

The other Africa: overlapping rivalries in the Maghreb

Eduard Soler i Lecha



Photography: "Moving Shadows II, X", [Girma Berta](#)

Periphery or connector? These are two very different ways of perceiving the geopolitical position of the Maghreb, a sub-region made up of five states (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania) plus a territory of disputed sovereignty (the former Spanish colony of Western Sahara) in the northwest of the African continent, with an area of six million km² and a population of over 100 million.

The term Maghreb means 'west' in Arabic, which is why it is sometimes translated as 'the Arab West'. This designation establishes a link to the Arab world and thus, in geopolitical terms, to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The most common approach to the geopolitical dynamics of the space stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf has been to look at it as a multipolar, conflictual, regional security complex which is heavily penetrated by foreign interests [1]. Within this region, different sub-regions can be distinguished, and the Maghreb is one of them. Some of the peculiarities of the Maghreb as a sub-region are the imprint of French colonialism, its proximity to Europe, the weight of the Amazigh culture and language as a distinguishing feature, the existence of a sub-

regional cooperation organisation (the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), created in 1989), a bipolar system that pivots around the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, and a relatively peripheral position regarding the region's main conflicts, such as the Arab-Israeli and, more recently, the Syrian conflict.

A second way of analysing the geopolitical position of the Maghreb is to highlight its Africanness, which turns 'the Arab West' into 'North Africa'. The African Union (AU) is usually divided into five geographical regions (North, West, East, Central and South) to which the diaspora is added. The Maghreb is part of North Africa along with Egypt, a country whose population is, by itself, as high as that of all the Maghreb countries combined. Beyond the existence of this subdivision within the AU, what is significant is how the different Maghreb countries have been giving more relevance to their Africanness, through political declarations, state travels, constitutional reforms and greater involvement in continental organisations and projects, an involvement in which Morocco and Algeria are not cooperating but openly competing [2]. Security ties between the Maghreb and the Sahel countries have also been strengthened, especially after the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 and the Mali war of 2012. Similar to what happens when we think of the Maghreb as part of the Arab world, this African view of Maghreb geopolitics also tends to make it seem peripheral and marked by particularisms.

The Maghreb is one of the most powerful links between the Arab world and Africa, but also between Africa and Europe. Sometimes this connecting role promotes dynamics of competition and conflict

A third perspective emphasises the Maghreb's role as a connector between different regions. The Maghreb thus becomes one of the most powerful links between the Arab world and Africa, but also between Africa and Europe, which turns the Mediterranean into a kind of inland lake. Only 14 km separate the Andalusian coasts from those of North Africa, and the Strait of Gibraltar is also the obligatory passage between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. This position is particularly relevant when talking about strategic infrastructures (ports, energy and digital resources, etc.), migration or illicit trafficking. Sometimes this connecting role generates opportunities for cooperation and dialogue, but this paper focuses on how it also promotes dynamics of competition and conflict. It does so by analysing how the enmity between Morocco and Algeria reflects in the African policies of both countries, how the Maghreb has become one of the scenarios where the regional powers of the Middle East project their struggle for regional hegemony, asking whether the Maghreb can also be one of the spaces of competition between two Mediterranean powers such as France and Turkey and, finally, how the relative loss of Western influence and the rise of China and Russia as global powers is materialising.

Maghreb rivalries: Algeria-Morocco

Shortly after becoming an independent country, Algeria clashed with Morocco in what became known as the War of the Sands (*Guerre des Sables* in French) between October 1963 and February 1964. While the new Algerian republic wanted to preserve the borders inherited from colonisation, Morocco claimed part of western Algeria as its own. The territorial claim inaugurates a long phase of confrontation between the two most populous countries in the Maghreb, but it is only one of the ingredients: both Morocco and Algeria have accused each other of interference in their respective internal affairs, and the ideological clash has placed them in opposing camps in Arab, African and international politics. Morocco has cultivated relations with Europe and more specifically with France, while Algeria broke with the French and has reinforced an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist discourse. Morocco clearly sided with the United States during the Cold War period and maintained good relations with other conservative Arab monarchies. Algeria, on the other hand, became involved in the non-aligned movement, with a foreign policy of support to revolutionary movements, and was closer to Moscow than to Washington in the great bipolar world confrontation.

It is in this context that Hassan II launched the Green March in order to annex Western Sahara in 1975, taking advantage of Spain's political weakness during the last weeks of dictator Francisco Franco's life. Algeria, on the other hand, supported the pro-independence Frente Polisario. Since then, the Sahara conflict has remained one of the main obstacles to any attempt to achieve greater cooperation and integration among the Maghreb countries. Its echoes have also reached the rest of the African continent. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), fully supported by Algeria, won recognition from over twenty African countries, including some of the most influential such as Ethiopia, Tanzania and Nigeria, and in 1982 the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the AU, accepted the SADR as a full member by a simple majority. Morocco, in protest, left the organisation. The political change in South Africa, with the end of apartheid, brought a turnaround in relation to the Sahara thanks to the good relationship that had been established since the 1970s between Polisario and the African National Congress, reinforcing the idea that Africa was the Achilles' heel of Morocco's foreign strategy.

