

Introduction

This chapter reflects on the Maghreb states, their internal challenges and how they navigate, from within the region, the transformations of an international context marked by the erosion of multilateralism, the crisis of the liberal order and the weakening of Western liberalisation and democratisation agendas. These have given way to more pragmatic and short-term priorities, focused on ensuring cooperation on migration and security matters against a backdrop of the West's loss of moral authority in Gaza, the selective application of international law in Ukraine, and the breakdown of the principle of state sovereignty, as reflected in the United States' intervention in Venezuela.

On the domestic front, the anti-authoritarian protests of 2011 known as the "Arab Spring" and their subsequent extensions in 2016 (the Hirak in the Rif) and 2019 (the Algerian Hirak) highlighted the deepening of social, economic and territorial inequalities and the questioning of regimes and governance mechanisms. Maghreb regimes have demonstrated their resilience through reforms that have not altered authoritarian structures (Morocco and Algeria) and through the re-establishment of authoritarian rule in Tunisia following the election of President Kaïs Saïed in 2019. In Libya, the political and territorial fracture that began following the civil war triggered by the 2011 revolution against Colonel Gaddafi continues.

Domestically, there is a rollback of civil liberties, increased repression and a narrowing of spaces for dissent, with weakened civil societies that are, in many cases, deprived of external resources following the dismantling of USAID by the Trump administration and the reduction of cooperation budgets by countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden (Lynch, 2025). This authoritarian and technocratic governance (Barreñada, 2023) has failed to address the structural problems of social justice and economic and territorial inequalities that fuelled the anti-authoritarian protests over the past decade. The persistence of the root causes of this discontent is what has driven the 2025 mobilisations of Gen Z 212 in Morocco, which question the large-scale investments in sports infrastructure carried out by the government led by Aziz Akhannouch to the detriment of sectors such as healthcare and education (Colin, 2025). In Tunisia, political mobilisations against Kaïs Saïed's authoritarian populism have been accompanied by protests in the suburbs against the environmental degradation caused by the phosphate processing industry in Gabès (Ben Hamadi, 2025). In Algeria, social unrest has led to an increase in

the number of Algerian migrants reaching the Spanish and European coasts (Kessous, 2025).

At the regional level, the Maghreb is facing changes in the international environment in a fragmented manner. Rivalries, bilateral conflicts and mistrust are having an impact on shared political and security challenges, such as the dispute over Western Sahara, the conflict in Libya and instability in the Sahel. The intensification of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is hampering the prospects for greater political and economic integration in a region that already has one of the lowest levels of intra-regional trade in the world, with less than 5% of trade taking place between its own countries (Liga, 2023). In a context where the Maghreb is seeing its importance as an energy supplier to Europe reinforced by the war in Ukraine and Europe's commitment to climate neutrality, the lack of regional integration remains a key obstacle to its development, stability and the exploitation of opportunities offered by the trend towards the regionalisation of globalisation.

At the international level, one can observe how the trend towards selective disengagement from traditional partners has been gaining momentum, seeking to diversify partners and alliances in line with national interests. This distancing, which is often more rhetorical than real, has been encouraged by the United States' selective withdrawal from the region, the shift in the European agenda towards migration and security issues, and the waning appeal of its regional project in the Mediterranean.

This trend, previously highlighted by Fernández Molina (2019) and Fabiani (2021) and reinforced following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has become firmly established following Donald Trump's second arrival at the White House in January 2025. The Maghreb is not mentioned once in the National Security Strategy published in November 2025. The section on the Middle East confirms the US disengagement from the region, which has ceased to be a key supplier of hydrocarbons for the United States, and confirms the abandonment of policies promoting democracy, stating that "the key to successful relations [...] is to accept the region, its leaders and its nations as they are, whilst collaborating in areas of common interest". The strategy highlights the Trump administration's clear interest in extending the Abraham Accords – through which Israel has normalised relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan – to more nations in the region and the Islamic world. The Maghreb countries are also not mentioned in the section dedicated to Africa, which advocates prioritising trade and

investment relations with countries that open their markets to US goods and services, with investments in the energy sector and critical minerals.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted the priority of the European Union's international agenda towards the East, against a backdrop of socio-economic vulnerability in the southern Mediterranean countries, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the European Union has sought to balance its relations with its southern neighbours through the adoption of a new regional pact for the Mediterranean, its content confirms Brussels' abandonment of its liberal and democratising agenda in the region. The new pact approved in November 2025 can be seen as a scaled-back attempt to revive the Euro-Mediterranean process launched thirty years ago in Barcelona, in an international and regional context then very different from the current one, in which the European Union faces an existential crisis due to the war in Ukraine and the risk of losing the US defence umbrella (Roggero, 2025).

