

Historical Evolution and Contemporary Insights: The Diplomatic Relations between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries in the 20th Century

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolution of China's diplomatic relations with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) throughout the 20th century. It traces the transition from symbolic and low-profile interactions during the late Qing and early Republican periods, through cautious wartime diplomacy, to the establishment of bilateral and multilateral cooperation frameworks in the post-Cold War era. Relying on historical document analysis and comparative historical methods, the study identifies the key drivers, strategies, and implications of Sino-Lusophone relations. The findings highlight how the historical trajectory of China-PSC relations offers practical lessons for contemporary initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and South-South cooperation.

Keywords

China-Portuguese-speaking Countries; Historical Evolution; Multilateral Diplomacy; Forum Macao; Belt and Road Initiative.

1. Introduction

The 20th century was a transformative period for China and its relations with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) including Portugal, Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique. China's evolution from a semi-colonial state to an active global player coincided with Lusophone countries' own trajectories of colonial rule, decolonization, and nation-building. Despite geographic distance, shared historical intersections-most notably through Macau-provided pathways for diplomatic engagement.

While previous studies have offered descriptive overviews of Sino-Lusophone relations, there is a need to analyze this evolution systematically in light of global diplomatic trends. This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- (1) How did China's diplomatic relations with PSCs evolve throughout the 20th century?
- (2) How did China's diplomatic strategies toward PSCs adapt to global political shifts, including colonialism, the Cold War, and globalization?
- (3) What historical lessons can inform contemporary initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Forum Macao?

This study adopts a qualitative historical approach. It first relies on archival and documentary analysis of treaties, government statements, and diplomatic correspondence, which provide a foundational understanding of formal interactions between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. Next, it conducts a secondary literature review of historical and international relations scholarship on Sino-Portuguese and Sino-Brazilian ties, situating the study within existing academic discourse. Finally, it performs a comparative historical analysis of key

diplomatic phases, from bilateral contact to multilateral frameworks, emphasizing the role of Macau and Forum Macao as bridging platforms. By synthesizing primary and secondary sources, this study constructs a narrative that not only traces events but also identifies patterns and implications for contemporary diplomacy.

In addition to archival research and comparative historical analysis, this study also incorporated semi-structured in-depth interviews with diplomats, policy experts, and scholars engaged in China-Portugal relations. These interviews provided firsthand insights into decision-making logic, perspectives, and institutional practices that may not be fully captured in official documents or secondary literature.

The interview subjects comprised three groups: (1) former Chinese diplomats and officials with direct experience in Portuguese-speaking country affairs, particularly those related to Macao and the China-Portuguese-speaking Countries Cooperation Forum; (2) experts and scholars from Portuguese-speaking countries (especially Portugal, Brazil, and Angola) who study or participate in bilateral and multilateral initiatives; and (3) international organization practitioners familiar with China-Portugal cooperation.

The interviews employed a semi-structured format, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences in detail while ensuring comparability across cases. Thematic coding was applied to identify recurring narratives concerning pragmatic diplomacy, cultural bridges, and institutionalization. By triangulating these findings with historical records, the study enhanced interpretive depth and provided a more comprehensive understanding of China-Portugal relations.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interview Subjects

Interview code	Origin	Position/Professional Background	Areas of Participation	Interview highlights
I1	China	Former diplomat (former Embassy in Portugal)	Diplomatic decisions	experience in diplomatic interaction between China and Portuguese-speaking countries and negotiations on the Macao issue
I2	Macao SAR China	University Researcher (Macao Belt and Road Research Center)	Academic research	Macao serves as a bridge between China and Portuguese-speaking countries
I3	Portugal	Former diplomat and think tank expert	International Relations	The evolution of Sino-Portuguese relations from the perspective of the Portuguese side
I4	Brazil	University Professor (International Relations/Latin American Studies)	Academic research	normalization of China-Pakistan relations and South-South cooperation
I5	Angola	Government Consultant (Infrastructure and Economic Co-operation)	Policy practice	China's experience in aid and infrastructure cooperation
I6	Mozambique	NGO Representative (Social Development)	Development cooperation	The social impact of China's participation in local economic development
I7	International Organisations (CPLP)	researcher	Multilateral cooperation	Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries under a multilateral framework

Source: Drafted by the authors

2. Historical Evolution of China-PSC Relations

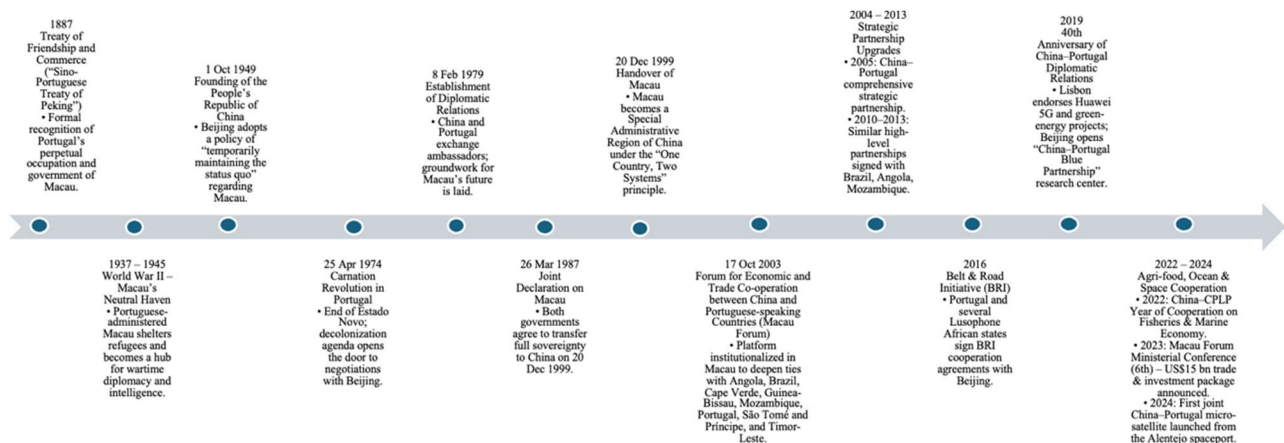


Figure 1. China–Portugal (& Lusophone World) Major Diplomatic Milestones (1887 – Present)

Source: Drafted by the authors

2.1. Early Contact and Symbolic Diplomacy (Late Qing to Early Republic)

The first Opium War(1839-1842) marked a watershed in Chinese history, forcing the Qing Empire to enter the global capitalist system and initiating a process of modernization. This conflict not only shattered China's long-standing seclusion but also accelerated the disintegration of the traditional tributary system-a framework that had structured imperial China's foreign relations for centuries through ritualized exchanges and hierarchical order. Under increasing pressure from Western imperial powers, China began a slow and uneven transition toward a modern system of sovereign state diplomacy. Within this transformation, Macau emerged as a critical node in Sino-Portuguese interactions.

