




## Article

# Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia amid Sino-American Rivalry: Strategic Hedging and the pursuit of Autonomy

Mustapha JALI 

*Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdallah University, Faculty of Legal Economic and Social Sciences, Fez, Morocco.*

### ABSTRACT

This article examines how the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China is reshaping strategic autonomy and economic decision-making in North Africa, with a focus on Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. It seeks to assess the extent to which U.S.-China competition influences the strategic behavior of North African states, as well as how domestic structural conditions mediate this impact. Drawing on neorealism, dependency theory, and the concept of strategic hedging, the study employs qualitative comparative analysis alongside process tracing to analyze policy trajectories from 2015 to 2025. The findings indicate that North African states are not merely passive arenas of great power competition, but rather active agents that strategically leverage this rivalry to maximize their gains; however, their capacity to do so varies considerably.

### KEYWORDS

U.S.-China rivalry, strategic hedging, dependency, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia.

## Introduction

The intensification of strategic competition between the United States and China has emerged as one of the defining features of contemporary international politics. While much of the scholarly and policy attention has focused on East Asia, increasing evidence suggests that this rivalry is global in scope, extending into regions traditionally embedded within Western spheres of influence.

North Africa occupies a critical geopolitical position at the intersection of Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East. Historically anchored within U.S. and European security and economic frameworks, the region has, over the past decade, experienced a growing Chinese presence, primarily through infrastructure investment, trade expansion, and technological cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This dual engagement raises fundamental questions about the evolving nature of external influence and regional agency.

This article addresses the following research question: To what extent does U.S.-China rivalry reshape the strategic autonomy and economic decision-making of North African states, and how do domestic structural conditions mediate this impact?

The central argument advanced here is that North African states are not passive arenas of great power competition, but rather active strategic actors that employ hedging strategies to maximize benefits from both powers. However, their capacity to do so is uneven and conditioned by domestic variables such as economic resilience, governance structures, and debt exposure. As a result, emerging multipolarity does not eliminate dependency but reconfigures it, producing what can be termed “conditional autonomy.”

The article contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it integrates neorealist and dependency perspectives through the concept of strategic hedging. Second, it provides a systematic comparative analysis of Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia based on clearly defined variables. Third, it highlights the role of domestic structures in shaping external alignment strategies, thereby advancing debates on Global South agency in international relations.

## Theoretical Framework

Neorealism provides a foundational framework for understanding the structural dynamics of U.S.-China rivalry. According to Mearsheimer; the international system is defined by anarchy and the distribution of material capabilities among states. The rise of China represents a shift in this distribution, generating competitive pressures as the United States seeks to maintain its relative dominance (Mearsheimer, 2014).

In this context, regions such as North Africa become arenas where great powers project influence to secure strategic advantages. From this perspective, the engagement of both the United States and China in North Africa reflects broader systemic imperatives rather than purely regional dynamics. While neorealism emphasizes systemic competition, dependency theory highlights the structural inequalities that shape interactions between developed and developing countries. Early formulations by Prebisch (1950) and later by Cardoso and Faletto (1979) argue that peripheral economies are integrated into the global system in ways that reproduce dependency and limit autonomous development (Prebisch, 1950; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979).

In North Africa, both Western and Chinese engagements can generate forms of dependency. Western financial institutions impose conditionalities that shape domestic policy, while Chinese financing—often tied to infrastructure projects—can create debt obligations and long-term economic dependence (Brautigam, 2009). On the other hand, Strategic hedging emerges as a bridging concept that captures how states navigate uncertainty in a competitive international environment. Rather than aligning fully with one power “balancing” or another “bandwagoning”, states pursue diversified engagement strategies that combine cooperation and risk mitigation (Kuik, 2008).

In the North African context, hedging involves maintaining security ties with the United States while expanding economic and technological partnerships with China. This allows states to extract benefits from both sides while avoiding overdependence.

This article distinguishes between structural multipolarity, defined by the distribution of power among multiple major states, and emerging multipolarity, characterized by fluid alignments and overlapping spheres of influence (Acharya, 2018). North Africa exemplifies the latter, where competing external actors coexist without rigid alliance structures.