Added to this is the European Union's loss of credibility among Maghreb societies, whose demands for mobility remain unmet by a European Union obsessed with immigration control. Mobility partnerships remain conditional upon the signing of readmission agreements for irregular migrants arriving in Europe from the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Restrictions on mobility contribute significantly to the deterioration of the European Union's image among the middle classes and elites—the main applicants for visas—as does the double standards applied in the treatment of refugees depending on the origin of the conflict. The speed and flexibility with which reception mechanisms were activated for Ukrainian refugees in 2022 contrast with the treatment meted out in 2015 to those fleeing Syria, or with the evacuation in November 2023 of only foreigners or Palestinians holding foreign passports from the Gaza Strip (Hernando de Larramendi y Azaola, 2024). This deterioration in the EU's image is also fuelled by the lukewarm response to the genocide in Gaza, with the EU unable to speak with one voice in condemning the disproportionate nature of the Israeli response following the attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023, nor to condemn Israel's use of starvation as a weapon of war.

The Maghreb in the face of shifts in the international order. Multi-alignment, transactionalism and assertiveness

On the international stage, the Maghreb states are addressing the transformations of the international order in a fragmented manner by recalibrating their foreign policies. Against a backdrop of the international system's restructuring, Maghreb regimes seek to strengthen their autonomy and pragmatically diversify their foreign relations, emphasising the defence of national interests (Ghanem, 2025). Separately, they are attempting to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the trend towards a regionalisation of globalisation, which has intensified following COVID-19 and been reinforced by the Trump administration's return to trade protectionism. By leveraging the flexibility of their environmental regulations and the free trade agreements signed with the European Union, they are highlighting their location as a gateway to European markets to attract foreign investment. They are also seeking to exploit their geographical location as a gateway to emerging African markets and as providers of security and stability in the Sahel, an area increasingly perceived by the European Union as its southern border.

In recent years, a number of general trends can be identified in the international discourse and behaviour of the Maghreb states, which have become more pronounced since the start of Donald Trump's second presidential term in January 2025.

Firstly, there is a trend towards selective disengagement from historical partners such as the European Union, which has intensified following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Maghreb states are calling for greater involvement in defining the framework of their relations with the European Union. Morocco and Tunisia are distancing themselves from Brussels' proposal for new Comprehensive and Deep Free Trade Agreements due to the impact that a reciprocal opening of markets would have. Algeria, whose geopolitical significance as a supplier of natural gas has since been reinforced, is keeping its distance from the cooperation initiatives launched by Brussels with the countries of the Southern Neighbourhood. In addition to its reservations regarding the European Neighbourhood Policy, which it did not fully join until 2017 with the adoption of the Common Priorities of the Partnership, there is its desire to renegotiate the Association Agreement signed in 2005.

This disengagement is more evident in rhetoric than in strictly material terms, as levels of economic (inter)dependence have remained unchanged. The European Union remains

the main trading partner of the Maghreb states. In 2024, Morocco accounted for 59% of trade with the European Union, Tunisia for 54.8%, Algeria for 48%, Libya for 42.5% and Mauritania for 32.8%. However, its power and normative appeal have weakened, and the North African states are asserting a degree of autonomy—at least rhetorically—through which they seek to avoid unconditional alignments, considering that these offer limited benefits for their survival and the defence of national interests. Consequently, they are diversifying their partners and alliances by exploring new frameworks for cooperation, such as that offered by the BRICS, which Egypt joined in 2024 and which Algeria attempted, unsuccessfully, to join.

The growing presence of China and Russia and the increasing influence of regional powers—the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel—competing to gain influence in a region whose geopolitical importance has been reinforced by its role as a bridge between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa—enable the Maghreb states to diversify their political and economic relations in areas such as infrastructure development, military cooperation and trade relations, prioritising the defence of national interests through a multi-alignment approach. The European Union is no longer regarded as the default ally, and the Maghreb states are taking advantage of the existence of a range of potential options (Cherif, 2025).

