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Article

MASA Continuum: A Geopolitical Framework for Maghreb-Sahel Connectivity and Morocco-Algeria Rivalry

Tanane Yacine
Ibn Tofail University, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Kenitra, Morocco.

ABSTRACT
The Maghreb and the Sahel are frequently examined through separate regional frameworks, obscuring the relationships connecting them. This article develops the MASA Continuum (Maghreb-Sahel-Africa) as a geopolitical framework for analyzing these relationships and their implications for Morocco-Algeria rivalry. The analysis identifies the potential significance of Atlantic-Saharan-Sahelian connectivity for Morocco's regional positioning, while emphasizing that infrastructure completion, partner-state agency, insecurity, and Algerian adaptation condition its strategic effects. Three prospective trajectories illustrate these contingencies. The article contributes a relational framework for studying cross-regional connectivity and middle-power rivalry, rather than a predictive model of an inevitable regional hierarchy.

KEYWORDS
Maghreb-Sahel; MASA Continuum; regional security complex; Morocco-Algeria rivalry; Moroccan Sahara.

Introduction

Regional analysis in the twenty-first century faces a fundamental cartographic problem. The categories through which academics, policymakers, and international institutions organize space, the Maghreb, the Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world, are not neutral descriptive tools. They are inherited constructs, products of colonial border-drawing, Cold War institutional architecture, and the organizational inertia of regional bodies whose geographic mandates reflect administrative convenience more than structural reality.

Nowhere is this cartographic issue more critical than in the space linking North Africa and the Sahel. It is a region that conventional analysis systematically fragments, yet one that is constantly reunited by historical depth, geographical continuity, sociocultural networks, and security interdependence. The analytical cost of this partitioning is substantial, as it gives rise to fragmented frameworks incapable of capturing the structural integration, strategic competition, and geopolitical transformation that define this space in the twenty-first century.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR, Tanane Yacine ✉ tanane.yacine@uit.ac.ma 🏛 Ibn Tofail University, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Kenitra, Morocco. *Received*, November 9, 2026; *Accepted*, November, 19, 2026. © 2026 Journal of International and Prospective Studies.

This article addresses this analytical void. It introduces the "MASA Continuum" as a novel geopolitical framework, designed to reconceptualize the Maghreb-Sahel space as a structurally integrated regional unit, rather than as an administrative boundary separating distinct regional systems. This framework draws upon three complementary theoretical traditions: regional security complex theory, which provides the security architecture; new regionalism, which supplies the logic of integration; and the constructivist approaches to regional identity, which offer the normative and sociocultural dimension.

This article makes three distinct contributions to academic literature. First, it proposes the concept of the "MASA Continuum" as a theoretically grounded alternative to the fragmented regional architectures currently used to analyze the Maghreb-Sahel space. In doing so, it offers an analytical approach that is rooted in history and relevant to policymaking. Second, the status of the Moroccan Sahara is viewed not merely as the object of a bilateral territorial dispute, but as a geopolitical pivot for a project of continental integration. This new perspective is significant for understanding the territory's role within the broader context of African geopolitics. Third, the concept of "coercive structural suffocation" is developed, representing an original contribution to the theory of competition among middle powers in sub-regional system. This analytical approach focuses on regional processes and dynamics rather than on systemic competition between great powers. This makes it possible to reveal the multifaceted, incremental, and coercive nature of Morocco's strategic consolidation within the framework of the MASA continuum.

The article is structured as follows: The first part develops the theoretical foundations of the MASA continuum framework. The second part analyzes the geohistorical underpinnings, and structural pillars, as well as the role and the positioning of the Moroccan Sahara as a geopolitical pivot. In the third part, this framework is applied as an analytical tool to examine the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria; specifically, the costs, dynamics, and developmental trajectories of this rivalry are reassessed through the lens of coercive structural suffocation.

The theoretical framework: The concept of MASA Continuum

The argument presented in this part is rooted in an initial cartographic approach: before re-examine the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, it is necessary to develop a new understanding of the space in which this rivalry unfolds.

The MASA continuum does not derive from a single theoretical tradition. It is situated at the intersection of three complementary frameworks, Regional Security Complex theory, New Regionalism, and constructivist approaches to regional identity, each of which sheds light on a dimension of the integrated Maghreb-Sahel space that the others fail to fully capture. The relationship between these three traditions is not eclectic, but architectonic: they operate at different levels of analysis and address distinct facets of regional integration; their combination, therefore, forms a theoretical framework that transcends the simple sum of its components.

a. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a security architecture for the MASA Continuum.[1] RSCT defines a "regional security complex" as a set of units whose fundamental security concerns and challenges are so deeply interdependent that their national security issues cannot be analyzed or resolved in isolation. The central tenet of this theoretical framework, namely, that security interdependence is geographically structured, forming distinct regional clusters that cannot be reduced to a global scale or fully explained through simple bilateral relations, applies directly to the Maghreb-Sahel space.

The security dynamics of the Maghreb cannot be understood without taking the Sahel into account: instability in the Sahel facilitates migration, the circulation of arms, and the infiltration of jihadist networks along the southern perimeter of the Maghreb. Conversely, state competition within the Maghreb, particularly the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, shapes the political economy of governance in the Sahel in a way that no strictly sub-Saharan analytical framework could capture. RSCT

[1] See Buzan, B., & Wæver, O., *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

offers a conceptual vocabulary to describe this interdependence; notions such as "securitization," "patterns of amity and enmity," or the status of an "insulator" state (or buffer state) are directly relevant to the security pillar of the MASA Continuum.

However, RSCT presents a significant limitation within the context of the MASA continuum: it is primarily concerned with the structure and dynamics of security interdependence, rather than with broader political, economic and social processes to which regional integration may emerge or deepen[2].

While RSCT helps explain the security interdependence between the Maghreb and the Sahel, it does not by itself provide a comprehensive account of the economic, infrastructural and sociocultural processes that may sustain regional integration, nor does it provide the necessary tools to analyze regionalism as a political project. For this purpose, the framework draws upon "New Regionalism."

b. New Regionalism, proposes a fundamentally different analytical starting point. While RSCT approaches regions from a top-down perspective, defining them through the prism of security interdependencies, New Regionalism analyzes them from a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the social, economic, and political processes that have been built and deepened within regional spaces over time.

Hettne'sconcept of regionness, defined as the degree to which a geographical space has developed the institutional, social, and normative characteristics of a coherent region, is particularly relevant to MASA Continuum.[3] The Maghreb-Sahel space is currently characterized by a low degree of institutional regionalism: its formal regional organizations are fragmented, overlapping, and lack effectiveness. However, regionness cannot be reduced solely to institutional density. It also encompasses trade networks, migration dynamics, shared security challenges, and the sociocultural depth of cross-border communities, all of which existed in the Maghreb-Sahel space long before the establishment of its institutional architecture and, furthermore, extend well beyond it. Thus, New Regionalism offers the MASA Continuum its own logic of integration: a framework that allows for an understanding of how the Maghreb-Sahel space constitutes a region, in social and economic terms, even where formal institutional regionalism has failed.

However, despite its analytical richness, New Regionalism approach tends to interpret regional identity as an outcome of integration processes rather than as an independent variable that shapes these processes. It fails to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the role that historical memory, cultural depth, and normative discourse play in the construction and reproduction of regional space. It is precisely in this sense that constructivist approaches to regional identity become significant.[4]

c. Constructivist approaches, within the field of International Relations, argue that regions are not merely geographical spaces defined by material facts (such as proximity and interdependence), but are, rather, intersubjective constructs. They exist because the actors that compose them share, debate, and continuously reconstruct notions of belonging, identity, and legitimate order.

For MASA Continuum, this constructivist dimension is analytically indispensable. The colonial separation was not merely a material operation; it was also a discursive one. It established a spatial imaginary in which the Maghreb and the Sahel were presented as distinct, bounded entities, mutually alien to one another. Challenging this spatial imaginary cannot be limited to mapping material interdependencies; it requires recovering the historical memory, sociocultural networks, and normative frameworks through which integration between the Maghreb and the Sahel was conceived and practiced long before colonial division imposed its own spatial epistemology.

