macau. Other factors are needed to justify the overhead costs involved in such a diplomatic enterprise.

This thesis attempts to address the gap in the literature by identifying these larger political motivations from China's perspective, while exploring whether lusophone participants also perceive benefits from the Macau Forum. In this way, I hope to make an original contribution to the study of China's multilateral regionalism and its international development strategies in the Global South.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

I make use of various sources and methodologies to answer this thesis' two-part research question. For the first part addressing China's motives, I rely on primary material from diplomatic and academic sources to uncover the reasons for China's multilateral regional initiative in the Lusosphere. I make extensive use of the online archives of various foreign ministries, especially those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC). I also employ discourse analysis on Chinese academic debate related to the Macau Forum's aims. These academic articles were accessed via the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database.

As for the second part of my thesis related to lusophone perceptions of the Macau Forum, I again make use of discourse analysis in relation to diplomatic source material. The public statements and interviews made by officials from the Lusosphere were all accessed online via publicly-available media platforms. I performed the translations of all Chinese and Portuguese source material into English based on my prior university-level training in these languages.

## **5. PROMOTING CHINA'S VISION OF DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION**

First and foremost, the benefit of the multilateral Macau Forum for China is that it has allowed Beijing to promote and test out its broader vision of international development based on 'depoliticised' economic and trade cooperation, all while positioning itself as a major power. The following subsections explore these elements in relation to a historical analysis of China's broader foreign policy goals.

### **5.1. 'Depoliticised' Trade and Development Cooperation**

The establishment of the Macau Forum in 2003 has allowed China to promote its vision of international development cooperation in line with its long-established foreign policy principles. These are expressed in the Five Principles of Coexistence: (1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 1954). These five principles were originally elaborated in the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement; at that time, the newly-founded People's Republic of China was attempting to reach out to non-communist countries in Asia to reassure them that China would not interfere in their internal affairs (Nathan and Scobell, 2015, p. 28).

In the lead up to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the official formulation of these five core principles, they appear to have gained a new sense of prominence in the Chinese foreign policy establishment. This time, however, these principles were linked with the purpose of promoting a certain vision of international development and cooperation (as opposed to resolving Cold War-era ideological tensions). A series of official statements were published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign affairs across its various embassies calling for the "carrying forward" of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to "actively explore ways for effective South-South cooperation under new circumstances" (Embassy of PRC in Turkey, 2004). Particular emphasis was placed on providing "economic and technical aid with no political strings attached to other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin

America” (Ibid.) Moreover, these official statements carried the message that “the Chinese government firmly stands for the establishment of a new type of international relations and a new international order”, so as to “completely do away with the unjust and unreasonable factors and negative influence in the old international relations and repudiate hegemony and power politics” (Embassy of PRC in Estonia, 2004).

In the context of development cooperation, this vision contrasts strongly with Western-style development aid conditionality, which ties forms of support to the implementation of internal reform programmes dictated by creditor countries. Such an approach has been a core part of the World Bank, established under Western leadership within the Bretton Woods system. Of course, this Western approach contrasts with China’s Five Principles of Coexistence, especially the third principle pertaining to mutual non-interference. In sum, Beijing’s vision is that stronger and wealthier (Western) countries should not impose their values on weaker and poorer nations via development cooperation.

The Macau Forum’s promotion of China’s ‘depoliticised’ vision of trade and development cooperation is evident in various aspects of this multilateral regional initiative, including its official rhetoric and institutional features:

### ***5.1.1. Official Rhetoric***

First, the official rhetoric associated with the Macau Forum clearly deemphasises policy conditionality. For instance, as clearly stated in the introduction from the Secretary-General of the Permanent Secretariat on the Macau Forum’s official homepage, it is “an intergovernmental and *apolitical* multilateral cooperation mechanism [emphasis added]” (Fórum de Macau, 2021).

To appreciate China’s specific approach to multilateral regionalism and development cooperation, it is worth comparing the Macau Forum to the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa [Community of Portuguese Language Countries] (CPLP), the only other multilateral organisation specifically encompassing all lusophone nations, which also focus on development cooperation. In comparison with the Macau

Forum, the Lisbon-based CPLP, which was founded in 1996 under Portugal's leadership, has an explicitly political agenda. Indeed, one of the first preambulatory clauses of the Constitutive Declaration of the CPLP states that heads of state of the founding members are “imbued with the perennial values of Peace, Democracy and the Rule of Law, Human Rights, Development and Social Justice” (CPLP, 1996). Furthermore, the CPLP’s statutes define “political and diplomatic coordination” as one of its three main objectives (Ministério das Relações Exteriores do Brasil, 2014).

### ***5.1.2. Institutional Features***

The Macau Forum’s promotion of China’s ‘depoliticised’ approach to trade and development cooperation is also evident in the organisation’s institutional design. Although initiated by the Chinese central government, it is organised by the Ministry of Commerce—not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is remarkable considering that one of the Macau Forum’s main tasks is convening Ministerial Conferences with over nine countries, including some politically important players for China including Brazil, Angola and Portugal. By hosting these diplomatic activities under the auspices of the Ministry of Commerce, it is clear that China wants to keep discussions solely focused on trade matters.

Another institutional aspect of the Macau Forum that highlights its ‘depoliticised’ approach relates to the CPDFund and its financing mechanism. The allocation of financing from the CPDFund is based only on three principles: (1) investment promotion, (2) market orientation and (3) mutual benefit (CPDFund, 2013, p. 5). There is no mention of supporting human rights or democratisation; rather, the objective is merely to “enhance overall strength of the investing companies and the economic development of the member states [...] following market principles” (CPDFund, 2013).

It should also be noted that all the CPDFund-financed projects to date have related to large-scale infrastructure development (e.g., electrical and solar power projects). This infrastructure-centred focus reflects and externalises China’s own development

experience in which large-scale infrastructure and industrialisation projects took priority and were pursued with limited foreign political intervention.

