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**The United States' Policy Shift on Western
Sahara: A Geopolitical and Economic Analysis**

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ABSTRACT

In late 1975, as Franco's dictatorship drew close to an end, Spain's disregard for the future of the Western Sahara region after its decolonization, coupled with the wish of King Hassan II of Morocco to strengthen his position in the country, ignited a conflict between Morocco and the Sahrawi rebel force for control over the territory that persists to this day. This paper traces the history of the United States' involvement in the dispute and analyzes the most recent geopolitical and economic context, in order to shed light on why the Trump administration shifted its policy on Western Sahara in 2020.

Keywords: Western Sahara, conflict, Morocco, United States, geopolitics, economy.

RESUMEN

A finales de 1975, con la dictadura de Franco acercándose al final, la despreocupación de España por el futuro de la región del Sáhara Occidental después de su descolonización, junto con el deseo del rey Hassan II de Marruecos de fortalecer su posición en el país, se desencadenó un conflicto entre Marruecos y la fuerza rebelde saharaui por el control sobre el territorio que aún persiste. Este trabajo traza la historia del intervencionismo de Estados Unidos en el conflicto y analiza el contexto geopolítico y económico más reciente para esclarecer porqué el gobierno de Trump cambió su política exterior respecto al Sáhara Occidental en 2020.

Palabras clave: Sahara Occidental, conflicto, Marruecos, Estados Unidos geopolítica, economía.

To my grandfather for being one of the people who has believed in me the most, and
with whom I will not be able to celebrate.

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Introduction

Today I signed a proclamation recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal is the ONLY basis for a just and lasting solution for enduring peace and prosperity!
(@realDonaldTrump)

When Donald J. Trump posted this tweet on December 10, 2020, the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front over Western Sahara appeared stalemated. The United Nations' defence of a referendum for self-determination for the Sahrawi people had not been fruitful and the ceasefire had just ended. The tweet announced Donald Trump's proclamation that the United States supported Morocco's 2007 plan for establishing their sovereignty over an autonomous Western Sahara. This surprised the international community, because it meant that the United States abandoned their traditional neutrality but also triggered a chain reaction in several countries. Starting with Spain in 2022, several others have decided to follow the same decision.

The relevance of Trump's proclamation cannot be denied. First, the United States is obviously one of the great world powers and its decisions have an impact on the international politics of many other countries. In only five years, Spain, Israel, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom this month, have followed the American example and recognized Morocco's autonomy proposal. Then, the United States and Morocco hold a great influence in areas as important as geostrategy, security and mass immigration in the north of Africa. The fact that their alliance affects such crucial areas is enough to understand what it can mean, especially given that they also count with the support of Israel. Finally, the aspects that surround this decision serve as a precedent for future decision-making and establishing future action. Next November 2025, Morocco intends to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Green March, and the conflict could renew.

Given this, the scarcity of investigations on the subject is striking. Safwaan Zamakda Allison's "A paradigmal shift in the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over

Western Sahara" (2021) mostly deals with the diplomatic relations between Morocco and the United States in the previous forty-five years and their interests over Western Sahara, anticipating that "a Paradigm shift is taking place, and that Moroccan sovereignty over the entire region is becoming the norm and accepted by the international community". He does not look into the causes. "The Art of the Deal or 'Abandoning' Self-Determination? US Recognition of Morocco's Territorial Sovereignty over Western Sahara", by Christopher J. Borgen (2022), reviews the United States' arguments for recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara and concludes that "in as much as the population of Western Sahara has a right to decide its own future, [the recent recognition] has undermined key principles of international law". Sarah Yerkes and Natalie Triche's "Trump's Lesser-Known Deal of the Century? Resolving the Western Sahara Conflict" (2025) is the most recent and clearest attempt to analyse the US position and focuses on the options ahead, but the authors do not deal with the causes, either.

This dissertation examines this recent shift in American foreign policy to analyse its causes. After tracing the involvement of the United States in the Western Sahara question since the Green March of 1975, the analysis primarily concentrates on geopolitical aspects like Sahara's strategic location. To address this, it has been necessary to review the complex relationship between the United States and Morocco and Morocco and the Arab world. Economic relations between the United States, Europe, and Morocco have been next examined, with special attention to trade and mineral and energy resources. An emphasis has been laid on establishing a clear timeline of events and central aspects, to be able to identify the main factors leading to such change in the international policy of the United States.

