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The Maghreb: opportunities and challenges for Spain in the new international scenario

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Abstract:

The Maghreb is once again the focus of attention for european and spanish policy. Both in the framework of the external action of the European Union (EU) and in the latest political decisions of our country, Maghreb is seen as a priority area in political, commercial, social and cultural relations, which has also been explicitly expressed. Furthermore, it is shown in the data and events of recent years, and in Spain's political rapprochement with countries such as Morocco and Mauritania. Moreover, the Maghreb's relations with Europe, in particular with the EU, in central areas such as security and defense, or migration, have been commonplace for some time now, and this continues to be a challenge for EU policy.

Keywords:

Spain. European Union. Strategic relationship. Cooperation. Leadership. Maghreb.

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Introduction

The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation acknowledges, in its foreign policy section on the Maghreb, that "both the Maghreb and the Middle East constitute a fundamental and priority pillar of our foreign action. Both regions are undergoing profound changes, *bringing opportunities and challenges for our country's interests*"[2]. The expression of this will, together with the recent practice developed by Spain, as well as the data that demonstrate the close economic, social and cultural relations between Spain and the Maghreb, lead to confirm that this region in particular, as well as the Sahel[3], have been areas of great interest for our country for some time now[4].

In recent decades, Spanish experts and scientific doctrine have echoed these relations, which have been analysed on many occasions and from different perspectives, at least from the historical, economic and security points of view. The links between the Maghreb-Sahel and Spain are a key issue in 21st century international relations for Spanish foreign policy. This is clearly seen in the executive summary of Spain's Foreign Action Strategy for the years 2025-2028, since although "Latin America and the Caribbean is a constant in Spain's identity and foreign action" and, furthermore, "in the next four years the objective is to redouble this effort and strengthen the Ibero-American Space", this Plan states that Spain, for the coming years, will "intensify our relations with the countries of the Mediterranean basin in the Maghreb and the Middle East, with a firm commitment to peace and stability in our southern neighbourhood". Furthermore, "we will continue to invest in a qualitative leap in our relationship with Africa, through the implementation of the new Spain-Africa Strategy 2025-2028 and with a special focus on West Africa"[5].

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[2] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación del Gobierno de España, Magreb y Oriente Próximo, https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/Magreb-y-Oriente-Pr%C3%B3ximo.aspx. (emphasis added).

[3] Among others: URTEAGA GUIJARRO, Diego, 15 años de relaciones entre España y el Sahel, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos (IEEES), Documento Marco, 09/2020, 9 de octubre de 2020, pp. 870-891.

[4] In particular, some Maghreb countries such as Morocco: VILAR, Juan B.; HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI, Miguel; y VILAR, María José (edts.), Monográfico sobre: las relaciones de España con el Magreb, siglos XIX y XX, Anales de Historia Contemporánea, nº. 23, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Murcia, 2007.

[5] Ministerio de Asuntos exteriores, Unión europea y Cooperación, Estrategia de Acción Exterior de España, 2025-2028. Una política exterior con identidad propia, p. 7.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that four of the countries that make up West Africa, one of which also belongs to the Maghreb region (Mauritania) and, if we take as a reference the institutional definition of some authors on the Sahel[6], four of its five countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) would also be included in this region[7]. In any case, because of its geographical proximity, and also partly because of language and culture, the Maghreb area would be the one with the closest and deepest ties to Spain and, in particular, at least four countries in this region: Morocco, on the one hand and historically, and Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania, more recently.

Thus, less than a year ago, in the Joint Declaration between Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, President of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and Pedro Sánchez, it was categorically stated that "Mauritania is a priority country for Spanish cooperation". It also recalled "the excellent state of bilateral relations" between the two countries, indicating some of the instruments of collaboration recently adopted in "areas such as health, migration and security, expressing their willingness to continue deepening cooperation in these traditional sectors and to extend it to new areas of mutual interest"[8] in the coming years. In this regard, it is also worth recalling the existence of Treaties of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Spain and Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania.

Therefore, although Latin America and the Caribbean not only continue to be a key region for Spain and an area of historical-cultural and linguistic brotherhood, the data show, nevertheless, that a significant rapprochement is taking place between Spain and Africa, both in general and in relation to certain countries, in different sectors of cooperation; and in matters and forms of collaboration of different nature. The Spain-Africa report,

[6] LOSADA FERNÁNDEZ, Ángel, El Sahel: un enfoque geoestratégico, Real Instituto El Cano, ARI 95/2018 2 de agosto de 2018, pp.1-6.

[7] In any case, it should be borne in mind that it is not easy to identify the countries which make up these regions and that there may be variations depending on the criteria used. In addition to the work mentioned above, see also: FELIU MARTÍNEZ, Laura, La situación del Magreb en la escena internacional actual, Cuadernos de estrategia, nº. 106, 2000 (Ejemplar dedicado a: Magreb: percepción española de la estabilidad en el Mediterráneo, prospectiva hacia el 2010), pp. 19-68.

[8] Declaración conjunta entre el Reino de España y la República islámica de Mauritania, Nuakchot, 27 de agosto de 2024, p. 3, https://embajada-mauritania.es/2024/08/28/declaracion-conjunta-entre-la-republica-islamica-de-mauritania-y-el-reino-de-espana/.

published in November 2024, indicates that "Spain exports goods for more value to Africa than to Latin America (10,429 million euros compared to 9,760 million euros in the first half of 2024, but the trend has been maintained in general for years) and imports goods from Africa for a much higher value than those coming from Latin America (18,225 million euros compared to 11,872 million euros in the first half of 2024)"[9]. And, as can be seen in the following graph, published in February 2025, Morocco would be one of the African countries with the highest imports and exports, to and from Spain[10].

Breakdown by geographical area. February 2025

Área Geográfica	EXPORTACIONES			IMPORTACIONES			SALDO (Mill. €)	
	Millones €	% total	tva (%)	Millones €	% total	tva (%)	feb-25	feb-24
ÁFRICA	**1.896,6**	**5,9**	**14,1**	**2.941,7**	**8,3**	**-4,4**	**-1.045,0**	**-1.414,2**
Argelia	198,1	0,6	157,6	416,8	1,2	-7,5	-218,7	-373,5
Egipto	104,2	0,3	6,2	105,0	0,3	-13,1	-0,8	-22,8
Marruecos	1.045,1	3,3	-0,1	907,5	2,6	3,5	137,6	169,1
Nigeria	29,5	0,1	17,7	407,0	1,1	-48,9	-377,5	-770,7
Sudáfrica	110,1	0,3	7,2	83,3	0,2	10,5	26,8	27,3

Source: Ministerio de Economía, Comercio y Empresa, Gobierno de España, Informe Mensual de Comercio Exterior, February 2025.

[9] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, Gobierno de España, España África 2025-2028, Trabajando juntos a través de una relación estratégica, noviembre de 2024, p. 45.
[10] Ministerio de Economía, Comercio y Empresa, Gobierno de España, Informe Mensual de Comercio Exterior, febrero 2025, p. 13, https://comercio.gob.es/ImportacionExportacion/Informes_Estadisticas/Paginas/Informes-periodicos.aspx

The economic data, although eloquent, are not the only ones that demonstrate this rapprochement. With regard to cultural influence and, in particular, interest in the Spanish language in the Maghreb, it has been pointed out that during the year 2023-2024, and in relation to Spanish courses, "the greatest volume of activity is located, as in the last academic year, in the geographical area of the Maghreb, with 26,741 enrolments"[11]. In particular, "the Spanish language is present, albeit modestly, in countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and even Mauritania. In the case of Algeria, moreover, Spanish is spoken as a second language by the Sahrawi refugees settled in the province of Tindouf", although "the country in which the presence of Spanish is most intense is undoubtedly the Kingdom of Morocco", stating that "in the north of Morocco Spanish can be considered a *second language* for many of its speakers"[12] which is quite significant. The influence of the Spanish language in the region is of great value as a key element of the foreign policy and "soft power" of our country towards the geographical space of the Maghreb[13].