Well into the 21st century, Morocco decided to remedy the situation. Mohammed VI is a key player in Morocco's rediscovery of Africa, which has also been supported by the expansion of Moroccan business conglomerates into sub-Saharan countries [3]. The strategy is bearing fruit: some African countries withdrew their recognition of the SADR, and Morocco re-entered the AU in January 2017. With the outbreak of the pandemic, Africa also became the main target of the so-called 'mask diplomacy', an industrial conversion effort aimed to produce and export or donate masks to strategic countries [4]. In terms of the security agenda, Morocco has also positioned itself as an actor in the Sahel, either by strengthening collaboration with the governments of these countries or by presenting itself to its international partners as a vector of regional stability.

The dynamism of Morocco's African policy during the first two decades of the 21st century coincided with a phase of retreat in Algeria, aggravated by the ill health of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika [5]. Algerians have, however, sought to limit Moroccan influence by promoting alternative frameworks for regional security dialogue in the Sahel that exclude Morocco, such as the Nouakchott process. In terms of infrastructure, they have reactivated strategic projects connecting Algeria and Nigeria through gas pipelines, highways or digital cables, which compete with alternative projects led or participated in by Morocco. The reform of the Algerian constitution in 2020 also opens the door to Algerian participation in AU's military operations, and the appointment in 2019 of Ramtane Lamamra as foreign minister hints at a willingness on the part of the state apparatus to regain a foothold on the African continent.

The end of the ceasefire between the Polisario and Morocco and the announcement that Algeria was breaking diplomatic relations with Morocco point to an escalation of tension in the Maghreb

The end of the ceasefire between the Polisario and Morocco in November 2020 and the announcement in August 2021 that Algeria was breaking diplomatic relations with Morocco, accusing it of trying to destabilise the country and supporting independence movements in Kabylia, point to an escalation of tension in the Maghreb. Given that both Rabat and Algiers see Africa as a space of competition, it is to be expected that the tension will spill over into their African policies. One of the questions now is whether other African countries will try to distance themselves from this competition or, on the contrary, to take advantage of it to intensify ties with one of the two Maghreb powers or, if they are skilful enough, with both at the same time.

The other regional powers

As explained in the introduction to this paper, Africa is only one of the geographical spaces in which the Maghreb countries are embedded. They are also part of the Arab world, the Mediterranean basin and, in geopolitical terms, the MENA region. Despite attempts to promote dialogue and regional cooperation through organisations such as the Arab League and initiatives such as the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean, division and competition between regional powers have prevailed in these spaces. Few conflicts have been resolved, new ones have been added, fault lines have deepened and alliances have become more volatile and malleable [6].

One Maghreb country, Tunisia, was the first epicentre of social and political protests that shook all Arab countries in 2011 and unleashed fierce competition between regional powers across the Arab world. Qatar and Turkey have gone hand in hand, interpreting the political changes of 2011 as an opportunity to gain influence and seeing the Muslim Brotherhood as an ally. The Emirates, Al-Sisi's Egypt and Saudi Arabia form the opposite pole, have

accused the Turks and Qatar of destabilising the region and see the Muslim Brotherhood as the enemy to beat. This rivalry has been described as a new cold war between Sunni powers [7].

Libya has been one of the most obvious scenarios of this regional competition and its destabilising potential. In 2014, the political transition process collapsed and two opposing power centres were formed; Turkey and Qatar, on the one hand, supported the Tripoli government politically, financially and militarily. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, on the other, supported the Tobruk government and Marshal Haftar, with the argument that it would eradicate terrorism [8].

The collapse of Libya caused great concern among the Maghreb countries, which feared that instability would spill over the borders, as it had already done in 2012 with the Mali crisis, the hostage-taking of In Amenas in Algeria in January 2013, and the 2016 assault on the town of Ben Gardane in southern Tunisia. As a result, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco deployed mediation actions, which were not always coordinated. In fact, the competition between Algerians and Moroccans became very visible in this area, promoting alternative mediation frameworks.

