THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE
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MOROCCO'S ATLANTIC SAHEL INITIATIVE: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

MASTER’S THESIS

Sofia ÜNVER

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN STUDIES

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

As I believe I have accomplished this meaningful work, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the director of the Institute for Area Studies, Prof. Dr. Enver Arpa. He has provided crucial support and demonstrated constant and particular interest in this research project.

Fruit of reflection and serious work, the elaboration of this end-of-studies thesis could not have been accomplished without the support of a large number of people, whom they find here the expression of our deep gratitude.

My sincere thanks go particularly to my thesis supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mürsel Bayram, for his lucid and relevant advice and technical and psychological support.

My sincere thanks go mainly to all the professors of the Master of African Studies program for their constructive comments and advice throughout our studies

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ABSTRACT

The turmoil in the Sahel has led to an ever-changing political, social, and cultural landscape in the region. The region has been marginalized, having long been the target of imperialist and colonialist movements from the global North, as well as a victim of internal conflicts, civil wars, and sectarian differences. Following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the landlocked countries face many economic challenges that put them at a disadvantage on the regional and global trade map. The Atlantic Initiative was launched to break the economic isolation of these countries in order to ensure their effective integration into the international economic system. In this context, Morocco's Atlantic Initiative stands out as a strategic solution aimed at overcoming these obstacles by providing landlocked African countries with access to the Atlantic interface, opening up new prospects for economic development and regional integration. Furthermore, the thesis examines how political fallout, elite interactions, and institutional frameworks affect integration and separation efforts among developing regions. Similarly, the study highlights how the adoption of inter-country political approaches within and beyond the borders of the Sahel, such as “divide and rule” and economic pressure, has led to unrest and proved to be a dominant force in shaping the region. In this context, the study uses a qualitative research approach, conducting structured and in-depth interviews with 10 geopolitical experts from Morocco to gain insights into the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative and explore avenues for cooperation, territorial integrity, prosperity, and peace in the Sahel region, as well as in the Global South. In conclusion, the Atlantic Initiative comes at a crucial moment in the region's evolution to strengthen cooperation between Morocco and the Sahel and respond to various geopolitical complexities and security, economic, and financial challenges. Moreover, the thesis also pointed out significant obstacles, such as external political pressures and regional constraints, that must be overcome for the success of the Atlantic Initiative.

Keywords: Sahel, power, Regional Integration, South-South Cooperation, Coexistence

ÖZET

Sahel'deki karışıklıklar, bölgedeki siyasi, sosyal ve kültürel manzarayı sürekli olarak değiştirmiştir. Bölge, uzun süredir küresel Kuzey'in emperyalist ve sömürgeci hareketlerinin hedefi olmasının yanı sıra iç çatışmaların, iç savaşların ve mezhepsel farklılıkların kurbanı olarak marjinalleştirilmiştir. Mali, Burkina Faso ve Nijer'in Batı Afrika Devletleri Ekonomik Topluluğu'ndan (ECOWAS) çekilmesinin ardından, karayla çevrili ülkeler, bölgesel ve küresel ticaret haritasında kendilerini dezavantajlı konuma sokan sayısız ekonomik zorlukla karşı karşıya kalmıştır. Atlantik Girişimi, bu ülkelerin uluslararası ekonomik sisteme etkin bir şekilde entegre olmalarını sağlamak amacıyla, ekonomik izolasyonlarını kırmak için başlatılmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Mağrip Atlantik Girişimi, kara ile çevrili Afrika ülkelerine Atlantik kıyısına erişim sağlayarak ekonomik kalkınma ve bölgesel entegrasyon için yeni ufuklar açarak bu engelleri aşmayı amaçlayan stratejik bir çözüm olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Ayrıca, tez, siyasi etkiler, elitlerin etkileşimleri ve kurumsal çerçevelerin gelişmekte olan bölgeler arasındaki entegrasyon ve ayrılık çabalarını nasıl etkilediğini incelemektedir. Benzer şekilde, çalışma, Sahel sınırları içinde ve ötesinde “böl ve yönet” ve ekonomik baskı gibi ülkeler arası siyasi yaklaşımların benimsenmesinin nasıl huzursuzluğa yol açtığını ve bölgeyi şekillendirmede baskın bir güç olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma niteliksel bir araştırma yaklaşımı kullanarak, Fas'tan 10 jeopolitik uzmanla yapılandırılmış ve derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirerek Fas Atlantik Girişimi hakkında içgörüler elde etmek ve Sahel bölgesinde ve Küresel Güney'de iş birliği, toprak bütünlüğü, refah ve barış için yollar aramak amacıyla yapılmıştır. Sonuç olarak, Atlantik Girişimi, Fas ile Sahel arasındaki iş birliğini güçlendirmek ve çeşitli jeopolitik karmaşıklıklar ile güvenlik, ekonomi ve finansal zorluklara yanıt vermek için bölgenin evriminde kritik bir anda ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca, tez, Atlantik Girişimi'nin başarısı için aşılması gereken dış siyasi baskılar ve bölgesel kısıtlamalar gibi önemli engellere de dikkat çekmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sahel, güç, Bölgesel Entegrasyon, Güney-Güney İş birliği, bir arada yaşama.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEC: African Economic Community

AGUIMCO: Guinean -Moroccan Agency for Cooperation

AMAMCO: Morocco Mali Agency for Cooperation

AMCI: Africa Carbon Markets Initiative

AMU: Arab Maghreb Union

AES: Alliances of States Sahel

CEMA: Centre for Epidemiological Modelling Analysis

CEMAC: Community of Sahelo-Saharan States

CEN-SAD: Community of Sahel–Saharan States

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

FDI: Foreign Direct Investment

G3: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger

G5: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania.

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

L.L.S.C.: Landlocked Sahel Countries

IDP: Internationally Displaced Persons.

MAI: Morocco Atlantic Initiative

MINUSMA: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

MER: Market Exchange Rates

OCP: Office Cherifien de Phosphate

MAFMS: Moroccan Armed Forces Memorial Services.

UN: United Nations

UNHRC: The United Nations Human Rights Council

EU: European Union

US: United States

UOA: African Union Organization

UEMOA: The West African Economic and Monetary Union

UAE: Union Arab Emirates

WADB: West Africa Development Bank

WAEMU: West African Economic and Monetary Union

WTO: World Trade Organization

Introduction

The importance of the Sahel to the Kingdom of Morocco dates back to the first dynasties that ruled Morocco, including the Saadis, Almoravids, Almohads, and Alawites (Yaymut, 2015). The Almoravids penetrated southern Morocco to spread the Islamic call and fight heresies and ancient monotheistic beliefs. Yusuf ibn Tashfin Almoravid established a state that stretched from the far north of Morocco to the Niger River in the south. The Saadian state extended as far south as Morocco, and al-Mansur al-Zahabi al-Saadi was determined to conquer Sudan, which today includes Senegal, Mali, and Niger. Meanwhile, the Saadian army, the Alaouite Ismaili army, conquered Sudan (i.e., Senegal and Mali) after the annexation of the Sahara to Morocco. Moulay Ismail brought a large number of Sudanese to Morocco, created a large army, ruled Morocco from the Senegal Valley south to Tlemcen, and expelled the Spanish from the Moroccan coasts of the Mediterranean. Islamic teachings continued to spread in Africa from southern Morocco through trade caravans and spiritual groups that worked to spread the Maliki school across the continent, despite the obstacles of foreign conquest. Historically, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso were under a single colonial authority. Consequently, the absence of direct maritime access was not considered a major obstacle as they formed part of a unified territory. Since gaining independence, no Atlantic nation has posed a challenge comparable to that presented by these three landlocked states. To mitigate the potential influence, these nations could develop over time; all bordering states, except Algeria, are reluctant to grant them access to the Atlantic Ocean. Consequently, the landlocked nations are seeking to capitalise directly on their economic engagements with Morocco, and they are now in a position to determine their political endorsements. Maritime access can be used freely when it is exclusive. However, it necessitates legal and diplomatic arrangements. It also requires considerable investment when it shares it with multiple parties.

Morocco is striving to position itself as a regional security provider in West Africa. In recent years, Morocco has emerged as a significant partner in the development of various sectors across multiple West African nations, while also aspiring to enhance peace and stability in this African subregion, which continues to grapple with substantial challenges and formidable threats. Importantly, a plethora of initiatives is currently underway to tackle issues such as regional integration, green energy, religious extremism, terrorism, and transnational organized crime, including illicit drug trafficking, which remains a considerable menace to peace and security within the region.

The evolution of the African geopolitical landscape in the 21st century has led to unique efforts to achieve regional integration that transcends traditional continental divisions and rethinks established concepts of South-South alliances. Among these important developments, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative, officially known as the Royal Atlantic Initiative (RAI), embodies a decisive strategic reconfiguration of Morocco's diplomatic relations with landlocked countries, positioning the Kingdom as a crucial channel of communication between Africa's interior regions and global maritime infrastructure. The King has opened up promising prospects for South-South cooperation and launched various initiatives to strengthen the country's engagement in the international community, particularly through its African initiatives. This initiative aims to improve maritime access for landlocked countries in the Sahel region via Moroccan ports on the Atlantic coast, thereby addressing one of the most persistent structural constraints facing these countries, namely their geographical isolation from international trade routes. Following the departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the (ECOWAS) in early 2024, Morocco strengthened its diplomatic and strategic engagement with these coastal countries. The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative aims to give landlocked coastal states access to Atlantic trade routes via Moroccan ports, thereby cementing its position as a pivotal link between the Atlantic Ocean and the Sahel. This strategy strengthens Morocco's geopolitical position and supports these countries in establishing new regional alliances that go beyond traditional alliances in West Africa. However, these developments are taking place against a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, characterized by the growing influence of Russia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran, all of which have their own interests in the Sahel region.

This thesis aimed to discuss the Moroccan Atlantic Initiatives launched by Morocco with Sahel countries. The thesis is structured as follows:

- The first Chapter of the thesis deals with the methodology adopted while conducting this study. It focuses on the research design, the research instrument to collect data, the participants, the setting, and the ethical considerations.

- Chapter one focuses on Sahel geopolitical dynamics. This chapter is segmented into three discrete sections: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

- The second chapter discusses Atlantic Initiatives and International Perspectives. This Chapter clarifies the goals of the Atlantic Initiatives, specifically highlighting how Morocco's Initiative may act as a framework for enhancing collaboration and promoting sustainable development across the Sahel region, particularly among nations lacking coastal access. Through a comprehensive examination of these dynamics, the study will provide essential policy recommendations aimed at optimizing Morocco's initiatives to strengthen economic resilience and foster sustainable development throughout the Sahel region. Moreover, the research will examine the mechanisms by which Morocco's infrastructural investments can significantly enhance these Sahelian countries' access to global markets, thereby facilitating regional economic integration.

- The subsequent subsection examines the global perspectives of the Atlantic Initiative within the framework of geopolitical considerations. This subsection is defined by an evaluation of the strategic significance of the Sahel region, the scale of external interventions, the conflicts that emerge from conflicting international objectives, and the consequent ramifications for the stability of the regional system, alongside the ephemeral transmission of various security phenomena across multiple strategic locations.

- The third chapter articulates the regional complexities and challenges linked to the Atlantic Initiatives, emphasizing the geopolitical, social, and economic dimensions of the Sahel, while highlighting the significance of tailored approaches designed to enhance regional integration.

- Chapters four critically introduce Morocco's assertive policy in the Sahel, while also investigating the prospects for Morocco to catalyse South-South collaboration, thus promoting sustainable socio-economic integration within the Sahelian nations. This approach corresponds with the broader aims of augmenting regional collaboration and tackling urgent issues such as security, economic advancement, and migration. Last but not least, the current research paper ends with a general conclusion, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

- Finally, Chapter Five highlights the protocol and process of the interview. Analyze the data gathered from expert opinions about Morocco's Atlantic Initiative.

Background of Study

The leaders of the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republics of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali commenced an innovative leadership initiative aimed at establishing safe, secure, and economically accessible maritime routes for these nations. Since that initial undertaking, nine sessions of collaborative coordination have occurred, complemented by the official visits of His Majesty King Mohammed VI to the Member States, but also by movements towards liberation and development facilitated through agreements with technical operators within the maritime sector. In his address at the Economic Forum of Tangiers, King Mohammed VI previously underscored that the leadership of the Member Countries had designated the Sovereign with the responsibility of coordinating this significant project, which is underpinned by a commitment at the international level and is fundamentally recognized as a humanitarian necessity that transcends any political affiliations. The analysis, development, and execution of the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative encompassed in the subtopics are the culmination of remarkable, comprehensive efforts by both the Executive branch and the committed administration, specifically involving all Ministries participating in the preparatory commission overseen by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Persuaded that a strengthened integration of the African continent at both multilateral and regional dimensions constitutes one of the most reliable pathways toward sustainable development and significant advancement for African nations, King Mohammed VI of Morocco proposed, in January 2024, the "Morocco Atlantic Initiative" in collaboration with four partner countries: Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. His objective was to engage prominent African nations in a comprehensive cooperative endeavor, simultaneously working toward the establishment of continental infrastructure and the implementation of investments that would facilitate the creation of economic zones and the provision of public and private opportunities for the local populace.

This initiative signifies a tangible manifestation of South-South cooperation in the framework of development partnerships, as its emphasis centers on the mastery of land use planning, which is vital for the security, economic stability, and social advancement of society. It embodies a novel paradigm of relationships and solidarity, which is entirely harmonious with the relevant agendas of international organizations, which remain vigilant in this sphere. Concurrently, its focus on the advancement of methodologies that enhance anti-erosion and drainage control bears considerable implications for the conservation of soil fertility.

Research Gap

This thesis aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the Morocco Atlantic Initiative as a case study of South-South cooperation in Africa. It will examine how the initiative seeks to:

1. Maximize economic integration between Morocco and the landlocked Sahel countries by providing maritime access.

2. Address transnational economic, security concerns, such as terrorism and illegal trafficking, through enhanced cooperation and investment.

By doing so, this research will contribute to the Morocco's role as a regional leader in the Sahel has not been fully explored, especially in light of recent initiatives such as the MAI. Under-Researched Economic Integration: The economic aspect of regional integration, particularly providing maritime access to landlocked countries, is a novel approach that has received little scholarly attention in the African context.

The disparity between Morocco's Atlantic initiative and the landlocked Sahelian countries is significant, as it underscores the complexities associated with regional connectivity and security dynamics. Morocco seeks to capitalize on its geographical positioning to stimulate economic growth and promote stability within the West African region. Nevertheless, the landlocked nations of the Sahel encounter logistical impediments that may obstruct collaborative efforts and economic integration. It is imperative to address this disparity for Morocco to make a meaningful contribution to regional security and development, thereby ensuring comprehensive approaches to collective challenges such as economic integration, green energy, terrorism, and regional security. The significance of geopolitical and economic of the Sahel region has attracted substantial attention from scholars and policymakers; much of the literature has focused primarily on security and conflict in the area, particularly the proliferation of terrorist organizations, coups d'état, and transnational crime networks. Existing studies tend to emphasize external interventions by international organizations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and ECOWAS. However, limited scholarly work has been dedicated to examining the role of regional African actors, such as Morocco, in fostering sustainable socio-economic development through innovative frameworks like the Morocco Atlantic Initiative (MAI).

Moreover, while some research has discussed the concept of South-South cooperation as a means of addressing developmental inequalities between Global South countries, most studies have overlooked the specific dynamics of such cooperation when applied to landlocked Sahelian nations. This leaves a gap in the understanding of how South-South cooperation can be operationalized in regions affected by political instability, terrorism, and poor infrastructure. Additionally, few academic inquiries have investigated the economic integration of the Sahel region through maritime access, which is critical for landlocked countries like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Prior studies have rarely analyzed how initiatives such as the MAI could bridge the gap between coastal economies and landlocked nations by providing access to trade routes, thus facilitating greater regional integration. Furthermore, the interplay between economic initiatives and transnational security concerns, such as cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration, has been underexplored in relation to Morocco's leadership in the region.

Research Questions

This thesis aims to tackle the following research questions:

- To what extent is the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative able to maximize regional benefits and address the numerous pressing issues in the region?

Aim of Study

The current research sought to explore the following research objectives:

To scrutinize the historical progression of Morocco's foreign policy within Africa and its repercussions on regional dynamics. The second objective of the study explore the primary elements that have shaped Morocco's significant interactions with African nations during various historical timelines. Furthermore, Research aims to evaluate the ramifications of Morocco's initiatives on the Sahel regarding the regional and international economic, political, and social advancement. The analysis of the impact of Morocco's interactions with African nations on its stature and sway within regional entities like the African Union by analyzing regional and global challenges.

Another objective is to investigate the barriers and opportunities encountered by Morocco in developing bilateral relations with African states, especially in the context of recent geopolitical changes. The crucial influence of Western Sahara in shaping the dynamics of Morocco's regional relations and the pivotal strategic role of Dakhla Port in this initiative.

The scarcity of research in the Sahel region, especially recent research about the Moroccan Atlantic initiative is the main motive behind the current study, bringing the matter of Morocco as an active north African country in the Sahel region to light, while further highlighting Moroccan participatory stance with other surrounding countries the Sahel or with countries from the global north under the wise leadership of King Mohammed VI.

The primary objective of this research is to explore the ever-evolving dynamics of South-South cooperation within the Sahel region countries, with a specific focus on Morocco's Atlantic Initiative, for example; The withdrawal of the French colonizer from Sahel resulted in the emergence of new powers such as China and Türkiye, Russia and especially Morocco playing Pivotal role in the region and reshaping new geopolitics map. In light of instability and external interference that have historically and politically characterized the Sahel, this study seeks to understand how new forms of regional engagement and cooperation can offer alternatives to traditional, North-driven models of development and control. Morocco's strategy, particularly its Atlantic Initiative, is examined as a paradigmatic example of how soft power, strategic diplomacy, and economic outreach can be used by a Global South country to influence and potentially reshape geopolitical realities in its surrounding region. By examining Morocco's role in the Sahel region, the study assesses the impact of soft power mechanisms in attracting economic investments, diverse political dialogue, cultural ties, and institutional partnerships that are leveraged to exercise political influence and force regional integration processes.

Furthermore, the study tackles the political frameworks influencing integration or fragmentation in the Great Sahel. It also investigates how political coups and institutional agendas support or hinder regional cohesion and separation. The focus is also on the competing power dynamics between actors from the Global North and the Global South, especially strategies such as economic pressure, divide-and-conquer tactics, and destabilization efforts that exacerbate divisions. Therefore, this research addresses how integration efforts can emerge within the region and reflects on how external interference often acts as a disruptive force. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how South-South cooperation, driven by regional initiatives from Morocco, can evolve beyond economic coordination into a strategic form of political coexistence, unity, and peace.

The recent African policy implemented by Morocco during the last five years has facilitated and further strengthened the diversification of strategic alliances within the Maghreb region, away from the European grasp, while simultaneously augmenting its influence in both West and Central Africa. On one side, the monarchy's mediation, infused with the principles of Sunni Islam, has championed a notion of "religious stability" in the aftermath of the Libyan and Malian crises. Conversely, the incremental integration of Moroccan enterprises within the African market has redefined Morocco's position within the region, particularly following the re-establishment of its presence in the African Union in 2017. This critical year has conferred Morocco a distinguished status within the geopolitical dynamics of the Sahel–Saharan domain. In this scholarly discussion, the focus is not on the motivations that compelled Morocco to reassess its foreign policy framework but rather on the mechanisms of this new diplomatic strategy that facilitated its transition from a "passive" participant to an active "mediator," while also enabling it to pre-emptively address the threats posed by terrorism and the execution of its strategic initiatives.

Methodology

Research Design

This section outlines the research methodology in the current study. It specifies the research design, methodology, and approaches, in addition to the techniques utilized for data collection and the strategies employed for data analysis throughout the project. The research design constitutes an extensive framework that a researcher selects to integrate the various components of the study coherently and methodically. It enables the effective resolution of the research question. Its primary objective is to ensure that the evidence gathered is pertinent and contemporary. This study utilizes a qualitative research design, which includes a thorough analysis of the information provided in interviews and a comparison with what is found in the literature. The research offers a comprehensive analysis of the Atlantic Initiative of Morocco, while outlining the challenges encountered by Landlocked Nations and the resultant effects on both regional and global integration. In order to engage pragmatically with this vision, it has become imperative to contextualize the circumstances within the framework of its available resources in this historically entrenched economic partnership.

Data Collection

The study uses a qualitative research design, focusing on Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and its impact on the Sahel region's geopolitical and economic landscape. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with Moroccan experts in geopolitics and diplomacy, and was analysed in comparison with existing literature. The research is descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory, examining Morocco's foreign policy evolution, regional integration efforts, infrastructure projects like that of Dakhla Port and the African-Atlantic Gas Pipeline, and the role of the Western Sahara. It addresses gaps in existing research, aiming to evaluate Morocco's influence and challenges in the Sahel and broader African context.

Challenges and Opportunities for Integration

The integration of Morocco with landlocked Sahel countries presents both challenges and opportunities. While shared cultural and historical ties can facilitate cooperation, the diverse political and economic landscapes of these regions pose significant hurdles (Hout & Salih, 2019; Suleiman, 2024). The potential for regional integration is further complicated by external influences, such as relations with Russia, Türkiye, Iran, the UAE, and China, which impact regional dynamics and necessitate a nuanced understanding of global and regional interactions (Muhammad Reza Suleiman, 2024). The feasibility assessment of infrastructure investment projects invariably possesses qualitative elements and cannot simply be encapsulated by measuring any of its salient features. Nevertheless, these elements are essential for realizing advancement and are also crucial in the preliminary stages of contemplation. Furthermore, the statistical analysis will be performed to examine the impact of the MAI on trade flows, economic growth, control of illegal migration rate, development of infrastructure, e.g, regional transport, communication networks, logistics. The percentage of investment of Morocco in the Landlocked Sahel Countries, and poverty reduction between Morocco and the landlocked Sahel countries.

It is worth noting that each question was designed to provoke insightful, comprehensive comments from specialists, facilitating a fuller comprehension of the political, economic, and strategic aspects of the Atlantic Initiative and its ramifications for both Morocco and the Sahel region. The study seeks to deliver a thorough analysis of this geopolitical and economic undertaking by integrating expert knowledge with a qualitative assessment of the answers.

Summary

The research seeks to obtain comprehensive insights from specialists concerning the geopolitical and economic aspects of the endeavors. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three specialists with considerable experience in international relations, regional cooperation, and Moroccan foreign policy to gather data. The participants were meticulously chosen based on their proficiency and knowledge of the Sahel region and Morocco's strategic aspirations. The interview methodology comprised eight open-ended questions aimed at addressing critical elements of the research inquiries. The inquiries examined the regional and international influences motivating Morocco's ambition, the associated hurdles, the alignment with the requirements of Sahel nations, and the initiative's prospective effects on diplomatic relations, particularly with neighboring Algeria.

The methodology emphasized the utilization of expert opinions to collect comprehensive qualitative data, enhancing the comprehension of the subject matter. The semi-structured format of the interviews facilitated adaptable replies while preserving a distinct emphasis on the research aims. The results of these interviews will yield significant insights into Morocco's strategic position and the wider ramifications of the Atlantic Initiative for the Sahel area.

CHAPTER I

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN THE SAHEL REGION

1.1 Background

The Sahel region covers the south-central latitudes of North Africa and is located between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea. The region encompasses northern Senegal, southern Mauritania, central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, southern Algeria, Niger, northern Nigeria, central Chad, central and southern Sudan, northern South Sudan, Eritrea, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and northern Ethiopia (Kardjadj, 2019).

This area encompasses approximately 5,700 km and is acknowledged as a transitional ecological zone distinguished by semi-arid grasslands, savannas, steppes, and thorn shrublands, situated between the Sudanese savanna to the south and the Sahara Desert to the north. The region boasts fertile lands, and agricultural practices make substantial contributions to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of numerous nations located within the Sahel today (Giannini et al., 2003; Mathon et al., 2002).

Historically, the Sahel has hosted a multitude of nationalities along with diverse ethnic and religious communities that have, over time, encountered complex and often adversarial interactions. (Citaristi, 2022). Hence, the region represents a geographical expanse that encompasses five nations within West Africa, namely Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso. It is predominantly characterized by sandy terrain and is currently experiencing a security crisis that jeopardizes the lives of its inhabitants, who are grappling with forced displacement and violent massacres, resulting in a significant loss of human life. This prevailing instability has also had detrimental effects on the region's industrial infrastructure, which has approached a state of collapse, particularly in the aftermath of the Malian crisis of 2012 (European-Union, 2015).