Macau, a significant outpost in East Asia since the mid-16th century, held a unique and complex status. Although Portuguese settlers had long conducted trade and resided in Macau with the consent of Chinese authorities, the territory remained under Chinese sovereignty. The Portuguese paid land rent and were subject to administrative oversight by Chinese officials. However, as the Qing's authority weakened, Portugal gradually expanded its de facto control over Macau-an expansion emblematic of the broader colonial ambitions of Western powers in China.

In 1887, leveraging Qing's vulnerability following a series of humiliating treaties with Britain, Portugal-backed by British diplomatic support-forced the Qing government to sign the Tratado de Amizade e Comércio Sino-Português, thereby formalizing Macau's status as a Portuguese colony^{[4][6][16]}. This treaty not only represented a severe infringement of Chinese sovereignty but also exemplified the mechanisms by which Western imperial powers carved territorial concessions through unequal treaties. Subsequently, Macau's strategic role within Portugal's global colonial network was further consolidated.

From the late Qing through the early period of Republic of China, formal diplomatic exchanges between China and Portugal remained limited due to internal political upheaval, regime transitions, and persistent foreign intervention. Nonetheless, sporadic yet symbolically important interactions-such as consular activities and official correspondence-did occur and served to maintain a minimal diplomatic connection^[20]. As one of the Western colonial powers in China, Portugal's position was shaped by both competition and cooperation with other colonial powers, further influencing the evolving contours of Sino-Portuguese relations.

Although still in its embryonic stage during this era, the role of Macau as a cultural and commercial bridge began to take shape. It served not only as a Portuguese colonial foothold in the Far East but also as a conduit for trade, cultural exchange, and limited diplomatic engagement. This laid the groundwork for the more structured and multifaceted relations that would unfold between China and the Lusophone world in the 20th century.

2.2. Wartime Pragmatism and Macau as a Diplomatic Conduit (1937–1945)

With the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, Portugal adopted a policy of neutrality. Macau became a critical conduit for low-profile exchanges. It enabled information flow, modest material support, and the maintenance of minimal diplomatic contact. This model of restrained yet stable engagement created trust and provided lessons for post-1949 diplomacy.

2.2.1. Portugal's Neutrality in WWII Allowed Macau to Serve as a Safe Intermediary for Information and Material Exchange

With the full-scale outbreak of The War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in 1937, the global political landscape grew increasingly volatile. As the specter of World War II loomed over the international order, many countries recalibrated their foreign policies in response to mounting geopolitical tensions. In this context, Portugal adopted a policy of neutrality, opting not to engage directly in the hostilities unfolding in East Asia^{[17][19]}. This decision was not merely a product of moral or ideological considerations but rather a calculated strategy grounded in national interest and geopolitical analysis. Portuguese government understood that participation in the war could endanger their already limited resources and expose their overseas colonies-particularly those in Africa-to the ambitions of competing imperial powers. Maintaining neutrality thus emerged as a pragmatic choice in the early stages of global conflict. Portugal's neutrality conferred a unique and relatively stable status upon Macau. Strategically located at the mouth of the Pearl River, Macau served as a critical conduit between China and the international community. During the war, its strategic importance became increasingly evident: for China, Macau functioned as a relatively safe channel for information and material exchange; for Portugal, it provided a foothold to sustain influence and visibility in East Asia^[10]. In this context, Portugal successfully maintained its neutrality while participating in selective wartime collaboration and sustaining limited yet significant interactions with China.

The Chinese government, for its part, clearly recognized the special geopolitical significance of Macau. Amid the severe pressures of war, China was in urgent need of international sympathy and assistance. By leveraging Macau's unique geographic and political conditions, China maintained pragmatic contact with Portugal. These interactions were not oriented toward direct military collaboration, but rather aimed at enhancing diplomatic positioning in the broader international arena. Through Portugal, China sought a modest yet vital window to generate global awareness and potentially secure external support.

2.2.2. Early Forms of Low-profile Cooperation Laid the Groundwork for Postwar Engagement

Although prominent diplomatic exchanges between China and Portugal were absent during this period, their relationship was characterized by a pattern of low-profile yet stable cooperation. In terms of information exchange, Macau became an essential platform through which China could disseminate its message abroad and gather international intelligence-efforts that were crucial for winning foreign understanding and support^[5]. Regarding material exchange, despite wartime constraints, Macau provided a limited yet valuable channel for the inflow of supplies that supported China's resistance efforts. Diplomatically, contact was maintained through traditional means such as correspondence and emissaries, preserving basic bilateral engagement during a time of global uncertainty.

This model of restrained yet stable engagement offered valuable lessons for post-1949 diplomatic reconstruction. It demonstrated that, even amid ideological and systemic differences, China and Portugal could identify overlapping interests through flexible diplomatic approaches and the strategic use of geographic intermediaries. The wartime experience of cooperation through Macau thus laid important groundwork for the future development of Sino-Portuguese relations in the latter half of the 20th century.

2.3. Early PRC Diplomacy and Cold War Constraints (1949–1970s)

The founding of the PRC in 1949 reshaped China's diplomacy amid the Cold War's ideological divide. Portugal, aligned with the Western bloc under Salazar, was cautious and distant. China maintained its sovereignty claim over Macau but adopted a strategy of "temporary maintenance of the status quo" to avoid confrontation. This strategic patience preserved stability, allowed minimal contact, and set the stage for eventual normalization.

2.3.1. Limited Direct Engagement Due to Portugal's Alignment with the Western Bloc and Cold War Ideological Divides

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 ushered in a new era in Chinese history, fundamentally reshaping both domestic structures and international dynamics. At that time, the world had entered the early phase of the Cold War, with the capitalist bloc led by the United States and the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union entrenched in ideological and geopolitical confrontation. Under this global bipolar order, the PRC faced the formidable challenge of reconstructing its foreign relations within an increasingly hostile environment.