Acharya's concept of "localization", is a process through which external norms are adapted and internalized within regional contexts, reflecting local historical and cultural foundations, is highly relevant here: MASA Continuum constitutes precisely this type of localization, serving as a framework that affirms the spatial logic inherent to this region, in contrast to the categories imposed by the colonial and postcolonial international order. [5]

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[2] Dennis Senam Amable, Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions: An Adaptation for the Regional Security Complex Theory, *Global Studies Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 4, October 2022.

[3] Hettne, Söderbaum, "Theorising the Rise of Regionness", New Political Economy, Pages 457-472, 2010.

[4] See Prieto Germán, Camilo, "How does regionalism unfold? Discussing the relationships of constitution and causation between identity and institutions." OASIS, vol., no. 17, 2012, pp.7-37.

[5] Acharya A, "*How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism,* and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism*", International Organization*, vol. 58, n° 2, 2004, pp. 239–275).

Katzenstein's analysis, which describes regions as "porous" not defined in opposition to their external environment, but rather shaped by interactions with it, further enriches this framework: MASA Continuum does not form a closed regional system, but rather an open one, structured by its interconnections with the broader dynamics of the Atlantic economy, the Mediterranean security complex, and African geopolitics.[6]

Grosso modo, MASA Continuum is of particular importance, as it embodies, at a theoretical level, these three distinct traditions. While RSCT provides a framework for security architecture, it fails to fully capture the social and normative dimensions of regional integration. New Regionalism, for its part, proposes a logic of integration but lacks a sufficient theoretical foundation regarding the role of identity and historical memory. Constructivism, meanwhile, contributes normative and intersubjective depth yet, it requires the material foundations present in RSCT and New Regionalism. [7]

MASA Continuum approach integrates these three elements, interdependence in the security sphere, the logic of integration, and normative depth, into a unified analytical framework, tailored to the specific historical, geographical, and political characteristics of the Maghreb-Sahel region. In doing so, it seeks to address the limitations of each existing theory, establishing itself as a unique analytical tool. This tool enables a comprehensive examination of the structural integration, historical depth, security dynamics, and normative contradictions that characterize this region in the 21st century.

The MASA Continuum: reframing the Maghreb-Sahel through the Moroccan Sahara pivot

This part develops the MASA Continuum as a framework for understanding the Maghreb-Sahel as a structurally integrated space. It argues that the Moroccan Sahara functions not merely as a territorial dispute, but as a geopolitical pivot.

The MASA Continuum: Beyond colonial cartography

The concept of MASA Continuum, Maghreb-Sahel region, is an analytical framework designed to grasp the reality of a whole subsystem, transcending the distorting epistemological paradigm of both the colonial era and the post-colonial period.

1. The colonial production of separation

As depicted on modern maps, the Maghreb-Sahel region is divided into two distinct systems: on one hand, the North African regional system, encompassing the Arab League and the northern bloc of the African Union, and, on the other, the sub-Saharan regional system, structured around the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the western and central blocs of the African Union. However, this cartographic reality is not a natural phenomenon; rather, it is an artificially constructed framework.[8] To grasp the integrity of the Maghreb-Sahel, it is essential, as an analytical necessity, to understand how this structure came into being, the interests it served, and why its legacy continues to influence both academic research and political decision-making, thereby systematically distorting the region's true geographical essence.

The foundation for this process was the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885. The Berlin Conference did not merely partition Africa among European powers; it also introduced a principle for territorial

[6] Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions. Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, Cornell University Press, 2005.

[7] Hopf, Ted, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 171–200.

[8] Lydon, Ghislaine. "Saharan Oceans and Bridges, Barriers and Divides in Africa's Historiographical Landscape." *The Journal of African History*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2015, pp. 3–22.
Bentahar, Ziad. "Continental Drift: The Disjunction of North and Sub-Saharan Africa." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–13.

acquisition that subordinated Africa's territorial structure to European administrative requirements. The principle of "effective occupation" required colonial powers to demonstrate practical control over the territories they claimed.[9]

This requirement dictated a logic for defining borders that bore no relation whatsoever to existing political structures, trade networks, or socio-cultural communities in Africa.[10] The Sahara was transformed by the cartographic logic of the Berlin Conference into a border zone: serving as the outer limit for colonial territories in North Africa and the northern boundary for regions south of the Sahara. What was once a unified space facilitating interconnectedness became, instead, a dividing line.

The legal consolidation of this colonial cartography was achieved through the principle of *uti possidetis* juris. In the African context, the application of *uti possidetis*, formalized in the 1964 Cairo Resolution, adopted by the Organization of African Unity, transformed colonial administrative boundaries into international borders, granting them the status of full sovereignty. This principle was explicitly conceived to prevent territorial revisionism and the instability that might arise from it; however, it had the effect of institutionalizing the divisive legacy of colonialism in a lasting way. The cartographic status of the Sahara does not follow a logic of continuity; rather, from a legal standpoint, it remains frozen as a border, exactly as it was established at the time of decolonization.

What emerged from Berlin and encapsulated in the principle of *uti possidetis* is not limited to a mere drawing of borders; it constitutes a true spatial epistemology. This framework for conceptualizing African space relegated elements that were structurally integrated and historically central to the periphery, while simultaneously institutionalizing as permanent features arrangements that were, in essence, entirely contingent. At its most fundamental level, the MASA continuum framework challenges this spatial epistemology. It does not propose a reconfiguration of borders; rather, it advocates for a critical re-examination of the analytical categories through which these borders are understood, as well as the weight assigned to them in the study of regional dynamics. The Maghreb and the Sahel do not constitute two distinct regions separated by the Sahara. On the contrary, they form a single, integrated space, a space in which internal differences have been systematically exacerbated by a colonial cartographic legacy that African states, regional institutions, and international research have, for various reasons, found it convenient to perpetuate.

2. Long term geohistorical foundations

MASA Continuum cannot be reduced to a theoretical construct applied to an indifferent geographical framework. It refers to a process of reconstruction, an analytical restoration of the spatial logic that the Maghreb-Sahel space created, maintained, and reproduced over the centuries, long before colonial-era demarcations imposed their own cartographic epistemology.

Identifying this geohistorical foundation is not an act of nostalgia, but rather an analytical necessity. Any approach seeking to define the structural bases of regional integration must demonstrate that such integration is not merely the result of ephemeral circumstances (the conjuncture), but is instead rooted in deeper origins, shaped by *longue durée* processes that, while obscured by colonial cartography, were never entirely erased.

MASA Continuum rests upon two such processes: trans-Saharan exchange networks, which served as the material infrastructure for integration; and the networks of Sufi brotherhoods, which constitute the sociocultural and normative architecture of integration across the Sahara. Together, these two elements comprise a structural stratum of the history of the Maghreb-Sahel: a stratum that evolves slowly, persists despite political ruptures, and shapes the deep grammar of the regional space.

The commercial network that spans the Sahara Desert forms the material foundation for the integration of the Maghreb and the Sahel. For over a millennium, from the 8th to the 19th century, the Sahara did not act solely as a barrier, but rather as a major conduit and corridor for exchange. This region functioned as a zone of intense commercial activity, connecting the economy of the Sahel, centered on

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[9] Rwigema, P. C. "Impacrt of the Berlin conference (1884 1885) on EAC development: 140 years after the divide of Africa", *International journal of political science and public administration,* Vol. 6, Iss. 1, 2025, pp. 25-58.

[10] Tayyab Mahmud, "Colonial Cartographies, Postcolonial Borders, and Enduring Failures of International Law: The Unending Wars Along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier". Vol 36, Issue 1, Brooklyn Journal of International Law, 2010.

trade in gold, salt, and enslaved people, with the Maghreb and, more broadly, with Mediterranean trade networks.

Major axes, such as the Sijilmasa–Timbuktu route, which linked Morocco to the Niger Bend; the Ghadames–Kano itinerary, which connected the central Maghreb with the Hausa states; or the Tripoli–Bornu route, which joined the eastern Sahara to the Lake Chad basin, were not merely sporadic paths of communication, but rather, enduring but shifting corridors of commercial interdependence.