The Sahel is rife with armed conflicts within specific nations, while territorial disputes intermittently arise, and international terrorist organizations escalate their operations. Certain states within the region exhibit a clear incapacity to administer effective governance, rendering them categorically as “failed states.” The deep-rooted nature of tribalism within the area often obstructs the development of a cohesive national identity, which consequently incites episodes of internal unrest, nurtures tribal separatism, and sustains extremist political and religious movements (Kortunov, 2022). It is perceived as a parched and impoverished area due to various factors, including desertification, food insecurity, and threats posed by Islamist terrorism (Robert Muggah, 2019).

In January 2023, the ECOWAS lost three of its founding members, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, comprising 16% of its population of 424 million and 7% of its GDP (Resnick, 2025). The three countries have created the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, AES), a mutual defence and security pact formalized through the signing of the Liptako Gourma Charter in 2023.

While the ECOWAS gave these three AES members states a six-month transitional period until July 2025 in case they backed out and wished to return, AES leaders rejected this option, emphasizing that their decision is irreversible. This represents a fundamental breakdown in regional integration and the authority of ECOWAS as a regional governance mechanism. Their exit from Africa's largest political and economic union threatens to disrupt the flow of goods, services, and people, with potentially devastating consequences for food security in a region where nearly 17 million children under the age of five are severely malnourished. The ECOWAS is challenged by its lack of direct access to the sea, exacerbating the economic impact of high tariffs and sanctions that impede access to coastal ports. This situation has led to long transport delays, logistical challenges, and inflationary difficulties in food prices across the region. This unusual division coincides with Morocco's strategic initiative for the Atlantic Ocean, which offers these countries alternative maritime access to the Atlantic Ocean. The landlocked countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have supported Morocco's initiative to grant them access to the Atlantic Ocean, with the foreign ministers of these countries expressing their position during a meeting with King Mohammed VI in Rabat (Banchereau, 2025). This creates new trade routes that go beyond the traditional coastal access points of the ECOWAS, which could disrupt existing economic relations. These interdependent transformations represent a radical reorganization of regional power structures, raising questions about five decades of existing integration frameworks and creating new geopolitical dynamics in the Sahel region, West Africa, and Africa as a whole.

1.2 Mali

Mali ranks as the fifth largest nation on the African continent, encompassing 4.1 percent of Africa’s total land area and accommodating 1.5 percent of the continent's population. The per capita income of the nation is among the lowest globally, and being landlocked while situated in a region characterized by limited economic affluence, its prospects for growth and advancement are significantly hindered (Aikins, 2025). Mali is unable to leverage the economic advantages of affluent neighbouring countries, while its low population density and considerable distances from the coastline of West Africa further restrict trade opportunities. Poverty and spatial economic disparities are evident throughout the country, with 40 per cent of GDP being generated in the capital, Bamako. This privileged economic position of Bamako affects welfare levels: A person native to Bamako can expect a per capita consumption level two and a half times higher than a person born in Ségou or Sikasso (O’Driscoll et al., 2021).

Historically, Mali gained its independence in 1960, with President Modibo Keita serving as the first president of a single-party socialist regime (Clark, 1999) . However, a military coup in 1968, led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, significantly weakened Keita's government. The unveiling of a modern constitution in 1979 paved the way for an innovative electoral framework, skilfully managed by President Moussa Traoré, which propelled the country towards its second republic (Aikins, 2024). Mali is known as one of the poorest countries in the West African region. It has a GNP per capita of approximately US$671 (Nam, 2022), placing it 182nd on the 2018 Human Development Index published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In 2015, the estimated population was 18.14 million, with a population density of 12.8 people per square kilometer. The population is predominantly young, with a large proportion (54.9 per cent) residing in rural areas (Clio, 2021).

The agricultural sector is a major source of employment for the active labor force, accounting for 67.77 percent of the population recorded in 2023 (Economy, 2024). The heavy reliance on the primary sector results in Mali's heavy dependence on its natural resources, making it vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. In addition, the disruption of ecosystems has significantly affected rural demographics, resulting in unsatisfactory outcomes in the context of environmental governance (Canton, 2021).

Despite suffering setbacks since 2020, Mali showed economic resilience in 2022, with real GDP growing to 3.7 per cent despite security challenges, unrest, and sanctions. Economic growth is expected to rebound in 2023 and 2024, fuelled by agriculture and gold production

(Anyalebechi, 2023). However, economic conditions are risky due to security issues, possible postponement of elections, price volatility, fiscal conditions, and environmental issues. Inflation peaked at 10 per cent in 2022 due to shocks to energy and food prices as a result of the conflict in Ukraine and regional sanctions; however, it is expected to decline to 5 per cent in 2023 and 2 per cent in 2024, in line with expected declines in global energy and food prices (Shaw, 2013).

Mali's population grew dramatically between 1990 and 2019, rising from 8.5 million to 20.6 million. Projections indicate that by 2043, the total population will double again, reaching an estimated 41.1 million under the current scenario. Mali's GDP, as measured by GDP using market exchange rates, increased almost fourfold from US$5.2bn in 1990 to US$20bn in 2019. On the current trajectory, the country's GDP is expected to triple, eventually reaching US$65.6bn by 2043.ref

The GDP per capita of Mali, recorded at $26.59 billion in 2024 (World, 2024), surpassed the average of low-income nations in Africa by 21%. It is projected that by 2043, this figure will increase to US$3,388, representing a 3.1% rise above the average of US$3,494 for similar income-group counterparts in Africa. As of the year 2019, approximately 43.5% of the population in Mali lived below the extreme poverty line defined at US$1.90 (World Bank, 2018), a statistic that was slightly below the mean for low-income nations throughout the African continent. Nevertheless, projections for 2043 suggest that the poverty rate will be 26.1%, which would be approximately 8 percentage points greater than the average for low-income countries in Africa (World Bank, 2018). Mali possesses a range of mineral resources such as gold, uranium, bauxite, and manganese, with gold and cotton being the main exports driving its economy. Despite facing challenges in gold production due to exploitation issues, Mali aims to diversify its mining sector. Gold, accounting for a significant portion of Mali's exports and government revenue, has driven the country to be the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa. The mining industry supports over two million people in Mali. The country's untapped potential includes substantial gold, iron ore, uranium, manganese, lithium, and limestone deposits. Mali has introduced new mining laws to increase state and local investors' shares in mining projects, aiming to boost the sector's development. Furthermore, Mali is set to commence lithium production by 2020, leveraging its identified exploitable reserves (Mainguy, 2011). Mali is positioning the fourth largest gold producer on the African continent, following Ghana, South Africa, and Sudan. In 2018, gold represented Mali’s paramount export, accounting for 64% of total exports and 21% of governmental revenue. The valuation of gold is subject to fluctuations in alignment with global market prices. The sector has encountered challenges, as several unproductive mines have been shut down, with others facing potential closure. However, in 2007, Mali saw the opening of two new mines with a combined annual production capacity of 14 tonnes, alongside the launch of two smaller mines in 2010.

Gold panning operations contribute around 10% of the country's gold exports and support more than two million people, making up more than 10% of the population. Mali has significant mineral potential beyond gold, with estimates of 800 tonnes of gold deposits, two million tonnes of iron ore, 5,000 tonnes of uranium, 20 million tonnes of manganese, four million tonnes of lithium, and ten million tonnes of limestone. The enactment of the new mining law in 2023 increased the share of state and local investors in mining projects to 35%, compared to 20% previously. Furthermore, Mali has identified 694,000 tonnes of recoverable lithium reserves, with plans to start lithium production by 2020 (Kojima et al., 2010).

Cotton is Mali's second most important export, with over 4 million Malians working in cotton farming, accounting for 15% of the country's exports in 2018. Despite facing a decline in the late 2000s due to adverse weather conditions and low international prices, Mali's cotton production rebounded in the early 2010s, reaching over 700,000 tonnes in the 2018-2019 season, making Mali Africa's largest cotton producer (International-Trade-Administration, 2024).

In the first half of 2022, ECOWAS sanctions significantly impacted budget implementation as revenues decreased by 17% compared to previous years (Avoulete, 2022). Tax and non-tax revenues saw a notable decline, particularly in indirect taxes, while fees revenue increased due to higher fuel costs and increased trade traffic through alternative routes. Authorities focused on restricting expenditure to align with available revenue, prioritizing payment of wages, rentals, scholarships, and security expenses while cutting back on capital expenditure and non-essential spending. Suspension of trade with ECOWAS member states, except for essential goods, disrupted financial activities by freezing public assets and ending regional financial assistance, though trade sanctions were strictly enforced while financial sanctions were comparatively more lenient (World Bank, 2018). After Mali’s withdrawal from ECOWAS, alongside Burkina Faso and Niger, leading to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), (Aboagye, 2025). This represents a fundamental breakdown in regional integration and ECOWAS's authority as a regional governance mechanism. Mali is facing negative impacts on its revenue generation. The restrictions on sea access and sanctions have amplified economic challenges and price inflation in the region.

Moroccan Atlantic Initiative emerges at a pivotal moment when traditional Western partners, particularly France, have seen their influence decline in the Sahel region, and the exit of Mali's, Niger and Burkina Faso from Ecowas This creates opportunities for Morocco to position itself as an alternative partner, Morocco has shown considerable economic interaction with the African continent, with shipments rising from 300 million to over 3 billion between 2004 and 2024 (Hzaine, 2025).

Moroccan investment across Africa has increased significantly over the past decade, rising from \$100 million in 2014 to a substantial \$2.8 billion by 2024. The Global Financial Centres Index saw it ranked 56th out of 119 in October 2023, and fourth in the Middle East and Africa region as of March 2025 (Abidjan, 2025), with Mali being positioned as the third most significant recipient of Moroccan capital on the African continent. It is expected that transport costs will be reduced significantly for landlocked Sahel states by the initiative, as logistics costs are currently driven to 30-40% of import values by geographic isolation. The Atlantic Initiative could enhance port access and strengthen the competitiveness of Mali's mining and agriculture sectors (Ghoulidi, 2024). The initiative aligns with broader regional integration goals, potentially facilitating increased trade flows between North and West Africa, as well as helping to formalize trade routes. However, such integration can only be successful if sustained political commitment is shown and practical cooperation among all stakeholders is ensured.

1.3 Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, a landlocked nation located in West Africa, a country often referred to as 'the land of honest individuals' in the local languages of the More and Dioula peoples, has an area of 274,122 square kilometers (ACHRP, 2025). This landlocked nation is surrounded by Niger to the east, Mali to the northwest, and the nations of the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and Benin to the south. Due to its landlocked status, Burkina Faso is located over 500 kilometers from the coastline of the Gulf of Guinea. The country is characterized by predominantly flat terrain and a tropical climate. The rainy season persists for a period of four to five months. (from May to October), while the remaining 7 months (from November to April) signify the dry season (Bakanl & Birli, 2024).

Burkina Faso has recently been grappling with conflict and instability, which have posed significant challenges to the security and advancement of the country. The repercussions of these conflicts have directly affected the citizenry of Burkina Faso, resulting in phenomena such as displacement, loss of income sources, and fatalities. Historically, this nation was previously a French colony designated as Upper Volta and attained its sovereignty in 1960. Since then, Burkina Faso has experienced numerous instances of political turbulence and instability. The effects of these conflicts on Burkina Faso reach beyond its own borders, as can be seen from the unrest in the Sahel region (Normile, 2023).

Moreover, the presence of extremist factions within the country, coupled with multiple episodes of governmental upheaval, has precipitated a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI). According to Kambou and Khariss (2020), acts of terrorism in Burkina Faso have led to a reduction in FDI by as much as 0.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The existence of political unrest has further contributed to a decrease in domestic investments in Burkina Faso (Büttner et al. 2022). Illustrate that a one standard deviation increase in instability correlates with a decline in per capita expenditures on education, healthcare, and durable goods by approximately 35%, 9%, and 3%, respectively. Scholars contend that the lack of economic opportunities and fears regarding violence have deterred households from pursuing long-term investments such as land, machinery, and livestock.

They note a negative correlation between political instability and the acquisition of durable goods, as well as investments in home improvements, education, and healthcare. As a result, this predicament has intensified the burden on institutions that were already financially constrained and facing challenges (Bank, 2023). Following the coup d'état that transpired on September 30, 2022, which resulted in the removal of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, Captain Ibrahim Traoré inaugurated himself as the new transitional president on October 21, 2022. The Transitional Charter was amended and subsequently ratified on 25 May 2024. According to the revised document, there has been a five-year prolongation of the period of transition, with commencement on 2 July 2024. From 2015 onward, Burkina Faso has been facing a mounting number of terrorist attacks, leading to considerable population movements. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has reported that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPS) in the nation surged from fewer than 50,000 in January 2019 to 2.01 million as of 30 March 2023 (World Bank, 2024). Burkina Faso is a member of both the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the (ECOWAS). These entities and their member states have a supranational relationship. Furthermore, Burkina Faso is a member of the Organization for the Harmonization of Business

Law in Africa (OHADA). Consequently, uniform laws instituted by the OHCLA are automatically integrated into the national legal framework (Sore, 2023).

On September 16, 2023, Burkina Faso, alongside Mali and Niger, established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to consolidate their efforts against terrorism via a unified defense framework. Additionally, the withdrawal of these nations from ECOWAS is to be effective as of 28 January 2024, with the reason for this being the insufficiency of support for their counter-terrorism efforts (Sore, 2023). Comprehensive sanctions were imposed on Burkina Faso by the Economic Community of West African States following military coups in January and September 2022, and a significant escalation in regional tensions was marked.

These sanctions, part of ECOWAS's "zero tolerance" policy toward unconstitutional changes of government, had far-reaching consequences across economic, political, social, and humanitarian dimensions (Andreeva T.A) (Kolade G. Olubiyo, 2024). As a result, the sanctions regime ultimately contributed to Burkina Faso's decision to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2024, and the sanctions exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation. Burkina Faso faces severe food insecurity, with 7.5 million people classified as being in crisis, emergency, or famine conditions (Danielle, 2025). The country is one of the world's hunger hotspots, with nearly 17 million children under the age of five suffering from acute malnutrition across the wider West African region. Potential changes to the protocols on freedom of movement have caused uncertainty regarding the livelihoods of Sahelian migrants residing in ECOWAS countries. More than 1.3 million Burkinabés live in Côte d'Ivoire, where many run small businesses to support their families back home (Danielle, 2025).

Despite the sanctions' intent to restore stability, security conditions continued deteriorating. In 2023, the number of terrorist attacks fell by 17%, but the number of deaths increased by 68% to 1,907. This means that Burkina Faso is now the country with the highest impact of terrorism in the world. It is reported that terrorist's control 40–60% of the country's territory (State, 2024). The dissolution of the union carries profound ramifications for food security in a region where millions are confronted with severe malnutrition (Danielle, 2025). Burkina Faso's exit from ECOWAS is a threat. It could affect access to the Regional Food Security Reserve. It could also affect access to regional electricity markets. 70% of the country's electricity is imported from its neighbors, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire (Department, 2024).

The economic framework of Burkina Faso is predominantly anchored in agriculture; however, the nation concurrently ranks as the fifth-largest gold producer on the African continent. The agricultural sector is responsible for approximately 18.5% of Burkina Faso’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs nearly three-quarters of the labor force (World Bank). Around 26% of the population engages in subsistence farming, with cotton being the main cash crop and a significant source of export revenue (Musah et al., 2024). Notable cash crops comprise groundnuts, shea nuts, and sesame, whereas crucial staple crops encompass pearl millet, sorghum, maize, and rice. In the year 2023, total cereal production was estimated to be around 5.2 million tons by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), sustaining levels comparable to those of 2022 and indicating a 4% increase relative to the average of the preceding five years (US Department of State, 2022).

The industrial sector of Burkina Faso continues to be relatively immature and in its growth phases, making a limited impact on the national economy (28.7% of GDP and 7% of employment). Prominent subsectors include agro-processing, textiles, and mining. The process of agro-processing entails the conversion of agricultural assets like cotton, shea nuts, and grains into superior products, including fabrics, edible oils, and ready-to-eat meals, all while facing obstacles like insufficient infrastructure and scarce financial support.

Historically, textiles have been a significant pillar of Burkina Faso's industrial environment, yet they are now facing a reduction in viability attributable to the influx of budget-friendly imports and a scarcity of investment in state-of-the-art technologies. Conversely, the mining sector, particularly about gold extraction, has experienced considerable expansion, drawn foreign investment, and made significant contributions to export revenues and government income (gold represents nearly three-quarters of total exports), World Bank.

With the Moroccan Atlantic Initiatives, which aim to enhance trade and investment between Morocco and West African nations, the competitiveness of Burkina Faso's gold and cotton sectors could be strengthened by enhanced port access through the Atlantic Initiative, including Burkina Faso, and by fostering economic integration and development initiatives.

Furthermore, the Initiative has significant implications for Burkina Faso, particularly for economic growth and regional cooperation. The Morocco-Burkina Faso relationship exemplifies Morocco's successful re-engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa and its strategy of building South-South partnerships (El-Katiri, 2015). For Burkina Faso, the relationship provides access to Moroccan expertise and investment, and potentially to the Atlantic Ocean through the proposed infrastructure projects (Karr, 2024). The partnership has practical implications for regional stability, as both countries collaborate on counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel region. The recent diplomatic mediation by Morocco also demonstrates how strong bilateral ties can facilitate conflict resolution and humanitarian interventions.

1.4 Niger

Before the post-colonial era, Morocco and Niger shared historical ties primarily through trans-Saharan trade routes and cultural exchanges. The interactions between these regions were influenced by the complex socio-political dynamics of the time, particularly during the French colonial period, which began in Morocco in 1912. Before this, from the mid-19th century, Moroccan traders and nomadic groups engaged in commerce with West Africa, including Niger, facilitating the exchange of goods such as gold, salt, and textiles. Additionally, the emergence of Moroccan literary and cultural identity during this period reflected a broader engagement with African narratives, highlighting the interconnectedness of Moroccan and sub-Saharan cultures (Bidwell, 2012).Thus, the historical ties between Morocco and Niger were characterized by a rich tapestry of trade and cultural exchange, significantly impacted by colonial interventions. The interconnection between Morocco and Niger is primarily influenced by economic relations and regional integration efforts. Morocco has been actively pursuing membership in the ECOWAS, which includes Niger, to enhance its trade and investment opportunities across the region. (Suleiman, 2024). Furthermore, Morocco and Niger have strong ties based on solidarity and mutual support, and Niger has never recognized the separatist Polisario Front. Niger was also one of the first countries to support Morocco's return to the African Union.

This aspiration is driven by Morocco's desire to strengthen its competitive export potential and diversify its economic partnerships, as evidenced by increasing trade volumes and foreign direct investment (FDI) between Morocco and ECOWAS countries (Karim, 2018). Additionally, Morocco's strong maritime connectivity, particularly with East African nations, positions it as a strategic player in regional trade dynamics, potentially benefiting Niger through enhanced access to global markets (Bouazza et al., 2023; Karim, 2018). However, challenges remain, including the need for formal trade mechanisms to replace informal trading practices that can undermine economic stability (Golub & Mbaye, 2023). Overall, Morocco's integration efforts within ECOWAS could foster deeper economic ties with Niger, promoting mutual growth and development (Karim,20018).

Morocco's military cooperation with Niger is framed within a broader context of regional security dynamics, particularly following the recent coup in Niger. Morocco aims to position itself as a key security provider in West Africa, engaging in initiatives to combat terrorism and organized crime, which are prevalent threats in the region (El-Katiri, 2015).

Concurrently, Niger's security sector is undergoing significant transformations, including the establishment of Special Forces and hybrid units, which reflect a response to both internal and external security challenges (Wilén, 2022). Security collaboration constitutes another pivotal aspect of the Moroccan-Nigerian relationship. Morocco has been actively participating in regional security initiatives, particularly within the Sahel region, where Niger is situated. The Sahel has been afflicted by terrorism, transnational organized crime, and various other security dilemmas, and Morocco has emerged as a crucial contributor to efforts aimed at addressing these challenges (El-Katiri, 2015).

The evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly the potential military intervention by ECOWAS in Niger, underscores the urgency for Morocco to solidify its military ties and operational readiness in the face of instability (Raube, 2023).Thus, Morocco's military collaboration with Niger is not only a bilateral effort but also a strategic maneuver within a complex regional security framework.

Morocco's economic interconnections with Niger represent a significant facet of their bilateral rapport. Morocco has been proactively involved in fostering economic collaboration with sub-Saharan Africa, including Niger, as part of its initiative to establish itself as a conduit for international enterprises seeking access to Africa. This endeavor has entailed the formulation of trade agreements, investment in pivotal sectors, and the promotion of South-South cooperation (Berahab, 2017).

A principal domain of economic collaboration between Morocco and Niger is the agricultural sector, which is a key area of cooperation between the two countries. Investment in agricultural initiatives in Niger has been allocated by Morocco to enhance food security and facilitate sustainable development (Berahab, 2017). This collaboration is in accordance with Morocco's comprehensive strategy to fortify its economic relations with the sub-Saharan region of Africa and to affirm its position as a pivotal player in the regional development arena (Abyre et al., 2018). In addition to agriculture, Morocco has also undertaken infrastructure enhancement projects in Niger. These initiatives have focused on augmenting transportation systems, energy provision, and other essential infrastructure, all of which are vital for economic progression and development. Morocco's involvement in these initiatives is driven by its ambition to strengthen economic ties with Niger and to promote regional integration.

Following a coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, a series of sanctions have been imposed by ECOWAS on Niger. These measures are intended to reinstate constitutional governance, but will have considerable ramifications for Niger's financial system and the security of the region. The sanctions include financial restrictions and border closures, which are expected to put pressure on the junta's ability to pay public sector salaries and deliver humanitarian aid. This could lead to unrest and further destabilization in the region. In less than four months following the sanctions in July 2023, the price of rice in Niger surged by 8% (Danielle, 2025). Even ECOWAS member countries not under sanctions suffered consequences, like Benin's reduced revenue at the Cotonou port, a key transit point for goods to Niger. However, Morocco's Atlantic Initiatives may offer alternative pathways for Niger. The uranium and crude oil sectors of Niger are poised to reap substantial benefits from the enhancement of export routes and the mitigation of transportation expenses. Current limitations on port access, exacerbated by the country's withdrawal from ECOWAS, severely hinder its ability to capitalize on its natural resources.

1.5 Summary

The Confederation of Sahel States, which includes Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, seeks to enhance regional integration and address security issues prevalent in the Sahel. This coalition emerges as a response to the declining authority of ECOWAS to promote political stability and foster collaboration among its member states.

Morocco aspires to establish itself as a conduit to Africa for international enterprises and has augmented its security involvement in the Sahel to combat transnational terrorism (Mattes, 2016). Nevertheless, the G3 Sahel, an alternative regional security framework, encounters obstacles such as internal dynamics and the involvement of various international stakeholders, which hinder its efficacy. While the Morocco Atlantic Initiative and the Confederation of Sahel States signify substantial advancements toward regional collaboration, the geopolitical environment remains intricate. The engagement of many international stakeholders and the fluctuating foreign approaches of Sahelian nations persist in influencing the region's dynamics, presenting both chances and impediments for the realization of stability and cohesi

CHAPTER II

THE GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF MOROCCAN ATLANTIC INITIATIVE

2.1. Moroccan Atlantic Initiative

Morocco inaugurated its ambitious Atlantic Initiative on November 6, 2023, with the intention of facilitating maritime access to the Atlantic Ocean for Sahelian nations while simultaneously augmenting the kingdom's geopolitical influence within the Sahel-Saharan region. This initiative is explicitly aimed at nations such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, with the aspirational objective of reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of the Sahel and Sub-Saharan regions, which are currently contending with a succession of coups instigated by deteriorating economic and social circumstances (Zaanoun,2024).

The persistent economic marginalization of the Sahel region constitutes one of the most urgent developmental challenges facing the African continent. This wide region, made up of landlocked nations like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, confronts considerable impediments to participating in world markets. The geographic isolation, defined by distances reaching several hundred kilometers to the closest maritime ports, intensifies logistical expenditures, accounting for 30-40% of import values, as a result, profoundly restricting economic competitiveness and narrowing developmental pathways (Mold, 2022).

