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## Reassessing the power of regional security providers: the case of Algeria and Morocco

Anouar Boukhars

McDaniel College, Westminster, MD, USA

More than half a decade after the collapse of the Libyan state and the severe destabilization of Mali, regional policymakers are still seeking the appropriate principles and patterns of management that can foster a modicum of stability in the broader regional security architecture linking the Maghreb and the Sahel. In such processes of constructing management options, the importance of regional powers in affecting regional security becomes salient, as the outcomes of their role and orientations can be determinant in building effective or failed security orders. It is thus crucial that regional powers not be identified simply based on their material capabilities (military spending, economic size, population size) but also on their behaviour in executing a wide range of security issues. First, their performance in initiating coordinated policies and achieving their security policy preferences is paramount to the provision of regional leadership. In other words, the possession of a higher degree of relative military power or economic capabilities is not the most accurate yardstick for judging whether or not a state be recognized as a regional security provider. Second, this recognition, which is largely a function of both the material and ideational capabilities that guide the behaviour of regional powers, must be earned.

The logic here is that when aspiring regional security providers are confronted with or called upon to tackle regional security problems, the relevance of their power relies on their capacity to lead, assist, cajole and persuade. To a significant extent, this leadership is reflected in their ability to influence their neighbours, reduce security dilemma dynamics with other powers in the system, and limit the intrusions of extra-regional powers.<sup>1</sup> Such outcomes cannot transpire unless underpinned by three key criteria: (a) the capacity and willingness to contribute to regional security (military aid, mediation, peacekeeping), (b) soft power resources (transnational religious belonging, cultural diplomacy, economic relations) and (c) acceptance of great power status by peer states.

Obvious as it may sound, effective leadership is also heavily contingent upon the domestic performance of regional powers.<sup>2</sup> Countries that aspire to be regional leaders but are hobbled by structural problems, incoherent political institutions and disintegrating national projects will have difficulty assuming the mantle of regional responsibility and acting as interlocutors between their region and major powers. Currently none of the much talked about regional powers in Africa (Algeria, Nigeria or South Africa) have been able to harness the potential of their capabilities for the advancement of their regions' security and peace. Ideally, given their size and economic and military potential, they should bolster their neighbours' security, political stability and economic vitality.<sup>3</sup> The reality however is that it is external interveners or under-rated emerging regional powers that assume this role. In the case of the Sahel and West Africa, it is France and Morocco that have distinguished themselves as active actors. France is leading anti-insurgent operations against al Qaeda-linked fighters while Morocco is using its soft power

assets, bolstered by its growing military capability, to spread its influence in the region. Morocco's combination of elements of soft and hard power to advance its regional aims effectively provides an interesting case study that offers a clear counterpoint to Algeria's approach to exercising state power.

This article examines the roles and orientations of both Algeria and Morocco and assesses how their foreign policy behaviour affects their regional economic and security order. Much has been written on Algeria as a regional power or pivotal state.<sup>4</sup> Very few studies, however, have provided an integral assessment of the country's actual behaviour in executing the basic auxiliary roles regional security providers take on as leaders, power brokers, agenda-setters and protectors. In this regard, the choice of Morocco whose foreign policy behaviour emphasizes the use of soft power provides an interesting comparative case to broaden the traditional determinants of how rising powers aspire to contest the mantle of regional leadership.

### A framework for regional security providers

The concept of power and the ways to measure it are central to the literature on regional security providers. The predominant model has power rooted in material capabilities. Derrick Frazier and Robert Stewart-Ingersoll argue that any state must possess a 'significant share of the region's power capabilities in order to qualify as a regional power'.<sup>5</sup> The possession of significant material capabilities (primarily military and economic power), they assert, is what determines the influence that states have relative to others in their region. Even for prominent scholars such as Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, who challenge the limitations of traditional international relations theories, the conceptualization of regional security providers remains wedded to structural factors.<sup>6</sup> This article recognizes that material capabilities are important but contends that for a state to become a regional security provider, it must meet certain preconditions, foremost among them possession of necessary material and ideational capacity; judicious employment of such power resources; and regional recognition of its leadership.<sup>7</sup> The internal dynamics of the state (political and economic system) are also critical components in regional leadership.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, the first step is to examine the regional security order in the Maghreb and Sahel with a focus on the material and ideational capabilities of its important powers: Algeria and Morocco. The second step is to discuss how each state employs its foreign policy instruments in trying to affect the security and economic order of their region. As articulated above, this article argues that successful regional powers are those that wield a mix of hard and soft power, or in Joseph Nye's words, 'smart power'.<sup>9</sup> This analytical concept fits nicely within the realist, liberalist, and constructivist perspectives of International Relations (IR). The final step is to assess the third criterion necessary for regional security providers: acceptance of leadership by the other states.

### Algeria: ascendancy frustrated

Algeria perceives itself as the foremost regional power in the Maghreb and Sahel. Hydrocarbon wealth and a sizeable geography fuel this promise to mould these overlapping spheres while acting as their focal point for the international level. Algeria boasts strong military power projection capabilities and recognized counterterrorism expertise. The 2016 Global Firepower (GFP) ranking places Algeria as one of the top African military powers in terms of total labour force, military arsenal, technological expertise and access to strategic assets. Second highest ranked in the continent after Egypt, Algeria has the largest defence budget (US\$10.5 billion in 2017)<sup>10</sup> and accounts for the largest share of arms imports to Africa.<sup>11</sup> But beyond appearances, the country has struggled to shape regional events or gain recognition for its claimed status of regional leadership. Unless a state has overwhelming material capability and the political will to force its

regional security agenda on its region, it must earn recognition of its leadership through maintaining amicable interactions with its neighbours and smartly leveraging its state capabilities to play constructive roles in conflict prevention, crisis management mediation, peacemaking and peace enforcement. As will be illustrated below, Algeria's doctrinal rigidity,<sup>12</sup> contentious relations with Morocco and France,<sup>13</sup> and ineffectiveness of the regional security institutions it developed have hindered its long quest to earn regional legitimacy for its leadership. The protracted severe illness of President Abdellaziz Bouteflika has also deprived Algeria of the internal cohesion and presidential leadership necessary to have an effective foreign policy.