These axes sustained urban centers on both sides of the desert, fostering the development of complex systems based on credit, trust, and commercial law, despite the immense geographical distances.[11] Sahelian cities, such as Timbuktu, Djenné, Agadez, and Kano, were not peripheral outposts of a distant Maghrebi civilization; on the contrary, they served as key nodes within a shared commercial and intellectual space. The core of this system was situated along the trade axis that traversed the Sahara. This was not merely a matter of commercial exchange between two distinct regions, but rather a process of internal circulation within a single, an interconnected, though unevenly integrated, trans-Saharan commercial space.

The disruption of this network by colonialism was profound, yet incomplete. At the beginning of the 20th century, France's conquest of the trans-Saharan routes subordinated the north-south axis to the east-west logic of the French colonial administration, reoriented trade flows toward coastal ports, and disrupted and reconfigured longstanding economic ties between the economies of the Maghreb and the Sahel. The contemporary informal Saharan economy, characterized by cross-border trade in fuel, food products, manufactured goods, and livestock, is not a new phenomenon born from the failure of the postcolonial state. Rather, it is the current manifestation of a commercial logic with roots reaching back a millennium; a logic that persisted throughout the colonial era, endured following the imposition of postcolonial borders.[12]

The networks of Sufi orders constitute one historically significant dimension of connectivity between parts of the Maghreb and the Sahel. Major Sufi orders, such as the Tijaniyya, the Qadiriyya, and the Sanusiyya, have functioned as complex transnational networks encompassing spiritual authority, commercial infrastructure, political mobilization, and educational institutions. These connections are sustained through religious and social institutions that are not reducible to interstate cooperation, although they may interact with state-sponsored initiatives. The expansion of the Tijaniyya across the Sahara and into the Sahel has given rise to a network rooted in shared religious authority, mutual obligations, and social trust.[13]

This network has demonstrated remarkable resilience, enduring both the territorial divisions of the colonial era and the borders established during the postcolonial period. Annual pilgrimages, which connect Tijani communities in the Sahel to the orders' shrines in Morocco, most notably in the city of Fes, serve as a living social infrastructure. This infrastructure continuously maintains and renews the integration between the Maghreb and the Sahel through the lens of everyday religious practice.[14]

Within the framework of MASA Continuum, the analytical significance of Sufi brotherhood networks manifests in three ways. First, they demonstrate that integration between the Maghreb and the Sahel was not limited to commercial and intellectual exchanges among elites but was also anchored in a vast social organization. Second, they reveal the capacity of regional integration structures to endure and adapt under crises. In the postcolonial era, their resurgence allowed them to re-establish their influence across the Sahara. Third, for MASA Continuum, they constitute a historical and normative foundation for

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[11] Lydon Ghislaine, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 494 pages.

[12] Judith Scheele, "Tribus, États et fraude : la région frontalière algéro-malienne", *Études rurales* [Online], 2009, pp. 184,

[13] Rachida Chih, "J-L. Triaud et D. Robinson (dir.), La Tijâniyya. Une confrérie musulmane à la conquête de l'Afrique, Karthala, 2000, 512 p.", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 2002, 95-98.

[14] Berriane, Johara. "Pilgrimage, Spiritual Tourism and the Shaping of Transnational 'Imagined Communities': the Case of the Tidjani Ziyara to Fez." International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1–10.

Morocco's contemporary regional strategy. This foundation is often overlooked in purely material or strategic analyses of Moroccan foreign policy: the Kingdom's ties to the Sahel region are not merely a response to a geopolitical project, but are part of a process of restoring a historical religious authority

which trace back to Sufi networks.[15]

3. The four structural pillars

The MASA Continuum rests on four structural pillars, geographic, sociocultural, economic, and security, that together constitute the integrated regional unit the framework identifies. These pillars are not a taxonomy of regional attributes assembled for analytical convenience; they are the four dimensions that operate simultaneously and reinforce each other and form a structural continuum empirically demonstrable and theoretically coherent.

To avoid repetition, the geographic pillar, establishes the physical foundation and an architecture of connectivity of the Continuum through river systems, mountain waypoints, desert corridors and the Atlantic façade that colonial cartography rendered invisible but never destroyed.

The sociocultural pillar gives MASA Continuum its human depth. The colonial partition of the Maghreb-Sahel space divided not only territories but communities. Three registers confirm the sociocultural Continuum's integration. The first is linguistic: the Tamazight extends from Moroccan Rif and Atlas to Mali and Niger, constituting a linguistic family whose geographic reach corresponds almost onto the spatial extent of the MASA Continuum. The second is religious as demonstrated above. The third is migratory, the Maghreb-Sahel space is an active zone of mobility in the world, with multi-directional migration flows. These three registers together constitute a sociocultural fabric whose density and durability distinguish the MASA Continuum from a simple geographic contiguity.

The economic pillar provides the Continuum's material grounding in the present. The contemporary economic integration of the Maghreb-Sahel space operates at two levels, formal and informal, that together constitute a more significant economic interdependence. At the formal level, the energy infrastructure initiative, if implemented would be a structural transformation of the MASA Continuum's economic architecture, creating a north-south energy spine that will anchor the Atlantic-Sahelian corridor in material infrastructure of historic significance. Morocco's broader African investment strategy, concentrated in banking, insurance, telecommunications, and agriculture across West and Central Africa, constitutes a second dimension of formal economic integration, positioning Morocco as second-largest African investor in sub-Saharan Africa (after South Africa) and the largest in West Africa where 43% of Moroccan outward investment goes and establishing commercial networks that reinforce the Continuum's economic coherence.

At the informal level, the cross-border trade networks constitute an economic integration whose volume is difficult to measure precisely but whose structural significance for border communities from southern Morocco to northern Niger is beyond dispute.[16]

The security pillar completes the Continuum's structural architecture by establishing the shared threat environment that constitutes the security interdependence complex of the MASA space. The Sahel's security crisis, the proliferation of jihadist organizations (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin JNIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara ISGS, Boko Haram), the cascade of military coups since 2020, the collapse of the French Barkhane architecture, and the deepening presence of Russian private military contractors is not a Sub-Saharan phenomenon that happens to produce externalities for the Maghreb.

It is a regional security dynamic whose causes, actors, and consequences are structurally embedded in the MASA Continuum as a whole. Moroccan and Algerian security calculations are directly shaped by Sahelian instability; conversely, Sahelian states' security environments are profoundly shaped by Maghrebi competition. The MASA Continuum's security pillar thus operates in both directions simultaneously. This bidirectional security interdependence is an empirical demonstration of the integrated regional space the framework claims.

The four pillars do not operate independently. They form a mutually reinforcing system in which each dimension of integration strengthens and is strengthened by the others.

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[15] Bakary Sambe, « Tidjaniya : usages diplomatiques d'une confrérie soufie ». *Politique étrangère*, Hiver, 4, pp. 843-854, 2011.

[16] James McDougall and Judith Scheele, *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

4. Institutional landscape

Institutional fragmentation is a feature of the MASA Continuum that can reinforce regional divisions and hinder coordination across the Maghreb-Sahel space.

The Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) illustrates the difficulties of institutionalizing regional cooperation in a context of persistent interstate rivalry. Bringing together Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, it sought to promote cooperation and economic integration among its members. Yet its achievements have remained limited: the Presidential Council has not convened at summit level since April 1994, and a 2019 IMF study estimated intraregional trade at less than 5 per cent of the member countries' total trade.[17]

The Morocco–Algeria rivalry is central to understanding this trajectory, but its effects should be examined in conjunction with the Union's institutional arrangements rather than treated as a purely external obstacle. Article 6 of the founding treaty reserves decision-making to the Presidential Council and requires unanimity, making collective action vulnerable to persistent disagreement among member states. The closure of the Algeria–Morocco land border in 1994 further restricted bilateral exchanges, although it did not amount to a rupture of diplomatic relations, which occurred in 2021. The UMA can therefore be analyzed as a case in which political rivalry and consensus-dependent institutional design have reinforced one another.

