



Policy Perspective

AFCON 2025: Does Africa Really Want to Trust Itself?

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ABSTRACT

Aware of the strategic role of sport as a lever for development and international influence, Morocco has made it a central pillar of its soft power diplomacy. Hosting the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations represented a major test, allowing the country to demonstrate the quality of its infrastructure, its organizational expertise, and its capacity to anticipate and manage crises. At the same time, AFCON 2025 offered a genuine opportunity for African countries to reflect on whether the continent as a whole is willing to trust itself in driving its own development and whether it is collectively prepared to manage its affairs. In this article, we will examine the concept of sports geopolitics, the instrumentalization of Moroccan sport as a tool of foreign policy, AFCON 2025 as an illustration of Morocco's rise as a sporting power, geopolitical rivalries, and their impact on the international image of both Morocco and Africa.

KEYWORDS

Morocco, AFCON 2025, geopolitics, sport, influence.

Introduction

More than just a leisure activity, sport has, since the second half of the 20th century, become a thriving economic market, a globally consumed product, and a universal language. Above all, it constitutes a powerful tool of influence through which states project and export the image they wish to convey on the international stage. In recent years, aware of the strategic role of sport as a driver of development and international influence, Morocco has chosen to join the select group of states that have made this instrument a central pillar of their diplomacy of influence. From this perspective, hosting the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) represented a first major test. Morocco demonstrated its ability to host and organize a continental-scale event, thereby laying an essential milestone in preparation for the 2030 World Cup.

The success of this competition can be assessed on several levels. However, its major achievement lies in strengthening Morocco's image as a modern state, as well as consolidating its attractiveness as a tourist and investment destination. At the same time, hosting AFCON also served as a real test, making it possible to identify the challenges and risks that may arise, particularly unforeseen events such as media campaigns of provocation and disinformation, as well as issues related to security and the smooth running of matches. Some states, due to geopolitical rivalries, attempted to orchestrate such actions in order to discredit the proper conduct of the event.

These events have provided valuable lessons for Morocco in view of upcoming engagements: organizing events of such magnitude must necessarily rely on rigorous strategic anticipation, based on the prior development of crisis scenarios. Such an approach not only makes it possible to identify potential risks, but also to assess their impact and prepare appropriate, rapid, and coordinated responses.

Sport: A Tool of Foreign Policy

The geopolitics of sport is a subject that is attracting growing interest among journalists, consultants, political leaders, and public decision-makers. However, understanding this concept and transforming it into a genuine state policy requires in-depth conceptualization by specialists in geopolitics, insofar as it directly relates to states' foreign policy. In academic circles, the expression "geopolitics of sport" is frequently used to analyze these dynamics. Nevertheless, the concept remains ambiguous and does not always accurately reflect the real objectives pursued by states through sport.

From a theoretical standpoint, there are several definitions of geopolitics. In general, it refers to the relationship between geography and politics. Among the definitions that clearly illustrate this relationship is that of Halford Mackinder, for whom geopolitics is the study of the influence of geography on political power and on the history of peoples. (MACKINDER, Halford, 1904). For his part, Raymond Aron defines geopolitics as the analysis of power relations between political units within a given space. (Aron, 1962). Based on these two conceptions, the geopolitics of sport can be defined as the instrumentalization of sport in the service of a state's foreign policy interests, aimed at strengthening its position, its influence, and consolidating its power within a given geographical space, whether regional, continental, or even global. In this perspective, sport appears as a genuine instrument of soft power.

The use of sport as a tool of foreign policy is not always easy to demonstrate. When official documents related to states' foreign policy, official political statements, or speeches by political decision-makers do not explicitly establish this link, it becomes difficult to speak of the geopolitics of sport.

Nevertheless, beyond this argument and the conceptual dilemma, observing the practices of states makes it possible to highlight the existence of this connection. The essential criterion lies in the willingness of states—through these channels of foreign policy—to use sport as an instrument of geopolitical influence.

Applied to the sporting domain, there is hardly a more effective means of projecting influence and enhancing a country's image than hosting major regional or international sporting events.