Since its hard-fought independence from France in 1962, Algeria has sought to become an influential force in the developing world, mobilizing support in multilateral forums for its agenda of self-determination, inviolability of borders, non-interference in domestic affairs and sovereign equality. In Africa, its diplomacy reached its golden age during the Presidency of Mohammed Boukharouba, better known by his *nom de guerre*, Houari Boumediene (1966–1978).<sup>14</sup> His globe-trotting diplomats advanced the revolutionary enterprises in Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Rhodesia, to name but a few countries where the revolutionary winds were shaking off the colonial yoke. Boumediene also abetted Marxist, left-wing and other self-proclaimed progressive groups opposed to the pro-Western governments of Morocco, Niger and Senegal. In his desire to link revolutionary causes and movements across regions, Algeria struck alliances with other revolutionary countries such as Cuba and Yugoslavia. Algerian officers provided training and materiel to Palestinian guerilla fighters and Cuban-Allied groups in Latin America. Algiers also served as a base for guerillas from South Africa to Argentina and Venezuela.<sup>15</sup>

This embrace of diplomatic activism had waxed and waned during the tenure of Boumediene's successor, Chadli Bendjedid (1979–1992). Bendjedid was among the most travelled Algerian presidents in Africa, developing close friendships with its leaders and offering his good offices to mediate inter-state conflicts such as the one that pitted Tanzania against Uganda. He also played a major role in the formal admission of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) into the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now AU) in 1984. At the height of Bendjedid's diplomatic offensive, one former minister said, 'There were no fewer than thirty-four joint commissions for economic, scientific and cultural cooperation with countries of the continent.'<sup>16</sup> Bendjedid's tenure, however, was also characterized by the closure of dozens of embassies in Africa, mainly due to the extreme economic duress that resulted from the 1986 collapse of oil prices.

The descent of Algeria into a bloody civil war in 1992 further diminished Algeria's regional aspirations.<sup>17</sup> The primary objective of Algerian foreign policy in the 1990s was to prevent the isolation of the country and any regional or Western interference in its own internal conflict.<sup>18</sup> The military regime sought international acquiescence for its decision in January 1992 to abort the electoral process and the subsequent ruthless counterinsurgency campaign against armed Islamist groups. In the process, it wielded the same diplomatic playbook of other Arab authoritarian governments: it is either the survival of the military controlled regime or Islamist revolutionary chaos.<sup>19</sup> In some ways, the post-Arab uprisings environment seems to be reasonably similar insofar as radical Islamism is still considered the major security threat to internal stability. This 'either-or' disjunction forced Europe and the United States into a position of reluctant acquiescence. Fear of Islamists coming to power trumped deep concerns about the military's human right abuses and the brutality of its counterinsurgency methods.

The military victory against violent Islamist insurgency and the election of the former foreign minister of Houari Boumediene, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, to the presidency in April 1999 reinvigorated Algerian foreign policy. Bouteflika was determined to restore Algeria's battered image. The gradual return of peace to the country and an improving economic outlook facilitated his task. Bouteflika then embarked on reclaiming Algeria's leadership role on the African continent, evident with its involvement in brokering a peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000, the creation of a cabinet position dealing solely with Africa, and the formation of the New

Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001. The dramatic changes in the international landscape caused by the 9/11 attacks on the United States strengthened Algeria's geopolitical ambitions. Bouteflika skilfully used these tragic incidents to brandish Algeria's 'warrior legitimacy' gained during the 1990s civil war when the country was a living laboratory of counterterrorism policy and practice. Algerian officials also never passed up an opportunity to remind their international interlocutors that the terrorist attacks in the United States proved that the Algerian regime was prescient in its warnings throughout the 1990s about the dangers of radical Islam.<sup>20</sup>

The proliferation of violent extremist groups in Algeria's southern hinterland boosted Bouteflika's push to make Algeria a key power broker and partner in international and regional counterterrorism efforts in the trans-Sahara region. From the 2002 Pan Sahel Initiative, expanded into the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership in 2005, to the 2007 Africa Command (AFRICOM) based in Stuttgart, Germany, Algeria was solicited to share and use its experience in counterterrorism and counterintelligence in the fight against terrorism and organized crime. Its leadership might be 'a prickly, paranoid group to work with', as former US Ambassador to Algeria Robert Ford wrote in a diplomatic cable in 2008, but its importance in the fight against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was recognized as essential.<sup>21</sup> The security partnership between the United States and Algeria was strengthened in 2010 with the signing of a customs mutual assistance agreement and a mutual legal assistance treaty. In February 2011, the two countries created a bilateral contact group on counterterrorism and security cooperation, and Algeria's importance in the security realm is enhanced by a set of defence partnerships with several European countries, including Great Britain and Germany.<sup>22</sup>

In April 2010, Algeria attempted to assume the mantle of regional leadership in the fight against terrorism by creating the Tamanrasset-based Comité d'État-Major Opérationnel Conjoint, (CEMOC) whose main function was to bolster military and security cooperation, and intelligence and logistical coordination, between its members (Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger) and build support for a 75,000-strong joint force. Algeria also hoped to expand its operations to the 'second ring' countries of the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, and Senegal).<sup>23</sup> In the end, neither CEMOC nor the Fusion and Liaison Unit (FLU), created also in 2010 and based in Algiers, lived up to their promise of pooling intelligence and coordinating forces in the fight against violent extremist groups.<sup>24</sup> The promised troops and the communication infrastructure were never built or made available. When push came to shove in Mali in 2012, both the CEMOC and FLU were paralyzed, unable to respond to, let alone avert, the takeover of the north by militant Islamist groups.