To prepare this study properly, it has been necessary to reach out for other studies, books and articles. The first step was to gather sources that provided the historical context of US involvement in the Sahara since 1975 and a basic understanding of the conflict. These were quite numerous. "Neutrality or complicity? The United States and the 1975 Moroccan takeover of the Spanish Sahara" by Jacob Mundy both address the public arguments and positions of the United States over the years on the dispute, providing the

possible events of interest attached to each movement. They also contain information about the reaction of the rest of the countries, and which of them decided to involve directly or indirectly in the dispute over Western Sahara. In this field the major contributions have been made by Domingo Garí, with papers such as “The US Adventure in Western Sahara: From Ford to Trump” (2022) and “Reagan’s Strategy for North Africa Aggravated the Crisis in Western Sahara” (2022).

The core of the research involved geopolitics and economy in the region. The understanding of how the economic and political relations of Morocco with the United States and the rest of the world are built, and how that relations affect Western Sahara have been essential to the study. On economy, studies as “Economy of Western Sahara” by János Besenyö (2011) and “Critical Minerals and Routes to Diversification in Africa: Opportunities for Diversification into Renewable Energy Technologies - The Case of Morocco” by Antonio Andreoni and Elvis Avenyo (2023) have been essential because of their accounts on what resources belong to Western Sahara and which have been taken from them by Morocco. While for the geopolitical side it has been required to navigate through the official records of each past and current administration to see what was included about the issue and through sources from the first part of the process and press articles to see what has been left out of the records. Most of the records included mostly the efforts of peacekeeping and counterterrorism measures on the area; while the sources and articles have highlighted the rather direct involvement of the United States as Domingo Garí stated in “The US Adventure in Western Sahara: From Ford to Trump”: “In 1980, the last year of the Carter administration, abundant military assistance, field advisers, and military engineers were sent to the Moroccan army”. In this last part, the area of defence in the Western Sahara region has been really helpful in filling the blank spaces that the economy could not explain. This is since both countries, Morocco and the United States, in the last years have been playing important roles trying to maintain stability in the region. This is due Morocco being located in a very unstable zone, which has a direct influence in the very own country and the rest of the world. Finally, among the sources consulted, official sources have been very relevant: official proclamations, International Court

resolutions and research reports. Websites such as Congress.gov or the official sites of the United Nations or the European Union have been of great use as they have shed light on what principles and agreements are based on the relationships between Morocco and the rest of countries.

Regardless of all the valuable information that all these sources provide, we have come across important problems during the research process. As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of material in general, or it is not open access. Most importantly, there is little data related to the region of Western Sahara that is not directly related to Morocco, or that extent is attributed to Morocco, since Morocco controls the majority of the Western Sahara territory. This has made it difficult to get the facts straight and clear. The website of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic has not been updated since 2019 and only publishes brief press reports. We can only learn about them and the testimonies of the Sahrawi people through some brief NGOs' reports. Therefore, not much can be said on their response to events, as we would have wished.

Despite all the difficulties, this essay tries to give an answer to the question of why the United States changed its foreign policy with respect to Western Sahara so abruptly. Addressing this question requires critical thinking, contextual understanding, and a thorough analysis of the evidence available. This is what will be done in the following pages.

1. The Western Sahara Conflict: A Historical Overview

The Western Sahara conflict started in the period between 1973, when the Polisario Front was formed, and late 1975, with the end of the Spanish colonization of the region after the collapse of Franco's regime. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly requested the International Court of Justice (ICJ) a decision on control of the Sahara, hearing claims on the parties. King Hassan II of Morocco claimed that the Sultanate of Morocco had historical links with the area before the Spanish had colonized it. On October 16, 1975, the IJC published their opinion that there was not "any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity", except for the allegiance of "only some, of the tribes of the territory" to the Sultan (ICJ Reports 16 October 1975, 129).

Trying to consolidate his weak position on the throne, King Hassan II publicly called for an occupation of the territory on November 6. This occupation was called the Green March, in which 350,000 peasants participated along with Moroccan authorities. Talks between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania also began that same day with the intention of reaching an agreement. Finally, on November 14, the three countries reached the "Madrid Accords", in which Spain ceded its responsibilities on Western Sahara to the Moroccan and Mauritanian governments, north and south of the territory, as well as the leaders of the Sahrawi Yema'a council. In the words of the official text of the agreement, "Spain will proceed forthwith to institute a temporary administration in the Territory, in which Morocco and Mauritania will participate" (Declaration of Principles on Western Sahara).