From the outset, the Chinese government adopted an independent and peaceful foreign policy, aimed at safeguarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. Simultaneously, China sought to establish diplomatic relations with other nations on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. However, the Cold War context posed considerable obstacles. Western powers, spearheaded by the United States, imposed political isolation, economic sanctions, and military threats in an effort to contain the newly established communist regime. Within this context, Sino-Portuguese relations assumed a nuanced and complex character.

Portugal, a longstanding colonial power aligned with the Western bloc, held political and ideological positions in stark contrast to those of the PRC. Under the authoritarian regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, Portugal's domestic governance was rigid and conservative, and its foreign policy heavily influenced by colonialist doctrines. Consequently, the Portuguese government regarded the PRC with suspicion and hostility. Despite this, the Chinese leadership, while adhering firmly to the principle of diplomatic autonomy, sought pragmatic avenues for engagement with Western countries, including Portugal. The PRC recognized that breaking international isolation and expanding its diplomatic space required a flexible approach to international engagement, particularly in the ideological straitjacket of the Cold War. China aimed to explore the possibility of establishing bilateral dialogue based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, even with ideologically divergent countries such as Portugal.

2.3.2. Strategic Patience and "Temporary Maintenance of the Status Quo" on the Macau Question

During this period, the status of Macau emerged as a central issue in Sino-Portuguese relation. The PRC maintained a consistent position that Macau was an inalienable part of Chinese territory. However, in light of the sensitive and volatile international climate of the early Cold War, the Chinese government opted for a policy of "temporary maintenance of the status quo." This strategy was not a concession on sovereignty, but rather a pragmatic diplomatic calculation aimed at preserving broader national interests. It created the conditions for future peaceful resolution of the Macau issue and allowed space for the gradual normalization of Sino-Portuguese relations.

China's handling of the Macau question demonstrated considerable diplomatic patience and strategic foresight. On one hand, the PRC communicated its principled position through various channels, emphasizing the importance of peaceful negotiation. On the other, it maintained a baseline of contact with the Portuguese side to prevent miscalculation and escalation. This prudent and flexible approach not only preserved relative stability in bilateral relations but also laid a solid foundation for future diplomatic normalization^{[9][3][8]}.

During the formative years of the PRC, Sino-Portuguese relations reflected a delicate balance of opposition and engagement. Despite sharp differences in political ideology and governance models, China remained committed to its core diplomatic principles of independence and peaceful coexistence. Through pragmatic diplomacy and strategic restraint-particularly in the handling of the Macau issue-the PRC demonstrated a mature and far-sighted approach to international relations. This diplomatic posture helped pave the way for the eventual development of more constructive and normalized ties between China and Portugal.

2.4. Normalization and Expansion (1970s–1990s)

The 1970s witnessed transformative change. Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution and decolonization opened the way for normalization of relations in 1979. Around the same time, China established relations with Brazil (1974) and strengthened ties with Lusophone Africa. Sino-Portuguese and Sino-Brazilian relations expanded into trade, culture, and education. Macau's status became a focus of pragmatic negotiations, leading to the Joint Declaration and eventual peaceful resolution. These bilateral developments, combined with growing South-South and UN cooperation, laid the foundation for multilateral initiatives like Forum Macao.

2.4.1. Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution and Decolonization Facilitated Normalization of Relations in 1979.

The 1970s witnessed profound shifts in the global political landscape. As the Cold War structure began to loosen and the trend toward multipolarity emerged, key international developments-such as the fall of Saigon and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan-reshaped strategic alignments. In parallel, Portugal underwent a transformative domestic upheaval: the Carnation Revolution of 1974 marked the end of decades of authoritarian rule under the Estado Novo regime. This bloodless revolution not only redefined Portugal's political institutions but also accelerated the decolonization of its overseas territories. In quick succession, former colonies in Africa gained independence, signaling the disintegration of Portugal's colonial empire. In the wake of these developments, Portugal's foreign policy shifted toward fostering equitable, post-colonial international partnerships. Within this changing global context, the Portuguese government came to recognize that establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) aligned with both national interest and international realities.

The formal establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Portugal in 1979 represented a remarkable moment in bilateral relations, marking their transition into a normalized and institutionalized framework. This milestone was the outcome of strategic calculations made by both parties amid a volatile global environment. For Portugal, this diplomatic initiative reflected a significant reorientation of foreign policy from colonial-era priorities to a realist engagement with emerging global powers. In the aftermath of prolonged colonial wars and authoritarian rule, Portugal sought to redefine its international identity, expand diplomatic engagement beyond traditional Western alliances, and strengthen ties with Asian nations. Establishing relations with China also served to improve Portugal's international standing and dispel the lingering shadows of its colonial past. For China, the establishment of diplomatic ties with Portugal was consistent with the broader objectives of its post-1978 foreign policy characterized by diversification and comprehensive global engagement. Despite the persistence of Cold War antagonisms, China actively sought to transcend ideological barriers and foster pragmatic cooperation with countries across the ideological spectrum.

Diplomatic normalization with Portugal not only improved China's image in Western Europe but also enhanced its leverage on the global stage. It further laid the institutional groundwork for bilateral cooperation in trade, culture, education, and other domains. Despite evident differences in political systems and developmental trajectories, both sides demonstrated considerable political acumen and diplomatic flexibility following normalization, gradually cultivating a foundation of mutual trust and cooperative engagement.

Notably, the two countries adopted a pragmatic approach to Macau. As Portugal's last remaining colonial holding in China, Macau had long been a delicate topic in bilateral relations. However, following the establishment of diplomatic ties, both parties displayed patience and goodwill, engaging in continuous dialogue and negotiation. This process laid the political and diplomatic groundwork for the peaceful return of Macau to Chinese sovereignty in the late 1990s [16].

2.4.2. Establishment of Relations with Brazil and Subsequent Ties with Lusophone Africa

The 1970s marked a period of profound transformation in global politics, during which China and Brazil underwent a historic shift in their diplomatic relations-almost concurrently with the normalization of China's ties with Portugal. In 1974, China and Brazil formally established diplomatic relations, thereby ending over two decades of mutual diplomatic isolation and opening a new chapter in bilateral cooperation. This breakthrough was not merely symbolic; it emerged from calculated strategic considerations on both sides, responding to the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape and shifting global power dynamics.