However, these Spain-Maghreb relations also involve other relevant actors in 20th and 21st century international relations, such as the EU, the United States and Russia, which will undoubtedly condition the role that Spain can play in the African region and its *necessary, strong or controlled protagonism*. Moreover, in recent years, the presence of these global actors, especially the US and Russia (and in multiple ways), has been revitalised in Latin American and Caribbean countries[14], and in certain Maghreb countries, which will affect Spanish foreign policy in this area. Nor should we forget the historical ties, in many cases due to the Spain-Latin America and the Caribbean link, of some Latin American and Caribbean States with parts of the Maghreb[15]. In short, an amalgam and a knotted network of relations, interests and actors that will complicate and

[11] Instituto Cervantes, Memoria 2023-2024, p. 83.
[12] FERNÁNDEZ VÍTORES, David, La pervivencia del español en el Magreb, Centro Virtual Cervantes, https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/iecibe/03_fernandez.htm
[13] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, El español en el mundo, 24 de enero de 2025, https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/ElEspanolEnElMundo.aspx (cursiva añadida).
[14] Recent work on the subject: MALAMUD, Carlos, y NÚÑEZ, Rogelio, Rusia en América Latina, año y medio después de la invasión de Ucrania, Real Instituto El Cano, ARI 109/2023, 2 de noviembre de 2023, pp.1-12.
[15] BOUSSELHAM, Dina, América Latina y el Magreb, Nuevatribuna, 2 de enero de 2014, https://www.nuevatribuna.es/articulo/america-latina/america-latina-y-maghreb/20140102162152099624.html

condition the evolution of the bilateral and triangular link: Maghreb-Spain, and Maghreb-Spain-EU.

Within the EU, France is undoubtedly the country that traditionally has the most ties with the African region as a whole. However, the current rejection of French policies on the African continent, linked to Spain's particular relationship with Morocco, as one of the key actors in the region, could help our country to lead, within the EU framework, policies towards the Maghreb in an international geopolitical context of maximum tension and in which France has clearly lost influence[16]. In essence, talking about the relationship between Spain and Africa necessarily involves analysing the connections with the Maghreb, since Morocco is a very prominent player in this region, a reality that, as in previous years[17], is also echoed in Spain's current External Action Strategy for the period 2025-2028.

Moreover, Spain and the Maghreb are linked in a fairly comprehensive way from the point of view of international relations, at least because of two factors. On the one hand, because of the possible "neighbourhood frictions" between Spain and the countries that make up the Maghreb region, an aspect that influences essential foreign policy issues such as security and defence or migration; and, on the other hand, because of the different actors involved which, in addition to powerful countries in the current international community, also include international cooperation and integration organisations. Therefore, this paper aims to highlight some of the areas and sectors in which the Spain-Maghreb relationship could be strengthened, and the role that Spain could (and should) play as a leading country in its relations with North Africa, within the

[16] It has been pointed out that: "beyond the international rivalries at stake on the continent, these diplomatic setbacks seem to signal the end of French influence. Furthermore, they call into question the ability of Paris to maintain its status as a middle power at a time of severe transformation of the post-war international order", Instituto Coordenadas de Gobernanza y Economía aplicada, 23 de octubre de 2023, https://www.institutocoordenadas.com/es/dedicacion-tematica/geopo-nuevos-analisis-sobre-temas-geopolitica-internacional/francia-se-asoma-perdida-influencia-en-africa_20252_102.html

[17] Thus, it has been highlighted that the Spanish Strategy for External Action (2021-2024) "approaches the African continent with a differentiated view of the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, based on historical reasons as well as on policies and concrete actions developed in each of them", DÍEZ ALCALDE, Jesús, África: visión y cooperación desde Europa y España, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Documento de Análisis, 01/2024, 9 de enero de 2024, p. 19.

framework of its status as an EU member State. All this, with special emphasis on the opportunities for our country in the context of a new world order.

Main areas in which the Spain-Maghreb relationship is expressed and could be enshrined

At present, relations between Spain and the Maghreb area are projected in different areas and sectors of cooperation in which different actors intervene. Doctrine has highlighted the role played in this interaction, among others, by companies, non-governmental organisations and civil society, regional and national institutions, universities and academic centres and institutes, and, in general, the different political parties[18]. Indeed, the presence and connection of these actors is reflected in the multiple fields in which relations between Spain and the Maghreb as a whole are developed, as well as in the bilateral relations of the Iberian country with the different countries that make up the Maghreb reality's. Although it also has a bearing on EU-Maghreb relations, or EU-Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania, without forgetting the link with the Ibero-American space. Moreover, it has been stressed that "of the plethora of interactions that Spain maintains on the international scene, not many are as important as those that link it with Morocco"[19], wich will be a priority country for Spanish cooperation in the region.

In addition, in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), a number of Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements have been approved between the EU and some Maghreb countries, such as Algeria and Morocco. The fields of application and essential content of these agreements reinforce the thesis that, beyond the relevance of certain Maghreb countries in European collaboration, there are also particularly notable - and interlinked - areas of cooperation in recent years, such as the field of education, culture

[18] La política exterior española hacia el Magreb. Actores e intereses, HERNANDO DE LARRAMENDI MARTÍNEZ, Manuel, (coord.), Ariel España, 2009. Además, los cambios políticos han influido sobremanera en las relaciones entre España y los países del Magreb, véase: MONTABES, Juan; JORDÁN, Javier; y SZMOLKA, Inmaculada, Continuidad y Cambio, La política exterior española hacia el Magreb ha pasado por diferentes fases según el partido de gobierno, Ideas Políticas, marzo 2004, pp. 56-59.

[19] SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Salvador, Presente y futuro de las relaciones España-Marruecos en el contexto del Magreb, en España-Marruecos: Conciencia geoestratégica, Global Affairs Journal, Center for global affairs & strategic studies, Facultad de derecho-relaciones internacionales, Universidad de navarra, nº.4, enero 2022, p. 7.

and language; security and defence, as well as territorial conflicts; connectivity and migration; and the economic sector in its various dimensions[20]. All of them show, first, the Maghreb's interest in Spain (and therefore in the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean) and vice versa; and, second, Spain's particularly close ties with the Maghreb, within the African continent, and in particular with certain countries in the region, among which Morocco stands out.

i) Firstly, with regard to *education, science, culture and language*, it is well known that both the French language and the Gallic culture and education system have predominated on the African continent. However, the historical influence of Spanish culture and language is not unknown in the region, and especially in North Africa, while there is also an influence of Arabic on Spanish culture and language. It has rightly been stated that "in their contact with the Arabs and the North Africans of Morocco, the Iberian peoples enriched their lexical resources with Arabic words, making them their own", just as "the Moroccans, (...) included words of Spanish and Portuguese origin in their dialectal variants"[21]. In this regard, it should be recalled that "more than 86 million people live in the Maghreb, and they are of Arab majority"[22]. The predominance of Arabic and the influence of Arabic on Spanish contribute to the generation of important linguistic links between Spain and the countries of the region.

In addition, in recent years, Spanish has gained influence in the African region and, beyond the clear historical ties, "the language of Cervantes has had a notable improvement in North Africa, especially in Algeria and Morocco. Every day, more and more non-Spanish-speaking North Africans are trying to learn the language, and many are taking international exams such as the Instituto Cervantes' Diploma in Spanish as a

[20] Indeed, the EU itself has pointed out that these Euro-Mediterranean "aim to promote: *regular political and security dialogue* in order to foster mutual understanding, cooperation and common initiatives; *economic, commercial and financial cooperation*, including: the progressive liberalization of trade in goods; facilitation of trade in services and movement of capital to achieve liberalisation as soon as the necessary conditions are met; sustainable development of the Mediterranean region; and regional integration; *social, cultural and educational cooperation*, mainly through intercultural dialogue, migration control, capacity building, promotion of labour law or gender equality", European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:r14104&frontOfficeSuffix=%2F.