The pact was not a solution. It meant the beginning of an armed conflict between the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces and the Sahrawi resistance group Polisario Front. Hassan II claimed Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, defending that "a majority of the tribal notables had expressed their fealty to King Hassan II" (Hultman, 1977, p. 27). In 1976, when a new state was created under the name of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), Algeria entered the conflict by supporting and financing the Polisario Front as its military force. Although, as Yerkes and Triche indicate, Algeria "has never

made a territorial claim to Western Sahara" (2025, p. 2), the country has been a very influential actor in the dispute: it supported the recognition of the SADR since the beginning, was the host of refugee camps for the 150.000 Sahrawi people who were displaced from their homeland, and also helped them enter the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

This organization called for the withdrawal of Morocco and Mauritania from the Sahara (Hultman, 1977, p. 30). Following this, Mauritania left its part of the territory, the southern third, to SADR in 1979 (Yerkes & Triche, 2025, p. 9. [3]) but Morocco stayed, and the war continued. The Polisario Front's "guerrilla" war allowed them to gain eighty-five percent of the Western Sahara, whereas the Moroccan strategy relied on the construction of a "defensive border" that helped Morocco to regain eighty percent of territory (Garí, 2022, p. 87). The Western Sahara territory is still divided in two areas: one controlled by Morocco; the other, by the Polisario.

From the start, the United Nations observed how the situation was evolving, the continuation of the occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco, the Polisario attacks, and the tension between Morocco and Algeria. The Security Council had often discussed the possibility of giving the Sahrawis the opportunity to decide for themselves, applying "the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the territory" declared by the UN Resolution 1514 of 1960 (ICJ Reports 16 October 1975, 162). In 1991, it resolved that "a referendum for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara" was held, organized and supervised by the UN, with the collaboration of the OAU (UN Resolution 690, p. 2) and gave the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) the mandate to prepare it.

In 1997, the first proposal for a peaceful and fair resolution involving the autonomy of Western Sahara within the Moroccan state was made. The UN Secretary General sent James Baker III, United States Secretary of State, with a proposal, Baker I, which was rejected by the Polisario Front; in 2003 he delivered a second proposal, Baker II, that consisted of holding a referendum on self-determination after a transition government of

five years. At first both parties accepted this last solution, but Morocco rejected it at the end because of the possibility of the Sahrawi people achieving independence (Borgen, 2022, p. 133).

MINURSO presented a few problems, one of them being that it was not monitoring if human rights were being respected in the region. Philippe Bolopion revealed that the proposal of carrying out these reports was vetoed by France (permanent member of the UN Security Council): “For several years [...] France has used its veto power to keep the UN away from issues related to human rights in the territory annexed by its Moroccan ally in 1975” (2010). Due to this veto and an information blockade from the Moroccan authorities, it was hard to access to the reports on violations of human rights in the area, which include violence, murder, rape, torture, threats, judicial abuses, arbitrary detentions, discrimination and marginalization in the job market and educational institutions, lack of freedom and expression, and reports of people missing (Human Rights Watch, 2024). A statement from Human Rights Without Borders brought up this situation from the Polisario Front side: “We have witnessed the shadow that the Polisario Front has cast over its people, through evidence and testimonies that we have obtained” (2024)

On 11 April 2007, Morocco made a move in line with Baker I: the proposal to the United Nations of an autonomy statute for the region that could be negotiated and submitted to the Sahrawis in a referendum (UN S/2007/206). There, the populations and their authorities would have autonomous power over the Sahara, “within the framework of the Kingdom’s sovereignty and national unity” (p. 2), clarifying that the financial resources for the autonomy would be drawn from “taxes, duties and regional levies enacted by the Region’s competent authorities” and “proceeds from the exploitation of natural resources allocated to the Region” (p. 13).

At first, this proposal only counted with the support of Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Then, the ceasefire in the region, which had been held since 1991, was broken. Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Western Sahara’s independence movement, “vowed to end a 29-year-old ceasefire with Morocco, citing

recent Moroccan border operations as a provocation" (Paget & McCluskey, 2020). Therefore, on December 4, 2020, just a month before the end of his first mandate, Donald Trump made an official proclamation of his administration's support for Morocco's initiative. It stated that the Moroccan proposal was the only viable and reasonable solution:

[T]he United States recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory. (Trump, 2020)

It encouraged all the parties to negotiate an acceptable solution, using Morocco's autonomy plan as a framework.