## **5.2. Great Power Positioning**

The Macau Forum also allows China to assert itself as a central player and major leader in international development cooperation. Indeed, the Macau Forum not only popularises China's approach to economic development, it also projects China *itself* as a global political player that is capable of rallying other developing countries around its development agenda. For this reason, the Macau Forum could be described as a 'sinocentric' institution.

The Macau Forum undeniably places China in a position of prominence, as evidenced in its institutional structure and functioning. Besides the physical headquarters being based permanently in Macau, the institutional organisation places China in a dominant leadership role. The following organisational structure (Figure 2) of the Macau Forum highlights China's central role within this multilateral regional institution:

**Figure 2: Organisational Chart of Macau Forum**

(Permanent Secretariat, 2021b)





The ‘sinocentricity’ of this institutional arrangement can be observed in many areas. First, the Secretary-General of the Macau Forum is nominated by the PRC’s Ministry of Commerce. As shown above, of the three Deputy-Secretary Generals, only one is appointed by the Portuguese-speaking countries (the other two are appointed by the PRC and the Macau government). Lusophone countries accordingly have very little say in the management and organisation of the Macau Forum. This has proved to be a major source of contention between the PRC and Lusophone countries (Alden and Alves, 2017, p. 162).

Second, according to the Macau Forum’s statutory rules, agreements must be reached by consensus, effectively giving China a veto over any decision-making processes (Ibid.). The lusophone member states have reportedly attempted to change the voting procedures so that a two-thirds majority could exercise decision-making power; China unsurprisingly rejected these proposals as it would have meant Beijing’s decisions could effectively be overruled (Ibid.). The central positioning of China within the institutional framework of the Macau Forum means that China can ensure that Chinese values, interests and preferences prevail in the multilateral policy-making processes.

This ‘great power positioning’ is evident in China’s other development-oriented multilateral regional institutions, such as FOCAC and CELAC. The former especially highlights this lack of equality and ‘sino-superiority’. During FOCAC’s triennial summits, for example, dozens of African leaders gather to meet a single Chinese counterpart (Embassy of PRC in South Africa, 2012). Such multilateral forum diplomacy positions China (symbolically, at least) as a recognised power and authority, especially as a development actor.

### **5.3. Reasons for Targeting the Lusosphere**

So far, this chapter has explained how China has promoted its particular vision of international development through self-created multilateral, regional fora like the Macau Forum. However, the above arguments do not address why China targeted the Lusosphere specifically to promote its brand of multilateral regionalism with Chinese

characteristics. To understand why this region was a ripe target for China's promotion of international development norms, it is necessary to address factors relating to resource potential, regional coherence and (lack of) great power rivalry.

First, the Lusosphere overall possesses vast reserves of energy resources—which are increasingly sought after by China. According to some estimates, the combined oil and gas reserves of the Lusosphere would make it the world's fourth largest producer by 2025 (it was already the seventh largest producer in 2015, if counted as a single unit) (Portuguese American Journal, 2014). Such primary fuel sources are needed to satisfy the soaring demands of China's rapid economic growth; an inability to meet these demands would necessarily interrupt the country's development process (Trough, 1999). In light of the widening gap between China's energy demand and domestic supply, Beijing has sought to expand its sources of oil and gas imports and to diversify away from its overdependence on the Middle East region. This drive became all the more urgent once China became a net importer of oil in 1993 (Oil & Gas Journal, 1994). The resource-rich Lusosphere thus became a natural target for China's increasingly outward-looking oil economy.

Second, the Lusosphere was, at the time of the Macau Forum's creation, a region beginning to show signs of increased institutionalisation and coherence as an international grouping. As mentioned previously, lusophone countries began attempts to coordinate political and diplomatic decision-making starting in 1996 with the creation of the CPLP. From China's perspective, the Lusosphere was a region that China could work and engage with as a single unit given these early steps toward integration and institutionalisation. It should be recalled that China's previous multilateral region-based forum on international development was created in relation to Africa, which also possessed signs of increasing regional institutionalisation (as evident in the announcement of the African Union created in 1999).

The final reason why the Lusosphere was a suitable region for China to target relates to the relatively uncontested and leaderless nature of the Lusosphere, which makes it a safe space for China to experiment with new diplomatic initiatives. By 'uncontested' and 'leaderless', I am referring to the absence of any significant great power rivalry concerning the Portuguese-speaking world. The only country that has shown any

consistent and meaningful attempts to exercise political leadership and influence over the Lusosphere is Portugal, a small European nation with limited international clout. Although Portugal would seem a natural leader given its historical role as the historical lusophone metropole, it has been slow to do so given political instability and financial weakness at home. It has also been reluctant to do so out of fear of neo-colonialism accusations (Santos, 2003, p. 2). Brazil, meanwhile, has merely flirted with the idea of playing a leadership role in the Lusosphere; this was the case during the years of Lula da Silva's presidency from 2003-2010, during which time he promoted the notion of "South-South cooperation" with fellow lusophone states, especially in Africa (Ministério das Relações Exteriores do Brasil, 2012). Finally, the lusophone nations form a relatively small regional grouping that usually passes under the radar of great power politics.

#### **5.4. Foreign Policy Experimentation**

This last point on why China targeted the Lusosphere for its multilateral development diplomacy highlights another important function of the Macau Forum. The process of creating and maintaining the Macau Forum can be considered a learning process for China to test out its vision of international development in a relatively 'safe' political geography. This makes the Macau Forum similar to the SCO, which has "taught Beijing valuable lessons on how to form, shape, and engage "new models" of international organisations" (Grace, 2018). The creation of the Macau Forum can be understood as the foreign policy equivalent of China's incremental and experimental reform process, which was originally applied in the domestic economic context by Deng Xiaoping. This process is encapsulated by the Chinese allegorical saying: 摸着石头过河 (*mō zhe shítou guò hé*) or "crossing the river by feeling the stones", which is used to express a policy-related working method to explore untested processes using a safe approach. This saying and its associated logic have heavily influenced and inspired Chinese government and party officials since its promotion during the years of reform and opening up (People's Daily, 2018). It is thus unsurprising that this gradualist and incrementalistic reform mind-set

has eventually also been applied to external policy-making, such as in China's recent multilateral regional initiatives.