[21] OKAB, Abdesslam, Interacciones lingüísticas: Marruecos - Península Ibérica, Revista de ciencias humanas y sociales / Varia, Al Irfan, n°: 1 293, p. 293.

[22] Entre fronteras, ¿Qué es el Magreb?, http://entrefronteras.com/que-es-el-magreb/

Foreign Language in order to find a job in the Spanish-speaking world"[23]. To the extent that Morocco ranks fourth (also including the EU bloc) in the list of countries with the largest population of Spanish speakers, with "1,754,485" as the "total number of potential users of Spanish", as can be seen in the table below[24].

CUADRO 4 | POBLACIÓN HISPANOHABLANTE EN PAÍSES Y TERRITORIOS NO HISPÁNICOS

(TABLE 4 | SPANISH-SPEAKING POPULATION IN NON-HISPANIC COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES)

País	Grupo Dominio Nativo (GDN)	Grupo Competencia Limitada (GCL)	Total de usuarios potenciales de español
Estados Unidos	41.899.801	15.354.000	57.253.801
UE-27	1.267.000	28.047.000	29.314.000
Reino Unido	216.518	4.882.741	5.099.259
Marruecos	12.774	1.741.711	1.754.485
Canadá	707.400	664.959	1.372.359
Brasil	522.443	170.444	692.887
Filipinas	4.584	562.337	566.921
Suiza	212.970	343.161	556.131
Australia	175.491	384.000	559.491

[23]MARKRIA, Souhila, La lengua española en Argelia y Marruecos entre pasado y presente: "De la jaketia a la rehispanización", Studii de gramatică contrastivă 38/2022, p. 24.
[24] El español en el mundo, Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2024, p. 52.

Sáhara Occidental		423.739	423.739
Belice	58.893	157.363	216.256
Antillas Neerlandesas	46.621	156.715	203.339
Argelia	1.149	173.600	174.749
Japón	131.000	29.000	160.000
Israel	104.000	45.000	149.000
Aruba	14.737	74.650	89.387
Andorra	34.132	37.545	71.677
Trinidad y Tobago	4.000	66.401	70.401
Noruega	13.000	24.000	37.000

País	Grupo Dominio Nativo (GDN)	Grupo Competencia Limitada (GCL)	Total de usuarios potenciales de español
Guam e Islas Marianas del Norte (Estados Unidos)	1.309	30.924	32.233
Rusia	28.924		28.924
Nueva Zelanda	22.000		22.000
Turquía	5.460	16.200	21.660

Islas Vírgenes (Estados Unidos)	16.788		16.788
China	15.130		15.130
Jamaica	8.500		8.500
Bulgaria		5.000	5.000
India	4.855		4.855
Otros países	160.323		160.323
Total	45.689.802	53.390.493	99.080.295

Source: El español en el mundo. Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2024, pp. 52 y 53.

The Cervantes Institute, supported by Ibero-American institutions, is a key element in the expansion of the Spanish language, but also of Spanish culture in general, which increases interest in our country, particularly in all the States of North Africa and specific Maghreb countries, such as Morocco, where it is more feasible to establish closer links in the academic, cultural and linguistic fields. All this to the point that, as expressed by the Spanish ambassador in Rabat, following the presentation of the annual programme of cultural activities of Spain in Morocco 2025, held on 3 February this year in the Moroccan capital, "Morocco and Spain live an exceptional moment in their cultural, artistic and scientific relations"[25].

Connections in the field of education between Spain and Morocco are growing, with the Spanish system climbing up the rankings compared to the prevalence of the French system in the country, and penetrating strongly into the region. This interest can be seen

[25] Nota de prensa, España refuerza su dialogo cultural con Marruecos, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, Embajada de España en Rabat, 3 de febrero de 2025.

both in the Maghreb countries and, specifically, in the number of Moroccan and Algerian students who choose Spain for their academic formation. As early as 2004, it was noted that "more and more Moroccan students are studying in Spanish universities, especially in Granada, groups of writers, artists and intellectuals are publishing in Spanish, and the official Moroccan television broadcasts a newscast programme in Spanish at prime time"[26]. An additional fact is that, in 2024, Libya had "40,628" students of Spanish (among others, in primary, secondary and vocational training, university education and the Cervantes Institute centres), data exceeded by Morocco with "62,258" students, although the Algerian country was at the top of the list with a total of "88,679" students[27]. Spain and Spanish are considered in Morocco, at least, as the gateway to Europe and Latin America, and our country is the expression of a "mestizaje" whose components include Arab and Muslim influences[28].

In short, in recent years, the Maghreb countries have shown an intense inclination towards the Spanish language, but also towards the education system and Spanish training centres and universities. In addition to this, there are good relations between the Maghreb region and Spain in other cultural aspects, such as music, or in areas that strengthen cultural ties, such as the media, or the creation of associations, among others[29].

ii) Secondly, with regard to the *economic sphere*, the excellent links that have long existed between North Africa and Spain are well known[30], and there are currently numerous good numbers that could be highlighted in this respect. In particular, as it is the case with other areas, this relationship can be seen fundamentally with certain Maghreb countries, such

[26] MARKIEGI, Xabier, El español en Marruecos, octubre 2004, Instituto Cervantes, p. 31.
[27] El español en el mundo, Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2024, pp. 60 y 61.
[28] It has been stressed that "we can speak, without fear of being mistaken, of a cultural crossbreeding between the two shores of the Mediterranean which gave rise to what would later be a European nation with an integrative vocation as is Spain today" MUÑOZ SÁNCHEZ-BRUNETE, Javier, La enseñanza del español en los países del Magreb. Datos generales, el español en el mundo, Anuario 2003, Centro Virtual Cervantes, https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/anuario/anuario_03/munoz/p01.htm
[29] Among many others, the existence of "Atalayar Entre Dos Orillas" which "was born in 2013 with the commitment to meet the urgent need for knowledge and communication on the relationship of Spain and Europe with the rest of the world, especially with the Mediterranean peoples, and to promote better coexistence and understanding among millions of people", https://www.atalayar.com/estaticas/quienes-somos.html.
[30] ARTETXE LARRABIDE, Aintzane, La Unión Europea y España en su relación con el Magreb: Los casos de Marruecos y Argelia, Tesis Doctoral, diciembre 2015, pp. 191-193.

as Morocco and Algeria, despite the complex situation we are experiencing with the latter country as a result of recent events in Spanish foreign policy. Moreover, the economic-trade field could be considered strategic for Spain in relations with the Maghreb and, above all, in the leadership that our country could exercise in Maghreb-EU relations.

Let us look at the situation in relation to the two Maghreb countries mentioned. With regard to data on the relationship between Morocco and Spain, it has been noted that this country "is the destination of only 3 % of its exports, and the origin of a modest 2.2 of its imports. For Morocco, however, Spain is its main supplier and client. Morocco receives 15.6 % of its imports from Spain - ahead of France (12.2 %), China (10.1%) and the United States (7.4%) - and sends 24.1 % of its exports to Spain, ahead of France (21.6%), Italy (4.7 %) and the United States (4 %). Spain is therefore a major trading partner for Morocco, while for Spain, for the time being, Morocco is just another partner"[31]. In recent years, Algeria has also been considered a "priority partner"[32] for Spain in the economic and commercial field, both as a traget and, above all, as a receiver of products, with our country being "one of Algeria's main suppliers and customers", although "bilateral trade has traditionally been loss-making for Spain, as Algeria is the leading supplier of natural gas to Spain"[33].

