

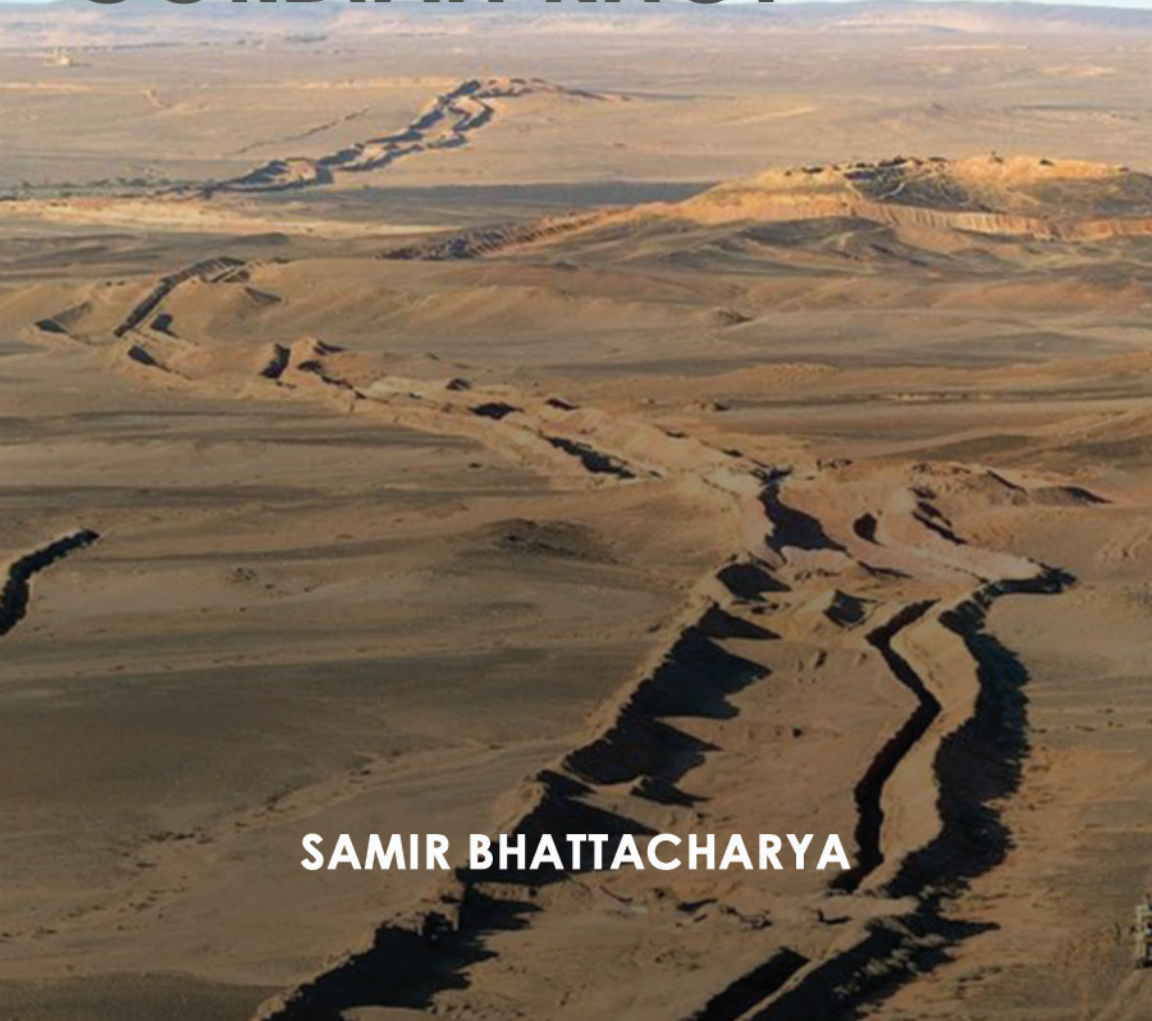


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WESTERN SAHARA

THE NORTH AFRICAN GORDIAN KNOT

An aerial photograph of a vast, arid desert landscape. A prominent, winding, dark-colored riverbed or dry channel cuts through the sandy terrain, creating a zigzag pattern. The surrounding land is flat and extends to the horizon under a clear sky.

SAMIR BHATTACHARYA

Western Sahara

The North African
Gordian Knot

Samir Bhattacharya

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Abstract

Located in northwest Africa, Western Sahara was under Spanish occupation from 1884-1975. Western Sahara is home to some of the most abundant fishing reserves globally and also holds one of the most extensive phosphate reserves. Since 1975, Morocco has been de facto governing over 80 percent of the land known as the Moroccan Sahara. And Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, has been fighting for an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Despite an UN-mediated ceasefire in 1991 with a promise for a referendum on self-determination and the presence of MINURSO to oversee the process, the referendum never took place.

