

THE SINO-MOROCCAN RAPPROCHEMENT



**An Analysis of Geoeconomic convergence,
Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb**



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**An Analysis of Geoeconomic Convergence,
Diplomatic Calibration and Media Narratives in a Changing Maghreb**

Edited by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has been driven by a convergence between China's efforts to secure its role in global value chains and Morocco's export-led economic model. This pragmatic engagement has accelerated since Rabat's accession to the BRI in 2017, particularly in the renewable energy, infrastructure, and logistics sectors.

Tanger Tech City, an industrial free zone co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan firms, has developed into a flagship BRI project that has attracted investments from major Chinese EV component and battery manufacturers. Strategically located between the Tanger Med port and Atlantic corridors, the Tech City seamlessly integrates industrial capacity with global trade routes.

Morocco's rise as a middle power and growing importance in China's regional strategy has turned into diplomatic leverage that appears to have recalibrated Beijing's longstanding neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict. Without endorsing Moroccan sovereignty, Beijing has increasingly accommodated Rabat's position while carefully managing its partnership with Algeria.

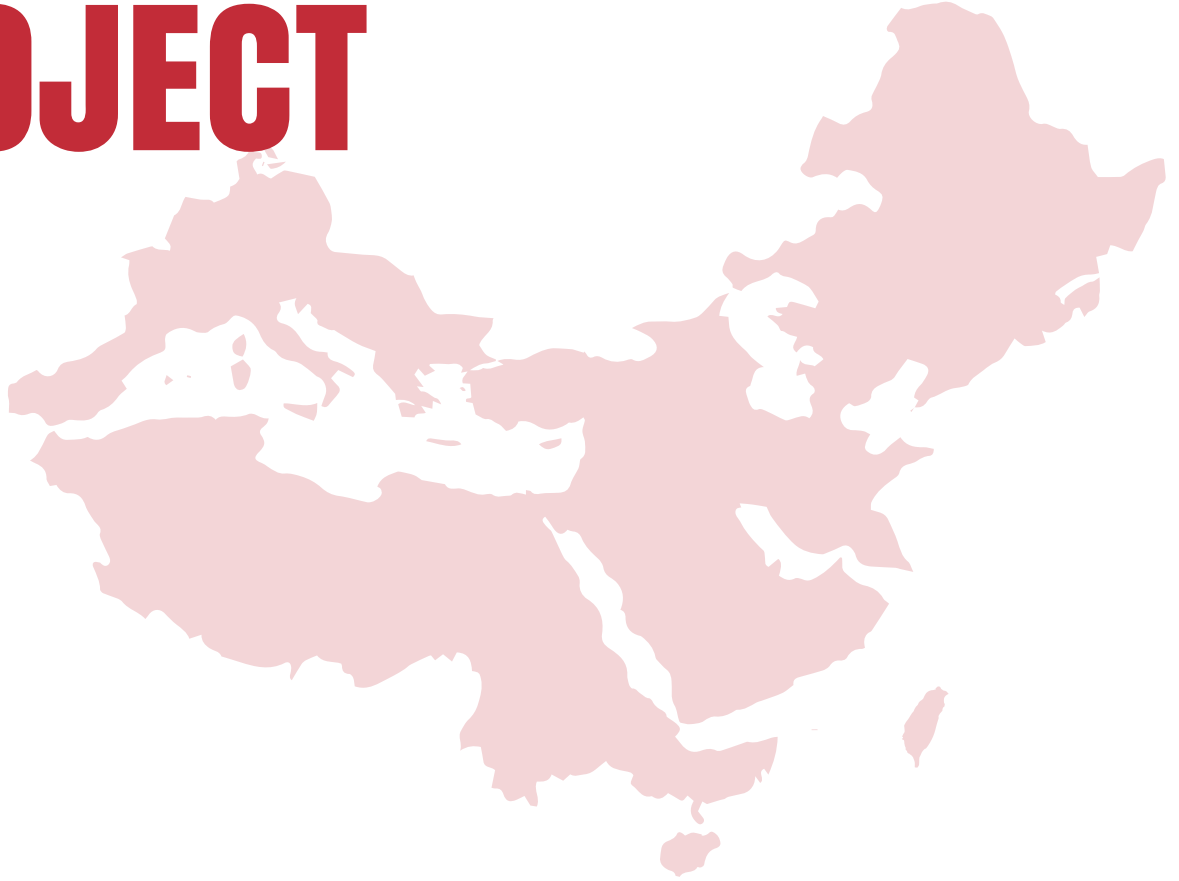
Against this backdrop, disruptions catalyzed by the Hormuz blockade have internationalized the Western Sahara issue as external actors reevaluate the region as an alternative corridor for energy and trade flows. Consequently, Morocco's Autonomy Proposal for resolving the conflict has gained further traction as a viable framework for promoting economic security and regional stability.

Amid the shifting balance of power, the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has become a prism through which French, Algerian, Tunisian and other external actors are reassessing their strategies to adapt to and harness the geopolitical momentum in the Maghreb.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE CHINAMED PROJECT



The wider Mediterranean is a vast region that stretches from the Iranian Plateau to the Strait of Gibraltar, from the Alps to the Horn of Africa. It is an area characterized by long-term trends, but it is also the epicenter of centrifugal forces that connect Europe, Africa and Asia. Our research team at the ChinaMed Project analyses how the dynamics of this region intersect with one of the most consequential macro-trends of this century: the transition of China, with its 1.4 billion people, from the periphery to the center of the international system.

Our research platform's mission is to track and investigate how China's presence in the region is changing the balance of power on the ground in a nuanced, yet incremental fashion. We achieve this by collecting data and creating indicators that analyze China's growing economic, commercial, and security ties with the countries of the wider Mediterranean, which we make publicly available at ChinaMed Data.

Moreover, we publish the ChinaMed Observer - sharp and focused analyses of the media discourses in China and the

countries of the wider Mediterranean region on the most recent events and the most pressing trends in Sino-Mediterranean relations.

We also actively engage with and participate in the expanding connections between China and the wider Mediterranean through a range of academic initiatives including: the China Management and Business Program, scientific publications, and academic events. The ChinaMed Project, a part of the TOChina Hub developed by the University of Turin and promoted by the Torino World Affairs Institute, carries out these initiatives and its research through various partnerships, including those with the HH Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah Programme at Durham University, the China Global South Project, and the Asian Studies Unit of the Research Department of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. ChinaMed also enjoys the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Fondazione CRT, one of Italy's largest charitable foundations.

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The TOChina Hub, ChinaMed's resilient sponsor, – with its President Prof. Giovanni Andornino – and the University of Naples "L'Orientale" – with its Rector Prof. Roberto Tottoli – deserve our most sincere gratitude for their generous trust and support. John Cabot University (JCU) – with its President Prof. Franco Pavoncello, the Director of the Guarini Institute for Public Affairs Prof. Federico Argentieri, and the Director of the Master in International Affairs Prof. Michael Driessen – have generously promoted our activities and co-financed this report. We would like to sincerely thank them as their deep trust and warm encouragement provide our team with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

It is a pleasure to express our gratitude for the support provided to our project – in accordance with Article 23 bis of the Decree of the President of the Italian Republic 18/1967 – to the Unit for Analysis, Policy Planning, Statistics and Historical Documentation of the Directorate General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, its brilliant head Counsellor Giuliana Del Papa, and her valuable team. It goes without saying that the views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

Disclaimer: The terminology and analysis presented in this Report do not necessarily reflect the personal views of the authors or official stance of the ChinaMed Project, T.wai. For the sake of consistency, this Report employs the commonly recognized term of "Western Sahara."

The rapprochement between Morocco and China has emerged as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in North Africa in recent years. This Report examines the growing Sino-Moroccan partnership through three analytical angles: geoeconomic convergence, conflict management in Western Sahara, and regional perceptions among Morocco's Mediterranean neighbors.

Chapter 1 traces the evolution of the Sino-Moroccan relationship by analyzing Tanger Tech City, an industrial free zone co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan firms, as a case study. Since establishing a "strategic partnership" in 2016 and Rabat's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017, bilateral economic ties have expanded rapidly, driven by a convergence between China's efforts to secure green value chains and Morocco's export-led economic model and ambitious decarbonization agenda. Attracted by the Kingdom's geographic position, free trade access to European and American markets, and large reserves of green transition minerals, Chinese investment has concentrated in renewable energy infrastructure and electric vehicle component and battery manufacturing.

Chapter 2 examines China's evolving approach to the Western Sahara conflict against the backdrop of deepening Sino-Moroccan economic cooperation. Moroccan experts and media circles have increasingly discussed whether geoeconomic convergence may translate to political alignment, pointing to China's abstention on United Nations Security Council Resolution 2797 (2025), which endorsed Morocco's autonomy proposal as the basis for resolving the conflict, as a meaningful shift. Our analysis of regional media discourse and Chinese diplomatic behavior suggests that as economic ties deepened, Beijing appears to have adopted a more ambiguous position accommodating Rabat's diplomatic priorities - an approach that has complicated its balancing act between Morocco and Algeria.

Chapter 3 looks at how the partnership between Morocco and China has been perceived in the region through French, Algerian and Tunisian media debates. Drawing on media analysis, it examines how regional narratives have framed the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement not only as an economic development, but as a catalyst of broader recalibrations of power in the Maghreb, and the restructuring, if not erosion, of France's historical prominence in it.

Overall, the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement intersects with wider trends, accelerated by disruptions to trade and energy flows in the Gulf, which have transformed the region into a theater of great-power competition. While China endeavors to maintain access to the wider Mediterranean, Morocco's rise as a middle power - supported by its relative stability, renewable energy potential, industrial and trade connectivity - has reinforced its regional position and widened its diplomatic leverage in the emerging world order.

CHAPTER 1

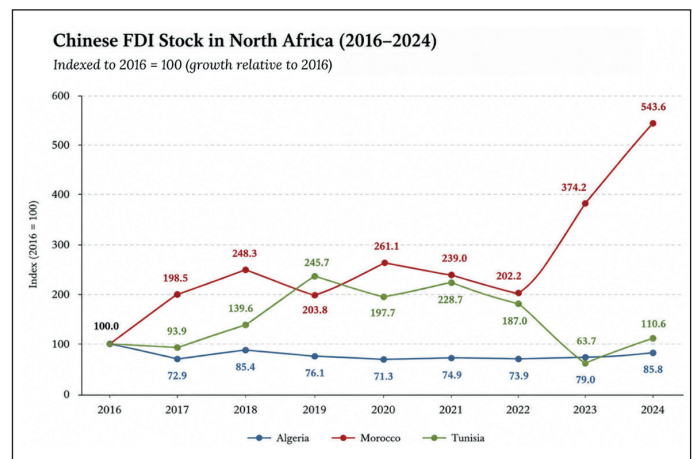
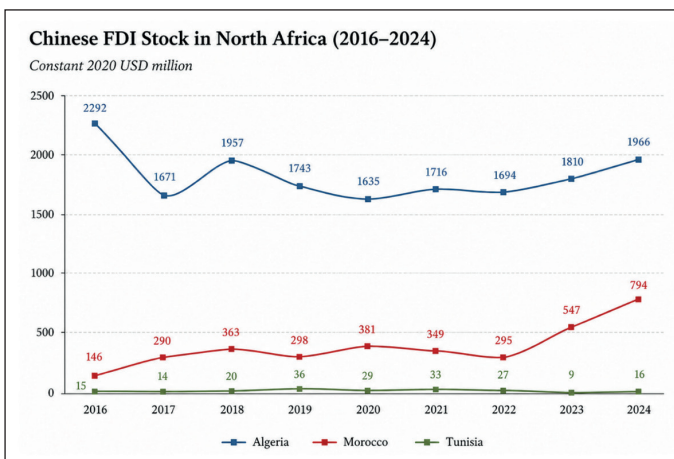
CHINA'S INDUSTRIAL FOOTPRINT IN MOROCCO: MOHAMMED VI TANGER TECH CITY AS A CASE STUDY

By Imane EZZEHOUANY and Amanda CHEN

This Chapter examines the evolution of Sino-Moroccan economic ties in the context of Morocco's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on Tanger Tech City as an emerging platform for green manufacturing driven by a convergence of geoeconomic interests between the two countries.