This assertion of autonomy, moving away from unconditional alignment with the United States and the European Union, was evident in the votes held at the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is also evident in the rejection of the sanctions against Moscow demanded by European partners. Morocco has continued to import Russian diesel, re-exporting part of it to Europe (Horner, 2023), and signed a new fisheries agreement with Moscow in October 2025 that includes the waters of Western Sahara (Cembrero, 2026). Despite differences with Russia over the presence of military entities such as Wagner or the Africa Corps in Libya and Mali, Algeria renewed in 2023 the strategic partnership signed in 2001, coinciding with the official visit of Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune to Moscow. Algeria has also begun to redirect its wheat imports from France towards Russia and other Eastern European countries in response to Paris's open support for Morocco on the issue of Western Sahara (Meddeb, 2025). Tunisia, for its part, has stepped up its imports of Russian grain and oil and has promoted electoral cooperation by allowing Russian observers to attend the 2024 presidential elections, whilst rejecting the presence of Western electoral observers (Bobin

and Gasteli, 2024). The two opposing governments in Libya maintain relations with Russia. In the east of the country, the close ties between Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army and Moscow have been consolidated following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria in December 2024 and the subsequent transfer of military personnel from Syria to Libya, which has reinforced the role of this territory as a platform for projection into the Sahel. In the west, the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity also maintains a pragmatic relationship with Russia. In this context, a barter system whereby unrefined Libyan oil is exchanged for Russian diesel allows both parties to re-export part of these resources via the black market, generating a steady flow of revenue for armed groups linked to rival factions (Tani and Saleh, 2025).

All the Maghreb states have joined the Belt and Road Initiative, known as the New Silk Road (and have signed agreements with China) (Zoubir, 2025). Since 2013, China has been Algeria's main trading partner, where, amongst other projects, it has built Algiers Airport, the capital's Grand Mosque and a section of the east-west motorway (Chabouni, 2023). In 2025, the two countries signed a dozen agreements in sectors such as the automotive industry, construction, mining and energy. One of the main projects is the collaboration on the exploitation of the Gara Djebilet iron ore mine and the construction of the railway line that will connect this mega-deposit in southern Algeria with Oran via Tindouf and Béchar. Importing Algerian iron ore will allow China to diversify its reliance on imports from Australia. China is also Mauritania's main trading partner. Chinese investment in Morocco has increased in recent years, focusing on high value-added sectors such as renewable energy, the automotive industry and electric batteries, seeking to access European markets via free trade zones and circumvent Western tariffs by taking advantage of the free trade agreements Morocco has in place with the European Union and the United States (ChinaMed Project, 2025). Chinese companies have secured a significant share of the contracts for the construction of the new high-speed rail line between Kenitra and Marrakech. In November 2024, President Xi Jinping made an unexpected stopover in Casablanca on his return from the G-20 summit held in Brazil. In September 2025, both countries signed a strategic dialogue mechanism between their foreign ministries, building on the Strategic Partnership signed in 2016.

Coinciding with Kaïs Saïed's official visit to Beijing in May 2024, both countries signed a strategic partnership agreement aimed at boosting cooperation in infrastructure and energy construction. Chinese cooperation has also been sought to address the refurbishment of

the phosphate production and processing units of the Tunisian Chemical Group, which are responsible for the environmental degradation that sparked a wave of protests in Gabès in the autumn of 2025.

The weakening of the European Union's transformative agenda in the Mediterranean and its replacement by specific agreements linked mainly to migration and security issues have been accompanied by a strengthening of transactional logic, capitalising on the negotiating power afforded by Brussels' prioritisation of the externalisation of control over its external borders (Fakir, 2025a).

Most Maghreb states have agreed to assume the role of "border police" in exchange for economic and political concessions enshrined in migration agreements (Tunisia, 2023; Mauritania and Egypt, 2024), through which they secure concrete benefits that go beyond migration cooperation. The EU's focus on migration agreements provides a position of strength in relations with European states, enabling them to secure rapid concessions whilst circumventing the logic of political conditionality present in the European Neighbourhood Policy, which is increasingly perceived as interference. Although Morocco has not signed a migration agreement, its status as a key security partner and an indispensable partner for controlling migration flows in North-West Africa has strengthened its negotiating power in relations with Brussels. By linking the issues under negotiation, the Moroccan authorities seek to secure funding for border control – an increasingly politicised issue in Europe – ward off criticism on issues linked to human rights or scandals such as the bribery of MEPs and European Parliament officials, and secure backing for ways to circumvent the rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which annulled the 2024 Trade Agreement on the grounds that the consent of the people of Western Sahara was an essential condition for its application in that territory. In Libya, the memorandum of understanding signed in 2017 between the Government of National Unity and Italy to control migration flows has provided the authorities in Tripoli with significant leverage, which in January 2025 resulted in the release by the Italian authorities of the head of the judicial police, who was in charge of a migrant detention centre and against whom an arrest warrant had been issued by the International Criminal Court (Domínguez, 2025).