By integrating these perspectives, the article argues that North African states operate within a structurally competitive yet economically asymmetrical system, where hedging becomes the primary strategy for navigating uncertainty and maximizing autonomy.

## Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative comparative research design, combining process tracing and policy analysis to examine how Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia respond to U.S.-China rivalry.

1. Research Design and Case Selection: The selection of Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia follows a most-different systems design, capturing variation in: economic capacity; political systems; geostrategic importance; historical alignment with the United States. This variation allows for a systematic analysis of how domestic conditions influence strategic behavior.

2. Analytical Variables: The study operationalizes four key variables. Strategic autonomy: the ability to pursue independent foreign policy choices. Economic dependence: reliance on external financing, trade, or investment. Geostrategic position: geographic and strategic relevance in global trade and security. Historical alignment: depth of prior engagement with the United States. These variables provide a

consistent framework for cross-case comparison.

3. Data and Sources: The analysis draws on multiple sources to ensure triangulation: official government documents and policy statements international datasets (IMF, World Bank, SIPRI) academic literature and policy reports. The timeframe (2015-2025) captures the intensification of U.S.-China rivalry and its regional manifestations.

4. Method of Analysis: The article employs: process tracing to identify causal mechanisms linking external pressures to domestic responses comparative analysis to identify patterns across cases. This methodological approach enhances both analytical rigor and replicability.

## The Shifting International Order

The world is currently in a steady transformation toward multipolarity as states mobilize resources to achieve status and security in an increasingly competitive environment. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. hegemonic status is being fundamentally challenged by China's rise as a "global security actor" (Green et al., 2024).

Scholarship distinguishes between "structural multipolarity" and "emerging/inter-polar multipolarity." Structural multipolarity is a configuration where power is distributed among several poles, such as the U.S., China, Russia, and the European Union (EU), which often results in a "one superpower and several big powers" model. This structure is historically viewed as potentially unstable and prone to alliance failures (Ferguson, 2018). In contrast, the "emerging multipolarity" or "inter-polar" view focuses on managed and interdependent power systems (Ferguson, 2018). This framework recognizes that while power is diffusing, states are linked through complex, multi-partner, and multicultural networks.

For North African states, this transition represents a period of both opportunity and danger. It offers the chance to build a "multi-order world" by linking diverse regional and global institutions (like the African Union, BRICS+, and the UN) (Ferguson, 2018; Security in Context, 2026). However, it also carries the risk of direct military or economic conflict between the U.S. and China, which could force these states into costly alignments (Ferguson, 2018; Swanepoel, 2025).

The narrative of Great Power Competition has reframed the continent of Africa from a "source of threats" to an "epicenter of geopolitical shifts". The United States has articulated a strategy that attempts to downplay the perception of Africa as a mere battleground for rivalry, instead emphasizing shared prosperity and the role of the African agency (Mishra, 2026). However, the underlying reality remains one of intense contestation over resources, technology, and normative influence (Akubueze, 2025).

China's approach has evolved from "business-first" economic diplomacy to a more comprehensive "Global Security Initiative" (GSI) that positions Beijing as a neutral and constructive security actor, in contrast to what it portrays as a "declining and interventionist West" (Security in Context, 2026). This symmetrical competition—where both powers now offer both security and economic goods—forms the backdrop against which Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia must formulate their interests.

## China's Expanding Role in North Africa

Over the past decade, China's presence in North Africa has expanded significantly, both in scope and ambition. What initially appeared as a largely economic engagement—centered on trade and infrastructure—has gradually evolved into a more comprehensive strategy that combines finance, technology, diplomacy, and selective security cooperation. While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues to provide the overarching framework, Beijing's approach increasingly reflects a long-term effort to consolidate influence across multiple domains (Rolland, 2017; Brautigam, 2009).

A comparative perspective across Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia reveals that China does not apply a uniform model; instead, it adapts its engagement to domestic conditions. In Morocco, Chinese investment has been incorporated into a broader strategy of economic diversification and industrial development. Projects in logistics, manufacturing, and infrastructure complement Morocco's ambition to position itself as a regional hub linking Europe and Africa. Crucially, Moroccan policymakers have maintained a careful balance, engaging China without weakening established partnerships with Western actors. This reflects a deliberate strategy of controlled diversification, allowing Morocco to benefit from Chinese capital while

preserving a degree of strategic autonomy.