Middle Eastern countries were not the only ones to take sides in the Libyan crisis. The two European countries with the greatest interests in Libya also took opposing sides: Italy with Tripoli and France with Haftar. Moreover, Turkey took advantage of its ascendancy over the Tripoli government to sign an agreement on the delimitation of its exclusive economic zones, which contradicted Greek claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. For its part, the Greek government, with the support of Cyprus, decided to further strengthen the existing coordination mechanisms with Egypt and Israel and to create new ones in which the Emirates and France also participate. Athens also intensified its dialogue with the authorities in eastern Libya. The aim has been none other than to join forces among those who want to contain Turkey's regional ambitions.

In this dance of alliances and counter-alliances, one of the moves that may have the most repercussions for the Maghreb is the rivalry between France and Turkey, and specifically between their presidents [9]. Macron has accused Erdogan of being a vector of instability and has gone so far as to propose a Pax Mediterranea to other countries as a response to the return of regional imperial powers and the ghost of their past, making explicit mention of Turkey [10]. Erdogan, for his part, has criticised France for acting with a colonial mentality not only in the Maghreb but across the African continent, and has even accused his president of islamophobia and mental health problems.

One of the moves that may have the most repercussions for the Maghreb is the rivalry between France and Turkey, and specifically between their presidents: Macron and Erdogan

One of the latest actors to enter the scene has been Israel, and it has done so through the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Morocco. This move has taken place in the framework of the so-called 'Abraham Accords' promoted by the Trump administration and was preceded by the announcement of recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara by the former US president, a few days before leaving the oval office. Although Joe Biden's arrival cooled Morocco's expectations on the Sahara, the Israeli government and Moroccan authorities have continued to take steps to visualise this rapprochement, including a visit to Morocco by Israeli foreign minister Yair Lapid. In reaction, Algeria, a country that has had an unequivocally pro-Palestinian foreign policy since independence, has viewed these moves with concern and has accused Morocco of trying to involve Israel in regional dynamics in the Maghreb. Indeed, Morocco has for years accused Iran of providing support to the Polisario through Hezbollah and, more recently, Israeli officials have argued that Algeria and Iran are part of the same regional bloc [11].

The Maghreb and the global rebalancing of power

In a context in which the centre of gravity of the international agenda seems to be shifting towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific, it could be deduced that the Maghreb is losing importance in the strategies of the great powers. While this may be relatively true for the US, and its low profile in the Libyan crisis is the most palpable example, this does not seem to be the case for its international rivals, China and Russia, nor for the old European powers.

Beijing and Moscow are building on the links that were created during the Cold War period, for example with Algeria, but they want to go much further. To do so, they are focusing on their strengths. Russia is undoubtedly doing so in the area of security. Again, this phenomenon is not specific to the Maghreb but is consistent with Russia's strategy in Africa and the Arab world, where it is present not only through government agreements but also through private paramilitary companies such as the Wagner group. China, on the other hand, has focused on the implementation of infrastructure projects, the construction of emblematic buildings, and the intensification of trade relations whereby China imports raw materials and exports manufactured goods. It is also increasingly one of the main buyers of public debt from countries in the global south.

Russia and China's international and African expansion is not only taking advantage of the perceived withdrawal of the United States, but also filling the vacuum of a European Union engulfed by concatenated crises and weakened by division among its member states. In spite of that, European countries as a whole remain the main trading partners of the Maghreb economies, and the ties created by geographical proximity and population movements between the two shores maintain the centrality of these links. The Maghreb continues to have a strong impact on its northern neighbours, as seen in the Spanish-Moroccan crisis of 2021. The rest of the member states and the EU as a whole also remain relevant for their southern partners. What happens is that they share prominence with China or Russia and also, as explained in the previous section, with Turkey or the Gulf countries. Some countries, such as Algeria, feel particularly comfortable in this new setup,

being aware that it gives them more room for manoeuvre and that they can take advantage of a climate of greater international competition. But even a clearly atlanticist and Europe-oriented country like Morocco has understood that it had to diversify its international alliances to defend its interests. For all these reasons, it would not be accurate to speak of a process of substitution, but rather of a new, more complex reality that some have described as a process of decoupling [12].

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has accelerated these movements, because in a context of vaccine shortages in international markets, both China and Russia offered their vaccines in the Maghreb countries, not only in the form of contracts and donations but also with agreements to produce them in their own countries. It is likely that once Europe has achieved sufficient levels of immunisation, it will also strengthen cooperation on vaccines with its southern neighbours, and thus also reproduce the competition between global powers to strengthen ties with the Maghreb countries and, more generally, with the African continent. Moreover, one of the EU's main strategic bets is strengthening its relationship with Africa through a bi-continental partnership, the terms of which are to be agreed at a summit that had to be postponed due to the pandemic. Although official documents are more subtle, European leaders such as President Macron and former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker have been quite transparent in explaining how this interest in Africa also responds to the desire not to lose ground to China. In a more nuanced language, the current High Representative, Josep Borrell, has also pointed out that «for European foreign policy, there are, perhaps, only three issues that are really strategic: the extent to which we manage to shape events in our neighbourhood; the way we navigate the growing strategic competition between the US and China; and the nature of our future partnership with Africa and the type of social-political model that will prevail in that continent» [13].