China and Morocco established a [strategic partnership](#) in 2016, during King Mohammed VI's state visit. The following year, Rabat became the first African country to join the BRI. Since then, the value of Chinese assets in the Kingdom increased from \$146 million in 2016 to **\$794 million** in 2024. Although Algeria continued to host larger volumes of Chinese investment, with FDI stock reaching \$1.97 billion in 2024, Morocco recorded the strongest expansion, increasing its Chinese FDI stock by more than fivefold over the same period.

This rapid expansion strongly reflects Morocco's attractiveness as an emerging industrial platform for Chinese manufacturers.¹ The trend was driven less by traditional development finance than by [private firms](#) aligning their overseas strategy with Beijing's new national priorities:



Comparison of Chinese FDI stock trends in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia between 2016–2024

Source: PRC Ministry of Finance; data compiled and elaborated by ChinaMed.

Also accessible via <https://www.chinamed.it/chinamed-data/north-africa/morocco>

the globalization of its renewable energy industry and the consolidation of the green value chain.²

Morocco holds over 70% of the world's phosphate reserves, a [key component](#) of lithium-iron-phosphate batteries, alongside deposits of cobalt, manganese, nickel and copper.³ Combined with the Kingdom's renewable energy potential and free trade access to European and American markets, this [mineral endowment](#) has made Morocco an attractive destination for Chinese industries linked to the green transition.

Chinese technological know-how aligns with Rabat's [decarbonization](#) goals and ambition to become a regional hub for renewable energy production.⁴ Chinese firms are already involved in major projects, including the [Noor solar complex](#) in Ouarzazate⁵ – the world's largest concentrated solar power plant – and a [wind turbine blades factory](#) in Nador for export and domestic needs. These strategic investments positioned

¹ Amanda Chen, "The Sino-Moroccan Green Partnership in the Shadow of the Iran War," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, May 28, 2026.

<https://www.stimson.org/2026/the-sino-moroccan-green-partnership-in-the-shadow-of-the-iran-war/>.

² Francesca Congiu, "From infrastructures to strategic minerals: mapping Chinese capital in Morocco (2004–2024)," *OrizzonteCina*, Vol. 16 No. 2 (2025): 24–48, <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.82002/119545>.

³ *L'Opinion*, "Batteries pour véhicules électriques: BTR New Material s'apprête à investir 4,9 milliards de dirhams dans une nouvelle usine au Maroc" [Batteries for Electric Vehicles: BTR New Material Prepares to Invest 4.9 billion Dirhams in a New Factory in Morocco], April 25, 2024, https://www.lopinion.ma/Batteries-pour-vehicules-electriques-BTR-New-Material-s-apprete-a-investir-49-milliards-de-dirhams-dans-une-nouvelle_a48324.html.

⁴ Moroccan Ministry of Commerce, "Décarbonation de l'industrie" [Industrial decarbonization], <https://www.mcinet.gov.ma/fr/content/industrie/decarbonation-de-lindustrie>.

⁵ The Noor solar complex is a blended finance, multi-stakeholder project co-developed by the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy (MASEN) and Saudi ACWA Power. The Chinese firms SEPCOIII and CHINT were involved in the design and building of the plants alongside other international engineering companies. See "World Bank, Morocco - Noor Ouarzazate Concentrated Solar Power Project (English) (Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099032625151032430>.

Chinese companies as key players in Morocco's path toward decarbonization.⁶

At the industrial level, Chinese EV component and battery manufacturers that have nearshored to Morocco benefit not only from proximity to mineral resources, but also from Rabat's export networks and integrated automotive ecosystem spearheaded by **Stellantis/Peugeot** in Kenitra and **Renault** in Tangiers that have [positioned](#) it as Africa's top car manufacturer.⁷ From Beijing's perspective, relocating part of its EV manufacturing capacity to Morocco may act as a potential avenue for circumventing trade restrictions from the European Union and the U.S., with both of which Rabat enjoys free trade agreements.

On its part, Rabat has implemented a supportive policy framework. The [2022 Investment Charter](#) further enhanced the country's attractiveness by providing investment incentives to domestic and foreign firms alike. This convergence fostered a growing partnership that strengthens Beijing's position in emerging value chains while accelerating the Kingdom's path toward a net-zero economy.

In this context, **Tanger Tech City**, a flagship BRI project co-developed by Chinese and Moroccan stakeholders, has become a [preferred](#) destination for Chinese industrial investment. Although segments of the Moroccan press often echo European narratives that portray Chinese investments as opportunistic attempts to circumvent tariffs, Moroccan experts across political orientations generally view Tanger Tech City as a national enterprise for stimulating economic growth, improving infrastructure, and encouraging domestic production in the emerging sector of green technologies.

Tanger Tech City and the Political Economy of the BRI

The Mohammed VI Tanger Tech City was launched in 2017, the same year Morocco joined China's BRI. Spanning over 2,167 hectares, it is among the largest industrial parks in the Kingdom – comprising a free trade zone and an urban settlement.⁸ From its inception, the project was expected to attract up to \$10 billion from 200 Chinese companies operating in high-value-added sectors such as aeronautics, automobiles, and communication and information technology, alongside creating 100,000 jobs and providing housing for 300,000 residents within a decade.⁹

Despite the ambition, however, the project remains in the development phase due to initial disputes over asset distribution between the first Chinese partner and the local sponsor, **BMCE Bank of Africa**.¹⁰ This challenge reflected broader host-country sensitivities regarding control, ownership and sovereignty concerns related to BRI infrastructure. With regard to the dispute, the former president of the Tangier Region, **Ilyas El Omari**, asserted: "The company that will own the city and build it needs to be Moroccan. We welcome Chinese companies but only as investors."¹¹ Moreover, the site's susceptibility to flooding created technical hurdles that further deterred companies from moving in.

At this critical juncture, the Moroccan state intervened by signing a new agreement with state-owned **China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)**, which acquired a 35% stake in the project. Moroccan stakeholders retained majority control through BMCE (25%), the Tangier-Tetouan-Hoceima regional government (20%) and the **Tanger Med Special Agency**.¹² Following this restructuring, nearly 30 companies have signed contracts with the **Tanger Tech Development Company (SATT)**,¹³ including 12 Chinese investors from the electric vehicle and battery sectors.¹⁴

Tanger Tech City thus performs a dual geoeconomic function. On the one hand, it facilitates the expansion of Chinese industrial presence along the BRI by operating as a gateway to Western markets thanks to Morocco's strategic location and free trade agreements. On the other, Chinese capital and localised production can support Morocco's industrial development and domestic value-capture.

A Sino-Moroccan "Corridor" for Automotive Electrification

Positioned on the Strait of Gibraltar between Africa and Europe, Tanger Tech has often been described as the North African counterpart of Shanghai, the [world's largest](#) and busiest container port. The comparison reflects both Rabat's ambition to position itself as a critical logistics hub and Chinese efforts to retain access to global markets.

From the Tech City, Chinese companies facing high tariffs applied to products originating from China may export to the EU and the U.S. without trade barriers. In a statement released to the Moroccan independent news magazine *TelQuel*, former Chinese Ambassador to Rabat **Li Changlin** noted, "Our companies faced difficulties in Europe and chose to thrive in Morocco."¹⁵

⁶ Mariateresa Natuzzi, Bianca Pasquier and Giorgia Facchini, "China's Energy Strategy: The Case of North Africa," *ChinaMed Project*, October 23, 2025, p. 16, <https://www.chinamed.it/publications/chinas-energy-strategy-the-case-of-north-africa>.

⁷ Margarita Arredonds, "Morocco becomes Africa's leading car producer," *Atalayar*, August 16, 2024,

<https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/economy-and-business/morocco-becomes-africas-leading-car-producer/20240816190000204184.html>.

⁸ *Le Matin*, "La zone franche d'exportation Tanger Tech étendue à 494 hectares" [The Tanger Tech export free zone has been expanded to 494 hectares], March 14, 2025, <https://lematin.ma/economie/la-zone-franche-dexportation-tanger-tech-etendue-a-494-hectares/268318>.

⁹ *Morocco World News*, "Tangier: King Mohammed VI Launches \$ 1 Billion Chinese Investment Project," March 20, 2017,

<https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2017/03/101112/tangier-king-mohammed-vi-launch-largest-chinese-investment-project-north-africa/>.

¹⁰ Yassine Majdi, "From Mirage to Reality: the Real Story of Tanger City," *TelQuel*, January 8, 2025,

https://telquel.ma/2025/01/08/from-mirage-to-reality-the-real-story-of-tanger-tech_1912054.

¹¹ Ruth Sherlock, Lama Al-Arian & Sandy Wei, "Will Morocco's Chinese-Funded 'Tech City' Ever Break Ground?," *NPR*, October 3, 2018,

<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/03/638297986/will-moroccos-chinese-funded-tech-city-ever-break-ground>.

¹² Badiia Hamama, "Morocco's Chinese Funded Tech City: the Shanghai of North-Africa?," *Il giornale dell'architettura*, December 29, 2020,

<https://ilgiornaledellarchitettura.com/2020/12/29/moroccos-chinese-funded-tech-city-the-shanghai-of-north-africa/>.

¹³ Safae Hadri, "Industry: Tanger Tech Revs Up with Chinese Investments," *TelQuel*, July 15, 2024,

https://telquel.ma/2024/07/15/industry-tanger-tech-revs-up-with-chinese-investments_1882781.

¹⁴ MAP, "Batteries automobiles : Deux géants chinois s'installent à Tanger Tech" [Automotive batteries: Two Chinese giants set up shop at Tanger Tech], *L'Opinion*, May 14, 2024, https://www.lopinion.ma/Batteries-automobiles-Deux-geants-chinois-s-installent-a-Tanger-Tech_a54106.html.

¹⁵ Yassine Majdi, "Li Changlin: (Chinese) companies have experienced difficulties in Europe and have chosen Morocco to prosper," *Telquel*, December 27, 2024, https://telquel.ma/2024/12/27/li-changlin-chinese-companies-have-experienced-difficulties-in-europe-and-have-chosen-to-prosper-in-morocco_1910250.

Early investors in the Tech City include **Sentury Tire**, which established a radial-tire manufacturing plant in 2023, alongside **Bonsing Corporation** (automotive textile coating), **Haomei Material** (aluminum profiles), **Hailing Group** and **Lingyun Industrial** (automotive components).¹⁶ Taiwan-based **Froch Enterprise**, a stainless-steel producer, also announced a \$30 million investment to set up a local subsidiary.¹⁷ More recently, both Chinese lithium battery giants **Shinzoom** and its competitor **BTR New Material** have established cathodes and anodes plants projected to start production in 2026.¹⁸

While Morocco already hosts Western automotive manufacturers like Renault and Stellantis/Peugeot, Chinese firms are contributing to the electrification and diversification of the automotive value chain by localizing parts of production to the Kingdom.

Due to its proximity to Tanger Med, Africa's largest container port, the Tech City functions as a strategic industrial-logistics corridor linking production to export routes. In this configuration, the flagship BRI project may also enhance the supply chain resilience of Chinese firms as global trade continues to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope amid volatility in the Gulf and the Red Sea. Under these conditions, the Sino-Moroccan platform may emerge as a stable alternative, bolstering both Rabat's position as a logistics hub and China's continued access to global value chains.

Strategic Resilience amid External Pressure

The economic entanglement between Beijing and Rabat has unfolded amid growing US-China trade frictions. While these tensions have enhanced Morocco's attractiveness to Chinese investors, they have also raised concerns among local actors regarding the long-term reliability of the free trade agreements that underpin the Kingdom's export-oriented economic model. **Hassan Sentissi**, President of the Moroccan Association of Exporters, lamented that the recent 10% tariffs imposed by the U.S. on Moroccan exports have been a disappointing setback for Moroccan companies engaged in international trade.¹⁹ Similarly, the European Commission's decision on March 14, 2025, to impose countervailing duties on Moroccan exports of aluminum wheels also drew attention.²⁰ As a clear consequence, **Dika Morocco Africa**, a subsidiary of the Chinese **Citic Group**, suspended the construction of its fourth aluminum factory in Kenitra, and redirected investments to Portugal in order to bypass these measures.²¹

These U.S. and European tariffs were interpreted as aimed at curbing Chinese economic influence rather than a direct challenge to Morocco itself. Yet, the President of the Moroccan

Automotive Federation **Adil Zaid** warned that even limited measures targeting only specific products "could have a far more significant impact on Morocco's appeal as an industrial hub" if extended to other strategic sectors.²²

Positioned as a new industrial frontier, Tanger Tech City finds itself caught at the intersection of global trade rivalries and Morocco's national development objectives. While Moroccan media have consistently highlighted the project's potential to attract foreign and especially Chinese capital, generate employment, and consolidate the Kingdom's role in the emerging industries, Rabat must contend with growing European and American scrutiny of Chinese geoeconomic influence in the region.