On the contrary, in December 2020, President Trump recognised the Moroccan claim over Western Sahara in exchange for a normalisation deal between Morocco and Israel. While President Biden's Administration now appears to support Trump's policy tacitly, the Ukraine crisis has provided Algeria with a fresh opportunity. Algeria is Europe's biggest gas exporter in Africa. Moreover, it is also a strong ally of Russia. As Spain backed Morocco's proposition to create an autonomous Western Saharan under Moroccan control, this change of position will undoubtedly disturb the North-African diplomatic equilibrium, and the implications could be dangerous. There are four possible scenarios emerging from here. While the region is going through a period of uncertainty, the future of Western Sahara will have significant implications for the region's stability.



Map of Western Sahara

(Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/the-other-side-of-the-moroccan-wall/a-18753807>)

Introduction

The 16th Congress of the Polisario Front took place from January 13 to 20 at the Sahrawi refugee camp in Dajla, in the city of Tindouf, Algeria, under the slogan "*Escalating Fight to Expel the Occupation and Complete Sovereignty*".¹ The meeting took place against the backdrop of the low-intensity war that has been going on in Western Sahara since November 2020. As a matter of fact, this Congress was the first one to be held after the end of the more than 30-year ceasefire in Western Sahara. In the election, the 73-year-old current President, Brahim Ghali, got re-elected as the President of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) for another three-year term with 69 percent of votes. He also retained his position as the Secretary General of the Polisario Front. Although he managed to hold both positions with tacit support from Algeria, there were many asking for his resignation, as there are many who favour a more aggressive approach vis-a-vis the Moroccan Army.²

While Morocco allegedly receives tacit support from the United States, France, and Israel, there are allegations against Algeria, South Africa, and Iran for supporting the Sahrawi Republic with military backing.³ Cuba also supports the struggle of Sahrawis, as was evident by the presence of a Cuban delegation in the Polisario Front congress.⁴ The ceasefire of 1991 was supposed to represent a victory for the democratic ideal with a referendum and usher in an era of peace focused on economic development and cooperation rather than competitive politics. While it may seem that the resumption of hostilities after three decades of ceasefire has once again churned the sands of North Africa, the diplomatic imbroglio between Morocco and Algeria over the territory of Western Sahara may, in fact, be the last stir before another protracted war.

Background to the Crisis

As it appears, after years of stagnation, the Western Sahara conflict is back in the news again and might finally be resolved. The current uproar started on March 18, last year, when Spain made a substantial shift in its North Africa policy by backing Morocco's proposition to create an autonomous Western Sahara under Moroccan control.⁵ And the US government swiftly endorsed the Spanish position. Wendy Sherman, US Deputy Secretary of State, described the idea as "serious, credible, and feasible, and a viable strategy to satisfy the aspirations of the people of the area."⁶

Justifying its decision, the Spanish government described this as a paradigm shift in its North Africa policy. Further, this shift marks the start of "a new phase in relations between Spain and Morocco based on mutual respect, the completion of agreements, the absence of unilateral actions and the permanent transparency of communication".⁷ However, the Spanish endorsement of the Moroccan proposal has clearly irked Algeria. Morocco's regional adversary, Algeria, shelters and supports the Sahrawi Liberation Front "Polisario," an acronym in Spanish for the popular front

for the liberation of Sahrawi. Polisario, an indigenous guerrilla group, is still fighting for the independence of Western Sahara. Algeria has also provided space to more than 176,000 Saharawi refugees.⁸ In response to the Spanish announcement of its support for Morocco over the Western Sahara dispute, Algeria's ambassador to Spain was summoned back.⁹

As the world is scrambling for peace in Eastern Europe due to the Ukraine crisis, this North-African standoff largely concerns Europe and the USA for various reasons. Europe wants to diversify its energy sources to reduce its overdependency on Russian gas and urgently requires Algerian gas to ensure its energy security. The potency of the crisis was demonstrated when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited both Morocco and Algeria on the same trip within ten days of the Spanish endorsement.¹⁰

Importance of Western Sahara

Located in the northwest of Africa, Western Sahara is a largely desert tract bordered by the Atlantic Ocean, Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. With a surface area of 266,000 square km, Western Sahara is nearly the size of Britain.¹¹ Although United Nations classified it as a "non-self-governing territory", technically, it is still a colony, the last African colony. About 500,000 locals living here are known as Sahrawis.¹² They are indigenous people of mixed descent – Berber and Arab. They primarily speak an Arabic dialect known as Hassaniya.¹³

Some of the world's richest fishing waters can be found in Western Sahara. Morocco exports about 100,000 tons of fish per year to Spain, with the bulk of the Moroccan Sardines or Octopus captured off the coast of the disputed territory of Western Sahara.¹⁴ The EU continues to raise illegal and illicit fishing on different multilateral platforms.¹⁵ Strangely, its fishing vessels are still operating in the Saharawian waters, depleting its most valuable natural resources.¹⁶

Western Sahara also holds one of the world's most extensive phosphate reserves, almost 72 percent globally, when combined with Moroccan reserves.¹⁷ It is an essential ingredient for the production of modern fertilisers. Hence, control over Western Sahara interprets as a tight grip over world food production. Morocco's state-owned phosphate company OCP controls 54 percent of the fertiliser export market in Africa. And it owns the Bou Craa mine which is located in Western Sahara and is considered one of the world's largest Phosphate mines.¹⁸ In addition, the region has enormous potential for untapped offshore oil and gas deposits.¹⁹ Morocco also extracts sand, salt, and other agro products for commercial use.²⁰ Finally, Western Sahara's lands also provide possibilities for Morocco to use as a strategic site for renewable energy production.