From the perspective of the MASA Continuum, a separate issue concerns the relationship between the Union's membership-based mandate and the cross-border connections linking the Maghreb, the Sahara, and the Sahel. Its failure to encompass this wider space should not be treated as an established cause of its paralysis. Rather, it raises the question of how a Maghrebi organization might coordinate with neighboring regional frameworks to address relationships extending beyond its membership. The analytical issue is thus not whether the UMA was designed around an inherently incorrect regional geography, but whether its institutional arrangements enable cooperation both within the Maghreb and across its wider regional connections

ECOWAS faces institutional challenges that differ from those confronting the Arab Maghreb Union. Before the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger took effect on 29 January 2025, the organization provided a common regional framework for fifteen states, including these three central Sahelian countries. Their departure marked a significant institutional rupture. The crises surrounding military takeovers and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 highlighted disagreements over constitutional governance, sanctions, security cooperation, and the legitimacy of regional intervention. In this context, the AES emerged as a framework for mutual defense and assistance, reflecting both security concerns and the political interests of its member governments.

From the perspective of the MASA Continuum, these developments raise questions about how West African regional institutions engage with security, economic, and social dynamics extending into North Africa and across the Sahara. Such connections do not render existing regional frameworks irrelevant, but they underscore the importance of coordination across institutional boundaries. The MASA Continuum thus offers a complementary analytical perspective on the relationship between overlapping regional connections and fragmented governance arrangements.

The African Union's system of Regional Economic Communities provides a useful setting for examining the relationship between regional connectivity and institutional organization. Rather than assigning states to mutually exclusive geographical blocs, the AU recognizes eight communities that developed through distinct historical processes and have overlapping memberships and mandates. Such

[17] Alexei Kireyev, Boaz Nandwa, Lorraine Ocampos, Babacar Sarr, Ramzy Al Amine, Allan Gregory Auclair, Yufei Cai, and Jean-François Dauphin, *Economic Integration in the Maghreb. An Untapped Source of Growth*. International Monetary Fund Paper, *No. 19/03,* 2018.

overlaps can complicate policy coordination and implementation, although they do not necessarily imply institutional competition or incompatible objectives.

Within this architecture, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), established in Tripoli in February 1998, is particularly relevant to the MASA Continuum. Its objectives encompass economic integration, regional security, peace, and the free movement of people and goods across the Sahel-

Saharan. It therefore offers a case through which to examine institutional efforts to organize cooperation across established regional divisions. Its broad geographical scope should not, however, be treated as evidence that its membership constitutes a homogeneous or already integrated regional space.
Nor should its post-2011 trajectory be described as institutional disappearance. The adoption of a revised treaty in 2013 and its continuing recognition and activities within the AU framework indicate organizational persistence, without establishing the effectiveness of its integration agenda. From the perspective of the MASA Continuum, the central question is therefore how a transregional mandate can be translated into sustained cooperation. CEN-SAD provides an opportunity to investigate the relationship between geographical scope, political support, institutional capacity, and implementation, rather than a direct validation of any single conception of regional space.

This institutional fragmentation is analytically significant for the MASA Continuum framework in a specific sense. It suggests that the regional relationships examined in this article cannot be adequately understood through a single existing institutional framework, whose membership boundaries, mandates, and historical trajectories were shaped by distinct political and territorial processes.

The MASA Continuum therefore offers a spatial lens for identifying connections that extend across these frameworks, without implying that existing organizations are obsolete or that their limitations derive from a single institutional design. Its analytical value lies in clarifying the relationship between overlapping regional ties and fragmented governance arrangements. It does not propose a new regional organization, which remains a matter for political actors and institutional negotiation. Rather, it offers a conceptual basis for asking how future forms of cooperation might better account for the cross-border relationships that current arrangements address unevenly.

Moroccan Sahara pivot of the Continuum

This section examines whether the Moroccan Sahara can serve as a pivot territory within the MASA Continuum by connecting Atlantic, Saharan, and Sahelian spaces. It develops two arguments: its potential role as a regional gateway; Morocco’s normative and diplomatic strategy.

1. repositioning the Moroccan Sahara: from contested periphery to geopolitical pivot

The conventional framing of Moroccan Sahara in international relations scholarship and policy analysis positions it as a “frozen conflict”. This framing is relatively accurate as a description of the legal and diplomatic impasse but it is analytically impoverishing as a framework for understanding this territory's strategic significance in the twenty-first century. It treats the territory as a passive object of competing sovereignty claims rather than as an active geographic variable in the regional order of the MASA Continuum. Moroccan Sahara is not a contested periphery at the margins of Moroccan and Algerian competition; it stands as the geopolitical keystone of the MASA Continuum. It acts as the territorial hub structuring Atlantic-Saharan-Sahelian connectivity, while providing the essential spatial logic for Morocco's continental integration strategy.[18]

The pivot potential of Moroccan Sahara rests on three geographic facts. The first is Atlantic access: Sahara territory provides Morocco with an extended Atlantic that projects southward toward the maritime corridors of West Africa positioning Morocco as the natural maritime gateway between the landlocked Sahel states and the Atlantic West African coast.[19] Thus, Dakhla is the operational center of MASA Continuum with consequential material infrastructure. In fact, the deep-water port under

[18] Abderrafie Zaanoun, "Morocco's Atlantic Initiative and Potential Challenges to Regional Leadership," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2024. See also Nezha Alaoui, M’hammdi Larabi Jaïdi. Le Sahel, un espace à enclavement multiple. *Policy Center for the New South,* Policy Paper, 2025.

[19] Abdelhak Bassou, « Le Maroc dans la cartographie de l’Afrique atlantique : la communauté d’intérêts neutralise les paradoxes », *Policy Center for the New South*, Policy Paper, 2025.

development is the substructure level; the special economic zone built to attract industrial investments is the economic level and the connectivity level is to position Dakhla as the Atlantic hub connecting European markets to West African economies.[20] Furthermore, the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline, an ambitious continental project, will increase the pivot logic potential of Moroccan Sahara. In truth, the pipeline would create a permanent energy interdependence between Morocco, fourteen West African states and Sahel states.

The second is Saharan depth: Sahara territory provides Morocco with direct territorial continuity into the Saharan interior, connecting the Moroccan Atlantic façade to the trans-Saharan land routes that have historically constituted the Continuum's material infrastructure, and giving Morocco the territorial platform from which to project economic and political influence in MASA Continuum. The third is strategic hinterland: by controlling the territory between the Moroccan Atlantic coast and the Mauritanian border, Morocco reduces the geographic discontinuity that would otherwise separate its territory from its Sahelian engagement zone.[21]

The consolidation of Moroccan sovereignty over Sahara territory, through 2797 SC Resolution and the accumulation of international recognition, is therefore not merely a victory in a bilateral territorial dispute. [22] It is the progressive construction of the legal and normative architecture that makes Moroccan Sahara at the center of MASA Continuum internationally legible and institutionally actionable. Each recognition, whether by a great power, a Gulf state, or an African neighbor, does not merely add a diplomatic point to Moroccan Sahara score; it may reduce the normative uncertainty releasing even more Morocco's capacity to develop the territory, attract investment, and build the infrastructure through which the pivot potential becomes materially operational. The Moroccan Sahara, in this analytical perspective, is simultaneously a territorial asset and a geopolitical pivot.[23]

2. Morocco's African strategy: Normative and diplomatic dimensions

The material dimensions of Moroccan Sahara's pivot strategy are sustained and legitimized by a normative and diplomatic architecture that gives Morocco's regional ambitions their political coherence and institutional expression. This architecture operates across two registers.

The first register is institutional re-engagement with the African Union. Morocco's return to the AU, in January 2017, was a strategic calculation. By re-entering the AU, Morocco accepted the institutional cost of SADR's presence but gaining the strategic benefit of direct access to the continental institution through which African regional governance is increasingly organized. Morocco's subsequent engagement with AU structures has positioned it as an active and constructive continental actor growing political influence rather than a peripheral observer.