Donald Trump's Proclamation changed the historical course of US political stance with the Sahara, which until then was characterized by a constant conflict on whether to support its longtime ally Morocco or formally show a public image of support and advocacy for self-determination and human rights: after him, Joe Biden followed suit. Perhaps most importantly, it also changed the situation internationally, after decades of silence. In July 2023, Israel announced its support through a letter that also displayed Benjamin Netanyahu's intentions of strengthening relationships with Morocco and the possibility of opening a consulate in Dakhla. In March 2023 the Spanish President Pedro Sánchez sent a letter addressed to King Mohammed VI, where he recognized the Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara territory, after having hosted Brahim Gali, leader of the Polisario Front, provoking a diplomatic incident with Morocco; and in December 2023, the German government under Frank-Walter Steinmeier presidency wanted to repair its relations with Morocco and, therefore, accepted its autonomy proposal. In 2024 France would also be officially part of this group, although the French Ministry showed its support for the proposal at the UN when Germany declared its support. Finally, in June 2025, the United Kingdom decided to back Morocco's proposal, after a tense debate in the House of Commons in May 2024: "Lammy [David Lammy, Secretary of State for Foreign and

Commonwealth Affairs] said Morocco's autonomy proposal was "the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis for a lasting resolution of the dispute"" (Landale, 2025).

As more countries begin to take a stand in the conflict, they pressure the UN Security Council to adopt a quick and effective solution to the matter, with the acceptance of the autonomy plan as the one that resonates the most. For the moment, the Security Council has voted to extend by one year the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, until October 31, 2025 (UN Resolution 2756, 2024). Next November 2025 Morocco intends to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Green March.

Seeing how sudden the shift on American foreign policy has been and its importance in the international sphere, the next step is to analyse the reasons behind this.

2. The Western Sahara, the United States, and Geopolitics

The Western Sahara is located in western and central North Africa, along the Atlantic coast. It is considered part of the region known as the Maghreb, together with Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. Out of these five countries, all support the Sahrawi right to self-determination except Morocco. The Maghreb is not a political union, but, covering one third of the Arab world, it maintains close political links with it. The five countries above are members of the Arab League, a loose confederation founded in 1945 to enhance cooperation principally in terms of economy, communication, and social welfare. When Morocco first joined in with the intention of gaining support in its claim over the territory of the Western Sahara, the confederation did not show any interest in the Western Sahara: “Efforts to gain support in the Arab World for the idea of a greater Morocco did not receive much support despite efforts in the early 1960s to enlist the Arab League for it” (Zunes, 1995, p. 23). As a consequence, the SADR is not part of the confederation. The SADR has been left out of the economic agreements of the region, too. The Maghreb countries form the Arab Maghreb Union, an economic alliance created to guarantee cooperation to safeguard the exploitation and trade of their resources. But again, Morocco is opposed to the inclusion of the SADR in the Union.

This regional geopolitical context is important to analyze the United States’ involvement in the Western Sahara question. The dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the Western Sahara territory broke out during Gerald Ford’s presidency, in 1975. At that time the main concern of the United States was to solve the issue as diplomatically as possible, in order not to create an unstable situation in North Africa and in Spain, which was about to undergo transition after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. In 1977, Tami Hultman explained the United States double policy, while defending the international resolutions. He wrote, “Publicly neutral, U.S. officials privately maintain their skepticism that POLISARIO is a significant force with strong indigenous support”, adding that “they also express their anxieties about an independent POLISARIO-run Sahara that could threaten the ‘stability’ of the Maghreb” (p. 30). At first, the United States avoided any direct involvement. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was trying to

soothe the atmosphere so that it did not end in a violent conflict: “Kissinger placed his council in the context of the United States government’s wish to be ‘helpful where we could without becoming a party to the dispute’” (Mundy, 2006, p. 293). However, it was known at the time that the United States was supporting Morocco’s fight against the Sahrawi rebels. Hultman published that millions of dollars of Ford’s administration had been given to Hassan II in military sales credits and bombers “which Morocco was using to bomb the Saharan camps”, as Hultman informed in 1977 (p. 30).

Jimmy Carter’s administration was characterized by public neutrality and still not direct public involvement in the conflict. He was presented as an advocate for the principle of self-determination. Yet, during his mandate, the United States followed on Ford’s policy and continued to provide Morocco all types of military assistance used in the fight against the Polisario Front. The reason was that they wanted King Hassan II to be able to deal with the military pressure that his country was suffering. In a letter to Hassan II, Jimmy Carter reassured him about his support and compromise with the stability in the region:

I have been deeply concerned about the intensified military pressures you and your country have been facing in recent months. This situation is increasingly threatening to Morocco and to the stability of the region. As you know, I have decided on certain changes in our policies governing sales of military equipment to your armed forces which are designed to help you meet the immediate military situation.
(Carter, 1979)

Under Ronald Reagan’s administration Morocco made use of the United States military aid again to change the course of the conflict. Such resources allowed Morocco to encounter the Polisario Front and almost took them out of the territory, regaining the eighty percent that Morocco had lost in first stance. The same diplomatic double standard continued: “Reagan proposed maintaining close military and economic cooperation with Morocco, although his foreign policy team announced that they would continue to work with Morocco and Algeria to find a solution to the Sahara conflict” (Garí, 2022, p. 288). The difference was now that this was part of his large military buildup against the Soviet

Union, as, from the start of the conflict, it was believed that they were behind the Polisario Front's actions. Still, Reagan did not officially make any claims of breaking such traditional 'neutrality'.