In Egypt, China's role is more pronounced and structurally significant. Egypt's economic challenges—particularly high external debt and the need for large-scale infrastructure—have made Chinese financing especially attractive. Chinese involvement in major development projects illustrates the scale of engagement, particularly in construction, transport, and industrial zones (Scobell & Nader, 2016). However, this relationship is not without constraints. While Chinese capital provides short-term economic opportunities, it also contributes to long-term financial exposure. Egypt's strategy can therefore be understood as a form of pragmatic balancing, where engagement with China complements—but does not replace—ties with Western partners. In this context, diversification expands options but does not eliminate dependency.

Tunisia presents a contrasting case. Chinese engagement remains limited and relatively fragmented, reflecting Tunisia's smaller market size, political instability, and constrained institutional capacity. Although Tunisian authorities have expressed interest in expanding cooperation with China, their bargaining power remains limited. As a result, Chinese projects tend to be episodic rather than transformative.

This comparison highlights an important point: China's influence is not solely determined by its own capabilities but is mediated by the domestic structures of partner states. The technological dimension of China's strategy further reinforces its growing influence. Through the Digital Silk Road, Chinese firms have expanded into telecommunications, data infrastructure, and smart city development (Triolo, 2020). These initiatives are strategically significant because digital infrastructure shapes not only economic modernization but also governance and data control.

In Morocco, digital cooperation has been approached cautiously, reflecting concerns about long-term dependence. In Egypt, such technologies are more closely aligned with state-led development and administrative centralization. Tunisia, constrained by limited resources, has struggled to engage at a comparable scale.

China's evolving role also includes a modest but growing security dimension. Through arms sales, training programs, and participation in multilateral forums, Beijing has begun to diversify its regional engagement (George et al., 2025). Although this presence remains limited compared to that of the United States, it signals a gradual expansion of China's strategic toolkit. In Egypt, such cooperation aligns with an existing pattern of diversified defense partnerships. In Morocco, it remains carefully managed to avoid disrupting Western alliances, while in Tunisia it remains marginal.

At the institutional level, China promotes a distinct model of cooperation based on non-interference and development-first principles, particularly through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (FOCAC, 2022). This approach resonates with governments seeking alternatives to Western conditionality (Acharya, 2018). However, while this model offers flexibility, it may also create new forms of dependency, especially in cases involving large-scale borrowing.

In sum, China's engagement in North Africa has evolved into a multidimensional strategy combining economic, technological, and diplomatic tools. Yet its impact varies significantly across cases. Morocco leverages Chinese involvement to enhance diversification, Egypt uses it to manage structural constraints, and Tunisia struggles to derive substantial benefits. This variation underscores the importance of domestic capacity in shaping the outcomes of external engagement.

## The United States' Evolving Strategy

The United States remains a central actor in North Africa, but its strategy has undergone important adjustments in response to China's rise and the broader transformation of the international system. Traditionally, U.S. engagement in the region has been anchored in security cooperation, military assistance, and long-standing alliances. While these elements continue to define American influence, they are increasingly complemented by economic and technological initiatives aimed at maintaining competitiveness in a more multipolar environment (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023; White House, 2022).

From a security perspective, the United States retains a clear structural advantage. In Morocco, military cooperation, joint exercises, and defense agreements form the backbone of a stable partnership. Morocco's designation as a major non-NATO ally reflects the depth of this relationship, providing both strategic and operational benefits (Cook, 2017). In Egypt, U.S. security engagement is even more entrenched, supported by decades of military aid and cooperation. Egypt's control of the Suez Canal and its regional influence make it a cornerstone of U.S. strategic interests. Tunisia, although less prominent, has also benefited from U.S. support, particularly in counterterrorism and institutional capacity-building.

However, the limitations of a security-centric approach are becoming increasingly evident. China's growing economic presence has highlighted the importance of competing in development and infrastructure. In response, the United States has launched initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), aimed at mobilizing private capital and offering alternatives to Chinese financing (White House, 2022). Yet these initiatives often lack the speed and scale of Chinese investments, which can reduce their immediate appeal.