The Atlantic Initiative serves as a representation of Morocco's regional strategy, formally commenced in November 2023, aiming to create an integrated trade and transportation framework that links the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Sahel region (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024). These initiatives aim to encompass maritime infrastructure development, energy projects, and comprehensive trade facilitation mechanisms designed to reconnect the Sahel region to global supply chains via Morocco's Atlantic coastline. Burkina Faso is a member of the ECOWAS and the Sahel Alliance. Moreover, these initiatives could be a catalyst to promote regional integration, create more economic corridors, and facilitate increased trade between North and West Africa. Establishing formal trade routes and implementing digital infrastructure would help shift a significant portion of regional trade from informal to formal channels, strengthening economic governance and improving tax revenue collection. The initiatives emerge at a critical juncture when traditional regional frameworks are experiencing significant upheaval, particularly following the withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024). A key aspect of this initiative is the ambitious Dakhla Atlantic Port project, a deepwater infrastructure with a total investment of US$1.2 billion, systematically designed to support significant shipping capacity and act as a vital link for Sahelian countries to connect to international markets (Ahdani, 2022). Expected to open in 2029, the port epitomizes Morocco's ongoing commitment to redefine regional trade structures and support an innovative approach to economic integration. The utility of this maritime infrastructure system is dependent on the collaborative relationship between Morocco's future facilities and the enduring infrastructure available in Mauritania's Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

As Mauritania actively navigates the complex dynamics of regional relations, particularly those with Morocco and Algeria, the attractive prospect of specialized port synergies becomes a notable incentive for cooperative economic ventures. Rather than inciting competition, these ports embody the opportunity to form a comprehensive maritime infrastructure network along the magnificent Atlantic coastline. Through strategic planning in the establishment and management of port facilities, Morocco and Mauritania can develop a unified maritime gateway network, tailored to meet the diverse needs of different market segments and trade corridors (Business focus, 2023).

The port framework includes a well-developed logistics infrastructure and a variety of transport modes, which will facilitate integrated connectivity with road transport networks of particular importance for countries without direct maritime access. The Atlantic Initiative project will provide reliable global trade routes and a map of markets open to global trade with significant reductions in land and sea transport costs. In addition, the green hydrogen infrastructure envisioned for Dakhla establishes the network as a viable route for future clean energy exports, in line with the global shift towards energy transition and sustainability.

This ambitious project to develop the port of Dakhla, located in the Western Sahara region, has been undertaken in partnership with Morocco to achieve this continental regional goal, with an investment of $1.2 billion. Morocco's vision to make the port of Dakhla a vital and economic center open to landlocked Sahelian countries. The port is scheduled to be completed in 2028, with a capacity to handle 35 million tonnes of cargo per year, which will strengthen ties and links with North and West African countries (Karr, 2024).

Enhanced international engagement within the Moroccan-administered region of Western Sahara would serve to substantiate Moroccan authority over the territory. (Reuters, 2024). Nonetheless, this predicament also presents a significant opportunity for transformative regional integration. The development of a comprehensive vision for the Atlantic domain is at the core of the Royal Atlantic Initiative, through which Morocco is pursuing the cultivation of this vision. The strategic geographical position of Morocco and its established proficiency in infrastructure development are being leveraged to lead efforts aimed at the re-establishment of connections between the Sahel and global supply chains via its Atlantic coastline.

Morocco has made in strengthen economic relations with the African continent. This proposal is not just about alleviating logistical challenges. It aspires to promote co-development and mutual prosperity among the countries of the continent within the framework of the initiative's core principles of solidarity and co-operation between the actors of the Atlantic-African initiative. At the center of this vision, driven by royal initiatives, are two interconnected pillars: An advanced maritime infrastructure network along the Atlantic Ocean and coherent energy systems (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024). Recent geopolitical transformations have introduced additional complexities to these challenges while concurrently fostering opportunities for substantial change.

The creation of the Sahel Alliance by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, coinciding with the exit of the three countries from the ECOWAS at the beginning of 2024, marks a significant change in the regional political and economic environment of the Sahel. The reconfiguration of the strategic alliance in this region has led to the rise of great powers such as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates as an alternative to the traditional powers, turning the region into a geopolitical conflict.

The initiative taken by Morocco demonstrates the political and strategic acumen that goes beyond traditional security-oriented frameworks in addressing the issues facing the Sahel region, prioritizing a comprehensive strategy that links infrastructure enhancement and economic development. In addition to accelerating the search for regional solutions and new alliances (Asadou, 2023). Despite persistent endeavours to exploit the disintegration of ECOWAS, epitomized by the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Mold, 2022). The initiative provides an opportunity to diversify foreign trade routes and import and export pathways for these countries, which currently struggle with geographical isolation. Mali's economy is primarily based on gold, cotton, and livestock. It could benefit significantly from reduced transport costs and improved access to ports through the Atlantic Initiative. This framework aims to boost the competitiveness of Mali’s mining and agricultural sectors, which aligns with Morocco’s vision of transcontinental connectivity. Investments in energy infrastructure could boost Mali's mining and farming activities while fostering value-added processing industries, creating jobs, and promoting economic diversification. Likewise, Niger's uranium and oil industries could benefit from improved export routes and reduced transportation costs, particularly following its withdrawal from ECOWAS (Administration, 2024). Morocco's initiatives could provide alternative trade routes and new industrial capabilities. Like Mali, Burkina Faso could benefit from streamlined access to global markets, particularly for gold and cotton, by leveraging improved energy access and infrastructure, which could formalise trade flows and reduce transaction costs. As a result, this could increase the export volume and economic revenue of these nations by up to 40 percent (Ghoulidi Rida, 2024). This will have a positive impact on the countries of the region and thus reflects the Kingdom of Morocco's interest in establishing regional economic integration blocs in the region. The Sahel countries have a combined population of more than 85 million. Niger is the most populous country in this union, with a population of about 25 million (Kimani, 2024) , and has one of the world's greatest uranium reserves and significant oil deposits. Burkina Faso has a population of 21 million and mainly depends on the agricultural sector, with self-sufficient farming being the primary economic activity (Lassana Toure, 2024).

Mauritania, with a total population of 4.2 million, depends mainly on fishing for its economy, benefiting from its Atlantic coastline, as well as mineral resources including iron, copper, and gold. Mali has a population of about 21 million, three-quarters of whom work in agriculture, even though only one-fifth of the country's land is cultivable (Cederic, 2011). Morocco, which is preparing to implement the Union's initiative, is particularly interested in strengthening its maritime capacities, while at the same time planning to expand its Atlantic port to facilitate trade with these countries. In addition, the highway linking Tiznit and Dakhla, which is almost 100% complete, is set to connect this hub port with the African interior via Mauritania.

The initiative is expected to enhance political stability, strengthen Morocco's regional influence, and address common security and geopolitical dilemmas such as terrorism, irregular migration, and drug trafficking. It primarily aimed to counter Algeria's efforts to isolate

Morocco and hinder regional growth and security. Algeria is seeking to establish an interconnected Maghreb Union comprising Tunisia, Libya, and Algeria, an alliance that was officially announced in November 2023 through partnerships with its allies. This is in addition to Algeria's military support for armed groups in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, the Atlantic Initiative's goal is to tackle the interconnected challenges of security and development by focusing on investments in agriculture, food, and pharmaceuticals. This approach aims to address the underlying causes of instability and promote long-term sustainable growth in the region (Rida, 2025).

Industrial dynamism and artificial intelligence play an important role in the development of the region, where traditional economic and political systems are undergoing significant changes. Morocco's remarkable success in increasing its economic leverage in Africa from $300 million to more than $3 billion in exports over twenty years underscores the potential of innovative regional integration frameworks. These initiatives demonstrate how regional efforts can collaborate to address common challenges in the region. With the opening of new horizons and new ways to create a broader regional integrated economy that responds to the challenges defined by the region. (Zanon, 20249). However, their victory will depend on unwavering political commitment and effective teamwork among all the players involved, with the Moroccan-Mauritanian Alliance serving as an essential spark for broader regional progress. While the coast is undergoing evolving geopolitical transformations, this infrastructure development strategy is a wise path to encouragement for regional integration and economic growth, with the potential to fundamentally alter the region's economic landscape and development trajectory for the foreseeable future. Moreover, in January 2025, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Islamic Republic of Mauritania formalised an agreement to interconnect their electrical grids to create a cohesive link between their national networks. This accord constitutes a component of the broader Atlantic–West Africa energy corridor initiative (Lyammouri, 2025). For Mauritania, which encompasses numerous inland regions lacking connection to the national electrical grid, this agreement presents an opportunity to procure electricity from Morocco to mitigate existing shortages, particularly in the northern regions. Morocco, with its substantial investments in renewable energy sources (specifically solar and wind), is well-placed to supply Mauritania with cost-effective electricity, thereby improving energy accessibility for the Mauritanian population and industrial sectors. In the long term, this electricity corridor could be incorporated into the West African energy market. Therefore, integrating energy systems would complement the integration of transport networks (Lyammouri, 2025).

2.2 Russia's Strategic Engagement in the Sahel

Russia's expanding involvement in Africa over the preceding decade manifests across various spheres. In the realm of diplomacy, there has been a notable surge in high-level interactions between the Russian government and African nations in recent years. For example, during the five years of unrestricted travel before the onset of the pandemic in 2020, leaders from African states and governments made over 20 visits to Moscow, representing a significant uptick when compared to the mere 17 visits recorded during the preceding 15 years. This escalation was further enhanced by the inauguration of the Russia-Africa Summit, the inaugural session of which, convened in Sochi in October 2019, attracted 43 heads of state and government to Russia. Concurrently, senior Russian diplomats, particularly Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Deputy Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, have undertaken increasingly frequent missions to various African countries (Donelli, 2023).

Russia has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing diplomatic relations with Sahel countries through the updated foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation and the Russia-Africa summits initiated in 2019. These summits, held in 2019 and 2023, aimed to bolster diplomatic cooperation with African nations and were attended by numerous heads of state and officials. The first summit in Sochi in 2019 attracted significant participation, with multiple agreements and memoranda signed. However, the second summit in St. Petersburg in 2023 witnessed lower attendance from African countries, including Sahel nations, indicating a decline in high-level representation. This shift highlights Russia's renewed engagement with the African continent and its efforts to strengthen ties with Sahel countries through diplomatic initiatives.

Since March 25, Russian enterprises have established multiple strategic agreements with Mali concerning the construction of gold refineries, geological surveys, and collaborative initiatives in civil nuclear energy. The governments of Mali and Russia also formalized several agreements about cooperation in the production of oil, gas, uranium, and lithium on March 31 (Donelli, 2023). The execution of these cooperation agreements represents a significant advancement in actualizing various memoranda of understanding and high-level negotiations conducted between the two nations during the years 2020 and 2022 (Foster, 2022; Lanfranchi & de Bruijne, 2022).

The Malian junta presumably aims to leverage its intensified presence in the resource-abundant regions of northern Mali, having expanded its footprint in the area with the assistance of the Wagner Group in the final quarter of 2023. In October and November 2023, the Malian military, in conjunction with its Wagner affiliates, regained control over territories previously occupied by insurgents in northern Mali (Anyalebechi, 2023). This military campaign enhanced access to unregulated artisanal gold mining sites that had earlier been under the dominion of rebel factions, while simultaneously positioning them in proximity to untapped deposits of oil, gas, and uranium (Adu & Mezyaev, 2023). In early February 2023, Malian and Wagner forces temporarily occupied the Intahaka gold mine, recognized as the largest artisanal mining operation in northern Mali. Local inhabitants reported that the mercenaries-imposed entrance fees and conducted certain gold mining activities before their withdrawal (Anyalebechi, 2023).

The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative significantly affects Russia's strategy in the region by reshaping economic and security dynamics. As Morocco strengthens its economic partnerships with Western countries, Russia faces increasing competition for influence and market presence in vital sectors such as energy, agriculture, and tourism.

This initiative may force Russia to adapt its energy policies to maintain its presence, especially as Morocco diversifies its energy sources away from Russian supplies. Furthermore, the initiative's focus on security cooperation could increase tensions between NATO and Russia, as Russia may view Morocco's alignment with Western security frameworks as a threat. As a result, Russia may be forced to adjust its security plans and possibly work with Morocco on counterterrorism and regional stability initiatives to protect its interests. Overall, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative presents challenges and opportunities for Russia in achieving its strategic objectives in the Atlantic region.

In conclusion, the rise of Russia and Morocco's interests in the Sahel shows a multipolar world where countries seek to expand by forming partnerships (Bamidele, 2025). Morocco's initiative aims to strike a balance between regional stability and economic and security interests, in contrast to the often-perceived challenge that Russia's presence poses to Western influence (Mattes, 2016). The Sahel region's complex geopolitics highlights the interplay between traditional and emerging powers. Russia and Morocco pursue their own strategic objectives. Russia's actions may be perceived as counterbalancing Western influence, whereas Morocco's initiatives prioritise regional stability and economic development.

2.3 China's Strategic Engagement in the Sahel

The relationship between the Sahel countries and China has evolved over the years, with mutual benefits in investments and cooperation across various sectors. The collaboration provides an avenue for Sahel nations to broaden their diplomatic ties and access affordable goods, while China strengthens its economic and political foothold in these developing regions. China's economic liberalization under globalization, Beijing is extending its political influence in the area, aligning infrastructure projects with the needs of partner countries through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Kohli, 2018). China's substantial involvement in public procurement through bilateral agreements has proven advantageous for both parties due to the cost-effectiveness of Chinese products. Additionally, China's strategic objectives in the Sahel include territorial exploration, enhancing operational capacities, and testing new military equipment through training exercises at its military base.

For instance, the cooperative venture between the Republic of China and the Republic of Mali, in conjunction with several other African nations, has resulted in a significant surge in the demand for a diverse array of commodities within the Chinese market. There has been a notable escalation of at least 50% in the utilization of iron ore, cotton, crude oil, diamonds, and other resources (Diallo, 2018). Given that Mali is acknowledged as one of the foremost producers of iron ore and cotton on the African continent, the ramifications of this intensified demand have been distinctly evident within the Malian economic landscape. An impressive 95% of the country's cotton output is exported, comprising 22% of the national treasure of export revenue. The lack of a processing industry forces Mali to abandon its unprocessed assets, thereby stripping the country of much of the value that could be extracted from this vital sector (Camara, 2015).

Additionally, China has pursued policies in Africa that are very similar to those currently being implemented in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, where military juntas are in power. In 2023, China EXIM Bank approved a $49 million loan to Burkina Faso's cash-strapped government, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, to build a solar power plant in Lombe (Hakeenah, 2024). In 2024, Mali, also experiencing financial difficulties, agreed with the Chinese energy company Sinohydro to build a 100-megawatt solar power plant in Savo. China's electric vehicle (EV) industry giant, China Ganfeng Lithium Company, owns a 40 per cent stake in Mali's Goulamina lithium mine. This mine is one of the world's largest lithium projects (Adeyemi, 2025).

As a result, China has become a primary destination for many locally produced goods in the wake of this cooperative initiative. However, one of the more concerning adverse consequences of the China-Africa partnership is the detrimental effects experienced by domestically manufactured clothing and furniture. These indigenous products have been swiftly overshadowed by more competitively priced imports from China.

China's policy of non-interference in internal affairs is based on respect for sovereign authority and regime stability, allowing it to work with governments of varying types in Africa as long as they maintain a strong grip on power. This strategy focuses on supporting regime stability in fragile regions like Niger, indicating a preference for regimes over citizens and significant involvement in internal affairs. This approach has been evident in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, where China has made significant investments in infrastructure projects to bolster regimes led by military councils. For instance, China granted a $49 million loan for a solar power plant in Burkina Faso and signed deals to build solar plants and invest in lithium mining in Mali (Hakeenah,2024). However, this involvement raises concerns about the rule of law and the potential risks for investors operating in these regions (Hakeenah,2024).

Morocco is strengthening infrastructure in the Sahel region as part of the Atlantic Initiative, which could compete with Chinese investments (Diallo, 2024). Moroccan initiatives could provide increased trade opportunities for Sahel countries, reducing their dependence on Chinese investments that have raised concerns about debt dependency (ICA, 2018). Furthermore, they could stimulate economic growth in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso by promoting local partnerships and investments (Diallo, 2024). This contrasts with the economic model of Chinese investments. Morocco's growing influence will not stop China's economic dominance in the Sahel, thanks to its extensive infrastructure investments through the Belt and Road Initiative. Competition between the two countries will affect the region's economic and political future. Morocco must offer sustainable and beneficial partnerships if it wants to succeed.

2.4 Iran's Strategic Engagement in the Sahel

Tehran has supported African countries critical of Western powers, such as those in the Sahel, by providing diplomatic backing and military cooperation against terrorism. Iran seeks to fill the void left by Western countries in the region through arms sales and defense exports, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sudan. Tehran aims to expand its influence in Africa and position itself as a key arms supplier to nations in the Global South, leveraging the changing geopolitical landscape in the region (Toğa, 2024).

After the coup in Niger that removed President Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023, French forces were expelled, and the country terminated its anti-terrorism deal with the United States, prompting the evacuation of American troops. Allegations arose about Niger secretly negotiating with Iran for uranium in exchange for weaponry, which the military junta denied (IISS, 2023).

In January 2024, Niger's officials travelled to Tehran to sign agreements, with Iran offering assistance to navigate international sanctions (Schiavi, 2023). Iran has also strengthened its relationship with Burkina Faso. In January 2023, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, Ali Bagheri, made a surprising visit to Burkina Faso in West Africa, as part of a multi-country tour. The visit aimed to discuss increasing economic cooperation and trade between the two countries, while also criticizing Burkina Faso's former colonial power, France. The choice to engage with Burkina Faso can be linked to its political instability, abundant natural resources like gold, and potential battery technology resources such as lithium and manganese dioxide. Iran, facing economic challenges due to sanctions, may benefit from access to these resources. The anti-Western and anti-French sentiment expressed by Iran could be linked to exploiting Burkina Faso's revolutionary history, particularly the legacy of Thomas Sankara. The country's valuable resources, coupled with the decline in Western investments due to terrorism, make it an appealing prospect for economic agreements (Rodman, 2023) that could bypass international sanctions. Iran has articulated diplomatic backing for military regimes in the Sahel, notably in nations such as Mali and Burkina Faso, which have distanced themselves from Western powers. Iranian officials have commended these states for their resistance to hegemonic European policies and colonialism (Parens, 2023).

Nigeria has seen a significant increase in its Shia population, which can be attributed to Iranian influence and support for the Islamic Movement in Nigeria since its emergence in 1984. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) oversees the operations of Iranian entities involved in religious and cultural initiatives internationally. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (OCRI) and Al-Mustafa University, Iran's most prominent religious institution, have contributed significantly to this progress (Dirk, 2024). Iranian representatives are working to expand the scope and quantity of soft power, as evidenced by the launch of a Hausa-language media platform, Hausa TV, which aims to attract the attention of more than 50 million Hausa speakers across the African continent. However, the channel shows little interest in African issues, focusing instead on Iran, the ‘axis of resistance’ against Israel, and the position of Shiite Islam in the African context (Bouvier, 2024). Iran's influence in Africa, specifically in the Sahel region, is driven by its anti-Western stance, capitalizing on African countries' anti-Western sentiments to position itself as a counterforce against Western imperialism. Emphasizing Islamic solidarity encompassing both Shia and Sunni communities, Iran presents itself as a supporter of oppressed Muslims globally, particularly appealing in regions where Islamic identity plays a significant role. By backing resistance movements like Hamas and Hezbollah, Iran aims to form alliances with African countries sharing anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist views, bolstering its ideological impact in the region. This approach leverages historical ties and resonates strongly with nations that have faced colonial or neo-colonial oppression, positioning Iran as a champion of sovereignty and resistance against foreign interference in Africa's evolving political landscape (Schiavi, 2023).

Iran utilizes cultural diplomacy strategically to advance its principles and ideologies by organizing events such as the Iran-Africa Trade Summit to bolster collaboration among Islamic nations. The annual summit in Tehran aimed to enhance economic ties between Iran and African countries, with President Raisi advocating for government partnerships in resource extraction, supply chain improvement, and private investment across sectors like agriculture and healthcare (Schiavi, 2023). Although the number of African Union member states participating in the summit decreased compared to the previous year, Iran emphasized its commitment to Africa, with exports reaching $1.183 billion in 2023 (Scollon, 2024). Through this platform, Iran seeks to assert its anti-Western hegemony stance and cultivate relationships with like-minded nations, highlighting its dedication to strengthening ties with African countries that share similar perspectives (McAllister, 2023). However, the Sahel region has experienced a substantial surge in terrorism and organised crime, particularly in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (Ateku, 2024).

The emergence of the Union of the Sahel is a collective response to these security challenges, emphasising regional cooperation to counter external threats, including those posed by Iran (Issaev, 2025). Iran's increasing presence in the Sahel region is considered a potential destabilising factor as it seeks to expand its influence by forming alliances with local groups, which could hinder counterterrorism efforts (Umar et al., n.d.). Sahelian states may view Iran's strategy as a threat to their sovereignty and stability, prompting Morocco to advocate for a coordinated regional response. Morocco's Atlantic Initiative promotes security and development, positioning itself as a mediator and supporter of Sahelian states in the face of external influences, including Iran (Correa, 2022). Through promoting intelligence sharing and military cooperation, Morocco aims to bolster the Sahel countries' ability to deal with internal and external threats effectively (ATCO, 2024). Morocco's Atlantic initiative seeks to promote regional stability in the face of threats. These threats include Iran's strategy. However, some argue that focusing on external factors may distract attention. This distraction would be from addressing the root causes of instability. These root causes include governance issues and socio-economic challenges within the Sahel countries themselves (Umar et al., n.d.).

2.5 United Arab Emirates' Engagement Strategy in the Sahel

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) policy concerning Africa is inextricably linked to the considerations of both external and internal security of the nation (specifically addressing the challenges posed by Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, alongside the imperative of food security) as well as the commercial interests of its ruling elite (facilitating trade and financial transactions among the East, West, and South). In relation to security concerns, the UAE has proactively augmented its military presence in North and East Africa, as well as in adjacent maritime regions, and has intervened in the internal affairs of various African nations on multiple occasions. Regarding the economic aspect, the UAE has, on one hand, leveraged its corporations to enhance Emirati soft power within Africa; concurrently, diplomatic avenues and political influence have provided national (often familial) Emirati enterprises with a competitive edge in several African nations. In sum, throughout the past two decades, the UAE has emerged as a significant political and economic foreign entity within Africa (Ardemagni, 2024).

The Africa policy of the UAE has increasingly demonstrated assertiveness and multidimensionality, with the Gulf state concurrently evolving into a principal investor and trading partner for the continent while establishing an unprecedented military presence (notably for a non-Western actor) in the region. Within the African context, the UAE has effectively harmonized its two principal foreign policy objectives, counteracted the ascendancy of political Islam, and positioned itself as the foremost financial and logistical conduit linking all regions of the Old World (Kostelyanets, 2022).

In 2019, the UAE signed a military cooperation agreement with Mali and later provided 60 armored vehicles to Bamako. The UAE has a unique approach in Africa, offering military support through mercenaries and proxies rather than deploying its own army. The UAE has supported armed groups like the Libyan National Army and Sudanese Rapid Support Forces through financing, training, and equipping fighters, mainly from Sudan and Chad, using covert supply chains and logistics companies (Davidson, 2019). There are rumors of UAE collaboration with the Wagner Group to supply weapons to the Rapid Support Forces via Chad, with Dubai acting as a key hub for illicit gold and diamond smuggling networks. Mali's weak enforcement, with minimal gold taxation and manual transport to Dubai, the Wagner has facilitated the transfer of up to $1 billion worth of Venezuelan gold to the UAE in 2020, revealing a significant shadow economy supporting armed groups and expanding Emirati influence (Studies, 2024).

The United Arab Emirates has been providing security assistance to various countries to help them combat perceived ideological threats from Islamist, jihadist, and terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. In the Sahel region, the UAE has supported countries like Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria by providing armored vehicles, transport aircraft, and funding for military infrastructure. Specifically, the UAE aided Mali with armored vehicles after signing a military cooperation agreement, while also assisting Nigeria in its fight against Boko Haram. Furthermore, Abu Dhabi has collaborated with the G5 Sahel force and pledged financial support of 30 million€ (US$31.5 million), including conducting logistical flights to aid in the international community's efforts to combat terrorism in the Sahel region (Studies, 2024).

Bilateral relations between the United Arab Emirates and Morocco are distinguished by strategic collaboration, particularly within the context of Morocco's Atlantic Initiative, which aspires to enhance its geopolitical influence in West Africa. This collaboration embodies a more extensive geopolitical framework wherein both nations endeavor to elevate their regional stature and foster mutual economic relations.