Yet, persisting volatility in global supply chains amid the Hormuz blockade may strengthen Morocco's diplomatic leverage as external actors, and European partners in particular, accelerate decarbonization strategies reliant on access to its renewable energy base and logistical corridors. In this sense, the Sino-Moroccan partnership was driven not only by shifts in the international economy, but by Rabat actively positioning itself to shape emerging trade and industrial networks linking Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Against this background, the next Chapter turns to China's evolving diplomatic position on the Western Sahara dispute to assess whether deepening Sino-Moroccan ties may be influencing Beijing's traditionally neutral approach to the conflict – a possibility increasingly discussed in Moroccan media and expert commentary.

¹⁶ Fatima Ezzahra Rachidi, "Lingyun Industrial et Haomei New Materials projettent de produire au Maroc des composants automobiles" [Lingyun Industrial and Haomei New Materials plan to produce automotive components in Morocco], *Médias24*, February 17, 2025, <https://medias24.com/2025/02/17/lingyun-industrial-et-haomei-new-materials-projettent-de-produire-au-maroc-des-composants-automobiles/>.

¹⁷ Soufiane Sbiti, "À Tanger Tech, neuf investisseurs primo-installés pour lancer la zone industrielle" [At Tanger Tech, nine first-time investors have set up shop to launch the industrial zone], *Le Desk*, December 24, 2025, <https://ledesk.ma/datedesk/a-tanger-tech-neuf-investisseurs-primo-installes-pour-lancer-la-zone-industrielle/>.

¹⁸ *Médias24*, "BTR New Material Group prévoit l'achèvement de ses deux usines à Tanger d'ici 2026" [BTR New Material Group plans to complete its two factories in Tangier by 2026], January 8, 2025, <https://medias24.com/2025/01/08/btr-new-material-group-prevoit-lachevement-de-ses-deux-usines-a-tanger-dici-2026/>.

¹⁹ Rochdi Mokhliss, "Droits de douane américains : une « douche froide » pour les exportateurs marocains (ASMEX)" [US tariffs: a "cold shower" for Moroccan exporters (ASMEX)], *Le Matin*, April 3, 2025, <https://lematin.ma/economie/droits-de-douane-us-une-douche-froide-pour-les-exportateurs-asmex/271013>.

²⁰ Adil Faouzi, "EU Aluminum Wheel Tax on Morocco Reveals Trade War Brewing with China, Morocco World News, March 24, 2025, <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2025/03/187365/eu-aluminum-wheel-tax-on-morocco-reveals-trade-war-brewing-with-china/>.

²¹ Hespresse, "Morocco to challenge EU tariffs on aluminum car wheels exports," March 20, 2025, <https://en.hespresse.com/106146-morocco-to-challenge-eu-tariffs-on-aluminum-car-wheels-exports.html>.

²² Safae Hadri, "EU surcharges on aluminum wheels: what Moroccan industrialists think," *Telquel*, April 3, 2025, https://telquel.ma/2025/04/03/eu-surcharges-on-aluminum-wheels-what-moroccan-industrialists-think_1924689

CHAPTER 2

FROM GEOECONOMICS TO DIPLOMATIC RECALIBRATION: CHINA'S EVOLVING POSITION ON THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT

By Imane EZZEHOUANY, Bianca PASQUIER and Amanda CHEN

This Chapter briefly outlines the historical background of the Western Sahara conflict before examining the evolution of China's position and perceived diplomatic recalibration since the establishment of the Sino-Moroccan Strategic Partnership in 2016. It then explores Beijing's increasingly complex balancing act between Rabat and Algiers in the shifting regional dynamics, and great-power competition over strategic corridors and resources in the Maghreb accelerated by the Iran War.

For decades, China has maintained a position of cautious neutrality on the Western Sahara conflict, balancing its relations with both Morocco and Algeria while supporting UN-led processes. As Sino-Moroccan [economic cooperation](#) deepened in recent years, however, the Moroccan discourse around the bilateral relationship has gradually expanded to discussing prospects of securing Beijing's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.²³

This shift became evident after Chinese President [Xi Jinping's unexpected stopover](#) in Casablanca in November 2024, which Moroccan and [international](#) observers interpreted as a political rapprochement signalling Rabat's privileged role in China's Maghreb strategy. This perception intensified after the Spanish media outlet *Espiral 21* reported that Beijing was allegedly preparing to open a consulate in Laayoune, the largest city in Western Sahara, and invest in a land bridge connecting the territory to the Canary Islands.²⁴ Although neither Beijing nor Rabat confirmed the claims, [Jawad Kerdoudi](#), President of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations (IMRI), observed that "there is no smoke without fire."²⁵

Expectations heightened when Moroccan FM [Nasser Bourita](#) visited China in September 2025, during which the two ministries of exterior established a Strategic Dialogue mechanism to strengthen political consultation and coordination on bilateral, regional, and global issues. Despite the lack of explicit references to Western Sahara in the official communiqué, discussions on "regional and international issues of common interest" were interpreted as reflecting a convergence on principles such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, in opposition to separatism and

extremism.²⁶ China's abstention on [UNSCR 2797](#) in October was subsequently received by Moroccan commentators as a diplomatic recalibration implicitly favouring Rabat's Autonomy Proposal for resolving the conflict.

Shortly before the vote, Chinese FM [Wang Yi](#) had reportedly phoned his Algerian counterpart [Ahmed Attaf](#) [to explain Beijing's stance](#). The exchange underscores China's increasingly delicate balancing act between Algeria and Morocco, one that appears to be tilting subtly toward Rabat as economic ties deepen. At the same time, the Western Sahara dispute has become embedded within great power rivalry – a trend accelerated by the disruptions precipitated by the Iran War – as external actors reassess the mineral-rich region through the prism of geoeconomic competition and strategic connectivity.

Within this evolving context, the United States has sought to preserve influence along the Atlantic corridor by [encouraging](#) a rapprochement between Morocco and Algeria/Polisario. China, for its part, has also come to view the region as a pillar of its long-term industrial and connectivity strategy, one that hinges upon a predictable and stable security environment. These dynamics, combined with the [rapid expansion](#) of Sino-Moroccan economic ties, have raised the question whether Beijing may be adopting a calibrated ambiguity compatible with Morocco's autonomy plan – allowing it to safeguard its strategic interests in the region without incurring meaningful political costs.

A Brief History of the conflict

Origins of the Western Sahara War (1975–1991)

The Western Sahara conflict dates back to the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1976, when both Morocco and Mauritania laid territorial claims to the region. Both countries entered into armed conflict with the [Polisario Front](#), a Sahrawi political

²³ Khadija Alimoussa, "Bourita visits China to strengthen cooperation... Sabri: a key stage to end the contrived Western Sahara dispute", *TelQuel*, September 18, 2025, <https://ar.telquel.ma/بوريطة-يزور-الصين-لتعزيز-التعاون-مع-ب/بوريطة-يزور-الصين-لتعزيز-التعاون-مع-ب/>.

²⁴ *Espiral 21*, "China ofrece un puente con Canarias entre España y Marruecos" [China offers a bridge with the Canary Islands between Spain and Morocco], November 13, 2024, <https://espiral21.com/china-ofrece-un-puente-con-canarias-entre-espana-y-marruecos/>.

²⁵ *Atlantic Radio*, "Sahara : vers une reconnaissance de la Chine?" [Sahara: Towards Chinese recognition?], November 20, 2024, <https://atlanticradio.ma/podcast/sahara-vers-une-reconnaissance-de-la-chine>.

²⁶ Mohammed Jaabouk, "Sahara: China reassures Morocco ahead of October UN deadline," *Yabiladi*, September 20, 2025, <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/176879/sahara-china-reassures-morocco-ahead.html>.

and military organization supported by Algeria that seeks the independence of Western Sahara.²⁷

Ahead of the Spanish withdrawal, Morocco and Mauritania [had requested](#) an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to clarify the legal status of the territory. While the ICJ acknowledged the existence of legal ties of allegiance between the Sultans of Morocco and certain tribes in Western Sahara, stating that the territory was not [Terra Nullius](#) before Spanish colonization, it concluded that such ties did not constitute claims for territorial sovereignty under international law.²⁸

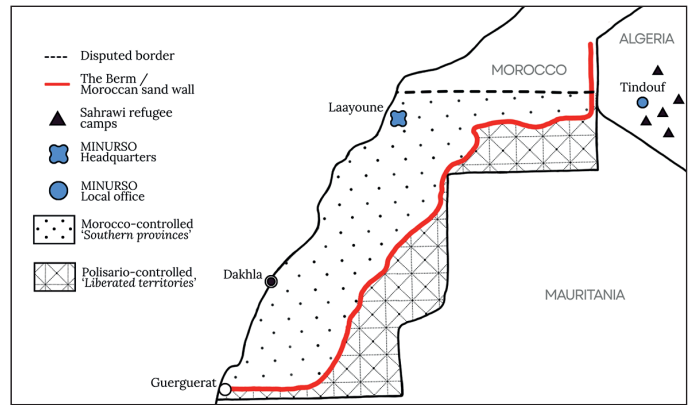
Morocco rejected the judgment, arguing that the Court ignored the concept of [bay'a](#), the "act of allegiance" to the leader, in Islamic jurisprudence and within the Moroccan monarchical system.²⁹ A few months later in November 1975, King Hassan II organized the "Green March," during which nearly 350,000 unarmed Moroccans entered Western Sahara to assert the Kingdom's territorial claim.

The four-day march forced Spain to the negotiating table and precipitated the [Madrid Agreement](#) with both Morocco and Mauritania, to whom it delegated administrative responsibilities in the process to "decolonize" the territory of Western Sahara, while affirming that the views of the local population would be respected.³⁰

However, politically and practically, this paved the way for Morocco and Mauritania to take control of the territory after Spain's withdrawal in 1976. The Polisario Front rejected the partition and launched a war of independence against both countries by proclaiming the **Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)**.³¹ While Mauritania withdrew in 1979, over the years, Morocco has built a defensive wall known as the "sand berm," encircling over 80% of the territory, with the remaining 20% under Polisario control. Since the eruption of the conflict, several Sahrawi refugees also fled into neighboring Algeria, where their descendants continue to live to this day [relying](#) on international humanitarian aid.

From MINURSO to Morocco's Autonomy Proposal

In 1991, a ceasefire was announced by the United Nations Security Council ([res 690/1991](#)) with the establishment of [MINURSO](#), a UN mission tasked with overseeing a demilitarized buffer zone along the sand berm, and the organization of a



Territorial Division and Disputed Borders in Western Sahara (ChinaMed Project)

referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara. However, the referendum was repeatedly delayed due to Morocco and the Polisario's disagreement over the eligibility criteria for Sahrawi voters, leading to a prolonged political stalemate.³² The repercussions of the impasse were not confined to the territory, but affected the geopolitical equilibrium of the entire region.

Due to Algeria's long-standing support for the Polisario, the Western Sahara issue remains among the main drivers of its diplomatic tension with Morocco. Rabat has long been wary of Algiers' role in the conflict, maintaining that its political, logistical, and diplomatic support for the Polisario makes it a key actor in the dispute.³³ **Jawad Kerdoudi**, President of the Moroccan Institute of International Relations (IMRI), asserts that Algeria's refusal to recognize itself as a party to the conflict makes it "responsible" for the impasse.³⁴

Regional tension and fundamental disagreements between Rabat and the Polisario/Algiers significantly undermined MINURSO's mission. According to **Riccardo Fabiani**, North Africa Director of the International Crisis Group, "There were so many diplomatic and bureaucratic obstacles to the implementation of the referendum that it has become unattainable."³⁵ **Sarah Zaaimi**, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's North Africa Program, further criticized the mission for "remaining paralyzed for years".³⁶

Since 2007, Rabat has shifted its approach by promoting an [Autonomy Proposal](#) for Western Sahara to be recognized under its sovereignty. This initiative has shifted the focus of the dispute from holding a referendum on independence

²⁷ *Al Jazeera*, "أبرز أحداث قضية الصحراء الغربية" [Major events in the Western Sahara issue], November 3, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2015/11/3/أبرز-أحداث-قضية-الصحراء-الغربية>.