In Morocco, this evolving competition has led to a more balanced external strategy. While the United States remains a key partner, Moroccan policymakers now operate in a more diversified environment, where multiple external actors compete for influence. This enhances Morocco's bargaining power but also requires careful management of external relationships. In Egypt, the situation is more complex. While the United States remains indispensable in the security domain, its economic influence has declined relative to China and other actors. Egypt's reliance on external financing has made Chinese investment particularly attractive, even as it continues to engage with Western institutions (Scobell et al., 2018).

Tunisia again illustrates the limits of external engagement. The United States has played a significant role in supporting Tunisia's democratic transition, but ongoing political and economic challenges have constrained the effectiveness of this support. Unlike China, U.S. assistance is often tied to governance reforms and policy conditionality. While these conditions aim to promote long-term stability, they can also reduce the short-term attractiveness of U.S. engagement (Kentikelenis et al., 2016).

Technologically, the United States emphasizes digital governance, cybersecurity, and regulatory standards aligned with liberal norms. This contrasts with China's state-centric model and creates a competitive technological landscape (Triolo, 2020). Morocco has sought to balance these competing influences, while Egypt integrates technology into state-led development strategies. Tunisia, constrained by limited resources, has fewer opportunities to shape its digital trajectory.

A key challenge for the United States lies in the perception that its engagement is less flexible than China's. Political conditionality, particularly in areas related to governance and human rights, can be viewed as restrictive by regional governments (Kentikelenis et al., 2016). In contrast, China's emphasis on non-interference provides a more immediately attractive alternative, even if it carries long-term risks.

Overall, the United States retains significant structural advantages in North Africa, particularly in security and institutional influence. However, these advantages are increasingly challenged by China's expanding role. Morocco illustrates a balanced strategy of diversification, Egypt demonstrates pragmatic multi-alignment, and Tunisia highlights the constraints imposed by domestic fragility. In this evolving context, maintaining influence will require the United States to adopt a more integrated and flexible approach that combines security, economic, and technological engagement.

## **The Intensification of Sino-American Rivalry and Its Regional Repercussions**

The growing competition between China and the United States in North Africa is not merely a reflection of global power shifts; it is increasingly shaping the region's strategic landscape in tangible ways. The contrast between the two powers is particularly visible in the instruments they deploy and the logic underpinning their engagement. While China advances primarily through geoeconomic expansion under the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States continues to rely on a combination of security partnerships, diplomatic influence, and conditional institutional support (Rolland, 2017; U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). This divergence does not simply reflect different foreign policy traditions—it structures the choices and constraints facing North African states.

China's approach is anchored in a long-term economic vision that prioritizes infrastructure, industrial

capacity, and access to strategic resources. Unlike Western models of engagement, Chinese cooperation is generally framed as politically neutral, avoiding explicit conditionality related to governance or human rights (Brautigam, 2009). This has made Chinese financing particularly attractive to governments seeking rapid development without external political pressure.

In Egypt, flagship projects such as the Suez Canal Economic Zone and the New Administrative Capital illustrate the scale and ambition of Chinese involvement, reinforcing the country's position along critical global trade routes (Scobell et al., 2018). In Morocco, the 2017 accession to the BRI marked a turning point, followed by increased Chinese investment in ports, transport infrastructure, and industrial zones. Tunisia, although less central to Beijing's strategy, has also benefited from technical assistance and smaller-scale projects in infrastructure, healthcare, and transport. Beyond physical infrastructure, China's presence is expanding through educational exchanges, concessional loans, and institutional partnerships, gradually embedding its influence within local systems (Brautigam, 2009).

This economic expansion is closely tied to China's broader strategic priorities. Its growing investment in Africa's mining sector—exceeding \$7.9 billion in 2023—reflects a clear effort to secure access to critical minerals necessary for the global energy transition and China's industrial ambitions (SIPRI, 2024). In this sense, North Africa is not only a market or transit zone, but also part of a wider geoeconomic network linking resources, production, and global supply chains (Triolo, 2020).