The acceptance of this subordinate role in migration management has not prevented the reinforcement of discourses emphasising sovereignty and decision-making autonomy.

The claim of “economic sovereignty” was the argument used in 2021 by Tunisia to freeze negotiations on the Comprehensive and Deep Free Trade Agreement (ALECA) proposed by the EU, on the grounds that free competition in sectors such as agriculture and services in economies that are not on an equal footing would be disastrous for the country. That same argument was invoked in 2023 by President Kaïs Saïed to reject the conditions set by the International Monetary Fund for granting a credit line of 1.9 billion dollars, opting instead for other bilateral alternatives and resorting to domestic borrowing.

The priority given to defending national interests has been accompanied by a trend towards greater assertiveness in international conduct when interests diverge, thereby reinforcing their sense of agency. The use of assertive policies based on the idea of sovereignty is an ongoing process subject to trial and error, which explains why results vary greatly from one country to another. In the case of Morocco, for example, this takes the form of a foreign policy that has resorted to triggering diplomatic crises with its traditional partners. These have been used as instruments of pressure to achieve political objectives in its attempts to replace the international framework of decolonisation for the resolution of the Western Sahara dispute with an administrative one through autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty (Fernández-Molina, Hernando de Larramendi and Ojeda, 2023). This assertiveness led it to suspend institutionalised political dialogue with the EU between 2016 and 2019, which affected intelligence cooperation (Fakir, 2025b), which is crucial for countering terrorist attacks in response to the rulings of the Court of Justice of the EU that annulled trade and fisheries agreements for including the territory and waters of Western Sahara within their scope. The US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020, in exchange for Morocco establishing diplomatic relations with Israel and joining the Abraham Accords, bolstered Morocco's resolve through a diplomatic approach that makes relations with other countries contingent on their positions on the Western Sahara issue. In this context, Rabat's offensive to undermine the international consensus must be situated, involving the provocation of diplomatic crises with Germany (2020), Spain (2021) and France (2022) in order to secure their backing for its proposal for autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara (Fernández-Molina, Hernando de Larramendi and Ojeda, 2023). It is also within this framework that we must view the entry into Ceuta in May 2021 of nine thousand Moroccan citizens, fifteen hundred of whom were unaccompanied minors, as a means of

exerting pressure to secure the Spanish Government's backing for the Moroccan autonomy plan in Western Sahara.

Algeria, for its part, has also demonstrated assertiveness in responding to the Spanish government's shift on the Western Sahara issue by suspending, in June 2022, the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation, and by freezing non-energy exports and imports with Spain. Algeria adopted the same trade reprisal against France after Paris, in July 2024, described the Moroccan autonomy plan as "the sole basis" for resolving the conflict over Western Sahara. In Tunisia, this behaviour can be seen in the decision to expel members of the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters, in response to their criticism of the process of drafting the new 2022 Constitution, which Kaïs Saïed described as "interference in Tunisia's internal affairs" and an "attack on the country's sovereignty".

In their relations with the European Union, the Maghreb states are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the fragmentation of European action in the region, which is governed *de facto* not by Brussels but by the capitals of southern Europe, each with priorities and interests that do not always coincide. For example, in July 2023, during negotiations on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Memorandum of Understanding between Tunisia and the European Union, Italy's vision prevailed, whereby Tunisia committed to strengthening migration controls in exchange for economic concessions, without including references to the issue of human rights as demanded by some northern European countries (Cherif, 2025). The effectiveness of Tunisia's measures to combat illegal migration has reduced the number of irregular migrant arrivals. In the first eleven months of 2025, Italy recorded around 4,500 arrivals from the Tunisian coast. In the same period of 2023, the figure was 96,000 – twenty times higher.

By embracing the European framework for externalising borders, Kaïs Saïed has managed to limit criticism from Brussels regarding the regime's increasingly repressive tendencies, which were exacerbated in 2025 by the imprisonment and sentencing of virtually all opposition political leaders. The assumption of this subordinate role, which contradicts his rhetoric on the country's autonomy, is offset by the revival of a sovereigntist narrative for domestic consumption which, however, does not call into question relations with Brussels. It is within this framework that we must situate, for example, the reprimand issued in November 2025 to the European Union ambassador by the President of the

Republic, on the grounds that he had failed to respect diplomatic protocol by meeting with the general secretary of the country's main trade union, the UGTT, against a backdrop of tensions arising from the deterioration of the social and political situation. The rhetoric regarding regained national dignity vis-à-vis the European Union, reiterated following the adoption in November 2025 of a European Parliament resolution on the rule of law and human rights in Tunisia, did not prevent the Tunisian Assembly of People's Representatives from passing, a few weeks later, three bills that expanded and revised the content of the existing free trade agreement.

