

Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI: Balancing Diversity and Respect

by Nizar Messari

On 30 July 2020, King Mohammed VI of Morocco celebrated the 21st anniversary of his reign. A look back at his twenty plus years in power will demonstrate how foreign policy was a key area of interest and dedication for the King.

Aside from Morocco's growing focus on Africa, its efforts to diversify relations and dependencies, as for example indicated by the deepening links with Russia, China, India, Brazil among others, and the adoption of a more combative and self-confident foreign policy, are further examples of Morocco's shifting foreign policy over the past two decades.

The pivot to Africa can be considered the clearest novelty. Not that the continent was absent from Moroccan foreign policy in the first four decades of the country's independence: Morocco was a founding member of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and has maintained strong links

with several African states (such as Senegal, Gabon and former Zaire) and leaders (such as Patrice Lumumba from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Ahmed Sékou Touré from Guinea, to mention a few).

Yet, the new focus on Africa brings three key differences when compared to the first decades of Morocco's independence: Africa has progressively replaced the Arab world in Morocco's priority scale, Morocco is no longer conditioning its diplomacy in Africa on the issue of the Western Sahara, and finally, trade and business have become key components of Morocco's presence on the continent.

As for the first element, Morocco is not renouncing the Arab component of its identity as much as it is reclaiming its African identity. This was enshrined symbolically in the 2011 constitution, when other dimensions were added to Morocco's Arab-Islamic identity in the

Nizar Messari is Vice President for Academic Affairs at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (Morocco), where he teaches in the International Studies programme.

preamble of the constitutional text with a special mention of the country's deep African roots.

In another symbolic but indicative series of events, King Mohammed VI first criticised the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) during a January 2017 speech to the African Union (AU), declaring it an organisation without a future,¹ and soon thereafter applied for membership with the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS), underlining the southbound re-orientation of Morocco's foreign policy.²

Until then, and since the mid-1970s, the Western Sahara conflict had been the most important issue in Moroccan foreign policy. Morocco believes that any solution should pass through a change in Algerian policy and positioning: as long as Algeria supports the separatist movement, there will be conflict, and Morocco's relations with Algeria will suffer.

This is what makes the second aspect of Morocco's new African policy – its desire to develop diplomatic ties throughout the continent and diversify relationships, regardless of the position of those states on Western Sahara –, the all more relevant.

¹ The full speech is available here: Kingdom of Morocco, *Full Speech of HM the King at 28th African Union Summit*, Addis Ababa, 31 January 2017, <https://www.maroc.ma/en/royal-activities/full-speech-hm-king-28th-african-union-summit>.

² For a comprehensive analysis to Morocco's bid to join ECOWAS, see: Imru Al Qays Talha Jebbil, "Morocco-ECOWAS: Good Intentions Are Not Enough", in *MIPA Articles*, 13 February 2020, <https://mipa.institute/7323>.

The mere fact that Morocco applied and re-joined the African Union in 2017 underlines that Morocco was ready to set aside the position of multilateral organisations and other states regarding Western Sahara and explore relationship options with them.

It is in this context that the re-opening of embassies and the appointment of ambassadors to Angola, Mozambique, South Africa and Nigeria (and the appointment of experienced and highly prestigious diplomats in the latter two states) should be understood.

Meanwhile, Morocco's important economic investments and partnerships with Ethiopia (with a fertilizer plant worth 2.4 billion US dollars) and Nigeria (with a 5,000 km long natural gas pipeline that requires several billions of dollars of investments), as well as the expansion of Moroccan companies on the continent, from mining to the banking sector and from telecom to construction companies, reinforced this reorientation in Moroccan foreign policy. Between 2000 and 2015, Morocco's trade with the rest of the continent grew by 12.8 per cent and so too did its positive trade balance.

On top of the significant rise of importance of Africa, Morocco has also sought to limit its traditional dependence on Europe and the West, deepening links with China, Russia, India, Brazil among others. Suffice to say for instance that Morocco's trade with Brazil has been growing by an average of 30 per cent every year since 2015, and Chinese tourists were – in the pre-COVID 19 world – the single fastest growing group in Morocco's tourism

industry since 2016, when Morocco scrapped visa requirements for Chinese visitors.

From approximately 10,000 Chinese tourists in 2015, Morocco hosted 132,000 in 2018.³ Besides consistently being present in forums such as China–Africa, India–Africa and Russia–Africa, Morocco has also managed to deepen its links with almost all members of the BRICS (with the exception of South Africa), seeking new markets, new investors and new economic partnerships with those states.

