

Chapter 4

The Western Mediterranean: Energy and Geopolitics

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A. Introduction

In recent years, the geopolitics of the Western Mediterranean have become much more dynamic, as changes in domestic realities, foreign policies and global shifts have all brought a new layer of complexity to the region. Understanding the interplay of Western Mediterranean dynamics, particularly those between its two key actors, Algeria and Morocco, can help identify tools to navigate bilateral relationships and regional ties.

As Algeria and Morocco feature prominently in this equation, it is important to understand each actor on their own but also how they relate to each other as competitors, with tensions between them having persisted and even increased in recent years. Therefore, grasping the landscape of Western Mediterranean tensions requires a closer look at these two actors: from the domestic backdrops to their foreign policy priorities, including the Western Sahara conflict, and the nuance of their regional ambitions and postures.

Morocco has historically been a closer ideological partner to Europe than Algeria, but the Kingdom's approach to the Western Saharan issue has been viewed as aggressive by key European allies, driving a wedge in old partnerships. Algeria has been a reliable energy exporter albeit a less friendly partner. It shares various priorities with Europe including security and trade ties (energy), but between Europe and Algeria there are divergences from the ideological to the practical in the realm of foreign policy, energy transition, and domestic priorities.

Algeria and Morocco's mutual perceptions and interaction in the Western Mediterranean sphere are driven by a hard zero-sum game approach and, more recently, a mutual refusal to foster goodwill. To this, Europe has responded in the past with efforts to balance these relationships, without weakening Morocco. As Algeria becomes a key source of European energy, that balance is harder to strike, and especially as the latter's access to Russian gas supplies has decreased. European efforts to isolate Russia following its aggression in Ukraine adds an interesting dimension to Europe's relationship with Algeria, since it is a long-time Russian partner in North Africa.

These trends merit a closer understanding, particularly as the engagement of international actors has evolved in recent years, and so too have domestic realities. For Europe, this confluence of geopolitical and internal dynamics is crucial to understand, especially as this key interlocutor is grappling with shifts in its own policies and priorities.

B. Long-standing rivalries and new realities

In recent months, Algeria's increasing focus on foreign affairs and frustration about changes in the Western Sahara conflict have precipitated unprecedented tensions between Algeria and Spain. However, this stands in contrast to growing European demand for Algerian gas. Furthermore, the animosity between Morocco and Algeria peaked in 2021, driven by the Western Sahara conflict, Morocco's budding relationship with Israel, and the perception in Algeria of Morocco's regional ambitions and aggressive foreign policy. But how did these tensions come about? To understand that, it is important to look at the evolution of the two country's foreign policy agendas over the past few years, in an increasingly multipolar world, and against charged domestic backdrops.

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C. Domestic impetus

In both Morocco and Algeria, domestic dynamics play a key role in shaping foreign policy. Morocco's post-2011 path featured a concoction of limited political reforms and halting economic development to keep the country stable as others in the region faced upheavals and transitions (Ottaway, 2012). The Moroccan monarchy and its tightly run foreign policy establishment had come to view this stability, and the regime's openness and even embrace of Western ideas of free trade, liberalisation and willingness to pursue reforms, as providing a powerful selling point internationally. Furthermore, in mid-2011, feeling secure in its domestic trajectory, Morocco became powerfully cognisant of the vacuum created by Libyan President Ghaddafi's unseating and eventual death. That vacuum became greater as Algeria's regime became increasingly domestically focused during the final years of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Boukhars, 2013). The combined departure of Ghaddafi and the Algerian regime's preoccupation with domestic affairs left Morocco conscious of its potential and looking to use its assets to advance its foreign policy goals and exert influence on a regional level.

Algeria's domestic dynamics differed in the sense that the government did not face a major challenge in the form of 2011-related protests. Rather, an outbreak of protest did not come about until 2019. Prior to that, through the effective combination of incentives and crackdown, the government weathered calls for change. Two subsequent events eventually changed this. First was the gradual fall of oil prices as precipitated by the 2013 oil price downturn which limited the government's ability to spend on social policies that previously allowed the government to get away with its authoritarianism and political stagnation. This factor laid the ground for the second, the popular rejection of a fifth term for then President Bouteflika.