UN, "Background," *MINURSO – United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara*, <https://minurso.unmissions.org/en/background>.

²⁸ Shoji Matsumoto, "On additional issues in the Western Sahara Advisory Opinion," *Policy Center for the New South*, January 21, 2021.

<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/additional-issues-western-sahara-advisory-opinion>.

²⁹ Jérôme Besnard, ed., *Rethinking the Sahara Dispute: History and Contemporary Perspectives*, trans. Nasser Bouchiba, preface by Yehuda Lancry (Rabat: Editions Bouregreg, 2024).

<https://en.hespress.com/82047-new-book-in-chinese-examines-sahara-dispute-through-history-and-contemporary-perspectives.html>.

³⁰ UN, "Declaration of principles on Western Sahara (Madrid Accords), Spain-Morocco-Mauritania," November 14, 1975, *United Nations Treaty Series*, Vol. 988, p. 257, I-14450. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20988/volume-988-i-14450-english.pdf>.

³¹ The Polisario Front proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 with a government in exile in Algeria. It has been a full member of the African Union (AU), and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), since 1982. As for the United Nations, the SADR is not recognized as a member state although it maintains a representative in New York to coordinate with MINURSO.

³² Andrei Popoviciu, "The failed diplomacy between Morocco and Polisario," *Al Jazeera*, November 18, 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/the-failed-diplomacy-between-morocco-and-polisario>.

³³ *African Press Agency*, "Western Sahara conflict is a Morocco-Algeria proxy war – Russian think tank," March 17, 2026.

<https://apanews.net/western-sahara-conflict-as-morocco-algeria-proxy-war-russian-think-tank/>.

³⁴ Jawad Kerdoudi, "La résolution 2602 du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU sur le Sahara favorable au Maroc" [UN Security Council Resolution 2602 on the Sahara is favorable to Morocco], *EcoActu*, November 2, 2021, <https://ecoactu.ma/la-resolution-2602-du-conseil-de-securite/>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/the-failed-diplomacy-between-morocco-and-polisario>.

³⁶ Sarah Zaaimi, "Why it's time to terminate the UN's dysfunctional mission in Western Sahara," *Atlantic Council*, April 9, 2025.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/why-its-time-to-terminate-the-uns-dysfunctional-mission-in-western-sahara/>.

as originally mandated by MINURSO, to finding a "mutually acceptable" political solution, which Morocco asserts is only possible through its autonomy plan.³⁷ Yet, the Polisario has maintained its demands for a referendum and rejected the Moroccan initiative. For its part, Rabat does not recognize the Polisario's claim to self-determination, which further stalls mediation efforts over the conflict.

The Abraham Accords and Growing Support for Rabat's Position

Tensions have grown since November 2020, when the ceasefire [broke down](#) after Morocco used force to remove unarmed Sahrawi protestors near Guerguerat, in the UN-monitored buffer zone on the border with Mauritania. The SADR subsequently [declared](#) the end of the ceasefire, although hostilities remained limited as both the Moroccan army and Polisario fighters retreated almost immediately.³⁸ The international community reacted with caution, as even Algeria [urged](#) both parties to avoid further escalation.³⁹

In December, the first Trump Administration [recognized](#) Moroccan sovereignty on the territory as part of the Abraham Accords in exchange for Morocco normalizing its relations with Israel. Although the development led Algiers to break diplomatic relations with Rabat in 2021 over its [perception](#) of Moroccan-Israeli ties as a national security threat, Morocco's position on the Western Sahara dispute has since continued to garner international support.

Over the past years, Morocco has encouraged the opening of [consulates](#) in the territory and accelerated its large-scale infrastructure and development projects in the Western Saharan cities of Laayoune and Dakhla under the banner of its [Atlantic Initiative](#).⁴⁰ By leveraging diplomatic outreach and geoeconomic incentives, especially among land-locked Sub-Saharan states seeking maritime access, Rabat has bolstered its sovereignty claim with growing international support.

According to Morocco's Permanent Representative to the United Nations **Omar Hilale**, more than 120 countries today [endorse](#) Morocco's Autonomy Plan as a serious, credible basis for resolving the issue.⁴¹ [Egypt](#) and land-locked [Mali](#) were the latest countries to present their support. Following Rabat's historic success at the UN Security Council with the adoption of [Resolution 2797](#) in October 2025, an emerging international consensus around Morocco's position on Western Sahara appears to be prompting even China to [recalibrate](#) its traditional approach toward the conflict amid the shifting regional balance of power.

From Early Revolutionism to Diplomatic Neutrality

Beijing has historically adopted a position of cautious neutrality toward the Western Sahara conflict, refraining from explicitly taking sides between Rabat and the Algiers-backed Polisario, and consistently declining to recognize either claim.⁴² Yet, this may appear odd when considering that in the early years since its foundation, China had supported anti-colonial struggles and national liberation movements in Third World countries through arms transfers and by [training](#) foreign fighters with its People's Liberation Army.

For instance, China had not only supported Algeria's provisional government since 1958, but also supplied it with weapons in its war of independence against France. Yet, this kind of military and political assistance was not offered to the Algiers-backed Polisario Front. Beijing's differing approach toward the Algerian decolonization movement and the SADR were a result of a profound shift in its foreign policy in the 1970s. China was transitioning from the international revolutionism of the Mao era to a posture of peaceful development driven by economic growth under the leadership of **Deng Xiaoping**.

When the Western Sahara war broke out in 1975, Beijing had just regained its seat at the UN Security Council⁴³ and was adjusting its role within the international system from that of a revisionist/challenger to that of a normative player. In this context, **Wu Wanjun** from Sun Yat-sen University and **Pedro Sobral** from Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages [interpreted](#) Beijing's "non-interference" policy toward Western Sahara as a result of this pragmatic shift, aimed at maximizing Chinese economic interests in North Africa while balancing relations with both Morocco and Algeria.⁴⁴

As a consequence, despite the Polisario's self-identification as a "national liberation movement," China did not extend the same level of ideological and material support it had previously provided to other national liberation movements. Moreover, Wu and Sobral argue that perceived similarities between Taiwan and Western Sahara as separatist regions supported by foreign powers may have consolidated a consensus between Beijing and Rabat, where "both sides remain neutral and do not interfere in each other's domestic issues."⁴⁵

³⁷ *United Nations Security Council*, "Letter dated 11 April 2007 from the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General," S/2007/206, April 13, 2007.

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/MINURSO%20S2007%20206.pdf>.

³⁸ *International Crisis Group*, "Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara," March 10, 2021.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/middle-east-north-africa/western-sahara/b082-time-international-re-engagement-western-sahara>.

³⁹ *Ambassade d'Algérie en France*, "L'Algérie déplore vivement les graves violations du cessez-le-feu dans la zone d'El Guerguerat au Sahara occidental" [Algeria strongly deplores the serious ceasefire violations in the El Guerguerat area of Western Sahara], November 13, 2020.

<https://amb-algerie.fr/6419/la-algerie-deplo-re-vivement-les-graves-violations-du-cessez-le-feu-dans-la-zone-del-guerguerat-au-sahara-occidental/>.

⁴⁰ Simon Roger, "A Dakhla, au Sahara occidental, le Maroc intensifie sa politique de grands travaux" [In Dakhla, in Western Sahara, Morocco is intensifying its policy of major public projects], *Le Monde Afrique*, September 6, 2025.

https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/09/06/a-dakhla-au-sahara-occidental-le-maroc-intensifie-sa-politique-de-grands-travaux_6639205_3212.html.

⁴¹ Safaa Kasraoui, "Hilale: Autonomy Plan is Demonstration of Morocco's Goodwill, Only Path to Western Sahara Dispute," *Morocco World News*, November 17, 2025. <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/11/268259/hilale-autonomy-plan-is-demonstration-of-moroccos-goodwill-only-path-to-western-sahara-dispute/>.

⁴² Jamal Laadam, "The Chinese stance on the Moroccan Sahara shifts from neutrality to subtle backing of sovereignty," *Modern Diplomacy*, July 18, 2025,

<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/07/18/the-chinese-stance-on-the-moroccan-sahara-shifts-from-neutrality-to-subtle-backing-of-sovereignty>.

⁴³ This occurred in 1971, when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758, which recognized the representatives of the People's Republic of China as "the only lawful representatives of China to the United Nations," a resolution for which Algeria was one of the principal sponsors.

⁴⁴ Wanjun Wu and Pedro Sobral, "China's non-interference policy towards Western Sahara conflict," *Africana Studia* No. 29 (2018): 132.

<https://ojs.lettras.up.pt/index.php/AfricanaStudia/article/view/7633>.

⁴⁵ Wu and Sobral, "China's non-interference policy towards Western Sahara conflict," 134.

<https://ojs.lettras.up.pt/index.php/AfricanaStudia/article/view/7633>.

In spite of China's position of diplomatic neutrality and support for MINURSO's mandate by [providing](#) peacekeeping personnel to the mission, Moroccan, Algerian and Sahrawi commentators have interpreted Beijing's stance as a form of veiled support for either claim.

In this regard, **Fadoua Ammari** from Hassan II University in Casablanca and **Rida Lyammouri** from the Policy Center for the New South [have noted](#) that Polisario representatives were excluded from the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) despite their African Union membership. In their view, "participation in these summits is structured around China's diplomatic recognition policy, which excludes the SADR as a legitimate government of a sovereign state."⁴⁶ *Atalayar*, a Spanish-based publication focused on Maghreb-Europe relations, went as far as [suggesting](#) that by excluding the Polisario, this China-Africa summit clearly supported "Morocco's territorial integrity."⁴⁷

These comments did not go unnoticed, spurring reactions from the Algerian and the Sahrawi press. Writing for the Algerian channel *Al24 News*, **Latifa Ferial Naili** [critiqued](#) Moroccan media's "falsely claimed victory" by clarifying that the SADR has never participated in FOCAC due to it being a bilateral mechanism between China and select African countries, and not a multilateral event involving the entirety of the African Union.^{48 49} For its part, *The Sahara Press* [responded](#) to the perceived Moroccan media campaign by emphasizing that:

"China has constant and unwavering positions on the issue of decolonization in Western Sahara [...] reflected in the statements of representatives of this country at the United Nations, particularly in the Security Council, as well as in the communiqués issued by the Chinese authorities on many occasions."⁵⁰

This divergence in interpretations raises a broader question about the extent to which China's professed neutrality may be masking a more calibrated form of managed, strategic ambiguity.

From Neutrality to Strategic Ambiguity: Moroccan Perceptions of China's Diplomatic Shift

King **Mohammed VI**'s visit to China in 2016 took place at a critical moment for Morocco. Just weeks earlier, UN Secretary General **Ban Ki-moon** had [described](#) Morocco's presence in Western Sahara as an "occupation," a position that Washington

also [appeared](#) to support.⁵¹ In this context, the visit heralded a new orientation in Rabat's diplomacy toward strategic diversification while maintaining its traditional alliances with the United States and Europe. As China's economic presence expanded in the Kingdom, Rabat's [expectation](#) grew that deeper ties may, over time, foster greater Chinese receptiveness on Western Sahara.⁵²

Officially, Beijing's doctrine remained unchanged: China continued to affirm support for a UN-led process based on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. Yet, since 2018, its behavior at the UN began to show small but meaningful adjustments compatible with Rabat's position.⁵³ China voted in favor of UNSCR [2440 \(2018\)](#) and [2602 \(2021\)](#), both of which framed the Moroccan plan as "a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution" to the conflict based on compromise.⁵⁴

Moroccan commentators increasingly interpreted these developments as evidence of a diplomatic recalibration. Notably, China's abstention during the UN Security Council vote in October 2025 that formally endorsed Morocco's "Western Sahara Autonomy Proposal" was widely perceived not only as a pragmatic shift, but a subtle yet meaningful diplomatic win. **Hicham Ismaili**, Ph.D. student at the University of Fes' Laboratory of Political Studies and Public Law, observed that although "ideological consistency and relationships with other African nations may prevent a full-throated endorsement," China's vote can be considered a "tacit acceptance" of the plan.⁵⁵

The [Observatorio de la Política China](#), a Spanish foreign policy publication, reached a similar assessment that was circulated by the Moroccan news outlet *Hespress*, noting that:

"Although China's principles have clearly favored a solution through self-determination, in practice, its actions have become more ambiguous and pragmatic over time."⁵⁶

Other analysts explicitly linked this diplomatic evolution to Morocco's growing importance for Chinese industrial and connectivity interests in North Africa. While China's earlier favourable stance at the Security Council may have indicated an attempt to align with the prevailing consensus within the international community, Ammari and Lyammouri regard Beijing's posture in October 2025 as a direct result of geoeconomic calculus.⁵⁷

⁴⁶ Fadoua Ammari and Rida Lyammouri, "La Chine et la Russie face à la question du Sahara marocain : vers une convergence des intérêts stratégiques" [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara: toward a convergence of strategic interests], *Policy Center for the New South*, June 13, 2025, p. 16.