Thus, in addition to the importance of certain countries in the African region in economic relations in the strict sense, there are also particularly relevant sectors that have historically been of great importance in Spain-Maghreb relations, and which are also seen in the Maghreb's connections with the EU, such as the areas of fishing and energy. Some years ago, it was pointed out that "within this bilateral framework of relations, (...) the EU and Spain's economic relations with Morocco and Algeria take precedence, with trade and energy, the latter being one of the Union's strategic and priority areas, (...) Morocco is the EU's and Spain's main trading partner in the Mediterranean. Moreover, through the

[31] SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Salvador, Presente y futuro de las relaciones España-Marruecos en el contexto del Magreb, en España-Marruecos: Conciencia geoestratégica, Global Affairs Journal, Center for global affairs & strategic studies, Facultad de derecho-relaciones internacionales, Universidad de navarra, nº. 4, enero 2022, p. 6.
[32] FEÁS, Enrique, El impacto de las medidas de Argelia sobre la economía española, Real Instituto El Cano, ARI 42/2022, 16 de junio de 2022, p.1.
[33] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, Oficina de información diplomática, Ficha país, Argelia, p. 5.

electricity interconnection in the Strait of Gibraltar, *Morocco participates in the EU electricity market, through Spain* (...) In the case of Algeria, (...) it is one of the three main gas suppliers to the EU and the first in the case of Spain"[34]. This position has been shaken after the recent diplomatic crisis between the two countries, although, as reflected in the information published in 2025 and the data below, it seems to have been maintained[35].

In spite of the relative straining of relations between Spain and Algeria since the Spanish government's statement on the Sahara, "in 2024, Spain bought 38.7% of all imported gas from Algeria (compared to 29.2% the previous year). In 2024, Spain's exports to Algeria amounted to 857.1 M€ (141.5% increase compared to 2023), while imports amounted to 6,623.2 M€ (0.4% increase compared to 2023)"[36]. Therefore, although economic and political relations between the Maghreb country and Spain have been slowly and timidly recovering since 2022[37], it seems reasonable to agree with Sagrario Morán when she states the need, as a strategy for the coming years, to "open with greater determination new channels of cooperation on issues that are already being considered in the near future and which are linked to sustainability and progress in all dimensions of the two countries. In fact, Spanish-Algerian economic relations can be increased and strengthened in areas such as agri-foodstuffs, communications, technology, renewable energies and water management"[38].

In short, it is a matter of diversifying the fields of economic collaboration between Spain and the Maghreb, which could be beneficial for our country but, above all, for the European bloc, which is not exactly at the best moment in its relations with Algeria

[34] ARTETXE LARRABIDE, Aintzane La Unión Europea y España en su relación con el Magreb: Los casos de Marruecos y Argelia, Tesis Doctoral, diciembre 2015, p. 330. (cursiva añadida).
[35] Among others: Argelia sigue siendo el principal suministrador de gas a España, 22/05/2025, https://www.cadenadesuministro.es/transporte-maritimo/argelia-sigue-siendo-principal-suministrador-gas-espana_1509233_102.html
[36] Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, Oficina de información diplomática, Ficha país, Argelia, p. 5.
[37] Among others: El Confidencial, El presidente argelino asegura que la relación con España "ha vuelto a la normalidad", 23/03/2025, https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2025-03-23/presidente-argelia-sanchez-marruecos-ue_4092290/; y el canal, Barcelona y Argelia trabajan para "recuperar y potenciar" líneas marítimas regulares, 13 junio, 2025, https://www.diarioelcanal.com/barcelona-y-argelia-trabajan-para-recuperar-y-potenciar-lineas-maritimas-regulares/
[38] MORÁN BLANCO, Sagrario, La relación de España con Argelia: más allá de la colaboración energética, UNISCI, nº 63, octubre, 2023, p. 34.

either[39], and which needs to strengthen essential areas of its foreign policy that are, moreover, its hallmark for this century, such as sustainability, environmental protection and digitalisation.

iii) Finally, and as more sensitive aspects, there are the areas of *security and defence and also migration*, and even what could broadly be called *connectivity* between the Maghreb-Spain and the EU, that is, various sectors of cooperation that present singularities and in which relations between the parties have been intensifying. Let us turn our attention to the field of migration. Of course, the issue of migration and security has been a constant in recent years between Spain and certain Maghreb countries, particularly Morocco, which has sometimes led to considerable political and territorial instability with consequences in the European sphere. Once again, in the aforementioned fields, Morocco is one of the Maghreb countries with which Spain has the best relations and through which Spain's leadership towards the Maghreb in these áreas could be channelled within the framework of the European Union[40].

In this sense, it is vital that Spain and Morocco work together to regulate migration, fundamentally from North Africa to our country, at least as an intermediate destination before moving on to Northern Europe. This leads to the assertion that Spain and Morocco are “condemned” to understand each other on migration and security issues. Therefore, beyond the clear economic ties between the two countries, with Morocco being “one of Spain's main trading partners outside the European Union”, it can be affirmed that “Morocco plays a fundamental role in the management of migratory flows towards Europe, with both nations having strengthened their collaboration in the fight against terrorism through the exchange of information and the carrying out of joint operations”[41].

[39] Among others: RTVE, La Comisión Europea mete en la lista negra de riesgo de blanqueo a Mónaco y Argelia y saca a Gibraltar y Panamá, 10/06/2025, https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20250610/comision-europea-incluye-monaco-lista-paises-alto-riesgo-blanqueo-capitales/16619115.shtml

[40] BELLIDO LORA, María de los Ángeles, Inmigración y cooperación hispano-marroquí en búsqueda y salvamento marítimo: perspectivas de una cooperación SAR en la región del Estrecho de Gibraltar, Revista de Estudios Jurídicos y Criminológicos, n.º 7, enero-junio, 2023, pp. 87-124.

[41] KARIM, Ismail, Las Relaciones entre España y Marruecos: Un Modelo hacia el Partenariado Estratégico, EuropeanPublic& Social Innovation Review, nº. 10. 2025, p. 10, https://doi.org/10.31637/epsir-2025-1539

A more detailed analysis of relations in these areas (migration, security and defence) makes it necessary not to lose sight of the delicate situation in which most of the Maghreb countries find themselves. All of this conditions the nature of the relations that could be established with Spain and the EU, to the point of designing collaboration strategies taking into consideration the "challenges" that exist in the African region[42], or the "shared challenges". As it has been pointed out, for example, in the context of relations between Spain and Mauritania – and beyond ties with Morocco or Algeria- it could be noted that "Spain and Mauritania share security challenges, threats (…). Both countries are committed to strengthening their cooperation (...), and underline the need to define common objectives in the fight against terrorism, radicalisation and organised crime, in particular against human smuggling and trafficking (...) In this sense, they welcome the adoption of a Declaration to promote cooperation in the fight against international criminal organisations and networks"[43]. At the same time, it is said that, in relation to Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, Spain has long pursued "a comprehensive approach to migration issues", taking these countries into account with regard to irregular migration. This would be just one example among other policies, also of a European nature, in the area of migration[44].

The same is true of other Maghreb countries such as Algeria and Tunisia. However, in all the fields analysed, there is often a lack of a common policy, both on the European side and, above all, in relation to the African side of the Maghreb, or, in any case, there is a prevalence of national interests and a strengthening of bilateral relations, which could be explained by the absence of solid institutions in the Maghreb region, as well as by the social, economic, political and security instability in which this region is immersed. Thus, relations from Europe towards the Maghreb are normally and in practice developed with

[42] It has been pointed out that "in the Maghreb, the security vulnerabilities identified in Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania have endogenous roots but are all affected by the strategic tension between Morocco and Algeria, which poses both to Spain and the rest of the EU an immediate southern neighbourhood fraught with challenges", ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, Carlos, Desafíos en el Magreb en materia de defensa, Ministerio de Defensa, 2023, p. 95.