Recently, the UAE has augmented its strategic, investment, and developmental connections with Morocco, encompassing heightened trade commitments, foreign direct investment, and collaboration on substantial energy and infrastructure initiatives. The Moroccan Atlantic Royal Initiative, inaugurated in 2023 and projected for implementation in 2024, endeavors to facilitate maritime access to the Atlantic Ocean for landlocked Sahel nations through Moroccan ports and to establish an economic corridor linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Sahel. (Faouzi, 2025) .The United Arab Emirates has emerged as a significant proponent and investor in pilot projects associated with this strategic vision, particularly concerning the proposed gas pipeline interconnecting Nigeria, Morocco, and Africa, wherein Emirati financial institutions, including sovereign wealth funds and banks, play a crucial role in financing and partnership. This coalition fortifies Morocco's status as an Atlantic hub while bestowing the UAE with geo-economic leverage in West Africa and the Sahel region.

The UAE and Morocco have partaken in numerous diplomatic and economic initiatives, thereby reinforcing their bilateral relations. Morocco's Atlantic Initiative aspires to establish Morocco as a conduit to Africa and to attract investments from Gulf nations, including the UAE, to catalyze economic growth and development (Matis, 2016). There are indications that both public and private investments from the UAE are facilitating significant projects associated with the Atlantic Vision, particularly the endorsement of a gas pipeline linking Nigeria and Morocco (Atlantic Africa), efforts to attract foreign direct investment, and comprehensive memoranda of understanding covering trade, ports, and energy.

The United Arab Emirates development finance institutions, such as the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development, in conjunction with other Gulf financing mechanisms, are securing Moroccan infrastructure and development initiatives, thereby positioning the UAE as a pragmatic partner in large-scale cross-border projects. The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development serves the reciprocal interests of both parties. Morocco acquires financing, political endorsement, and project partners to construct the Atlantic Corridor, while the UAE ensures investments in energy and infrastructure, thereby enhancing its influence in West Africa and the Sahel region. Morocco's stability and proactive security measures have rendered it a preferred partner for the UAE in confronting regional challenges (Real, 2018). The UAE has invested in Moroccan infrastructure and development to support its goal of expanding economic influence in West Africa (Mattis, 2016). This is part of a broader strategy to strengthen Morocco's position as a regional trade and investment hub, particularly with Gulf nations (Ilori, 2022). However, despite the strong partnership between the UAE and Morocco, there are underlying tensions within the Maghreb region, particularly about Algeria, which could hinder their collaborative endeavours. The geopolitical landscape of North Africa is undergoing a significant transformation, influencing the nature of these bilateral relations.

2.6 Türkiye’s Strategic Engagement in the Sahel

After establishing its authority in East Africa and augmenting its political and military capacities in North Africa, Türkiye’s expansion in East Africa has strengthened its political, military, and economic capacity in Africa. The importance of West Africa has been crucial in Türkiye's strategic development to transform its soft power into political and military power.

Ankara’s approach toward West Africa is shaped by insights garnered through its extensive relationships with the African continent and its strategic involvement in Libya. Türkiye incessantly engages in the advancement of its relations with African nations, with particular emphasis on the Sahel and Sahara regions, as well as the western segment of the continent, aiming to forge diverse partnerships to realize its strategic aims, which revolve around establishing a presence in this pivotal area of the continent and facilitating the transformation of the regional dynamics in the Sahel and Sahara.(Askar, 2020).

Türkiye and Burkina Faso maintain a robust framework of bilateral relations, this relationship designed to enhance bilateral ties, with the establishment of the Turkish Embassy in Ouagadougou and the Burkina Faso Embassy in the years 2012 and 2014, respectively. Türkiye has committed a financial contribution of US$5 million to the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel (Affairs, 2022), of which Burkina Faso is an integral member. During the period between March 2024 and March 2025, Ankara’s exports to Burkina Faso dipped by US$3.31 million (41.8%), sliding from US$7.92 million to US$4.62 million, in contrast to a surge in imports by US$41,200 (10.8%), which ascended from US$381,000 to US$422,000 according to according to Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), (Complexity, 2024).

In Mali, Erdogan critiqued France's actions in Libya and the Sahel, leveraging post-colonial sentiments against France and highlighting historical ties with Africa to position Türkiye as a non-imperialist partner promoting equality (Inanc, 2023). By portraying France as a supporter of terrorism, Erdogan aimed to establish mutually respectful partnerships with West African countries through "win-win agreements." Türkiye’s focus on humanitarian diplomacy in Africa involves crisis assistance, refugee reception, and support for marginalized populations, spearheaded by entities like AFAD, TIKA, and the Red Crescent, aligning with its emphasis on promoting a just world and advocating for reforms within international bodies like the United Nations (Enver Arpa,2022). This approach contrasts with NGO efforts aimed at improving conditions for civilian victims, showcasing the divergent objectives between state-led and non-state humanitarian diplomacy initiatives (Işbilir, 2021). The coup and anti-French protest in Mali presented an opportunity for Türkiye to enhance its influence, bolster its African policy, and utilize anti-colonial rhetoric to expand its presence in the region (Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, 2022). Türkiye’s proactive involvement in West Africa is indicative of its broader foreign policy aims and the significance of the region within the global context. Türkiye has openly articulated its critique of the counterterrorism measures implemented by France and has enthusiastically endorsed initiatives intended to foster stability that are primarily led by African organizations, such as the G5 Sahel coalition. (comprising Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad). In January 2013, the Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs denounced France’s Operation Serval counterterrorism initiative, asserting that the United Nations Security Council had only authorized an intervention led by Africans and that such "unilateral actions" from France would undermine the agency of Malians concerning their political trajectory. Additionally, Turkish media outlets aligned with the state have raised apprehensions regarding France's potential use of counterterrorism operations as a mechanism for extending its influence over its erstwhile colonies, including Mali and Niger (Ramani, 2021).

In recent years, Sahel nations have demonstrated an increasing propensity to procure Türkiye military equipment, particularly its competitively priced drones, thereby introducing a novel aspect to bilateral relations. However, Türkiye maintains a strong alliance with Niger that extends well before the Nigerian military junta took power in July 2023. Türkiye has been seeking to increase its investments in Niger since 2012. Furthermore, the diplomatic efforts of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Sahel in 2012 and 2013 the region formed the basis for significantly enhanced Turkish economic engagement in the years that followed (Aïssatou, 2022). The outreach efforts undertaken by Türkiye culminated in substantial agreements related to infrastructure, defence, and mining during the years 2019 and 2020. In 2022, Türkiye supplied six Bayraktar TB2 drones to Niger, with French media reporting considerations to depend on these drones to contest territories controlled by insurgents and regions where state forces are notably absent, and it has nearly tripled the frequency of drone strikes after assuming power (Armstrong, 2021).

The expansion of Türkiye's influence in Niger may lead to competitive dynamics with other important stakeholders in the region, such as China, Russia, and Morocco, regarding access to natural resources and military dominance. Both Russia and Türkiye are keen to obtain mining licenses at two uranium mines that the military council had revoked in front of Western companies (Aïssatou, 2022). The junta rescinded the permits from French state-owned Orano and Canadian-owned in June and July 2024 due to disputes concerning the firms' proposed timelines and target areas (Bisht, 2022). Türkiye is attempting to strengthen its regional presence by fostering security cooperation, economic partnerships, and diplomatic engagement. Türkiye faces significant challenges stemming from the political instability in the Sahel, including risks to its investments, citizens, and broader strategic objectives in the region. The region's volatile security situation, characterised by high levels of conflict and unstable governance, complicates Türkiye’s operational and diplomatic efforts. To illustrate, the ongoing strife in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where the levels of conflict are high or the situation is insecure, endangers the security of Türkiye personnel and initiatives, including military instruction, economic investments, and humanitarian operations (Tanchun,2021).

The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative positions Morocco as a logistical and diplomatic gateway between the Atlantic and the Sahel, creating an alternative partnership space that partially overlaps with Türkiye's expanding regional footprint. By offering landlocked Sahel states access to Atlantic ports, Morocco provides critical economic incentives that enhance Rabat’s leverage, whereas Türkiye has mainly focused on security, diplomacy, and industry. (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024) Morocco's initiative is set to boost economic interdependence in the region, reducing the Sahel's reliance on external actors such as Türkiye for trade and connectivity. Rabat’s religious diplomacy (Maliki-Ashari alignment) offers a cultural affinity that challenges Türkiye’s soft-power strategy, which is based on humanitarian aid and educational networks (Haciri, 2025). The MAI’s focus on infrastructure, energy corridors, and market integration could redirect investment priorities away from Türkiye's defence industry-heavy engagement. Morocco provides Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso with a non-military developmental model, which may balance or dilute Türkiye’s strong security profile in the region. The initiative boosts Morocco’s geopolitical visibility, potentially enabling it to compete with Türkiye for leadership among external partners seeking influence in the Sahel’s new political environment (Alawsate, 2025). However, the MAI also creates complementary opportunities, as Türkiye can benefit from new trade corridors and Moroccan maritime infrastructure. These overlapping interests could generate a competitive-cooperative dynamic, particularly in energy, logistics, and regional mediation (Eljechtimi, 2025). Overall, the MAI restricts but does not eliminate Türkiye's influence; instead, it reshapes the regional landscape by offering Sahel states diversified strategic choices.

The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative significantly influences Türkiye's strategy in the Sahel by shaping the regional dynamics of economic cooperation and security. Morocco's policy towards the Sahel, particularly during the reign of King Mohammed VI, has been to focus on reestablishing relations, including strengthening security and economic cooperation with the countries of West Africa (Admin, 2024), establishing economic corridors and investment routes, and promoting South-South cooperation. Morocco's goal is to establish itself as a strategic investment channel for major global powers, including China, Türkiye, and Russia.

This ongoing diplomatic and economic engagement gives Morocco leverage in its partnerships in West Africa, prompting caution towards emerging external players.

In summary, the rivalry among Russia, China, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Türkiye, within the Sahel region, is delineated by divergent strategies aimed at augmenting their influence and promoting economic advancement. The principal objective for these nations is to forge robust partnerships with Sahelian states, which are actively pursuing economic progress amidst persistent instability. As they compete for influence, the disparate approaches adopted by these countries epitomize their distinct national interests and strategic imperatives in the Sahel, ultimately shaping the geopolitical terrain of the region.

This competition accentuates the significance of external partnerships in the Sahel's pursuit of stability and development, illuminating the interrelationship between military assistance and developmental support in fostering regional resilience. In the present circumstances, the Kingdom of Morocco's initiative appears to consolidate its alliance with European nations and to reinforce its role in supporting Western interests in the face of Russian and Chinese expansion. This suggests that Morocco will have little difficulty securing financial support for the Atlantic Initiative from the United States and Europe, both of which are seeking regional partners to further their own strategic objectives. This also helps to explain why Morocco played a leading role in establishing the Atlantic Cooperation Support Partnership, which was launched by Washington in September 2023. Morocco's ambition to strengthen its leadership has strategic gains, but there are risks from the complex interests of the involved countries.

CHAPTER III

THE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF MOROCCAN ATLANTIC INITIATIVE

3.1 Mauritania in the Sahel

Mauritania is located between latitudes 15 and 29 north and longitudes 6 and 19 west, covering an area of 1,030,700 square kilometers. It is bordered to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the south by Senegal, to the south and east by Mali, to the northeast by Algeria, and to the northwest by the Moroccan Sahara. This strategic location has allowed Mauritania to shine between the countries of North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Mauritania is characterized by the diversity of civilizations, rich cultures, and multi-ethnicity, with a demographic growth of 3,340,627 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Arabs (والألسرة) 56.9 per cent of the population lives in poverty. Of this population, 18.4 per cent are children under the age of five and 23 per cent are women of childbearing age. The majority of the population is young (EU-Directorate-General, 2024).

With 44 per cent under the age of 15 and 76 per cent under the age of 35. This demographic structure generates a high demand for access to essential services such as education, health care, and employment. (Action, 2024). The mineral sector constituted a significant component of Mauritania's economy, representing approximately 12% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). The Mauritanian economy has experienced successive negative repercussions due to the low prices of crude oil and minerals, especially iron ore, as Mauritania is the second producer at the African level and ranks fifteenth internationally as an exporter of iron production in 2017. In addition to iron ore, Mauritania exports copper, crude oil, gold, and gypsum, as well as a variety of cement, granite, marble, quartz, and salt, according to the Ministry of Petroleum, Energy, and Mines. Mauritania's mineral wealth contains 2 billion metric tonnes (Gt) of iron ore, 780 metric tonnes (MT) (equivalent to 25 million ounces) of gold, 20 million MT (MT) of copper ore, 1,500 MT (equivalent to 50 million ounces) of uranium, 10 Gt of gypsum, and 160 Gt of phosphate rock (Workman, 2018).

The Sahel-Saharan region, owing to its abundant subsoil resources, possesses significant global relevance. The stability of this area will influence not solely the future trajectories of the nations within its bounds, but also the dynamics of interactions among European powers, particularly those engaged in the Malian conflict. The Kingdom of Morocco has established itself as a pivotal actor in the West African geopolitical landscape. Consequently, the collaborative efforts between Morocco and Mauritania represent a crucial avenue for fostering regional integration that is equipped to address shared challenges on counter-terrorism and economic advancement. Although the relationship between terrorism and socio-economic underdevelopment may appear self-evident, this association has not consistently been integrated into counter-terrorism strategies. (Tobi & El Jai, 2020).

Morocco and Mauritania possess aligned interests. In the context of cooperative endeavors, the dual imperatives of economic development and counter-terrorism, which frequently exhibit a symbiotic relationship, necessitate the prioritization of these strategic objectives, as they have the potential to facilitate closer ties between Rabat and Nouakchott. As the framework of security cooperation between the two nations is fortified, it is anticipated that enhanced economic collaboration will emerge, leading to the establishment of trade routes that grant access to diverse West African markets.

Morocco and Mauritania's independence coincided with a fundamental challenge to building relations between the two countries. Morocco officially recognized the sovereignty of Mauritania in 1969, after which diplomatic relations between the two countries began in 1970. Morocco has since become the dominant African investor in Mauritania. Mauritania has 80 agreements in the economic, social, cultural, and technical fields, including agreements, memoranda of understanding, and cooperation programs. The establishment of various sectoral committees and specialized working groups also exemplifies this cooperation (Toutate, 2025). In this regard, Moroccan operators are engaged in a plethora of sectors, encompassing telecommunications, banking, construction, fishing, and services. Mauritania is also the Kingdom’s third-largest customer in Africa, after Senegal and Djibouti.

From a financial perspective, Morocco has distinguished itself over the past decade through its ambitious economic strategy aimed at African engagement. As the custodian of the Kingdom’s African identity, King Mohammed VI has reiterated, in numerous addresses, the aspiration for regional economic and financial integration, pledging benefits for the entirety of the continent. In this vein (IRES, 2019).

In relation to the stock of Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) abroad, Côte d'Ivoire, recognized as the most prosperous economy within the West African Economic and Monetary Union, occupies the foremost position, having attracted over 13% of the total stock by the conclusion of 2017. In terms of FDI flows, this same nation garnered 23.2% of cumulative inflows between 2013 and 2017, whereas Mauritania attracted a mere 1.9% during the same timeframe. Nevertheless, an escalation in outward FDI flows directed toward Mauritania could enable Morocco to reinforce its status as a proactive investor in both Africa and Mauritania, thereby establishing direct connections with West African nations that are recipients of Moroccan FDI (Ghanmi, 2020).

On the Mauritanian front, the collaboration between Moroccan and Mauritanian enterprises has the potential to generate beneficial synergies through the exchange of expertise, particularly within the financial services sector. Furthermore, Mauritania harbors aspirations to reform its economy, particularly through the diversification of sectors. Morocco, which has previously navigated the necessity of diversifying its commercial portfolio, is well-positioned to impart its expertise to its southern neighbour (IRES, 2019). Meanwhile, Morocco and Mauritania formalized a memorandum of understanding to enhance bilateral collaboration in the domains of electricity and renewable energy, as well as to augment the sharing of expertise in electrical safety.

Morocco's Minister of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development, Leila Benali, and her Mauritanian counterpart, Mohamed Ould Khaled, launched electricity promotion projects, primarily for rural areas, as well as clean energy projects and standardization between the two countries. In accordance with the directives of King Mohammed VI, and within the framework of the Royal Atlantic Initiative, which aims to enable Sahelian countries to benefit from the resources of the Atlantic Ocean, the electricity interconnection between the two countries 'creates avenues for energy exchange between them and Europe, as well as West Africa, within the framework of the West African Energy Community (WAEC),' he said (Maroc.ma, 2025).

The nexus between Mauritania and Morocco is significantly shaped by historical territorial disputes, particularly in relation to Western Sahara. Initially, both nations harbored mutual interests in the region; however, Mauritania's occupation of Western Sahara, coupled with ensuing military confrontations, precipitated a deterioration in bilateral relations. The withdrawal of Mauritania from the occupation in 1979, along with its formal recognition of the

Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1984, markedly exacerbated tensions with Morocco. (Faria & Vasconcelos, 1996; Klosowicz, 2022).

Following a series of coups and episodes of political instability in Mauritania, the administration overseen by Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya formally embraced a stance of neutrality regarding the Western Sahara conflict during the 1990s. This strategic policy realignment facilitated the re-establishment of diplomatic ties with Morocco, thereby paving the way for enhanced cooperation and dialogue (Mormul, 2021).

In contemporary times, Mauritania has endeavored to navigate a precarious equilibrium between Morocco and Algeria, particularly in light of the prevailing tensions surrounding the Western Sahara dispute. Mauritanian officials have articulated a commitment to achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict, pursuing solutions that garner acceptance from all parties concerned. This diplomatic approach is underscored by statements from Mauritanian authorities advocating for regional collaboration and dialogue during international diplomatic interactions (Taib, 2020).

3.2 Algeria in the Sahel

The Sahel region has consistently been a matter of significant concern for the Algerian state over an extended period, attributable to a multitude of factors. In addition to the pervasive issue of terrorism, Algeria has expressed considerable apprehension regarding the developments on the Tuareg dilemma and the evolving situation in northern Mali following the disintegration of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. The Tuareg dilemma is not a novel phenomenon; however, it has undergone pivotal transformations since the autumn of 2011. The colonial legacy of France's reconfiguration of African boundaries led to the fragmentation of the Tuareg demographic across the Maghreb and Sahel territories. Nonetheless, despite their geographical dispersion, the Tuareg have managed to preserve certain connections facilitated by their seasonal migratory patterns (transhumance) within the region (Sour, 2022).

The strategic vision of Algerian policymakers regarding the nation's aspirations for a middle-power status, with an intensified regional emphasis on the Sahel, has been predominantly influenced by three principal factors: namely, apprehension surrounding Morocco's ascent as a regional balancer, the necessity to counteract intraregional security threats, and the ramifications of the rivalry among great powers within the region. Consequently, within a strategically volatile regional context characterized by an unbalanced multipolarity, the escalating activism exhibited by Algeria can be interpreted as a manifestation of the country's endeavours to foster peace and stability in the Sahel, particularly against the backdrop of a diminishing French hegemony in the region (Bouacha, 2017).

Conversely, in light of the prevailing regional constraints, particularly the precarious security environment that impedes Algeria's capacity to assume a more prominent role in mediating the crises in Libya and Mali, the concept of role conflict as articulated by role theory may more aptly elucidate Algeria's departure from its formerly envisioned middle-power role as a regional balancer. Although the self-perception of Algeria as a middle power remains intact and increasingly entrenched, an examination of Algeria's role preferences in the pursuit of middle-power status illuminates the profound influence of significant historical roles on shaping the role conceptions enacted in the quest for middle-power identity. (Chauzal, 2015).

The geopolitical rivalry between Morocco and Algeria has historically shaped the interactions and diplomatic relations between these nations, alternately fostering periods of peace and conflict, thereby serving as a critical lens through which to examine the power dynamics at play between these competing states in the region, particularly in relation to the Western Sahara issue. As a territory abundant in economic resources and possessing significant strategic relevance, Western Sahara has attracted various stakeholders vying for dominion, including the principal competing nations, each driven by distinct objectives, interests, and aspirations (Sour, 2022). The departure of Spain, as the historical colonizer of Western Sahara, has not resolved the conflict but rather intensified it, drawing in both former colonial powers and contemporary states, all of whom are eager to augment their influence, extract resources from the Sahara, and secure a foothold on the African continent. Hence, Algeria and Morocco are engaged in a contest for regional supremacy. Consequently, Algeria regards France and its regional allies, particularly Morocco, as the most formidable obstacle in its pursuit of regional hegemony. The bilateral relations between these two nations have been characterized by tension across various issues, notably the Western Sahara question, which has impeded the potential for close security and military collaboration (Boukhars, 2012). Moreover, the protracted rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, both within and beyond the context of Western Sahara, has obstructed regional security initiatives, including the African Union's role in managing the ongoing crisis. (Zoubir, 2018).

Western Sahara is geographically situated between Morocco and Mauritania to the south, Algeria to the east, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. This region was historically a focal point of European colonial ambitions, even before its designation as a Spanish colony towards the latter part of the 20th century, from which Spain ultimately withdrew in 1975 (Brooks & Clarke, 2018). It is imperative to note, however, that Western Sahara has experienced a phase of local resistance during and following the colonial era, as well as decades of armed conflict, culminating in a ceasefire agreement in early 1991. Furthermore, Western Sahara's vast resources, coupled with its strategic position as a gateway to the Sahara and the African Atlantic coastline, have accelerated competition across multiple fronts and played a significant role in shaping new interests that are poised to have lasting implications for the region's future as a whole (Zunes, 1995).

Morocco and Algeria are currently pursuing markedly different trajectories. Morocco is enhancing its diplomatic relations and investing in the countries of the Sahel region, whereas Algeria is primarily concentrating on the exclusion of Morocco from the Arab Maghreb Union. Morocco’s strategic approach is yielding new opportunities, in contrast to Algeria’s strategy, which is exacerbating its international isolation. Algeria, on the one hand, sought to counteract Morocco’s Atlantic Initiative through a strategic integration of incentives and punitive actions; however, its strained bilateral relations with Sahelian nations substantially undermine its position. (Mhammed, 2022). In January 2024, Algiers initially halted loan disbursements to all countries participating in the initiative. Thereafter, in February 2024, it introduced initiatives designed to create “free trade zones” with Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Tunisia, to enhance infrastructural development and strengthen economic connections (El Yaaqoubi, 2024). Nevertheless, Algeria and the Sahelian states have not yet achieved a consensus regarding the progression of these initiatives. Moreover, Algeria has endeavored to respond to Morocco’s advancements in the Sahel through increased diplomatic engagement with its North African neighbors, particularly Libya and Tunisia. Similarly, Algeria has undertaken deliberate efforts to improve its intricate relationship with Niger to maintain a degree of involvement with the African Economic Community (AEC) and address the urgent challenges associated with trans-Saharan migration (Chikhaoui, 2024). Initially, Algeria opposed the proposed regional intervention aimed at overthrowing Niger's military coup after it came to power in July 2023, and positioned itself as a mediator amid regional turmoil. However, the military junta rejected the proposed six-month transitional framework and accused Algeria of engaging in ‘manipulation’. As a result, Algeria suspended mediation efforts due to ‘inconclusive’ negotiations and ‘legitimate concerns’ about Niger's response to accepting Algerian mediation.

In April 2024, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the President of Algeria, together with Kais Saied, the President of Tunisia, and Mohamed Al Menfi, the President of Libya, convened a summit in Tunis focused on reinvigorating the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), deliberately excluding Morocco and Mauritania from the discussions (Oumansour, 2024).

The formation of this new alliance provides an illuminating perspective on the current geopolitical landscape in North Africa. It signifies a recent rapprochement between Algeria and Tunisia, prompted by Tunisia's economic difficulties, which has resulted in a closer alignment, thus rendering Tunisia in a state of dependency upon Algeria. In the context of the ongoing rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, Libya is navigating a multifaceted internal situation characterized by a dual foreign policy: engaging with the newly formed Maghreb bloc while simultaneously advocating, through its envoy Sami Al Menfi, to King Mohammed VI, for Morocco's reintegration into the revitalization of the AMU. Mauritania, opting for a position of neutrality, distinguishes itself by its commitment to the AMU. This allegiance paradoxically resulted in its exclusion from the newly established Maghreb union framework (El Yaaqoubi, 2024).

