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THE COST OF STRATEGIC FAILURE IN NORTH WEST AFRICA

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President Donald Trump's proclamation that the US recognises the sovereignty of the kingdom of Morocco over the disputed territory of the Western Sahara – if it is endorsed by his successor, comforts Morocco because it could encourage other states to follow suit. The unresolved Western Sahara conflict has accelerated the arms race in North Africa and cost a loss of annual GDP growth of more than 2 % annually.

Trump's decision caught the European Union off guard and demonstrated, yet again, its lack of strategic vision about a region which is vital for its security, particularly that of three of its members, Spain, Italy and France. To have an Africa policy worthy of the name, the EU needs a bolder North African policy.

The EU's position remains fully aligned with that of the UN Security Council which supports negotiations to resolve ongoing conflicts, but this has not stopped it signing trade and fishing agreements with Morocco despite the European Court of Justice ruling in 2018 that any such agreement must not include the territory of, or indeed impact any other rights of the Saharawi people.

President Donald Trump's proclamation that the US recognises the sovereignty of the kingdom of Morocco over the disputed territory of the Western Sahara fits with the unilateral wrecking-ball diplomatic initiatives for which the outgoing president is famous. The decision by Morocco to join the United Arab Emirates, Bahrein and Sudan and jump aboard the normalisation train with Israel is further evidence that the Trump brand of transactional diplomacy has moved the needle on Arab-Israeli relations, one that had been frozen for decades.

Trump's decision met with strong criticism from former UN envoys to the Western Sahara, notably former US ambassador Christopher Ross and former US Secretary of State James Baker III who described the decision as "shocking and disappointing." Back in 2004, after lack of support at the UN had scuppered two plans for settlement of the dispute he had put forward, Baker had acknowledged that "the UN can only be as effective as its member states...the member states don't want to solve this and they are not willing to use political chips to solve it, so it is not going to be solved." What was true then has been even more so in 2020.

Trump's decision, if it is endorsed by his successor, comforts Morocco because it could encourage other states to follow suit. Morocco failed in its bet on leaving, in 1994, the Organisation of African Unity then reengaging, in 2017 with the African Union (AU) in changing the fact that the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) remains a full member, whose armed wing the Polisario remains under tight Algerian military control. Far fewer countries recognise the SADR, some never have while others have either withdrawn their recognition or frozen it in a diplomatic paper chase which adds nothing to the dispute. In the same interview James Baker III noted that "the Saharawis have a claim to the Western Sahara having been the indigenous people who were

there when the Spanish pulled out but years before that of course Morocco claimed part of the territory so there are competing claims. The International Court of Justice was not willing to come down on one side or the other with respect to those claims". The logic behind such reasoning is dangerous because it amounts to questioning the validity of existing frontiers in Africa, which are the result of colonial decisions – hence they are considered as sacrosanct by the AU. Baker's historical logic would entitle Morocco to claim sovereign rights over the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on its northern coast.

Despite stating that a referendum trumped historical links, the court's ambiguity has served Morocco well as much as the impossibility of determining who is a genuine Saharawi. The Spanish colonial authorities conceded in 1977 that their census figures of 75,000 were subject to caution and Moroccan authorities have moved thousands of their own into the Western Sahara since that date. The nomadic nature of the former colony and surrounding areas in Algeria, Mauretania and Morocco make any idea of a census a virtual impossibility.

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Militarisation hinders economic development

This unresolved conflict has had two consequences which nobody disputes. It has accelerated the arms race in North Africa and cost a loss of annual GDP growth of more than 2 % annually, and the result of closed borders between Algeria and Morocco. Algeria has been able to spend hundreds of billions of dollars of its oil and gas income on weapons most of which it purchases in Russia. That said, cooperation on anti-terrorism between Algeria and the US remains close and many Algerian officers have been trained in the US over the past thirty years. Morocco continues to modernise its army, with long standing allies in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia footing part of the bill. Despite this massive arms build-up, war between the two neighbours is unlikely. The last time they skirmished was in 1975. As its exports of hydrocarbons decline and its economy stutters, Algeria will be hard put to keep up its weapons buying spree.

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about a region which is vital for its security, particularly that of three of its members, Spain, Italy and France. The EU's position remains fully aligned with that of the UN Security Council which supports negotiations to resolve ongoing conflicts, but this has not stopped it signing trade and fishing agreements with Morocco despite the European Court of Justice ruling in 2018 that any such agreement must not include the territory of, or indeed impact any other rights of the Saharawi people.