From China's standpoint, the restoration of its lawful seat in the United Nations in 1971 signaled a critical moment in its reintegration into the international community. As its global legitimacy and visibility expanded, China pursued a more proactive foreign policy aimed at strengthening ties with developing nations, particularly in the Global South. Establishing relations with Brazil-the largest Portuguese-speaking country in Latin America-was both strategically and symbolically significant. For Brazil, its rapid economic ascent in the early 1970s positioned it as Latin America's leading economy, yet its foreign policy remained overly dependent on the United States. Recognizing the limitations of this dependency, Brazil sought to diversify its international partnerships. Normalizing ties with China offered Brazil access to the Asia-Pacific market and an opportunity to assert a more autonomous and influential role in global affairs.

The establishment of diplomatic relations provided both countries with substantial strategic advantages. For China, cooperation with Brazil offered a gateway to deeper engagement with Latin America, a region of great geopolitical and economic importance. For Brazil, China's emergence as a major actor in the Asia-Pacific allowed for new trade and investment opportunities, bolstering Brazil's regional strategy and global profile. This mutually reinforcing partnership marked the beginning of a long-term bilateral trajectory characterized by pragmatism, complementarity, and growing interdependence.

Throughout the 1980s, Sino-Brazilian relations matured significantly, with expanding cooperation across multiple domains. Trade became a cornerstone of the relationship, with China exporting a wide range of industrial and high-tech goods, while importing large volumes of Brazilian agricultural products and raw materials. This exchange reflected a high level of economic complementarity. In the realm of science and technology, the joint China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite (CBERS) program stood out as a pioneering initiative. It not only advanced the two countries' space capabilities but also laid the groundwork for further collaboration in fields such as agricultural technology and renewable energy. Cultural diplomacy also played a key role, with both nations investing in exhibitions, artistic performances, and academic exchanges that enriched public understanding and fostered societal goodwill.

In the multilateral sphere, China and Brazil coordinated closely within institutions such as the United Nations, often adopting shared positions on issues vital to the interests of developing countries. As prominent voices in the Global South, both nations actively promoted South–South cooperation and advocated for a more balanced and equitable international economic order. Brazil, due to its leadership role within the Lusophone world, emerged as a crucial bridge for China’s engagement with Portuguese-speaking countries. Through this partnership, China was able to gain deeper insights into Lusophone political and economic dynamics, which proved invaluable in shaping its broader strategy for engagement with the Portuguese-speaking world. Ultimately, the sustained growth of Sino-Brazilian relations provided a stable and strategic foundation for China’s evolving cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries^{[14][11]}. It offered not only practical experience in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy but also served as a model of solidarity and shared development among emerging powers. This relationship demonstrated the potential of strategic South–South alliances and contributed meaningfully to the formation of a more multipolar and inclusive global order.

2.4.3. Increasing Multilateral Engagement, Laying Foundations for Forum Macao

The end of the Cold War ushered in a profound transformation of the global political landscape, leading to the expansion and deepening of international cooperation mechanisms. Against this backdrop, China’s engagement with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) began to evolve beyond the traditional framework of bilateral diplomacy. A gradual but notable shift toward multilateralism emerged, introducing a more dynamic, diversified model of interaction and revealing broader prospects for future cooperation.

Within multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, China and PSCs collaborated frequently and effectively on a range of global issues, including decolonization, human rights, and development assistance. China consistently upheld a strong position in support of national liberation and independence movements worldwide. During the wave of decolonization in Lusophone Africa, China provided multifaceted support—moral, material, and diplomatic—to countries such as Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau, actively assisting their quests for independence. Furthermore, China played a key role in helping these newly independent countries gain recognition in the international community and secure membership in global organizations. Through such support, political trust between China and Lusophone African countries deepened, laying the groundwork for sustained cooperation in international affairs.

Concurrently, China and PSCs began to explore mechanisms for structured, regionally oriented dialogue. Although the formal establishment of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Forum Macao) did not occur until 2003, the concept and institutional foundations were already taking shape in the late 1990s, particularly in the context of Macau’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1999. In the lead-up to and aftermath of this historic event, China and PSCs significantly increased their interactions across multilateral meetings and cultural and economic exchanges, exhibiting a clear trend toward institutionalized cooperation. Owing to its unique historical trajectory, linguistic heritage, and deep-rooted connections with PSCs, Macau emerged as a natural bridge for multilateral cooperation. Recognizing Macau’s strategic potential, China gradually positioned the region as a hub and platform for engagement with PSCs. Through cultural festivals, trade exhibitions, academic exchanges, and policy dialogues hosted in Macau, China and PSCs deepened ties in trade, investment, education, and cultural affairs^{[2][13]}. These sustained engagements laid a solid foundation for the later formalization of Forum Macao.

The continued expansion of multilateral cooperation between China and PSCs reflects not only the deepening of bilateral relationships but also the broader transformation of China’s diplomatic strategy. Moving beyond the traditional state-to-state model, China’s diplomacy has increasingly embraced complex, multi-nodal, and network-based approaches. This evolution

has enabled China to engage with PSCs in a more holistic and integrated manner, aligning development priorities, leveraging comparative advantages, and coordinating collective responses to global challenges. Furthermore, this model offers valuable insights for other countries seeking innovative modes of international collaboration, contributing to the emergence of a more balanced and effective global governance system^[1].

This trajectory of multilateral cooperation underscores the longstanding historical and geopolitical connections between China and PSCs, as well as their shared aspirations for development. Although geographically distant, China and the Lusophone world have been connected for centuries via maritime trade and cultural exchanges. From the ancient Maritime Silk Road to the colonial legacies and post-colonial independence struggles of the 20th century, these historical experiences have provided a rich backdrop and institutional memory for contemporary collaboration. As economic globalization deepens interdependence, the need for multilateral frameworks becomes increasingly urgent for achieving sustainable development and shared prosperity.

2.5. Macao's Return and Institutionalization of Multilateral Cooperation (1999–2000s)

The return of Macau to China in 1999 marked the culmination of historical transformation. It symbolized peaceful conflict resolution and created a hub for China–PSC engagement. By 2003, Forum Macao was launched, institutionalizing multilateral cooperation in trade, investment, and culture. Macau emerged as both a practical and symbolic bridge for long-term multilateral collaboration.