The Macau Forum can for many reasons be considered the foreign policy equivalent of “crossing the river by feeling the stones”. The decision to create a brand-new multilateral organisation with its own secretariat is a daunting task for any country's government officials—especially for a country like China, which had not engaged extensively in multilateral, organisation-based diplomacy prior to the 2000s.

The idea of Beijing experimenting diplomatically with the creation of multilateral, regional projects like the Macau Forum is raised in research institutes affiliated with China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A research report from the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), the in-house think tank of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, states that Beijing is currently at a stage in which it “explores its diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”, especially in terms of “what role group cooperation diplomacy should play” (Hu 2015, p. 40). The Macau Forum can thus be viewed as an initial foray into China-led multilateral development initiatives, thereby laying the basis for more ambitious and expansive development-as-diplomacy projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.

## **6. STRENGTHENING MACAU’S INTEGRATION WITH MAINLAND CHINA**

The added benefit for China of creating a multilateral regional organisation like the Macau Forum cannot be understood without reference to the SAR’s specific role within this initiative. After all, a high-level decision was made at some point to create this forum in joint cooperation with the Macanese government and to base its headquarters in Macau—instead of Beijing. To understand the logic of this decision, we can turn to the issues of economic diversification, the Greater Bay Area Initiative and Macau’s foreign policy orientation

### **6.1. Economic Diversification of Macau**

The Macau Forum can be viewed as an attempt to strengthen Macau’s economy and to increase its economic integration with the mainland after the SAR’s handover in 1999. China’s official long-term social and economic development plans lay out this intention clearly. The Chinese Communist Party’s Five-Year Plans particularly stress this objective; for example, the 10<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2001-2005), which covers the years immediately following Macau’s return to the mainland and the creation of the Macau Forum, refers to the importance of developing the SAR’s economic linkages. It sets out the basic task of “maintaining the long-term prosperity” of Macau and “strengthening economic cooperation and exchanges between” Macau and mainland China (Chinese Central People’s Government, 2001).

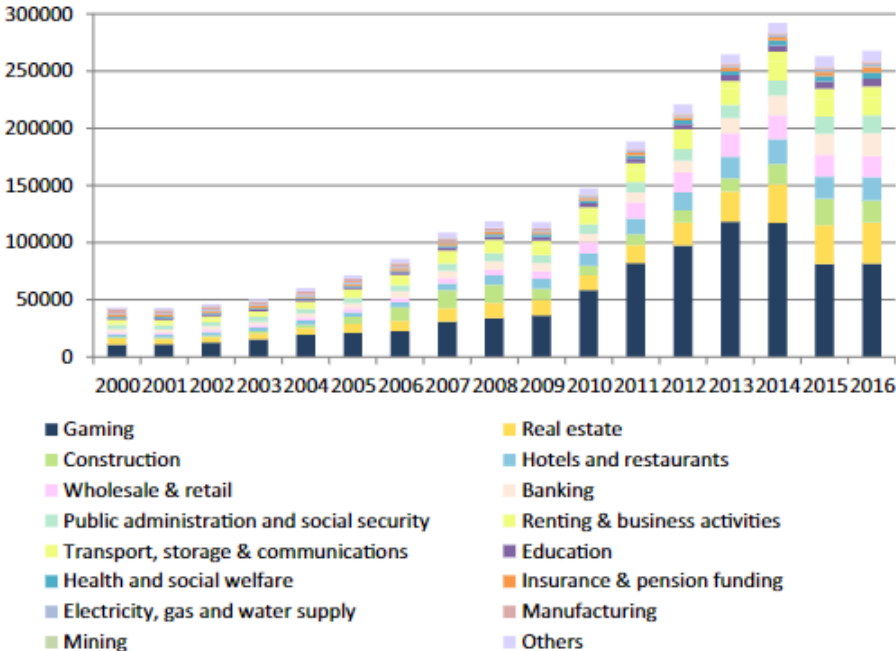
Later Five-Year Plans shift the focus from merely strengthening Macau’s economic linkages with the mainland to diversifying the SAR’s economy as well. The 14<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2021-2025) highlights this issue in regard to Macau and its relations with Portuguese-speaking countries. The official policy document states that the central government will “help Macau expand its functions as a service platform for business cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries” and help Macau “appropriately diversify its economy” (People's Government, 2021).

Official Chinese statements on the Macau Forum itself provide further evidence that an objective of the multilateral organisation is to diversify the SAR’s economic profile. A statement released by the PRC’s Ministry of Commerce after the conclusion of the Macau Forum’s last Ministerial Conference provides a typical example. It concludes by affirming that the Macau Forum has “brought new opportunities for Macau to consolidate its status as a service platform for business cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, and to promote the development of an appropriate degree of economic diversification” (Ministry of Commerce, 2022).

The implicit message of such official statements is that Beijing is concerned about Macau’s excessive reliance on the gambling sector for economic growth. One should recall that from 1999 to 2015, Macau underwent a dramatic opening-up of its gambling market, primarily due to the territory holding a monopoly over casino gambling within China (Sheng and Gu, 2018, p. 72). Indeed, by 2013, the gambling sector accounted for over 60% of the SAR’s GDP (Ibid.). This imbalance was also present at the start of the decade (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Gross Value Added of Economic Activities in Macau, 1999-2016 (million MOP\$)**

(Sheng and Gu, 2018, p. 78)



The dangers of Macau's overconcentration in one single sector have been laid out clearly in economic studies. After all, a basic economic principle is that increased diversification reduces risk. Some economic studies have highlighted that Macau's highly concentrated economy makes it markedly more volatile, as evident in the Macanese economy's spike in bull markets and major drops in bear markets (Zhang and Kwan, 2009, p. 302). The overexposure of Macau's economy to one single economic activity thus presents a high degree of risk for the steadiness of its economic growth. Aside from concerns regarding unstable growth, the dominance of gambling in Macau has also led to widely-cited concerns regarding negative social impacts, such as an increase in criminal activity including gangsterism and prostitution (Hao, 2005, p. 1).