<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des>.

⁴⁷ Raúl Redondo, "Le Forum de coopération Chine-Afrique soutient l'intégrité territoriale du Maroc" [The China-Africa Cooperation Forum supports Morocco's territorial integrity], *Atalayar*, September 5, 2024

<https://www.atalayar.com/fr/articulo/politique/forum-cooperation-chine-afrique-soutient-lintegrite-territoriale-du-maroc/20240905120720204834.html>.

⁴⁸ Latifa Ferial Naili, "Morocco's Makhzen Regime Uses Fictitious Claims of SADR Exclusion from FOCAC to Distract from Tokyo Scandal," *Al24 News*, August 24, 2024. <https://al24news.dz/en/moroccos-makhzen-regime-uses-fictitious-claims-of-sadr-exclusion-from-focac-to-distract-from-tokyo-scandal/>.

⁴⁹ It may be interesting to note that the other country excluded from the 53 African states parties to FOCAC out of 55 AU members is the Kingdom of Eswatini, the last African country to recognize the Republic of China instead of the PRC.

⁵⁰ *The Sahara Press*, "Participation of SADR in FOCAC Summit: Makhzen regime is engaged in propaganda of fictitious victory to cover up its scandal in Tokyo," August 26, 2024, <https://www.spsrasd.info/en/2024/08/26/4874.html>.

⁵¹ Samir Bennis, "Why Morocco is Disappointed With the US Position on Western Sahara," *Morocco World News*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2016/05/109506/why-morocco-is-disappointed-with-the-us-position-on-western-sahara/>.

⁵² Samir Bennis, "What Impact of Morocco-China Strategic Partnership on Western Sahara?," *Morocco World News*, May 21, 2016. <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2016/05/109279/what-impact-of-morocco-china-strategic-partnership-on-western-sahara/>.

⁵³ Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 4.

<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des>.

⁵⁴ UN Security Council, "Resolution 2440 (October 31, 2018)," UN Doc S/RES/2440 (2018), [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2440\(2018\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2440(2018)).

⁵⁵ Hicham Ismaili, "China's Delicate Balance: Predicting Beijing's Position on Morocco's Autonomy Plan at UNSC" *Morocco World News*, October 30, 2025, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2025/10/265914/chinas-delicate-balance-predicting-beijings-position-on-moroccos-autonomy-plan-at-unscl/>.

⁵⁶ Tawfiq Boufertih, "مرصد السياسة الصينية: بكين تميل إلى الحكم الذاتي في الصحراء المغربية" [Chinese Policy Observatory: Beijing tends toward autonomy in the Moroccan Sahara], *Hespress*, November 7, 2025, <https://www.hespress.com/-1650995-مرصد-السياسة-الصينية-بكين-تميل-إلى-الحكم-الذاتي-في-الصحراء-المغربية.html>.

⁵⁷ Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 12.

<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des>.

Chinese companies maintain an active presence across the Kingdom from Tanger Med to the Gotion High-Tech gigafactory in Kenitra. These investments, according to the experts, depend on a regional stability that China could secure only by supporting Morocco's integration of the Western Sahara "provinces":

*"A pacified Sahara, well integrated into Morocco, could become a space of opportunity: exploitation of mineral resources (the Sahara holds reserves of phosphates, of which Morocco is the world's leading exporter), development of renewable energy (wind and solar power in the desert), and infrastructure projects linking Morocco to the rest of Africa (trans-Saharan highways, energy links, and a future gas pipeline)."*⁵⁸

In a similar vein, **Lahoucine Bekkar Sbaai**, a Moroccan lawyer specializing in migration, human rights, and the Sahara conflict, holds that Morocco's accession to the BRI, its reliability as an investment and trade partner, its strategic location, and its expanding economic cooperation with China are all indicators that "if this trend continues on its current trajectory, China's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara may only be a matter of time."⁵⁹

Experts also linked this apparent recalibration to Rabat's consistent support for the One-China principle in international fora, particularly on "sensitive issues such as Hong Kong and Taiwan,"⁶⁰ to which Beijing may be responding by "demonstrating an understanding of Morocco's sovereignty concerns."⁶¹

However, these interpretations were not universally shared within Moroccan commentary. **Souad Mekkaoui**, co-founder of the Moroccan pro-government magazine *Maroc Diplomatique*, criticized China's abstention as remaining constrained by its longstanding partnership with Algeria, contrasting it with what she described as a "clear-sighted choice" by major Western powers – including Spain, France, the UK, the U.S., and Germany.⁶²

Despite widespread optimism around a Sino-Moroccan political rapprochement, critical assessments such as this reflect the growing diplomatic complexity facing Beijing as tensions between Rabat and Algiers remain unresolved.

China's Delicate Balancing Act in the Maghreb

China's expanding footprint in both Morocco and Algeria has made strict neutrality increasingly complex. At the same time, growing international support for Morocco's position have [deepened](#) Algerian perceptions of strategic encirclement.

France's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty in 2024 followed by President Xi's stopover in Casablanca later that year generated unease in Algiers, where some officials inferred that Beijing's position no longer reflected the depth of Algerian support for China on issues such as Taiwan and Tibet.⁶³

Reflecting these frustrations, the Algerian ambassador to China reportedly [conveyed](#) to **Yahia Zoubir**, a prominent expert on China-North Africa relations, his dissatisfaction with Beijing's ambivalence:

*"We have supported China on many issues, including China gaining a seat at the UN. We told our Chinese partners that Western Sahara is a different question from Tibet or Xinjiang to no avail."*⁶⁴

Chinese officials nonetheless continued attempting to reassure Algeria of the importance Beijing attached to the bilateral relationship. In an interview with Zoubir, a former Chinese ambassador to Morocco [observed](#) that "ties with Algeria are more important and more comprehensive than those with Morocco."⁶⁵

Similarly, while Moroccan observers widely interpreted China's abstention on UNSCR 2797 as a diplomatic success, Beijing's UN representative **Fu Cong** justified the decision by referring to imbalances in the US-led draft, a rhetoric that neither opposed the text nor shielded Algeria's preferences.⁶⁶

In practice, Beijing attempted to manage the tension by exercising heightened caution around projects that touched contested zones.⁶⁷ For instance, reports [documented](#) Chinese purchases of Western Saharan phosphates between 2018 and 2021, after which sourcing stopped.⁶⁸ Beijing also showed hesitation over the Gâra Djebilet project – among the world's largest iron ore reserves – located in Algeria's Tindouf Province, home to Sahrawi refugee camps and a long-standing [source of contestation](#) between Rabat and Algiers over mining rights.⁶⁹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Lahoucine Bekkar Sbaai, "Le Maroc et la Chine: la diplomatie économique au service de la souveraineté sur le Sahara" [Morocco and China: Economic diplomacy in service of sovereignty over the Sahara], *Atalayar*, November 5, 2025, <https://www.atalayar.com/fr/opinion/lahoucine-bekkar-sbaai/maroc-et-chine-diplomatique-economique-au-service-souverainete-sur-sahara/20250609110500215700.html>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ammari and Lyammouri, [China and Russia on the issue of the Moroccan Sahara], p. 5.

<https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/la-chine-et-la-russie-face-la-question-du-sahara-marocain-vers-une-convergence-des>.

⁶² Souad Mekkaoui, "Sahara: La Russie a choisi, à quand le courage de la Chine ?" [Sahara: Russia has made its choice, when will China show the courage?], *Maroc Diplomatique*, October 19, 2025, <https://maroc-diplomatique.net/sahara-la-russie-a-choisi-a-quand-le-courage-de-la-chine/>.

⁶³ Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27 No. 110 (2018): 133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019>.

⁶⁴ Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algeria and China: Shifts in political and military relations," *Global Policy*, Volume 14, Special Issue (2023): 62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13115>.

⁶⁵ Ibid, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13115>.

⁶⁶ Imane Ezzehouany, "From Geoeconomics to a Chinese Diplomatic Shift on the Western Sahara? Moroccan Press Coverage of FM Bourita's Visit to Beijing," *ChinaMed Project*, December 1, 2025. <https://chinamed.substack.com/p/from-geoeconomics-to-a-chinese-diplomatic>.

⁶⁷ Alessandro Giuli, "The strategic caution of Russia and China in Western Sahara," *MedOr Italian Foundation*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.med-or.org/en/news/la-prudenza-strategica-di-russia-e-cina-nel-sahara-occidentale>.

⁶⁸ Eduard Soler i Lecha and Inés Arco Escriche, "The Western Sahara conflict in a post-hegemonic world: interests, values and foreign policy strategies," *The Journal of North African Studies* Vol 30, No. 4: 579–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2025.2500472>.

⁶⁹ Mohammed Jaabouk, "Algeria and Morocco's joint exploitation of the Gara Djebilet iron mine ignored for a new project," *Yabiladi*, April 1, 2021. <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/108002/algeria-morocco-s-joint-exploitation-gara>.

A comparable pattern appeared in the security domain. As Algeria increased [purchases](#) of advanced Chinese arms following disruptions to Russian supplies amid the Ukraine war,⁷⁰ Morocco also [acquired](#) Chinese combat UAVs as part of its defense diversification efforts.⁷¹ Even reports of Polisario members using commercially available Chinese drones illustrate how China's technological footprint reaches all sides without translating into political alignment.⁷²

Taken together, developments since 2016 suggest that China has moved beyond declarative neutrality toward a strategy of managed ambiguity. Rather than openly endorsing Morocco's sovereignty claims, its investments, diplomatic behavior, and cautious silences shape an environment increasingly compatible with Morocco's autonomy narrative while preserving the balance necessary to maintain its partnership with Algeria. This approach allows Beijing to expand regional influence without assuming the political costs of a formal alignment.

Beijing and the Shifting Regional Balance of Power

Great-Power Rivalry and the Internationalization of Western Sahara

China's evolving posture on the conflict intersects today with a broader reconfiguration of power across North Africa where the Western Sahara issue has evolved from a regional territorial dispute to being recast as a central theater of competing global alignments.⁷³

As traditional Western influence is weakened by a fragmented Mediterranean policy, China and Russia have consolidated their presence, treating the region as a strategic pivot connecting Europe and the Sahel to global trade routes. Consequently, the fate of Western Sahara now conditions the viability of critical assets – including Atlantic maritime gateways, trans-Saharan connectivity, and emerging renewable energy networks.

In this context, the United States has intensified diplomatic efforts to encourage a settlement between Morocco and Algeria. Washington's urgency appears driven by a strategic concern that prolonged instability could create openings for rival powers along the Atlantic façade – a maritime sphere that has historically remained within the Western security orbit.

Since late 2025, the United States [has organized](#) several confidential meetings aimed at finding a formula that addresses Morocco's autonomy proposal while maintaining a meaningful role for Algeria.⁷⁴ The [signing](#) of the first-ever U.S.-Algeria military cooperation agreement under the second Trump administration suggests that Algiers may indeed be recalibrating its own strategic alliances, potentially moving toward a framework that could lead to regional pacification.⁷⁵

Yet, internal challenges continue to limit the prospects for a sustainable reconciliation in both Morocco and Algeria. **Raouf Farrah**, an Algerian political science researcher, [observed](#) in the *Middle East Eye* that a visible gap persists between state policies and domestic public opinion, particularly regarding the role of external powers in the region.⁷⁶

In Morocco, the normalization with Israel has created friction with a population that maintains a strong alignment with the Palestinian cause. Meanwhile in Algeria, any perceived shift on Western Sahara risks contradicting the long-standing anti-colonial narrative that underpins the government's domestic legitimacy. This internal friction could make any formal agreement brittle or difficult to implement in the long term.