The diversity of interests in the Maghreb among the countries of southern Europe allows Maghreb capitals to capitalise on these differences. At times of bilateral tension with one of them, relations with the others are prioritised. This is what Morocco did during the diplomatic crisis with France between 2021 and 2024. The rift between France and Morocco was fuelled by reports of alleged Moroccan espionage using the Pegasus programme, which is said to have targeted President Macron and twelve other ministers, and by Paris's rapprochement with Algeria, symbolised by Macron's state visit to that country in August 2022. The deterioration in Franco-Moroccan relations enabled the Spanish government, which had just changed its position on Western Sahara, to be recognised as a privileged partner by Rabat. Following the earthquake that devastated the Haouz region in September 2023, the Moroccan government rejected the aid offered by France, but accepted that of Spain, along with that of the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The subsequent reconciliation between France and Morocco in July 2024, following Paris's endorsement of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, triggered a crisis with Algeria, which the Algerian authorities exploited to deepen their relations with Italy, making it their privileged European partner in energy matters.

In Libya, the lack of common positions on the civil conflict has allowed the two sides vying for legitimacy and control of the country to favour certain European nations over others. The internationally recognised Government of National Unity has received support from Italy in exchange for its cooperation in the fight against immigration. In the east of the country, Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army receives backing from France (Soler, 2023).

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco and the return to a logic of blocs in the regional sphere

Regional dynamics in the Maghreb have been shaped since independence by the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco. The issue of Western Sahara is one of the areas that frames bilateral relations between the two countries as a zero-sum game. This rivalry, linked to the struggle for regional hegemony, has hindered successive attempts at economic and political integration in the Maghreb, such as the Arab Maghreb Union created in 1989, which has been effectively paralysed since 1994. Although the rivalry has diminished during periods of shared vulnerability, as occurred in 2011 during the early stages of the anti-authoritarian protests known as the “Arab Spring”, it tends to intensify when the perception of vulnerability is asymmetrical (Hernando de Larramendi, 2019).

The perception that Morocco had sought to capitalise on Algeria’s international isolation during President Bouteflika’s final terms in office, as well as the internal weakness of the Algerian regime during the Hirak protest movement in 2019, intensified the bilateral rivalry, which escalated into a breakdown in diplomatic relations during the summer of 2021. The trigger for Algeria’s decision was the perception that Morocco had crossed a red line by interfering in its internal affairs through publicly expressing support for the Kabyle people’s right to self-determination (Hernando de Larramendi and Thieux, 2022). However, underlying that decision was the issue of Western Sahara. The compromise agreement reached by Morocco in December 2020 with President Trump, whereby Rabat normalised its relations with Israel in exchange for US recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara, heightened bilateral tensions. Algeria considers that Morocco’s accession to the Abraham Accords and the strengthening of security cooperation between Morocco and Israel brings the “Zionist enemy” closer to its border. One sign of the bilateral escalation was the decision by the Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach in October of that year not to renew the tripartite agreement allowing Algerian gas to reach Spain via Moroccan territory through the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (GME). Algeria’s decision to terminate the contract that had allowed Algerian gas to transit through Morocco for twenty-five years cut off supplies to Moroccan combined-cycle power stations, which generated around 12% of the electricity consumed in the country. This prompted Rabat to request that the pipeline operate in the opposite direction to enable it to receive natural gas from Spain. Following the Spanish government’s shift in March

2022, which regarded autonomy as the ‘most serious, realistic and credible’ option for resolving the Western Sahara conflict, Algeria warned of reprisals should the gas infrastructure be used in reverse to transfer even ‘a single molecule of Algerian gas to Morocco’ (Hernando de Larramendi *et al.*, 2023). The rise in bilateral tension is also evident in both countries’ determination to flex their military muscle through the creation of new military regions in border areas, the organisation of military manoeuvres and increased defence budgets. In 2024, it accounted for 8% of GDP in Algeria and 3.5% in Morocco.