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President Bouteflika had been largely absent since a serious stroke in 2013 left him unable to walk and speak. Since then, debate concerning Algeria became focused on the need for a succession plan. Yet the president, who had amended the Constitution to allow himself a third and fourth term, pushed ahead with a planned fifth run in February 2012. This galvanised the population, finally bringing the unrest of 2011 to Algeria. Over the course of 2019, Algerians steadily and consistently protested Bouteflika's planned run (Boubekeur, 2019).

The Hirak movement of 2019 galvanised the population to not only reject a fifth presidential run but also turned into calls for a complete political overhaul (Boubekeur, 2020). The outcome of the Hirak movement was a reorganisation of the country's political figures without limiting the role of the military in domestic and foreign policy affairs. The transition brought Abdelmajid Tebboune, a known bureaucrat and politician, to the presidency. One of the most salient outcomes of the transition in Algeria is the extent to which the new leadership is now focused on rejuvenating the country's foreign engagement in a region marked by key changes, including the evolution of Morocco's engagement in the region, changes to the Western Sahara conflict and, more recently, the flow of global geopolitics into the Maghreb region.

D. Foreign policy postures

In the years of Algerian absence, Morocco was experiencing its own foreign policy evolution. In addition to the space ceded by Algeria and Libya, Morocco was internalising what it viewed as crucial regional restructurings that necessitated broadening its network of international partners. The perception within Morocco, and other countries, had been growing that the EU was increasingly frustrated that its engagement and spending in the Maghreb had not yet yielded the desired stability and prosperity, especially since 2011. The declared Asia-pivot of the Obama Administration compounded these concerns. And, finally, the emerging realisation that more international players are seeking a role in the Maghreb, whether that is China's ascendance through the belt and road initiative (BRI)-related investments and outreach or Russia's security role in Libya and the Sahel.

This drove Morocco to two key conclusions: the need for them to diversify their global partnerships and the need to take on their own leadership role, especially in an African context where it can forge more equal partnerships. To that end, Morocco set out trying to engage with China, Russia and India, and to open out to the rest of the African continent. In looking southward, Morocco wanted to merge two priorities: developing stronger economic ties that could pay dividends domestically; and gaining support on the Western Sahara conflict, an issue that is also at the heart of the monarchy's domestic legitimacy (Fakir, 2020). Morocco's African outreach picked up speed and intensity ahead of and during Morocco's return to the African Union (AU) in December 2016.



In re-joining the AU, Morocco now favoured engagement to shape the narrative about the Western Sahara conflict at the AU, while pursuing strong bilateral relationships including with nations that have a relationship with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The results of this, over the course of six years, proved quite promising. Morocco managed to reverse recognition of the SADR among several nations in the AU. It also managed to secure recognition of its own sovereignty claims from several African nations. By 2020, 15 African states had established consulates in the territory, indicating their diplomatic support for Morocco.

Algeria came out of the 2020 transition looking to make up for lost time and build momentum. Once the country's transition was settled, Algeria's new leadership turned its attention to rejuvenating the country's foreign policy establishment and signalled a readiness to become more active and engaged regionally. This had an important domestic dimension. By shifting its attention to foreign policies, the leadership was signalling that the period of domestic transition was over, and that the country was ready to make up for lost momentum and time. It also provided an opportunity for the leadership, which was still facing much popular dissatisfaction over the limited nature of political change, to gain popularity at home for bringing Algeria back onto the regional and international stage.

In July 2021, President Tebboune appointed Mr Ramtane Lamamra Minister of Foreign Affairs. Lamamra is a veteran of African affairs and colloquially known as Mr Africa from his years as Commissioner for Peace and Security at the AU, and rejuvenated Algeria's diplomatic corps to ensure a more active presence and reflect a more engaging foreign policy approach regionally. Through its focus on the Western Sahara conflict, Algeria wants to position itself as the guardian of the Third Way. The Arab League Summit of 3 November hosted in Algiers showcased two important elements in this regard. First was the sort of diplomatic leadership role Algeria wants to play: a major diplomatic broker that favours political solutions to ongoing regional crises potentially including the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia and, closer to home, the Mali conflict.