China's Role in the Region: Influence Without Alignment

The March 2026 Iran War and the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz further accelerated the geopolitical significance of North Africa. While the United States seeks to stabilize the region to contain rival influence, China increasingly views the Maghreb as a strategic alternative for energy diversification and industrial connectivity. **Zhang Chuchu** of Fudan University [described](#) North Africa as a potential "new fulcrum for energy security," while **Jonathan Fulton** questioned whether the region may become a "[Second Gulf](#)" for Chinese interests.⁷⁷

In this context, Algeria's [role](#) as a vital fossil-energy supplier has gained renewed importance, while Morocco [remains](#) structurally exposed to energy shocks and domestic economic pressure.⁷⁸ Yet despite Algiers' energy leverage, Rabat has continued to advance its autonomy plan for Western Sahara, including efforts to link the Polisario to Iran in order to secure further American support.⁷⁹

At the same time, China's search for alternative supply chain routes insulated from Gulf volatility increasingly intersects with Morocco's infrastructure advantage, renewable energy ambitions, and Atlantic connectivity. More broadly, both

⁷⁰ Yahia H. Zoubir, "China in the Maghreb: Forging a New Era of Geopolitical Influence," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, October 20, 2025, <https://mecouncil.org/publication/china-in-the-maghreb-forging-a-new-era-of-geopolitical-influence/>.

⁷¹ Samir Bennis, "Morocco Acquires Advanced Chinese TB-001K Combat Drone," *Morocco World News*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2025/02/164709/morocco-acquires-advanced-chinese-tb-001k-combat-drone/>.

⁷² Soler i Lecha and Arco Escriche, "The Western Sahara conflict in a post-hegemonic world," <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2025.2500472>.

⁷³ Bianca Pasquier, "Mediterranean Anxieties over the Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement: French, Algerian, and Tunisian Media Perspectives," *ChinaMed Project*, November 10, 2025, <https://chinamed.substack.com/p/mediterranean-anxieties-over-sino>.

⁷⁴ Yassine Ben Driss, "Western Sahara Dispute Entered Its Final Chapter Behind Closed Doors in Madrid," *Morocco World News*, February 12, 2026, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2026/02/278575/western-sahara-dispute-entered-its-final-chapter-behind-closed-doors-in-madrid/>.

⁷⁵ Margarita Arredondas, "Algeria redirects military cooperation to the US in response to Russia's influence in the Sahel," *Atalayar*, January 25, 2025, <https://www.atalayar.com/en/articulo/politics/algeria-redirects-military-cooperation-to-the-us-in-response-to-russias-influence-in-the-sahel/20250123163610210285.html>.

⁷⁶ Adlene Meddi, "War on Iran: How Algeria and Morocco manoeuvre the fallout," *Middle East Eye*, March 15, 2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/between-threats-and-opportunities-algeria-and-morocco-manoevre-fallout-war-iran>.

⁷⁷ Chuchu Zhang, "How Iran War Is Reshaping China's Geo-Economic Cooperation with North Africa," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, March 27, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2026/how-iran-war-is-reshaping-chinas-geo-economic-cooperation-with-north-africa/>.

⁷⁸ Hafed Al Ghowell, "Impacts of the Iran War on North Africa, the Sahel, and the Mediterranean," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, March 31, 2026, <https://www.stimson.org/2026/impacts-of-the-iran-war-on-north-africa-the-sahel-and-the-mediterranean/>.

⁷⁹ *North Africa Post*, "Strikes on Iran to weaken Polisario, Hezbollah and Houthi proxy networks," March 31, 2026, <https://northafricapost.com/95865-strikes-on-iran-to-weaken-polisario-hezbollah-and-houthi-proxy-networks.html>.

Chinese and regional long-term strategies converge on the necessity of a predictable security environment in the Maghreb predicated on stability in Western Sahara.

Ultimately, given the intractable nature of the territorial dispute, Beijing is unlikely to assume a political role despite its regional stakes.⁸⁰ Instead, China is expected to continue maintaining influence by expanding economic interdependence with both Morocco and Algeria, while accommodating the emerging consensus surrounding the Moroccan autonomy proposal internationally. As for managing the mediation process for resolving the conflict, China will likely defer to other powers – such as the United States – which also retains a strategic interest in stabilizing the region.

Against this backdrop of evolving but restrained Chinese engagement in the Maghreb, the next Chapter shifts from conflict management to regional perceptions, examining how France, Algeria, and Tunisia have interpreted the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement.

⁸⁰ Sun & Zoubir, "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa," 237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1389019>.

CHAPTER 3

MEDITERRANEAN ANXIETIES OVER THE SINO-MOROCCAN RAPPROCHEMENT: FRENCH, ALGERIAN, AND TUNISIAN PERSPECTIVES

By Bianca PASQUIER

Although the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has primarily been interpreted through the lens of economic pragmatism and Morocco's ambition to diversify its international partnerships, it has also triggered a range of reactions in France, Algeria, and Tunisia – each filtered through distinctive political, historical, and media lenses. This Chapter examines how experts and mediate debates in these countries have interpreted and responded to deepening Sino-Moroccan ties.

Historically one of Rabat's closest partners, France has expressed concern over its waning influence in the Kingdom as China's presence expands. The Algerian discourse revealed a mix of anxiety and denial, driven by fears that closer ties between Beijing and Rabat could further deepen its regional marginalization. Tunisian media, by contrast, struck a tone that oscillated between admiration and self-reflection regarding Tunis' own place in the region.

This comparative approach highlights how the China-Morocco rapprochement functions as both a mirror and a catalyst of broader power reconfigurations in the Maghreb, challenging colonial hierarchies and inviting local elites to reassess their foreign policy orientations.

France's Waning Influence Amid China's Rise

Franco-Moroccan relations have fluctuated dramatically over the past decade, reflecting deeper tensions between postcolonial legacies and Rabat's global partnerships. In recent years, relations deteriorated due to a series of political and diplomatic crises, notably the European Parliament's

January 2023 vote condemning the Kingdom for failing to respect press freedom, and France's restrictive visa policy targeting Moroccan nationals.⁸¹ These developments provoked a sharp reaction from Rabat, with King **Mohammed VI** [declaring](#) that "our relations are neither good nor friendly" in response to President **Emmanuel Macron's** February 2023 speech on France-Africa relations, in which he outlined Paris' new policy for the continent.⁸²

However, following the [chill in France's relations with Algeria](#), the Élysée recalibrated its Maghreb policy in favor of Rabat, with Macron's state visit to Morocco in October 2024 [marking](#) a turning point.⁸³ During the visit, the French President explicitly recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, an unprecedented gesture that signaled both reconciliation and an attempt to reassert France's strategic interests in the region.⁸⁴ This Franco-Moroccan diplomatic thaw led to a series of reciprocal ministerial visits in 2025, which showcased Paris' efforts to restore the confidence that had eroded over years of mutual suspicion.

French media and policy analysts increasingly acknowledged Morocco's indispensable role in France's regional strategy, especially as [relations with Algeria remain strained](#). The conservative magazine *Le Point* [noted](#) that "the Maghreb countries are moving further and further away from Paris," emphasizing France's growing need to secure a reliable partner in North Africa.⁸⁵ *Le Monde* journalist **Frédéric Bobin** similarly [observed](#) that "faced with the impasse on reconciliation with Algiers, Paris is inclined to rebalance its Maghreb diplomacy in favor of Rabat, particularly on Western Sahara."⁸⁶

Despite the apparent rapprochement, official French discourse remained cautious. The Quai d'Orsay maintained that "its

⁸¹ *Jeune Afrique*, "La réponse du Maroc à Macron: «Nos relations ne sont ni bonnes ni amicales »" [Morocco's response to Macron: "Our relations are neither good nor friendly"], March 1, 2023. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1423034/politique/la-reponse-du-maroc-a-macron-nos-relations-ne-sont-ni-bonnes-ni-amicales/>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Brahim Oumansour, "Politique étrangère marocaine: nouvelle donne au Sahara occidental ?" [Moroccan Foreign Policy: A New Deal in Western Sahara?], *French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS)*, November 8, 2024. <https://www.iris-france.org/politique-etrangere-marocaine-nouvelle-donne-au-sahara-occidental/>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *BBC News Afrique*, "Géopolitique : la France va-t-elle perdre son influence au Maghreb après son déclin en Afrique subsaharienne?" [Geopolitics: Will France lose its influence in the Maghreb after its decline in sub-Saharan Africa?], October 12, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-67039986>.

⁸⁶ Frédéric Bobin, "Au Maghreb, la tentation du recentrage de la France vers le Maroc" [In the Maghreb, the temptation of France refocusing on Morocco], *Le Monde*, March 11, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/03/11/au-maghreb-la-tentation-du-recentrage-de-la-france-vers-le-maroc_6221303_3232.html.

diplomacy in the region is not a zero-sum game," suggesting that warming relations with Morocco do not necessarily imply a cooling of ties with Algeria.⁸⁷ Yet, beneath this rhetoric of balance lay an implicit acknowledgment of Morocco's growing leverage. "Though a small market on a global scale, Morocco has managed to position itself as a preferred interlocutor and economic partner for European countries – such as France and Spain – as well as for most French-speaking sub-Saharan nations," **observed Frédéric Maury**, CEO of *Jeune Afrique*,⁸⁸ and **Nadia Rabbaa**, a UN Communications Specialist.⁸⁹

Against this background, the strengthening of Sino-Moroccan relations is perceived as a challenge to France's historical prominence in the region. As journalist **Mohand Hakhifi** **observed** in *Arab News*, "France's traditional and historical preponderance in Morocco is tending to diminish in favor of China, a country for which Morocco represents many interests, especially related to infrastructure investments."⁹⁰ More concretely, Chinese investments have reshaped Morocco's economic landscape, particularly in sectors once dominated by French influence.

Sino-French **competition** in the transport sector over Morocco's high-speed rail network exemplifies this shift. Through competitive pricing and strategic lobbying, China's state-owned **China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC)** outcompeted French bidders in the Marrakech-Agadir railway project.⁹¹

The competitive dynamic extends to emerging sectors of the green economy. As *Jeune Afrique*'s **Bilal Mousjid** **noted**, "between industrial ambitions and power struggles, Morocco has become the new arena of Sino-European competition."⁹² Similarly, *Le Monde* has also **criticized** Brussels' inertia in the global battery race, where Chinese giants **CATL** and **BYD** lead the field.⁹³ **Hakim El-Karoui**, head of the French strategic consulting firm *Volentia*, further **observed** that Morocco's interest lies not merely in attracting investment, but in acquiring technological know-how – a domain in which "the Chinese are much more advanced than the Europeans."⁹⁴

In this context, French media have often adopted a dual narrative: casting China's growing presence as a cause for alarm while simultaneously calling on France to "wake up" and respond. The French state-owned radio news network *RFI*, for instance, **portrayed** the influx of Chinese tourists and investors into the Cherifian Kingdom as both beneficial and destabilizing.⁹⁵ While acknowledging that "relations with China are seen as a way to strengthen Morocco's position vis-à-vis the West," such alarmist framings **reveal** persistent anxieties about a perceived "Chinese colonization" of France's former protectorate.⁹⁶

Morocco's strategic tightrope between Paris and Beijing has become increasingly apparent in expert commentary. Economist **Abdelmalek Alaoui**, CEO of the *Guepard Group*, **observed** in a research note for the *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique* that Rabat's decision to distance itself from the BRICS – which China has increasingly shaped into an "anti-G7" platform – reflected an acute awareness that deepening ties with Beijing could jeopardize its long-standing partnerships with the West.⁹⁷ Conversely, **François Lafargue** from the Paris School of Business **cautioned** against exaggerating this shift, suggesting that China's presence in the Maghreb remains largely "complementary to European investments."⁹⁸

Ultimately, the overall tone of French media betrayed an underlying anxiety: that France's traditional influence in Morocco is being outpaced by a more agile and pragmatic competitor. The head of a French CAC 40 company quoted in *Le Monde* **captured** the sense of unease: "The Moroccan Minister of Industry told us that the Chinese were contacting him every day and that we needed to wake up before it was too late."⁹⁹

As France contends with China's growing presence in Morocco, its neighbors Algeria and Tunisia observe these developments through the prism of regional competition. Beijing's expanding investments in the Moroccan economy have heightened both countries' awareness of their own strategic positioning in the Maghreb.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Jeune Afrique* is a French-language pan-African weekly news magazine founded in 1960 in Tunis, known for its in-depth political, economic, and cultural coverage of Africa and its diaspora. The magazine, the most widely read pan-African news source, is currently headquartered in Paris..