Significantly, although Morocco would have hoped for some Russian support on the Western Sahara issue in the UN Security Council, which never materialised, Morocco kept developing and reinforcing its links with that country. This was clear in the wake of the King's visit to Russia in 2016 and the agreement between both countries to establish a Strategic Partnership which, for instance, resulted in a 13 per cent growth in trade between both countries in 2018 alone.⁴

The message Morocco sends to the West through this diversification of partnerships is that it cannot be taken for granted, and that it has other credible options on the table. In sum, while Morocco clearly does not

consider itself a power that can play a major role on the global stage, it wants to ensure that global shifts do not compromise its interests and therefore is working to reduce its vulnerability to eventual changing priorities in the US, Europe and the EU.

The third major change in Moroccan foreign policy – being more affirmative in external relations – became more evident over the last decade. In situations of crises with its partners, Morocco, which used to be subdued and adopted low key positions, no longer hesitates to retaliate and make its voice heard.

In successive episodes with the US, France, Sweden and the European Union, Morocco did not hesitate in taking a stand and playing its cards, as limited as they could be, in order to defend its vital interests.

The episode with the US occurred in 2014, under the Obama administration, when the US's former UN ambassador Susan Rice introduced a draft resolution that expanded the mandate of the UN mission in the Western Sahara to include human rights.

In response, Morocco immediately froze imminent joint military training exercises with the US and put pressure on the US State Department to amend the draft resolution. Morocco eventually succeeded in reverting the US decision and the crisis was quickly circumvented, but in that occasion, Morocco signalled that it was ready to play the cards it has in order to defend its interests.

³ For more details on Morocco's strategic objectives towards Chinese tourists, see: El Mehdi Berrada, "Le Maroc veut devenir une destination de choix pour les touristes chinois", in *Jeune Afrique*, 12 September 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/828449/>.

⁴ For more on Morocco's relations with Russia, see: "Le Maroc et la Russie affichent des relations au beau fixe", in *La Tribune*, 26 January 2019, <https://lnt.ma/?p=171251>.

Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI: Balancing Diversity and Respect

With France, the crisis came during a French police operation in 2014 that tried to hand the head of Moroccan intelligence a subpoena while he was in France (and dining at the Moroccan embassy, which is formally Moroccan territory). Morocco immediately suspended its justice and intelligence cooperation with France, which weakened the French police at a time it was fighting the so-called Islamic State and Al Qaeda attacks on its territory.

It was only after clear and legally binding assurances were given to Morocco that its representatives could not be targeted by legal procedures in any way or manner in France, that Morocco re-started its justice and intelligence cooperation with Paris.

The case with Sweden happened in 2015, when the Swedes began considering the possibility of recognising the Sahrawi Republic as a sovereign state. Although those discussions were internal to the Swedish parliament, Morocco took the risk seriously. It thus launched a diplomatic counteroffensive and also suspended the opening of an IKEA store in Morocco, although the funds and the license for that store belonged to a Kuwaiti investor.

Moroccan-Swedish relations went back to normal when the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs officially put any recognition of the Sahrawi Republic to rest.

Finally, when in 2015 the European Court of Justice suspended the EU–Morocco fishing and agricultural agreements because they included the Western Sahara, Morocco again

froze its cooperation with the EU until the EU Parliament approved and passed agreements on both issues that explicitly included the Western Sahara.

On that occasion, Morocco consistently rejected the argument made by several EU representatives according to which the EU Commission had no control over the judiciary branch and kept insisting until its position prevailed.

Finally, a more recent instance of a different kind of assertiveness in Morocco's foreign policy is its continuing mediation in post-Ghaddafi Libya. More than merely hosting negotiations among the conflicting parties, Morocco has also consistently resisted pressure from some of its key allies to support the Eastern Libyan General Khalifa Haftar against the UN-recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli, a government that emerged from the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), that was signed in Morocco in December 2015.

By maintaining a policy of support for Libyan national reconciliation, Morocco has continued to host talks and support the UN-led process in Libya. Independently of the eventual success of Morocco's efforts, the fact that Morocco follows through on its own plans and objectives in Libya underlines its newfound assertiveness in its international relations.