The next years may be described as of relative tranquility. It was during George H. W. Bush's presidency, between 1989 to 1993, that the ceasefire was achieved in 1991. The United States involvement in the United Nations gave fruit in the creation of the peacekeeping mission of MINURSO. The mission counted with the support of the United States. Today, the country provides the largest economic support to the peacekeeping efforts of the United Nations, just like in 1991. According to Browne and Blanchfield, in that year the United States contributed with twenty-five percent of assessment, that is, the percentage of the United Nations regular budget corresponding to each country (2013, p. 4). After him, Bill Clinton deepened those peacekeeping efforts and promoted the activist role for America in the extension and protection of human rights for the Sahrawis. It was under his administration that in 1997, White House Chief of staff and US Secretary of State, James Baker III was sent as a UN Secretary-General's special envoy for Western Sahara with the task of finding a fair and peaceful solution, and which resulted in the above-mentioned Baker I (1997) and Baker II (2003) proposals. As Yerkes and Triche record, Baker later said:

‘When I first took the job on I was led to believe that the conflict was ripe for some sort of autonomy-based solution where the Moroccan would give self-government to the Sahrawi, the conflict would be resolved, the people from the camps would move back into the territory itself, and they would be given a liberal degree of self-government. I worked very hard on that for the seven years. We were never able to accomplish that.’ (Yerkes & Triche, 2025, p. 2)

This resulted in Baker's later resignation in 2004. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is essential to note that, as early as 1997, his peace plan included the possibility that the Sahara obtained this form of self-government: “an autonomy-based solution”.

During George W. Bush's presidency, there was a clearer involvement in the Maghreb and Sahel areas, directly related to Bush's doctrine on counterterrorism. The instability of this region had always been a concern for the United States and by then, terrorism in the North of Africa was its principal cause. It had its roots in resistance groups seeking the Maghreb countries' independence from France, especially in Algeria, where terror endured: "the conflict between Islamism and its opponents was the foundation for all the terror inflicted upon the Algerian people from 1992 to the present" (Gray & Stockham, 2008, p. 92). However, the effects of terrorism affect the whole region: "Maghreb must be understood as a regional system in which the interacting units affect each other" (Lounnas & Messari, 2018, p. 3).

In 2005, George W. Bush launched the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative, consisting in reinforcing the local capacities to fight terrorism, strengthening cooperation between security forces, and providing training in seven Saharan countries. Two years later, George W. Bush created a new military command in Africa, the Africa Command or AFRICOM, although the United States was unable to find a country host for it and consequently, they had to find an alternative, "a distributed command" that aims to be 'networked' in different countries in various African regions" (Zoubir, 2009, p. 991). They built partnerships with Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, as part of the Maghreb, and Chad, Mali, Niger and Senegal, as part of the Sahel. The Western Sahara conflict was displaced to the background behind the 'global war on terror'.

Barack Obama's foreign policies during 2009 and 2017 were more directed to the Middle East, and specifically Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Iran. Then, the Sahel (i.e. Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania (south), Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad) was undergoing the jihadist expansion and the ongoing Sahel War powered by the Islamists since 2011. Especially after the events of 9/11, the United States' interventions to fight terrorism in the area, direct and indirect, intensified. In this context, Morocco emerged as a natural ally. The only public statements on the topic are related to praising Morocco for the reforms taking place in the country at that moment and a joint statement where the neutrality over the Western Sahara question was once again established

as an American concern: “The President pledged to continue to support efforts to find a peaceful, sustainable, mutually agreed-upon solution to the Western Sahara question” (The White House, 2013).

It was in 2020, during Donald Trump’s first administration it is said that came a significant change in the United States political position with the conflict; from neutrality to an official announcement of support to Morocco’s 2007 autonomy proposal. Trump’s proclamation has been contextualized and explained differently. Yerkes and Triche have underlined how “Trump’s statement coincided a tripartite agreement between Israel, Morocco, and the United States to normalize relations between Israel and Morocco” (2025, p. 1) in the context of the Abraham Accords, implying that American relations with Israel are the driving force behind the agreement with Morocco. Others defend that his policies go more in line with the ones of Donald Reagan, mostly because both presidents gave an important credit to increasing the spending on defense and rebuilding the military to boost their economies (Thompson, 2017). A different explanation is that one of Donald Trump’s main foreign policies is directed to a power fight with Russia and China (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.) and that because both countries have been slowly making economic progress in Africa (overall in the north) in the last decades, this recognition and full support to a long-lasting ally is part of said power fight Morocco.