It is within this framework that sport can be mobilized as an effective instrument of foreign policy, enabling states to achieve, defend, and promote their strategic interests, sometimes in ways comparable to, or even surpassing, traditional instruments of diplomacy. The examples of China, and more recently Qatar, clearly illustrate this strategy.

Historical Overview of Sport and Sporting Events in Morocco

The instrumentalization of sport by Morocco as a lever of foreign policy is by no means accidental; rather, it is part of a carefully considered and progressively developed strategy. The success of this sports geopolitics relies on several key determinants that Morocco has cultivated over the years. The country benefits from relative political stability, mobilizable financial resources, and modern infrastructure enabling it to host or support major international sporting events. In addition, notable sporting performances—particularly in football—have strengthened its influence and visibility on the international stage, in line with a soft power approach.

This strategy is also consistent with the broader orientations of Moroccan diplomacy. Finally, public support constitutes a decisive factor: in Morocco, sport is a genuine social phenomenon and an important element of national culture. The successes as well as the failures of Moroccan athletes in national and international competitions regularly generate feelings of collective pride, but also debates, criticism, and strong public engagement, reflecting the deep-rooted place of sport within Moroccan society.

In the aftermath of the protectorate, Morocco began to pay particular attention to the development of the sports sector. Underperformance was often perceived as a real public policy crisis, requiring direct state intervention and a redefinition of governance methods within national sport.

The restructuring of the sector has accelerated significantly following the Royal Letter of 2008 addressed to the participants of the National Sports Conference in Skhirate. In this foundational speech, King Mohammed VI emphasized the need for a comprehensive reform aimed at modernizing sports governance, professionalizing federations, and making sport a lever for human and territorial development.¹

The reforms undertaken in this context resulted in the adoption and establishment of a significant legal and institutional framework, notably the promulgation of Law 30-09 on physical education and sports, the anti-doping law, as well as the law against violence in sports venues. At the same time, the state strengthened governance mechanisms, encouraged the training of professionals, and made substantial investments in sports infrastructure, including stadiums, training centers, and local sports facilities. (El Hamel, 2025).

These transformations marked a new stage in Morocco's sports policy, shifting the sector from a primarily associative mode of management to an integrated strategic approach, centered on performance, good governance, and regional and international influence. Aware of the strategic role of sport as a driver of development and international influence, Morocco has, since the 1960s, placed particular importance on hosting regional and international sporting events. (Takhalouicht, 2020).

This orientation is not, however, a recent phenomenon. It dates back to the 1960s, just four years after independence, when Morocco hosted the first Arab Games in Casablanca in 1961. This event represented a genuine political and diplomatic showcase, demonstrating Morocco's ability to host foreign delegations and assert itself as a credible actor on the regional and international stage. Sport thus emerged as a privileged instrument for legitimizing national sovereignty and consolidating the image of the Kingdom. Subsequent sporting events organized by Morocco, as well as its numerous bids, confirm the continuity of this strategic orientation. The country notably hosted the Mediterranean Games in Casablanca in 1983, followed by the Africa Cup of Nations in 1988—two major events that helped strengthen its position within the Mediterranean and African spheres. In addition, the Kingdom submitted several bids to host the FIFA World Cup in 1994, 1998, 2006, and 2010, illustrating a consistent ambition to establish itself among the leading nations of global sport. This is further complemented by other bids for international competitions, such as the Handball and Volleyball World Championships in 2015, 2018, and 2019.

Alongside hosting international competitions, Morocco has also created its own globally oriented sporting events, which over time have become true markers of its soft power. Among the most emblematic are the Hassan II Golf Trophy, created in 1971, the Marathon des Sables launched in 1986, and the Trophée Aïcha des Gazelles in 1990. More recently, the Mohammed VI International Athletics Meeting, inaugurated in Rabat in 2008, joined the prestigious Diamond League circuit in 2016, thereby cementing Morocco's place among the elite of global athletics.