France is a special case. Since 1975 its economic and diplomatic support for Morocco has been unflinching. Spain has successfully developed its ties on economic and immigration cooperation with Morocco and Algeria. France's complex relations with Algeria have deprived the EU of some of its diplomatic and economic leverage in a region where many EU members are content to advance their economic interests and avoid broader strategic considerations. This is not the case of Germany. After the collapse of the USSR, Germany built a policy towards former eastern Europe countries which tied them to the reunited country's

economic interests. France meantime saw no objection to divisions between North African countries because it reasoned that they suited its interests best. It never really subscribed to the point made by the former head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss Kahn, that "there will be no European bloc if it does not turn the Mediterranean into an internal sea". Spanish diplomats grasped that point perfectly well but the Process of Barcelona was doomed by the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin a few weeks

before it was launched and the terrorist attacks against the US in 2001.

The suction effect of an unstable periphery, which the EU first encountered during the post Yugoslav wars, has stretched over the past thirty years from Belarus and Ukraine through the Caucasus and the Middle East, and from there to the African shores of the Mediterranean and Sahel countries. Relations with Russia remain fraught while the EU has lost much influence in the eastern Mediterranean. In the central Mediterranean, French support for the master of eastern Libya, the self-proclaimed Marshal Haftar, has pitted France against Italy and Algeria whose top military brass are not alone in viewing the lack of French support for the UN backed government in Tripoli (Libya) and its policies in Sahel countries as neo colonial. The French historian Jean-Pierre Filiu argues that, at the very least French strategy in Libya is confused. So long as it "gives the impression it supports Haftar, it will de facto encourage the Algerian and Sudanese generals to bury the democratic aspirations of their people".

One of the reasons for France's lack of coherence can be traced to its lucrative arms deals with the United Arab Emirates. One of the *quid pro quo* of such contracts has, in the words of Akram Khariief, an Algerian-based defence and security analyst, "turned France into a diplomatic sub-contractor for Emirati interests in Libya". In the current UN negotiations between warring parties in Libya, France is not one of the major participants. French diplomatic posture regionally has been weakened by its short term commercial interests. Events in Libya impact directly on Algeria. In 2013, Algeria was forced to spend billions of dollars redeploying its army from its western to its eastern frontier following the attack, and crippling for many months, in the gas field of Tiguentourine by a terrorist group based in nearby Libya. That redeployment underscored the fact that Algeria viewed the threat to the country's eastern border as more serious than that from its Moroccan one.

The court of world opinion

Another factor which is often overlooked is that the diplomatic weight of Algeria and Morocco has reversed since 1975. The court of public opinion may not have the same weight as international law, but its importance can be decisive. When the dispute started in 1975, Algeria was riding high. As leading member of the Non-Aligned Movement and staunch defender of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), its diplomatic credentials were further burnished by its role in helping release the US diplomats held hostage in Iran in 1981. With ample oil and gas resources, it had the means of its ambitions. Morocco, in sharp contrast, was just recovering from two attempts on King Hassan's life. Repeated Polisario attacks and Algerian success in getting the SADR recognised by many countries were followed by a major financial crisis when the kingdom defaulted on its foreign debt. In the CIA and Europe, some believed the monarchy would not last long.

The collapse in the price of oil in 1985 and the civil war which followed the failed attempts to liberalise the political and economic system in 1988-1992 plunged Algeria into civil war. It turned the country inwards. The collapse of the USSR signed the death warrant of an agonising Non-Aligned Movement. By 1992, a decade which had witness the Algerian President Chadli Bendjedid and King Hassan initiate a fruitful political dialogue which resulted in the building of a gas pipeline which carried Algerian gas across Morocco to the Iberian Peninsula was quickly forgotten. The twenty-year presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-2019)

and long vice like grip of General Mohamed Mediene over Algeria's intelligence services (1990-2015) provoked bitter clan infighting which hollowed out the senior ranks of the civil service and state companies such as Sonatrach, severely debilitating the bureaucratic elite. As they scared off private foreign capital and kept foreign journalists at arms' length, Algerian leaders failed to notice the growing importance of the international court of public opinion in shaping international perceptions of a country. Earlier this month, General Mediene was acquitted of conspiracy charges against the state in 2019 by the military court in Blida. His return to a position of power, which he de facto never lost despite being sacked by Bouteflika in 2015, underlines the cloak and dagger nature of a system which seems incapable of reforming itself.

Algerian leaders inadvertently comforted Morocco's long game by turning in on themselves. Algeria squandered the immense prestige, second only to Vietnam, it gained during its bitter eight-year war of independence against France (1954-1962). Its leaders failed to frame a new vision for their country which, as Robert Malley put it, "had been fabricated by myriad, uncoordinated manifestations – Algeria as surrogate for the

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revolutionary masses, Algeria as the proxy for the progressive masses, Algeria as model for the developing world". A majority of Algerians will not view the army top brass as legitimate rulers so long as they deny them a voice in how the country's future is shaped.