[43] Declaración conjunta entre el Reino de España y la República islámica de Mauritania, Nuakchot, 27 de agosto de 2024, p. 3, https://embajada-mauritania.es/2024/08/28/declaracion-conjunta-entre-la-republica-islamica-de-mauritania-y-el-reino-de-espana/. Ver también: Marco de Asociación País de Mauritania – España (2024-2027), Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación.

[44] *Cfr.*, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea, y Cooperación, Magreb y Oriente Próximo, https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Paginas/Magreb-y-Oriente-Pr%C3%B3ximo.aspx

the Maghreb countries individually, that is, through purely bilateral relations, which would lead to the following statement:

First, there is no real and strong partnership between the EU and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)[45], but rather, as noted above, these relations have long leaned towards bilateral collaboration[46]. All this, despite the fact that in 2002 the "Report on relations between the European Union and the Arab Maghreb Union: a privileged partnership (2001/2027(INI))" was approved, which stressed the importance of boosting regional relations by strengthening Maghreb regional integration[47] in which "trade between the countries of the region (...) has never exceeded the 4% threshold"[48]. Integration in the Maghreb region would be fundamental for managing relations with the EU, at least, as part of the doctrine has noted, "between its three core countries (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia)", generating "reinforced EU cooperation with these three countries"[49].

Second, it reinforces the idea of the close links that exist between certain European countries and some Maghreb countries, both because of the relevance of these countries as key actors in the region and because of their geographical location and historical ties. In particular, these are Morocco and Algeria. To the extent that, as has been observed, Spain's economic, linguistic and cultural relations with Morocco exceed those of the Arab country with the European bloc. Moreover, Spain would be the gateway to Europe and EU territory. This leads to the defence of Spain's leadership in the collaboration that could be implemented by the EU in the fields analysed. In any case, as is well known, Spain's

[45] As is well known, the UMA is a framework for cooperation between the countries of the Maghreb, rather of a political and economic nature, which was created under the 1989 Marrakesh Treaty, and which has considerable difficulties in achieving the objectives that led to its creation, see: DÍAZ BARRADO, Cástor Miguel, Nuevas perspectivas de las instituciones económicas en el espacio africano: avances políticos y normativos, Anuario Español De Derecho Internacional, 28, 2012, en particular, pp. 74-76.

[46] FONTELA MONTES, Emilio, El marco de las nuevas relaciones Europa-Magreb. El equilibrio hacia el sur, Revista española de economía agraria, nº. 172, 1995, pp. 11-29.

[47] Parlamento Europeo, Informe A5-0175/2002, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-5-2002-0175_ES.html?redirect. This desire has also been reflected in other instruments adopted by the EU such as: Comisión Europea, Comunicación conjunta al Parlamento Europeo, al Consejo, al Comité Económico y Social Europeo y al Comité de las Regiones. Apoyo al refuerzo de la cooperación y la integración regional en el Magreb: Argelia, Libia, Mauritania, Marruecos y Túnez, Bruselas, 17.12.2012, JOIN (2012) 36.

[48] AMMOR, Fouad, Segunda intervención, Integración y cooperación subregional en el Mediterráneo Occidental: las relaciones entre la Unión Europea y el Magreb Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals, nº. 57-58, 2002, p. 119.

[49] Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional, Ministerio de Defensa, La seguridad en el mediterráneo: complejidad y multidimensionalidad, Monografías del CESEDEN, 92, p. 14.

bilateral relations with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania have been channelled through the conclusion of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation Treaties, being the most outstanding expression of their application the High Level Meetings (HLM), which also cover collaboration in the different areas mentioned above[50].

In short, it can be said that, on the one hand, projection towards the Maghreb has been a priority for Spanish foreign policy in recent years; and, on the other hand, the issues of migration, connectivity and also security and defence are key aspects in this relationship[51]. However, the close ties that exist between the parties are mainly expressed in the economic, cultural and political fields - especially with certain Maghreb countries - which reflects, at the same time, Spain's privileged position as a member State of the European Union to lead the agreements and collaborations that emerge between the EU bloc and the countries of North Africa.

Despite possible political crises, the proximity between our country and its African neighbours understanding -with Morocco being one of the most important countries in the Maghreb region- is essential or, in any case, interaction is required and, without a doubt, the need to promote interculturality and multiculturalism between both parties. To the point that “relations between Spain and the Maghreb, and especially with Morocco, have a changing but always lively character”, while “from an extra-linguistic point of view, Spanish is also the bridge to Europe and to the West in general”[52].

[50] It is interesting to recall, as it has been said, that “since its accession to the current European Union in 1986, Spain has tried to Europeanize its relations with the Maghreb countries” (...) “the new Spanish foreign policy has tried to focus its bilateral relations with each country of the Maghreb, although with some more intense than with others (...), and on the other hand, to focus its foreign policy at multilateral level Euro-Mediterranean. It has thus made a good impression as an intermediary between the present EU and the Maghreb countries, through cooperation initiatives between the EC and the countries of the southern Mediterranean, including those of the Maghreb, which has allowed it to overcome the traditional economic issues marked in a bilateral relationship with Morocco, to a multilateral context and in which other matters are included and not only economic, but without giving up bilateral cooperation”, ZEBDA, Siham, Las Reuniones de Alto Nivel de España con Túnez y Argelia, con especial referencia a las de 2018, Paix et sécurité internationales, Journal of International Law and International Relations, nº. 6, janvier-décembre 2018, pp. 193 y 194.
[51] ALGORA WEBER, María Dolores, Las relaciones de España con el Magreb: Vecindad, amistad y seguridad en el mediterráneo occidental (parte II), Revista de Derecho, Empresa y Sociedad (REDS), nº. 8, 2016, pp. 17-38.
[52] MUÑOZ SÁNCHEZ-BRUNETE, Javier, La enseñanza del español en los países del Magreb. Datos generales, en El español en el mundo, Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2003, https://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/anuario/anuario_03/munoz/p01.htm

Specifically, Morocco's proximity to the European continent, due to its closeness to Spain, would imply that both Morocco and Spain are key points of connection with the Maghreb, and in general with Africa and the Arab world, on the one hand, and with the EU and Latin America, on the other. However, Spain's importance in this scenario is due not only to its position as a link with different geographic and geostrategic spaces, but also to the value it can attain in the framework of European and Mediterranean "strategic autonomy"[53] and promoting European values. All of this would reinforce the EU's role as a solid bloc in the changing and uncertain international landscape, as well as Spain's role within the European bloc and in the international community of the 21st century.

Multilateralism as a tool for facilitating Spain's leadership in the Maghreb

Multilateralism has been the subject of considerable discussion on the current international scene since the US has directly attacked it. With the arrival of Donald Trump to power, many headlines have referred to the "end of multilateralism"[54], in addition to the recent American practice of withdrawal and threats to withdraw from some international organisations, considering this withdrawal as one of the "priorities" of the US president's mandate[55]. The various international bodies have been quick to defend the mechanisms

[53] In this sense, it has been pointed out that "in an increasingly globalized world order, the Mediterranean region has not been limited to being a bridge area to other strategic areas, but has focused on creating a space with its own strategic autonomy" ALGORA WEBER, Marí Dolores, Las relaciones de España con el Magreb: Vecindad, amistad y seguridad en el mediterráneo occidental (parte II), Revista de Derecho, Empresa y Sociedad (REDS), nº. 8, 2016, p. 19. Véase: BERTOT TRIANA, Harold, La incompleta autonomía estratégica europea en su hora decisiva. El Economista, 11/03/2025, https://www.eleconomista.es/opinion/noticias/13262162/03/25/la-incompleta-autonomia-estrategica-europea-en-su-hora-decisiva.html.