The second element of Algeria's perception of its own role is the extent to which it wants to breathe new life into issues that have been overlooked or issues that hold an important ideological stake for the country. During the Arab League summit, Algeria focused on the Palestinian issue and, prior to that, it hosted talks among Palestinian factions. Algeria also submitted a formal request to join the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) group, wanting to draw attention to the issues it believes the world has unfairly moved on from.

E. Western Sahara and regional rivalry

The Algerian leadership's perspective and ideological focus shapes its position toward the Western Sahara conflict and continues to view it as Morocco's Achilles heel and the best way to curb the kingdom. Morocco's own approach to the Western Sahara has continued to evolve recently, even marking a major shift from rejecting engagement with any partner that does not support Morocco's position to one that prioritises engagement to secure bilateral recognitions while the international process remains stalled. Historically, the Western Sahara conflict has been an arena where the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria played out most powerfully. Even predating that, the neighbouring countries, despite much shared history, have been on separate political evolutionary paths and developed mistrust and suspicion over the course of decades of disputes including the Sand War in 1963 (Mohsen Finan, 2020).

In the 1960s, following both countries' independence, the Western Sahara territories remained under Spanish administration, and contestation over their outcome became a preoccupying issue for Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and the then nascent Polisario Front. Since the 1970s, Morocco and the Polisario Front have been locked into a territorial dispute over who can rightfully govern the Western Sahara. The issue is one of incomplete decolonisation, border demarcation, and a disagreement about what decolonisation meant for each of these two parties (Rousselier, 2014).

The UN has managed the conflict since its early days. The process has failed to provide a resolution but has succeeded in ending fighting through the ceasefire agreement of 1991, which the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was monitoring. Beyond the ceasefire, the UN process has been largely about finding common ground for negotiations – the Polisario wants to hold a referendum in the area to decide whether those concerned want autonomy or full integration with Morocco. Now, the main sticking point of the question of a referendum is who is entitled to vote. In 2007, Morocco came up, unilaterally, with what they viewed as a compromise solution to propose autonomy. In doing so, they took the referendum talk off the table. So now, when talking about the UN process, Morocco wants to see negotiation on autonomy while the Polisario and Algeria want to negotiate on the whole issue of referendum, opening the door to independence. This, Morocco rejects.

While negotiations stalled – and increasingly held little appeal for the Moroccan authorities that are already in de facto control of nearly 80 percent of the territory – the ceasefire held, rendering this a dormant conflict. This changed in November 2020 when the Polisario and Morocco reengaged in active fighting. Warning signs of the weakening ceasefire had existed before, particularly around the Guergarat strip of land that was under MINURSO control. In November



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2020, a caravan of trucks was held up due to Polisario protests in the area. The Moroccan Moroccan army claimed to mobilise in order to disperse the protests. The Polisario Front had already been facing stronger calls from within to resume fighting as the international process had stalled. At the same time, Morocco was preparing for the breakthrough of US recognition on the Western Sahara front. This would solidify Morocco's gains made over the course of its “return to Africa”.

Over the course of its engagement on this issue, US policy has been to support the UN-led process. In practice this meant keeping the process alive without taking any steps that could weaken Morocco's hand. There have been very few exceptions to this approach overall. Morocco for its part has always sought to nudge the US closer through strong lobbying leveraging historical ties, strong security cooperation, and its long-time embrace of the US world view. The US approach changed at the end of the Trump Administration with its vigorous pursuit of Arab-Israeli normalisation (Zartman, 2020). In December 2020, the outgoing Trump Administration signed a deal with Morocco: Morocco's normalisation of ties with Israel for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

US recognition immediately presented several issues (Bolton, 2020). Among those is the impact it had on the credibility of the UN process. There is now much less impetus for both Morocco and the Polisario to negotiate. For Morocco, why negotiate an international solution when the country can gain bilateral recognitions that cement its de facto status in the territory it controls? For the Polisario also, negotiating becomes less tenable as the group has weakened over the years and faced domestic pressures to resume fighting as the population grows more desperate in the absence of a final resolution. But in addition to the damage the Trump Administration's policy change did to the international process, US recognition also shifted the parameters of what support for Morocco meant. Based on this, Morocco set out to try and convince and even pressure key allies to also declare their own recognition of Moroccan sovereignty.