⁸⁹ Frédéric Maury & Nadia Rabbaa, "Le Maroc, un pont d'or pour la Chine ?" [Morocco, a golden bridge for China?], *Jeune Afrique*, December 29, 2015. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/286294/economie-entreprises/maroc-pont-dor-chine/>.

⁹⁰ Mohand Hakhifi, "L'influence de la France recule au Maroc au profit de la Chine" [France's influence in Morocco is declining in favor of China], *Arab News*, June 16, 2021. <https://www.arabnews.fr/node/106251/monde-arabe>

⁹¹ Amin Rboub, "TGV Marrakech-Agadir: Guerre entre Paris et Pékin" [Marrakech-Agadir high-speed train: War between Paris and Beijing], *L'Économiste*, December 3, 2019. <https://www.leconomiste.com/1053898-tgv-marrakech-agadir-guerre-entre-paris-et-pekin/>; *BFM Business*, "Le Maroc veut deux nouvelles lignes de TGV" [Morocco wants two new high-speed rail lines], January 31, 2022. https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/entreprises/transports/le-maroc-veut-deux-nouvelles-lignes-de-tgv_AV-202201310192.html;

Abdelmalek Alaoui, "Réconciliation avec le Maroc : le voyage des gros contrats," [Reconciliation with Morocco: the large contracts visit], *La Tribune*, October 27, 2024. <https://www.latribune.fr/economie/politique/reconciliation-avec-le-maroc-le-voyage-des-gros-contrats-1009874.html>.

⁹² Bilal Mousjid, "Du cobalt au lithium, la Chine prend racine au Maroc... et Paris s'en méfie" [From cobalt to lithium, China is taking root in Morocco... and Paris is wary], *Jeune Afrique*, October 6, 2025. <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1727834/economie-entreprises/du-cobalt-au-lithium-la-chine-prend-racine-au-maroc-et-paris-sen-mefie/>.

⁹³ *Le Monde*, "La grande faiblesse de l'Europe face à la Chine" [Europe's great weakness in the face of China], July 25, 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/07/25/la-grande-faiblesse-de-l-europe-face-a-la-chine_6623852_3232.html. (also available in English).

⁹⁴ Mohand Hakhifi, *Arab News*, June 16, 2021. <https://www.arabnews.fr/node/106251/monde-arabe>.

⁹⁵ Matthias Raynal, "Au Maroc, le retour des touristes chinois, une aubaine économique?" [In Morocco, the return of Chinese tourists, an economic boon?], *RFI* Podcast "Afrique économique," September 25, 2025. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/afrique-%C3%A9conomie/20250924-au-maroc-le-retour-des-touristes-chinois-une-aubaine-%C3%A9conomique>.

⁹⁶ Clea Broadhurst, "Avec le Maroc, la Chine s'offre un pont vers l'Europe en réinventant ses partenariats stratégiques en Afrique" [With Morocco, China is building a bridge to Europe by reinventing its strategic partnerships in Africa], *RFI* Podcast "À la une en Asie," October 29, 2024. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/%C3%A0-la-une-en-asie/20241029-avec-le-maroc-la-chine-s-offre-un-pont-vers-l-europe-en-r%C3%A9inventant-ses-partenariats-strat%C3%A9giques-en-afrique>.

⁹⁷ Abdelmalek Alaoui, "La nouvelle partition géopolitique du Maroc" [Morocco's new geopolitical division], Note de la FRS n°19/2023, *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, October 19, 2023. <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/nouvelle-partition-geopolitique-maroc-2023>.

⁹⁸ François Lafargue, "La présence économique de la Chine au Maghreb: Ambitions et limites" [China's Economic Presence in the Maghreb: Ambitions and Limits], *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, October 29, 2018. <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/presence-economique-chine-maghreb-ambitions-limites-2018>.

⁹⁹ Alexandre Aublanc, "Le Maroc, porte d'entrée de la Chine sur l'Union européenne" [Morocco, China's gateway to the European Union], *Le Monde*, September 6, 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/09/06/le-maroc-porte-d-entree-de-la-chine-sur-l-union-europeenne_6305265_3212.html.

Algeria's concerns about Regional Isolation

Algerian media presented diverging interpretations of China's regional engagement, largely reflecting their political and institutional affiliations. Official outlets portrayed Sino-Algerian ties as exemplary and thriving, while independent and foreign commentators highlighted their stagnation and a growing anxiety over Morocco's deepening partnership with Beijing.

State media such as *Radio Algérienne* [described](#) the 2025 China-Algeria Forum as a milestone in bilateral ties, with the signing of eight agreements valued at over two billion USD in areas such as automobiles, railways, and agriculture that will reportedly generate "thousands of jobs."¹⁰⁰ The Chinese ambassador to Algiers **Dong Guangli** hailed Algeria as "an ideal destination for Chinese investors," a rhetoric mirrored by Algerian political figures and official coverage.¹⁰¹

Assembly President **Ibrahim Boughali** [praised](#) China's "consistent stance in favor of just causes" in reference to Beijing's support for Palestine and Western Sahara,¹⁰² while *Carrefour d'Algérie* even [described](#) the partnership as "perfect," identifying the automotive industry as a flagship sector of cooperation.¹⁰³

By contrast, foreign and independent analysts suggested an ambivalent and less optimistic picture. As the German researcher **Isabelle Werenfels** [noted](#) in *Le Petit Journal Marocain*, "while Algeria remains a market for China, Morocco has become a collaborative player in high-value-added projects."¹⁰⁴ At the same time, China's [aforementioned](#) abstention on the UNSCR 2797 endorsing Morocco's autonomy plan was interpreted as a clear limit of Beijing's "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Algiers.

While Morocco's partnership with Beijing has become increasingly strategic, Algeria's position remains largely transactional and overshadowed by the Sino-Moroccan economic entanglement.

Independent Algerian journalist **Abdou Semmar**, founder of the investigative outlet *Algérie Part*, has been a vocal critic of his government's triumphalist rhetoric. On his YouTube channel, where he regularly reposts *Algérie Part*'s live investigative discussions, Semmar [argued](#) that real Chinese investment has dwindled since the end of **Abdelaziz**

Bouteflika's presidency (1999-2019), as China increasingly perceives Algeria as "an unstable and closed-off country."¹⁰⁵ He further noted that Chinese President **Xi Jinping's** stopover in Casablanca in November 2024 went almost unmentioned in Algerian state media, an omission that, he [commented](#), "is not trivial" and "heralds a new geopolitical configuration that threatens Algeria's regional influence."¹⁰⁶

Semmar pointed to the [relocation](#) of a truck manufacturing project from Algeria to Morocco and the inauguration of the Shanghai-Casablanca air route as evidence of this shift, warning and lamenting that: "**Abdelmadjid Tebboune** is isolating us ... all major projects have been diverted to Morocco."¹⁰⁷

He also interpreted the [meeting](#) between the Algerian President Tebboune and the head of the French shipping giant **CMA-CGM** to discuss deeper involvement in Algerian port infrastructure as an [indication](#) of Algeria's intention to "turn its back on China" in favor of renewed cooperation with France – a development he views as symptomatic of Algiers' shifting alliances and waning appeal to Chinese investors.¹⁰⁸

Thus, while official Algerian discourse continued to celebrate a "perfect friendship," independent and foreign media depicted a reality of missed opportunities and a growing sense of diplomatic isolation.

Tunisia Between Self-reflection, Comparison and catching up

While Algeria remained locked in competition with its western neighbor, Tunisia adopted a more nuanced stance, acknowledging Morocco's success and even viewing its trajectory as a potential model for its own development. Sino-Tunisian relations are often described as cordial and historically grounded, yet structurally limited. Many observers thus see significant room for growth, provided that Tunis can define a coherent strategy, perhaps by drawing lessons from Rabat's experience.

Appeals for deeper cooperation were widespread. As *Al Maghreb* [reported](#), the Chinese ambassador to Tunisia, **Wan Li**, called for "a new starting point for broader cooperation" on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰ *Radio Algérienne*, "Algérie-Chine : volonté commune des opérateurs économiques de promouvoir le partenariat bilatéral" [Algeria-China: Common desire of economic operators to promote bilateral partnership], April 15, 2025. <https://news.radioalgerie.dz/fr/node/63066>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Meriem Djouder, "Algérie – Chine : Partenariat consolidé" [Algeria – China: Consolidated Partnership], *Le Jeune Indépendant*, June 10, 2025. <https://www.jeune-independant.net/algerie-chine-partenariat-consolide/>.

¹⁰³ B. Habib, "Algérie-Chine: L'entente parfaite" [Algeria-China: Perfect understanding], *Le Carrefour d'Algérie N°7161*, April 20, 2025. <https://lecarrefourdalgerie.dz/media/magazines/pdf/253491-190425.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ *Le Petit Journal Marocain*, "Le Maroc devient un allié de la Chine, l'Algérie était et reste une cliente" [Morocco becomes an ally of China, Algeria was and remains a client], November 30, 2024. <https://www.lepetitjournalmarocain.com/2024/11/30/maroc-partenaire-chine-algerie-cliente/>.

¹⁰⁵ Abdou Semmar, "La Chine s'éloigne dangereusement de l'Algérie pour privilégier le... Maroc" [China is moving dangerously away from Algeria to focus on... Morocco], *Youtube*, October 4, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYeNcO2KE_Y.

¹⁰⁶ Abdou Semmar, "Le Président chinois Xi Jinping préfère Casablanca à Alger : les chinois ont-ils ignoré l'Algérie?" [Chinese President Xi Jinping prefers Casablanca to Algiers: have the Chinese ignored Algeria?], *Youtube*, November 24, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYASNDMRC10>.

¹⁰⁷ Abdou Semmar, "Le Président chinois Xi Jinping préfère Casablanca à Alger : les chinois ont-ils ignoré l'Algérie?" [Chinese President Xi Jinping prefers Casablanca to Algiers: have the Chinese ignored Algeria?], *Youtube*, November 24, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYASNDMRC10>; Abdou Semmar, "La Chine ne mise plus sur l'Algérie et lui préfère le Maroc : réveillez-vous monsieur Tebboune!" [China no longer relies on Algeria and prefers Morocco: wake up, Mr. Tebboune!], *Youtube*, January 20, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NTrJ8xUzZM>.

¹⁰⁸ Abdou Semmar, "Tourner le dos aux chinois et tout miser sur les français : l'énorme bêtise que veut faire Tebboune" [Turning one's back on the Chinese and betting everything on the French: the enormous stupidity that Tebboune wants to commit], *Youtube*, June 8, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_WTijJ9gY.