2.5.1. Peaceful Handover of Macau: Symbolizing A Transition from Colonial Legacy to Partnership

The handover of Macau to the People's Republic of China on December 20, 1999, marked a historic milestone in the process of national reunification. It ended over four centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and restored China's sovereignty over the territory, thereby completing another crucial step toward territorial integrity^[12]. Beyond its domestic political significance, Macau's return had far-reaching implications for international diplomacy. It stood as a powerful example of peaceful conflict resolution, particularly regarding colonial legacies, and demonstrated the potential of dialogue and cooperation between states with different political systems and cultural backgrounds.

The peaceful handover was the result of a carefully managed, trust-based diplomatic process. Since the signing of the *Declaração Conjunta do Governo da República Portuguesa e do Governo da República Popular da China Sobre a Questão de Macau*, in 1987, China and Portugal had engaged in consistent and constructive dialogue. Despite internal political transitions in Portugal during this period, the Portuguese government remained committed to the terms of the Joint Declaration, ensuring a smooth and peaceful transition. This level of diplomatic maturity and historical responsibility offered a valuable precedent for the international community on managing sovereignty-related issues through negotiation rather than confrontation.

Following the handover, the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) embarked on a new phase of development under the principles of "One Country, Two Systems" and "Macau people governing Macau." This framework respected Macau's distinct cultural identity, social institutions, and historical legacy, while safeguarding the rights and freedoms of its residents. With strong support from the central government, Macau implemented reforms to diversify its economy, improve social services, and enhance living standards ^[7]. The territory has since maintained long-term stability and economic prosperity, reinforcing strategic trust between China and Portugal.

Macau's post-return success also catalyzed deeper cooperation between China and Portugal across economic, cultural, educational, and technological sectors. Portuguese firms became increasingly involved in Macau's development, particularly in infrastructure, finance, and tourism. Simultaneously, Macau emerged as a key platform for Chinese businesses seeking to access Portuguese-speaking markets. Culturally, Macau's unique East-West heritage enabled it to serve as a vital bridge for Sino-Portuguese cultural exchange. Through exhibitions, academic forums, and tourism promotion, the two countries enhanced mutual understanding and people-to-people connectivity.

Ultimately, Macau's return was not merely the restoration of sovereignty—it also symbolized the transformation of Sino-Portuguese relations from a colonial legacy to a forward-looking partnership rooted in cooperation and mutual benefit. The diplomatic trust and institutional frameworks established during the transition have since enabled China and Portugal to serve as co-creators of new multilateral initiatives. Today, Macau plays a central role in facilitating China's broader engagement with the Portuguese-speaking world, offering a compelling model for building peaceful and productive international relationships ^{[15][16]}.

2.5.2. Launch of Forum Macao: Formalizing China–PSC Multilateral Economic and Cultural Engagement

The early 21st century witnessed a dramatic intensification of globalization, marked by tighter international economic linkages and significant restructuring of the global economic order. Against this backdrop, China's emergence as the world's second-largest economy has been accompanied by an expansive outward strategy, aimed at diversifying trade partners, extending investment networks, and identifying new engines of growth. Angola, Mozambique, Brazil, and Portugal have become indispensable partners in this process, owing to their strategic geographical distribution, rich resource endowments, and vast developmental potential.

In 2003, the formal establishment of the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation Between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (Forum Macao) in Macau marked a turning point in the institutionalization of Sino–PSC economic engagement. Macau, with its historical ties to the Lusophone world and its special administrative status under the “One Country, Two Systems” policy, offered a unique environment for launching this multilateral diplomatic platform. The forum initiated a new era in economic cooperation, providing a regularized and structured mechanism for dialogue and partnership between China and PSCs^[2].

Forum Macao's scope has expanded significantly over the past two decades, encompassing critical sectors such as trade, finance, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and public health. More than just a venue for enterprise-level exchange, the forum plays a vital role in fostering mutually beneficial cooperation and strengthening the broader architecture of South–South cooperation. By aligning development agendas, coordinating investment flows, and sharing expertise, China and the PSCs have been able to leverage complementary strengths and better navigate the challenges posed by globalization. For China, the forum facilitates access to emerging markets and strategic resources across Africa, Latin America, and Europe. For PSCs, it offers access to Chinese capital, technology, and market demand—enhancing infrastructure development, industrial diversification, and sustainable growth. This collaborative model not only reinforces bilateral economic ties but also supports the construction of a more balanced, inclusive, and development-oriented international economic order. Forum Macao thus stands as a cornerstone of China's economic diplomacy with PSCs and a model of pragmatic, multilateral cooperation.

From an operational standpoint, Forum Macao has leveraged strong support from the central government of China and the unique administrative capabilities of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) to implement a series of investment agreements and cooperative frameworks. The forum capitalizes on Macau's historical and cultural ties to the Portuguese-

speaking world, as well as its distinctive institutional advantages, to facilitate substantive cooperation. Macau's strategic role as a bridge between China and Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) has been fully utilized-not only as a cultural and historical convergence point, but also as an active promoter and enabler of economic collaboration. Under the impetus of Forum Macao, Chinese investment in PSCs has grown significantly, demonstrating strong momentum in sectors critical to national development. These include energy, mining, infrastructure, telecommunications, and agriculture. The expansion of investment across these strategic industries has injected fresh vitality into bilateral economic development and strengthened China's long-term economic engagement with Portuguese-speaking countries.

Angola provides a representative example of this cooperation model. Chinese enterprises have actively participated in Angola's large-scale infrastructure reconstruction, contributing technological expertise and project management capacity to improve transportation, energy, and other foundational sectors. This support has played a crucial role in Angola's post-war economic recovery and social development. Notably, China and Angola pioneered a "resources-for-infrastructure" financing arrangement, where oil-backed loans helped fund reconstruction while simultaneously ensuring China's energy security. This innovative model has served as a benchmark for mutually beneficial cooperation and offered valuable lessons for other developing countries.

In Brazil and Portugal, Chinese capital has also been highly active, particularly in sectors such as ports, energy, and real estate. Chinese enterprises have contributed to local economic development and industrial upgrading through direct investment, joint ventures, and co-development initiatives. These projects have generated employment opportunities, revitalized key economic sectors, and created conditions for long-term sustainable growth. At the same time, they have enabled Chinese firms to expand into overseas markets, access strategic resources, and gain experience in international operations-demonstrating the growing comprehensiveness and depth of Sino-Portuguese cooperation.