The breakdown of diplomatic relations between Algeria and Morocco has intensified competition between the two countries in the Maghreb region, reviving a logic of alliances that previously existed in the region during the 1980s, when Algeria signed a Treaty of Fraternity and Concord with Tunisia and Mauritania in 1983, to which Morocco responded the following year by signing the Treaty of Arab-African Union between Morocco and Libya. To counter Morocco’s diplomatic advances on the issue of Western Sahara, Algeria has strengthened its ties with Tunisia. Isolated both regionally and internationally, Tunisia relies on Algeria to cover two-thirds of its gas consumption, for security cooperation in controlling the 1,200 kilometres of shared border, and for economic aid to alleviate the country’s financial difficulties following the rejection of the agreement proposed by the International Monetary Fund. In October 2025, the two countries signed a defence cooperation agreement just weeks after a drone attack struck several ships of the Global Sumud Flotilla anchored in the port of Sidi Bou Saïd, which were heading to Gaza to break the blockade of the Strip. Tunisia’s dependence on Algeria has prompted it to abandon its neutrality and align itself with Algeria within the Maghreb region. Although it does not recognise the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the invitation and official reception extended to the Secretary-General of the Polisario Front, Brahim Ghali, in 2022 on the occasion of his visit to Tunisia to participate in the 8th Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) triggered a diplomatic crisis with Morocco that has yet to be resolved. Tunisia has also joined, alongside Libya, the alliance spearheaded by Algeria in 2024 to attempt to revitalise the Arab Maghreb Union (El Yaaqoubi, 2024). Coordination between the two countries also extends to the situation in Libya. At a trilateral meeting with Egypt in November 2025, the three countries urged all parties to “commit seriously” to the UN-sponsored political settlement process to end years of division in the country.

Both Algeria's and Morocco's interest in strengthening their relations with Mauritania forms part of the revival of the "axis" dynamic in the region. Mauritania's position as a bridge between the Maghreb and the Sahel gives it key geostrategic value in the regional rivalry between the major Maghreb powers. Faced with this dynamic, Mauritania, although it has recognised the SADR since 1984, seeks to maintain a position of "positive neutrality", striking a delicate balance between its two neighbours, who are competing to draw it into their respective spheres of influence (Lacher and Werenfels, 2025).

With the three-day visit of Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani in December 2021, Algeria sought to give new impetus to bilateral trade relations with the signing of a cross-border free trade agreement and a project to improve connections via a road which, with Algerian funding, will link the cities of Tindouf in western Algeria and Zouerate in northern Mauritania. In January 2024, the Algerian and Mauritanian presidents inaugurated the first permanent border post between the two states in Tindouf. For Morocco, the land connection with Mauritania via the Guerguerat crossing is a key factor both for its plans to expand trade relations with West Africa and to bolster its position on Western Sahara.

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco extends beyond the Maghreb to the Sahel and West Africa. The rise in instability in the Sahel following the fall of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011 and the French intervention in Mali turned the region into a new arena of competition with Algeria. To gain influence, both countries have vied with one another by promoting competing mediation initiatives, presenting themselves as providers of stability and security in a region increasingly perceived by the European Union as its new security frontier. Using the geographical argument that Morocco does not share a direct border with the Sahel countries, Algeria excluded Morocco from regional security initiatives such as the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (CAERT) or the Joint Operational Staff Committee (CEMOC). Morocco, for its part, took advantage of the vacuum created by the French and European withdrawal from 2022 onwards and Algiers' distancing itself from the military juntas that seized power following the coups d'état in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023). The creation by these three countries of the Alliance of Sahel States and their distancing from the Economic Community of West African States, from which they withdrew in January 2025, has been exploited by Rabat to promote the Atlantic Initiative, the aim of which is to provide it with

access to the Atlantic Ocean via the port of Dakhla, in Western Sahara, thereby seeking implicit recognition of its sovereignty over this territory. The viability of this project depends on incorporating Mauritania, an obligatory transit point for Sahel countries to access the Atlantic.

The logic of competition with Algiers is also articulated through two competing mega-projects through which both countries seek to strengthen their influence in Africa and Europe by becoming transit points for Nigerian gas destined for North Africa and European territory, projects whose importance was reinforced following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to the trans-Saharan gas pipeline project, which would transport Nigerian gas to Algeria via Niger, Rabat has been promoting since 2016 the idea of an alternative pipeline that, also starting from Nigeria, would cross the Atlantic Ocean through eleven West African countries, including the waters of Western Sahara, before reaching Morocco.