[54] To name just a few examples: Cincodías, Trump, un nuevo orden mundial y el fin del multilateralismo: la brújula económica para 2025 en Europa, 19 de diciembre de 2024, https://cincodias.elpais.com/economia/2024-12-30/trump-un-nuevo-orden-mundial-y-el-fin-del-multilateralismo-la-brujula-economica-para-2025-en-europa.html; El País, Un Trump miope ante el orden mundial, 22 de enero de 2025, https://elpais.com/opinion/2025-01-22/un-trump-miope-ante-el-orden-mundial.html; y Ugo Santkin, Le retour de Trump, un coup fatal au multilatéralisme ?, Le soir, publié le 26/01/2025, https://www.lesoir.be/650931/article/2025-01-26/le-retour-de-trump-un-coup-fatal-au-multilateralisme.

[55] As noted by the EU, "this is the second time that the United States has initiated the process of withdrawal from both the WHO and the Paris Agreement. During Trump's first term (2017-2021), the United States formally notified its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in November 2019 (which then took 12 months to have effect). Shortly after taking office, President Biden reversed this decision, and the United States formally rejoined the agreement in February 2021. President Trump also began the WHO withdrawal process in 2020, although he never completed it and the decision was subsequently revoked by the Biden administration", Noticias Parlamento Europeo, Debate sobre la retirada de Estados Unidos de la OMS y el Acuerdo de París, 10 de febrero 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/es/agenda/briefing/2025-02-10/6/debate-sobre-la-retirada-de-estados-unidos-de-la-oms-y-el-acuerdo-de-paris. In the same line, this information has been collected by other international

set up by the international organisations that have been so beneficial in recent years. Thus, it suffices to recall how the resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 22 September 2024 on the Pact for the Future commits to "new beginning in multilateralism", through the adoption of "action to strengthen and reinvigorate multilateralism and deepen international cooperation"[56]. Indeed, despite the attacks on multilateral cooperation (whether expressed through international agreements or institutional schemes), many have seen an opportunity in the new international configuration that Europe and Spain could take advantage of in their relations with the Maghreb.

From the European perspective, some have referred to this issue, as offensives against multilateralism by the US or Russia could generate benefits for international coalitions such as the EU, to the extent that "rather than lamenting these turbulences, we must seize this opportunity to lay the foundations of a new multilateralism, temporarily without the United States, that respects Europe's values on the global challenges of the coming decades: climate change, new digital technologies, immigration, inequality and the rise of far-right populism"[57]. In other words, the eventual creation of a multilateralism in which EU countries' dependence on the United States is reduced and which serves as a basis for the dissemination of EU values and principles in its international relations.

The relations that some Maghreb countries have had for some time with the US on the one hand, and with Russia and China on the other, are well known, although "what is new now is Washington's attempt to forge a strategic alliance with Rabat, making Morocco a preferential ally in Africa and the Arab world"[58], which conditions Morocco's role in the Maghreb region and generates different blocs. On the one hand, Morocco with the

organizations and NGOs: Trump: La retirada de Estados Unidos de la OMS desprecia la salud pública mundial, Amnistía Internacional, 22 de enero de 2025, https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/noticias/noticia/articulo/la-retirada-de-la-oms-es-corta-de-miras-y-perjudicara-a-estados-unidos-y-al-resto-del-mundo/; y Noticias ONU, Estados Unidos abandona la OMS y el Acuerdo de París, ataques en Cisjordania, Catatumbo... Las noticias del martes, 21 de enero 2025, https://news.un.org/es/story/2025/01/1535866.

[56] A/RES/79/1, 22 September 2024.

[57] See: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/04/07/trump-and-vance-are-giving-us-a-chance-to-create-a-new-multilateralism_6739928_23.html

[58] SÁNCHEZ TAPIA, Salvador, Presente y futuro de las relaciones España-Marruecos en el contexto del Magreb, en España-Marruecos: Conciencia geoestratégica, Global Affairs Journal, Center for global affairs & strategic studies, Facultad de derecho-relaciones internacionales, Universidad de navarra, nº.4, enero 2022, p. 11.

support of the US and, on the other hand, Algeria with the support of Russia and China[59]. All this despite the fact that Trump's arrival could shake up the various rapprochements that have taken place in recent decades and that, in this atmosphere of total uncertainty, any scenario could occur[60]. In any case, in recent months, it has been stated that "Morocco and the United States are strengthening their relations after Donald Trump's return to the White House"[61], which "could take its toll on Spain"[62]. Indeed, Morocco has been politically skilful in joining the US to defend its causes, linked to critical aspects of sovereignty and security, and defence or territorial integrity, which could condition Spain and the shape of Spain-Morocco relations in the medium to long term future.

However, beyond the hasty news and contexts that President Donald Trump may generate, the EU constitutes for Spain the essential mechanism on which it could focus when it comes to building a privileged and permanent relationship with the Maghreb, which would place the EU in a good position, while Spain exercises leadership. The interest of the Maghreb and also of the Sahel countries is certainly to strengthen ties with Europe and, in particular, with what the EU means and represents, and Spain could be the gateway, as it would be in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean. In other words, Spain as a route to Europe and America. It is not surprising, then, that under the slogan "strengthening multilateralism and the relationship between Mauritania and the EU", contained in the Joint Declaration between Spain and Mauritania, adopted in 2024, the President of the African country highlighted "Spain's essential role in the European Union, the G20 and the United Nations and underlines *Spain's commitment and leadership in the advancement of European policy towards the Mediterranean and the*

[59] Rusia y China, a la conquista del Magreb: se alían con Argelia y restan influencia a Marruecos, 2 de julio de 2023, El Español, https://www.elespanol.com/mundo/africa/20230702/rusia-china-conquista-magreb-alian-argelia-restan-influencia-marruecos/775672530_0.html

[60] Among others, see as recent information: BBC News Mundo, Cómo Trump y Putin han sacudido el orden mundial en una semana, 20 febrero 2025, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/crrdlyvqnlwo

[61] TORRES, Antonia P., 03/03/25, disponible en: https://www.atalayar.com/articulo/politica/marruecos-estados-unidos-estrechan-relaciones-vuelta-donald-trump-casa-blanca/20250227124509211783.html

[62] Europapress, Los expertos coinciden: el regreso de Trump envalentonará a Marruecos y podría pasar factura a España, 10 de noviembre de 2024, https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-expertos-coinciden-regreso-trump-envalentonara-marruecos-podria-pasar-factura-espana-20241110111648.html

Sahel, welcoming its work as a bridge between Mauritania and the EU, (...) this work also enables Mauritania's concerns to be known and addressed within the EU"[63].

The role that multilateralism could play in these relations is truly significant, creating links between the Maghreb and the EU countries', driven by institutionalised cooperation. In this line, the importance of the representation of the African Union (AU) in the region, based on Maghreb countries such as Mauritania, which has held the presidency of the regional organisation until February 2025, stands out. This has been highlighted in the Joint declaration between the Islamic country and Spain[64]. In addition, there are other collaboration schemes with Maghreb countries with European influence, such as, for example, the Western Mediterranean Forum, also known as "5+5", which "brings together five EU countries (Spain, France, Italy, Malta and Portugal) and five southern Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia)"[65]; and the Union for the Mediterranean created in 2008, which has its origins in the Barcelona Process promoted by Spain in 1995[66], constituting the current framework for collaboration between the EU and 16 States of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (with all the Maghreb countries as members, except Libya, which has observer status)[67].