While economic cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries continues to accelerate, cultural exchange has also gained remarkable momentum, evolving into a vibrant and increasingly diversified dimension of bilateral relations. Areas such as language, education, and the arts have become essential soft power connectors-intangible but powerful threads weaving the hearts and minds of people from both sides into a shared fabric of mutual understanding and friendship.

Portuguese language and Lusophone cultures are taking root and flourishing across China, attracting growing interest and admiration. In culturally diverse and economically dynamic cities such as Macau, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, Portuguese language institutions have emerged in large numbers, alongside a wealth of cultural events. These activities-ranging from art exhibitions, musical performances, and culinary festivals to academic seminars-have built solid bridges of people-to-people exchange, significantly enhancing public awareness and emotional resonance between China and the Lusophone world.

As of 2023, a total of 23 Chinese universities had launched dedicated Portuguese language programs in response to the growing demand for linguistic and cultural expertise in Sino-Portuguese relations. These institutions aim to cultivate a new generation of professionals proficient in Portuguese, well-versed in Lusophone cultures, and capable of contributing in fields such as diplomacy, trade, and translation. Driven by curiosity and passion, these students are emerging as the next generation of cultural ambassadors and builders of friendship between China and PSCs. At the same time, Lusophone countries have enthusiastically embraced Chinese culture by establishing Confucius Institutes at their universities. These institutes serve not only as platforms for language education, but also as gateways to China's rich cultural heritage-from the elegant strokes of Chinese calligraphy and the wisdom of Confucianism to the rhythm of classical poetry and the diversity of contemporary literature.

The deep cultural appeal of China continues to captivate Lusophone audiences, enhancing understanding and emotional affinity across linguistic and geographic divides.

Moreover, under the broader vision of the Belt and Road Initiative, cultural exchange has been elevated to a strategic role in fostering “people-to-people connectivity” and consolidating the foundations of cooperation. Collaborative efforts between China and PSCs in the fields of cultural festivals, exhibitions, film and television production, and art exchanges have been steadily increasing. Particularly noteworthy is the role of Macau—a city shaped by centuries of Sino-Western cultural intermingling—which has become an indispensable platform for cultural diplomacy. With its rich heritage, cosmopolitan society, and robust infrastructure, Macau continues to serve as a preferred venue and catalyst for cross-cultural events^[18].

3. Discussion

While historical records trace a broad trajectory from symbolic to pragmatic to normalized to institutionalized diplomacy, interviews underscore the subjective dimensions of this process. Chinese diplomats (I1) emphasized the role of patience and restraint, noting that *avoiding confrontation over Macau was less about weakness and more about ensuring room for future cooperation*. In contrast, Portuguese-speaking interviewee (I7) highlighted symbolic trust built through cultural familiarity, describing Macau as *a laboratory of coexistence* that facilitated smoother negotiations at the turn of the 20th century.

Interviewees also underscored continuity between historical experience and contemporary practice. For instance, the Brazilian expert (I4) viewed *the 1970s normalization not merely as a diplomatic milestone but as “the beginning of an economic imagination,” resonating with current Belt and Road Initiative*. Similarly, the Angolan respondent (I5) linked China's wartime support for liberation movements to the legitimacy of present-day infrastructure partnerships.

These perspectives enrich historical analysis by revealing how actors themselves interpret the meaning of diplomatic evolution. They demonstrate that China's pragmatic and patient strategy is not merely documented in archives but is perceived by practitioners as a deliberate and consistent approach. This interplay between historical records and lived experience underscores the value of combining archival analysis with qualitative interviews.

3.1. Evolution of Diplomatic Models

From symbolic and marginal exchanges, China's relations with PSCs have developed into extensive, multilateral involvement. From cautious bilateralism during colonial and Cold War periods to a sophisticated integration of bilateral and multilateral strategies in the post-Cold War era, the shift reflects China's adaptive diplomacy.

China's diplomacy with Portuguese-speaking countries during the 20th century shows a multi-stage development influenced by changing domestic and international priorities. Sino-Portuguese relations were marginal and symbolic during the late Qing and early Republican eras, and they were mostly mediated through Macau. Portugal's minor role in Chinese diplomacy and Qing vulnerability were both reflected in the sparse official exchanges. China's limited sovereignty under Western imperial pressures was exemplified by the 1887 treaty confirming Portuguese control of Macau. Reactive rather than proactive, diplomatic interactions were intended to maintain symbolic recognition rather than to exert influence.

A period of cautious pragmatism emerged in Chinese diplomacy during World War II. Because of Portugal's neutrality, Macau became an important but subtle diplomatic channel. In order to prevent Japanese intrusion, practical low-profile engagement emerged during this time through information sharing, covert trade, and limited coordination. Despite their modesty, these exchanges served to preserve continuity and served as a practice for indirect diplomacy strategies used after the war.

Significant restrictions were imposed during the early PRC and Cold War era (1949–1970s). Portugal was at odds with the PRC's socialist stance because of its membership in NATO and alliance with the Western bloc. China, however, opted for strategic patience, preserving its Macau claim without resorting to direct conflict. This stage exemplifies an adaptable diplomatic approach that strikes a balance between long-term national interest and ideological commitments. By the 1970s, détente and decolonization had changed the world. China was able to expand and normalize, first with Brazil and then with Lusophone Africa and Portugal itself, thanks to the Carnation Revolution in Portugal in 1974. During this time, bilateral ties developed into multifaceted partnerships that included early multilateral cooperation, trade, and cultural exchanges. China's involvement in these nations had significantly increased by the 21st century, moving from being a passive observer to an active participant. China currently interacts with Lusophone countries on a variety of platforms and levels, giving the relationship vitality and strategic depth^[16].

Finally, the return of Macau (1999) and the launch of Forum Macao (2003) marked the institutionalization of a multilateral model. By this stage, China had transformed a century of peripheral contact into a structured network of political, economic, and cultural ties, culminating in a platform for South–South cooperation. This trajectory answers the first research question by demonstrating that China's diplomatic relations with PSCs followed a path of **symbolic → pragmatic → normalized → institutionalized engagement**, each stage reflecting adaptation to domestic capacity and international context.