The competition between Algeria and Morocco has yielded relatively benign outcomes for Mauritania, as the political and economic stability of Nouakchott has empowered its leadership to maintain distance from its neighbors while adhering to a policy of neutrality concerning Western Sahara. Following the cessation of the ceasefire in Western Sahara in November 2020, Mauritanian officials have persistently engaged in regular discussions with representatives from Algeria, Morocco, and the Polisario Front, reaffirming their nation's commitment to a return to negotiations brokered by the United Nations (IISS, 2021).

3.3 Nigeria in the Sahel

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with nearly 180 million people. It ranks as the continent's number one economic power, surpassing South Africa, and stands as Africa's leading producer of oil and gas. Nigeria's political landscape has been severely disrupted by a series of military coups. Since gaining independence in 1960, the nation has experienced a turbulent political environment devoid of stability. It was only after the end of the military dictatorship and the establishment of a democratic civilian government in 1999 that some semblance of political order was achieved; however, the country remained under the rule of the same political party until 2015. This year marked a pivotal moment in Nigerian politics, as the opposition, led by Muhammadu Buhari, won the presidential election, signaling the beginning of a democratic political transition within the country (Khadija, 2025).

Morocco was one of the first countries to recognize and formalize diplomatic relations with Nigeria. Indeed, shortly after Nigeria gained independence in 1960, Morocco opened an embassy in Lagos, Nigeria's former capital, where the partnership between the two countries flourished based on the collective promise to uphold the principles of liberation, the culture of peace, solidarity, and respect for territorial integrity. Morocco remained steadfast in this commitment, condemning the attacks on national unity and territorial integrity perpetrated by separatist entities in the Biafra region of southeastern Nigeria between 1967 and 1970. Morocco not only condemned these attacks but also called for the implementation of any measure that would swiftly re-establish the authority of the Federal Government in the secessionist region (Gowon, 2025).

Even though diplomatic relations between Morocco and Nigeria before the democratic transition were marked by contradictions and did not fully meet expectations, mainly due to Nigeria's contradictory position on the regional issue of the Moroccan Sahara and the internal instability in Nigeria resulting from the political transformation initiated by the opposition's success in the elections, which led to the rise to power of opposition leader Muhammadu Buhari, (RwangPatrick Stephen, 2025), these relations towards a comprehensive approach to bilateral cooperation that is likely to yield beneficial results for Morocco's national interests. (Khadija, 2025).

The Kingdom of Morocco engages in spiritual diplomacy and recognizes the crucial role played by the Muslim community in Nigeria, which includes members of the influential Tijaniyyah, as well as the Qadiriyyah, whose repeated requests to reconsider its position towards Morocco have been taken into consideration by the Nigerian government. Cooperation measures in the religious sphere could be beneficial to Nigeria in its efforts to curb religious extremism and the abuses committed by the extremist Islamic group Boko Haram. In this context, it is worth noting the strengthening of relations between the two countries through joint initiatives in the field of security. At the beginning of 2016, a group of 53 Nigerian imams was providing religious instruction at the Mohammed VI Institute in Rabat. (Guardien, 2016) **.**

The relationship between Morocco and Nigeria has evolved into a multidimensional strategic partnership covering areas such as agriculture, fertilizer production, energy, security, and institutional cooperation. This new momentum culminated in the launch of the "Atlantic Gas Pipeline project, which aims to ensure energy security for several African countries and contribute to the electrification and socio-economic development of the continent. This project is making significant progress, with feasibility studies and route planning completed, as well as the signing of 11 memoranda with the Economic Community of West African States and the countries through which this gas pipeline will pass.

In June 2018, the OCP Group launched an innovative initiative in collaboration with the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA) and a delegation from the Nigerian government: The Presidential Fertilizer Initiative (PFI). The initiative was first announced during the official visit of President Muhammadu Buhari of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Kingdom of Morocco. The initiative aims to establish a mixed-use industrial platform in Nigeria that will utilize Nigerian natural gas and Moroccan phosphate to produce 750,000 tonnes of ammonia and one million tonnes of phosphate fertilizer annually by 2025. The agreements signed at the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) between OCP Africa and the Nigerian delegation, led by the Minister of Petroleum Resources, Mr Timipre Marlin Silva, highlight OCP's dedication to promoting agricultural development initiatives in Nigeria (OCP, 2021).

A memorandum of cooperation between OCP Africa, the Fertilizer Producers and Suppliers Association of Nigeria (FEPSAN), and the Nigerian Sovereign Investment Authority (NSIA) to commit to the next phase of the Nigerian President's Fertilizer Initiative. A shareholders' agreement between OCP Africa and NSIA to establish a joint venture (JVC) that will oversee the development of an industrial base specializing in ammonia and fertilizer production in Nigeria. Memorandum of understanding between OCP Africa, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and NSIA to assess the possibility of NNPC investing in the joint venture and facilitating its support in terms of gas supplies. A framework agreement between OCP Africa, Mobil Producing Nigeria (MPN), NNPC, Gas Aggregation Company Nigeria (GACN), and NSIA on the supply of gas to the industrial platform. Memorandum of Understanding between OCP Africa Group, Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria, and NSIA, focusing on land acquisition, facilitation of administrative procedures, and cooperative agricultural development projects within Akwa Ibom State. (OCP, 2021).

These agreements aim to supply Nigerian farmers with high-quality fertilizers specially designed to meet the specific requirements of their soil, offered at competitive prices and produced locally. They also aim to strengthen the strong partnership between the OCP Group and various institutions in the Nigerian gas sector. These agreements will enable the technical dimensions of the industrial platform to be realized. This industrial platform benefits from the natural resources of both Nigeria and Morocco, specifically Nigerian gas and Moroccan phosphate.

During the year 2023, the Kingdom of Morocco was involved in the export of commodities worth $109 million to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The predominant categories of goods that Morocco exported to Nigeria included Mixed Mineral or Chemical Fertilizers, amounting to $62.4 million, Processed Fish valued at $27.5 million, and Spices totaling $2.88 million. During the preceding five-year period, the volume of exports from Morocco to Nigeria has exhibited a decrease at an annualized rate of 9.48%, diminishing from $179 million in 2018 to $109 million in 2023 (OEC, 2025).

Conversely, in 2023, Nigeria conducted exports to Morocco amounting to $43.6 million. The principal products exported by Nigeria to Morocco comprised Bran priced at $23.9 million, Float Glass at $6.72 million, and Unprocessed Synthetic Staple Fibers amounting to $4.68 million. Over the last five years, the exports from Nigeria to Morocco have similarly contracted at an annualized rate of 4.42%, declining from $54.7 million in 2018 to $43.6 million in 2023, according to OEC.

In conclusion, the current geopolitical and geo-economic turmoil, which has exacerbated fragility, instability, and global crises, coupled with increasing foreign interference in Africa, poses the same challenges to Morocco and Nigeria that require joint and unified responses. In this context, these two countries should consider defining the contours of a renewed strategic partnership, based more on mutual trust and respect and on a joint development approach based on potential integration and synergy, as well as on the differences in economic development between Morocco and Nigeria. However, the departure of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States and the new alliance between the Group of Three and Morocco through the Atlantic initiatives could provide Morocco with a new trade corridors and new regional powers that could lead to competition between Nigeria and Morocco in the region, especially since Nigeria plays a pivotal role in ECOWAS and the Sahel.

A project involving the construction of a natural gas pipeline along the seabed of the Atlantic Ocean has been proposed, which seeks to transport Nigerian natural gas through the maritime zones of diverse West African states, particularly includes Benin, Togo, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Senegal, and Mauritania, before navigating through Western Sahara to ultimately reach Morocco, ultimately culminating in Europe, with its announcement occurring in late 2016. Should this initiative be executed successfully, it is poised to represent the largest infrastructure endeavours on the African continent. In addition, the Morocco-Nigeria gas pipeline project has the potential to set a precedent for South-South relations, covering both economic and political dimensions (Le projet de gazoduc Maroc-Nigeria au cœur d'une lutte informationnelle, 2020). The institution of this gas pipeline is expected to stimulate industrial development in the West African region (Ojoye, 2019).

The involved parties formalized their agreement in May 2017 by signing a Memorandum of Understanding in the presence of King Mohammed VI and Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama (Bozonnet & Tilouine, 2017). The Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline is recognized as one of the key projects initiated by King Mohammed VI.

The King's vision for collaboration with Africa is predicated upon mutual development, knowledge dissemination, and a symbiotic partnership, with the overarching aim of fostering political and economic integration across the continent. (Bozonnet & Tilouine, 2017; Ojoye, 2019). The overall length of the pipeline, which will extend the existing West African Gas Pipeline (WAGP), is projected to be approximately 6,000 kilometers in the forthcoming decades. The regional antagonism between Algeria and Morocco is profoundly interconnected with the emergence of new gas pipelines within North Africa and beyond (Bozonnet & Tilouine, 2017).

The following delineates key facets of this association (Hatim, 2021; Voytyuk, 2023):

1. Geopolitical Competition: The contest for dominance in the North African arena is escalating, particularly as both Algeria and Morocco endeavor to position themselves as pivotal actors within the energy sector. The establishment of new gas pipelines is perceived as a strategic initiative aimed at augmenting their geopolitical stature and securing energy supplies for Europe, which is increasingly seeking alternatives to Russian gas.

2. Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline: This proposed infrastructure, which is designed to transport Nigerian gas through Niger to Algeria and subsequently to Europe, constitutes a central element of Algeria's strategy to amplify its gas exports. Algeria regards this initiative as an opportunity to reinforce its status as a principal gas supplier to Europe, whereas Morocco's participation in this venture is constrained by the prevailing tensions between the two nations.

3. Impact of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline Closure: The cessation of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG), attributable to the deteriorating relations between Algeria and Morocco, engenders significant ramifications for regional energy dynamics. This pipeline represented a vital conduit for Algerian gas to transit to Europe via Morocco. Its closure has compelled Algeria to increase its reliance on the MedGaz pipeline, which establishes a direct connection between Algeria and Spain, thereby raising concerns regarding supply capacity and dependability (Freeman, 2022).

4. Nigerian Gas as an Alternative: The emergence of Nigeria as a novel participant in the European gas market introduces an additional dimension to the rivalry. The European Union's interest in diversifying its energy portfolio aligns with Nigeria's aspirations to export gas to Europe. This scenario possesses the potential to alter the equilibrium of power within the region, as Nigerian gas may serve as a substitute for both Algerian and Moroccan supplies.

5. Regional Stability and Cooperation: The rivalry complicates initiatives aimed at fostering regional cooperation in the development of energy infrastructure. Both nations stand to gain from a more cohesive energy strategy that encompasses collaboration on pipeline projects. However, historical grievances and territorial disputes, particularly concerning Western Sahara, impede such cooperative efforts (Strachan, 2014).

6. Future Prospects: The trajectory of gas pipelines within the region will hinge upon the capacity of both Algeria and Morocco to navigate their rivalry and engage in constructive dialogue. The geopolitical landscape is evolving, and both countries must adapt to shifting energy demands and market conditions to sustain their influence in the region.

3.4 Summary

In summary, the Sahel region, which includes countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, exhibits a complex and multifaceted historical narrative. This area is characterized by its notable cultural heterogeneity, yet it faces a multitude of modern challenges that threaten its stability and progress. The Malian crisis, which began in 2012, has exacerbated the vulnerabilities inherent in the Sahel, resulting in a significant decline in both industrial infrastructure and governance effectiveness. This deterioration has not only cultivated an atmosphere conducive to conflict but has also enabled the proliferation of extremist ideologies, thereby further complicating an already delicate socio-political milieu.

From a historical perspective, the Sahel has served as a vital hub for commerce, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices across the expansive Sahara Desert. Nevertheless, the contemporary situation starkly contrasts with this legacy, as the region contends with severe crises characterized by widespread food insecurity, environmental degradation exacerbated by climate change, and a persistent state of political instability. These interconnected factors have cumulatively rendered the Sahel one of the most unstable regions on a global scale, where the confluence of socio-economic adversities and security threats poses substantial risks not only to local communities but also to overarching regional and international stability.

In response to these complex challenges, Morocco has proposed the Atlantic Initiative, a strategic framework aimed at enhancing regional collaboration and development. By capitalizing on Morocco's favorable geographical positioning, this initiative seeks to ameliorate economic conditions and fortify security across the Sahel. However, the efficacy of this initiative is contingent upon addressing deep-seated issues, such as governance deficiencies, economic vulnerability, and the alarming rise of non-state armed groups that undermine both state authority and social cohesion.

As external powers like China and Iran increasingly compete for influence in the Sahel, the geopolitical environment becomes markedly more competitive and intricate. These evolving dynamics highlight the imperative for a nuanced comprehension of the interplay between local realities and international aspirations. The complexities inherent in this context underscore the urgent necessity for comprehensive strategies that prioritize sustainable development, regional integration, and the establishment of robust governance frameworks. Such methodologies are crucial for adeptly navigating the intricate challenges that lie ahead for the Sahel, ultimately ensuring a more stable, secure, and prosperous future for its nations and peoples. The involvement of international stakeholders must be judiciously managed to avert the exacerbation of existing tensions and conflicts, while promoting collaboration that honors the sovereignty and aspirations of Sahelian nations.

Moreover, the regional rivalry between Algeria and Morocco serves as a pivotal determinant influencing the advancement of new gas pipelines, with profound implications for energy security, geopolitical dynamics, and regional collaboration within North Africa. Internationally, Algeria has cultivated a substantial relationship with Russia, a remnant of the Soviet period, which has fostered significant defence collaborations and cooperative endeavours within international organizations that persist despite the geopolitical consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia continues to serve as a crucial military and political ally for the juntas in Mali and Niger (Henneberg et al., 2023; Zoubir, 2024).

CHAPTER IV

MOROCCO'S GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS IN AFRICA

4.1 Historical Context

In the year 1960, four erstwhile African territories formerly under French colonial rule, specifically Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, proclaimed their sovereignty. The historical connections between these nations and Morocco stem from the colonial demarcations that delineate their borders. Furthermore, the animosity exhibited by these states towards their previous colonial authority has engendered, from the perspective of Paris, an imperative for fostering rapprochement between Morocco and these West African states perceived as 'hostile' for the sake of containment. In addition to these geopolitical considerations, Morocco's engagement with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is predominantly influenced by the historical dynamics shaped by Moroccan cultural and intellectual contributions to the Sahel region. Morocco's aspiration to cultivate relations with these four nations, which share analogous characteristics of Islamic cultural heritage and Saharan civilization, is informed by a particularistic ethos derived from its receptiveness to the African continent south of the Sahara, particularly in relation to the Moroccan legacy associated with the Western Sahara. These nations have contributed a substantial corpus of historical, geographical, social, cultural, economic, and anthropological insights, which have profoundly influenced Morocco's engagement within the Sahel. The examination of the interactions between Morocco and the Sahelian nations during the epochs preceding and succeeding their independence is marked by a persistent oscillation between cooperation, misinterpretation, conflict, and renewed engagements, which delineate a divergence between historical economic interests and contemporary ideological orientations. This dynamism underscores the significance of investigating Morocco's proactive stance in the political landscape of these nations.

4.2 Morocco’s Geopolitical Strategy in the Sahel

The geographical significance of Morocco, situated at the confluence of the Atlantic and Mediterranean seas, coupled with its longstanding historical relationships with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, accentuates the critical nature of its central role in the initiative. Historically recognized as a transit hub for commercial exchanges, Morocco's Atlantic coastline has consistently functioned as a vital conduit for traders and explorers. Moreover, the infrastructure of Morocco has been systematically developed to enhance trade facilitation via the ports of Tangier and Casablanca, thereby enabling the seamless movement of goods to local, regional, and international markets (Mouline, 2015). Through the utilization of its deep-water ports, the integration of the Standard Gauge railroad traversing Spain, and the collaboration with other nations to advance the necessary infrastructure and logistics for merchant transit, including prospective rail routes within the region, Morocco is poised to emerge as a preferred conduit for nationals of the Sahel to access global markets (Nechad et al., 2023).

Morocco's contemporary geopolitical landscape is characterized by a dynamic reconfiguration, which diverges from the historically predominant notion of "geography as destiny" that has shaped it. Geopolitical discourse in previous eras. In this context, geopolitics is conceptualized in a more expansive framework, emphasizing that, despite the influences of globalization, geographical factors, including regions, territories, and maritime routes, play a critical role in influencing foreign policy, security strategies, and economic interactions. The term "geo-economics" may also be appropriately employed, reflecting the significant impact of economic and developmental considerations on Morocco's international strategies. Nevertheless, the term geopolitics serves as a convenient and succinct descriptor. Presently, Morocco's geopolitical alignment is transforming due to shifts in the regional dynamics of North and West Africa.

The evolving partnerships with key actors in Europe and the United States, alongside the emergence of novel alliances and opportunities within the Atlantic realm, both to the north and south, further contribute to this transformation. Several salient issues warrant attention. Firstly, the rate of change is notably intensifying. Historically, Morocco has grappled with the challenges posed by unstable societies and security concerns along its borders. The intricate dynamics of its relationship with Algeria, particularly regarding divergent perspectives on the Western Sahara question, have hindered prospects for bilateral collaboration and broader economic integration within the Maghreb region. The lack of regional cooperation in the Maghreb has incurred considerable economic and political repercussions for the region and its stakeholders. Consequently, this has obstructed a unified regional strategy and complicated North Africa's interactions with the European Union. (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024).

Secondly, the dimensions of maritime and aerial spaces are increasingly pivotal to Morocco’s developmental and security frameworks, broadly construed. The enhancement of maritime trade and the establishment of modern maritime infrastructure are generating prospects for growth, both within Morocco and across a broader geographic area. The Tanger-Med container port, along with other facilities, is strategically positioned to leverage Morocco’s advantageous location at the intersection of the Mediterranean and Atlantic commercial routes. (Lyammouri & Ghoulidi, 2024).

Thirdly, the significance of regions and regionalism is becoming more pronounced within the strategic considerations of Morocco and its neighboring areas. This phenomenon is partly attributable to internal governance and developmental imperatives. However, there exists a broader context that transcends Morocco's territorial boundaries. The potential for regional integration within the Maghreb remains unrealized yet holds significant promise. In West Africa and across the continent, future developmental trajectories are likely to be shaped along strategic corridors and essential commercial routes, accompanied by requisite hard and soft infrastructure improvements. (Sour, The Western Sahara conflict in the Algerian Moroccan relations, 2022)

Morocco is poised to occupy a central role in this evolving landscape, particularly along the West African coastline and its hinterlands. Furthermore, when considering the northern trajectory, more effective connections to Portugal and Spain, as well as within the Western Mediterranean, may be envisioned. Conventional and alternative energy sectors will emerge as critical domains of transformation and opportunity within this context. The future landscape will prominently feature advancements in solar energy, telecommunications, and the establishment of new oil and gas pipelines, facilitating connectivity between northern and southern regions (Lesser et al., 2012).

Meanwhile, in November 2023, Morocco began a strategic project to establish a comprehensive trade and transport infrastructure linking the country's Atlantic coast with the Sahel region (Map, 2024). A key part of this project is the ambitious Dakhla Atlantic Port, a deep-water facility costing US$1.2 billion. It is designed to handle large volumes of cargo and will be a vital link between the Sahelian countries and the rest of the world. Scheduled to open by 2029, the port is a testament to Morocco's commitment to transforming regional trade and fostering economic integration (Assahifa, 2024).

Fourth, contemporary geopolitical transformations have introduced additional layers to these challenges while concurrently fostering possibilities for significant transformation.

The establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, coupled with their exit from the ECOWAS in early 2024, marks a substantial reconfiguration of the political dynamics within the region. This reorganization, along with the burgeoning influence of Russia, Türkiye, and China in the area, offers both impediments and pathways for novel strategic initiatives. Within this intricate milieu, Morocco's initiative embodies a strategic shrewdness that surpasses international geopolitical security-focused responses to the Sahel's issues, highlighting a holistic approach that integrates infrastructure enhancement along with economic prospects. Moreover, the departure of conventional Western allies, notably France, has expedited the quest for inventive regional solutions and collaborations (Asadu, 2023).

Ultimately, internal reforms can emphasize the resilience of Morocco's unique characteristics, both regionally and in the perceptions held by Atlantic partners. These reforms do not revolve around Moroccan internal policy, but also international laws. However, amidst a period characterized by swift and transformative changes within the region, it is evident that officials and analysts will assess Morocco's capacity to assume new external roles largely based on its internal circumstances. The effectiveness of Morocco's reform initiatives will serve as a crucial facilitator in bolstering and diversifying Rabat's standing on the international stage.

4.3 Morocco’s Diplomatic Strategy in the Sahel

Morocco has established an extensive diplomatic presence across the African continent to more effectively advance the interests of its nation. In fact, Morocco maintains a total of 91 diplomatic missions globally, which encompass 29 Moroccan embassies situated in Africa. Morocco's diplomatic engagements with sub-Saharan Africa, especially in relation to West Africa, have experienced a significant transformation under the reign of King Mohamed VI, subsequent to the passing of his predecessor, King Hassan II, in 1999. During the tenure of King Hassan II, Morocco's international relations, and consequently its policies about Africa, were predominantly influenced by its "West Sahara policy" which aimed at consolidating Morocco's territorial claims over the Southern Provinces, annexed in 1976 and formerly administered by Spain, however, King Mohamed VI has reformulated and expanded Morocco's foreign policy framework to Sahel countries, influenced in part by global dynamics (Nechad et al., 2023).

Morocco initially adopted an aggressive diplomatic approach towards countries recognizing the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) after leaving the Organization of African Unity (OAU). However, this hostility was short-lived, and Morocco shifted towards building friendly relationships with African nations instead. Feeling isolated and excluded as the only African nation not part of the OAU, Morocco focused on strengthening ties with its traditional allies and revitalizing relations with other countries while lobbying for the reversal of recognition for the SADR (Daher, 2018). Following the events of 1980, it became apparent that Morocco was adopting an alternative foreign policy towards sub-Saharan African nations. Specific agreements were formulated to promote cooperation across various sectors in line with the Moroccan vision of complete sovereignty over the Sahara, and numerous mixed commissions were established. Several organizations were established. These included the Guinean-Moroccan Agency for Cooperation (AGUIMCO) and the Morocco-Mali Agency for Cooperation (AMAMCO).

After 1980, it became apparent that Morocco was adopting an alternative foreign policy paradigm with respect to sub-Saharan African nations. Specific agreements about cooperation across diverse sectors that align with the Moroccan vision of a whole and complete sovereignty over the Sahara were formulated, and numerous mixed commissions were instituted. Several organizations, such as AGUIMCO and AMAMCO, were established.

Morocco sought to cultivate constructive relations with regimes characterized by political leadership that markedly differed from its own, a strategy that was initially met with resistance from Hassan II: "If Morocco initially opted to sever all ties with African nations recognizing SADR, it subsequently resolved, starting in 1985, to advocate within each of these countries for the reinstatement of their recognition."

Diplomatic relations were established with Angola in 1985, Cape Verde in 1987, and Benin in 1991 within this specific geopolitical context. In 1986, to strengthen Morocco's presence in Africa, the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation (AMCI) was established (Baida, 2013). This organization, operating under the auspices of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was entrusted with the promotion of international cooperation, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan African countries.

For example, in the realm of education, it extended between 1,500 and 2,000 scholarships to students aspiring to pursue their studies in Morocco. (Patty, 2011; Tarrósy et al., 2011), the majority of whom hail from French-speaking regions of Africa. Through the

AMCI, Morocco aimed to provide training to future generations of the African elite, thereby enhancing the country's image and prestige across the continent (Ojukwu et al., 2020). Additionally, in 1989, Morocco established the Institute of African Studies, a research institution located in Rabat, which is dedicated to promoting scholarly research and cultivating expertise in African studies (Berahab, 2017).

Morocco commenced the enhancement of its diplomatic relations with sub-Saharan African nations during the mid-1990s due to various factors. Primarily, it endeavored to establish new connections in reaction to its marginalization from the Organization of African Unity. In an effort to address challenges such as the Sahrawi conflict and to foster North African solidarity, Morocco established the Arab Maghreb Union in 1989 and subsequently became a member of the Community of Sahel-Saharan States in 2001. As the global paradigm transitioned from socialism to capitalism, Morocco identified novel opportunities for collaboration with African states. Prime Minister Abderrahmane Yousfi executed 20 diplomatic agreements within a single year, culminating in a total of 270 partnerships by the decade's conclusion. Moreover, Algeria's domestic turmoil enabled Morocco to reassert itself as a continental leader in Africa, free from external influence (Daher, 2018).