The ineffectiveness of the CEMOC and the FLU is rooted in a number of factors, ranging from the lack of a coordinated strategy for intelligence sharing to the absence of the requisite mutual trust among participants. The other members of these counterterrorism forums complained that Algeria hoarded intelligence about armed groups in the Sahel, while Algiers suspected some of its partners, especially Mali, of intelligence leaks.<sup>25</sup> Other reasons for the failure of these initiatives were structural, namely that both the CEMOC and the FLU were constructed, in part, to ward off regional competitors (Morocco) and Western encroachments in its immediate backyard.<sup>26</sup> Algeria's attempts to block what it perceived as regional spoilers and international destabilizing forces<sup>27</sup> did not however prevent its Sahelian neighbours from bolstering their security partnerships with France and others. On occasions, wrote Alexis Arieff, analyst in the Congressional Research Service, they 'worked with each other in joint military operations instead of coordinating through Algeria'.<sup>28</sup>

The disappointment with both platforms and the reluctance of Algeria<sup>29</sup> to respond to Mali's request for military help in 2012<sup>30</sup> led five of its Sahelian neighbours (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso) to create an alternative regional platform, the so-called G-5 Sahel, whose mandate is to deal with cross-border security threats in the Sahel area.<sup>31</sup> The new organization, which will be made up of approximately 5000 troops operating on a strip of approximately 31 miles on each side of the countries' borders,<sup>32</sup> is strongly supported by France which has been

all too happy to step into the leadership void that Algeria ceded by the inadequacy of its aid<sup>33</sup> and reluctance to militarily come to the rescue of its stranded neighbours.<sup>34</sup>

Excluded from Algerian initiatives, France and the EU ended up backing platforms that operated outside the orbit of Algeria. Military interventions by France in Mali (January 2013), Niger (May 2013), and Burkina Faso (January 2015) have demonstrated the utility of its power-projection capabilities.<sup>35</sup> Its strong advocacy for the initiatives of five Sahelian countries to bolster their collective security in international forums (European Union, United Nations (UN), World Bank)<sup>36</sup> as well as its own monetary and logistical support for the G-5 plans to set up a regional war college in Nouakchottas as well as a joint counter-terrorism force<sup>37</sup> ingratiated it with countries struggling to stem the tide of violent extremist attacks.<sup>38</sup> The lesson, according to Algerian scholar Tewfik Hamel, is that while building an effective regional peace and security architecture cannot be done by marginalizing Algeria, intransigence cannot be a winning strategy either.<sup>39</sup> After all, no country has the means to tackle Sahelian challenges alone.

So far however, Algeria emphasizes its indispensability, believing that sooner or later its expertise will be solicited.<sup>40</sup> After all, Algeria has intimate knowledge of regional violent extremist networks, and is widely suspected to have a discreet and complex relationship with Iyad ag Ghali,<sup>41</sup> longstanding Touareg leader and head of a new jihadist formation in the Sahara, (The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims).<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Algeria has been an indispensable mediator in the Malian conflict, even if the Bamako peace agreement it brokered in June 2015 is 'faltering and the deal's collapse is a real possibility'.<sup>43</sup> Algeria's bilateral aid also remains useful as was evidenced in Niger in 2013 and 2015 when Algiers trained two anti-terrorist battalions of 150 men each and then promised the construction of a military barracks for the Nigerian special forces at In-Abangarit, on the common border between Algeria, Niger and Mali.<sup>44</sup>

Algeria's neighbours realize that without its active cooperation, it would be difficult to deal with intractable conflicts in Mali or Libya. In Tunisia, Algeria played a constructive role in stabilizing the post-Ben Ali political transition.<sup>45</sup> Without its support, write Christopher S. Chivvis and Amanda Kadlec, 'bolstering Tunisia's security will be very difficult'.<sup>46</sup> Algeria's election for a two-year term as chair of the African Police Cooperation Mechanism (*AFRIPOL*), whose first General Assembly took place in May 2017, is a testament to such recognition.<sup>47</sup> But it remains equally true that Algeria cannot realize its leadership aspirations by trying to monopolize security agendas and debates or, as some of its neighbours purport, withhold critical intelligence on some of the armed actors roaming its immediate neighbourhood. The latter point was brought up by French President Emmanuel Macron when he called on Algeria to fully engage in the fight against terrorism. In May 2017, French media reported that Macron had a telephone conversation with President Bouteflika where he related his desire to have a frank discussion on the Malian issue. The urge for candour and frankness was widely interpreted as Macron's exasperation with Algeria over its presumed support for Iyad Ghali.<sup>48</sup> These perceptions of Algerian behaviour have impacted its ability to construct regional consensus around the thorny security issues its region faces. Aspiring regional powers such as Algeria cannot galvanize recognition of their pivotal status if they fail to build coherent regional structures and partnerships that advance mutual interests.

Algeria's struggle to attain its regional security preferences is also attributed to its domestic travails. 'Banal as it may sound,' writes Terence McNamee, 'being successful at home is key to being a successful swing state.'<sup>49</sup> In other words, without well-managed economies and functional political systems, regional powers are bound to falter in their desire to be their regions' stabilizing force or the driving impetus behind regional economic growth or integration. Algeria's stagnant hydrocarbon economy, compounded by its domestic political stasis, have hampered its regional ambitions and reduced its clout across the continent.<sup>50</sup> Mourad Goumiri, president of the Association of Algerian Academics for the Promotion of National Security Studies (ASNA), presaged the warning signs of waning influence in 2012 when he wrote that diplomacy

based on petroleum rent-sharing is bound to lose its leverage the moment that sky-high energy prices recede.<sup>51</sup>

This point was driven home in January 2017 during the showdown over Morocco's return to the African Union. That the Kingdom successfully marshalled overwhelming support for its return into the African fold despite the manoeuvres of Algeria (and South Africa) is a testament to the scale of the shift in the balance of power in the African Union. The difference could not be starker between 1984 when Morocco left the OAU (now AU) after a simple majority of members voted to recognize the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and July 2016 when twenty-eight African countries penned a letter to the 27th African Union (AU) Summit in Kigali, Rwanda, calling for the suspension of the SADR's membership. 'It may not be the great diplomatic victory which the Moroccans claim,' said a former Algerian diplomat, 'but for Algeria it is a serious warning sign. Our traditional diplomatic levers, based on the aura of the war of independence and the direct aid we have provided, have lost their clout.'<sup>52</sup>

Algerian enterprises and business people have also lamented the country's lack of an effective economic diplomacy strategy. Algerian billionaire Issad Rebrab and the food and drink tycoon, Slim Othmani, have expressed dissatisfaction with burdensome rules, stifling regulations and other trade-related restrictions that disadvantage Algerian businesses and deter the expansion of their economic footprint in the African continent. Even when the state tries to recalibrate its regulatory landscape, the new procedures end up tightening rules on the outflow of overseas investment, said Othmani. The result is that the Algerian business locomotive is ready to roll but the government is not.