Looking deep into the situation, what Morocco and Donald Trump seem to be doing is just following the line of Baker I (1997); submitted under the administration of Jimmy Carter. In this first plan it was proposed an autonomy-based form of government in which Morocco would control foreign affairs and defence (and that was rejected by the POLISARIO for not containing the possibility of independence). Meanwhile, Morocco’s autonomy plan of 2007 addresses the same strategy under the same conditions of managing foreign affairs and defence while the Saharans would be able to manage their own government.

China and Russia stay rather apart from the problem. China has been following a ‘non-interference policy’ with it, focusing principally on its economic interests in the

region. The similarity of this conflict with the one between China and Taiwan it is a influence as well. With this policy, China has managed to have a balance in the region by keeping close trade relationships with both Morocco and Algeria. As Wanjun and Sobral state, “In 2017, China was the 13th largest export market and the 3rd largest import market for Morocco. The bilateral relations with Algeria are similar” (2018, p. 235). This allows for Moroccan-Chinese economic and diplomatic relations to develop, while not entering the conflict about the Western Sahara. Through the past decade, and “mainly due to sanctions imposed on Russia following the Crimea annexation” (Němečková, Melnikovová, and Piskunova 2021, p. 369), Russia looked into Africa in search of another trade market. Historically, Russia (and formerly the Soviet Union) and Algeria have held closer relations which could have led Russia to prefer favoring Algeria in their economic agreements. Nevertheless, the protagonism of Morocco in the United Nations and their importance on the sector of marine fishery has been an incentive for Russia's interest in strengthening relations with the country, so that marine fishery has become “one of the key sectors of Russian-Moroccan economic cooperation” (Němečková, Melnikovová, and Piskunova 2021, p. 383).

For the European Union, the countries along the Northern coast of Africa are security providers. The existence of migratory routes from the sub-Saharan region and their role as migratory controls requires from them a balanced relation with Morocco and Algeria. They are suffering from a lot of pressure. Abderrahim stresses how, “although the number of irregular migrants in the Maghreb remains relatively modest, the increase in migration has led to significant economic impacts, integration challenges, and a rise in anti-migrant sentiment” (2024, p. 8). After the uprisings in Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, have appeared as the main agents of migratory control. Their different approaches break the equilibrium in favor of the first two. While the Moroccan and Tunis approach to the situation is based on facilitating the integration of the immigrants in their societies and improving their rights (Abderrahim, 2024, p. 9), so that they move away from being border guards for the European Union to become a host country for immigrants, Algerian authorities still see the problem as a security matter” (p. 21). In that sense, the cooperation

between the European Union and Morocco and Tunisia has strengthened and there is a greater field for economic agreements. As the economic and migratory agreements solidify, the question of the Western Sahara and its traditional claims for independence and self-government loses importance for Europe and many leaders are more than ready to follow suit Trump's overt support of Morocco's plan.

3. The United States' Economic Interests in Western Sahara?

The economy of the Western Sahara is highly dependent on the rich natural resources of the area, the most important being phosphates, fish stocks, and oil. The first two are so abundant that it is agreed that the colonization of the region started because of them and that after the Spanish decolonization, Morocco's control of the largest part of the area was aimed at taking advantage of the situation. As Shelley put it in 2006, phosphates came first, fish stocks and oil, second: "While control of Saharan phosphate reserves may have been a factor in Morocco's determination to seize the Western Sahara, it is control of fish stocks and the hope of finding oil that now dominate the agenda for Moroccan officials" (p. 17).

The reserves of phosphates in Western Sahara are especially attractive because of their quality: eighty percent purity (Besenyö, 2011, p. 118). This makes them excellent for producing phosphate and industrial applications. One of the primary uses of this mineral is fertilizers, which are essential to intensive agriculture. Because it has no synthetic substitute, this mineral becomes even more valuable (Shelley, 2006, p. 17). As for fish stocks, Western Sahara is one of the richest fish areas in the world. Its importance relies on the development of the Moroccan fishing industry, the increasing global demand for seafood, and the health of its stocks of sardines, octopus, and squid (p. 18-19). Finally, the idea there could be oil in Western Sahara was born from the fact that its geology is similar to that in Mauritania, as both also stand in a potential oil province starting from the Gulf of Guinea (p. 19). Moroccan plans for exploitation began in 2001 and not even the war with the Polisario Front has diminished the interest in the area of oil extraction companies and Morocco, basically because Morocco has no oil (p. 18).