A brief History of the Western Sahara Dispute

In 1884, during the Scramble for Africa in Berlin, Spain colonised the region, and subsequently, by 1934, it was named Spanish Sahara.²¹ In 1969, Harakat Tahrir was formed as a pro-independence organisation against the Spanish occupation.²² Harakat Tahrir was crushed the following year. However, in 1973, inspired by the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a Western Sahara independence movement known as the Polisario Front was born.²³ Three years later, on February 27, 1976, the Polisario Front declared this territory, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), to be governed by its indigenous people. It has been fighting for its independence since then, first against Spain and now against Morocco.²⁴

In 1975, with the increasing pressure from the UN to decolonise and its domestic turbulences, Spain withdrew its troops. However, under fascist leader General Francisco Franco, Spain backed off from the promised referendum. Instead, Spain made a secret deal with Morocco and Mauritania known as Madrid Pact. As per the deal, Morocco and Mauritania got the joint right to administer the region, leaving nothing for the local people.²⁵

Morocco, led by King Hassan II, staged a "Green March" of 350,000 unarmed civilians and 25,000 armies to claim vast swaths of Western Sahara after the International Court of Justice ruled against Morocco's unilateral claim to the Spanish Sahara.²⁶ In August 1979, Mauritania signed a peace treaty with Polisario and gave up its claim.²⁷ However, Morocco refused to relinquish any control and reinforced its authority by occupying most of the territory.²⁸ And until this day, Morocco continues to control and de facto govern over 80 percent of the land known as the Moroccan Sahara. The Polisario Front holds the remaining 20 percent of the land, known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Since, the war between Morocco and Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, has persisted.



Moroccan Western Sahara Wall or Berm

(Source: <https://www.dzbreaking.com/2019/11/15/international-community-needs-to-pressure-on-morocco-to-remove-wall-of-shame/>)

After occupying the land, the Moroccan Army took the help of the US military to push the Polisario out of the eastern part of Western Sahara. Morocco also used US weapons acquired through companies like Northrop and Westinghouse. Consequently, in 1980, Morocco built the world's second-largest wall to protect the mineral resources of the

Morocco-occupied Sahara from the Polisario Front.²⁹ While in the eastern side of the wall, which Polisario controls, lies an inhabitable desert. This 2700-km-long wall stretches from the southern city of Guerguerat and reaches approximately 200 km into southeastern Morocco, 13 per cent of the length of the Great Wall of China.³⁰ As per the satellite images, in 2021, Morocco extended its sand berm by another 50 Kilometers.³¹ Furthermore, like the Berlin wall, the wall divided the Sahrawis who fled to Algeria from those who stayed back and therefore been termed by Sahrawis as the wall of shame, or the wall of death.³²

Enter the UN Peace Efforts

In 1991, the UN attempted to mediate a ceasefire on the promise of an independence referendum.³³ In the same year, the United Nations Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established based on UNSC resolution 690.³⁴ The prime objective of MINURSO was to hold a referendum on "self-determination" for the Sahrawis, the indigenous people of Western Sahara.

In 2000 and 2003, two Baker peace initiatives were proposed by James Baker, the former US Secretary of State then acting as the UN Secretary-General's Envoy.³⁵ The proposal called for a United Nations-sponsored referendum allowing people to choose between a merger with Morocco, autonomy, or independence. However, they were both shelved due to confusion over voting rights. The impasse continues to linger as Morocco is not ready to accept Sahrawis's self-determination and Polisario's autonomy.

Under the leadership of former German President Horst Kohler, the then UN Envoy to Western Sahara, two "roundtable" discussions took place among Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania.³⁶ The roundtable was hailed internationally as this was the first time Algeria joined the

UN talks over Western Sahara.³⁷ Although the deadlock wasn't resolved immediately, the positive development raised hope toward a negotiated peace. However, the abrupt resignation of Kohler over health issues in May 2019 stalled all the progress. And no further discussion took place over the next two years. The latest meeting took place in 2021 under the leadership of the newly appointed UN envoy to Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura. In their last meeting, UNSC decided to extend the mandate for MINURSO as the comprehensive settlement continues to elude.³⁸

African Union and Western Sahara

In 1984, SADR got recognised as a sovereign state as it joined the Organisation of African Union (OAU) and later became one of the founders of the African Union.³⁹ At that time, 34 African countries recognised Western Sahara. Many of them, however, withdrew or snapped their recognition. South Africa and Algeria are the only vocal defenders of Western Saharan autonomy today. South Africa abstained from voting in 2019 when the UN Security Council considered extending the observer mission in Western Sahara. It strongly opposed the resolution, claiming it was unbalanced and ignored African concerns. However, even South Africa appears to be softening its stance against Morocco since then. This was evident in 2020, when South African President Ramaphosa, during his concluding remarks at the 14th African Union Extraordinary Session, reaffirmed African Summit Decision 693, which gives the UN exclusive authority to find a solution to the Western Sahara issue.⁴⁰