F. New paradigms in the Western Mediterranean

By early 2021, Algerian leadership was increasingly attuned to Morocco's actions. The Trump Administration's decision had raised Algeria's alarm, as did Morocco's normalisation with Israel. Building tension accumulated in the August 2021 decision to cut diplomatic ties with Morocco. The diplomatic break between Morocco and Algeria has pushed concerns about North African stability to the forefront regionally and among international partners (Fakir, 2021). Alleged Moroccan attacks on Polisario targets that have involved three Algerian casualties raised concerns about the possibility of an armed confrontation between Algeria and Morocco.

The spectre of instability has increased with the rising tension, even though there have been no signs that either country would pursue armed confrontation. Concerns remain due to the decisiveness of the break and the fact that, unlike previous moments of tension, no avenues of engagement or communication remain. The range of worsening scenarios is more likely to look like the border skirmishes that occurred between Algeria and Morocco in 1976, rather than a full out border conflict like the Sand War of 1963. Even a one-off skirmish or potentially another drone attack that goes awry would have such significant implications beyond the immediate stability and safety of the areas themselves, involving national economic interests and domestic stability, and would raise global alarm. Neither Morocco nor Algeria is willing to risk such potential for domestic instability and economic disruption, especially amid difficult global economic circumstances, or undermining global perceptions of their respective stability in a volatile region.

Current circumstances together with the insights of precedent and historical contexts, point toward a lower likelihood of active conflict. However, tension is likely to remain as high as it has been. This is particularly true given that Algeria has benefited from said tension in meaningful ways. It has been able to reclaim greater regional presence and influence, in part due to the pressure it has exerted on Morocco. This hard-nosed approach also plays domestically in helping divert public opinion away from domestic issues to questions of regional security. It also indicates a degree of vigilance and a desire to push back against an ambitious neighbour, especially in the aftermath of a renewed active conflict with the Polisario and considering normalisation with Israel. The latter is a particularly powerful incentive with the rise of a right-wing government that is expected to render the daily lives and plight of Palestinians more miserable.

Regionally, the tension has also allowed Algeria to make some diplomatic gains with previously neutral actors like Tunisia. Tunisia has in the past stayed neutral on issues related to the Western Sahara. However, the combination of Tunisia's own domestic circumstances and the regional pressures have allowed the current president to draw closer to Algeria on the issue. President Kais Saied shares an ideological affinity with Algeria's civilian and military leadership. His pan-Arabist rhetoric and affinity with revolutionary ideals have endeared him to Algerian President Tebboune. Practically, however, the Algerian Government has provided important financial support to the Tunisian Government in the form of budgetary support and fuel. These two factors have facilitated greater and more natural alignment with Algeria than previously. The rest of the neighbouring countries have sought to remain as neutral as possible. This neutrality or ability to balance both relationships has proven more difficult for key European allies.

G. Europe stuck between: Spain as a case in point

Spain's diplomatic troubles with both Morocco and Algeria are evidence of Europe's challenges in the Western Mediterranean. In March 2022, Algeria suspended diplomatic and trade ties with Spain following the Spanish Prime Minister slightly shifting the country's position on the Western Sahara. Previously, Spain had nursed a range of headaches in its relationship with Morocco, most of which were Western Sahara-related (Regragui, 2022). In April 2021, Morocco discovered that Spain admitted the Polisario leader and President of SADR, Ibrahim Ghali, for treatment. This discovery incensed Morocco who claimed to have been blindsided by Spain's decision, which the country had sought to keep quiet. In the spring of 2021, Morocco-Spain relations hit a new low. Morocco withdrew its ambassador to Spain and launched media attacks targeting the then Foreign Minister Arancha González, whom Morocco blamed, directly precipitating a crisis of confidence in her leadership.

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The most impactful element of Morocco's response was using migration as a key point of leverage to pressure Spain (Garcés Mascareñas, 2021). Spain accused Moroccan border security of loosening controls, thus allowing a near total of 8,000 people, particularly minors, to cross into the Spanish towns of Ceuta and Melilla, causing a crisis on the other side of the border. Spanish security was overwhelmed by the arrivals, calling for Morocco to readmit them. The diplomatic crisis went on for months, as Spain laboured to find the right approach with a recalcitrant Morocco (Regragui, 2022). Nearly a year after the crisis, there was light at the end of the tunnel. The Spanish Prime Minister visited Morocco, vowing to restore and rebuild the relationship. A few weeks earlier, Morocco had announced that Spain supports Morocco's autonomy plan, within the framework of the UN process.