Spain's leadership in the region, both bilaterally and in the framework of the process of the European construction, would not be new[68], but it would be different as a consequence of the current international context. In this direction, France is another country that has close ties with the African continent and has influenced the region in cultural and linguistic terms. As is well known, France, beyond North Africa and with the

[63] (emphasis added). Declaración conjunta entre el Reino de España y la República islámica de Mauritania, Nuakchot, 27 de agosto de 2024, pp.1 y 2, https://embajada-mauritania.es/2024/08/28/declaracion-conjunta-entre-la-republica-islamica-de-mauritania-y-el-reino-de-espana/

[64] Declaración conjunta entre el Reino de España y la República islámica de Mauritania, Nuakchot, 27 de agosto de 2024, p.1, https://embajada-mauritania.es/2024/08/28/declaracion-conjunta-entre-la-republica-islamica-de-mauritania-y-el-reino-de-espana/

[65] BORRELL, Josep, Los retos del Mediterráneo occidental, 27.10.2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/los-retos-del-mediterr%C3%A1neo-occidental_es

[66] Union for the Mediterranean, https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/history/

[67] Union for the Mediterranean, https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/member-states/

[68] As it has been stressed "given its particular interest in this region, it is worth noting the decisive role that Spain has played in consolidating the European political architecture towards the Mediterranean" ARTECHE LARRABIDE, Aintzane, La Unión Europea y España en su relación con el Magreb: Los casos de Marruecos y Argelia, Tesis doctoral, Universidad del País Vasco - Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, 2016.

exception of a few cases such as the Belgian intervention, has been the most influential European country in the region. However, as experts in the field assert, in recent years "not only the former colonial power, France, but the West as a whole, is being expelled from the region, including the military forces that were deployed in the area at the request of the Sahelian nations themselves. And this largely induced geopolitical vacuum is being exploited by other revisionist powers, especially Russia".[69]. In general, there is undoubtedly a rejection of "European interference" on the continent, but particularly in North Africa and the Maghreb-Sahel, this "antipathy" is mainly towards France[70]. This situation can be exploited both because of Spain's historical behaviour in the area - different from French conduct in the region - and also because of the characteristics of Spain's foreign policy in recent years and the consubstantial - and natural - ties between Morocco, the Sahara and Spain in particular.

From the European bloc's point of view, France's position in the Maghreb area is not the best viewed, with Spain having a better consideration, although France's "expulsion" from the area is being complemented by the dominance of other actors in the region. As stated in 2023, "China in particular (...) has overwhelmingly increased its presence. It is joined by medium-sized powers such as Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (...). The United States (...) which has an important role in security aspects, (...) (and) Russia, (...) is clearly on its way back and in an aggressive manner".[71]. All of this in the context of a new international context in which, alongside the rise of armed conflicts and the breakdown of multilateralism, there is a tendency to use diplomacy and "soft power" to achieve interests, in which some Maghreb countries, such as Morocco, are being extremely skilful, and on which the EU should perhaps reflect in order to orient its policy in the coming years, at least as far as the Maghreb area is concerned.

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[69] SÁNCHEZ HERRÁEZ, Pedro, El Sahel: ¿también epicentro de la reconfiguración global?, Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2024, 2024, p. 153.

[70] Among others: La consigna del momento es: Francia tiene que abandonar África, Boletín 49, 5 de diciembre de 2024, https://thetricontinental.org/es/newsletterissue/boletin-sahel-soberania/ ; AGOZINO, LAHORADIGITAL, Adalberto C., La hegemonía francesa en África en crisis, 25 de septiembre de 2023, https://www.lahoradigital.com/noticia/36826/loco-mundo/la-hegemonia-francesa-en-africa-en-crisis.aspx.

[71] BELAUNDE MATOSSIAN, Francisco, La influencia francesa jaqueada en África, Agenda Internacional, XXX (41) 2023, p. 59.

It has been stated that "in a regional context of rivalry with Algeria and the impossibility of advancing in regional integration, Morocco has opted, since Mohammed VI came to the throne, for an African strategy that combines diplomacy, business and soft power"[72]. Indeed, these divergences in the Maghreb area have also been seen within the EU countries, since, in recent years, while Spain has positioned itself in favour of Morocco, France has tended to maintain closer interests with Algeria[73]. Thus, divergences have arisen in the foreign policy of the various EU countries towards the region, to the extent that it is argued that "French policy has played its own cards in North Africa and West Africa, but certainly the decline of European multilateralism must also be understood in the context of France's interventions in domestic and regional affairs"[74].

However, this situation is not only observed in the cases of Spain and France, but also with the positions of Italy and Germany, as it has been noted that "the Maghreb policies of the four most influential EU member States diverge from each other, as they are shaped by each country's national policy and its interaction with developments in the region". Indeed, the prevalence of national policies obscures the common objectives to be pursued by the European bloc, even if the synergies that individual States can build on are exploited. Although the Maghreb region has not promoted institutionalised cooperation like Europe, the most valuable thing would be to act jointly through the EU, in order to have greater power on the international stage. We therefore fully agree that "a better European strategy would be to use strong bilateral relations as entry points for a more coordinated policy based on areas where EU interests converge"[75].

Spain and France are not only neighbours, but also members of the EU, and they have an essential opportunity to promote, together with Italy, Germany and Portugal, a common

[72] PÉREZ TRIANA, Jesús Manuel, Política exterior de Marruecos: La pauta geopolítica que sigue Mohamed VI, Global Affairs Journal, Center for global affairs & strategic studies, Facultad de derecho-relaciones internacionales, Universidad de navarra, nº. 4, enero 2022, p. 20.
[73] CEMBRERO, Ignacio, Rumbo dispar de España y Francia en el Magreb: París fraterniza con Argel, y Madrid, con Rabat, El Confidencial, 17/08/2022, https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2022-08-17/rumbo-dispar-espana-francia-magreb_3476788/
[74] DEL MORAL, Lucía G., La política de Francia en el norte de África y África occidental: nuevas narrativas, viejas legitimidades, Revista UNISCI, nº. 60, octubre 2022, p. 175.
[75] El laberinto del Magreb: La armonización de las políticas europeas para el Norte de África, 12 febrero 2024, https://ecfr.eu/madrid/publication/el-laberinto-del-magreb-y-la-armonizacion-de-las-politicas-europeas-divergentes-para-el-norte-de-africa/

European policy towards the African region, resolving the existing differences or, in any case, making the EU's interest prevail as a key actor in international relations. In this sense, beyond cooperation within the framework of the UfM, further strengthening the Western Mediterranean Forum (5+5 dialogue) could be a good option, for at least the following reasons.

On the one hand, it is undeniable that Spain does not occupy a privileged position in the UfM. As we have pointed out, it is an organisation made up of the EU member States and 16 countries of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, including African and Middle Eastern countries whose relationship with Spain is less close, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Jordan. Likewise, although the origins of the UfM lie in the Barcelona Process, the absence of specific references to Spain's contribution to its creation is surprising, as well as it is difficult to find specific and favourable references to Spain in the organisation[76].

On the other hand, the “5+5” Dialogue is a more flexible forum for cooperation than the UfM, which may be beneficial to adapt to the different scenarios arising in the new international context, particularly regarding relations between Spain and the Maghreb. This forum has achieved important achievements, some launched by our country, as “it has served as a platform for seeking solutions to shared challenges, highlighting initiatives such as the Water Strategy for the Western Mediterranean (2015), driven by Spain and Algeria”. In addition, within the framework of this dialogue, Spain would have a more advantageous position, which could be complementary to the common EU policy represented through the UfM. As it has been said, “the countries of southern Europe, and especially Spain, immediately saw a great opportunity to achieve the pact (referring to the Barcelona Process), giving support whenever it was accompanied by a European

[76] To the extent that the three languages in which the information on the website of the Organization can be consulted are English, French and Arabic as can be seen from the link indicated and although, as it has been said, the Spanish language is very popular in the Maghreb States, https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/.

Community policy"[77]. Even, it should be stressed that Spain has held in the year 2024 the presidency of the Initiative 5+5 Defense which exists since 2004[78].

This project deals with an essential issue for the countries participating in the 5+5 Dialogue and, in particular, for the neighbouring countries within this partnership, such as Spain and Morocco; and, as has been pointed out, it is "a fundamental tool for Spanish defence diplomacy for its contribution to stability, the promotion of mutual understanding and the building of confidence between the countries on both sides of the western Mediterranean"[79]. All this outlines a scenario in which Spain has the necessary elements to play a leading role in the European policy developing with the Maghreb, at least in two areas: cultural, linguistic and educational; and in the field of security and defence.