The Algerian-Moroccan rivalry has also taken a political toll on the European Union and its member states, which have been forced to navigate a zero-sum dynamic in which every step forward in cooperation with one is perceived by the other as a hostile gesture. In 2024, the shift in France's position—regarding the Moroccan autonomy plan as the “sole basis” for resolving the conflict—intensified the bilateral crisis between Paris and Algiers, leading to the withdrawal of its ambassador from France and the imposition of restrictions on bilateral trade and investment. Taking advantage of the tensions in bilateral relations with France and Spain, Italy has been strengthening its strategic partnership with Algeria, a key element of Italy's ambitions on the African continent as set out in the Mattei Plan for Africa.

The impact of Trump's second presidency

Against a backdrop of heightened rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, the start of President Trump's second term has prompted the Maghreb states to adapt to the new landscape.

Rabat saw Trump's return to the White House in January 2025 as a unique opportunity to secure international recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara. Although the Biden administration did not go so far as to reverse the recognition granted by Trump at

the end of his term in December 2020, nor did it take steps to reaffirm with concrete actions a decision that had broken with the United States' traditional position of neutrality in the dispute (Fernández-Molina, 2025).

The preferential treatment Rabat seeks in its relations with the US administration is reflected in the tariffs applied to bilateral trade. Morocco, like Mauritania, is subject to a 10% tariff, compared to 25% for Tunisia and 30% for Algeria and Libya, from which petroleum products are excluded. The US trade surplus has prevented the US-Morocco Free Trade Agreement from being included on the list of treaties to be renegotiated, although the imposition of a 10% tariff on all Moroccan products clearly calls into question the spirit of the agreement signed in 2005.

Moroccan diplomacy uses the convergence of interests in the Middle East and the Sahel as a means of bolstering the country's image as a trusted ally of Washington. The Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and Israel's brutal response forced the Moroccan authorities to perform a delicate balancing act to prevent an openly pro-Palestinian street movement from getting out of hand, without altering their relations with Israel. The government tolerated the protests against the genocide in Gaza, whilst Mohammed VI, chairman of the Al-Quds Committee, expressed solidarity with the people of Gaza without severing or calling into question diplomatic, economic and security relations with Israel (Casani and Colin, 2024). Nor were the Abraham Accords, which Morocco had joined in 2020, denounced. The convergence with the US administration in the Middle East was reflected once again in October 2025, when Rabat backed the ceasefire agreement in Gaza promoted by President Trump whilst reiterating its commitment to the two-state solution as the sole basis for achieving a just and lasting peace in the region. During this period, Rabat has strengthened its relations with Israel in the military and security spheres through the purchase of arms, the transfer of technology in the aerospace sector, the manufacture of drones, and the authorisation for ships carrying military equipment destined for Israel to transit through and call at Moroccan ports. During the third meeting of the Joint Military Committee, held in Tel Aviv in January 2026, both countries signed a joint military work plan to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Through this triangulation of interests, Moroccan diplomacy seeks the definitive backing of the Trump administration for its position on Western Sahara, the cornerstone upon

which its foreign policy hinges. The view that Morocco's proposed autonomy plan is "the only basis" for resolving the dispute was reiterated by President Trump in the congratulatory message he sent to Mohammed VI in July 2025 on the occasion of the Throne Day. US support was also evident during the drafting of Security Council Resolution 2797 on Western Sahara, adopted on 31 October 2025 by eleven votes in favour, three abstentions (Russia, China and Pakistan), with Algeria—a non-permanent member for the 2023–2025 term—absent. Although the initial draft drawn up by US diplomats was clearly aligned with Morocco's positions, the text finally adopted is more ambiguous, the result of an arduous negotiation process to avoid a veto by Russia and China, allowing each party to emphasise the aspects most favourable to their positions. The resolution places autonomy at the centre, relegating references to the principle of self-determination to a marginal role. The resolution, which renews the mandate of MINURSO (the United Nations mission tasked with organising the referendum in Western Sahara) for one year, refers to the autonomy plan as the "basis" (without the article) and as "one of the most feasible solutions", leaving the door open to other possible solutions. The text of the resolution does not, however, include any reference to the proposal updated in October 2025 by the Polisario Front for a "politically acceptable solution that guarantees the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara". The resolution expresses appreciation to the United States of America for its willingness to host negotiations in support of the Special Envoy's mission to achieve a solution for Western Sahara and the region.

Although the resolution establishes a framework for negotiations without prescribing a specific outcome, it was welcomed with jubilation by Morocco. A few hours after its adoption, King Mohammed VI addressed the nation in a speech in which he described it as a "new victorious chapter in the process of enshrining the Moroccan identity of the Sahara [...] through a consensual solution based on the autonomy initiative". The sovereign also announced that Morocco would proceed with the updating and detailed formulation of the autonomy proposal, which should constitute "the sole basis for negotiation", and thanked President Trump, Britain, Spain and France for their efforts in this process. In light of what he considered a historic milestone, he designated 31 October as a new national holiday.