According to official Chinese statements, the solution to Macau's lack of economic diversification is to promote its role as a so-called trade platform between China and the Lusosphere. Although it is not explicitly mentioned, the idea is to shape Macau into an international business platform, especially as a seat for Sino-Lusophone commercial arbitration (Simões, 2012). The various business and commercial activities associated with commercial arbitration would allow for an increase in some of Macau's other economic activities listed in Figure 3, such as renting and business activities, which would all help diversify Macau's economy.

There also appears to be consensus among Chinese scholars that one of the Macau Forum's primary aims has been to diversify the SAR's economic base. Guo Yongzhong from the Institute of Social Economy and Public Policy at the Macau Polytechnic Institute argues that one of China's "strategic considerations" has been to "fundamentally fix the singular industrial structure of Macau's long-standing and dominant gambling sector, and to realise the strategic goal of developing the diversification of Macau's industrial structure" (Guo, 2011, p. 67). It is for these strategic goals that China has "invested a lot of human and financial resources" in the Macau Forum (Ibid.). This view is echoed by Qi Pengfei and Zhang Lingwei of Renmin University's School of Marxism Studies, who argue that the "Macau Forum has become a process for Macau to promote an appropriate degree of economic diversification" (Qi and Zhang, 2019, p. 34).

## **6.2. Greater Bay Area Initiative**

The creation of the Macau Forum also fits into China's ambitious plans for the so-called Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macau Greater Bay Area. This ambitious economic plan aims to integrate the different metropolises of the region, thereby fostering economic growth across southern China. The idea is for each major city in the Greater Bay Area to become important hubs in distinct sectors (Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Development Office, 2018). For example, Hong Kong would consolidate its status as a financial centre. Shenzhen, meanwhile, would strengthen its role as a tech hub. For Macau, its role in the Greater Bay Area Initiative is to nurture its development as a trade hub with the lusophone world, thereby integrating itself into the region's value chain.

Given that the Greater Bay Area initiative plan has been formulated relatively recently, it cannot explain China's initial motivation to establish the Macau Forum at the turn of the century. However, the importance of the Greater Bay Area initiative can help explain why China has been prepared to maintain the Macau Forum—despite the diplomatic costs and effort associated with it. Given the relatively low GDP of Macau within the Greater Bay Area, it may have been considered a 'weak link' in need of an economic boost. This can be visualised in the map below, which shows Macau's GDP as one of the smallest in the Greater Bay Area:



**Figure 4: GDP of Cities and Sub-Provincial Units in China's Greater Bay Area Initiative**

(BBC News, 2019)



Recent Chinese scholarship on the Macau Forum also highlights its usefulness in the context of China's Greater Bay Area Initiative. Chen Pengqin and Zhang Xiao from the Lusophone Institute of the City University of Macau argue that one of the Macau Forum's key potential functions is to "integrate [Macau] into the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and promote a new platform for appropriate industrial diversification" (Chen and Zhang, 2020, p. 63). More specifically, they claim that the Macau Forum can allow the SAR to "combine the resource-related advantages of lusophone countries with the capital, technology and manpower advantages of the Guangdong-Hong Kong Greater Bay Area to generate a complete industrial chain, further promote the construction of the common market in the Bay Area, and achieve coordinated development" (Ibid.).

Chen and Zhang use the example of Angolan diamond imports to demonstrate the usefulness of the Macau Forum within the Greater Bay Initiative. Macau, via its sino-lusophone trade platform, can coordinate the initial sale of Angolan diamonds to China. Certain districts of Guangzhou, meanwhile, can be responsible for the "industrial treatment" of such diamonds, while Hong Kong can manage the "final precision work and

offshore trade” of the finished goods (Ibid.). Whether the Macau Forum has actually performed this role in reality is not addressed; however, its potential to do so is made abundantly clear in academic discourse on the topic.

### **6.3. ‘Anchoring’ Macau’s Foreign Policy Orientation**

The Macau Forum also provides the SAR with a fixed foreign policy portfolio deemed appropriate by Beijing. Macau, one should recall, does in fact possess some limited foreign policy competences. This feature of Macau’s political status is enshrined in the Macau Basic Law, which came into effect on 20 December 1999 following the transfer of Macanese sovereignty from Portugal to China. This document clarified China’s constitutional principle of ‘one country, two systems’, which was designed to allow Macau a degree of independence in managing its socio-economic system as well as in directing some limited foreign policy matters. The relevant legislation can be found in Article 13, Chapter II of the Macau Basic Law, which stipulates that “the Central People’s Government authorises the Macau Special Administrative Region to conduct relevant external affairs, on its own, in accordance with this Law” (Government of Macau, 1999).

The PRC, however, has a highly centralised and unitary political system with tight political control over various regional divisions; this arrangement makes it unlikely for subnational governments to exercise much independence in external affairs (Liu and Song, 2020, p. 10). Indeed, the practice of paradiplomacy (that is, international relations conducted by non-central governments) is more typically associated with loose, federated states, such as Canada (which gives much international diplomatic leeway to the provincial government of Québec) or Germany (which allows Bavaria to extensively promote its regional identity abroad) (Kuznetsov, 2014, p. 72).

The process of establishing an intergovernmental organisation in Macau can be understood as Beijing’s attempt to ‘anchor’ the SAR’s quasi-autonomous foreign policy in a political orientation desired by China’s central government. This feature of the Macau Forum is also raised in relevant Chinese academic scholarship. For example, the aforementioned Qi and Zhang (2019, p. 38) of Renmin University highlight that the

platform status of the Macau Forum allows China to “continuously strengthen [...] a specific characteristic of Macau’s external exchanges and cooperation”—that is, the SAR’s diplomatic engagement with lusophone countries. Furthermore, as highlighted by Zeng Xiangming of the China University of Political Science and Law, good relations with lusophone countries is of great importance to Beijing, which has “extensive interests in their political support and abundant natural resources” (Zeng, 2012, p. 15). A permanent lusophone orientation in Macau’s foreign policy is thus viewed as of great strategic value for China’s Central Government.