Morocco and Western Sahara

Morocco has a history of using all the approaches, including economic, political and military resources, with the sole objective of tight control over Western Sahara. To recall, immediately after SADR was admitted to OAU, Morocco withdrew from the continental body to maintain diplomatic

pressure on OAU.⁴¹ Recently, in 2018, Morocco severed ties with Iran for the second time in a decade, accusing it of supplying arms to the Polisario through Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist organisation.⁴²

Furthermore, Morocco has always been cautious regarding its various treaties with the European Union and Spain, making no marginal concessions regarding Western Sahara. This deft diplomatic handling helped Morocco keep the conflict under wraps. As Shelley Toby puts it nicely in his book, Moroccan diplomats' success lay in keeping France and the United States out of the game and convincing the Soviet Union to remain disinterested.⁴³ Evidently, the diplomatic imbroglio over Western Sahara has hardly made it to the international news, apart from a few stray reports. As a result, Morocco could pursue its interests in the region without international interference.

Morocco has also been using other diplomatic tools to keep Western Sahara under its firm grip. Over the last few years, Morocco has authorised 23 friendly African and Arab countries to open consulates to Morocco in Morocco-occupied Western Sahara territories, in the cities of al-Dakhla and Laayoune.⁴⁴ Without a doubt, the primary goal of these consulates is to assert Moroccan authority through symbolic political messages rather than to provide consular services.

In 2017, thirty-three years after quitting the African Union (AU), Morocco rejoined the continental body with the explicit goal of cultivating regional support for its claim to Western Sahara as well as economic opportunities for Moroccan firms.⁴⁵ Since, King Mohammed VI has launched several diplomatic, investment, and trade initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa to amplify its voice in the AU to suspend SADR.

Meanwhile, Moroccan policies of settlement and assimilation in Western Sahara have jeopardised Saharawis and their identity. Morocco has invested

billions of dollars in Western Sahara's infrastructure development. Most of the infrastructure in the capital Laayoune and the coastal city Dakhala are built with Moroccan Dirham. Morocco has been constructing a state-of-the-art port at Dakhla.⁴⁶ Besides, the kingdom has been providing considerable incentives to encourage Moroccans to settle there. Over time, the number of Moroccans living in Western Sahara has largely surpassed the number of its indigenous inhabitants.⁴⁷ It's no surprise that Morocco wants everyone in Western Sahara, including the many Moroccan people who have settled there, to be able to vote, as this would tip the referendum in Morocco's favour. Algeria and the Polisario Front oppose the Moroccanisation of its territory and want only native Sahrawis to be eligible to vote.

Sahrawi refugees and Humanitarian Crisis

Since Morocco occupied the land of Western Sahara, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and many other reputable investigative groups have reported massive arrests, torture of dissidents, random disappearances, killings, and violent suppression against the pro-independence Sahrawi people living in the occupied territory.⁴⁸ According to the Freedom House survey of 210 countries, Western Sahara lies at the bottom when it comes to political rights.⁴⁹ As per Stephen Zunes, an international studies professor at the University of San Francisco, the human rights condition in Morocco-occupied Western Sahara is worse than in Iraq under Saddam and Indonesia under Suharto.⁵⁰

Sahrawi women have traditionally had more rights than women in other countries in the region. While they have been very active in the non-violent resistance movement in the occupied territories, there have been numerous reports of harassment and torture by the Moroccan Army, which Morocco dismisses as a propaganda war against Morocco. Massive protests took place in the Saharawi capital Dakhala in February 2020 against Moroccan occupation and the disappearance and possible murder

of Lehbib Aghrichi.⁵¹ There are also accusations against security forces for brutally cracking down on the demonstration.⁵²

President of the Sahrawi Association for the Defence of Human Rights, activist Sultana Khaya, was nominated for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought 2021.⁵³ Since 2005, Sultana Khaya has been suffering from physical attacks, death threats, torture and sexual assaults by the Moroccan authorities. On August 22 2021, Moroccan security agents broke into her house and sexually assaulted her and her sister Laura Khaya and physically harassed other family members. She has been under de facto house arrest since November 2020. In September, when she was nominated for her work on women's rights and promoting the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people, Morocco engaged in intense diplomacy, resulting in her disqualification from the final round. And on November 15 2021, Moroccan security forces again broke into the house, raped her and sexually abused her sisters and 80-year-old mother.⁵⁴ Many other journalists like El Bachir Khadda or Mohamed Lamin Haddi were sentenced for reporting the month-long Gdeim Izik protest camp in October 2010, killing about 11 Sahrawis and injuring hundreds.⁵⁵

During the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, half of the Sahrawis fled and entered Algeria. These refugees still live in tents, mud shacks, and brick buildings in the Tindouf province, 1,400 kilometres southwest of Algiers. The situation in Sahrawis settled in these refugee camps of Tindouf is not really better than those remaining in Morocco-controlled territory. These camps are running entirely on international aid. The World Food Programme (WFP) distributes the monthly ration while water tankers bring the water.⁵⁶ Some electricity pylons, installed by Algeria, provide electricity in the camps. In 2021, France donated \$ 478 000 to support the education of Sahrawi refugee children in Algeria.⁵⁷ And in March 2022, Spain donated US\$2.7 million to provide for their food and other medical

needs.⁵⁸ Finally, in November 2022, when WFP's funding requirement for Sahrawi refugees reached an all-time high, the European Union (EU) approved a humanitarian grant of US\$ 6 million to cover the basic food needs of Sahrawi refugees living in Algeria.⁵⁹