The Algerian government missed a valuable opportunity during the heyday of windfall oil revenues to carve out leadership stakes in African economies. Unlike other oil-rich states that invested their oil revenue surpluses abroad, Algeria chose not to establish a sovereign wealth fund, opting instead for the creation of a Revenue Regulation Fund (FRR) devoted to protecting the country's currency and budgets against the potential volatility of hydrocarbon prices. Most investments were geared towards the domestic market or placed in 'US sovereign bonds and deposits and tier-one banks'.<sup>53</sup> The result is that the country's aspirations of enhancing the competitiveness of Algerian businesses through the completion of promised transport infrastructures such as the Trans-Saharan highway between Algeria, Niger and Nigeria remain unsatisfied. The same disappointments apply to the non-realization of the Algiers-Abuja fibre link, the opening of new air routes and the reactivation of maritime links between Algeria and African countries.

Algerians tend to blame their political leaders for the country's unimaginative and incoherent economic strategy both at home and in Africa. As a case in point, Mourad Goumri cites the 2013 cancellation of over one billion US dollars in debt owed by 14 African countries. Instead of a debt-for-assets transaction, he said, 'The President must have been acting like the head of some clan and indulged in this gift for his own glory and personal renown.'<sup>54</sup> In more diplomatic terms, Mohamed Ould Noueigued, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Central Bank of Mauritania, preferred to see the debts converted into investments, 'which would have created jobs and in the process boosted Algeria's image'.<sup>55</sup> Examples where political whims or petty political squabbles undermine sound economic strategy abound. The latest incident occurred in 2016 when a petty breach of protocol almost derailed the African Forum for Investments and Business, an event that Algerian authorities and businesses hoped to spur on to greater trade and investment with Africa. It was also an initiative designed to catch up with Algeria's Moroccan rival whose dynamic businesses have greatly enhanced their presence in the continent.

Instead, what was billed as a great continental event in Algiers turned into a PR nightmare that saw Prime Minister Abdelmalek Selall and a number of his cabinet ministers withdraw from the conference hall in protest over Ali Haddad, an economic baron known to be close to the President and his brother, who jumped the queue and took the floor to deliver his speech ahead of the then Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra. When it comes to bad public relations,

it was hard to top the sight of the recriminations and dirty laundry of the Algerian regime played out in front of hundreds of senior African officials, entrepreneurs, and businessmen. This incident, described by the Algerian economist and editor of *Maghreb Emergent* Ihsane El-Kadi as 'the host country's attempt at suicide', exposed the structural challenges that confront Algeria's attempt to increase its linkages with Africa.<sup>56</sup>

Other missteps that undermined the forum's mantras of collective self-reliance and Algerian engagement for African prosperity and peace were the widely decried arrests of African migrants that coincided with the Algiers meeting. Ihsane El-Kadi best captured the mood in Algeria when he stated that despite the known malfunctions of the Algerian political system, 'Algerians were somewhat taken aback to discover that the standards of globalized African elites are higher than our own. And on a wide range of issues: multilateral governance, negotiation of regional exchanges, choice of projects, digital transformations.'<sup>57</sup>

These structural constraints on Algeria's African policy are compounded by the diminution of the role of the presidency in diplomacy. Indeed, it is impossible to explain Algeria's foreign policy conduct and outcomes without treating as interrelated the ills of the domestic environments and agency related issues. Diplomatic systems and processes are predicated on the centralized control of the traditional agents of diplomacy, namely the president and his networks of professional diplomats. Their effectiveness enhances their diplomacy of capabilities. In the case of Algeria, the struggles of its diplomacy are attributed to its domestic travails and the protracted illness of its president whose absence diminishes the significance of Algeria's diplomacy of status. In Africa, where diplomacy is made at the highest level, the fading of an ailing president Bouteflika into the background has been a major handicap. The immeasurable importance of the power of personal diplomacy, visits with foreign leaders, and symbolic gestures has been clearly displayed in Morocco's diplomatic offensive in Africa. To the chagrin of Algerian diplomats, the king of Morocco has led over forty visits to African countries, building rapport, nurturing trust and projecting self-confidence. Bouteflika, on the other hand, has never set foot even on the Sahel, bemoans former ambassador Abdelaziz Rahabi. Such 'absence in a world where the images and policies of a country are embodied by such strong personalities is very much a problem,' said El-Kadi Ihsane.<sup>58</sup>

Before his surprise replacement in March 2017, Algerian diplomats pinned their hopes on Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra, a seasoned career diplomat who served as the African Union's commissioner for peace and security from 2008 to 2013. True to his reputation, Lamamra brought vigour to his task, cultivating his African connections and playing crucial roles in trying to lead regional diplomacy in the Sahel. But despite the respect he earned from his peers, Lamamra never managed to fill the leadership void president Bouteflika left. This task has grown even harder with his replacement, minister for Maghreb and African Affairs, Abdelkader Messahel, whose first order of business was to escalate the feud with its Moroccan rival in October 2017 when he accused Moroccan banks and Royal Air Maroc of laundering drug money in Africa.<sup>59</sup> The remarks came at a meeting of business leaders in Algiers, where he was trying to refute claims about Algeria's inability to match Morocco's economic penetration of several countries in Africa. 'Too often, they compare us to Morocco, but there is nothing,' he said in exasperation, adding that when it comes to business strength and attractiveness 'there is only Algeria.'<sup>60</sup> Messahel's praise of Algeria's business strength and comparative attractiveness earned him applause from his audience even if the bitter reality remains that without recasting its political institutions and reshaping its economy, the country will continue to perform well below its potential.