This ‘paradiplomacy’ feature of the Macau Forum sets it apart from China’s other multilateral regional initiatives, like FOCAC and the China-CELAC Forum, which are exclusively managed by China’s Central Government. This serves as a reminder that China’s overall ‘forum diplomacy’ strategy cannot be exclusively analysed as one homogeneous whole. The particular arrangement of the Macau Forum (i.e., being co-organised between the Ministry of Commerce of China and the Macau SAR government) makes it a unique entity within China’s various international development fora, thereby justifying its stand-alone analysis in this research piece. As shown in the case of the Macau Forum, China’s multilateral regionalism initiatives serve not only external interests—on which most of the ‘forum diplomacy’ literature focuses—but also domestic interests, such as strengthening Macau’s politico-economic integration with mainland China.

## **7. SECURING BEIJING'S DIPLOMATIC RECOGNITION**

Historical analysis shows that the Macau Forum has helped reinforce China's global political standing by furthering Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. Beijing and Taipei, it should be recalled, have been competing for diplomatic allies since the end of China's civil war in 1949. This diplomatic battle has been—and remains—a central struggle in Beijing's foreign policy strategy; after all, diplomatic recognition is viewed as fundamental to a nation's political legitimacy in the modern state system (Rich, 2009). Beijing has thus attempted to pull away Taipei's last remaining diplomatic allies—most of them small and impoverished nations—through a variety of economic incentives known as 'dollar diplomacy' or 'chequebook diplomacy' (Waisová, 2020).

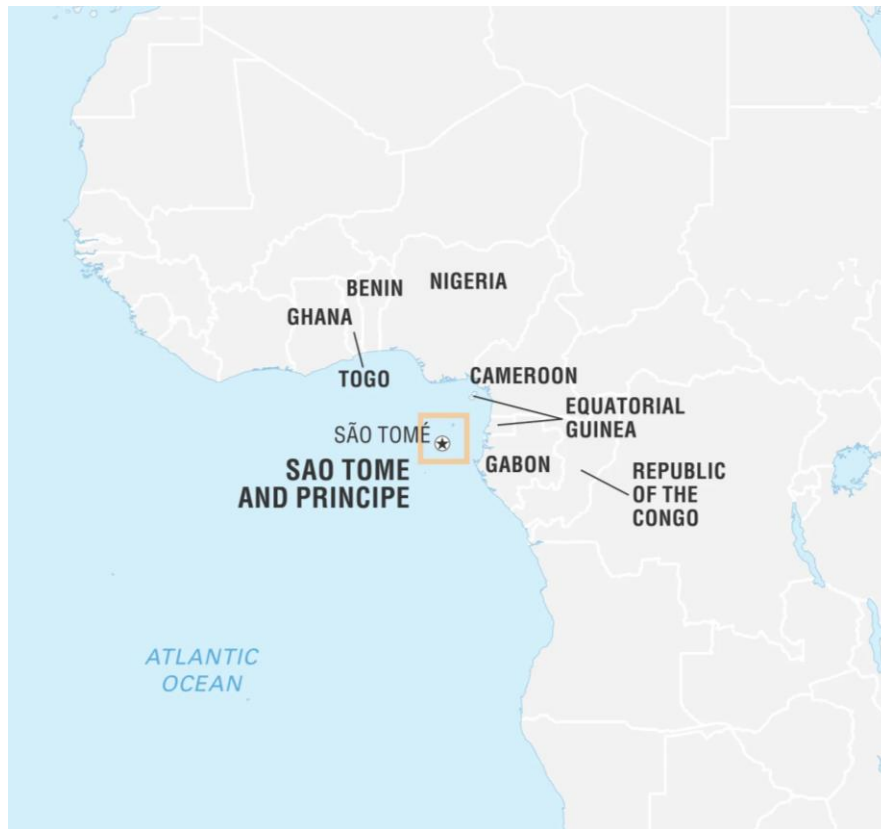
The Macau Forum can be considered as part of this grand strategy to wrest away Taiwan's remaining diplomatic allies. Indeed, the relationship between the Macau Forum and Taiwan's decreased diplomatic presence in the Lusosphere can be observed in the small countries of São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau and Timor-Leste. These national case studies reveal how the Macau Forum has secured Beijing's diplomatic recognition by pointedly excluding some Lusophone countries while 'locking in' diplomatic recognition from countries susceptible to Taiwanese charm offensives.

### **7.1. São Tomé and Príncipe**

São Tomé and Príncipe, the smallest and least-populated lusophone country, which is located in the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea (Figure 5), originally recognised the People's Republic of China (PRC) upon gaining independence from Portugal on 12 July 1975 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2018). On 6 May 1997, however, the island nation established diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC). During this period of 1975 to 1997, there was almost no trade between the two countries due to the small size of the island's domestic market and its shortage of foreign currencies (Ibid.). During this time, the highest-level diplomatic visit from the PRC was from Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in 1997 (Ibid.).

### Figure 5: Geographical Location of São Tomé and Príncipe

(Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022c)



Relations with the PRC could only be re-established once São Tomé and Príncipe cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which it did so on December 21, 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROC, 2016). The Taiwanese government claimed that São Tomé and Príncipe had “with excessive financial difficulties, and demands beyond those the ROC could meet, [...] ignored 20 years of friendly diplomatic relations, playing both sides of the Taiwan Strait while holding out for the highest bidder” (Ibid.).