The United States, by contrast, continues to frame its engagement through a security-first lens, even as it attempts to expand into economic and technological domains. Official strategic documents emphasize that competition with China constitutes a central national security priority, particularly in regions of geopolitical importance such as North Africa (White House, 2022). The region's proximity to Europe, combined with its control over key maritime chokepoints—including the Suez Canal and the Strait of Gibraltar—reinforces its importance in U.S. strategic thinking (Cook, 2017). As a result, Washington has focused on strengthening alliances, maintaining military cooperation, and supporting counterterrorism efforts, particularly in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

However, the U.S. approach differs from China's in both substance and perception. American engagement is often accompanied by political and economic conditionality, particularly in areas related to governance, democratic reform, and human rights (Kentikelenis et al., 2016). While these conditions are intended to promote long-term stability, they can reduce the flexibility and immediate attractiveness of U.S. partnerships, especially when compared to China's more transactional model. Moreover, despite long-standing relationships—such as designation as a major non-NATO ally—U.S. engagement has not always translated into visible large-scale economic projects comparable to those financed by China (Cook, 2017).

For North African states, this rivalry creates a complex mix of opportunities and risks. On one hand, the presence of competing powers increases access to external resources, investment, and political support. On the other hand, it introduces new pressures to position themselves within an increasingly competitive and, at times, polarized international environment (Acharya, 2018). The result is not a simple alignment with one power or another, but a continuous process of balancing and recalibration.

Egypt exemplifies this dynamic. While it continues to rely on the United States for military cooperation and counterterrorism—particularly in the Sinai—it has simultaneously deepened its economic relationship with China (Sharp, 2026). This dual engagement provides short-term advantages but also raises questions about long-term dependency. The expansion of Sino-Egyptian cooperation into the military domain, including joint air force exercises in April 2025, suggests a gradual broadening of ties that could alter traditional alignments (SIPRI, 2024). At the same time, Egypt's growing reliance on Chinese financing may reduce its resilience to external political and economic pressures (IMF, 2023).

Morocco, by contrast, has adopted a more balanced and carefully managed approach. Its strategic partnership with the United States remains central, particularly in light of Washington's support on the Moroccan Autonomy Plan for Sahara provinces. Yet Morocco has also expanded its economic cooperation with China, especially in industry, renewable energy, and infrastructure. This dual strategy reflects a deliberate effort to leverage great power competition without becoming overly dependent on either side. Morocco's position as a gateway to sub-Saharan Africa further enhances its importance as a site of future geopolitical and geoeconomic competition (Rolland, 2017).

Tunisia presents a more fragile picture. Facing a deep economic crisis, coupled with declining Western support amid concerns over democratic backsliding, Tunisia has become increasingly vulnerable to external financing pressures (World Bank, 2023). In this context, Chinese funding—often perceived as less restrictive—may become more attractive. However, this shift risks reinforcing structural dependency rather than alleviating it.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Sino-American rivalry in North Africa is likely to intensify. The resurgence of competitive economic strategies and efforts to counterbalance China's influence through alternative investment frameworks suggest a more contested regional environment (White House, 2022). While this may increase opportunities for regional states, it also raises the risk of geopolitical tension, including economic coercion and diplomatic polarization (Mearsheimer, 2014). Such risks may intersect with existing regional tensions, potentially amplifying instability. External alignments could influence disputes such as Algeria's hostility over the Moroccan Sahara or the issue of Nile water resources, or shape internal political dynamics in fragile states (Acharya, 2018). In these contexts, great power rivalry may act less as a stabilizing force and more as a multiplier of existing vulnerabilities.

Ultimately, one of the most pressing challenges for North African states is avoiding entrapment within this rivalry. Given their structural economic vulnerabilities and dependence on external financing, excessive reliance on any single partner could undermine long-term autonomy (Prebisch, 1950). Diversification—both in economic and strategic terms—therefore remains essential. Engagement with multiple actors, including the European Union and emerging partners, can provide a degree of flexibility that mitigates the risks of polarization.

In sum, the intensification of Sino-American rivalry is reshaping North Africa's strategic environment in profound and uneven ways. It expands opportunities but also introduces new constraints. The extent to which regional states can navigate this evolving landscape will depend not only on external dynamics, but fundamentally on their internal capacity to manage and balance them effectively.