In conclusion, the Maghreb's relatively peripheral position within the African continent and the Arab world has not prevented competitive dynamics from taking precedence over cooperative ones. This can be explained by the overlapping rivalries between the two main countries, Morocco and Algeria, which remain the most important factor. However, one should not lose sight of how the processes of change, both in the Arab world and in Africa, nurture the interests of several regional and global powers for the Maghreb. Whether they see it as a peripheral space or rather as a connector between different regions, they strive to consolidate their positions, expand them if possible, and in any case prevent their rivals from doing so.

REFERENCES

- 1 — For the classical definition of a regional security complex and how it applies to MENA see Buzan, B. & Wæver, O. (2003) *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press y, sobre el concepto de “región penetrada”, véase Brown, L. C. (1984) *International Politics and the Middle East. Old Rules, Dangerous Game*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- 2 — See, among others:
 - Werenfels, I. (2020) “Maghrebi Rivalries Over Sub-Saharan Africa”. *SWP Comment*, 54 [[Available online](#)].
 - Soler i Lecha, E (2020) “Ten Reasons Why the Maghreb Pivots to Africa”, *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020*, 70-77 [[Available online](#)].
 - Abderrahim, T. & Aggad, F. (2018) “Starting afresh: The Maghreb’s relations with sub-Saharan Africa”, *ECDPM Discussion Paper*, 225 [[Available online](#)].
 - Dworkin, A. (2020) A return to Africa: Why North African states are looking south, *ECFR Policy Brief*, 2020 [[Available online](#)].
- 3 — Messari, N. (2018) Morocco’s African Foreign Policy, *MENARA Future Notes*, n. 12 [[Available online](#)].
- 4 — Iraqi, F. (2020) “Maroc : la diplomatie des masques, nouvel atout du royaume”, *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2020 [[Available online](#)].
- 5 — Hernando de Larramendi, M. (2019) “Doomed regionalism in a redrawn Maghreb? The changing shape of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco in the post-2011 era”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 24:3, 506-553.
- 6 — See, among others:
 - Del Sarto, R.A. et al (2019) “Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011”, *MENARA final report*, 1 [[Available online](#)].
 - Hiltermann, J. (2017) *Tackling the MENA Region’s Intersecting Conflicts*, International Crisis Group [[Available online](#)].
- 7 — Gause, F. G. III (2014) “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War”, *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, 11 [[Available online](#)].
- 8 — For a more detailed analysis of the implication of foreign actors in the Libya conflict, see Wehrey, F. “This War is Out of Our Hands. The Internationalization of Libya’s Post-2011 Conflicts From Proxies to Boots on the Ground”. *New America*, 14 September 2020 [[Available online](#)].
- 9 — Jabbour, J. (2021) “France vs. Turkey in the EastMed. A Geopolitical Rivalry between a ‘Keeper’ of the Old Order and a Challenging Emergent Power”, *Briefings de l’IFRI*, [[Available online](#)].
- 10 — Message du Président Emmanuel Macron au Forum Moyen-Orient Méditerranée de Lugano, 29 August 2020 [[Available online](#)].
- 11 — Hamadi, R. (2021) “Pourquoi le Maroc et Israël cherchent à impliquer l’Algérie avec l’Iran”, *TSA*, 28 August 2021 [[Available online](#)].
- 12 — Ghilès, F. (2021) Why North Africa is slowly decoupling from Europe, *Opini3n CIDOB*, 680 [[Available online](#)].
- 13 — Borrell, J. (2010) “EU-African relations are a strategic issue: Here’s why”, *ECDPM Great Insights magazine*, 9(3) 26 October 2021 [[Available online](#)].

**Eduard Soler i Lecha**

Eduard Soler i Lecha is a senior researcher at CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs) and coordinator of its geopolitics and security programme. He is a political scientist and holds a doctorate in International Relations. His areas of specialisation are the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East, prospective analysis and Spanish and European foreign policies. He has led research projects in these areas, such as MENARA (Horizon 2020), and he is currently part of the JOINT project, the Jean Monnet Atlantic 2.0 network, the R+D project "The Emergence of European Sovereignty in a World of Systemic Rivalry: Strategic Autonomy and Permissive Consensus (EUSOV)" and the Consolidated Research Group "Observatori de Política Exterior Europea [Observatory of European Foreign Policy]". He also collaborates with several training programmes at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Ramon Llull-Blanquerna University, the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI) and the College of Europe in Bruges.