An analysis of the sequence of historical events strongly suggests that São Tomé and Príncipe had been lured into switching diplomatic recognition through promises of financial assistance associated with the Macau Forum. In late 2010, Wen Jiabao, the then Chinese Premier, made a formal announcement at the 3rd Ministerial Conference of the Macau Forum, announcing China’s plans to establish the CPDFund with a total amount of US\$1 billion. This CPDFund, financially backed by the China Development Bank and

the Macau Industrial and Commercial Development Fund, promised to be “an important measure of the Chinese government to encourage and deepen the economic and trade cooperation between China (including Macau Special Administrative Region) and the Portuguese-speaking countries, focusing on the financing needs of the companies and promoting business growth, globalisation and economic improvement of the member states of the Forum with capital serving as a link” (CPDFund, 2013).

The CPDFund was then officially created in June 2013 (Macau Trade and Investment Promotion Institute, 2013). A mere six months later in November, the government of São Tomé and Príncipe signed an agreement with Chinese representatives to open a trade mission to promote economic projects in the small African nation (Reuters, 2013). The significance of this agreement is that such trade missions are often considered precursors toward full diplomatic recognition between states. Indeed, just three years later, São Tomé and Príncipe abruptly severed its diplomatic ties with Taiwan, allegedly after the latter had rejected the former’s request for \$200 million in development aid (Ives, 2016).

São Tomé and Príncipe then appears to have been ‘rewarded’ for its decision to end diplomatic relations with Taiwan by being granted a speedy accession to the Macau Forum. Indeed, only three months after bilateral relations between São Tomé and Príncipe and the ROC were officially terminated on 21 December 2016, the then Secretary-General of the Macau Forum, Xu Yingzhen, announced that “São Tomé and Príncipe is already a participant in our Forum” (RTP, 2017). Considering the relatively slow pace at which the Macau Forum holds Ministerial Conferences, this was a speedy integration process.

São Tomé and Príncipe appears to have been further rewarded following its accession to the Macau Forum by being specifically targeted for funding. In an exclusive interview, the then Secretary-General of the Macau Forum, Xu Yingzhen, announced that the CPDFund would send a delegation specifically to São Tomé and Príncipe “to establish more contacts with entrepreneurs and collect more information about the projects, with the aim of accelerating investments” (Sapo, 2019). He added that the Macau Forum’s permanent secretariat “gives enormous attention and importance to this meeting” (Ibid.).

Of course, it is extremely difficult to identify, let alone prove, cause-effect relationships in the analyses of international relations. However, it is surely not a coincidence that São Tomé and Príncipe stepped up its diplomatic relations with Beijing so soon after witnessing the concretisation of the Macau Forum's CPDFund. Nor can it be a coincidence that São Tomé and Príncipe was integrated into the Macau Forum and granted special investment attention so soon after establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing. Therefore, the Macau Forum, with its promise of lucrative investments and economic agreements, should be understood as China dangling a diplomatic 'carrot' to lure the last Taipei-allied lusophone nation toward Beijing.

## **7.2. Guinea-Bissau**

Guinea-Bissau's diplomatic relationship with the PRC is similar to that of São Tomé and Príncipe. Upon independence from Portugal in 1974, Guinea-Bissau, located in West Africa (Figure 6), established diplomatic relations with the PRC. On May 26 1990, however, Guinea-Bissau switched its diplomatic relations to the ROC. Diplomatic relations with the former were only restored eight years later on April 23, 1998 (China Internet Information Center, 2006). However, this restoration of diplomatic relations with the PRC was no guarantee that Guinea-Bissau would not re-establish relations with the ROC.

**Figure 6: Geographical Location of Guinea-Bissau**

(Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022b)



Guinea-Bissau's potentially wayward diplomatic behaviour had been raised as a concern by some Chinese specialists in sino-lusophone relations. For instance, the aforementioned Zeng of the China University of Political Science and Law has raised the fact that "Guinea-Bissau has repeatedly speculated between Beijing and Taipei to obtain more economic aid when dealing with the 'one China principle'" (Zeng, 2012, p. 15). His emphasis on 'repeatedly' highlights the impermanence of its diplomatic stance toward Beijing.

It is important to recognise that many small and medium-sized African states have broken and re-established diplomatic ties with the PRC multiple times. Over a dozen have engaged in this so-called yo-yo diplomacy (Diallo, 2018). Among this group, some countries, such as Liberia and the Central African Republic, have switched diplomatic recognition to the ROC a total of three times (Ibid.). In other words, an African country



switching its diplomatic recognition to the PRC is no guarantee of permanent diplomatic relations with Beijing. To counter this diplomatic flip-flopping, the Macau Forum can be understood as an attempt to regularise diplomatic relations with small and far-flung African nations with which Beijing might otherwise have difficulty maintaining frequent diplomatic contact. This can be framed as a process of reinforcing diplomatic normalisation with the PRC.

### **7.3. Timor-Leste**

Timor-Leste is another impoverished lusophone country (Figure 7) that Beijing could have understandably perceived as vulnerable to Taiwan's chequebook diplomacy. To understand Beijing's political concerns, one need look no further than a speech given by José Ramos-Horta, one of Timor-Leste's founding fathers and co-recipient of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize. In a keynote speech delivered to the Conference of the World Federation of Taiwanese Associations in Taiwan on 23 August 1997, Ramos-Horta concludes with the following words: "I am sure that the day will come when Taiwan gains its rightful place in the international community. The old Taiwanese Consulate building in our capital Dili is still your property. I hope the day will soon come when it becomes a full-fledged Embassy of Taiwan in our country" (Ramos-Horta, 1997).