Morocco's reaction belies a disappointment that the US recognition of its annexation of the Western Sahara has not begotten more recognition from European allies. The particulars of this case, and Spain's own history as the former colonial power and administrator of the Western Sahara territory, gave Morocco the opportunity to further pressure its ally. This is the background against which it is important to understand Algeria's own reaction and response.

Spain's policy shift on the Western Sahara, going from supporting the UN process to supporting the UN process while also indicating favourability for Morocco's proposed autonomy solution, is at its core a symbolic shift that is meant to give the absolute minimum to Morocco. However, looked at from a different perspective, particularly that of the Polisario and Algeria, it is a historic shift that predisposes negotiations to a particular outcome: autonomy. It also signals to Algeria that there could be a domino effect of recognition of Moroccan



sovereignty among European partners. More importantly, it demonstrates that Moroccan pressure can succeed. This Algeria needed to push back against, leading to its own crisis with Spain.

Immediately after the news of Spain's shift, Algeria responded with its own wave of pressure. This included withdrawing its diplomatic corps from Madrid, pausing trade, and decreasing migratory cooperation and the exchange of security information. The one area of cooperation that has not been disturbed is gas sales to Spain. This is the result of two factors. Firstly, sales are often insulated from such vicissitudes through tightly binding contracts and regulations that Algeria would be reluctant to violate as it would affect its credibility and viability as a gas supplier to Europe. Secondly, the reality remains that, for Algeria, gas sales are still a matter of financial consideration and are not yet subject to geopolitical calculations.

H. Algeria: A geopolitical gas giant?

Until the Russian attack on Ukraine, Algeria was the third largest gas supplier to Europe, behind Russia and Norway. Connected to its main buyers, Spain and Italy, through the Medgaz pipeline and TransMed pipeline, Algeria's importance for European energy security has risen as Russian gas supplies dwindled. In October 2022, the EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simons visited Algiers for discussions with Algerian Minister of Energy Mohammed Akrab. This followed the European Council President Charles Michel's visit to Algiers about a month prior to discuss a strategic partnership around energy. These visits are part of European efforts to present a united front to ensure dependable gas flows from Algeria. Italy, Spain and France all import Algerian gas to different degrees and each of these countries have sought to increase Algerian gas flows.

Italy managed to secure a series of commitments to its share of Algerian gas imports during Prime Minister Mario Draghi's visit to the country in July 2022. These deals were then solidified and expanded during the visit of Italy's new prime minister Georgia Meloni in the early days of 2023. Spain, in the wake of both diplomatic tension and the shuttering of the Maghreb Europe pipeline (GME) in November 2021, saw its shares of Algerian gas imports fall in 2022 by over 35 percent according to S&P Global data. With Algerian flow to Spain through GME halted, MedGas became the only pipeline exporting to Spain supplemented by LNG. But as Spain, Italy and others contemplate the future of their energy supplies from Algeria, some key challenges remain. First, the question of whether Algeria can increase its gas output further, enough to manage sustained increases in export remains a key question. While the share of Algerian gas exported to Europe increased from 10 to 12 percent, the total amount of Algerian gas exported to Europe decreased by 6 bcm in 2022 marking 44 bcm (Butt, 2023.) Algeria's gas industry is keen to draw investments

to boost production. This had taken a back seat in previous years as the nature of gas contracts prioritized shorter term engagement, as income from the energy sector diminished, and as more urgent national priorities overtook the national budget. The gas and oil industry had lagged in terms of investment in infrastructure as demand for renewable energy grew, and as Algeria's own business climate failed to show significant improvements in recent years.