## **Comparative Analysis of U.S.-China Rivalry in North Africa: Structure, Agency, and Uneven Outcomes**

This section examines how the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China shapes the strategic behavior of Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. Drawing on neorealism, dependency theory, strategic hedging, and multipolarity, and applying a qualitative comparative design based on process tracing and policy analysis, the analysis demonstrates that North African states are neither passive arenas nor fully autonomous actors. Rather, their responses reflect a continuous negotiation between systemic pressures and domestic structural constraints

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China has introduced new dynamics into North Africa's external relations, but its effects are neither uniform nor predetermined. Rather than producing clear-cut alignments, this competition has generated a more fluid strategic environment in which regional states attempt to navigate between opportunity and constraint. Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia illustrate three distinct responses to this evolving order, shaped not only by systemic pressures but also by domestic economic structures, institutional capacity, and political priorities.

From a neorealist perspective, the growing competition between Washington and Beijing reflects a broader shift in the distribution of global power (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). North Africa, positioned at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, has consequently emerged as a secondary theater of this systemic rivalry. However, the region does not respond uniformly. Instead, variations in economic resilience, institutional capacity, and geostrategic relevance produce differentiated patterns of alignment and autonomy.

At the same time, dependency theory provides a crucial corrective to purely systemic explanations. While great powers project influence, the ability of local states to navigate this competition is shaped by structural asymmetries embedded in the global economy (Prebisch, 1950; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). In North Africa, these asymmetries are most visible in debt dynamics, external financing needs, and integration into global value chains. As a result, the emergence of multipolarity does not eliminate dependency but reconfigures it.

Within this context, strategic hedging emerges as the dominant behavioral pattern. Rather than aligning

exclusively with either the United States or China, North African states pursue diversified engagement strategies that combine cooperation and risk mitigation (Kuik, 2008). However, the effectiveness of hedging varies significantly across cases, ranging from proactive and institutionalized strategies to reactive and constrained responses.

### ***Morocco: Managed Diversification and Strategic Balance***

Morocco stands out as the most consistent example of a deliberate and relatively successful hedging strategy. Its external policy is neither reactive nor opportunistic; rather, it reflects a long-term effort to diversify partnerships without undermining core alliances. The country's close security relationship with the United States—reinforced through military cooperation, joint exercises such as African Lion, and its designation as a major non-NATO ally—provides a stable strategic foundation (Cook, 2017). This security anchoring reduces vulnerability and allows Moroccan policymakers to engage other partners from a position of relative confidence.

At the same time, Morocco has actively deepened its economic ties with China, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese investments in industrial zones, automotive manufacturing, and port infrastructure are integrated into Morocco's broader development vision, rather than existing as isolated projects (Brautigam, 2009; Rolland, 2017). The Tangier Med complex, for instance, reflects a strategic effort to position Morocco as a logistics and manufacturing hub connecting Europe, Africa, and Asia.

What distinguishes Morocco is not simply the presence of multiple partners, but the way these relationships are managed. Engagement with China is carefully calibrated to avoid technological or financial overdependence, particularly in sensitive sectors such as telecommunications. At the same time, Morocco continues to deepen its integration with European markets, which remain its primary economic anchor. This layered strategy allows Rabat to extract benefits from great power competition while maintaining policy flexibility.

In theoretical terms, Morocco illustrates proactive hedging—a strategy enabled by relatively strong institutions, diversified economic linkages, and coherent long-term planning. While not immune to external pressures, Morocco demonstrates a notable capacity to shape the terms of its engagement.

### ***Egypt: Strategic Weight amid Economic Vulnerability***

Egypt occupies a different position, combining significant geopolitical weight with persistent economic fragility. Its strategic importance—rooted in control of the Suez Canal, its demographic scale, and its regional influence—ensures continued engagement from both the United States and China.

For Washington, Egypt remains a cornerstone of regional security architecture, receiving substantial military assistance and maintaining long-standing defense ties (Sharp, 2026). These relationships provide Egypt with critical security resources and international legitimacy.

China, however, has emerged as a central economic partner. Its involvement in large-scale infrastructure projects—including the New Administrative Capital and industrial zones along the Suez Canal—reflects a deepening economic footprint (Scobell et al., 2018). These investments are attractive not only because of their scale, but also because they are delivered with fewer political conditions than Western alternatives.