**Figure 7: Geographical Location of Timor-Leste**

(Encyclopædia Britannica, 2022a)



In sum, the economic conditions and potential political inclinations of Timor-Leste made it a ripe target for Taiwan’s diplomatic offensive. Indeed, this concern had been raised in Chinese academic circles around the time of the creation of the Macau Forum. For example, scholars from Xiangtan University’s School of Marxism Studies, highlighted that prior to Timor-Leste’s official independence in 2002, Taiwanese authorities had “attempted in a thousand and one ways to establish relations” with the small Southeast Asian state via repeated telegrams and calls from Taiwan’s Foreign Minister (Li and Zhou, 2004). They add that, “after the failure of these attempts, it cannot be ruled out that the Taiwan authorities will use their economic strength to sell their ‘pragmatic relations’ to Timor-Leste again. Timor-Leste is a small country with poor people and in need of much reconstruction. [...] It is not entirely impossible for Timor-Leste and the Taiwan authorities to develop so-called substantive relations. Developing and consolidating friendly relations with Timor-Leste will help prevent such a situation from happening”

(Ibid.). From Beijing's perspective, it is clear that diplomatic relations with Timor-Leste required strengthening.

#### **7.4. Exclusionary and Inclusionary Regionalism**

In sum, the cases of São Tomé and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau and Timor-Leste indicate that the Macau Forum has had the effect of 'locking in' mainland China's diplomatic relations with certain lusophone countries seen as susceptible to Taiwanese diplomatic overtures. The process of gaining and retaining diplomatic relations with mainland China can be considered one of the political benefits of the Macau Forum for China.

Beijing's attempts to re-establish and cement PRC diplomatic recognition in the above Lusophone states can be understood as a process of exclusionary and inclusionary regionalism. On the one hand, a country like São Tomé and Príncipe, which recognised Taiwan from 1997 to 2016, was deliberately excluded from this emerging sino-lusophone grouping as long as it refused to switch diplomatic allegiance to mainland China. Criteria for membership to the Macau Forum, after all, was not simply about possessing Portuguese as an official language, it was also predicated on having full diplomatic relations with the PRC.

The inclusionary dynamic, meanwhile, helps maintain potentially wayward diplomatic allies of mainland China, such as Guinea-Bissau and Timor-Leste, within a regional grouping that promises economic rewards. Loss of access to financing from the CPDFund makes the costs of dropping diplomatic relations with Beijing greater. As a result of these exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics of the multilateral Macau Forum, Beijing has now ensured that the entire Lusosphere recognises the PRC—and not the ROC—as the sole legitimate government of China.

## **8. CRITICISM FROM LUSOPHONE PARTICIPANTS**

This chapter answers the second part of this thesis' research question—that is, how is the Macau Forum perceived by participant states? Answering this question shifts the focus away from China's motives and onto the lusophone members themselves. In doing so, it is possible to assess the perceived effectiveness of the Macau Forum as a multilateral regional initiative, which officially aims at “promoting economic and trade exchanges between China and Portuguese-speaking countries [...] using Macau as a connecting platform” (Permanent Secretariat, 2021a)

Criticism from major participants of the Macau Forum suggest that the China-led institution has failed in this stated objective. These critical assessments are evident in public commentary from diplomats and officials from Portugal, Brazil, Angola and Macau. Discourse from these specific regions was selected for analysis given their significant status and 'weight' in both the Lusosphere and the Macau Forum. Publicly-available official commentary on the Macau Forum was also more readily available from these four territories.

### **8.1. Portugal**

Official commentary from Portuguese diplomats sheds light on Portuguese attitudes toward the Macau Forum. José Augusto Duarte, the Portuguese ambassador to China, criticised the Macau Forum in 2020 in an interview with Teledifusão de Macau, the SAR's public broadcasting service. He bluntly stated that the “Macau Forum has not shown any results” and has yet to “directly contribute to the creation of projects that create jobs or facilitate exports from Portuguese-speaking countries to China” (Plataforma Média, 2020). He also found fault with the CPDFund, claiming that it is “practically untouched, because the regulation is not adjusted to the economic reality in lusophone countries, which is a shame” (Ibid.).

It should be noted that Portugal's commentary on the Macau Forum may be deliberately critical because the country views the Macau Forum as rivalling its own

multilateral regionalist project in the Lusosphere. As the former centre of the Portuguese empire, Lisbon has attempted to regain a post-colonial role of influence across the Lusosphere with the founding of the Lisbon-headquartered CPLP. Indeed, Portugal's lack of engagement with the Macau Forum is evident in the fact that Lisbon has not once sent its most senior ministers to attend one of the triennial Ministerial Conferences (Coquin, 2021).

## **8.2. Brazil**

Brazilian diplomats have also displayed a lukewarm reception toward China's multilateral regional project in the Lusosphere. Critical commentary from senior Brazilian diplomats displays a negative perception of the China-centred Macau Forum. For example, the Brazilian ambassador to China, Paulo Estivallet de Mesquita, said in an interview in 2019 that although the Macau Forum is "interesting", it has yet to "start producing concrete results" (RTP, 2019). He described sino-lusophone cooperation as the following: "We start, sometimes, from a declaration of mutual willingness to work together, to cooperate, and to do things, but the difficulty is in transforming this into concrete steps" (Ibid.). Furthermore, in relation to the Macau Forum, the ambassador said that "the Chinese have a habit of announcing large amounts of available resources, but difficulties then arise in transforming these large volumes into concrete projects" (Ibid.).

The Brazilian ambassador amplified his criticism of the Macau Forum in an interview one year later. He said that "much remains to be done" on the question of "using the forum to promote projects that benefit the least developed countries of the community of Portuguese-speaking countries" (Pimenta, 2020). He added that, despite "having resources available", the Macau Forum "has not, up to now, translated them into a volume of concrete projects" (Ibid.). He emphasised that "there is still a need, perhaps, to think better about how to design these projects, especially in less developed countries, so that everyone can see the advantages and benefits of the initiative" (Ibid.). He also added that, from Brasília's perspective, the Macau Forum has "never been central" to the bilateral

relationship between Brazil and China. He also singled out the sinocentric model of the Macau Forum, which he considers “an initiative centred on China, from China” (Ibid.). The implicit criticism in this comment is that the Macau Forum serves the interests of China over those of its other members.