3.2. Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy

China's relations with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) throughout the 20th century provide valuable insights for modern foreign policy. They demonstrate how a state with limited power resources can slowly turn marginal interactions into real partnerships by adapting to changes in global politics and putting long-term strategic interests ahead of short-term gains. Three important lessons stand out: the importance of being practical and patient, the effective utilization of cultural and geographic bridges, and the need for gradual institutionalization.

3.2.1. Pragmatism and Patience as Strategic Tools

Pragmatism and patience characterized China's diplomatic behavior during the 20th century. This strategy arose not from inaction but from strategic imperative. In the late Qing and Republican eras, China has neither the capacity nor the international influence to contest Portugal's consolidation in Macau. Through exercising prudence, China maintained essential yet significant diplomatic channels without compromising fundamental sovereignty assertions. This approach gained heightened importance throughout the early period of the People's Republic of China and the Cold War. Portugal was both a colonial power and a NATO member, as well as an ally of the United States. Direct confrontation posed a risk of military escalation and international isolation for the newly created People's Republic of China. In response, China implemented a policy of "temporary maintenance of the status quo" concerning Macau. This decision embodied a long-term vision: instead of engaging in quick but perilous escalation, China amassed political capital and international credibility through the exhibition of moderation and consistency in its foreign policy.

Historical records of China's handling of Macau reveal the mechanisms of this patient pragmatism. For example, the Chinese government let a small amount of Portuguese administration persist while strengthening soft power through education, work, and cultural networks in the enclave. The result was a peaceful place where there was no fighting and the chance of reunification remained. In the end, this method worked out, and in 1999, Macau was peacefully handed over to China, which improved China's reputation as a responsible and trustworthy player in the international system.

3.2.2. Cultural and Geographic Bridges in Constrained Environments

The second lesson pertains to China's utilization of cultural and geographic intermediaries to maintain engagement in the face of challenging geopolitical circumstances. The diplomatic fulcrum between China and PSCs was primarily facilitated by Macau.

Macau served as a neutral zone for informal political contact, limited commerce, and communication during the 1930s and 1940s, when formal diplomacy was restricted and China was threatened by Japanese invasion. This experience underscored the importance of geostrategic micro-locations in foreign policy-small territories can function as secure conduits for influence and collaboration when direct bilateral channels are politically obstructed or perilous.

Culturally, the Portuguese presence in Macau and the broader Lusophone network facilitated soft power exchanges. Portuguese-language media, missionary activities, and commercial communities helped maintain a baseline of mutual familiarity between China and PSCs even during periods of ideological estrangement. Over time, this cultural familiarity evolved into functional utility, allowing China to expand contacts with Brazil and Lusophone Africa in the 1970s without starting from zero.

In contemporary terms, this lesson is highly relevant for initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China can replicate the "Macau model" by cultivating regional hubs-ports, free trade zones, and cultural centers-that function as bridges to wider transcontinental networks. By combining economic infrastructure with cultural and educational programs, China can sustain engagement even in politically sensitive or unstable regions.

3.2.3. Gradual Institutionalization as a Path to Durable Influence

The trajectory from symbolic engagement to Forum Macao reflects a strategic learning process. Early contacts in the late Qing era were ad hoc and transactional, focused on trade and symbolic diplomacy. The wartime and early PRC periods introduced limited pragmatic coordination, but relationships remained fragile and vulnerable to global politics.

By the 1970s and 1980s, however, China began converting bilateral breakthroughs into multilateral opportunities. The normalization of relations with Portugal and Brazil, combined with engagement in Lusophone Africa, created the critical mass for institutional frameworks. The establishment of Forum Macao in 2003 institutionalized economic, cultural, and political collaboration across multiple continents. By creating a recurring platform, China ensured that engagement with PSCs would outlast leadership changes, geopolitical shifts, and short-term crises.

This lesson underscores that durable influence is often the product of incremental, multi-phase institution-building. Contemporary Chinese foreign policy can draw from this experience by continuing to expand issue-specific platforms-from infrastructure and finance to climate and digital governance-that solidify China's role as a reliable multilateral partner.

3.3. Implications for Belt and Road and Global Governance

The historical evolution of China-PSC relations provides direct strategic insights for China's 21st-century diplomacy, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and broader participation in global governance.

3.3.1. Historical Foundations as a Source of Legitimacy

The first implication is that long historical engagement provides political legitimacy for modern initiatives. China's relationships with PSCs are not sudden or opportunistic; they are rooted in over a century of evolving diplomacy. This allows China to frame BRI projects in Lusophone countries-such as port development in Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique-as extensions of historical cooperation rather than as neo-colonial ventures. Historical continuity also strengthens mutual trust. For example, the peaceful handover of Macau serves as a symbolic

assurance that China respects sovereignty and can manage asymmetrical relationships responsibly. This precedent gives PSCs confidence to enter long-term BRI partnerships with reduced fear of political coercion.

3.3.2. Multi-Nodal Engagement as a Model for BRI Architecture

The second implication lies in the multi-nodal engagement model. Forum Macao and the use of Macau as a bridge illustrate how localized hubs can serve global networks. This is directly translatable to the BRI's corridor and node approach, where ports, free trade zones, and cultural centers create a web of interconnectivity rather than a single linear route. For PSCs, such a model is highly functional. Brazil, Angola, and Mozambique can connect to Asian and European markets via Chinese-financed hubs in a manner that respects local agency while integrating into global trade flows. Historical experience suggests that success depends not only on physical infrastructure but also on soft connectivity: language training, cultural exchanges, technology partnerships, and coordinated policy dialogues. The Macau precedent reinforces that infrastructure and institutions must develop together to create sustainable and politically resilient outcomes.

3.3.3. Strengthening South-South Cooperation and Global Governance Participation

The third implication concerns China's role in global governance and the Global South. Sino-PSC relations demonstrate that South-South narratives, built on mutual benefit and historical solidarity, enhance China's diplomatic capital in multilateral institutions. Through Forum Macao and BRI-linked platforms, China can position itself as a coordinator and facilitator rather than a hegemon, thereby attracting partners across Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Historical experience shows that multilateral structures anchored in shared history foster legitimacy, enabling China to contribute credibly to global challenges such as climate change, pandemic response, and digital governance.