Yet Egypt's ability to leverage this dual engagement is constrained by structural economic challenges. High levels of external debt, recurrent currency crises, and dependence on external financing limit policy autonomy (IMF, 2023). In this context, Chinese loans and investments can alleviate immediate pressures but also contribute to longer-term vulnerabilities. Similarly, U.S. assistance, while significant, is often tied to strategic and political considerations that restrict flexibility.

Egypt's strategy can therefore be described as constrained or reactive hedging. Rather than selectively balancing partners from a position of strength, Cairo often responds to immediate economic and political needs. This creates a situation of overlapping dependencies, where reliance on both Western security support and Chinese economic engagement reduces room for maneuver.

Consequently, Egypt's case highlights a critical insight: geopolitical importance does not automatically translate into strategic autonomy. Without sufficient economic resilience, structural constraints can offset the advantages of strategic centrality.

### ***Tunisia: Limited Leverage and Fragmented Engagement***

Tunisia represents the most constrained case among the three. Despite its symbolic importance following the 2011 revolution and its initial democratic transition, the country has struggled to translate external partnerships into sustainable economic or political gains. Its engagement with the United States has focused primarily on governance support, economic assistance, and counterterrorism cooperation. While valuable, these initiatives have not fundamentally altered Tunisia's structural vulnerabilities.

China's role in Tunisia remains comparatively limited. Although several infrastructure and development projects have been proposed, their scale and impact are modest relative to those in Morocco or Egypt. Political instability, administrative bottlenecks, and a less attractive investment climate have constrained deeper Chinese involvement.

From the perspective of dependency theory, Tunisia's challenges are rooted in persistent fiscal imbalances, high unemployment, and reliance on external financing (World Bank, 2023). These conditions reduce the state's bargaining power and limit its ability to engage external actors on favorable terms. Unlike Morocco, Tunisia lacks the institutional capacity to manage complex partnerships effectively. Unlike Egypt, it lacks the strategic weight to command sustained great power attention.

Consequently, Tunisia's approach to U.S.-China rivalry can be described as passive or constrained hedging. External engagement is shaped less by strategic choice than by immediate necessity and domestic instability. Interestingly, public opinion data suggests a growing openness toward China, reflecting dissatisfaction with Western economic prescriptions and perceived conditionality (Arab Barometer, 2024). However, this shift has yet to translate into a coherent state strategy.

### ***Comparative Insights: Multipolarity without Equal Opportunity***

A comparative reading of Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia reveals that the emerging multipolar environment does not produce equal opportunities for all states. While the presence of multiple external actors theoretically expands strategic options, in practice, the ability to benefit from this competition depends heavily on domestic conditions.

- Morocco demonstrates how institutional strength and economic diversification enable effective and proactive hedging.
- Egypt illustrates how structural economic constraints can limit the benefits of strategic centrality.
- Tunisia highlights how domestic fragility can reduce external engagement to a reactive and fragmented process.

These differences suggest that multipolarity does not eliminate dependency; it redistributes and reshapes it (Acharya, 2018). In this context, strategic hedging is not a uniform strategy but a spectrum, ranging from deliberate balancing to constrained adaptation.

Ultimately, the comparative evidence suggests that the impact of U.S.-China rivalry in North Africa is mediated less by the intentions of great powers than by the internal capacities of regional states. External competition creates opportunities, but it also introduces new risks, particularly in the economic and technological domains.

Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia illustrate three distinct trajectories within this evolving landscape. Together, they underscore a broader conclusion: strategic autonomy in a multipolar world is not given—it is constructed, negotiated, and often limited by structural realities.

## **Conclusion and Strategic Outlook**

This article set out to examine how the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China is reshaping strategic autonomy and economic decision-making in North Africa, with a particular focus on Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia. The analysis demonstrates that great power competition does not impose

uniform outcomes across the region. Rather, it generates a differentiated landscape of opportunities and constraints, in which domestic structural conditions ultimately determine the extent to which states can convert external engagement into strategic advantage.