The region is highly susceptible to international drug routes. Moreover, the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is highly active there. As per some Moroccan reports, local imams in the Polisario-controlled territory on Algerian soil have been recruiting young people for AQIM.⁶⁰ There is also the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (EI-GS), led by Adnane Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, a former active member of the Polisario Front. Unless there is some political solution, the youth living in the camps are particularly vulnerable to the calls of drug and extremist networks.⁶¹ The recent UN envoy Staffan de Mistura visited the region several times. His visits reignited some hope for finding a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Western Sahara.



Life in a Refugee Camp

(Source: <https://allthatsinteresting.com/polisario-sahrawi>)

Morocco-Algeria Bilateral Relations

The dispute between Morocco and Algeria dates back to their independence years when in 1962, they fought a brief war over their border, dubbed as 'Sand War'.⁶² After the independence, while Morocco carried on with its monarchy system, Algeria not only pursued socialism but also began supporting revolutionary movements across the world, making the conservative Moroccan monarchy uneasy.⁶³ The continued tensions between Morocco and Algeria have long hampered security and economic cooperation in North Africa. In 1994, Algeria accused Morocco of backing Islamist groups to create unrest in the country, which killed two tourists in Hotel Marrakesh and decided to close the border, which remains closed to this day.⁶⁴ Since then, the relations have remained strained as military tensions erupt regularly over purported invasions by one side or the other.

On December 10, 2020, President Trump announced that the Kingdom of Morocco and Israel have decided to establish full diplomatic relations.⁶⁵ The normalisation agreement between these two enemy nations rekindled tensions between Morocco and Algeria. As part of the accord, the US recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Saharan territory, making it the first significant international power to accept Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.⁶⁶ President Trump also pledged to open a US consulate to Morocco in Dakhla but was dislodged from his position before the deal materialised.⁶⁷

Late in 2020, a new round of conflict broke out. In November 2020, the Polisario announced its withdrawal from the truce and began small-scale attacks on Moroccan military positions⁶⁸. This was due to the incursion of Moroccan troops into a demilitarised "buffer zone" to clear Polisario demonstrators who were interfering with the Moroccan construction of a road connecting to Mauritania. Meanwhile, Algeria blamed Morocco for the increasing military clashes and the normalisation of relations with

Israel around the same time.

In April 2021, Morocco was accused of using drones to assassinate Addah al-Bendir, a leading Western Saharan independence fighter.⁶⁹ This was done in violation of the 1991 ceasefire agreement. Surprisingly, Morocco had no official denial of the operation that killed the Polisario leader except for the deployment of drones. However, as per Moroccan news site Le Desk, Bendir was killed using a French-Israeli unarmed Harfang drone.⁷⁰

In August 2021, Algeria experienced the worst wildfire in its history, killing at least 90 people.⁷¹ Algeria accused Morocco, specifically a Paris-based Kabyle independence organisation Rashad group and MAK, of fanning the fires and lynching a man wrongly accused of arson.⁷² Morocco is also suspected of utilising Israeli software Pegasus to monitor around 6000 Algerian politicians, army men, intelligence chiefs, senior government officials, diplomats and political activists.⁷³ Earlier in July, Morocco's UN envoy, Omar Hilale said that the people of Algeria's Berber region of Kabyle should have the right to define their status.⁷⁴ Several experts compared Morocco's statement at the UN in support of the Kabyle as a war cry. Periodic hostile actions and this statement led Algeria to sever its diplomatic ties with Morocco and cut off gas shipments to Spain that had previously passed through Morocco.⁷⁵ This was followed by the Algerian accusation of killing three truck drivers in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.⁷⁶

For the West, both countries are critical in the fight against terrorism in the broader Sahel.⁷⁷ Hence, this Algerian stance will complicate diplomacy in the region.⁷⁸ Furthermore, in the absence of international pressure, both Morocco and Algeria will keep their diplomatic distance as neither has any interest in waging war. Consequently, this might lead to another round of cold war in the North African desert.