AFCON 2025: Morocco's Rise as a Sporting Power

In recent years, Morocco has shown an increasing determination to join the select group of states that use sport as an instrument of geopolitical influence. The country has established itself as a key international destination for hosting sporting events, notably organizing the FIFA Club World Cup, the African Nations

¹ Message from His Majesty King Mohammed VI to the participants of the Skhirate Conference, on October 24, 2008.

Championship (CHAN), the African Games, the Women's Africa Cup of Nations, as well as the U20, U23, and U17 Africa Cups of Nations, not to mention the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup. This succession of competitions reflects a proactive strategy aimed at positioning Morocco as a leading sports platform on both the African and global stage.

The awarding of the 2030 FIFA World Cup to Morocco, co-hosted with Spain and Portugal, represents a historic turning point. This event is seen as a major achievement not only for Morocco but also for the entire African continent, which views it as recognition of its ability to host the world's most prestigious sporting competition.

However, the success of using sport as a geopolitical tool can only truly be confirmed if the event generates positive and lasting effects on Morocco's international image, both during and after the competition. The quality of organization, the smooth running of matches, security, the positive impressions of delegations and supporters, the media narrative conveyed during and after the event, as well as infrastructure management and post-event legacy, are all decisive criteria. In this context, hosting the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations represented a first major test. Morocco demonstrated its ability to manage a regional-scale event, thereby laying an essential milestone in preparation for the 2030 World Cup.

Morocco put in place an optimal framework: modern stadiums, training centers meeting international standards, a transport network including a high-speed train, hotel capacity adapted to delegations, dedicated fan zones, and above all, an efficient security system. These elements made it possible to deliver a tournament with an unprecedented level of organization in Africa, marking a break with certain negative perceptions associated with previous AFCON editions and establishing a real "before and after."

The success of this competition can be assessed on several levels. From an economic and media perspective, the number of sponsors increased from 17 in the previous edition to 23, while new broadcasting markets were secured, particularly in the United States, China, and Japan. The total number of viewers reached approximately 3.45 billion cumulative views across television and digital platforms, making this AFCON the most-watched in the history of the continental competition in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Moreover, stadium attendance reached around 1.3 million spectators, setting a historic record for the tournament. This increased visibility also strengthened CAF's economic position, with revenues rising by 90% compared to the previous edition, reaching 192.6 million dollars.²

For Morocco, the creation and development of infrastructure represent the first tangible benefit of AFCON. The competition also provided significant experience in organizing large-scale sporting events, thereby strengthening the country's institutional and logistical capacities. In addition, it generated substantial financial returns, estimated at over one billion euros.

The major success, however, lies in enhancing the Kingdom's attractiveness as an investment and tourism destination. During and after the competition, international media widely conveyed the image of a modern Morocco, capable of offering high-level infrastructure, well-managed organization, and a favorable security environment. This increased visibility helped consolidate the country's brand, improve investor confidence, and boost the activity of tourism operators and institutional partners.³

These results confirm Morocco's success and its credibility as a sporting power, strengthening its symbolic capital on the regional and international stage. They represent a decisive milestone in the Kingdom's sports diplomacy strategy and a full-scale testing ground for the preparation of the 2030 World Cup.

² CAF. TotalEnergies CAF Africa Cup of Nations 2025 Commercial Success in Morocco Leads to Surge in Competition Revenues and Sponsors. CAF Online, 16 janvier 2026.

CAF. CAF Extends Media Accreditation for AFCON Morocco 2025 Due to High Global Demand. CAF communication, octobre 2025 / février 2026

³ The Guardian, « Morocco no longer continental pariah as Afcon showcases its global standing », 27 December 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2025/dec/27/morocco-no-longer-continental-pariah-as-afcon-showcases-its-global-standing>

Le Point, « CAN 2025 : le Maroc peut-il tirer un bilan positif malgré le fiasco de la finale « ? 20 Janvier 2026. <https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/can-2025-le-maroc-peut-il-tirer-un-bilan-positif-malgre-le-fiasco-de-la-finale-XQKESEICH5EJZJHJ7DJD40TLEU/>.