During this moment of high energy demand, Algeria is looking to prioritize partnerships that promise higher investment rates in local infrastructure, while at the same time capitalizing on recent reforms to improve its investment outlook. Algeria has been able to replenish its coffers this year alone, with its income increasing by 4.7 percent compared to previous years (IMF, 2022). These funds allow the country some fiscal room to catch up on crucial investment--potentially addressing some of the neglected areas of development, including extractive industry infrastructure, and to buy the peace domestically. Furthermore, Algeria's domestic gas usage, the sale of which is heavily subsidized, has reached a 50 percent increase from 2008 to 2018 – and continues to take up significant capacity that is not exported (Oxford Energy, 2019).

While Algeria has provided a degree of relief to consumers like Italy, for the country to kick up its gas output to meet such demand, it requires the sort of investment in the industry that Europe is increasingly reluctant to make in non-renewable sources. At least it requires making investment in fossil fuels that counter its energy transition goals. Algeria has made lofty promises to Europe to increase levels of exports to the EU beyond what it was able to supply in 2022. In a recent wide-ranging interview with energy publication MEEES, Sonatrach CEO Toufik Hakkar emphasized the 5 years \$40bn investment plan focused on bringing new reserves into production. Algeria is keen to regain ground on gas contract prioritizing partners that will undertake longer term commitments that support investment in local infrastructure and allow the company to speed up discoveries and productions. However, this sort of long-term investment in fossil fuel production runs counter to EU goals for clean energy production. While Europe's appetite to secure some of these immediate efforts to diversify away from Russian gas underpin Sonatrach's current vision and budding partnerships. Longer term divergences are likely to rise as Algeria lags in terms of investment in renewable energy. To develop it, the leadership needs to balance spending to meet the needs of extractive industry in addition to other social and political priorities. While Algeria has improved the investment climate somewhat, including increasing the ownership stake for foreign companies, these efforts are halting and tend to be deprioritized when the state does not need to make urgent compromises. Momentum around these initiatives dries up when there is little impetus to make changes with such income flowing in.

Algeria needs further reforms to its investment and business climate to allow it to draw and absorb more foreign direct investment (FDI). The business climate remains a significant impediment to investment and the engagement of foreign companies, hence few companies have been able or willing to invest and function in such a context. While the appetite for risk on the part of larger companies might be higher at this moment, this will not obscure the potential for issues down the road. Part of the reluctance for Algeria's leadership to take on such reforms is driven by the fear of their political and social implications and the extent to which Algeria views itself as a committed ideological and principle-driven actor. There is a tension in Algeria between long-held post-colonial nationalist tendencies and the realities of Algeria's current circumstances in the broader world. This is as much an impediment to reform and easing of state regulation as other practical concerns.

I. The future of Algeria: Russia vs Europe

Algeria's relationship with Russia fits in this context. The military partnership between Algeria and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Russia dates to the post-colonial era. Algerian military leadership trained with their Soviet and Russian counterparts; Algeria relies on Russian military hardware as well. What drives this relationship is not that Algeria views the world solely the way Russia does, or that Algeria supports the Russian worldview. In Russia, Algeria finds a major ally and arms supplier that neither lectures it on democracy nor one that requires a shift to its views or a compromise of its principles. A stronger relationship with the EU can potentially provide more benefits to Algeria, but the question remains as to whether this is the kind of benefits the Algerian regime is interested in. The military exercises that Algeria conducted in cooperation with Moscow on 17 November 2022, as Russia faced successive setbacks in its campaign in Ukraine, appeared to Europe to be an example of Algeria being out of touch and anti-Western, even though the country does not see eye to eye with Moscow on much of the latter's engagement in North Africa and the Sahel. Algeria has not been supportive of Russia's role in Libya, and even less so of the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Mali and potentially elsewhere in the Sahel. In a 29 December interview with the French daily *Le Figaro*, President Tebboune mused that the money Mali spends on the Wagner Group is best invested in the economy (Threard, 2022). But Algeria will continue its committed relationship with Russia with potentially one determining factor being the latter's reputation as supplier of military equipment and technology which has been undermined during the Ukraine war.

Ideologically, so long as the current ranks of the leadership stay dominant – and those who can drive a new ideological or perhaps more pragmatic engagement remain overpowered – the regime is not likely to be swayed. Rather, Europe will have to settle for limited and practical engagement where possible. France is a

key example of this sort of engagement that seeks to bypass ideological sticking points. President Macron has had to navigate a difficult period in the perennially fraught relationship. France has recently settled on the understanding that there are few arenas wherein it can engage.