Algeria Controls the Supply of Oil and Gas

Algeria is the biggest supplier of gas for Spain and Europe from Africa. It has been delivering natural gas to Spain and Portugal via Morocco for the past 25 years using the Maghreb-European pipeline, also known as MEG.⁷⁹ However, in October this year, the contract between Algeria's state-owned energy company Sonatrach and the Moroccan National Office for Energy and Potable Water (ONEE) expired. Algeria refused to renew the contract over its skirmishes with Morocco.⁸⁰

Algeria has two other undersea pipelines, Transmed and Medgaz, and none of these two passes through Morocco.⁸¹ While Algerian Energy Minister Mohamed Arkab promised to meet Spain's demand by using the smaller undersea Medgaz-pipeline, the decision has generated fear of gas shortages and skyrocketing energy prices in Spain and other European countries.⁸² The suspicion escalated by Italy's agreement to import additional volumes from Algeria, amounting to around 12 per cent of its total demand. On April 11, Italian Prime Minister Draghi met the Algerian President to sign the deal.⁸³ It is feared that in order to supply extra gas to Italy, Algeria might reduce the supply or increase the price to Spain.⁸⁴ Moreover, the Medgaz pipeline has already hit maximum capacity and is highly susceptible to breakdowns as it is located mainly offshore.⁸⁵

Early in April, Algeria warned of halting its gas export to Spain after Spanish energy minister Teresa Ribera announced that Madrid would allow reverse gas flows to Morocco via the MEG.⁸⁶ Despite Moroccan claims of legal validity of the action, Algeria is clearly in an advantageous situation and would want some leverage. However, stopping the gas supply to Spain would only mean redirecting it to Italy, the other large buyer of Algerian gas. Be as it may, this Spanish volte-face in North Africa, particularly in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, would further complicate the energy security of Spain and broader Europe.⁸⁷ When Europe is scrambling to

replace Russian energy sources, this rapprochement appears to exacerbate the energy insecurity for Spain, France and the rest of Europe. Now, the scramble for alternative gas suppliers in Europe augured well for Algeria and provided the country with additional bargaining power.



Map of Algerian Gas Pipelines connecting Europe

(Source: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/algeria-threatens-to-cut-gas-contract-with-spain/>)

Morocco Controls the Flow of Migrants

Another key event in the region occurred in April 2021 when Spain allowed the treatment of 73 years old Western Saharan independence leader Brahim Ghali in the Spanish city of Logrono, creating a bitter diplomatic spat between Spain and Morocco.⁸⁸ Although Spain defended their position, citing the humanitarian aspect,⁸⁹ Morocco was clearly offended and recalled its ambassador to Spain,⁹⁰ only to be sent back later after the visit of the Spanish Prime Minister (PM).⁹¹

But if Algeria has influence through its gas and oil, Morocco has its own influence in controlling the migration flows. In May 2021, Morocco retaliated Spanish decision to host Ghali by deliberately easing border

controls with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, allowing at least 6000 migrants to enter Spain in less than 36 hours.⁹² The way the Moroccan border authority let illegal immigrants, including children, cross the border is one drastic instance of weaponising its border and alarmed the human rights groups against Spain.⁹³ This has prompted Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles to accuse Morocco of blackmailing Spain using minors.⁹⁴



Map of Ceuta and Melilla Islands

(Source: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/288300813616304689/>)

Geopolitics over the Western Sahara Dispute

Reinforcing the strategic presence in North Africa had taken on fresh urgency in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. Thus, when Spanish PM Pedro Sanchez and Moroccan King Mohammad VI shook hands in Rabat

on April 7, 2022, speculations were rife over what both sides stood to gain or lose from this rapprochement. During that trip, Spain affirmed its acceptance of the Moroccan proposal of 2007 for an autonomous region of Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty.⁹⁵ The Spanish PM also described the plan as the most serious, realistic and credible way to resolve the dispute.⁹⁶

An article in the daily *El Periódico de España* compared the Spanish endorsement for Moroccan rights over Western Sahara to barter for Morocco's promise to drop its claims to Ceuta, Melilla enclaves and the Canary Islands.⁹⁷ However, it is also likely that the Spanish action was prompted by US pressure to recognise Western Sahara as a Moroccan territory.⁹⁸

Algeria's diplomatic closeness with Russia further complicates the situation. As a matter of fact, Algeria is not only the most significant natural gas exporter in Africa; it is also a close ally of Moscow since its independence from France in 1962.⁹⁹ The Soviet Union provided much-needed financial, military and political support to the Algerian war of independence.¹⁰⁰ Both countries have maintained strong economic cooperation since the 1960s, and even today, Russia has substantial clout over Sonatrach, the national oil company of Algeria.¹⁰¹

Russia is Algeria's biggest weapon supplier, including Sukhoi and MiG jets, helicopters, tanks, and submarines.¹⁰² At this moment, any gas supply disruption from Algeria might cause energy insecurity in Europe, weakening its opposition to Russia. While Sonatrach has stated that it will expand its supply to Europe, its intention and production capacity are doubtful.¹⁰³ Furthermore, given Algeria's long-standing ties to Russia, it seems unlikely that Algeria will take any move that would be detrimental to Russian interests.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, Russia has hosted the Polisario Front twice in recent years, in 2017 and 2021, conveying a strong message of solidarity to Algeria.¹⁰⁵ In any case, there are new churns in the sands of North Africa. As tensions rise, this might drive the long-stalled Western Sahara peace talks forward and determine the future of the stand-off.