King Mohamed VI further reinforced these relations through the forgiveness of debt, the reduction of tariffs, and mediation initiatives among conflicting African nations. This dedication to African relations was exemplified through numerous agreements and official visits to diverse sub-Saharan countries, underscoring the mutual advantages in areas such as education, agriculture, health, tourism, and research. Mohamed VI reiterated Morocco's commitment to African partnerships, highlighting the critical importance of unity in addressing challenges such as terrorism and in fostering peace, security, and stability within the region.

Morocco's principal objective involved the establishment of alliances with African nations. Particularly, following a significant vote at the United Nations General Assembly, Morocco's primary aim was to foster alliances within African states. Numerous diplomatic engagements from various African nations have been documented across multiple Moroccan cities. At present, the discourse surrounding "development aid" constitutes the predominant strategy and operational mechanism within Morocco's foreign policy framework, signifying a departure from the diplomatic impasse that ensued after the election of Mozambique and Nigeria as non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. This strategic approach is influenced by the deteriorating relations with Algeria, which has historically been regarded as a rival and the principal adversary in Morocco's efforts to reintegrate into the African Union. Additionally, another essential tenet is the "advocacy for a global paradigm rooted in dialogue, mutual respect, and collaborative engagement Morocco's strategic prioritization of enhancing its influence in the Sahel is congruent with its overarching long-term foreign policy goals (Moroccan Companies 'Thrive' in West Africa- The Economist Says the North Africa Post, 2018). In light of a succession of diplomatic policy documents designed to formulate its Sahel strategy, Morocco has proactively sought to establish preferential relationships with adjacent nations while participating in diverse multilateral initiatives. A defensive diplomatic strategy is delineated through Morocco's endeavors to protect its interests, characterized by a significant emphasis on alleviating jihadist threats while concurrently addressing socio-economic and cultural demands.

Morocco's cooperative strategy with West Africa also emphasizes the enhancement of social relations. It is indisputable that North Africa has historically served as an appealing venue for West African students enticed by high-quality educational programs. Specifically, Morocco emerges as a pivotal locus for West African scholars owing to its proximate geographical location, the excellence and diversity of its educational offerings, which are directly pertinent to the developmental imperatives of Africa, as well as the scholarships provided through the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation. Available data indicate that Morocco accommodates over 18,000 sub-Saharan students, among whom 6,500 are beneficiaries of scholarships extended by the Moroccan government. In 2012, the Moroccan Agency for International Cooperation augmented the number of scholarships conferred to students hailing from Mali and Niger (Alami, 2013).

Indeed, Morocco has augmented its influence on the African continent in recent years by implementing a proactive policy and advocating a pragmatic approach amid the gradual integration of the "Greater Morocco" initiative with West African nations, aimed at formally regulating unrecognized migration and establishing a comprehensive strategy that encompasses both security dialogue and collaborative development partnerships. West African nations are poised to align with the expectations of Moroccan foreign policy by endorsing a "positive vote" during the recent assembly in Nouakchott. Furthermore, Morocco has effectively cultivated relationships through the utilization of soft power, particularly in the realm of student mobility and the potential for cooperative endeavors in the collective management of security. In addition to the established networks of French diplomacy in Africa and past practices, the new trajectory observed in parts of the African continent further aligns with the increasing prominence of Morocco in regions that were previously less politically reliant on Francophone nations (B. Anaemene, 2017). Meanwhile, Morocco's aspirations for regional leadership within the African continent are manifested through its expressed intent to reintegrate into the African Union. Following an extraordinary diplomatic initiative and notwithstanding the reservations exhibited by several African nations, most notably prominent states such as Algeria, South Africa, and Nigeria, Morocco successfully re-entered the organization in 2017. This endeavor constituted one of the primaries aims of the annual royal expeditions across the African continent (Daher, 2018).

In addition, Morocco is actively pursuing a policy of rapprochement with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). Recently, on February 24, 2017, Morocco submitted its application for membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). On June 4, 2017, ECOWAS, in principle, endorsed the integration of Morocco into the organization. Furthermore, Morocco has strengthened its ties with the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) through the establishment of a strategic partnership and the initiation of a free trade agreement. (Communauté Économique et Monétaire d'Afrique Centrale, 2016).

4.4 Morocco's Economic Strategy in the Sahel

Morocco's Construction of the Africa-to-Europe Corridor. Positioned in the northwestern extremity of the African continent, adjacent to the Atlantic Ocean on its western flank and the Mediterranean Sea on its northern boundary, the Kingdom of Morocco has traditionally served as a geographical nexus facilitating exchange among Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. In recent years, the semi-constitutional monarchy has skilfully integrated the soft power attributes derived from Morocco's triple heritage, Arab, African, and Mediterranean, with a robust initiative aimed at modernizing its transportation and industrial infrastructure to reconstitute Morocco as the central hub of a novel trans-regional commercial framework linking Africa to Europe and the Middle East (Dafir, 2012). On the same vein, Morocco presents a viable resolution. As a stronghold of stability at the threshold of a frequently unstable continent, it is also emerging as an economic powerhouse, characterized by its expanding economic and commercial connections both across the continent and beyond, and its increasing contributions to regional political stability and security, thereby rendering it an exceptionally appealing gateway for investment and a significant partner for the United States in Africa. Furthermore, it stands as the sole nation on the African continent to have established a free trade agreement with the United States and an accord that was reaffirmed and advanced as recently as 2013 through a trade facilitation agreement. For Charles Saint-Prot: “Morocco has increased aid to several African countries and cancelled the debts of the least developed countries” (Prot, 2014). Such offensive diplomacy also allows the kingdom to access African resources at competitive prices, to reduce the cost of production, and to conquer new markets by diversifying external outlets. (Dafir, 2012).

Moroccan economic foreign policy is currently emphasizing its presence and relations in Sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa in particular. The wide range of cooperative projects undertaken in recent years extends to security relations, with Morocco seeking to position itself as a regional security provider. Morocco’s renewed interest in sub-Saharan Africa is driven to a large extent by the remarkable economic performance of a variety of African economies over the last decade, and the potential for continued growth over the coming decades. Several African countries have been seeing much greater and increasing economic activity, particularly those rich in natural resources such as, but not limited to, copper, gold, oil, and gas. (Saddiki, 2018).

The contemporary Moroccan dynamic is inextricably linked to the transformations occurring on the African continent. The forgotten continent is no longer forgotten. It is now very successful and attracts the most foreign investors in the world. These investors come from developed countries as well as emerging countries. These countries are also starting to take an interest in the wealth of the world. Africa is becoming a niche market for the continent. The Monarchs of the Kingdom of Morocco have inaugurated a new era of collaboration between the countries of the South, instigating numerous initiatives in this regard and enabling the nation to embrace global integration, commencing with the African continent.

That said, there is still potential for the improvement and development of Morocco's position on foreign policy to be exploited. This area should no longer be the exclusive domain of the kingdom's high authorities; diplomats should be trained in economic diplomacy and economic intelligence to allow Morocco to play a more prominent role on the international stage. Morocco's strategic orientations are focused on three key areas: increasing its external outlets, ensuring the security of its raw materials supply, and promoting the internationalization of Moroccan companies. These should be studied further to boost the actions carried out in this area with high potential.

The profound geopolitical and geostrategic contestation currently manifesting throughout the African continent necessitates careful consideration by Morocco, which is executing comprehensive strategies and integrating economic intelligence into its diplomatic framework to augment its competitive edge in African markets. Morocco ranks as the fifth-largest economy on the African continent, boasting a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of $120 billion (Morocco's GDP, 2023), and is distinguished by a vigorous entrepreneurial climate. Moreover, Morocco is recognized as the leading African investor in the West African region, with its Tanger-Med Airport providing weekly connectivity to approximately ş40 ports within that vicinity; in addition, the African Development Bank estimates that nearly 85% of Morocco's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is directed towards sub-Saharan Africa (Kedem, 2019). During his visits in 2014 to Mali, Gabon, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, accompanied by a multitude of Moroccan entrepreneurs, Mohammed VI, alongside his ministerial delegation, formalized approximately 118 commercial agreements over a duration of 20 days (Cherkaoui & Tobi, 2021).

Since the year 2008, Morocco has been engaged in negotiations of a preferential Trade and Investment Agreement with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) as well as strategic partnership treaties with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States (CEMAC), with the intention of ultimately instituting free trade zones. The volume of trade conducted by Morocco with Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced a significant increase, having more than tripled between 2003 and 2013, escalating from 4.7 Moroccan Dirhams (MAD; €434.1 million) in 2003 to 14.4 billion MAD (€1.3 billion) by the end of 2013 (Morocco's GDP, 2023).

Despite this remarkable relative growth, Africa still constitutes between 5-7 percent of Moroccan exports. Nonetheless, it is the expressed aim of Rabat to rapidly augment this percentage by capturing a larger share of the African markets. Morocco's financial investments on the African continent have been increasing, representing 44 percent of the total Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2013 (valued at €127.2 million) as per the Moroccan Office des Changes, thereby positioning Morocco as the second-largest African investor on the continent, following South Africa (Tadlaoui, 2015). In accordance with the aforementioned principle of collective sharing and solidarity, His Majesty the King has instituted an innovative cooperative strategy with the entirety of the African continent. This strategic initiative has been evidenced through the formulation of over 1,000 conventions and agreements over a duration of five decades, alongside Royal visits to 30 nations within the previous twenty years. These efforts have culminated in Moroccan investments within Africa, amounting to US$3 billion between the years 2008 and 2017, which constitutes 80% of Moroccan investments abroad. As a result, the Kingdom has ascended to the status of the second-largest African investor on the continent and the leading investor in the West African region. In summary, Morocco's engagement with Africa is both extensive and multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions (Maissaa, 2016).

Morocco adopts a proactive diplomatic economic strategy, thereby enabling it to secure access to African resources at competitive rates, which subsequently reduces production costs and facilitates expansion into novel markets through the diversification of foreign markets. These initiatives empower Morocco to reinforce its presence and elevate its status within the global context, particularly within the African continent. At present, Africa occupies a pivotal role in the strategic agendas of global powers such as China, which ascended to the position of the world's leading economic force by the end of 2016 and has been progressively enhancing its engagements on the continent (B. U. Anaemene, 2011). The transition of China from a socialist economic framework to a market-oriented model has propelled it onto the global stage via a vigorous trade strategy aimed at transforming the global trade paradigm, as demonstrated by initiatives such as the Silk Road. In its quest to establish a significant presence in Africa, Beijing has orchestrated various initiatives, including an increase in diplomatic summits that have resulted in the formation of numerous bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements.

The Moroccan foreign affairs orientation places significant emphasis on fostering economic collaboration with the Sahel region, particularly with the LLS nations within this geographical area. This growing cooperation constitutes a component of Morocco's proactive and future-oriented strategy aimed at establishing economic, political, and cultural partnerships with Sahelian states (Bassou, 2023). In light of the emerging developmental challenges confronting Africa, economic integration and interregional trade have become essential and strategically vital, not solely for the LLS but also for enhancing and diversifying cooperative efforts and alliances among the two regions, whether they be African, Arab, or international in nature. Consequently, Morocco has embarked on a process of organizing investment forums in collaboration with Sahel countries, with the objective of investigating the opportunities that the Kingdom has to offer. These forums are designed to facilitate both financial and non-financial resources.

The new Moroccan dynamic is in harmony with the changes made in Africa. The forgotten continent has been revitalized and is now a resounding success, drawing the most prominent foreign investors from developed to emerging countries. These countries are also showing an increased interest in global wealth. Africa is becoming a niche market for the continent. The King of Morocco has paved the way for increased collaboration between the countries of the South, opening up new opportunities for the region. This move, initiated by the King, signals Morocco's commitment to strengthening ties with the African continent and the wider global community. Morocco should still be able to improve and develop its position on foreign policy (Regragui, 2023).

This area should no longer be reserved exclusively for the kingdom's senior officials; diplomats should undergo training in economic diplomacy and economic intelligence to enable Morocco to play a more prominent role on the international stage. The strategic orientations are intended to augment the external outlets of Morocco, ensure the security of its supplies of raw materials, and promote the internationalization of Moroccan companies. These should be studied further to boost the actions carried out in this high-potential area.

As a coveted area, Morocco must also take into account the fierce geopolitical and geostrategic competition currently taking place in Africa by adopting drastic measures by integrating the economic intelligence dimension into the process of economic diplomacy, for a better conquest of Africa (El-Katiri, 2015). Currently, as a result of substantial investments executed by Moroccan enterprises across Africa, Morocco is recognized as the second largest investor on the continent, following South Africa, while simultaneously holding the position of the foremost investor in West Africa.

It is noteworthy to highlight that Morocco has allocated approximately $5 billion towards sub-Saharan Africa over the past decade, thereby establishing itself as the second largest intra-African investor and the predominant investor in West Africa. Consequently, Morocco has ascended from the 130th position to the 50th on a global scale and persists in its advancement (Morocco's GDP, 2023).

Moroccan enterprises functioning within the continent engage in a myriad of sectors, including finance, banking, insurance, telecommunications, transportation, public works, tourism, agriculture, agribusiness, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, and various services. Nonetheless, this African engagement transcends mere material investments; Morocco also fosters multilateral cooperation with the continent, facilitated through treaties and accords between nations, ratified during the numerous diplomatic visits conducted by King Mohammed VI, encompassing diverse areas such as administrative, academic, technical cooperation, human development, as well as cultural and religious matters.(McNamee et al., 2013).

Africa possesses one-fifth of the banking assets located in West Africa. The fertilizer behemoth OCP operates in 16 African nations, whereas the leading telecommunications entity Maroc Telecom functions in several sub-Saharan African countries. Furthermore, Moroccan investments in African nations have exceeded \$2.5 billion, with a considerable fraction of these investments concentrated in the Sahel-Saharan region, particularly in Mali, which ranks as the third-largest beneficiary of Moroccan investments on the African continent. Furthermore, Royal Air Maroc and the National Office of Electricity exhibit substantial engagement. For instance, RAM has established thirty flight routes across the African continent, maintaining an average frequency of ten flights daily (Boukhars, 2019). The diminishing influence of France has resulted in a power vacuum that Rabat is endeavoring to address by positioning itself as a conduit from the African hinterland to the Atlantic.

The global financial crisis of 2007 had a profound impact on Morocco, primarily manifested through diminished demand from European trading partners and escalating oil prices. In 2009, exports experienced a decline of 14 percent, while remittances originating from Moroccans residing abroad fell by 9 percent. This scenario compelled the nation to diversify its commercial alliances to more effectively withstand global economic fluctuations. Consequently, Africa emerged as both a protective buffer and a promising opportunity. (Kuyoro et al., 2023). By the year 2040, Africa's economy is projected to benefit from a substantial demographic dividend derived from a working-age population of 1.1 billion individuals, increasing commodity prices that could elevate GDP to £1.54 trillion, and the rise of a middle class comprising 128 million households with significant consumption potential (Morocco’s GDP, 2023).

Morocco has actively pursued the strengthening of its relationships with Africa by applying for membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as its 12th member. Furthermore, the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline initiative is expected to facilitate the transportation of oil across the nation, thereby stimulating development in transit areas and generating new employment opportunities within industrial and agribusiness sectors. (Machrouh, 2022).

The kingdom has consistently advocated for its major corporations to increase their investments in the continent in its quest to reinforce ties with Africa. Consequently, Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa has experienced significant growth. From 2007 to 2023, the average annual growth rate of Moroccan FDI in Africa was recorded at 12.72 percent.

By 2023, annual FDI inflows to Africa were projected to reach 5 billion dirhams (£400 million). This figure constitutes 20 percent of Morocco’s overall outward FDI, positioning Africa ahead of Asia 13% but still trailing behind Europe 64% (Ait Soussane, 2024).

The existing infrastructures for road, rail, and air transportation are inadequate to accelerate the establishment of economic connections between Morocco and the Sahel region. As a result, there is an urgent need to allocate resources to the creation of additional or alternative transport routes to improve trade dynamics at the regional level and make it easier for travelers and tourists to travel. Such initiatives are expected to greatly improve connectivity between North and West Africa. Notably, Morocco is home to the primary maritime port of North West Africa (Saaf, 2017).

Morocco has established numerous partnerships throughout the West African region and is interconnected with several states in the sub-region through agreements that encompass various sectors, including non-double taxation treaties with Senegal. Two such agreements with Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire are currently undergoing the ratification process (Penresa, 2024). The non-double taxation agreement with Guinea Conakry is on the verge of being formalized. Morocco has executed agreements aimed at the protection and promotion of investments with two West African nations, namely Gambia and Mauritania, while additional agreements are presently in the ratification phase. Furthermore, Morocco is actively engaged in negotiations regarding a significant Free Trade Agreement with UEMOA (the West African Economic and Monetary Union). In addition, Morocco has finalized sector-specific agreements with Senegal in the domains of transportation and mining energy, as well as with Côte d'Ivoire in the sectors of investment, tourism, and fishing (B. U. Anaemene, 2017).

Correspondingly, additional ports throughout the nation are regarded as pivotal nodes linking the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea. These maritime connections are instrumental in the establishment of a North-South corridor that interlinks Tangier with Agadir, Lagouira, Nouakchott, Banjul, and Praia. Hence, the integration of these ports with certain Sahelian trade routes would yield investment opportunities and ensure considerable traffic flows of goods and passengers. Morocco is recognized as a principal investor in the sectors of road, maritime, and air transportation networks throughout the African continent. In this context, King Mohammed VI has initiated two significant projects that are projected to exert considerable influence on the transportation links between Morocco and the Sahel, particularly involving its predominantly landlocked nations, suppliers, and consumers.

In light of Morocco's political commitment to proactively engaging with the landlocked Sahel countries, alongside the trade restrictions imposed by the landlocked status of these nations, this section seeks to analyze prospective avenues for trade and investment between Morocco and the Sahel countries. There exists a plethora of trade and investment prospects between Morocco and the landlocked Sahel nations. Drawing from empirical evidence in regional collaborations among developing nations, certain instances merit attention. The African Highways initiative represents a ground-breaking framework that has sustained substantial support and enthusiasm from African nations over an extended period (IRF, 2025). Within the Southern African Development Community and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, numerous established and functional cross-border infrastructure initiatives and mechanisms have been implemented to facilitate cross-border trade.

Specific sectors delineate clear business prospects and possess enduring potential for economic advancement. Informed by experiences with Nigeria, there also exist certain prioritized trade and investment opportunities, alongside accompanying constraints. In the year 2000, Nigeria, influenced by intricate political dynamics and purported trade barriers, prohibited the importation of motor vehicles assembled in Benin from exported kits into Nigeria's duty-free market. Consequently, the prioritized value-added product for Morocco to negotiate with Mali is textiles, wherein the total global annual export of fabrics and ready-made garments from Mali currently approximates a mere USD 40 million.(Ben Larbi, 2021). Other sectors, albeit less appealing for immediate investment, may warrant exploration in the future, such as cottage or medium-scale agriculture and hydro-energy, primarily aimed at supplying urban areas in West Africa. Recommendations for policy reforms that could yield immediate benefits for economic synergy and trade encompass the organization of regular inter-ministerial meetings, the elimination of superfluous visa requirements, and the resolution of other cross-border transport challenges, among other initiatives.

The development of new national and regional policy frameworks and regulations to facilitate cross-border foreign direct investment lies entirely within the sovereign authority of the involved states. Significant inputs will be essential, however, in enhancing market competencies, providing technical assistance from goods and service providers, expanding their capabilities, harmonizing and extending regional norms and codes, and restructuring the provision of regional and local business training. A secondary substantial commercial opportunity resides in a biphasic approach to harnessing the untapped potential for tourism trade and investment between West Africa and Morocco itself (Ben Larbi, 2021). Initially, there exists a vast potential for growth in diving lodge tourism on Lanzarote and its relatively 'untouristy' counterpart, Boa Vista, within the long-haul Cape Verdean archipelago. Additionally, a second entrepot trade avenue that could be significantly expanded is the traditional market for the artisanal pottery of Mopti along the Upper Niger. A major enhancement of the container terminal at the port of Cotonou is currently underway. This inland waterway links six landlocked nations with two other ports. Volume would be significantly augmented by the establishment of a 'Trans-Sahel Express' railway service connecting Nouadhibou or Nouakchott with Nioro du Sahel, specifically designed to transport time-sensitive goods, including substantial Moroccan supermarket imports of fruits and vegetables cultivated in the Bafing basin, which could reach an annual total of 20,000 tons (Tanger Med, 2024). Moroccan enterprises ought to initiate their involvement by contributing to the advancement of industrial initiatives, such as the provision of standardized machinery for cashew nut processing, alongside the organization of educational and research initiatives that align with the overarching long-term corporate strategy.

Among the critical and requisite investments for the advancement of Africa and the mobilization of productive investments, economic and social infrastructures represent a substantial financial encumbrance. However, this infrastructural necessity is inescapable, notwithstanding the challenges posed by the continent's vastness, numerous natural impediments (such as the Sahara, mountains, rivers, etc.), and the pressing need to safeguard biodiversity. This complexity exacerbates the situation concerning the evolution of African infrastructure. Moreover, Africa grapples with a significant paradox in relation to infrastructure investment. On one hand, the demands are immense, accounting for more than 3.5% of the continental GDP; on the other hand, the quantity of bankable projects remains exceedingly low, and the timelines involved are excessively protracted. (Makboul & Ardy, 2023).

Nevertheless, the construction and rehabilitation of the continent's infrastructure is an urgent imperative, not solely due to the comprehensive execution of Agenda 2063 but, more importantly, because of the commitment of each of the 54 states to an inter-African philosophy of integrated connectivity aimed at fostering synergies and optimizing the utilization of the continent's resources for the benefit of the African populace. Morocco’s strategic plan to transport natural gas from Nigeria via a secure pipeline that is set to traverse thirteen nations before arriving in Europe is projected to incur an estimated expenditure of $25 billion, as indicated in the report by OCP Morocco. (Baida, 2021).

The primary industries in which Moroccan entities are engaged include banking (accounting for up to 50%) and telecommunications (constituting up to 25%). Furthermore, operators from alternative sectors hold significant positions, exemplified by RAM, which possesses a 50% stake in Air Sénégal International and a 51% stake in Air Gabon. Additionally, the SOMAGEC group has been operational in Equatorial Guinea since 2005, employing over 2,500 individuals (Berahab, 2017), while the ADDOHA group has established a presence in seven African nations within a decade. Through the robust involvement of Moroccan entities in Africa, the Kingdom of Morocco is advancing its economic diplomacy in West Africa, which attracts 80% of its investments, and in Central Africa, which receives 25% of Moroccan capital investments.

In the realm of telecommunications, Maroc Telecom has significantly augmented connectivity throughout the continent by establishing collaborative ventures with indigenous enterprises. Since the year 2010, Maroc Telecom has acquired substantial equity interests in numerous African telecommunications firms, including a 51 percent share in Gabon Telecom and a complete acquisition of Mauritel in Mauritania, thereby fortifying its influence across West Africa and propelling the enterprise into a regional powerhouse within the industry.(Berahab, 2017).

The real estate domain has also garnered noteworthy Moroccan investments. For example, the Addoha Group, a prominent Moroccan real estate developer, has been actively engaged in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea since 2015. The investments made by the group encompass both residential and commercial projects, strategically aimed at leveraging the burgeoning urbanization trends within these nations. Natural resources serve as a pivotal catalyst for Moroccan foreign direct investment (FDI), particularly within the extractive sectors. The OCP Group, a preeminent phosphate producer, is engaged in significant mining endeavors in Gabon and Ethiopia. OCP's phosphate operations in Gabon, which commenced in 2017, rank among the largest within the region (Berahab, 2017).

4.5 Morocco's Security Strategy in the Sahel

North Africa and the Sahel are beset by a multitude of security dilemmas, encompassing the expansion of extremist factions, the existence of hundreds of thousands of displaced individuals, recurrent drought conditions, and an escalating trade in narcotics, weaponry, and other illicit goods. The delineation between corrupt officials, criminal syndicates, and armed insurgents is frequently indistinct. National security constitutes one of the paramount priorities for the Kingdom of Morocco. The geographical positioning of Morocco at the convergence of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East renders it susceptible to a myriad of transnational threats, such as illegal immigration, as well as the trafficking of humans and narcotics, thereby necessitating an imperative for stringent control over its national borders. In light of its airports, seaports, and border crossings (Pham, 2013).