As Algeria sank into civil war in the 1990s, King Hassan undertook major economic reforms. He liberalised the banking sector, thus allowing the emergence of the likes of Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur and Attijariwafa Bank, which belongs to the royal family. He cut back on the rent economy which had characterised Morocco until then by signing new agreements with the EU. When his successor appointed Mostafa Terrab to run the state phosphate and fertilizer monopoly OCP in 2007, King Mohamed V helped transform the country's key industrial company from a sleeping beauty into a nimble international player. He refocused the kingdom's diplomacy away from any idea of building links with North African neighbours towards the south.

The appointment, in 1991, of André Azoulay, a Jewish banker of Moroccan origin from BNP-Paribas, as adviser tasked with modernising the kingdom's inter-

national communications, was King Hassan's master stroke. Israeli Jews have retained strong emotional links to the monarchy and international Jewish networks helped refurbish the image of Morocco abroad. Algerian leaders could not use such networks because Algerian Jews had been granted French citizenship in 1870, in what were then French *départements*. This cut them off from their historical roots in Algeria. Furthermore, Algeria's strong support for the PLO was the polar opposite of the monarchy's long-standing role as a discreet intermediary between Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

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As Morocco strived to modernise its economy and fit into a more globalized world, Algeria witnessed many of its brilliant oil and gas engineers and diplomats pass away or go into self-imposed exile. Neither Abdelaziz Bouteflika nor General Mediene had any use for reformist minded officers such as colonel Mouloud Hamrouche, the prime minister who led the reforms thirty years ago, the highly respected governor of central bank, Abderrahmane Hadj Nacer or Sadek Boussena who modernised Sonatrach and opened up Algerian oil and gas fields to foreign investment. Other modern reformist voices exist but have been silenced or lie behind prison walls. Algeria excels devouring its own children.

There is no internal dissent on Morocco's policy on the Western Sahara. The legitimacy of the ruling Alaouite dynasty is not questioned. The contrast with Algeria, where very few people have ever been interested in the Western Sahara, is striking. Most Algerians would like to be rid of the problem. Following the massive demonstrations of the Hirak in favour of democracy last year, Algerian people are focused on the fight to get the army to grant them the right to shape the future of their country. Even if the army is not monolithic, French policy in North West Africa does nothing to help those among the officer corps in Algeria who understand the need for reform, without which the legitimacy of the army will be increasingly questioned.

Spain, France and the EU need to think strategically

Trump's move might force Spain, Italy and France to reopen their strategic toolbox. Might the three countries put regional considerations of future stability before their immediate commercial interests? France is losing influ-

ence in Tunisia which recently signed a major agreement with the Pentagon to modernise its army and security forces. The Tunisian army has much stronger links with its US counterpart than with France, links which go back to independence in 1956. France was not consulted by Ben Ali before when he took power on 7 November 1987 nor was it by senior Tunisian officers on the eve of the fall of Ben Ali. Algeria and the US were. It is also worth noting that France has no arms contracts with North African countries. In Algeria, Germany and Italy are doing well on that count.

Trump's move might well offer Israel greater economic and security opportunities in Morocco in terms of investment but that risks pushing Algeria closer to Turkey, Russia and China. Such a development would harm EU's interests and do nothing to encourage Algeria to reform its sclerotic economic and political system. The Hirak and a younger generation of Algerian officers who appreciate how much the stand off between the people and the army is crippling the economy and losing Algeria regional influence will find it difficult to convince senior officers if France fails to change its strategy in the region. As happened back in 2007, with the debate on the cost of No Maghreb, Spain should position itself to offer new ideas. The failure of the Maghreb is also, as the executive director of OCP Group, Amar Drissi pointed out in 2011 (during a seminar in Cidob), a crisis of ideas and of perception. "If we want to change, we have to change twice: change the reality of our situation and change our perception of reality."

Europe is losing its capacity to shape events here as it is in the central and south western Mediterranean. Both Algerian and Moroccan leaders use the fear of the "other" to consolidate their power, but Morocco has, since the 1990s, moved ahead reforming, however haltingly. It has rebooted its international strategy. Since the end of the civil war, Algeria has lived on its now fast diminishing oil and gas income and, where its foreign policy is concerned, taken refuge in the myths of yesteryear. The EU will not move on North Africa if Spain, Italy and France do not come up with new ideas. The security of the EU depends on that of North Africa. To have an Africa policy worthy of the name, the EU needs a bolder North African policy. Trump's move was iconoclastic. But the new US administration might develop a more coherent policy on Libya.

Bold strategic thinking would allow the question of democracy in North Africa, of which the Western Sahara dispute is but one aspect, to be addressed. It might restore some order in Libya and comfort Tunisia as it attempts to put down deeper democratic roots. The cost of the continued failure of strategic thinking in Madrid, Rome, Paris and the EU will be high.