Although all the EU countries are represented in the UfM, European policy would have to overcome differences between some of the most representative countries for the Sahel region and also for the particular area of the Maghreb. In this line, taking advantage of the relevant synergies created by the 5+5 Dialogue, as a political forum for cooperation, Spain could lead a united and strong European policy, at least in certain areas of this relationship. It should be agreed that "true revolution will occur if opportunities replace risks in setting priorities and if cooperative efforts succeed in producing better results for all parties involved. Here is another area where Europeans could start by leading by example"[80]. All this, from a solid European policy despite the fact that, as is well known, neither the African continent nor the Maghreb are the most advanced spaces in terms of

[77] FLORENSA, Senén, Del Proceso de Barcelona a la Unión por el Mediterráneo. Un proyecto de futuro compartido, Idees, 21.01.2021, https://revistaidees.cat/es/del-proceso-de-barcelona-a-la-union-por-el-mediterraneo/

[78] Página web Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Defensa, Antecedentes, https://www.defensa.gob.es/5mas5/qu%C3%A9-es-5-mas-5/antecedentes

[79] Página web Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Defensa, La iniciativa 5+5 Defensa, https://www.defensa.gob.es/5mas5/qu%C3%A9-es-5-mas-5/la-iniciativa-5-5-defensa

[80] SOLER I LECHA, Eduard, Los países del Magreb pivotan hacia África… y no son los únicos, Anuario Internacional CIDOB, Nueva época, 02/2019, https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/los-paises-del-magreb-pivotan-hacia-africa-y-no-son-los-unicos. In the same line, it should be noted that "the priority in this area, from an essentially preventive point of view, is to drastically reduce the social, political and economic exclusion gaps that make possible the breeding ground for violence and migratory flows. (...) While recognizing the complexity of its implementation, there can be no doubt about its suitability to drive long-term and simultaneous efforts in the framework of the development and security", NÚÑEZ VILLAVERDE, Jesús A., Magreb y Sahel: una vecindad desafiante, Documento de análisis, IEEES, 42/2023, 31 de mayo de 2023, pp. 24 y 25.

institutionalized cooperation, at the same time that strictly institutional relations do not seem to function fully in the area.

Also, we should take in account the differences between the various countries of the Maghreb, as well as the different situations in which they find themselves today and in history[81]. These aspects certainly condition the Spain-Maghreb and EU-Maghreb relationship, generating an unequal linkage between the EU on the one hand and each of the countries that make up the Maghreb on the other. On the basis of the analysis of multilateralism as a key element of discussion in the current international community, it is necessary to consider to what extent Spain's role as EU leader in the relationship with the Maghreb would be conditioned? The loss of institutionality, in general, would negatively affect not only the progress of integration and cooperation processes in the African region, but also EU policy, at least in its links with the Maghreb countries.

The criticism of multilateralism by global leaders, and the turbulent political environments that currently inhabit the international scene, have led to the promotion of "soft power", being Maghreb countries quite solid in this type of exercise of power. The fight against multilateralism, which tends to favour the strengthening of more flexible cooperation frameworks (such as the 5+5 Dialogue), must be borne in mind when designing an appropriate EU and Spanish policy towards the Maghreb region. This is mainly due to the influence of various actors and interests that condition the relationship between the EU and the Maghreb, as well as the political and institutional situation in which the African region finds itself.

Conclusions

The analysis of relations between Spain and the Maghreb shows that it is a good time to strengthen our presence in this space, as well as to create new links between our country and the countries that integrate this region of the African continent. This is demonstrated

[81] Among others: COGNEAU, Denis, La economía política de la colonización en el Magreb y sus consecuencias, Gran Angular, afkar/ideas, 2023, pp. 22-24.

by the intense links of an economic, cultural, linguistic or social nature; as well as by Spanish foreign policy in recent years, which has focused on this region. Moreover, the political and legal instruments that have been agreed with various countries in the region indicate that the Spain-Maghreb relationship is one of the priorities for the coming years. However, the lack of regional institutionalisation in the Maghreb, compared with what is happening in Europe, particularly in the area represented by the EU, has some negative implications for the development of these connections.

On the one hand, Spain's relationship with the Maghreb is tied to European policy, essentially, as has been pointed out, through the UfM, which represents the whole EU; and with the 5+5 Dialogue as a forum of which some of the most relevant EU countries for the Maghreb area are members: Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Malta. On the other hand, mention should be made of the bilateral links that have been established between Spain and various countries in the Maghreb, particularly Morocco and Algeria; and, in recent years, with other countries in the area, such as Mauritania. This would be combined with the relations that other EU countries have with different Maghreb countries. From there, at least some aspects should be considered to clarify the role of Spain in the coming years in the Maghreb region.

Firstly, in the relations between EU countries and the Maghreb, some countries of this region such as Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco stand out. Much less is said about countries like Mauritania, with fewer resources and more problems of infrastructure and, in general, development; and Libya, with extensive and acute internal crises. In any case, Spain is the European country, and one of the countries in the world, that has the most relations -and at present, good relations, at least, -with Morocco; and with Algeria. From an economic point of view, the exchanges are undeniable, reaching data highly relevant for our country and also for the Maghreb region. Although not only that, Morocco represents an ideal space in the African region with regard to the good reception of the Spanish language, the Spanish-Ibero-American culture, and the educational and social connections.

Secondly, the future of relations between Spain and the Maghreb therefore lies within the framework of the community action which the EU is shaping. It is important to assess the joint possibilities within the Union and to identify the leadership, in this particular relationship with the Maghreb, of countries like Spain. To this end, a *united, strong and sustainable European policy* must be undertaken which is designed in an unwavering way in the face of political, social and economic changes in the region, regardless its shape, with the implementation of concrete policies, to the different realities that are emerging on both the European side and the African side. There is nothing to prevent *Spain from playing a leading role in this relationship*, so that the common European policy can take advantage of this leadership and, at the same time, our country can be seen as a key player in a specific dimension of European policy; as in the case of relations with Spanish-speaking countries on the American continent and the emergence of Ibero-American identity.

Spain could be a suitable country to lead the European policy in the Maghreb region, regardless of whether close and concrete alliances are established in each case, essentially with those European countries that also participate in the 5+5 Dialogue. It is clear that Spain could contribute to strengthening the EU-Africa Partnership, just as the Bi-regional Strategic Partnership between the EU and Latin America was promoted at the time, also on the basis of the postulates of Spanish foreign policy. At least with certain countries or in some areas of cooperation, it is clear the Spanish predominance in the Maghreb area and, above all, the possible opportunities through, for example, the Spanish language and culture.

Thus, a necessary, strong or controlled relationship between Spain and the Maghreb will depend on our country's ability to redefine European policy for the area. The best thing to do would be to balance our strengths, to take advantage of what Spain can contribute with a European vision in which objectives are clearly set and a real common policy is articulated; that it is the key to the success of the Community and our country's strategy in an area as important from a geopolitical point of view as the Maghreb. This will also allow the EU to achieve a greater representation in the current international scene, which is characterized by the weakening of multilateral cooperation spaces; and by the interests

of relevant actors in the area. The European Union will have to develop sufficient capacity to design a policy which takes into account the political aspects that shape relations between some of the Maghreb countries and the current global powers such as the USA, Russia and, to a lesser degree, China.

In short, given the changes that are taking place and coming up in the current international scene, the multilateral relationship between the EU and the Maghreb can be strengthened through the bilateral relationship between Spain and the Maghreb, or even Spain's connection with certain countries of the region. In an uncertain international scenario, relations between our country and the Maghreb are generally in good health and, in any case, the Maghreb region is a political priority for the coming years. The position that the EU and Spain can achieve in North Africa will depend on how they know how to take advantage of the changes that are being felt and that emerge, at present, in international society.

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