In October, the French Prime Minister Elizabeth Borne took a large delegation to Algiers, following President Macron's own high-level visit to the country in August. France has been keen to heal divisions with Algeria to facilitate reform on several crucial issues: domestic narratives affecting French citizens of Algerian descent, economic cooperation that impacts them as well, and security cooperation that touches everything from domestic stability to the Sahel security situation. French leadership wants to bypass the historical grievances of Algeria – France has no appetite or political will to address those in a forthright manner – and has since chosen to engage with Algeria's younger, global-leaning entrepreneurial class to circumvent or paper over divisions with the leadership. The US is another interesting example of how to engage with Algeria. US diplomatic outreach is focused on public diplomacy. Language has been a major focus of US public diplomacy, as younger Algerian generations are interested in building English as a second language rather than French. This area, together with some promotion of common business interests, has featured prominently on the US diplomatic agenda. Another important aspect is the idea of standing witness to Algeria's cultural and social trends rather than focusing on political hectoring, or lecturing leadership either on democracy, reforms more generally, or domestic priorities, let alone foreign policy.

J. Conclusions and policy recommendations

1. Laying the ground for sustainable partnerships in the Western Mediterranean

A stable and prosperous outlook for the Western Mediterranean requires more attention from international partners, the willingness to tackle short term thorny issues that impede effective bilateral engagement, and clear reminders of the opportunity cost of their diplomatic feuds. European partners have a role to play in identifying opportunities of engagement with key partners, particularly Algeria as the country seeks to expand its foreign policy engagement. Bilateral engagement now should continue to favour practical issues, while also finding ways to advancing conflict mitigation measures and early warning mechanisms to manage potential outbursts of tension. Most European partners have been reluctant or unable to advance any sort of dialogue between Morocco and Algeria, yet the moment is ripe for opportunities especially outside official channels for engagement on multilateral issues. From Europe's perspective, a more unpredictable approach can help foster good will and promote stability in the region.

2. Lowering the tensions between Morocco and Algeria

In this area, the action Europe champions can be twofold. First, Europe can help support more opportunities for unofficial exchange and communication among civil society groups. This would be particularly important because, over the course of the diplomatic break between Morocco and Algeria, antagonistic public discourse and demonisation of the other has grown substantially. Furthermore, Europe can champion and promote trilateral Track two engagements, between Morocco, Algeria and Europe. The parameters of these engagements can focus on discussing the future of the Maghreb region with the acknowledgement that both Morocco and Algeria are likely to remain political and economic heavyweights there and need to find ways to ensure their competition does not risk engulfing the region in tensions or conflict. This is also a space where multilateral issues such as climate change, infrastructure, and global health require broad avenues for collaboration and engagement.

3. Pushing Western Sahara negotiations forward

In the meantime, the Western Sahara issue as it stands at the UN desperately needs momentum. The Special Envoy Steffan de Mistura is working to get Morocco, the Polisario and Algeria to the negotiation table. To do so, he needs international support and, more crucially, the willingness to cajole. The difficult reality of the UN process is that the parameters of success have shifted from finding a solution to keeping the process alive. This is particularly crucial given the break of the ceasefire agreement and the once again active nature of the conflict. While the Special Envoy is focused on resuming negotiations, international partners can focus on lowering the barriers to finding another ceasefire. The issue is inextricably linked to control of the buffer zone, internal pressure within the camps, and the broader regional geopolitical context within which Israel is now a strong military partner of Morocco. All of these elements will need to be put back on the table in pursuit of a ceasefire or at least a truce.

4. Investing in the younger generations

Finally, there is always ample space for engagement with Algeria's younger generations. That can be done through educational exchanges or tech and start up industry funding and support. There is ample to invest in strong engagement with youth, in Morocco and Algeria to help shape perceptions and strengthen avenues for dialogue and partnership. Beyond official discourses, initiatives that bring together youth around thematic issues from both countries not only provide opportunities to build capacity and leadership for years to come. It also facilitates a more positive outlook between Europe and younger Western Mediterranean populations, and amongst them as well.

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