USA: Shifting Position

Morocco-US relationship goes back to 1777, when Morocco was one of the first countries to recognise US sovereignty. Since the end of the cold war, Morocco has been treated as the most prominent non-NATO ally of the US, resulting in several military deals. As a matter of fact, the relationship has been mutual. Before the 2016 election of the US, Moroccan state-owned phosphate company OCP operating from Western Sahara, donated several million to the Clinton Foundation.¹⁰⁶ Earlier, Moroccan King Mohammed VI pledged 500,000 USD to the Clinton Foundation to help build Bill Clinton's presidential library.¹⁰⁷

While the US played a crucial role in pressuring Spain to leave Western Sahara, since 1977, it has maintained a neutral stance.¹⁰⁸ Despite President George W. Bush's open support for the Moroccan proposition of 2007, he never formalised it. It was only Trump who not only formally recognised Moroccan rights over the disputed territory but also became the world's first major country to do so.

Interestingly, President Biden's Administration now appears to tacitly support Trump's policy shift on Western Sahara, avoiding the reversal of Trump's quid-pro-quo agreement with Morocco.¹⁰⁹ This was evident in the State Department's decision in May 2021 to officially recognise the Abraham Accords, establish a temporary Consulate in Dakhla, develop a new commercial port there, and release new maps representing Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty.¹¹⁰ Moreover, reports linking Polisario

to Hezbollah, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups mainly originate from Moroccan intelligence. Hence, they should be accepted with caution. And finally, when Russia annexed Crimea and most recently tried to annex Ukraine, the US is not only vehemently opposing it but also prepared for war, if required, reflecting its double standard.

China: Safeguarding BRI Investments

The current diplomatic imbroglio in North Africa has put China at a crossroads as it has substantial investments in both countries. China wants to develop Europe–Africa connectivity across the western Mediterranean using its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and for that, both countries are crucial.

Originally joining the BRI in 2017, Morocco upgraded its investment and financing agreements with China on January 5, 2022. However, China's participation in Moroccan infrastructure development sky jumped, particularly since Moroccan King Mohammed VI's visit to China in 2016, when both countries signed several strategic partnership agreements.¹¹¹ China has substantially invested in Morocco's emerging West Africa-to-Western Europe commercial transportation corridor. The corridor will use Morocco's al-Boraq high-speed rail line and the newly-expanded Port of Tanger Med.¹¹² The expansion work that China Merchants Group funded has transformed the Tanger Med port into the largest port in the Mediterranean.¹¹³

French-led European manufacturing predominates in Morocco. However, as France doesn't have a strong strategic ally in the region, China showed interest in integrating into the French-led value chain. French manufacturers Renault and Groupe PSA are the two major Moroccan vehicle manufacturing companies. To integrate into the French-led value chain, Chinese company Nanjing Xiezhong Group is constructing a US\$15

million facility to supply air conditioners. Similarly, CITIC Dicastal established a US\$400 million plant to supply equipment to Groupe PSA.¹¹⁴ In 2017, China's electrical vehicle manufacturer BYD Auto signed an agreement to build a 2,500-person plant. Once completed, it will be the 3rd biggest automobile factory in Morocco, just after Renault and PSA.¹¹⁵

Although currently off-track, China is also building Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City. Once completed, this US\$10 billion project funded by the Chinese Communications Construction Company, Haite Group, has the potential to transform the Moroccan economy.¹¹⁶ Another Chinese company, Hubei Forbon Technology, with Moroccan State-owned phosphate company OCP, has agreed to develop new generations of fertiliser solutions and smart agriculture.¹¹⁷

However, similar to Morocco, China has a substantial investment in Algeria too, and China plans to develop an infrastructure corridor connecting Sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean, passing through Algeria. In 2018 Algeria joined BRI, and the two countries are currently negotiating a five-year plan for cooperation. In July 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Mr Wang Yi visited Algeria, putting the construction of El Hamdania port into motion. Signed in 2016 with China State Construction Engineering Corporation and China Harbor Engineering Company, the commercial deep-water seaport would cost US\$3.3 billion. It would compete with Morocco's Tanger Med deep-water port, also built with Chinese financing.¹¹⁸ According to some reports, China will have control of the port for 25 years in exchange for financing.

Further, the port will be connected to Algerian railway lines and the East-West highway; other Chinese-backed infrastructure includes CITIC Corporation and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC).¹¹⁹ As China recently appointed senior diplomat Xue Bing as its new special envoy for the Horn of Africa, he may be given additional

charge of bridging the Algeria-Morocco divide.¹²⁰ Alternatively, a new special envoy can also be explicitly appointed to the region as the need to protect its assets become paramount.

Anatomy of Indian Neutrality

India has a history of bitter-sweet relationships with Morocco. In 1969, during the first Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) summit in Rabat, Morocco, persuaded by Pakistan vehemently opposed India's participation in the Summit. However, over the years, the India-Morocco relationship has bolstered several notches.¹²¹ Similarly, India has always maintained a cordial relationship with Algeria. As a matter of fact, Algeria established its embassy in India even before its independence in 1962.¹²² India upgraded its strategic relationship with Algeria when in September 2021, the Indian Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs V Muraleedharan, visited Algeria and met the Prime Minister of Algeria, Aymen Benabderrahmane.