In summary, and based on the analytical tools this article uses to identify and operationalize regional power – possession of necessary power resources, judicious employment of foreign policy instruments (material and ideational), and acceptance of leadership – Algeria has not yet met the full criteria of regional leadership. It has struggled to convert its material resources into

regional influence and its claim for leadership is contested and not recognized by other states in the region.

### Morocco: soaring ambition

If Algeria provides a case of a regional power that has struggled to translate its significant natural resources and huge expenditures on defence into effective leadership in the Maghreb and Sahel, Morocco offers a case study in how an aspiring regional security provider can turn its soft power assets into effective tools for regional influence.<sup>61</sup> Morocco has shrewdly displayed its ideational resources in its attempt for regional power projection. It has also gradually become more economically and culturally interconnected within its region.

Morocco's skilful mobilization of religion as soft power and the comparative advantage of its firms (including banking, insurance, and telecommunications), industrial companies (mainly phosphates), increasingly sophisticated manufacturing (aerospace, electronics, and cars) and rising capabilities in renewable energy increasingly place the Kingdom at the forefront of several issues affecting its region and beyond.<sup>62</sup> Morocco's military capability, even if less significant than Algeria, provides a further strategic boost for the country, as demonstrated by the November 2017 launch of its first observation satellite, making the kingdom 'the first African nation to acquire such a powerful surveillance aircraft'.<sup>63</sup> Algeria is preparing to launch its own satellite from China but Morocco's Earth observation satellite is believed to be much more powerful, giving the Kingdom 'the means to gather intelligence and an independence that no one else has in the region'.<sup>64</sup> The satellite, which will be used to monitor the country's borders and coastline as well as desertification processes, drought and agricultural activities, will certainly be deployed for intelligence applications in the Sahel.<sup>65</sup> Morocco's intelligence services are already active in some parts of the Sahel, and its telecommunication firm Maroc Telecom, which has six African subsidiaries, is suspected of gathering intelligence information on extremist groups in the countries it operates in.<sup>66</sup> In the summer 2016, Morocco interceded in the fight against Boko Haram by providing Niger with military equipment.<sup>67</sup> The return of Morocco to the AU will further impact this evolution of the Moroccan military's role in the Sahel and beyond.

Morocco's place in Africa has always been gradual, even if it has gained more leverage since Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999. This has continued despite the socio-economic problems as well as the security concerns that affected the regime during the 2011 protests, as both Mohammed Masbah and J.N.C. Hill discuss in this special issue. The grandfather of Mohammed VI, Mohammed V, was largely recognized in the African continent as an Africanist and anti-imperialist activist.<sup>68</sup> In 1960, Morocco participated in the first peacekeeping operation in the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). At the time, Mohammed V backed African nationalist leader and father of the Congolese nation, Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated in January 1961. In the same year, after the failure of the UN peacekeeping operation in the Congo, Mohammed V convened the Casablanca Conference that adapted an African charter whose 'anti-colonialist, anti-racial segregation' terms and obligations served as the basis for the establishment of the OAU on 25 May 1963.<sup>69</sup>

When King Hassan II came to power in February 1961, he tried to pursue his father's African legacy, even if his tenure was far more tortuous. Hassan II famously compared Morocco to a tree whose roots lie in Africa and branches in Europe. A few months after he became King, he created a Ministry of African affairs and in 1962 hosted Nelson Mandela who reportedly obtained from Rabat the delivery of weapons to support the African National Congress (ANC). Over time however, Hassan II grew disenchanted with what he perceived as the rigid ideological stand of several presidents on the continent. The eruption of the Western Sahara conflict in late 1975 exposed the continent's deep political, economic and ideological cleavages between the moderate countries aligned with Morocco and the so-called progressives backing Algeria.<sup>70</sup> Morocco's

withdrawal from the OAU in 1984 in response to its admission of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic intensified this divide.<sup>71</sup>

Since then, Morocco's primary concern has always been the fear of being penned in by a ring of encirclements by Algeria in the east and Spain in the north.<sup>72</sup> Its complicated relationship with Mauritania to the south has made alignment with Francophone Africa an absolute necessity in Morocco's anti-encirclement diplomacy.<sup>73</sup> With the ascent of King Mohammed VI to the throne in July 1999, Morocco imbued the partnerships that King Hassan II established in West Africa with significant economic value, beyond the traditional close personal relationships<sup>74</sup> and security partnerships that his father favoured. The Kingdom's recent pivot to Anglophone Africa is driven by the same spectre of geo-strategic encirclement, as Morocco's trade relations with the EU have become entangled in court rulings and legal considerations over the Western Sahara.<sup>75</sup> The imperative for the Kingdom to reduce its dependence on the European market and rebalance towards Africa's fastest growing economies has never been greater.

Since Mohammed VI ascended to the throne, he has been Africa-trotting, promoting the attractiveness of Moroccan businesses and developing the vehicles for a strategic partnership of complementary strengths, visions and solidarity. Every royal visit is linked with dozens of economic and investment deals in banking, insurance, telecommunications, mining, renewable energy, agricultural sustainability, fishing, and infrastructure. The world's leading phosphate exporter, Morocco's Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), Maroc Telecom, Royal Air Maroc, real estate developer Addoha Group and Attijariwafa Bank are well-implanted in several African countries. Three Moroccan banks – Attijariwafa Bank (AWB), Groupe Banque Centrale Populaire (BCP) and Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur (BMCE) – for example dominate the sector in Francophone West Africa.<sup>76</sup> Through these corporations and the recent creation of the Casablanca Finance City (CFC), Morocco aspires to become a regional financial platform and gateway to Africa's fast-growing markets.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, part of the allure of Morocco is the prospects it offers of South-South triangular cooperation in which the Kingdom uses its comparative advantages to mobilize the resources of its allies in the Arabian Gulf and partners in the developed world to invest in Africa.