Portuguese-speaking countries span four continents-Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas-and are embedded within various key international mechanisms. Their wide geographic distribution and cultural diversity provide a unique strategic advantage. As global governance structures continue to evolve, China and Portuguese-speaking countries are finding increasing space for interaction on transnational issues such as climate change, food security, energy transition, and digital economy governance. Within international organizations, China can form thematic coalitions with Portuguese-speaking countries, leveraging their regional influence and shared cultural ties to advance a more equitable, inclusive, and balanced global governance system-aligning with China's goal of promoting "pluralistic co-governance" ^[21]. Moreover, as integral members of the emerging market economies, Portuguese-speaking countries share a strong consensus with China on the Global South agenda. Both sides are well-positioned to engage in deeper strategic coordination aimed at enhancing the representation of developing countries, advocating for a fair and just international order, and collectively addressing global challenges in defense of shared interests.

The lessons derived from 20th-century Sino-PSC relations-strategic patience, cultural bridging, and gradual institutionalization-translate seamlessly into modern initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and Forum Macao. They illuminate a pathway for China to advance its global strategy through legitimate, cooperative, and historically grounded engagement, balancing national interest with mutual benefit.

4. Conclusion

The evolution of China's diplomatic relations with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs) across the 20th century reveals a comprehensive transformation from symbolic interactions to structured multilateral cooperation. This study, guided by archival research, documentary

analysis, and comparative historical methods, addressed three core research questions: how China's relations with PSCs evolved over time, how its diplomatic strategies adapted to global political shifts, and what historical lessons can inform contemporary initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and Forum Macao. By synthesizing historical evidence into an analytical framework, the study illuminates a five-phase trajectory that not only explains the past but also informs future foreign policy design.

The first phase, during the late Qing and early Republican periods, was characterized by symbolic and marginal engagement. Diplomatic exchanges were largely mediated through Macau, which functioned as a small yet pivotal bridge between China and the Lusophone world. This era coincided with the collapse of the tributary system and the incomplete institutionalization of modern diplomacy in China. Archival records indicate that interactions were largely limited to commercial transactions, missionary activity, and local administrative coordination. Despite its modest nature, this phase was foundational: it created an embryonic platform for cultural familiarity and geographic connectivity that would later facilitate deeper cooperation. The second phase, during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), marked a period of wartime pragmatism. Portugal's neutrality and Macau's unique status allowed for discreet but meaningful exchanges, including information flow and limited trade. This low-profile engagement demonstrated how China leveraged micro-geographic assets and soft channels to maintain connectivity in times of existential crisis, highlighting an early form of adaptive diplomacy that the study's historical method makes visible.

The third phase, spanning the early PRC and Cold War decades (1949–1970s), illustrates the role of strategic patience and calculated restraint. Portugal's alignment with the Western bloc, combined with China's socialist orientation and early international isolation, restricted direct bilateral engagement. Nevertheless, China maintained its sovereignty claim over Macau while pursuing a policy of "temporary maintenance of the status quo". This phase, illuminated through archival analysis, shows that China chose incremental trust-building over confrontation, laying the foundation for long-term diplomatic credibility. The fourth phase, during the 1970s to 1990s, represented a shift to normalization and strategic expansion. The 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the global wave of decolonization, and China's own policy adjustments under reform and opening allowed for a reorientation toward proactive diplomacy. China normalized relations with Portugal in 1979, expanded its ties with Brazil, and deepened its presence in Lusophone Africa, notably Angola and Mozambique. Comparative historical analysis shows that this era saw the broadening of relations from political symbolism to multidimensional cooperation, integrating economic, educational, and cultural exchanges alongside growing participation in international organizations.

The fifth and final phase, culminating in Macau's peaceful return in 1999 and the establishment of Forum Macao in 2003, reflects the institutionalization and multilateralization of China–PSC relations. By this period, engagement had evolved into a multi-layered framework, encompassing political dialogue, trade and investment partnerships, and cultural diplomacy. Forum Macao institutionalized cooperation, enabling regularized dialogue and South–South collaboration across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The historical trajectory revealed by this study answers the first research question by documenting a clear progression from symbolic contact to systemic, multilateral engagement, while the second question is addressed by illustrating how China adapted its strategies to colonialism, the Cold War, and post-Cold War globalization. The historical lessons are clear: strategic patience, the use of cultural and geographic bridges, and gradual institutionalization are crucial for transforming peripheral relationships into durable partnerships.

These historical insights carry direct implications for contemporary Chinese foreign policy, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and global governance participation, addressing the third research question. The experience of Macau demonstrates that soft-power

hubs and localized gateways can sustain engagement in constrained environments. The evolution toward Forum Macao illustrates that incremental institution-building enhances diplomatic resilience and amplifies China's leadership in South-South cooperation. Moreover, the legitimacy derived from long historical engagement strengthens China's narrative as a partner rather than a hegemon in the Lusophone world, which is critical for multilateral initiatives and global governance positioning. By linking historical patterns with modern practice, this study underscores that China's 20th-century diplomacy with PSCs is not only a record of the past but also a strategic template for sustainable 21st-century engagement.

Finally, this study points to several avenues for future research. First, a comparative regional approach is needed to capture variations in China's engagement with Lusophone Africa, Latin America, and Asia, as current scholarship has disproportionately focused on Portugal and Brazil. Second, the internal mechanisms of Forum Macao remain underexplored; documentary research and fieldwork could illuminate agenda-setting, policy implementation, and multilateral decision-making processes. Third, as China-PSC relations increasingly intersect with global agendas such as climate diplomacy, digital connectivity, and cultural exchange networks, future scholarship should integrate historical analysis with international relations and global governance frameworks. By connecting the past with emerging trends, researchers can generate theoretical insights and policy-relevant projections for the next phase of China-Lusophone cooperation.

In sum, this study-grounded in qualitative historical and comparative methods-transforms a descriptive chronology into a coherent, research-driven analysis of China's diplomatic evolution with PSCs. By following a five-phase trajectory and addressing the three guiding research questions, the study shows that strategic patience, cultural bridging, and institutional innovation collectively enabled China to progress from marginal interactions to systemic, multilateral engagement. These insights not only contribute to international relations scholarship but also offer practical guidance for China's contemporary and future diplomacy in a multipolar world.

Acknowledgments

This research has been supported by 2025 Higher Education Scientific Research Program: China-Africa Education Cooperation Project *Research on the Pathways for Cultivating International Skilled Talents between China and Portuguese-speaking African Countries in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative* in China Association of Higher Education (No. 25ZF0306) and 2022 Talent Introduction and Research Start-up Fund Project at Suqian University (No. 2022XRC090).

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