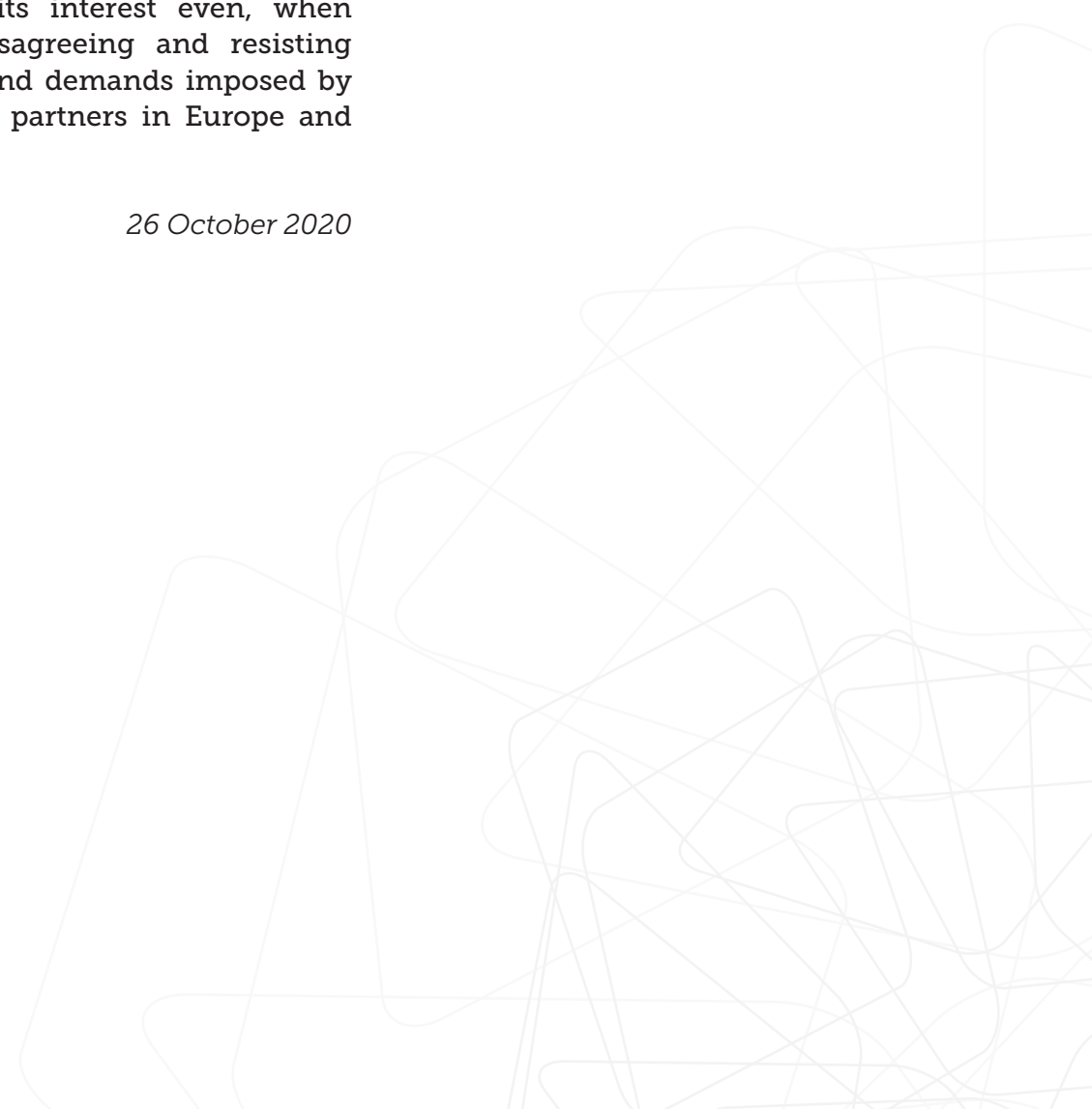
What these episodes symbolise is a more affirmative and sovereign posture of Morocco on the international stage, demanding respect from its partners, and using the tools at its disposal to ensure its interests are protected.



These three developments – the pivot to Africa, the diversification of partnerships and Morocco’s more assertive positioning – reinforce each other. Morocco’s increasing influence on its continent allows it to be heard more distinctly on the world stage, and to be able to better defend its interests with its partners, old and new.

The diversification of partnerships allows Morocco to be less dependent on the West, increasing its freedom of manoeuvre in the political, economic and even security domains. In sum, the above demonstrates that even for a relatively small country, skilful diplomacy and foreign policy can be useful and effective tools to promote and defend its interest even, when necessary, disagreeing and resisting the policies and demands imposed by its traditional partners in Europe and the US.

26 October 2020



Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 20 | 78 Nizar Messari, *Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI: Balancing Diversity and Respect*
- 20 | 77 Daniele Fattibene, *Sustainable Cocoa Production for the Planet and Its People: The Case of Ghana*
- 20 | 76 Daniele Fattibene, *Empty Oceans: EU Policy and Illegal Fishing in Ghana*
- 20 | 75 Kari M. Osland and Henriette U. Erstad, *"Irregular" Migration and Divergent Understandings of Security in the Sahel*
- 20 | 74 Afrah Nasser, *War and COVID-19 in Yemen*
- 20 | 73 Sajad Jiyad, *Struggling Iraq Faces Another Crisis in COVID-19*
- 20 | 72 Benedetta Brossa, *The Lebanese Crisis and the Mirage of Natural Gas*
- 20 | 71 Rosita Di Peri, *A Sectarianised Pandemic: COVID-19 in Lebanon*
- 20 | 70 Nathalie Tocci, *Unpacking the Conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean*
- 20 | 69 Cesare Merlini, *Religion vs. Secularism in Contemporary World Politics*