Morocco's critics however fear that its privileged status with the EU and its growing strength as a manufacturing hub for several European countries might contribute to flooding the West African market with Moroccan and European goods. This is one of the points held against Morocco's drive to join the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) where membership would provide tariff-free access to products originating from Morocco. Morocco counters that its investment policy and desire to join ECOWAS is not driven by predatory aims. As one Moroccan official stated, 'the tariff dismantling process will be done in a progressive way, similar to what Morocco experienced in its association agreement with the European Union.'<sup>78</sup> In other words, there will be a transitional period that allows states to adapt their economic policies and regulations and maximize the win-win potential of economic integration. This 'will be a marriage without divorce and without Brexit,' said the president of the commission of the ECOWAS, Marcel de Souza.<sup>79</sup>

So far, high tariffs, economic structures, weakness of infrastructure and financial markets, and the non-application of the 2008 free trade agreement between Morocco and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) have hampered trade flows with Francophone Africa. Currently, ECOWAS accounts for 50 to 60 per cent of Moroccan exports to sub-Saharan Africa, but its share in Morocco's total exports (3.8 per cent in 2016) remains minuscule.<sup>80</sup> The lack of business complementarity has deprived the region from new sources of economic development, experience-sharing, and financing, particularly in the critical areas of cross-border infrastructure in energy and transport. To be sure, there has been in recent years some improvement in regional connectivity. For example, Royal Air Maroc flies 170 weekly flights to more than 30 destinations on the continent. Morocco's Tanger-Med container port also assures weekly connections with nearly 35 ports in West Africa. There have also been efforts to increase export

insurance and improve access to trade finance lines of credit for the guarantee of payment of commercial transactions.<sup>81</sup>

Another criticism directed at Morocco's engagement in West Africa is its investment policy which has been geared towards non-productive sectors (banking, telecommunications), allowing Moroccan groups such as BMCE Bank of Africa to reap significant benefits (31 per cent of Group net income in 2015). In the last two years, however, the share of investments in industry jumped significantly, reaching 70 per cent of Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa in 2016. These projects, notes Moroccan Minister of Economy and Finance, Mohammed Boussaid, range from the pharmaceutical industry in Ivory Coast and Rwanda to the construction of trucks in Senegal, the agri-food industry in Guinea, Benin, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Mauritania and Tanzania, cement – in some ten countries – and construction of fertilizer plants.<sup>82</sup>

For Morocco, joining ECOWAS creates win-win results that both boost political and military cooperation in addressing security threats and enhance closer economic cooperation that creates job-generating growth and in the process prop up each country's stabilization efforts. The budding Nigerian Moroccan partnership is held up as an example of the potential benefits that regional economic partnerships can yield. The proposed Nigerian–Moroccan gas pipeline that will stretch along the West African coast all the way to Europe has the potential to boost electrification across West Africa. Another model of south-south cooperation is the growing partnership between the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority and Morocco's OCP. Morocco is helping boost fertilizer production in Nigeria as well as exploring and upgrading phosphate reserves in the country. The Group Managing Director (GMD) of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Dr. Maikanti Kacalla Baru, noted that the supply of Moroccan phosphate to Nigeria is breathing new life into agriculture by making fertilizers available and affordable. 'I am happy to inform you that this development has translated to the creation of about 50,000 jobs and led to the production of about 1.3 million tonnes of fertiliser in the country,' Baru stated.<sup>83</sup>

The growing rapprochement between Morocco and Nigeria has given new momentum to Morocco's self-professed sensible, pragmatic policy-making that adapts to specific circumstances. Despite strong opposition to Morocco's entry into ECOWAS from some business associations, political leaders and lobbyists who fear negative impacts on Nigeria's leadership position in the subregion, the Nigerian government seems to understand that Morocco's presence will give more weight to the community of West African states. Economic interdependence also tends to moderate political conflicts, as seen in Nigeria's recent softening of its support for the Algerian-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), a Sahrawi independence movement founded in 1973 and based in Algeria.

The same economic strategy and political pragmatism guides Morocco's foray into areas that extend beyond West Africa, where Morocco is already the first investor, towards regions long considered unfamiliar or unfriendly due to their support of the Polisario. Since Morocco withdrew from the OAU, it has taken a hardline position on what it deems its inviolable sovereign rights. Over the past three decades, the question of the Western Sahara has been a litmus test for Moroccan–African relations. The re-orientation of Moroccan foreign policy towards countries that still recognize the Polisario required the Kingdom to untangle its own censoring parameters that have constrained its diplomatic options to countries supportive of its rule over the Western Sahara.

The recent warming of relations between King Mohammed VI of Morocco and President Paul Kagame of Rwanda confirms this new diplomatic organizing principle of political alliances undergirded by dynamic and pragmatic insights that trump the ideological dogmas of previous eras. Kagame presides over a small landlocked country that is trying to rebuild its economy from the ruins of the devastating ethnic strife that tore the country apart in the mid-1990s. His technocratic rule, unconstrained by democratic forms, fit in perfectly with the technocratic styles of policy making that Mohammed VI favors.<sup>84</sup> Both leaders' priorities are aimed at reinforcing South-South partnership through investment promotion and the implementation of big projects. It

therefore comes as little surprise that Moroccan companies are finding a warm welcome in Rwanda for their investments in agriculture, housing, the banking sector, new technologies, air transportation, and renewable energy.