The second register is South-South cooperation and development diplomacy. Morocco has systematically constructed a bilateral cooperation architecture with African states that positions it as a development partner rather than merely an investor or competitor. The Mohammed VI Foundation of African Oulema, the training of African religious scholars at Moroccan institutions, and the deployment of Moroccan agricultural expertise through cooperation mechanism, all contribute to a normative positioning in which Morocco presents itself as a model of Islamic moderate governance, economic diversification, and climate-resilient development that African states can adapt to their own contexts. This is the normative dimension of the pivot strategy; Morocco is not only building infrastructure and accumulating

[20] Mariam Kerrouch, Khalid Hdidou. Le port de Dakhla atlantique. *African Scientific Journal*, *3*(33), 11. 2025.

[21] Safae El Yaaqoubi, "Sahel Strategy Anchored in Morocco and Mauritania". New Line Intitut for Strategy and Policy, 2025.

[22] UN Resolution, S/RES/2797 (2025)

[23] Ait Soussane, J., and A. Ibourk. "*The Impact of Recognizing Morocco's Sovereignty Over Western Sahara on Bilateral Foreign Direct Investment: An Empirical Analysis Using Panel Data From 2007 to 2022.*" *Thunderbird International Business Review* 68, no. 3: 333–355, 2026.

diplomatic recognitions, this article argues that it is constructing a regional identity where the Moroccan Sahara is the focal point that binds, as a legitimate interlocutor, the Sahel, West Africa and the Atlantic world.

3. Limits and constraints of the Moroccan advantage

Morocco's normalization with Israel through the Abraham Accords in 2020, its deepening security partnership with the United States, and its sustained relationships with France, Spain, and the Gulf states give its African strategy an external power backing, that amplifies its regional leverage considerably. The Israeli connection deserves particular analytical attention in the context of the MASA Continuum: beyond its military technology dimensions and depending on JISS arguments, Israeli normalization has given Morocco access to a network of Israeli economic and diplomatic relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa that Morocco can leverage for its own continental strategy.

The United States' recognition of Moroccan Sahara sovereignty has accelerated the diplomatic consolidation, demonstrating that Morocco's external partnerships are not merely defensive security arrangements but active instruments of its pivot strategy. However, the security vulnerabilities inherent to the MASA Continuum remain a primary concern. The cascade of coups, the successive military takeovers in Mali (2020–2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), the persistence and territorial expansion of jihadist violence in parts of the Sahel, and the reconfiguration of external military engagement following France's withdrawal from Mali have created a security environment in Morocco's strategic hinterland that it cannot manage unilaterally and that threatens to destabilize the economic and infrastructure projects (the road network, the Dakhla zone, the pipeline route) on which its pivot strategy depends. Morocco's security cooperation with Mauritania, Senegal, and other coastal West African states may mitigate some risks, but it does not amount to a comprehensive regional security architecture capable of coordinating responses across the Sahel and its neighboring spaces remains incomplete and contested.

Furthermore, Morocco's ambitions within the MASA Continuum may require financial, institutional, and human-capital investments beyond its current capacity. The principal risk facing the project Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline, in particular, is not simply that Europe is reducing its appetite for fossil fuels, but that this reduction may coincide with the pipeline's expected entry into service.
Under the EU's Fit for 55 frameworks and the REPowerEU plan, the European Commission has projected that full implementation of its measures could reduce EU gas consumption by around 30 per cent by 2030, while maintaining the goal of at least a 55 per cent net reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions by 2030 and climate neutrality by 2050.

If the pipeline were not operational before the early 2030s, it could face a European market characterized by declining demand, increased competition from LNG, and growing preference for lower-carbon alternatives. The project's long-term viability therefore depends on a combination of factors: timely construction, secure financing, contractual demand, regional offtake, and credible plans for eventual adaptation to lower-carbon gases. Without these conditions, the pipeline could face the risk of underutilization or stranded investment. Its strategic value for Morocco and Nigeria thus lies less in a guaranteed European market than in its potential to connect West African, North African, and European energy systems under favorable commercial and political conditions.

More broadly, the scale of Morocco's African strategy risks producing strategic overstretch if its diplomatic, investment, and development institutions are asked to sustain multiple objectives without commensurate resources. Careful prioritization is therefore essential to preserving the credibility of its pivot strategy.

Finally, Morocco's Atlantic strategy may generate friction with its European partners, particularly where regional connectivity, migration control, and competing economic interests intersect. Spain's sensitivity regarding Ceuta and Melilla, France's longstanding interests in Francophone Sahelian states, and tensions between the European Union's neighborhood policies and Morocco's African engagement can constrain Morocco's room for maneuver.

The 2026 migration crisis at Ceuta illustrated this interdependence: while the available evidence does not establish that Morocco deliberately orchestrated the border surge, the episode demonstrated Spain's vulnerability to disruptions at North African enclaves and the potential costs for Morocco of allowing tensions with European partners to escalate. Morocco's Atlantic strategy therefore depends not only on its capacity to build connections southward, but also on its ability to manage the political and diplomatic constraints arising from its relations with Europe.

The fate of the rivalry: structural competition and the MASA Continuum as a strategic arena

As established in the second title of this article, the MASA Continuum is not a neutral regional space. It is a structurally interconnected arena in which geographic, sociocultural, economic, and security relations simultaneously constitute the foundations of regional order and the terrain of strategic competition.

This part, uses the MASA Continuum as an analytical instrument to reframe the Morocco–Algeria rivalry beyond conventional accounts of a frozen conflict or an enduring rivalry. It examines the rivalry's structural trajectory, the asymmetric costs and opportunities generated by regional competition, and the conditions under which different outcomes may become more likely. The first section establishes the analytical foundations by introducing the concepts of coercive structural suffocation and crystallization arena, and by mapping the asymmetric costs of engagement across four dimensions. The second section develops the strategic analysis through an examination of Algeria's structural constraints, Morocco's regional-leadership strategy, and three possible trajectories for the evolution of the rivalry within the MASA Continuum.

Rivalry and cost in the MASA Continuum

This section provides the analytical foundations for examining the Morocco-Algeria rivalry as a structuring dynamic within the MASA Continuum.

1. Reframing the rivalry

The Morocco–Algeria rivalry is one of the most enduring and consequential bilateral antagonisms in the postcolonial Arab and African worlds. Since Algerian independence in 1962, the two states have experienced recurrent tension, including the brief but consequential Sand War of 1963, opposing positions in several regional disputes, and repeated cycles of diplomatic rupture and partial normalization. Their shared land border has remained closed since 1994, with no near-term prospect of reopening under current political conditions.

Scholar literature has generally approached this rivalry through three partly overlapping lenses: the Western Sahara dispute as its principal territorial object; competing postcolonial national identities and state-building projects; and regional power competition for influence in the Maghreb and the Sahel. Each lens captures an important dimension of the rivalry. None, however, provides a sufficient framework for assessing its structural trajectory: whether the rivalry is intensifying, stabilizing, or being reconfigured; at what pace; and with what consequences for the regional order of the MASA Continuum.

Addressing these questions requires combining three analytical perspectives: Power Transition Theory, which examines how shifts in relative capabilities affect the stability of interstate rivalries; Kennedy's concept of imperial overstretch, which highlights the risks arising when strategic commitments exceed available resources; and the original concept of the crystallization arena developed in this article, which examines the conditions under which asymmetric patterns of competition may become institutionally and politically entrenched. Together, these perspectives allow the rivalry to be analyzed not merely as a bilateral dispute, but as a structuring dynamic within the MASA Continuum.

Power Transition Theory, offers a useful analytical vocabulary for examining rivalries shaped by changes in relative capabilities. In its classical formulation, the theory argues that conflict becomes more likely when a dissatisfied rising state approaches parity with a dominant state and challenges the existing order. Applied to the Morocco–Algeria dyad, this framework should be treated as an analytical analogy rather than as a literal case of systemic power transition. Neither state is a great power, and the competition unfolds within a regional rather than global order. Nevertheless, the theory directs attention to a significant shift in the distribution of positional resources.