The resources of Western Sahara started to gain attention after the first phosphate mine in the region was discovered by Spain: Bou Craa. This was as early as 1963, though the extent of their importance became only known in 1968, and exploitation began in 1972, using American equipment (Rézette, 1975, p. 160). As early as 1975, Morocco had envisioned its potential. Writing on the Western Sahara and Moroccan colonization of the

region, while the International Court was discussing the UN's enquiry, Robert Rézette calculated that "Morocco which is the second greatest phosphate producing country in the world after the USA would, with the phosphates of the Sahara, become number one" (p. 95). He was right. According to the Geological Survey of the US Department of Interior, in 2017, Morocco was the largest global exporter of phosphate rock, and its second-largest producer, after China (2022, p. 60.1), making seventy percent of the phosphate rock resources in the world (Andreoni and Avenyo, 2023, p. 3). In that year, 66% of the United States imports of phosphate rock were from Peru and 34% from Morocco, which were consumed by the chemical industry in Louisiana (Jasinski, 2017, p. 56.3). Its value market has continued to increase.

Morocco also takes advantage of the fish banks on the coast of Western Sahara. Since colonial times, reports denounced that the coast abounded in fish but that it was exported not for the profit of the territory, but for that of Spanish fishermen (Rézette 1975, p. 26). In the early twenty-first century, it is promoting the growth of the Moroccan fish industry through income and employment, and increasing the Moroccan catch, Moroccan one being low in quantities and in not healthy conditions, contrary to the catch of Western Sahara (Shelley, 2006, p. 18). The number of countries interested in fishing licenses in the area is large. Among them are members of the European Community, principally Spain, and Russia. The basis for the exploitation of resources were laid in the Madrid Accords, which allowed Spain access to the fisheries until it joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986. After that, a series of treaties entered into force, with a brief pause in 1999 due to the Moroccan concern for the fishery stock. In them, the European Community had access to the fishery of the region in exchange of paying Morocco a certain amount of money (European Currency Units).

For its part, Morocco's interest in oil extraction in Western Sahara lies in the fact that Morocco has little oil production of its own, as much as in the fact that this resource is a highly desirable commodity internationally (Shelley, 2006, p. 19). In the 1960s, Spanish prospections had failed (Rézette 1975, p. 32). However, there are not many foreign countries interested in Saharan oil. The prospects are not so good and, as the Western

Sahara Resource Watch Reports (2024), so far, no major oil and gas findings have been made in Western Sahara. In any case, oil licenses are probably the most controversial. Environmentalists have raised their voices, and the Polisario Front and Sahrawi activists have also been hindering the exploitation of oil by foreign countries through protests (Allan, 2016, p. 657), claiming for the UN recommendations to be followed by Morocco and all countries:

The conclusion is, therefore, that, while the specific contracts which are the subject of the Security Council's request are not in themselves illegal, if further exploration and exploitation activities were to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, they would be in violation of the principles of international law applicable to mineral resource activities in Non-Self-Governing Territories. (United Nations, 2002, p. 6)

The result is that today, only two offshore exploration licenses have been awarded—both operated by Israel—and eight other licenses are available with no industry interested in buying them (Western Sahara Resource Watch, 2024).

Today, rare-earth metals and renewable energies are more attractive. They produce exports for functional elements of digital technologies and sectors like automotive and aerospace, and relieve European concerns about electricity. It is taken for a fact that Morocco “has become the most dynamic investment hub for medium-high tech industries in Northern Africa” (Andreonia and Avenyo, 2023) and has shown a striking growth towards renewable energies over the last two decades. Since the mid-2000s Morocco has worked to become a regional leader in clean energy, aiming to convert the forty-two percent of installed power capacity into renewable energy, with both solar and wind plants. There is no limit in the Western Sahara Desert or coast for planting them, and the supply of phosphate rock and cobalt to manufacture solar and wind technologies is guaranteed.

It is more than clear that the Sahrawi people are not obtaining any benefit from all this wealth described, or that it is just a rich minority that is benefiting. It would seem that this throws away the Moroccan excuses of its intervention in the region being beneficial for its people. But it is not that clear that the United States wants to participate in their exploitation.