In 2016, Attijariwafa Bank, one of Morocco's biggest banks with subsidiaries in Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Mali, among other countries, bought Rwanda's third largest bank, Cogebanque. Attijariwafa is following in the footsteps of its Moroccan counterpart, BMCE Bank, which, in 2015, acquired through its affiliate, Bank of Africa Group, a 90 per cent stake in local micro-finance bank, Agaseke Bank. In the sector of affordable housing investment, Hicham Berrada Sounni, the CEO of 'Palmeraie Développement', has committed to building 5000 economical houses in Kigali. Morocco's OCP will build a blending unit in Rwanda to produce fertilizers. The diplomatic dividends of this rapprochement with Rwanda bore fruit as early as 2013 when Kigali helped block the project of extending the mandate of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to Human Rights in the security council, where it served (2013–2014).<sup>85</sup>

Morocco's South-South economic outreach has also targeted the second most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia. In 2016, OCP forged a position of strength in Ethiopia's agriculture sector, which accounts for 90 per cent of its exports and 45 per cent of its gross domestic product.<sup>86</sup> As the world's largest phosphate exporter, OCP sealed a major deal to build a \$3.7bn fertilizer plant in Dire Dawa, 250km east of the capital Addis Ababa. 'This partnership is firmly rooted in a shared vision of Morocco and Ethiopia's leadership that African natural resources should be harnessed to drive Africa's development and common prosperity,' said Mustapha El Ouafi, managing director OCP Group.<sup>87</sup> Mohammed VI's private company, Managem, is also engaged in the exploration of gold mines in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz on the border with Sudan. These economic investments have made Ethiopia the sixth-largest commercial partner of Morocco, ahead of Mauritania and Senegal.

In the rest of Anglophone Africa, SAHAM Group's Insurance division has established a strong presence in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Mauritius. Founded in 1995 by Moulay Hafid Elalami, the current Minister of Industry, Trade, and New Technologies, the group partnered in 2015 with South Africa's largest insurer Sanlam to become 'a truly Pan-African financial services group operating across Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone markets'.<sup>88</sup>

Despite this growing dynamism of Moroccan businesses in Anglophone Africa, their efforts to penetrate this market will be challenging. For one, the region, says Paul Derreumaux, founder of Bank of Africa, has a different culture and way of doing business.<sup>89</sup> Moroccan banks will have to compete with British and South African Banks who enjoy a strong and well-established presence. Even OCP which has created subsidiaries in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia will have to confront the competition of Chinese and American fertilizer distributors. For now, however, these challenges seem not to hinder Moroccan businesses or diplomacy from seeking new economic and political partnerships. Quite the contrary, Morocco's investment diplomacy is steering the process of normalization with Rwanda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, South Sudan, and Zambia.

As a complement to this expansion of the economic footprint, Morocco has been trying to strengthen its nation branding by boosting its appeal on the continent. The country's scholarship programme pays for 8000 African students to study in Moroccan universities.<sup>90</sup> By facilitating the establishment of major French higher education institutions, the kingdom aspires to attract sub-Saharan students and position itself as a hub for university education in Africa. 'The training of future African senior executives is strategic for Moroccan "soft power" in Africa, where the kingdom has strengthened its development policy and multiplied economic partnerships,' said Ghaliya Kadiri of the French newspaper, *Le Monde*.<sup>91</sup> Currently, there are 18,000 students from sub-Saharan Africa enrolled in programs that range from business, political science, and information technology to aerospace engineering, architecture and design. Closer and more accessible than France, the country offers an educational and cultural context that facilitates the integration of

African students. Moroccan businesses in Africa provide another allure as they offer the promise of internships and potential jobs for African students.<sup>92</sup>

The expansion of Moroccan media cannot be ignored either. Both state and private media groups such as Medi 1 radio, Hit Radio and Eco Media have made inroads into Gabon, Burkina Faso, Senegal and other countries. In 2014, Morocco created the Federation of Atlantic African Press Agencies (FAAPA) which comprises some 20 African news agencies that operate under the coordination of the Moroccan News Agency (MAP).<sup>93</sup> The FAAPA is financed by the Moroccan state as is the African Training Centre for Journalists. Morocco's ambition to shape the narrative of African news can also be seen in the acquisition of the pan-African magazine *Les Afriques* by Moroccan businessman, Abderazzak Sitail.<sup>94</sup>

This soft power push extends to other domains, including financing African cultural activities. The Moroccan Cinematographic Centre (CCM) has provided funding for several African projects and assisted in the co-production and post-production of African films.<sup>95</sup> Morocco has also invested in humanitarian aid, conducting vaccination campaigns, donating food crop seeds, deploying mobile hospital units to affected areas, building a military hospital and a cancer institute in Guinea and Gabon<sup>96</sup> and helping establish a funding mechanism for 7000 small farmers in Senegal.<sup>97</sup> Morocco's immigration policy forms another part of the effort to polish the country's image. In December 2016 when Algeria expelled some 1500 African migrants to Niger, Morocco dispatched humanitarian aid to them and announced in great fanfare the second round of regularization of the status of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants.<sup>98</sup> In recognition of Morocco's leadership in migration issues,<sup>99</sup> the African Union charged Morocco's king Mohammed VI with coordinating the migration issue within the AU.

Morocco has also engaged in what the Chinese call 'host diplomacy', holding large-scale events such as the 2016 Marrakesh Climate Change Conference (COP22), dubbed by Moroccans COP Africa, to advocate for Africa's farmers and showcase its initiatives in improved soil management and adaptation of African Agriculture (AAA).<sup>100</sup> Africa boasts the largest share of arable land in the world (60 per cent) but its agricultural productivity is more than four times lower than in high-yielding countries.<sup>101</sup> Its fertilizer applications are inefficient and more often than not lack adaptability to local social conditions and crop requirements. This makes the rational use of fertilizers ten times lower than the low average of countries with high agricultural output.<sup>102</sup> The AAA initiative, supported by regional and international financing solutions and insurance, intends to raise agricultural productivity through the development of the most suitable management practices that help improve soil fertility and fertilizer use and optimize the productive use of water and energy in agriculture in fifteen African countries.<sup>103</sup>