Morocco has expanded its diplomatic networks, economic presence, normative initiatives, and security partnerships across Africa, while Algeria retains a substantial advantage in conventional military capability and defense expenditure. The relevant question is therefore not whether Morocco has overtaken Algeria in aggregate power, but whether its accumulating advantages in selected domains are eroding the previous regional hierarchy and increasing the costs of maintaining the existing equilibrium.[24]

Read in this way, the Morocco–Algeria rivalry can be understood as a contest over the terms of regional order in the MASA Continuum, rather than as a simple succession from a declining hegemon to a rising challenger.

Kennedy's concept of imperial overstretch, developed to explain the decline of great powers, though necessarily analogical, provides a second analytical instrument. Kennedy's central argument is that states may accumulate strategic commitments faster than the economic and institutional resources required to sustain them, thereby generating pressures that can erode their international position over time. [25]

Although Algeria is not a great power, this logic can be used heuristically to examine whether its regional commitments are becoming more difficult to reconcile with its fiscal and institutional resources. Several developments make this question analytically relevant. Algeria's economy remains heavily dependent on hydrocarbons, while declining hydrocarbon revenues and increased public spending have widened fiscal deficits and depleted fiscal buffers in recent years.[26] At the same time, Algeria maintains a large military establishment and exceptionally high defense expenditure relative to GDP, reflecting its commitment to conventional military capabilities and regional security. Its engagement in the Sahel, its diplomatic efforts to sustain support for its position on Moroccan Sahara, and its response to Moroccan regional initiatives all impose additional political and institutional demands.

The overstretch framework directs attention to the possibility of a progressive narrowing of Algeria's strategic bandwidth: the growing difficulty of sustaining all existing commitments simultaneously and the potential pressure toward selective prioritization. Whether such pressures translate into a durable reduction of Algeria's positional capacity within the MASA Continuum remains an empirical question.[27]

2. The crystallization arena concept

The second analytical instrument is the concept of the crystallization arena. It seeks to integrate insights from Power Transition Theory and the overstretch literature into a framework for examining whether an enduring rivalry is moving towards a durable reconfiguration of regional order.

A crystallization arena is defined here as a bounded regional space in which cumulative positional gains become increasingly resistant to reversal. The concept builds on the political science of increasing returns and path dependence, and on the international relations literature on credible commitments and rivalry dynamics. Crystallization occurs when advances in one domain reinforce gains in others, when the costs of counter-strategies rise over time, and when the disadvantaged party faces growing difficulty in restoring the prior distribution of influence. The concept does not assume that reversal becomes impossible. Rather, it identifies a process through which reversal becomes progressively more costly, politically demanding, and institutionally constrained.[28]

Three properties distinguish this process from a simple accumulation of advantages. First, cumulatively: gains in different domains may reinforce one another, producing a positional effect greater than the sum of isolated achievements. Second, increasing resistance to reversal: as material infrastructure, diplomatic support, and security arrangements become more entrenched, the cost of counter-strategies may rise. Third, asymmetric exhaustion/adaptation: the party seeking to preserve the prior balance may face increasing difficulty in responding to multiple fronts simultaneously.[29]

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[24] SIPRI, Trends in world military expenditure, 2026.

[25] Kennedy, P., *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, Unwin Hyman Limited, 1988.

[26] International Monetary Fund, Middle East and Central Asia Dept. "Algeria: 2025 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; and Staff Report", *IMF Staff Country Reports* 2025, pp. 270.

[27] Op. cit, SIPRI 2025.

[28] Goertz, Gary, and Paul F. Diehl. "Enduring Rivalries: Theoretical Constructs and Empirical Patterns." *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1993, pp. 147–71.

[29] Luis L Schenoni, Pedro Feliú Ribeiro, Dawisson Belém Lopes, Guilherme Casarões, Myths of Multipolarity: The Sources of Brazil's Foreign Policy Overstretch, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 18, Issue 1, January 2022.

The MASA Continuum can therefore be treated as a potential crystallization arena. Moroccan initiatives in diplomacy, infrastructure, economic connectivity, and security cooperation reinforce one another and complicate Algeria's capacity to preserve its previous regional position. Morocco gains are genuinely cumulative and become durable producing institutional continuity, reinforcing existing positional advantages and generating counter-mobilization. Morocco is using Coercive Structural Suffocation that refers to a strategy that generates cumulative and mutually reinforcing positional gains, progressively narrowing an adversary's capacity to contest the regional order. In this case, cumulative and mutually reinforcing positional gains, are progressively narrowing Algeria's capacity to contest the regional order. Algerian counter-strategies faces rising costs, and the resulting asymmetry becomes durable across time and issue areas.

3. The asymmetric costs of engagement

The crystallization logic of the MASA Continuum is most clearly examined through the asymmetric cost structure of the rivalry. Both Morocco and Algeria bear significant costs from their sustained competition, but these costs may be unevenly distributed across four dimensions: economic, security, diplomatic and institutional. The analytical question is therefore not whether one state bears no costs, but whether the distribution of costs and benefits systematically affects each state's capacity to sustain its regional position over time.[30]

The economic dimension reveals an important asymmetry in the two states' fiscal and strategic exposure. First, Algeria's economy remains heavily dependent on hydrocarbons. Indeed, between 2016 and 2022, oil and gas accounted for approximately 93 per cent of the country's merchandise exports, while hydrocarbons represented 46 to 47 per cent of budget revenues between 2020 and 2024.[31]

This dependence makes Algeria's fiscal capacity highly sensitive to hydrocarbon prices, production levels, and external demand. The consequences of this exposure became particularly visible after 2014. Algeria's international reserves declined from approximately 194 billion US dollars in 2013 to 48 billion US dollars by the end of 2020, reflecting the combined effect of lower hydrocarbon revenues, public spending pressures, and external financing needs. These developments constrained the state's fiscal flexibility and increased the difficulty of sustaining expansionary public expenditure.

Morocco, by contrast, has pursued a strategy of export diversification and industrial upgrading, particularly in automotive manufacturing, aerospace, phosphate derivatives, tourism, logistics, and renewable energy Automotive exports, for example, rose from 12 per cent of total exports in 2000 to 34 per cent in 2023, making the sector the country's leading export category. This diversification does not eliminate Morocco's external vulnerabilities, but it improves its capacity to absorb commodity-price shocks and sustain long-term investment programs.[32]

The relevant asymmetry is therefore not simply one of current economic performance, but of fiscal exposure and adaptive capacity. Morocco's more diversified export base may provide greater flexibility for sustaining strategic investments across economic cycles, while Algeria's hydrocarbon dependence may constrain its fiscal and strategic options during periods of price decline. Whether this asymmetry translates into a durable positional advantage within the MASA Continuum depends on contingent on each state's capacity to convert economic resources into diplomatic influence, institutional presence, and strategic resilience. However, a profound structural asymmetry increasingly tilts in Morocco's favor.

Through sustained economic diversification, the cultivation of multi-vector partnerships, spanning European, African, Gulf, and Asian arenas, and a strong capacity to attract foreign direct investment,

[30] Suhas, P.H. Asymmetric Rivals, State Capacity, and Regional Peace. In: Thompson, W.R., Volgy, T.J. (eds) Turmoil and Order in Regional International Politics. Evidence-Based Approaches to Peace and Conflict Studies, vol 10. Springer, Singapore, 2023.

[31] International Monetary Fund. Middle East and Central Asia Dept. "Algeria: 2021 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; and Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Algeria", IMF Staff Country Reports 2021, 253, 2021.

[32] El Aynaoui, Karim, and Arkebe Oqubay, 'Introduction', in Karim El Aynaoui, and Arkebe Oqubay (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Moroccan Economy*, Oxford Handbook, 2026.

Morocco is generating a compounding economic momentum. Within the MASA continuum, this economic advantage translates directly into structural power: it provides the material resources necessary to fund diplomatic and normative encroachment, thereby positioning itself as the indispensable economic hub of the Continuum.