Similarly, *La Presse* [celebrated](#) the "mutually beneficial and friendly relations" between the two countries, emphasizing opportunities in green energy, agribusiness, and artificial intelligence.¹¹⁰ Tourism has emerged as a particularly dynamic field, following a [new cooperation agreement](#) between the Tunisian Federation of Travel and Tourism Agencies (FTAV) and the Sino-North African Education Innovation Association for university exchanges, which brought 25,000 Chinese tourists to Tunisia in 2024.¹¹¹

Yet, **Donia Jemli** and **Adrien Mugnier** from the [Observatoire Français des Nouvelles Routes de la Soie](#) observed that Tunisia's engagement with China "came late" and remained "underexploited" due to a lack of strategic coherence.¹¹² They [argued](#) that Tunisia's weaknesses in logistics and connectivity have hindered it from integrating into China's Belt and Road Initiative, in sharp contrast to Morocco's proactive strategy.¹¹³ French diplomat **Louis Dugit-Gros** and Washington Institute senior fellow **Sabina Henneberg** echoed this diagnosis, [noting](#) that "Tunisia's structural obstacles and domestic crises have limited its attractiveness to Chinese investors."¹¹⁴

Tunisian discourse frequently [juxtaposed](#) the country's trajectory with Morocco's, casting the latter as both a model and a rival. Regarding in-bound Chinese tourism, FTAV president **Ahmed Bettaieb** explicitly identified Morocco and Egypt as "competitors."¹¹⁵

Moreover, former Tunisian diplomat **Elyes Kasri** [lamented](#) that "thirty years ago, Tunisia was a model for Morocco; today, the positions are reversed,"¹¹⁶ urging Tunisian leaders to draw inspiration from the Moroccan model in infrastructure, investment, and diplomacy.¹¹⁷ Writing in *L'Économiste Maghrébin*, Kasri further [warned](#) that "time is running out because the gap is widening dangerously."¹¹⁸

Tunisie Numérique likewise emphasized Morocco's advantage, presenting its alliance with China as "a significant advance over Tunisia and Algeria" and [arguing](#) that Rabat now occupies a privileged position in Beijing's regional strategy.¹¹⁹ Journalist **Sébastien Le Belzic** [reinforced](#) this perception, describing Morocco as "the most legitimate country in the Maghreb" for

China's Mediterranean strategy, thanks to the Tangier port – "the third most important hub in the world after Shanghai and Panama."¹²⁰

Recognizing Morocco's lead, Tunisian economic circles have called for introspection. The 2017 report by the [Arab Institute of Business Leaders Forum](#) held in Tunis, [recommended](#) that policymakers "draw lessons from Morocco's success" in attracting Chinese FDI through a consistent long-term strategy and institutional commitment.¹²¹

Overall, Tunisian media discourse revealed a mix of admiration, envy, and self-critique, recognizing Morocco's diplomatic dynamism while lamenting Tunisia's own stagnation.

The Sino-Moroccan Partnership in the Reordering of Maghreb Power Dynamics

Across French, Algerian, and Tunisian media, the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement has provoked a range of interpretations reflecting national anxieties and shifting power dynamics.

French discourse, oscillating between wistfulness and alarm, revealed the erosion of a postcolonial comfort zone. Whereas in North Africa, Algerian coverage – despite the dominance of official triumphalism – is challenged by independent voices that betray concerns over losing prominence in Beijing's diplomatic geography vis-à-vis China's deepening ties with Morocco. Tunisian media, meanwhile, articulated a blend of admiration and frustration, positioning Rabat as both a competitor and a successful model to emulate.

Together, these discourses illustrate how Morocco's pragmatic engagement with China – anchored in infrastructure, technology transfer, and industrial diversification – has redefined its image within the Maghreb and beyond. The Kingdom's strategy contrasts sharply with those of its neighbors: while Algeria maintains an ideological and

¹⁰⁹ Rawaa Qasim, "سفیر الصين بتونس وان لي: أدعو الى التكاتف لاتخاذ الذكرى الـ 60 للعلاقات الدبلوماسية بين الصين وتونس نقطة انطلاق جديدة لتعاون أوسع", *Al Maghreb*, May 23, 2024. <https://ar.lemaghreb.tn/مقالات-المغرب/item/108725-جديدة-اتعاون-أوسع-60-للعلاقات-الدبلوماسية-بين-الصين-وتونس-نقطة-انطلاق-جديدة-لتعاون-أوسع>.

¹¹⁰ Kamel Ferchichi, "Tunisie – Chine : Une coopération exemplaire qui résiste au temps" [Tunisia – China: Exemplary cooperation that stands the test of time], *La Presse*, October 10, 2025. <https://lapresse.tn/2025/10/10/tunisie-chine-une-cooperation-exemplaire-qui-resiste-au-temps/>.

¹¹¹ Sabrine Ahmed, "FTAV : Le tourisme tunisien se tourne vers la Chine" [FTAV: Tunisian tourism turns to China], *La Presse*, February 19, 2025. <https://lapresse.tn/2025/02/19/ftav-le-tourisme-tunisien-se-tourne-vers-la-chine/>.

¹¹² Donia Jemli & Adrien Mugnier, "Chine en Tunisie, affirmation d'une coopération ambitieuse" [China in Tunisia, affirmation of ambitious cooperation], *Observatoire Français*, September 16, 2025. <https://observatoirefr.com/2025/09/16/tunisie-chine-la-genese-une-cooperation-ambitieuse/>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Louis Dugit-Gros & Sabina Henneberg, "Présence de la Chine en Tunisie: jusqu'où va-t-elle et où va-t-elle?" [China's presence in Tunisia: how far and where is it going?], *Kapitalis*, April 8, 2024. <https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2024/04/08/presence-de-la-chine-en-tunisie-jusquou-va-t-elle-et-ou-va-t-elle/>.

¹¹⁵ Sabrine Ahmed, *La Presse*, February 19, 2025. <https://lapresse.tn/2025/02/19/ftav-le-tourisme-tunisien-se-tourne-vers-la-chine/>.

¹¹⁶ Elyes Kasri, "Le Maroc est un modèle à suivre pour la Tunisie" [Morocco is a model for Tunisia to follow], *Kapitalis*, September 19, 2023. <https://kapitalis.com/tunisie/2023/09/19/le-maroc-est-un-modele-a-suivre-pour-la-tunisie/>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Nadia Dejoui, "Elyes Kasri : « Le Maroc, un modèle de progrès face aux critiques »" [Elyes Kasri: "Morocco, a model of progress in the face of criticism"], *L'Économiste Maghrébin*, December 18, 2024. <https://www.leconomistemaghreb.com/2024/12/18/elyes-kasri-le-maroc-un-modele-de-progres-face-aux-critiques/>.

¹¹⁹ Souleymane Loum, "Maroc-Chine : une sacrée avance sur la Tunisie et l'Algérie avec cette alliance" [Morocco-China: a significant advance over Tunisia and Algeria with this alliance], *Tunisie Numérique*, January 6, 2022. <https://www.tunisienumerique.com/maroc-chine-une-sacree-avance-sur-la-tunisie-et-lalgerie-avec-cette-alliance/>.

¹²⁰ *Tunisie Focus*, "Le Maroc, nouvelle étape de «la Route de la soie» Chine-Afrique?" [Morocco, a new stage of the China-Africa "Silk Road"?], November 27, 2017. <https://www.tunisiefocus.com/economie/maroc-nouvelle-etape-de-route-de-soie-chine-afrique-181312/>.

¹²¹ *Tunis Forum 2017* - IACE, "Rapport de travail: Tunisie-Chine : Un Partenariat D'avenir" [Working Report: Tunisia-China: A Partnership for the Future], July 7, 2017. <http://www.iace.tn/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/TN-CHINE2017.pdf>.

traditional rhetoric that obscures its weakening regional position, and Tunisia struggles with domestic and economic instability, Morocco has successfully positioned itself as a critical node in global reconfigurations linking Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Ultimately, the Morocco-China partnership serves not only as a barometer of shifting economic alignments but also as a mirror reflecting how Mediterranean countries perceive themselves in a changing world order. Our analysis of French, Algerian, and Tunisian media suggests that there is an understanding that China's growing role in Morocco signals not only the end of a historical monopoly by the former colonial power in the Élysée - whether political, economic, or symbolic - but also the emergence of a new balance of power in the Maghreb.

CONCLUSION

How to Interpret the Sino-Moroccan Rapprochement?

The deepening Sino-Moroccan relationship lies at the intersection of two macro-trends in the wider Mediterranean region: China's expansion and the [rise](#) of Morocco as a middle power.¹²² A third macro-trend it intersects with is the geoeconomic shift away from traditional alliances in global diplomacy.¹²³ Recent shocks from the Covid-19 pandemic, to the U.S.-China trade war and the escalation in the Gulf are driving regional states to securitize their national interests through strategic hedging and diversification. This shift has resulted in a "portfolio diplomacy" through which states in the Maghreb "actively differentiate, combine and compartmentalise relations" among an array of external partners.¹²⁴

Accordingly, by deepening its engagement with China, Morocco is also reengineering its agency and room for manoeuvre while maintaining its traditional ties with the United States and Europe. China's economic presence in the Kingdom, albeit still limited compared to European and Gulf partners in overall investment terms,¹²⁵ has rapidly expanded in industrial sectors critical for the green transition and the restructuring of global value chains. As Beijing and other external powers continue to seek alternatives to disruptions in the Gulf, Morocco's relative stability, industrial base, and logistical infrastructure position it as a critical node in the rerouting of global trade and connectivity through Africa.

Amid mounting geopolitical volatility, conflict management – in Western Sahara as much as elsewhere in the wider Mediterranean – has become paramount for regional and international stakeholders. While growing recognition of Moroccan sovereignty on the territory has been widely interpreted as a step toward a pragmatic settlement, the trade-off between economic security and local grievances remains a source of tension. The Polisario Front's recent attack on Smara on May 5, 2026, aimed at derailing mediation efforts based on the Moroccan autonomy proposal, drew [unanimous criticism](#) from the European Union, the U.S., African and Arab states.¹²⁶ Against this backdrop, even China's position on the conflict appears to be evolving from strict neutrality toward

a form of pragmatic ambiguity that preserves flexibility to accommodate the emerging order.

This evolving dynamic is also reflected in external perceptions of the partnership. Recent reports highlighting growing [American and European concern](#) over Morocco's consolidation as a perceived "industrial platform" for Chinese investment underscore how the Sino-Moroccan rapprochement is being interpreted beyond North Africa itself.¹²⁷ The relationship thus functions as both a mirror and a catalyst of broader geopolitical trends, closely monitored not only by neighboring France, Algeria and Tunisia, but also by external actors adjusting their strategies to shifting power dynamics in the Maghreb.

¹²² Lana Bleik, Hafed Al Ghwel, Yusuf Can, "Morocco Country Policy Report," *Stimson Center North Africa Program*, May 15, 2026. <https://www.stimson.org/2026/morocco-country-policy-report/>.

¹²³ Kim B. Olsen, "Geoeconomic Diplomacy: Enhancing Abilities to Instrumentalise Economic Means of Power," In *The Geoeconomic Diplomacy of European Sanctions*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Nijhoff, 2022), doi: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004518834_004.

¹²⁴ Yahia Zoubir, "Russia and China in the Maghreb: Comparative leverage, state agency, and public opinion," in Caterina Roggero ed., *Reviving Euro-Maghreb Ties in a Multipolar Mediterranean*, *ISPI Policy Paper*, (Milan, Italy, 2026): 39. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/reviving-euro-maghreb-ties-in-a-multipolar-mediterranean-236078>.

¹²⁵ In 2024, China Mainland was Morocco's fifth largest FDI source behind France, the UAE, Germany and Spain. See Gary Ng, "Access Africa – Morocco: A Gateway to MENA and Beyond," *HKTDC Research*, September 22, 2025. <https://research.hktdc.com/en/article/MjExOTQzNTIwMw#:~:text=France%20is%20the%20country's%20top,total%20FDI%20inflow%20that%20year>.

¹²⁶ Muslim World League, "The Muslim World League Condemns the Attack Targeting the Moroccan City of Smara," May 9, 2026. <https://www.themwl.org/en/muslim-world-league-condemns-attack-targeting-moroccan-city-smara>.

Wissam El Bouzdaini, "Attaque de Smara. Les grandes puissances condamnent, le polisario rattrapé par ses roquettes" [Attack on Smara. Major powers condemn, Polisario caught by its own rockets], *Médias24*, May 8, 2026. <https://medias24.com/2026/05/08/attaque-de-smara-les-grandes-puissances-condamnent-le-polisario-rattrape-par-ses-roquettes-1673409/>.

¹²⁷ Christian Géraud Neema Byamungu, "Morocco, an Unexpected Winner of China's Strategy to Circumvent the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act," *CSIS*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/morocco-unexpected-winner-chinas-strategy-circumvent-us-inflation-reduction-act>; Peter Foster and Andy Bounds, "EU frets as China builds an industrial base in Morocco," *Financial Times*, May 31, 2026. <https://www.ft.com/content/706c1db4-ef4a-4e53-9bdd-f66496407626?syn-25a6b1a6=1>; Jonathan Fulton, "Morocco as a Chinese Industrial Base?," *China-MENA Newsletter*, June 2, 2026. <https://chinamenanewsletter.substack.com/p/morocco-as-a-chinese-industrial-base>.

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