An example of this South-South partnership is the pooling of the industrial assets of Morocco (phosphate) and Gabon (gas) to create one ammonia production unit and one phosphate fertilizer in Gabon as well as two phosphoric acid production units and one phosphate fertilizer in Morocco.<sup>104</sup> OCP estimates that this industrial project has the potential to cover more than 30 per cent of the continent's total demand for adequate and affordable fertilizers. OCP is engaged in similar strategic partnerships to power agricultural sustainability and improve food security through the building of mega fertilizer plants adapted to local soils in several African countries, most notably Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. Since 2012, the Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture has also been experimenting with the manufacturing of bio-organo-phosphate (bop) fertilizer and its use in both Morocco and Mali.<sup>105</sup> The end goal is to help contribute to Africa's Green Revolution, a plan that necessitates the use of more than 10 million tonnes of phosphate fertilizers. As King Mohammed VI said in his February 2014 speech in Abidjan, 'Africa must trust Africa.' The continent, he affirmed, 'needs less foreign aid and more mutually beneficial partnerships.'<sup>106</sup>

The dramatic rise of violent extremism in the Sahel provided Morocco with another opportunity to tap into a key instrument of its soft power appeal: religion.<sup>107</sup> The nerve centre of this symbolic soft resource is the Tidjania Sufi order which boasts millions of adherents in West

Africa and whose most visited holy site, the shrine of its founder Ahmed Tidjani who died in 1815, is based in Fez.<sup>108</sup> Morocco has skilfully used this heritage and its historic links to Muslims in West Africa to nurture powerful networks of influence.<sup>109</sup> For years, Morocco has been financing the construction of mosques, restoration projects of religious edifices, and provision of copies of the holy Quran in many countries including recently in Tanzania and Madagascar.

Mohammed VI has made himself promoter-in-chief of the Kingdom's spiritually oriented and tolerant brand of Islam, known as the Sufi-Maliki tradition, as an alternative to the extremist ideologies infesting the Sahel. The country's multimillion-dollar Mohammed VI Institute for training Imams, inaugurated in March 2015,<sup>110</sup> and the Foundation for African Ulema constructed in 2016 are examples of how Morocco is attempting to shape Islam in Africa.<sup>111</sup> The next big challenge for Morocco is to tailor its religious education so that it is better attuned to local contexts and practical experience. This would reinforce its credibility and attraction in a pluralistic religious market that abounds with youth looking to fill their emptiness with meaning, recognition, and social affirmation.

By many measures, Morocco's bet on sub-Saharan Africa has paid a handsome geopolitical and economic dividend. Today, Moroccan diplomacy is in exuberant mode. The start of 2017 saw the radiating effect of its diplomatic activism unfold within the halls of the AU. The kingdom's hard-fought return to the AU after a 33-year break is the fruition of a concerted, flexible and multi-faceted diplomatic offensive that saw the Kingdom effectively mobilize an arsenal of diplomatic, economic and religious resources to solidify its old alliances while changing the dynamics of its frosty relations with countries it long shunned because of their support for the Polisario.

For decades, Morocco has sought to maintain influence in the African Union while opting for the empty chair. Yet in recent years, it has become clear that an empty chair ceded the strategic advantage to its adversaries. The only recourse became to reverse decades of state doctrine, the cornerstone of which was to expel what Morocco calls a 'phantom' state, the SADR, from the only organization that recognizes it in the world. The decision to join a body that contains the SADR as a member required significant political courage and strategic foresight, even if Morocco will not cease its efforts to put an end to what it considers an oddity of international politics.

The return of Morocco to the AU is bound to shake up the organization, especially now that the flagship reforms of the AU, elaborated by its president Rwandan Paul Kagame, entered into force in 2018.<sup>112</sup> Morocco is determined to play a significant role in their implementation by integrating the structures of the AU, three of which are particularly coveted by the Kingdom: the Peace and Security Council (PSC) which it successfully integrated in April 2018, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), and the Pan-African Parliament (PAP).<sup>113</sup> It is these key structures that treat the most important and sensitive political and security issues in Africa, especially the Western Sahara dispute. Morocco's immediate goal is to nudge the AU towards neutrality, and then to gradually garner support for a win-win political solution to the Western Sahara dispute. With its new style of assertive diplomacy tempered by pragmatism, the Kingdom does not want the dispute to affect its drive to expand the market for its products and firms in Africa. Now that Morocco has flexed its diplomatic and economic muscles to regain its seat at the African Union, the Kingdom faces a new context where it must defend its core interests while at the same time proving that it is a responsible stakeholder whose membership benefits the AU, rather than deepens the divides of the continent.

Overall, Morocco's regional performance in the Maghreb-Sahel is mixed. If judged solely on the basis of its power of attraction, then the Kingdom certainly fulfils a key criterion of regional leadership. Its economic and trade policy, buttressed by its religious and cultural diplomacy, have earned it a lot of influence. The big challenge for Morocco however is that its ambitions for regional leadership are vehemently contested by Algeria, which constrains its manoeuvrability to act as a stabilizer force, especially in areas that Algeria deems as its sphere of influence (Libya, Mali, and Niger). In the end, this conflictive regional interaction impedes both countries' claim to leadership.

## Conclusion

This article pushed for a reconceptualization of power in a way that goes beyond the old conventional measures of power that stresses the pre-eminence of military capabilities in determining regional power status and shaping security orders. Successful regional leaders are the ones that can convert their power resources into regional influence, shifting actions and preferences of member states in directions that are well-coordinated and that they can steer and monitor. Such characteristics of regional power leadership are especially important when the sources of crises are acquiring a cross-border dimension that require regional solutions. In the case of the Maghreb and the Sahel where there is growing recognition of the multidimensional nature of threats, legitimate contenders to regional leadership are the ones that can combine the possession of military capability with the tools of soft power.

Such a combination, undergirded by domestic stability and political competence, is difficult to achieve, as the case of Algeria clearly illustrates. Despite its relatively high score in the conventional measures of hard power, Algeria has struggled to translate its significant natural resources and huge expenditure on defence into effective regional leadership. Its aspirations have been frustrated by its own moribund political system and its inability to command wide regional support for its security agenda within its own region. In the end, successful regional powers are those that manage to harness their internal stability, and comparative strengths. The Moroccan case is illustrative of a rising power that has made important strides in leveraging its soft power attributes and domestic stability to its advantage. The Kingdom still has a long way to go to fully reach its potential and achieve acceptance as a regional security provider, but the attraction of its soft power and growing military capabilities make it a serious power to contend with.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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