Criticism Campaigns: The Backdrop of a Geopolitical Rivalry

In a context of persistent regional tensions, the organization of AFCON 2025 in Morocco was targeted by media campaigns of provocation, as well as criticisms concerning refereeing, event organization, and Morocco as a whole. These actions, in reality, form the backdrop of a regional geopolitical rivalry orchestrated by Morocco's competitors, who sought to disrupt the smooth running of the competition and undermine the positive image that AFCON would project of the Kingdom and of Africa.

The use of sport as an instrument of soft power inevitably provokes reactions from competing states, which perceive any success by another state as a strengthening of its geopolitical position and regional influence. Morocco's reaffirmation of its African anchoring, its return to the African Union in 2017, its promising Atlantic initiative launched in 2023, its status as one of the main investors on the continent, the international support—including from the United Nations Security Council—for its autonomy initiative in the Sahara, as well as the co-organization of the 2030 World Cup with Spain and Portugal, are all elements perceived by regional competitors as signs of a rise in power.

While sporting events are ideal showcases for the host state to project a positive image and enhance its international influence, they are also opportunities for competitors to convey an opposite image. Without attempting to compare these situations or advocate one thesis over another, the history of major sporting competitions clearly illustrates this dual challenge. For example, during the 1980 Moscow Olympics, more than fifty nations, led by the United States, boycotted the competition in response—according to their official statements—to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.⁴

Similarly, the 2008 Beijing Olympics were accompanied by international campaigns criticizing China, particularly regarding its political system and human rights issues.⁵ Another illustrative case is the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, which faced criticism from NGOs and international media regarding working conditions on certain construction sites, the expropriation of families for the building of sports infrastructure, and the social and environmental impact of these projects.⁶ More recently, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar also represents a significant example: the event triggered a strong wave of criticism from certain Western states and international organizations, focusing on the working conditions of migrant laborers employed on infrastructure sites, as well as the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the country.⁷

Perspectives for the 2030 World Cup

Morocco successfully met the challenge of showcasing African football in an attractive and modern setting, thanks to state-of-the-art stadiums, sophisticated infrastructure, high-quality accommodations and hospitality for participating teams and fans, as well as exceptional popular enthusiasm. Hosting the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations highlighted the country's ability to deliver a sporting event meeting the most demanding international standards.

However, the incidents that occurred during the final, as well as the accompanying provocation and criticism campaigns, serve as a reminder that regional rivalries do not unfold solely on political, military, or economic fronts—they also play out in arenas of soft power, with sport now serving as a central vector. From the perspective of the dynamics of geopolitical rivalry between states, such tensions fall within largely predictable scenarios. The use of sport for influence inevitably exposes the host state to hostile reactions from rival or competing countries. Consequently, preparing a major sporting event cannot be limited to technical and logistical considerations; it must be planned strategically, with a rigor comparable

⁴ Le Monde, Moscou, pour oublier le boycottage des JO de 1980, 05007.2005.

⁵ Human Rights, Pas de trêve olympique pour les droits humains, 07.09.2008. <https://www.humanrights.ch/fr/pfi/droits-humains/politique-exterieure/de-treuve-olympique-droits-humains>

⁶ Aljazeera, Beyond samba, sex and soccer: The World Cup riots in Brazil, 28 May 2014. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/5/28/beyond-samba-sex-and-soccer-the-world-cup-riots-in-brazil>

⁷ France24, « Mondial-2022 : le Qatar fait face à une campagne de critiques "sans précédent", selon l'émir », 15.10.2022. <https://www.france24.com/fr/moyen-orient/20221025-mondial-2022-le-qatar-fait-face-%C3%A0-une-campagne-de-critiques-sans-pr%C3%A9c%C3%A9dent-selon-l-%C3%A9mi>

to that required in conflict management. This entails developing a comprehensive strategy in advance, incorporating risk anticipation, crisis scenario planning, and the establishment of coordinated response mechanisms.