The implementation of a multifaceted strategy that prioritizes security, religion, and human development. This new national strategy is based on legislative, regulatory, institutional, and security components. Moreover, it encompasses the issue of human development, the necessity to reconfigure the religious domain, and the execution of a multifaceted cooperative initiative. Morocco has active participation in all the bodies and organizations charged with combatting terrorism by proven experience in fighting terrorism at the regional and international levels, and given as an example for other countries to follow; Morocco is a major player in the global fight against terrorism and a strategic partner: Transfer of knowledge and proficiency, instruction of religious leaders, involvement in the anti-ISIS alliance. Morocco is the joint chair of the International Conference Against Terrorism. The tactical significance of West Africa and the Sahel-Saharan zone for Moroccan security concerns (Eljarh, 2016).

Morocco remains steadfast in its commitment to the implementation of robust security measures and customs protocols, facilitated through bilateral agreements with the United States and various other nations. In accordance with its customs and port security agreements with the United States and additional countries, Morocco is poised to execute significant enhancements while upholding rigorous security standards across its airports, seaports, and border crossings.

Furthermore, Morocco was elected with a substantial majority as the Vice-President for Africa within Interpol during the organization’s executive committee elections, which serves as an acknowledgment of its considerable endeavors to maintain security and stability both regionally and internationally (Interpol, 2024), as well as its prominent role in enhancing South-South security collaboration. The candidate from Morocco attained election through the endorsement of delegates from 96 member states, thereby securing a notable advantage over other aspirants during the voting process at Interpol's 92nd General Assembly, convened in Glasgow, Scotland (November 4-7-2024), as communicated by the General Directorate of National Security (DGSN) in an official press release. However, porous national borders and ineffective governance have paved the way for the regionalization of instability.

This phenomenon was highlighted by the surge of weaponry from Libya into the Sahara following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, which subsequently facilitated the separatist insurrection and ensuing military coup in Mali in early 2012 (Pham, 2013), as well as the high-profile terrorist assaults on the Algerian gas facility at In Amenas. In response to these ideologies, Morocco has developed a national strategy aimed at affirming and further institutionalizing the nation's extensive adherence to the Maliki school of Islam. Components of this assertive, multifaceted approach to countering violent extremism in Morocco have rapidly evolved. Within a fortnight of the Casablanca bombings, the Moroccan authorities enacted a new antiterrorism statute that intensified penalties, establishing a minimum incarceration period of ten years for active participation in terrorism, life imprisonment if such acts inflict serious bodily harm upon others, and the death penalty if they culminate in fatalities. Additionally, an anti-money laundering statute, instituted in 2007, enables the freezing of suspicious financial accounts and establishes a financial intelligence unit tasked with investigating and prosecuting crimes related to the financing of terrorism.

Meanwhile, Morocco's security in the area has also become an important part of its relations with a number of countries in the Sahel and West Africa. Moroccan leaders know that peace and stability in the Sahel are very important for their own economic growth. They also know that it is very important for the security of Morocco and the Sahel region. Over the last decade, intense interest has been shown by Morocco in supporting peace and security in the region, through regional and broader multilateral forums such as the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union. Morocco is strengthening its position in the West by leveraging a range of factors, including historic ties, domestic political stability, unique economic and institutional development experience, its strategically important geographic location, and relations with Western countries (Adimi, 2015).

The ongoing and complicated crises affecting the Arab world and the Sahelo-Saharan region have had, and will continue to have, a big effect on security in Morocco. The weakness of government authorities across the region, particularly in Libya, coupled with rising levels of violence in the Middle East and the involvement of regional and global actors in the Arab world's crises, enhances the effectiveness of jihadist recruitment strategies and entrenches jihadist movements.

The varied demands based on ethnic, autonomist, and separatist reasons, along with security issues and the fluidity of border situations, as well as the socio-political and cultural contexts, are negatively impacted, particularly in countries located along the northern Mediterranean coast. These menacing factors significantly impact the region's peace, security, and stability. A society's security and stability are manifested through its responses to challenges posed by the Arab world, the Mediterranean basin, and the Sahelo-Saharan region. In light of the multitude of threats, Morocco is compelled to formulate and implement a comprehensive security and military strategy. In this context, Morocco must collaborate with neighboring states. The recent surge of jihadist attacks globally indicates that no nation appears immune to such threats (EEAS).

4.6 Morocco’s Military Strategy in the Sahel

Throughout the 46 years of the FAR's existence, one can observe the enduring presence of two fundamental components, both of which are currently undergoing substantial transformations: tradition, which has established the FAR as an effective instrument for national defence, the fundamental purpose of all military forces, irrespective of whether they are engaged in safeguarding territorial integrity or political institutions, with the monarchy presiding at its apex; and modernization, which is manifested in Morocco’s growing involvement in contemporary endeavours (such as peacekeeping operations, combating smuggling, and enhancing diplomatic relations with various nations, among which Spain has historically held and should continue to uphold a pivotal role, etc.), and which, sooner rather than later, is expected to result in a redefinition of the institution within a state advancing towards greater democratization (Sebastian & Gorur, 2018).

Over the preceding decade, the Sahel region has been a major area of interest for global powers, primarily attributable to its heightened instability stemming from the Libyan crisis. These nations have established a military presence within the region, serving as both instructors for local armed forces and as integral components of military peace support missions aimed at mitigating the repercussions of sub-regional dynamics. In this framework, the European Union has played a pivotal role through its Common Security and Defense Policy missions. In contrast, the Erdogan administration in Türkiye has successfully cultivated robust bilateral relations with the G-5 Sahel nations to foster an economic and military partnership. Despite the involvement of various countries lacking geographical, historical, or cultural ties to the region, Morocco is progressively seeking to enhance its economic, political, and military collaboration with the G-5 Sahel nations in an effort to assume a more effective role in addressing security challenges within the region (Jakkie et al., 2019).

The engagement of the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces in the conflict in northern Mali on 27 June 2013 was aligned with its longstanding military policy regarding the Kingdom's sub-regional environment. In this regard, Morocco has deployed a battalion to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, operating under the auspices of the Force Intervention Battalion in the Meniyas region. To date, forty-nine Moroccan personnel, fourteen of whom are staff members and thirty-five are operational forces, have tragically lost their lives in this mission. Concurrently, the G-5 Sahel nations have engendered considerable instability, wherein eleven of the thirty-five central reforms proposed were specifically aimed at enhancing peace support operations, albeit with a call for greater consistency (Virginie Baudais, 2021) Following its involvement in the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo and, more recently, in the G-30 processes, the joint operations framework has established a brigade adept at fulfilling a highly effective operational role. In contrast to other military forces deployed in the region, Morocco possesses historically entrenched relations with the Sahel and is positioned to exert a more substantial influence, emphasizing the ethnic, historical, and cultural distinctions that underpin the Kingdom's military diplomacy.

The military strategy implemented by Morocco in the Sahel is characterized by an assertive and proactive approach, as opposed to a reactive one. This strategy is also defined by a framework of complementarity, the aggregation of resources, and collaborative relationships with military partners both within the region and beyond, aimed at fostering an effective response to security challenges.

Morocco leverages its regional and international partnerships to confront the diverse challenges present in the Sahel, particularly the menace posed by terrorist organizations. By facilitating the exchange of intelligence and training, Rabat seeks to formalize bilateral and multilateral military alliances through the sharing of expertise, official visits, meetings, and training exercises, thereby enhancing the operational capabilities of the various military entities integrated within the frameworks established following the Dakar and Nouakchott Conferences. The array of diplomatic, military, and economic stakeholders with whom Rabat collaborates forms a sophisticated mosaic encompassing 20 African nations, the G5 and CEMOC, the European Union, ECOWAS, the African Union, and several of its specialized technical commissions, in addition to the United Nations (Cherkaoui & Tobi, 2021).

The utilization of standing combat forces is intentionally orchestrated as an integrated instrument to tackle overarching security challenges, alongside established formal and informal policies and practices that contribute to fostering the requisite level of confidence essential for constructing a viable and sustainable network of collaboration at the national, regional, and international levels to stabilize the Sahel. To project a reassuring presence in the region for the benefit of the nations situated in the northern basin of the sub-region, Morocco is complementing its initiatives against security instability with economic projects and physical infrastructure, such as renewable energy initiatives that signify potential development opportunities for the local populations. (Jakkie et al., 2019).

The African continent has witnessed a surge in terrorist organizations rooted in religious ideologies, as exemplified by groups such as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, including the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and Boko Haram. Since the 1990s, Morocco has been actively involved in counterterrorism initiatives, providing military assistance to allied nations and participating in international efforts under the auspices of the United Nations. Morocco currently maintains a contingent of no fewer than 1500 military personnel deployed in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, and has been an engaged participant in the American-led initiative for the Sahel and Sahara since the year 2002 (Asmlal, 2017).

To this end, it endeavors to enhance the international, particularly African, dimension of cooperation, thereby striving to achieve equilibrium in its international positioning. A deliberate political effort is therefore made to engage with African entities that transcends any notion of Moroccan-African exceptionalism. Thus, while it opts to amplify cooperation within the Sahel, Rabat concurrently advocates for several specific partnerships and mechanisms across the continent. Given Morocco's own recent historical context, it also benefits from a degree of formality, placing equal emphasis on advancements in the international institutional framework as well as within Africa itself. The latter is essential for garnering support and resources for enhancements to intelligence and the human capital expected to provide feedback within the facilities and in the field where these initiatives are implemented. The accession to the African Union in 2017 represented a significant albeit delayed step that followed the re-entry of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic onto the African Union Panel. In both instances, however, Moroccan evaluations deliberately set aside the immediate ramifications of participation in the operations of the continental system.

The anticipated influence of Morocco within the African security framework is increasingly acknowledged by all nations, irrespective of their geographical positioning relative to the Sahara, as they become cognizant of the inherent African characteristics of the security challenges that pervade this volatile region. This perspective is, therefore, less an advantage in strategic terms and more a reactive adaptation to the prevailing regional environmental conditions, alongside other strategic and economically driven considerations.

In contrast, regarding the internal milieu, Morocco transcends mere geostrategic modifications, positing a more comprehensive contribution towards the security of coastal nations and underscoring that the prevailing environment, as it pertains to the overarching global-Malian ethnic dynamics, is equally as troublesome for Rabat as the other factors that contribute to domestic polarization. Nevertheless, despite the political incongruities manifest in extensive Moroccan media portrayals of Rabat's pivotal role in Mali, Morocco implicitly recognizes that a robust social and cultural foundation within its immediate context is essential to mitigate the type of radicalization exemplified by the incidents in Laayoune, particularly in Northern Mali. Morocco has the fifth-largest army in Africa. According to estimates, it has more than 310,000 active soldiers and 200,000 reservists. It has more than 200 aircraft, thousands of armored vehicles, and artillery. It also has a navy with an estimated budget of around $10 billion per year. A billion per year. Morocco's strength as a security leader in Africa is expressed in several complementary ways: Diplomatic, economic, religious, and military. (Madani, 2020).

The Moroccan Armed Forces (MAF) have participated in a diverse array of peacekeeping operations across Central America, the Middle East, Africa, the Far East, and Europe. The Moroccan Special Forces Memorial Service (SANAS) is regarded as one of the most proficient units within the African military landscape (Ardy, 2023).

The Regulations for Participation of Moroccan Military Components in Peacekeeping Operations delineate the policy framework regarding the engagement of Moroccan forces in peacekeeping and peace support operations. Aimed at the preservation of peace, security, and international stability of communities and mankind, the Moroccan military intervention today is no longer confined to national borders. It has evolved into a global security paradigm, predicated on collective security, of which Morocco has now emerged as a crucial ally. But the anticipated role of Morocco in the power relay within the African system is increasingly recognized, with all nations, whether situated on one side or the other of the Sahara, progressively acknowledging the inherent African character of the security threats that are prevalent in the volatile region.

This perspective is thus characterized more as a reaction to regional environmental dynamics than as a strategic advantage, alongside factors that are fundamentally strategic and economically driven. In contrast, Morocco transcends mere geostrategic modifications, positing a broader contribution to the security of coastal states while underscoring that the environmental conditions, intertwined with global-Malian ethnic contexts, are equally as troubling to Rabat as are the other factors contributing to domestic polarization. Nonetheless, despite the political dissonance with prevalent Moroccan media portrayals of Rabat's pivotal involvement in Mali, Morocco tacitly concedes that a robust social and cultural foundation within its immediate surroundings is essential to mitigate the radicalization trends witnessed in Laayoune, particularly in Northern Mali (El Houdaigui, 2019).

The Moroccan Armed Forces (MAF) have actively participated in an array of peacekeeping operations across Central America, the Middle East, Africa, the Far East, and Europe. The Moroccan Special Forces Memorial Service (SANAS) is recognized as one of the most proficient contingents among African military forces. Barring the most politically sensitive areas, Moroccan forces are engaged in a diverse range of military missions and operations. The deployment of MAF in peacekeeping endeavors within Africa is perceived in Morocco as a strategic maneuver to pre-emptively address military threats before their incursion into Moroccan territory (El Houdaigui, 2019).

Moroccan Armed Forces have been integrally involved in diverse United Nations operations since Morocco attained independence. Hence, the overwhelming majority of troops are currently engaged in MINURSO, the peacekeeping operation in the Sahara. To date, 57 Moroccan peacekeepers have lost their lives while on mission. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Ministry of Defense has endeavored to enhance participation in UN field missions, thereby leveraging the tradition and experiences that the MAF has accrued from Minurso. The objective was to equip Moroccan forces with substantial experience in domains beyond peacekeeping (Balboni, 2022).

As a result, participation in peacekeeping missions is predominantly associated with professional camaraderie and the application of military competencies rather than the achievement of a specific strategic objective. The involvement of Morocco in UN peace operations within Sub-Saharan Africa can also be interpreted as a strategy for establishing its identity as a significant player in the realm of security and as a globally recognized mediator, particularly in light of the persistent animosity from Algeria towards Moroccan aspirations. ‘’Mohammed Benaïssa, Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, has consistently promoted Morocco’s active support of the UN objective to consolidate peace and security and to enhance international relations. He also underlines that Morocco is currently contributing to five peacekeeping operations in Africa, America, and Europe, which makes it the thirteenth largest international contributor, the second largest in the Arab world, and the sixth largest in Africa’’ Mohamed Benaïssa, Minister of Foreign Affairs (Map, 2006).

Morocco represents a nation that has experienced profound impacts from various forms of migration, including inward, outward, and transit movements. The predominant trajectories of migration are oriented from north to south and vice versa. The migratory journeys of individuals initiate and conclude in numerous locations across both Africa and Europe. Only during specific intervals did these migratory flows predominantly trend towards the north; counter-flows invariably succeeded such intervals in the opposite direction. For centuries, Morocco has served as a recipient country not solely for individuals hailing from Spain and France, but also for a significant number of other Europeans. It is posited that the demographic composition of the Maghreb has historically encompassed approximately 15 percent of individuals of European ancestry, predating the colonial period. The continuous influx of tens of thousands of predominantly economically disadvantaged southern Europeans has constituted a commonplace occurrence in Northern Africa.

The escalating influx of migrants originating from sub-Saharan Africa traversing through Morocco to Europe during the initial nine months of 2018 has once again established it as one of the most significant migratory corridors within the Mediterranean region. By 30 September, approximately 37,000 individuals had engaged in irregular emigration between Africa and Europe utilizing the western Mediterranean migration route throughout 2018. Consequently, Morocco emerged as the primary nation of departure for migrants from Africa in 2008, whereas Spain was identified as the most pivotal entry point to Europe (Lahlou, 2018). With respect to the status of refugees, as transit to Europe becomes increasingly subject to rigorous procedural restrictions, Morocco has emerged as a host nation for a significant population of migrants, thereby catalyzing a notable rise in asylum applications.

Consequently, Morocco has re-evaluated its historically stringent asylum protocols, instituting a series of exceptional measures aimed at alleviating the backlog of pending applications. On the 17th of September, 2013, a committee was convened under the auspices of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation to regularize the status of refugees acknowledged by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The initial phase of the regularization initiative, which transpired between September and November 2013, encompassed a multitude of investigations and hearings orchestrated by the UNHCR in conjunction with the Office for Refugees and Stateless Persons, culminating in the endorsement of 577 asylum seekers. (Collyer, 2006).

The inaugural distribution of asylum and residency permits commenced on the 24th of December, 2013, targeting refugees and their respective families. The subsequent phase of this process was inaugurated on the 23rd of January, 2014, and is anticipated to persist until the formal implementation of the asylum legislation. Cumulatively, a total of 5,618 individuals were recognized as refugees during the period from September 2013 to December. (Nicholson & Kumin, 2017).

4.7 Morocco's Religious Strategy in the Sahel

The recent African policy implemented by Morocco during the final five years of King Mohamed VI's reign has facilitated the diversification of the Maghreb nation's strategic alliances, which were traditionally concentrated in Europe, while simultaneously augmenting its influence in both West and Central Africa. Specifically, on one side, the monarchy's mediation, infused with the principles of Sunni Islam, has championed a notion of “religious security” in the aftermath of the Libyan and Malian crises. Conversely, the incremental integration of Moroccan enterprises within the African market has redefined the position of the Moroccan state within the region, particularly following the reestablishment of its presence at the African Union in 2017 (Cogbill, 2019).

This pivotal year has conferred upon Morocco a distinguished status within the geopolitical dynamics of the Sahelo-Sahelian domain. In this scholarly discussion, our focus is not on the motivations that compelled Morocco to reassess its foreign policy framework but rather on the mechanisms of this new diplomatic strategy that facilitated its transition from a “passive” participant to an active “mediator,” while also enabling it to pre-emptively address the threats posed by terrorism and the execution of its strategic initiatives.

The Sahel constitutes a multifaceted region of the globe, it is characterized by a plethora of cultures and religious practices, encompassing various interpretations of Islam that tend to accentuate indigenous traditions. Furthermore, it represents a secular and undemocratic political landscape that experiences a considerable number of radical Islamic insurgencies. The Moroccan 'soft power' strategy within this region functions amidst a highly polarized environment of religious coexistence (Tadlaoui, 2015).

The enactment of public policies pertaining to the religious domain, which includes measures against terrorism, in a nation recognized for its opaque religious markets, complicates the Moroccan initiatives. Nevertheless, in light of potential missteps, this religious policy model necessitates thorough analysis. Given the intertwined issues of terrorism and stability within the Sahel, Moroccan influence is paramount in fostering prosperity and in curtailing the southward expansion of instability. Regrettably, the Moroccan Rasd Strategy is unlikely to yield prosperity due to the numerous challenges that policymakers will be compelled to navigate (Tadlaoui, 2015).

Furthermore, Morocco's religious policy in the Sahel region of Africa is distinguished by a strategic framework that seeks to promote moderate Islam while simultaneously bolstering its geopolitical stature. This policy has undergone significant evolution over the past twenty years, with a pronounced emphasis on religious diplomacy as a mechanism of soft power. The subsequent sections delineate the principal facets of Morocco's religious policy pertaining to the Sahel. Morocco has strategically positioned itself as a nucleus for moderate Islam, advocating a “middle path” methodology through initiatives such as the Mohammed VI Institute, which is dedicated to the training of religious leaders hailing from the Sahel (Baylocq S. & Hlaoua, 2016). The mediation endeavors of the Moroccan monarchy have been contextualized within the framework of “religious security,” particularly in the wake of the conflicts in Libya and Mali, thereby augmenting its function as a stabilizing entity in the region (Cherkaoui & Tobi, 2021).

Observers analyzing the evolution of Moroccan-African relations over the previous decade assert that the religious dimension has emerged as a significant and pivotal factor in fortifying these relations. Furthermore, the partnership between Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa is gradually being established as Morocco strategically positions itself within a continental framework, implementing a novel diplomatic approach that regards Morocco as a custodian of moderate Islam. Consequently, the kingdom has demonstrated its efficacy in the fight against extremism and terrorism, owing to the substantial expertise that Moroccan authorities have acquired in the management of religious affairs, which aims to safeguard the spiritual security of its citizens.

In the context of the initiative aimed at restructuring the "religious field," which the kingdom undertook following the terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003, a comprehensive training program for imams was initiated to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance as integral components of Morocco's religious culture (Mohammed VI, 2003).

This initiative has successfully attracted the attention of numerous Islamic nations, particularly in Africa. In response, these countries have begun to send imams to Morocco to pursue enhanced training. Upon their return to their home nations, these individuals promote values of moderation and tolerance among their communities, particularly during a period when Africa is experiencing a rise in extremism. Mali has emerged as one of the foremost nations seeking assistance from the Moroccan model in this domain of religious training. In this regard, immediately following the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the former president of the nation, and after a transitional phase that followed military confrontations involving Malian forces, French troops, and Azawad rebels, the Moroccan government entered into agreements with Mali, as well as with other nations such as the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Gabon. The approach adopted by Rabat in promoting moderation and tolerance has garnered the attention of a multitude of Islamic countries, given that Morocco's success in addressing the manifestations of religious extremism has been substantiated (Jamal, 2018). One of the most prominently promoted and effective initiatives within the framework of Morocco's religious diplomacy in Africa has been the imam training program, which fostered interest from Guinea and Nigeria after an initial agreement with the conflict-affected nation of Mali in 2013 to facilitate the training of 500 Malian imams in Morocco (Jamal, 2018).

Morocco has also used its religion to control mosques, provide religious materials, improve school lessons, train people in administration and management, and repair places related to religion (Mohammed VI, 2016). The success of these initiatives led to the formalization of Morocco's religious diplomacy, as seen in the creation of the Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams, Mourchidin, and Mourchidate in March 2015. This was followed in July of the same year by the establishment of the Mohammed VI Foundation of African Ulemas, which aims to serve as a platform for 'supra-national' collaboration among African religious scholars in the effort to combat radicalization and extremism. This transition signifies a shift from purely academic and scientific training to the organization and assembly of African scholars and imams within this institution (Mohammed, 2023).

King Mohammed VI has maintained relations with the Tijaniya order by organizing bilateral meetings with Senegal and welcoming their sheikhs and leaders. Morocco's national airline, Royal Air Maroc, signed a commercial agreement in February 2014 with the spiritual leaders of the Tijaniya Brotherhood in Bamako that offered preferential rates to Brotherhood members for travel arrangements connecting Abidjan and Fez (Tadlaoui, 2015).

The Moroccan Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs offers scholarships to West African students, and the number of study placements for African students in Moroccan higher education institutions has increased. Over 16,000 African students from diverse countries are accommodated in Morocco, with 90% benefiting from scholarships. Morocco's paradigm of constructive engagement is predicated upon its cultural and economic interactions with various nations across the African continent. Culturally, its interpretation of Islam, specifically the Sunni Maliki Ash'arite School, serves as a moderate alternative to countering violent extremism, which has become entrenched in the region and constitutes a fundamental aspect of its religious diplomatic efforts (Lamlili, 2015). One of the most frequented sacred sites of the Takamiya Sufi order, which is adhered to by millions in West Africa, is situated in Fez. Morocco's webs of influence have been meticulously cultivated, notably through the financing of mosque constructions, the restoration of religious structures, and the dissemination of copies of the holy Quran across numerous countries (Tadlaoui, 2015). Similarly, the Mohammed VI Institute, dedicated to the training of Imams, along with the Foundation for African Ulema, further illustrates Morocco's strategic involvement in matters concerning Islam within the region. For example, over 93% of the international student body enrolled at the Institute in 2019 hails from ECOWAS nations and Chad. Furthermore, in 2013, Morocco formalized an agreement to extend two years of training to 500 Malian imams to advance its moderate interpretation of the faith.

The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of Imams was inaugurated in Morocco pursuant to Decree No. 103.114 in the year 2014, to safeguard religious identity, foster patriotism, and promote the Islamic values of moderation, tolerance, and openness. (Cogbill, 2019). The institute is predicated upon three foundational pillars: an institutional framework, effective mentorship, and a comprehensive Islamic education complemented by modern scientific training. Its primary objective is to cultivate Moroccan imams hailing from Arab, African, and European nations, thereby facilitating their study of the Maliki school of jurisprudence alongside legal and ethical doctrines. The training curriculum encompasses essential elements of Sharia sciences, linguistic studies, human sciences, and the historical context of the imam's country. Furthermore, the institute aspires to forge collaborative partnerships with national entities and foreign nations of mutual interest. It has garnered requests for collaboration from African nations such as Tunisia, Mali, Guinea Conakry, and the Ivory Coast, in addition to other European countries, thereby functioning as a conduit for the establishment of genuine partnerships with African nations (Sambe & Hamdaoui, 2019).

Moroccan religious diplomacy, situated within the African milieu, confronts considerable impediments in its endeavors to address extremist ideologies and acts of terrorism, to counter the spread of Shiite Islam, and to compete for influence against Sufi Zawiyas, particularly the Tijaniya Sufi order that has its origins in Algeria. Traditionally, Sufi orders have engaged in a struggle against Christian missionary enterprises in Africa, which frequently rely on academic scholarships and language education. Despite the presence of Islamic philanthropic organizations throughout the African continent, a multitude of such entities have been disbanded due to concerns regarding their potential complicity in facilitating terrorism. (Tadlaoui, 2015).