The security dimension generates a second asymmetry rooted in geographic exposure. Algeria shares a land border with six states, several of which are affected by political instability, armed conflict, or cross-border criminal and militant networks. Its southern and south-eastern frontiers constitute major transit spaces for arms flows, and irregular migration across the Sahara. Algeria's security environment is also shaped by the legacy of the civil war of the 1990s and by the continued presence of armed groups operating across Saharan and Sahelian spaces.[33]

Morocco's immediate security perimeter is comparatively less exposed to largescale insurgent activity. Its southern frontier with Mauritania is relatively stable, while its Atlantic orientation provides a distinct strategic orientation toward West Africa and the oceanic space. This does not mean that Morocco faces no security challenges: it must manage its border with Algeria, migration pressures, and the security implications of its engagement with the Sahel.

The relevant asymmetry is therefore one of exposure rather than of simple capability. Algeria's wider and more unstable security environment may increase the opportunity costs of allocating resources to diplomatic and economic competition. Moreover, the deteriorating regional security situation impacts its domestic stability in terms of both state and regime security, and also, push Algeria to reconsider the normative foundations of its foreign policy. Algeria's 2026 decision to deploy forces to Niger, presented as a measure to protect its energy infrastructure and strategic interests, illustrates the growing security costs of its Sahelian exposure. At the same time, creates a durable positional disadvantage within the MASA Continuum.

The diplomatic dimension reveals a third asymmetry that may be particularly consequential for the rivalry's long-term trajectory. Morocco has pursued an increasingly proactive diplomatic strategy across Africa, the Gulf, Washington, and European capitals. This strategy has sought to expand support for its autonomy proposal, deepen bilateral partnerships, strengthen its presence within the African Union, and link its Sahara position to wider agendas of security cooperation, economic connectivity, and religious diplomacy.

By contrast, Algeria's diplomatic strategy has combined defensive positions on Moroccan Sahara with efforts to sustain support for the Polisario Front and the principle of self-determination. It has also pursued diplomatic initiatives in Sahelian crisis management and multilateral forums. Nevertheless, Algeria's approach has often been more reactive in relation to Morocco's expanding network of partnerships and recognition efforts.

The analytical significance of this asymmetry lies in the different costs associated with proactive and defensive strategies. A state seeking to preserve an existing diplomatic balance may need to sustain continuous mobilization across multiple forums, while a state advancing new initiatives may be able to build on successive agreements and partnerships. This does not mean that Moroccan gains are irreversible but they are consistent and growing. This rivalry suggests that a competition increasingly centered on diplomatic narratives, coalition-building, and the capacity to convert international recognition into durable institutional influence risks leading to the strategic exhaustion of one of the actors. Given that, Algeria appears increasingly vulnerable to this dynamic.

The institutional dimension adds a further layer to the asymmetric cost structure. Morocco's readmission to the African Union in 2017 restored its access to the continent's principal multilateral institution, from which it had been absent since 1984. During this period, Algeria had been able to sustain support for the SADR and for the principle of self-determination within AU deliberations. Morocco's return therefore altered the institutional balance, leading continental initiatives, building coalition support for its position, and progressively marginalizing SADR within AU structures. These efforts have increased the diplomatic space and complicated Algeria's ability to sustain support for the SADR within AU deliberations.[34]

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[33] Engels, B. The Crisis in Burkina Faso and the Coup Belt. *Z Außen Sicherheitspolit* 18, 2025. 13–23.

[34] African Union Assembly Decision 693, 31st Ordinary Session, Nouakchott, July, 2018. Assembly/AU/Dec.693(XXXI).

The institutional asymmetry between the two states is increasingly self-reinforcing, driven by Morocco's proactive, multi-dimensional engagement, in contrast to Algeria's reactive and ideologically constrained counter-strategies. Rather than an uncertain outcome, Morocco's structural advantage reflects a proven capacity to convert diplomatic access into tangible influence, coalition-building, and durable policy alignments within the AU. Consequently, the MASA Continuum is evolving into a site of active institutional crystallization, where Morocco's economic and diplomatic initiatives are steadily transforming its regional primacy into an entrenched, and potentially irreversible, structural reality.

Competition and rivalries' scenarios in the MASA Continuum

This section examines the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry as a structured competition within the MASA Continuum. It first considers Algeria's strategic dilemma, in which the costs of sustaining existing commitments may progressively constrain its capacity to shape the regional order. It then analyses Morocco's attempt to convert material advantages into normative and institutional influence. Finally, it outlines three possible trajectories for the rivalry's evolution, while stressing that these scenarios may overlap and evolve sequentially rather than follow a single linear path.

1. Algeria's strategic dilemma: overstretch and the dynamics of abdication

Algeria's strategic dilemma in the MASA Continuum is primarily structural, though not immune to conjunctural variation. It is not primarily a function of poor strategic choices or inadequate leadership, but of the deepening mismatch between the commitments that Algeria's historical regional role requires and the resources that its overextended political economy can sustain. This divergence produces dynamics of abdication: a process in which the cumulative costs of engagement across multiple competitive dimensions generate pressure toward selective disengagement that, while individually rational as cost-reduction measures, cumulatively reduce Algeria's positional capacity in the MASA Continuum in ways that accelerate the crystallization process it is trying to arrest.

The dynamics of abdication are visible across four registers. In the economic register, Algeria's hydrocarbon dependency has forced repeated cycles of fiscal austerity that directly constrain the state's capacity to fund the infrastructure, diplomatic, and security investments that competitive engagement in the MASA Continuum requires.

The decision to close the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline in October 2021 illustrates the abdication dynamic with particular clarity: Algeria sacrificed an export route and associated revenues (Algeria imposed costs on itself) in order to increase political pressure on Morocco, while Morocco absorbed part of the disruption through alternative supply arrangements.

In the diplomatic register, Algeria's escalating diplomatic posture toward Morocco, culminating in the severance of diplomatic relations in August 2021, has progressively reduced its capacity to engage Morocco through the back-channel negotiations and confidence-building measures that might arrest the crystallization process. Diplomatic rupture is a high-cost, low-return strategy in a crystallization arena: it signals resolve but forecloses the negotiated arrangements that might preserve Algeria's positional capacity at lower cost than continued competitive engagement. In the security register, the deployment of Algerian military resources along the southern perimeter, responding to Sahelian instability and perceived Moroccan encirclement, has created the overstretch dynamic that Kennedy's framework predicts: commitments are being maintained at the expense of the strategic bandwidth needed to contest Morocco's advances in the diplomatic and economic dimensions where the rivalry's outcome is actually being decided.

In the institutional register, Algeria's increasing difficulty in maintaining its anti-Moroccan coalition in the African Union, as Moroccan recognition gains erode the normative foundation on which that coalition rests, represents a form of institutional abdication: the progressive loss of the multilateral instruments through which Algeria has historically contested Moroccan advances without direct confrontation.

The abdication dynamics do not lead inevitably to Algerian strategic collapse. Algeria retains

significant residual capabilities, hydrocarbon reserves, military capacity, regional relationships, and the organizational resources of the Algerian state, that give it the means to contest Morocco's advances for the foreseeable future. What the dynamics of abdication produce is not defeat but reduced capacity to shape the regional order: the gradual reduction of Algeria's capacity to shape the regional order of the MASA Continuum, as the costs of maintaining its current commitments consume the resources that generating new strategic initiatives would require.

2. Morocco's attempt to construct a hegemonic order

Morocco's strategic consolidation in the MASA Continuum is not reducible to the coercive and material dimensions analyzed through the lens of coercive structural suffocation. Alongside the military buildup, the infrastructure investments, and the diplomatic offensive, Morocco is constructing a normative architecture; a framework of ideas, values, and institutional practices, through which its regional leadership is presented not as domination but as a legitimate and beneficial order that serves the interests of the states within the MASA Continuum. What is being aimed is the construction of consent, the production of a regional common sense in which Morocco's pivot role appears natural, desirable, and aligned with the interests of its African partners.