In this sense, hosting AFCON represented a true test: beyond assessing infrastructure and organizational capacities, it measured the country's resilience against provocations and media campaigns aimed at undermining Morocco's image and credibility. At the same time, AFCON 2025 also provided a genuine opportunity for the continent's countries to test whether Africa as a whole truly wants to trust itself with its own development, and whether Africa is collectively ready to manage its affairs.⁸ The two main challenges faced by the organizers during the competition concerned, on one hand, the misinformation spread by certain media and amplified on social networks, and on the other hand, stadium security and the smooth conduct of the matches.

Misinformation campaigns—taking the form of hostile messages disseminated by certain media, influence groups, journalists, or NGOs critical of “Made in Morocco”—serve as a warning signal for Moroccan authorities, the Royal Moroccan Football Federation, and the supervising ministry. In preparation for the 2030 World Cup, Morocco must adopt a structured, proactive communication strategy based on anticipation, to effectively counter attempts at information manipulation and protect its international image. Stadium security and the orderly conduct of matches are equally sensitive issues, particularly given the risk of pitch invasions by supporters. Close coordination between national authorities and international organizing bodies is essential to anticipate these scenarios, harmonize intervention protocols, and ensure the protection of teams and spectators.

For the 2030 FIFA World Cup, Morocco should consider several possible scenarios. Strategic foresight has become imperative in organizing major sporting events, given the scale of the geopolitical challenges tied to the Kingdom's growing regional and international positioning.

A first, “most favorable” scenario would rely on a gradual convergence of political positions between Morocco and the other states that would use the event as an opportunity for their political interests. Since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2729, which supports the autonomy initiative for the Southern Provinces under Moroccan sovereignty, Algeria has faced increased diplomatic pressure to consider this option as a basis for settlement. A dynamic based on converging strategic interests could help reduce current tensions and create a regional climate more conducive to minimal cooperation, favorable to the smooth running of the competition.

A second scenario would involve Algeria and its African partners maintaining a hostile posture toward Morocco. Even in this case, both parties could consider a pragmatic neighborly agreement guaranteeing regional stability during the event, similar to the approach Qatar took with certain Gulf countries ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The pursuit of occasional convergences of interest could form the basis of such an arrangement.

Finally, if these two scenarios prove unattainable, Morocco must prepare to face potentially more intense provocation and disinformation campaigns. In such a case, it could rely on its partners and co-hosts—particularly Spain and Portugal—as well as its international allies, to exert deterrent diplomatic pressure and safeguard the integrity of the competition.

In any case, the development of a comprehensive organizational strategy appears essential. The challenge lies not only in the logistical success of the event but also in the image Morocco seeks to project internationally. The challenges are as symbolic as they are political: consolidating the country's credibility as a major player in global sport and as a stable and attractive regional power.

Designing and implementing such a strategy cannot be fully effective without a multidisciplinary approach. It requires mobilizing researchers and experts in public policy, geopolitics, economics, sociology, sports management, sports marketing, communication, and sports law. This synergy between academic knowledge and operational expertise would allow risks to be anticipated, governance optimized, and overall coherence ensured in decision-making.

Institutionally, this strategy could be realized through the creation of a national commission working

⁸ This idea is inspired by the famous phrase of King Mohammed VI, “Africa must trust Africa,” spoken during the Moroccan-Ivorian Economic Forum in February 2014 in Abidjan.

close coordination with the Royal Moroccan Football Federation, the Moroccan National Olympic Committee, the Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports, as well as the various organizing committees. Such a structure would ensure strategic coherence, monitor objectives, and continuously evaluate ongoing actions.

Moreover, during the event, establishing crisis cells within the stadiums—comprising representatives from public institutions, private actors, media, and specialized experts—would provide an effective system for monitoring and rapid response. These cells would allow real-time tracking of developments, identification of warning signals, and the proposal of immediate, coordinated responses. The work carried out throughout the competition would thus contribute to building valuable expertise, particularly in managing high-risk matches. This accumulated experience would represent a lasting strategic asset, deployable for future large-scale events.

Disclosure statement

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