Meanwhile, when examining Morocco's religious outreach initiatives, one must take into account the nation's persistent rivalry for regional influence with its adjacent counterpart, Algeria, alongside its assertions regarding the Western Sahara. By enhancing its credentials as a leader within Africa and cultivating political influence, Morocco seeks to garner support for its claims to the contested territory of the Sahara. With the protracted conflict remaining in an unyielding deadlock, both Morocco and Algeria are engaging in a variety of diplomatic channels to advocate for their respective positions. Nonetheless, concerning religious diplomacy, Algeria's endeavors are significantly inferior to those of Morocco. Furthermore, the president of Algeria lacks the religious legitimacy conferred by the title held by the Moroccan monarch (Sambe & Hamdaoui, 2019). Moreover, the outreach initiatives of Morocco stand in stark contrast to those of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are perceived as foreign influences in comparison. The religious offerings of Morocco are not regarded with skepticism in West Africa, given that a significant portion of the population adheres to a similar interpretation of Islam. Furthermore, while Saudi Arabia and Iran allocate financial resources to the promotion of religion for geopolitical objectives.

The emergence of radicalism within the Sahel region is intrinsically linked to the proliferation of Wahhabism, which was fervently promoted by Saudi proselytizing efforts in the subregion during the 1970s. The dissemination of Wahhabism has prompted significant concern across various domains of Sahelian states, thereby introducing a novel potential for the emancipation of Morocco as the sole monarchy in the region, positioning it as a pivotal reference point for Islam, wherein Sufism represents its elevated form. This dynamic is one that the kingdom shares with numerous countries located in sub-Saharan Africa. A concerted federation among the diverse Sufi movements in the region is being established to effectively counteract the ascendancy of both Shi'ism and Wahhabism within the Sahel. (Mesa & Hamdaoui, 2018).

4.8 Summary

In summary, the migratory framework of Morocco presents a notable case study elucidating the intricacies and dynamics of migration flows within the Mediterranean region. Historically functioning as both a destination and a transit nation, Morocco has been profoundly impacted by various migratory trajectories, particularly those occurring between Europe and Africa. The demographic transitions engendered by both incoming and outgoing migration have considerably influenced the socio-economic structure of the country, epitomizing a heterogeneous populace that encompasses a significant proportion of individuals of European ancestry. The recent increase in migrants originating from sub-Saharan Africa, in conjunction with Morocco's shifting position regarding asylum, accentuates the pressing necessity for efficacious policy measures to address the challenges posed by irregular migration and asylum seeker status.

The initiatives undertaken by the government to regularize the status of asylum seekers reflect a dedication to humanitarian principles, while simultaneously underscoring the imperative for continuous reforms to accommodate the evolving migratory landscape. As Morocco persists in navigating its position within the broader migratory trends, it is crucial to scrutinize the ramifications of these developments on both national and regional stability, as well as on the circumstances of the migrants themselves.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter will delineate the data gathered from expert interviews and provide a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the responses concerning the research questions underpinning this study. The analysis will identify essential themes, insights, and patterns derived from expert opinions about Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and its geopolitical and economic ramifications for the Sahel region. A thematic analysis will be employed to examine the qualitative data, identify recurring themes, and investigate the interrelations among the many factors shaping Morocco's policy and its dealings with Sahel nations. The findings will be provided with thorough explanations, substantiated by direct statements from participants, to provide a comprehensive grasp of the topic.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The three interviews address eight items related to Morocco's Atlantic initiative, which seeks to enhance regional integration, foster cooperation with Sahelian nations, and navigate complex political landscapes. Each participant presents distinct viewpoints, drawing on their expertise to analyze Morocco's strategies, challenges, and the broader geopolitical context.

Item 1: Regional and International Factors Driving Morocco to Pursue the Atlantic Initiative

Participant 1 identified Morocco's desire to tap into new economic opportunities as a driving force behind pursuing the Atlantic Initiative. He stated, "It is probably due to the country's desire to open up other economic potentials." This highlights Morocco's interest in diversifying its economy and enhancing its role as a key player in African economic corridors. Participant 2 mentioned Morocco's strategic positioning and international reputation, stating, "These factors include: strategic positioning, Morocco's international reputation, favorable economic conditions..." This suggests that the country's geographic location offers crucial access to both Atlantic and Sahelian markets, which could increase Morocco's influence in global trade.

Meanwhile, Participant 3 emphasized the historical context of Morocco’s relationship with the African Union, highlighting Morocco's strategic shift by rejoining the union in 2017 after its previous departure in protest over the Polisario Front’s admission. As Participant 3 noted, “Morocco, like many other countries, has been forced to adapt to the major international changes brought about by globalization... Morocco decided to rejoin the African Union organization, which it had left in 1984, in protest at the admission of the Polisario Front." This move was part of a broader attempt to mitigate isolation and expand Morocco’s influence in West Africa.

Item 2: Future of Diplomatic Relations Between Morocco, the Sahel Countries, and Algeria

Regarding the future of Morocco’s diplomatic relations with Algeria, Participant 2 suggested that stronger ties between Morocco and Sahel countries might bring Morocco and Algeria closer together, potentially weakening Algeria’s position on the Western Sahara issue.

Participant 2 stated, "Relations between the countries of the Sahel can help bring Morocco and Algeria closer together, and the international consensus on the Moroccan Sahara affair is likely to weaken Algeria's position and isolate it." Conversely, Participant 1 emphasized that Morocco’s relations with Algeria are heavily influenced by France, whose role in the region complicates the situation. "The relations with Algeria are highly influenced by the French authorities. France has a big role in the conflicts between Morocco and Algeria." The need for Maghreb unity was highlighted as a solution to the challenges posed by Algeria, with Participant 1 stating, "The only possible solution lies in the Maghreb countries' union."

Participant 3 discussed the longstanding tensions between Morocco and Algeria, noting, "For half a century now, diplomatic relations between Morocco and Algeria have been severed...This situation persists because of Algeria's obstinate refusal to allow Morocco to reclaim its Saharan provinces in 1975."

Item 3: Role of External Diplomatic Support from the EU and the US

External diplomatic support was noted as crucial by Participant 2, who emphasized that the European Union and the United States’ backing could strengthen Morocco’s position in sectors like agriculture, security, and the phosphate trade. Participant 2 stated, "As a cornerstone of the region in various areas including agriculture, fisheries, security, and phosphate trade, external support from the EU and the US is crucial." This signifies that leveraging international support might enhance Morocco's efforts and promote its initiatives. Participant 1 proposed that Morocco should leverage its historical relations with Sahel countries and its geographic advantages to gain international backing. As Participant 1 mentioned, "The only way is through making group unions to face all challenges. A good example is what happened in Europe." Participant 3, however, underscored Morocco’s proactive approach in fostering economic cooperation, citing projects like the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline as examples of Morocco’s active diplomacy. "A good example is the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline... which will bring gas from Nigeria to Europe via Morocco's Atlantic coast."

Item 4: In a Region Marked by Challenges, How Can Morocco Effectively Promote the Atlantic Initiative?

Participants 1, 2, and 3 agreed that Morocco’s successful promotion of the Atlantic Initiative hinges on fostering unity and stability. Participant 1 reiterated that a Maghreb union could address the region’s challenges, including terrorism and border disputes. As Participant 1 stated, "The only feasible way is through a union of the Maghreb countries." Participant 2 emphasized Morocco’s diplomatic history and its strong relationships with regional countries as assets in advancing the initiative. "Through its good relations with all countries... its ancestral history." Participant 3 connected the Atlantic Initiative to Morocco’s broader strategic aims, including its goal to stimulate regional cooperation and promote shared prosperity, aligning with the need for a stable environment in the Sahel. Participant 3 remarked, "The launch of the Atlantic initiative has enabled the countries concerned to take important steps towards strengthening the framework for cooperation."

Item 5: Morocco’s Main Obstacles in Implementing the South-South Atlantic Initiative

All participants identified the main obstacles to the South-South Atlantic Initiative as stemming from both internal and external factors. Participant 1 cited external pressures from Western countries, particularly France and the United States, as significant hindrances.

Participant 1 noted, "The only obstacle comes from Western countries, especially France. The USA is also unwilling to allow such relationships in Africa." Participant 2 pointed to political, economic, structural, financial, and legal challenges, suggesting that the complexity of the context in which the initiative is being implemented poses a considerable barrier. Participant 2 explained, "The political, security, economic, structural, financial, legal and geopolitical challenges... in other words, the complexity of the context in which this ambitious project is being carried out." Participant 3 focused on the challenge of financing, pointing out that Morocco’s ambitious plans require significant investment. Participant 3 stated, "The main obstacle to the realization of the ambitious projects of the Atlantic initiative lies in the lack of sufficient means of financing."

Item 6: Alignment of the Initiative with the Needs of Sahel Countries

Participants agreed that the Atlantic Initiative could align well with landlocked Sahel countries' interests by providing economic benefits and opportunities for technological exchange and infrastructure development. Participant 1 noted, "I am confident that initiatives like that are beneficial to everybody. The benefits go far beyond economic prosperity."

Participant 2 echoed this sentiment, highlighting that South-South cooperation could transform livelihoods and improve access to resources and opportunities.

"La coopération sud-sud’ ’favorise des formes innovantes d'échange de connaissance, de transfert de technologies, et de rétablissement des moyens de subsistance peuvent transformer les vies des citoyens pour plus de dignité." Participant 3 stressed that Morocco’s investments in sectors like energy, infrastructure, and services in Sahelian countries already yield positive results, providing tangible benefits to the region. As Participant 3 stated, "Moroccan investments will enable the development of infrastructures in these countries."

Item 7: Opportunities and Challenges Presented by the Initiative

The participants discussed the opportunities and challenges that the Atlantic Initiative presents. Participant 1 highlighted economic prosperity and cultural exchange as key opportunities, noting, "Economic prosperity and development are the main gains. Additionally, cultural and educational exchange will lead to better experiences." Participant 2 acknowledged the potential for economic integration and cautioned about the security risks inherent in such a volatile region. "The challenges are manifold: Security risks." Participant 3 focused on large-scale projects like the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline as a significant economic opportunity, though he also noted the substantial financial implications involved in such ambitious undertakings. Participant 3 remarked, "The Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline, which will bring gas from Nigeria to Europe via Morocco's Atlantic coast, requires a budget of 25 billion dollars."

Item 8: Influence of the Atlantic Initiative on the Western Sahara Situation

All three participants emphasized that the Atlantic Initiative could positively influence Morocco's stance on the Western Sahara issue. Participant 1 suggested that the initiative could legitimize Morocco's territorial claims, stating, "It might be a solution to this long conflict. Unity may solve this crisis." Participant 2 pointed to changes in international consensus on the Moroccan Sahara issue, which could isolate Algeria further and strengthen Morocco's position. "The cooperation and regional stability expected and the search for the general interest can have a positive repercussion on the Sahara affair since it is a legitimate right that must be recognized to its rightful owner, Morocco." Participant 3 highlighted that the successful execution of the initiative could enhance Morocco's standing within the African Union and bolster its claims over the disputed Western Sahara region. Participant 3 concluded, "Morocco hopes to strengthen its position within the African Union... and its autonomy plan for this region is the only credible solution."

In conclusion, while each participant presented distinct perspectives on the various items discussed, they collectively underscored the significance of the Atlantic Initiative for regional integration, economic development, and geopolitical influence. All acknowledged the initiative's potential to foster cooperation between Morocco and Sahel countries, navigate complex diplomatic relations, and address security and economic challenges. However, they also pointed to significant obstacles such as external political pressures and financial constraints that must be overcome for its success.

Instrument: An Interview Protocol

This research employed an interview research instrument comprising eight open-ended questions aimed at obtaining comprehensive insights from experts regarding the geopolitical and economic dynamics of Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and its effects on the Sahel region. Each question was designed to elicit unique thoughts into the multifaceted aspects of the effort, emphasizing Morocco's role, the problems it encounters, and the prospects for collaboration with Sahel nations. The protocol was semi-structured, permitting flexibility in responses while ensuring a clear emphasis on the research aims. The following delineates each question along with its purpose:

1. What are some of the regional and international factors driving Morocco to pursue the Atlantic initiative?

This inquiry aims to ascertain the fundamental factors driving Morocco's engagement in the Atlantic Initiative, both regionally and internationally. The objective is to examine issues like economic interests, political affiliations, and security concerns that may affect Morocco's strategic choices in its engagement with the Sahel region. The objective is to comprehend the external and internal influences and prospects that are driving Morocco's geopolitical manoeuvres.

2. How might the Atlantic Initiative between Morocco and the Sahel countries outline the future of diplomatic and geopolitical relations between Morocco and Algeria?

This question examines the particular ramifications of the Atlantic Initiative on Morocco's relations with Algeria, a significant regional actor with distinct interests in the Sahel. This inquiry seeks to examine the potential effects of the initiative on diplomatic ties, especially considering the past conflicts between the two nations. The answer will elucidate the broader regional dynamics and how Morocco's actions may affect its relations with neighboring Algeria.

3. In a region marked by challenges like border disputes, terrorism, and political instability, how can Morocco effectively push the Atlantic initiative between Morocco and Sahel countries forward to achieve tangible goals?

This inquiry examines the practical obstacles Morocco encounters in advancing the Atlantic Initiative within a region plagued by instability. The objective is to analyze the tactics Morocco may utilize to surmount challenges such as terrorism, political disintegration, and border conflicts, while sustaining diplomatic relations with Sahel nations. This inquiry seeks to reveal insights into the viability of the plan and how Morocco may address these problems.

4. What are Morocco's main obstacles in implementing the South-South Atlantic initiative?

This inquiry aims to ascertain the particular obstacles Morocco faces in executing the South-South Atlantic Initiative, which highlights collaboration between Morocco and other developing nations in the Global South. The objective is to acquire an understanding of the economic, political, and institutional obstacles Morocco may have in promoting collaboration with Sahel nations, along with any internal or external elements that impede the initiative's success.

5. How might the South-South Atlantic initiative align with the interests and needs of landlocked Sahel countries?

This inquiry assesses the alignment of the South-South Atlantic Initiative with the specific requirements of landlocked Sahel nations, which encounter distinct economic and logistical obstacles. The objective is to comprehend how Morocco's endeavor may yield concrete advantages for these nations, including enhancements to trade routes, access to ports, or prospects for economic development, and how these countries view the initiative in relation to their distinct requirements.

6. What strategies could Morocco use to promote regional integration and South-South cooperation with Sahel nations?

This inquiry aims to examine possible solutions that Morocco can implement to enhance regional integration and South-South cooperation in the Sahel. It solicits expert opinions on the political, economic, and institutional strategies Morocco should employ to enhance relations with Sahel nations and foster cooperative development initiatives. The aim is to ascertain viable methods through which Morocco might enhance regional stability and development.

7. What specific opportunities and challenges might this initiative present for Morocco and the Sahel region?

This inquiry seeks to elucidate the potential and challenges posed by the Atlantic Initiative for Morocco and the Sahel region collectively. The study seeks expert insights to elucidate how Morocco and Sahel nations could mutually benefit from the initiative, as well as to identify potential dangers or challenges that may emerge. The objective is to reconcile the prospects for development and collaboration with the difficulties of execution.

8. How could the Atlantic initiative influence the situation in the Moroccan Western Sahara?

The concluding inquiry examines the possible impact of the Atlantic Initiative on the current political circumstances in the Moroccan Western Sahara. This is a critical and consequential matter in Moroccan geopolitics, and the inquiry seeks to examine how the effort may influence Morocco's stance and strategy concerning the Western Sahara conflict. The aim is to obtain expert perspectives on how regional cooperation may either facilitate or hinder Morocco's position on this matter.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, the phenomena witnessed in the Sahel region in recent years can be ascribed to the intricate interrelation of numerous factors that have manifested with disparate degrees of intensity and dynamism, contingent upon specific contextual circumstances. Originating from security predicaments, this conflagration promptly unveiled the dormant Specters of inadequate governance, pronounced inequalities, insufficient equitable justice, and pervasive poverty. Although the instinctual reaction might have been to enlist traditional allies to mitigate the conflagration, these partners were swiftly scrutinized for exacerbating the crisis and functioning as incendiary interveners. Following a decade of endeavors directed at reinstating peace and countering armed terrorist factions, conventional allies alongside their military contingents were gradually compelled to withdraw from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger by emerging authorities, some of whom ascended to power amid widespread discontent and the incumbents' failure to effectively address security crises and implement virtuous governance.

This geopolitical metamorphosis in the Sahel has engendered the emergence of new alliances and powers. At the international level, this initiative arises amidst a context of regional and global turmoil: numerous wars are ongoing in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa; Houthi assaults in the Red Sea significantly disrupt international maritime traffic; violent extremism is eroding Sahelian societies and exacerbating the destabilization of its nations; geopolitical rivalries are intensifying among the great powers within this strategically significant region of the Sahel, particularly with the emergence of a new and perilous actor advocating a clear agenda of destabilization, namely Iran, Russia, China, Türkiye and the UAE and their affiliates, while geo-economic competitions among developed nations are escalating, driven by their avarice for the vast mineral resources of the Sahel region; and the exacerbating disparities between the unprecedented development levels of affluent countries and the substantial regression of numerous impoverished nations, predominantly those in Africa, including those within the Sahel, thus fuelling international polarization and internal political tensions.

Furthermore, the Atlantic Initiative, advanced by the Kingdom of Morocco, epitomizes a strategic endeavor aimed at enhancing Morocco's geopolitical leverage within the Sahel region by enabling these landlocked countries' access to the Atlantic Ocean. This initiative reflects Morocco's overarching foreign policy framework, which is centered on strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with sub-Saharan Africa, particularly under the auspices of King Mohamed VI. The initiative is construed as a transactional paradigm through which Morocco provides financial aid and supplementary development assistance to both parties; this novel agenda instituted by Morocco includes augmented security measures, military logistics, and social strategies in return for political endorsement, especially concerning its stance on the Western Sahara dispute.

A contemporary strategic paradigm is represented by the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative, with the aim of transforming the dynamics between Morocco and the landlocked Sahelian nations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, in the context of notable regional transformations. The initiative seeks to alleviate the persistent structural impediments that have hindered these nations' economic diversification and connectivity by facilitating their direct access to the Atlantic through the development of infrastructure, energy corridors, and

At the regional level, it positions Morocco as a crucial nexus, interlinking the Sahel with West African and global trade networks, while also providing an alternative framework for collaboration that transcends traditional regional organizations such as ECOWAS. The project serves to consolidate Morocco's position in the context of West African integration, whilst concomitantly addressing the requirement of Sahelian governments for diversified trade routes and a reduction in dependency on coastal neighbours.

On the international front, the initiative augments Morocco’s geopolitical stature as a stabilizing entity capable of engaging with a multitude of partners, including Gulf nations, the European Union, Türkiye, China, and Russia, without aligning itself solely with any single major power. This multidirectional diplomatic approach bolsters Rabat’s position as a conduit between Africa, the Atlantic, and international markets. For the Sahelian states, the initiative presents a valuable opportunity to diminish their reliance on historical colonial ties, broaden their spectrum of partnerships, and advance security and developmental objectives in the context of escalating instability. The initiative intersects with the profound geopolitical rivalries of major powers, including the burgeoning presence of Russia, Türkiye, China, and the Gulf states in the Sahel region, thus rendering Morocco an increasingly salient geopolitical actor. In the North African region, it also intensifies rivalry with Algeria, particularly with regard to Western Sahara. A key part of the initiative is the new Dakhla Atlantic Port, which is designed to be a deep-water hub capable of handling large volumes of cargo and serving as the anchor of a future trans-Sahel corridor. For Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, Dakhla offers the prospect of maritime access, which could significantly reduce trade costs and boost export capacity. For Morocco, the port consolidates its southern development strategy and reinforces its diplomatic influence. Overall, the initiative reflects a dual ambition: to reshape Sahel connectivity and elevate Morocco’s geopolitical position at regional and international levels.

This initiative confronts various challenges that could impede its efficacy, including regional instability, conflicting interests from external powers, and the necessity for sustainable development strategies that authentically address the Sahel's intricate challenges. Furthermore, the success of the Atlantic Initiative will be significantly contingent upon Morocco's capacity to adeptly navigate these complexities while cultivating trust and collaboration among Sahelian states and other relevant stakeholders in the region.

Limitations of the Study

This study offers significant insights into Morocco's diplomatic policy and its relations with Sahelian governments; nonetheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

Limited Sample Size: A main constraint of this study is the minimal number of participants engaged in the interviews. The interview process involved merely three specialists, thus constraining the range and diversity of viewpoints that may have been obtained on the subject. The limited sample size may inadequately reflect the spectrum of perspectives within the wider domain of international relations, especially regarding Morocco's interactions with various Sahelian nations. This constraint mostly arises from difficulties in accessing a broader pool of specialists possessing direct expertise or a comprehensive understanding of the given subject matter. The availability and willingness of highly specialized players, especially within a specific geopolitical environment, were constraining. Therefore, the results may not be entirely applicable to all specialists or stakeholders engaged in this domain.

The geopolitical context and the evolving nature of relationships indicate that Morocco's diplomatic and economic ties within Africa are dynamic. Consequently, the conclusions derived from the data may only accurately represent the situation at the time of the interviews, as circumstances are subject to continual change. Geopolitical relations in the Sahel frequently undergo quick changes due to political turmoil, security issues, and external pressures, complicating the ability to obtain a full understanding of long-term patterns and consequences.

The research was limited by restricted access to real-time data and sources from governmental or international entities directly engaged in Morocco's foreign policy. The study utilized expert insights; nevertheless, a wider range of data sources, including government publications, official statistics, and policy papers, may have offered more comprehensive and stronger evidence to enhance the analysis.

Possible prejudice in Expert Opinions: Since the study depended on expert interviews, it is crucial to acknowledge the possibility of prejudice in their responses. The personal backgrounds, professional experiences, and subjective perspectives of each expert may have influenced their responses, thus adding bias to the conclusions. Although attempts were made to choose experts with varied expertise, the fundamentally subjective aspect of qualitative interviews must be acknowledged.

Language and Cultural Barriers: Despite the interviews being done in English, several participants may have felt better at ease articulating their thoughts in alternative languages. This may have influenced the depth and clarity of the responses, as linguistic restrictions could have restricted the expression of specific, nuanced viewpoints, especially regarding intricate geopolitical issues.

Insufficient Emphasis on Sahelian Perspectives: Although the study concentrated on Morocco's policies and ambitions, it lacked direct contributions from the Sahelian governments. A more equitable perspective, including the viewpoints of political leaders, diplomats, or specialists from Sahelian nations, may have yielded a more comprehensive picture of the reception and perception of Morocco’s actions throughout the area. This constraint confines the analysis to a unilateral perspective on the relationship, predominantly from Morocco's viewpoint.

The research comprehensively examines Morocco's extensive diplomatic and economic efforts in the Sahel: A more concentrated examination of specific efforts, such as distinct infrastructure projects or trade agreements, could have yielded greater insights into the concrete results of Morocco's policies. The overarching scope of the study may have neglected individual success stories or obstacles encountered in implementing certain elements of the Atlantic Initiative. In short, although this study provides significant insights into Morocco's developing diplomatic strategy in Africa, especially regarding its relations with Sahelian nations, the limitations above indicate that future research employing a larger and more diverse sample, enhanced data accessibility, and a more profound emphasis on regional perspectives would yield a more thorough comprehension of Morocco's role in the Sahel.

APPENDICES

The Interview Protocol

1. What are some of the regional and international factors driving Morocco to pursue the Atlantic initiative?

2. How might the Atlantic Initiative between Morocco and the Sahel countries outline the future of diplomatic and geopolitical relations between Morocco and Algeria?

3. In a region marked by challenges like border disputes, terrorism, and political instability, how can Morocco effectively push the Atlantic initiative between Morocco and Sahel countries forward to achieve tangible goals?

4. What are Morocco's main obstacles in implementing the South-South Atlantic Initiative?

5. How might the South-South Atlantic Initiative align with the interests and needs of landlocked Sahel countries?

6. What strategies could Morocco use to promote regional integration and South-South cooperation with Sahel nations?

7. What specific opportunities and challenges might this initiative present for Morocco and the Sahel region?

8. How could the Atlantic initiative influence the situation in the Moroccan Western Sahara?

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