The West African coastal states, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria, that are partners in the Nigeria-Morocco pipeline project have genuine economic interests in the infrastructure, energy access, and regional connectivity that Moroccan leadership provides. Their engagement with Morocco is not merely a response to Moroccan pressure but a reflection of convergent interests in Atlantic integration,
energy development, and access to Moroccan investment networks that Algeria cannot offer as an alternative. The actors of the MASA Continuum should be understood as potential sites of consent rather than as already consolidated constituencies. Their alignment with Morocco's regional project may strengthen if integration produces tangible benefits, particularly through the operationalization of the Dakhla Atlantic hub, progress on the proposed Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline, and the development of permanent land connections across the Sahel.

Religious networks connected to the Tijaniyya and other Sufi orders constitute an important reservoir of symbolic legitimacy for Morocco's African diplomacy. Their alignment with Moroccan religious authority may be conflated with political consent to Morocco's regional project.

Certain AU institutions and continental initiatives have provided platforms through which Morocco has sought to align its priorities with broader African development agendas, and their engagement reflects a genuine assessment that Morocco's initiatives serve continental development objectives.

On the second specification, Morocco's hegemonic normative content is organized around three pillars. The first is Islamic moderate governance: Morocco presents itself as a model of religious moderation and institutional stability. The Mohammed VI Institute for the Training of African Imams, which trains religious scholars from across Sub-Saharan Africa in Moroccan Islamic practice, is the institutional expression of this normative pillar.

The second is African economic sovereignty: Morocco's South-South cooperation architecture presents Moroccan investment and expertise as instruments of African development that strengthen rather than compromise African economic sovereignty. The third is Atlantic connectivity: Morocco presents its Atlantic pivot strategy as a potential continental public good that gives landlocked Sahelian states Atlantic access they cannot otherwise achieve, generating a genuine alignment of interests between Morocco's strategic ambitions and the development priorities of its West African partners.

On the third specification, the relationship between Morocco's normative architecture and its material hegemony is one of mutual reinforcement rather than decorative supplementation. The normative content legitimizes the material investments by framing them as development partnerships rather than strategic impositions; the material investments give the normative content its credibility by demonstrating that Morocco's hegemonic order project delivers tangible benefits rather than merely projecting appealing values.

3. Three trajectories for the rivalry's evolution

Trajectory 1: Coercive Consolidation. In this trajectory, Morocco consolidates its positional advantages within the MASA Continuum through the cumulative accumulation of diplomatic recognition,

infrastructure development, military deterrence, and normative authority. Now that his autonomy proposal is a settled matter, this would require, among other conditions, the operationalization of the Dakhla Atlantic port as a regional connectivity hub, measurable progress on the Nigeria-Morocco pipeline, and continued constraints on Algeria's fiscal capacity. Under these conditions, Algeria might shift toward a more defensive regional posture, maintaining its formal positions while reducing its active engagement in certain competitive arenas. The MASA Continuum would then become increasingly organized around Moroccan connectivity and institutional networks, though not necessarily under Moroccan control.

Trajectory 2: Competitive Stalemate. In this trajectory, mutual deterrence and the high political, economic, and diplomatic costs of escalation arrest the crystallization process at an asymmetric but inconclusive stage. Morocco retains its positional advantages but cannot fully convert them into durable structural facts, while Algeria retains the capacity to contest Moroccan advances but cannot reverse the gains already achieved. The MASA Continuum remains a contested space rather than a Moroccan-anchored one. This trajectory is likely to sustain prolonged regional instability, as neither state achieves a decisive outcome and both continue to bear the costs of competitive engagement.

Trajectory 3: Algerian Retrenchment with External Compensation. In this trajectory, Algeria partially reduces its direct competitive engagement in the MASA Continuum while deepening partnerships with external powers, particularly Russia, China, and Iran. These partnerships would not necessarily produce a coherent alternative regional order, but they could reinforce a partial bifurcation of the Continuum. On one side, Morocco would seek to consolidate an Atlantic-Sahelian connectivity corridor linking its territory to Mauritania, Senegal, and parts of West Africa. On the other, Algeria would seek to preserve influence through its Sahelian partnerships, trans-Saharan routes, and security relationships with the AES states. The result would not be a clear Moroccan victory or a simple stalemate, but a more fragmented regional order in which connectivity, security, and diplomatic alignment increasingly follow divergent logics.

The three trajectories are not mutually exclusive over time. Elements of stalemate, Moroccan consolidation, and Algerian external compensation are already visible in the current rivalry. The eventual configuration will depend on the interaction of Algerian fiscal sustainability, Moroccan investment attraction and the strengthening of its coercive structural suffocation strategy, Sahelian security dynamics, and the degree of external powers engagement. Rather than moving linearly toward one outcome, the rivalry may combine features of all three trajectories over time.

Conclusion

The analysis developed in this article has proceeded through two interconnected movements. The first is the construction of the MASA Continuum framework, it has challenged the colonial cartographic epistemology that fragmented the Maghreb-Sahel space into discrete regional systems. Drawing on theoretical synthesis and geohistorical evidence, it has sought to recover the structural integration that colonial partition obscured without entirely destroying.

The second, the deployment of this framework as an analytical arena for reframing the Morocco-Algeria rivalry, has questioned the adequacy of frozen-conflict and enduring-rivalry approaches when applied to a competition that is increasingly multidimensional, infrastructure-led, and institutionally embedded. It has introduced the concept of coercive structural suffocation as a heuristic for examining whether Morocco's cumulative diplomatic, economic, military, and normative initiatives are progressively constraining Algeria's capacity to shape the regional order without direct confrontation.

Together, these two movements support a central claim: the Moroccan Sahara should not be understood merely as a contested periphery at the margins of bilateral competition. It is better analyzed as a geopolitical pivot within a structurally integrated regional space, whose dynamics are increasingly shaped by a middle-power rivalry that conventional frameworks, largely calibrated for systemic great-power competition, do not fully capture. The concept of the crystallization arena gives this claim analytical specificity: the question is not simply whether Morocco is gaining advantage, but whether its

cumulative and mutually reinforcing gains are producing a durable shift in the regional balance whose implications extend beyond the bilateral dyad.

The three trajectories, coercive consolidation, competitive stalemate, and Algerian retrenchment with external compensation, do not exhaust the rivalry's possible futures. Rather, they identify the structural conditions under which each outcome becomes more or less plausible. What they share is the analytical centrality of the MASA Continuum as the arena within which the rivalry's outcome will be negotiated: whether Morocco consolidates its positional advantages, whether mutual deterrence sustains a prolonged stalemate, or whether external compensation produces a partial bifurcation of the regional space.

The proposed framework has several limitations. First, the MASA Continuum is a relational analytical construct, not an assertion that the Maghreb and the Sahel constitute a homogeneous or fully integrated regional system. The density and direction of their connections vary across territories, sectors, and periods. Second, the analysis draws primarily on documentary evidence and selected developments rather than systematic comparative measurement or process tracing. It therefore identifies plausible mechanisms without establishing their independent causal effects. Third, the focus on Morocco–Algeria rivalry may understate the agency of Sahelian and West African states, local communities, firms, and non-state actors. Fourth, the concepts of coercive structural suffocation and crystallization require further operationalization and testing against alternative explanations, counter-strategies, and instances of reversal. Application to other regional contexts would be most appropriate where cross-border interdependencies exceed existing institutional boundaries and where competing states seek influence through overlapping connectivity, diplomatic, security, and normative networks. Such applications would require contextual adaptation rather than the assumption that the Moroccan–Algerian configuration is generalizable.

More broadly, the Moroccan–Algerian case illustrates how middle powers in the Global South may compete for regional influence not only through military capabilities or formal institutions, but also through the cumulative construction of connectivity, diplomatic support, and normative authority. By examining these processes within a common relational framework, the MASA Continuum offers a complementary perspective on dynamics that conventional regional divisions may obscure. Its broader contribution lies in identifying connections between regional space-making and interstate competition, while opening an agenda for comparative research into the conditions under which positional advantages become durable, remain contested, or are reversed.

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Notes on contributor

Tanane Yacine, is Professor of Forieng Policy and international Relations, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, Ibn Tofial University, Kenitra, Morocco.

ORCID

Tanane Yacine 