It could be said that Morocco's alliance with the United States functions differently since it is not merely motivated by economic affairs. Some say this is because the Sultanate of Morocco was one of the first nations to recognize the United States independence and establish relations with them in 1777. The truth is that the USA-Morocco trade relationship is unbalanced: "From 2005 to 2019, the total value of Moroccan goods exported to the United States increased from \$446 million to \$1.6 billion, and U.S. exports to Morocco have increased from \$481 million to \$3.496 billion" (United States Department of State, 2022).

Almost twenty years ago, between 2004 and 2006, the United States and Morocco joined in a free trade agreement (FTA). This agreement eliminates trade barriers between both countries, and allows the United States to be in advantage in Moroccan markets over the rest of countries. It also came along with the title of 'major non-NATO ally' to Morocco. Nevertheless, this settlement has not been as economically satisfactory for both countries as it was expected (Henneberg, 2024). The weakness of trade in certain areas has obliged Morocco to move to the European market to fulfil the expectations. Morocco does not take a great part in the United States imports, as it is the other way around. This does not mean that it is a failure, but that it is not being as exploited as it could be. That could be so because the principal benefits of this are political and strategic, instead of economic. What this agreement has done is the opening of new markets to the United States, such as Egypt and Jordan, and the normalization of relations in 2020 between Morocco and Israel, in close alliance with the United States.

Perhaps there is one promising area. The Moroccan-American bilateral relations lay in such good ground that in January 2025 a change in the United States maritime policy

placed Morocco in a very advantageous position in shipping routes. Trump's administration has the intention to rely on ports of his allies to align trade policies, Morocco between them, with the purpose of interrupting China's non-market practices (The United States Government, 2025). For Morocco this means a decrease in shipping costs because of the rerouting of ships to transit through Moroccan ports, in particular Tanger Med. This shift is key in positioning Morocco at a crucial role in future maritime relations, and the United States strengthens its trading influence in the only area in the African continent where China has not yet landed.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the Western Sahara conflict in 1975, the United States has maintained a public statement of neutrality. This position has been supported by the United States involvement in peacekeeping efforts, as the country was one of the major economic contributors to MINURSO, along with the multiple counterterrorism initiatives carried out in the region. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that all those years has been favoring Morocco both economically and militarily rather presents a position closer to complicity. For this last statement it is worth mentioning the Jacob Mundy's words supporting the idea that the United States was hindering the efforts of the Polisario Front by underestimating it: "Western Saharan nationalism, especially in the form of Polisario, was not taken seriously, and was even derided".

This was until 2020 when Donald Trump published a proclamation saying the United States supported Morocco's 2007 plan of self-government for the Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. This plan is basically what James Baker III first proposed as a solution to the conflict in 1997, which had a failure as result, and now has been adopted by Morocco. The United States has always had a strong international presence and therefore, it is of relevance to try to understand why this time the country has followed such a distinct foreign policy. The reasons that may be behind this behavior have fallen into two categories: geostrategic and economic.

The American international policy is determined by its necessity of expanding its control and fight against rivaling powers like Russia and China. The long alliance of the United States with a resourceful and powerful country, as Morocco is nowadays, serves greatly to the first purpose. It is not an uncommon way that the United States uses a political alliance to achieve certain means, even if that goal is just to benefit other of its allies because in a not so long future that could bring them, the Americans, some benefits of that strategy. In addition, it is not only about direct benefits, but also about the building of an alliance network of countries located in strategic positions in, for instance, North Africa or the Middle East. In that way, the United States maintains a non-direct presence in those places, but it still gets to be there. This first purpose is actually motivated by the second, all

this ‘slow and subtle’ advance of the United States is highly determined by its foreign policy against the advancement (economic or political) of countries that pose a risk for the American economic, political, and social agenda. In the case of Western Sahara, a more than plausible setback for the United States to directly support the Sahrawi people is the fact that the Polisario Front is allegedly backed up or related to such rival countries as can be Russia or Iran, because of their either friendly or diplomatic relations with Algeria. As it is known, Algeria is the direct provider for the Polisario Front and has supported the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) from the beginning.

On the economic side, the only seemingly appealing motive appears to be boosting the US-Morocco Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Although this agreement has shown great results for both countries, it has also failed to reach expectations of an economic exchange between the countries on a large scale. The richest areas of the Western Sahara economy, natural resources, are not a primary target of the United States.

It would be fair to assume that in an era in which geopolitics is one of the principal matters, the United States reasons for its shift in foreign policy are linked to that topic. Specifically, since the United States has bothered to demonstrate that what is most important is the role that the country plays in geostrategy: encouraging political partnerships between its allies, as they are Israel and countries members of the Arab League like Morocco, and its fight against contrary great powers as Russia and China.

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