Algerian diplomacy, which defends the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination, has avoided confrontation with the Trump administration despite the latter's clear support for Morocco in the Sahara dispute (International Crisis Group, 2025). Unlike the situation with Spain and France – countries with which Algeria triggered diplomatic crises following their backing of the Moroccan autonomy proposal – Algiers, mindful of the new balance of power, has adopted a conciliatory stance towards the United States, seeking to avoid confrontation with the Trump administration. During his previous term as a senator, Secretary of State Marco Rubio called for sanctions to be imposed on Algeria due to its ties with Russia. Evidence of this stance was his absence from the vote on Resolution 2797, thereby avoiding taking a stand against a US-sponsored resolution favourable to Morocco, which deviated from the guiding principles of his foreign policy.

Through his absence, Algerian diplomacy is seeking to separate the dispute over Western Sahara from its bilateral relations with the United States. In addition to the conciliatory statements made by the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Attaf, regarding the US mediation initiative between Morocco and the Polisario Front, there was Algiers' vote in favour, in November 2025, in favour of Resolution 2803, in which the UN Security Council endorsed President Trump's Comprehensive Plan to end the Gaza conflict, which provoked rejection from some sectors of Algerian public opinion, who perceived it as a departure from traditional support for the Palestinian cause (Bobin, 2025). At the bilateral level, relations focus on security and energy issues. In January 2025, Algeria signed a memorandum on information sharing with the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) in response to the increased Russian presence in Mali and the Sahel through the Africa Corps. In September, General Claude K. Tudor, head of special operations at AFRICOM, met in Algeria with Saïd Chengriha, Chief of Staff of the Algerian Army. Military cooperation has also paved the way for the sale of US arms in a market hitherto dominated by Russia. In the energy sector, Algeria is negotiating the opening of the Algerian market to the US companies Chevron and Exxon for the exploration and exploitation of its significant shale gas reserves.

The United States' firm support for Morocco, however, is being balanced by Washington's efforts to promote reconciliation between Algeria and Morocco as a means of strengthening regional stability by anchoring the Maghreb within the Atlantic security architecture, curbing Russian expansion in the Sahel and containing Chinese penetration

in the region (Benmoumen, 2025). It is in this context that the tour of the Maghreb undertaken by Massad Boulos, President Trump's senior adviser on Arab and Middle Eastern Affairs, during the summer of 2025 should be viewed. The discreet diplomatic efforts undertaken were formalised in October 2025 by Steve Witkoff, Special Envoy for the Middle East, who, during an interview with the CBS television network, announced the signing of a peace agreement between Algeria and Morocco before the end of 2025, demonstrating the US willingness to directly facilitate potential tripartite negotiations between Rabat, Algiers and the Polisario Front once Morocco presents a revised version of its autonomy plan for Western Sahara.

Conclusions

In the face of shifts in the international order, accelerated by Donald Trump's second term as US president, the Maghreb states have adopted pragmatic strategies aimed at strengthening their autonomy and maximising the defence of their national interests against a backdrop of weakening multilateralism and the waning influence of Western liberalisation agendas. This adaptation translates into foreign policies based on multi-alignment, the diversification of partners and an increasingly transactional approach. This shift does not imply a material break with the European Union, which remains the region's main economic partner, but rather a selective, fundamentally discursive disengagement aimed at broadening the scope for autonomy and negotiation in a context where levels of economic and security interdependence remain high. This process is accompanied by greater assertiveness in foreign policy, expressed through the use of diplomatic crises, pressure strategies and sovereignist rhetoric, whose mixed results and experimental nature introduce new factors of uncertainty and volatility into relations with traditional partners and within the immediate regional environment.

At the regional level, the Maghreb continues to be characterised by deep political fragmentation and an inability to formulate collective responses to shared challenges. The structural rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, centred on the dispute over Western Sahara and the competition for regional hegemony, continues to block any significant progress towards Maghreb integration. This zero-sum logic not only limits intra-regional trade and opportunities for economic development but also reactivates dynamics of blocs

and axes that project bilateral competition into the Sahel and West Africa, with direct implications for regional stability and European interests.

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*Miguel Hernando de Larramendi**

Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Castilla-La Mancha and Director of the Group for the Study of Arab and Muslim Societies (GRESAM)