As in Portugal’s case, Brazil’s commentary may also be purposefully negative due to domestic reasons. Brazil has also attempted to play a leading political and economic role among lusophone countries, especially those in Portuguese-speaking Africa. This attempted ‘lusophone leadership’ reached its peak under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s tenure from 2003 to 2010. The Macau Forum, from Brazil’s perspective, competes with its vision to provide international development leadership to lusophone African countries. Brazil’s continued refusal to send a president to attend any of the Macau Forum’s conferences is suggestive of this underlying geopolitical competition (Coquin, 2021).

### **8.3. Angola**

Official diplomatic discourse from Angola, the largest lusophone country in Africa, has echoed similar criticisms of the Macau Forum—although in a less blunt manner. In a meeting with the Macau Forum’s Secretary General, the Angolan Ambassador to Beijing, João Salvador dos Santos Neto, argued that the CPDFund had to become more flexible in order to make it operational in the interests of the economies of the member countries (Jornal de Angola, 2021). Future Ministerial Conferences at the Macau Forum, he said, “must represent something much more tangible and substantive” (Ibid.). He further echoed this issue in stating diplomatically that “we have to bring our intentions closer to achievements” (Ibid.).

The Angolan Ambassador also raised the issue of China’s dominance over the CPDFund in calling for more input from the Macau Forum’s lusophone members. It should be recalled that, according to the CPDFund’s established investment procedures, any potential investment projects must first be recommended by the Macau Forum’s secretariat (CPDFund, 2013, p. 26). Furthermore, China has ultimate decision-making

authority within the secretariat as the Secretary General is always seconded from the Chinese government. He criticised this arrangement by calling for the “promotion of increased institutional capacity, especially in terms of advising on the design of projects to be submitted to the CPDFund” (Jornal de Angola, 2021). In other words, Angolan diplomats feel they have few opportunities to shape the Macau Forum’s development agenda to suit their own needs.

#### **8.4. Macau**

Although Macau is not itself a member of the Macau Forum, it is still worthwhile considering the views of members of the Macanese political establishment. This Macau-based perspective provides insight into whether the SAR is truly fulfilling a role as a “connecting platform” as envisioned by the Macau Forum (Permanent Secretariat, 2021a). Analysis of Macau-based political discourse on the topic suggests that the Macao Forum has not been successful in this aim.

The multilateral regional project has received criticism from Portuguese-speaking politicians within the Macanese political establishment. For example, José Pereira Coutinho, a Macanese parliamentarian and leader of New Hope, one of Macau’s main political parties, provided scathing criticism of the Forum in a plenary session of Macau’s Legislative Assembly. The relevance and significance of Coutinho’s perspective is that he is only one of two deputies in the Legislative Assembly who can speak Portuguese fluently. He is thus considered a political representative for lusophone Macau; this status is bolstered by the fact that he also has ministerial positions related to maintaining Macau’s links with Portugal (LusoJornal, 2021).

Coutinho claimed that “no results have appeared” from the Macau Forum (Diário De Notícias, 2019). He also added that the Macau Forum has not transformed itself into a platform to help create new businesses or jobs because of the “opacity of its management model and internal and external functioning” (Ibid.). Coutinho also criticised the future development plans of the Macau Forum, which, he argues, intend to “increase its human resource capacity” without defining “concrete goals and objectives that must be achieved

in the medium and long term to justify the use of public funds" (Ibid.). He called for Macanese authorities to "better scrutinise the entire restructuring and operating process [of the Macau Forum] to stop it from seemingly being a mere 'diplomatic travel agency' in the eyes of public opinion" (Ibid.).

Finally, he criticised the Macau Forum for not benefiting the local Macanese community or economy. He highlighted the issue of the Macau Forum hiring Chinese-Portuguese translators from mainland China instead of those originating from the Macau Polytechnic Institute (Ibid.). Coutinho elaborated on these complaints in an interview with *Hoje Macau*, one of Macau's Portuguese-language newspapers: "If, under the terms of the law, the hiring of non-resident workers must be limited in time, one wonders how long they are needed in Macau before they are replaced by local interpreters" (Silva, 2019). Such translators from the mainland are all hired on temporary contracts, he added, despite the permanent nature of the Macau Forum. Finally, he expressed his dissatisfaction that the Macau Forum's training centre has for several years refused to respond to such complaints (Ibid.).

In sum, the perception of the Macau Forum as depicted by certain Portuguese-speaking Macanese deputies is that of an ineffective and out of touch multilateral organisation that does not truly serve the interests of the local lusophone communities it is designed to cooperate with. Significantly, his comments reveal that the Macau Forum may not be achieving Beijing's objective of strengthening Macau's local economy and promoting the SAR itself as a platform for sino-lusophone relations, as elaborated in the previous chapter.



## 9. CONCLUSION

This thesis has analysed the Macau Forum, one of China's first multilateral regional initiatives, in order to gain insight into Chinese approaches to global economic governance in the realm of international development. The two-part research question guiding this case study explored China's motives for creating and maintaining the Macau Forum; it also addressed the reactions to this initiative from key lusophone participants. In response to this research question, I have argued that China was motivated to create the multilateral Macau Forum for three key reasons: (1) to promote and test out a Chinese vision of development cooperation, (2) to strengthen Macau's integration with mainland China and (3) to secure Beijing's diplomatic recognition among lusophone countries.

Commentary from lusophone members reveal, however, that the Macau Forum is perceived as lacking in terms of concrete benefits for developing countries. The Macau Forum, therefore, has served China's own political interests more than its stated objectives of trade and economic cooperation. This helps explain why China has been willing to devote the time and money necessary to maintain this multilateral organisation in addition to its bilateral relations with lusophone countries.

To conclude, it would appear the Macau Forum, as with China's other multilateral regional initiatives like FOCAC, is yet another instance of asymmetrical diplomacy benefiting Beijing more than participant countries. This reminds us that, although China's various self-made international organisations may claim to be strictly 'apolitical' and simply focused on trade development, they nevertheless contribute primarily towards China's pursuit of its own political objectives. In essence, the Macau Forum can be considered a self-serving style of rhetorical regionalism that is characteristic of China's modern-day multilateral diplomacy.

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