A central finding of this article is that strategic autonomy in North Africa is deeply conditioned by fiscal and structural capacity. In this regard, Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia illustrate three distinct trajectories. Morocco has managed to leverage diversification, institutional coherence, and relatively prudent macroeconomic management to pursue a proactive form of strategic hedging. Its engagement with both the United States and China reflects a calculated effort to maximize benefits while preserving policy flexibility. By contrast, Egypt's experience highlights the limits of geostrategic centrality. While Cairo remains indispensable to both Washington and Beijing, its high levels of external debt and structural economic vulnerabilities constrain its autonomy, producing a pattern of reactive hedging shaped by immediate financial imperatives. Tunisia, finally, represents the most constrained case, where economic fragility and political instability significantly reduce the capacity to engage external powers on favorable terms, resulting in a largely passive adaptation to external pressures.

These findings challenge deterministic interpretations of great power rivalry as a zero-sum game. Instead, North Africa emerges as a space of "competitive diplomacy", where states actively engage multiple partners to extract economic, political, and strategic gains. However, this agency remains bounded. The concept of conditional autonomy developed in this article underscores that while multipolarity expands the range of available options, it simultaneously reproduces new forms of dependency—particularly in the financial and technological domains.

Indeed, the shift toward a more fragmented and multipolar international order has not eliminated structural asymmetries; rather, it has transformed them. Financial dependency, especially in the form of sovereign debt and external financing needs, continues to limit policy independence. At the same time, the expansion of digital infrastructure—whether through Chinese-led telecommunications systems or Western-backed regulatory frameworks—introduces a new layer of "digital dependency" that may prove equally constraining in the long term. In this sense, the emerging order can be understood not simply as multipolar, but as polycentric and asymmetrical, where multiple centers of power coexist without producing equitable outcomes.

From a broader Global South perspective, the North African experience offers both a cautionary tale and a strategic template. It demonstrates that multipolarity alone does not guarantee greater autonomy. Without structural economic reform, diversification, and institutional strengthening, states risk transitioning from one form of dependency to another—what may be described as a form of "multipolar dependency" or even "multipolar imperialism," where influence is dispersed but constraints remain.

Ultimately, the ability of North African states to navigate this evolving landscape will depend on their capacity to pursue a credible "middle path"—one that leverages geostrategic assets and external competition while simultaneously insulating domestic economic and political systems from external shocks. In an era defined by overlapping crises and intensifying great power rivalry, strategic hedging is no longer a choice but a necessity. Yet its success is contingent on internal resilience as much as external opportunity.

While all three countries have engaged in some form of hedging, the findings suggest that short-term, transactional strategies are insufficient to ensure long-term autonomy. North African states should therefore move toward a more structural approach:

- Deepen economic diversification by expanding into higher value-added sectors such as advanced manufacturing, renewable energy, and digital services.
- Reducing reliance on external financing and commodity-based revenues is essential to limiting vulnerability.
- Strengthen fiscal sovereignty through prudent debt management, improved tax systems, and greater transparency in public finance. Without addressing debt dependency, strategic autonomy will remain limited regardless of external alignments.
- Develop institutional capacity in negotiation, project evaluation, and strategic planning. This is particularly important in managing large-scale infrastructure and technology agreements with external partners.

- Avoid digital dependency by diversifying technology providers, investing in domestic digital ecosystems, and adopting balanced regulatory frameworks that protect data sovereignty.
- Promote regional and mini-lateral cooperation, including sector-specific frameworks (e.g., energy, logistics, or digital connectivity). Greater coordination among North African states would enhance collective bargaining power and reduce fragmentation in dealing with major powers.

North Africa is increasingly becoming a testing ground for the realities of 21st-century multipolarity. The rivalry between the United States and China is not simply a contest for regional influence; it is part of a broader transformation of the global order. For Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia, the challenge is not choosing between competing powers, but navigating a complex web of interdependence without losing strategic direction.

In this evolving landscape, the decisive factor will not be the intensity of great power competition, but the ability of regional states to convert external pressure into internal strength. Strategic autonomy, in this sense, is not granted by the international system—it is built from within.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor

Mustapha JALI, is PhD Researcher in Geopolitics and international security, Faculty of legal economic and social sciences, Sidi Mohamed ben Abdallah University-Fez, Morocco.

### ORCID

Mustapha JALI 

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