During the Cold War, despite its non-aligned position, India was closely linked to the Soviet Union. In 1985, when the then PM of India, Rajiv Gandhi, visited Algeria on his way to the USA to meet President Chadli Bendjedid, a great friend of the Soviet Union, Rajiv Gandhi was convinced about the need to recognise Polisario.¹²³ Mohammad Abdelaziz, the Polisario leader, was a friend of Cuban revolutionist Fidel Castro and had Soviet backing. Upon his meeting with Bendjedid, the Indian PM agreed to recognise the sovereignty of Western Sahara. The decision got diluted only 24 hours later when the PM was persuaded in Washington that the decision to recognise the Polisario should be delayed if not cancelled.¹²⁴

The aftereffect of Indian recognition was dramatic. Immediately after India recognised the sovereignty of SADR, Morocco severed its diplomatic ties with India.¹²⁵ On the other hand, despite their financial shortcomings, elated Polisario opened a full-fledged embassy in New Delhi. However,

within a month, the Polisario realised that apart from having an embassy in the national capital, there was no real engagement with the Indian government. Consequently, the embassy was shut down the following year due to inactivity. However, the limbo persisted. Finally, in 2000, the Indian government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee decided to derecognise SADR. This derecognition shocked everyone and was vehemently protested by CPI (M) internally. They even termed this derecognition as a diplomatic volte-face.¹²⁶

Since then, there has been no discussion vis-à-vis Western Sahara in the Indian diplomatic circle. At that time, the Government of India decided not to explain their decision, and the status quo remains. And, the words such as 'self-determination' and 'referendum' or 'plebiscite' were avoided.¹²⁷ Moreover, the influence of the USA has also worked, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today, the Indian company Paradeep Phosphates Limited is the biggest importer of Western Saharan Phosphate. As a matter of fact, it is the only one of the three companies that continue to buy phosphate rock from the disputed land. Paradeep is also a subsidiary of Moroccan state-owned OCP.¹²⁸

Climate Change and Resource Scarcity

Climate change is another big concern for the Moroccans as they witness an increasing frequency of drought situations. The water table in its reservoirs has dropped from 49.5 per cent in 2021 to 32.4 per cent in June 2022, owing to a 64 per cent rainfall deficit. The mean precipitation from September 2021 to January 2022 was 38.8 millimetres. That number is normally around 106.8 millimetres.¹²⁹ In the period leading up to 1990, droughts in Morocco happened once every five years. However, from 1990 to 2000, the trend increased and has become a biennial occurrence.

Extreme heat is also becoming more common. Temperatures rose across the country over a 56-year period (1961-2017), with a peak increase of 2.6 degrees Celsius recorded in the central province of Taza, higher than the two degrees Celsius targeted by UN climate goals. The ongoing temperature increase will have a significantly negative impact on food production. In terms of water, the environmental consequences of glacial melt and sea level rise could devastate Morocco's vast 2,500-kilometer shoreline, which extends from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Rising sea levels could endanger the tourist industry in many seaside cities and villages, as well as harm the environment and crop yields.

There are already several crises in North Africa over scarce resources such as water. There are also issues other than water. A significant portion of Morocco's phosphate reserves is found in disputed lands of the Western Sahara. With the dwindling resources, the fisheries and phosphate found in the Sahara worth over \$500 million could create new grounds for conflict in the region. Currently, Morocco controls these two resources. As fresh tensions emerge and the focus of the conflict hinges on resource scarcity, in addition to ideology, Morocco will also have an economic incentive to keep the territory under its control.

For the Western Sahara region, Morocco has introduced its adaptation plan, 'Maroc Vert'. The project is built on two pillars: sustainable use of current resources and greater use of renewable energy sources. Morocco's fishing strategy, "Halieutis," founded in 2009 by King Mohammed VI, helps to develop new industrial platforms and achieve professional management of the country's fishery resources.¹³⁰ The plan aims to create a fishing industry in Dakhla based on the sustainable exploitation of this resource. However, given the land falls under "non-self-governing territory" recognised by the UN, this may create a new legal ground for the conflict.

The Maroc Vert programme also includes the 50 MW Foug El Oued Wind Farm Project near Laayoune, and the project has similar complexities of the Halieutis Plan.¹³¹ Morocco is developing another 300MW facility at Boujdour, another city under Western Sahara territory.¹³² Finally, Morocco is also seeking investment worth \$213 million for 52 square kilometres of unused land near Dakhla.¹³³ The plan is to convert the land into farms for fruits, vegetables, and fodder using a wind-powered desalting plant. While Morocco introduced these plans as climate change adaptation strategies for Morocco and beyond, given their implementation involves the disputed land, this may create new tensions.

Climate change will aggravate the conflict situation as reducing resources would also mean reduced access to resources for Sahrawi natives and would generate new dynamics and grounds for Saharawi grievances. It is essential that the dynamics of climate change be considered in order for a viable peace process to occur.

The Way Forward

The last Congress, held in 2019, was much before the Covid pandemic and the resumption of recent hostilities. Over 2,000 Sahrawi representatives attended the Congress this time and supported further escalation of violent means. Indeed, the re-election of Brahim Ghali as Polisario secretary-general is strong evidence of the Sahrawi people's support for the current military confrontation with Morocco. On the last day of the Congress, January 20, the Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army (PLAE) reported that it had bombarded Moroccan forces in Western Sahara's Al Mahbas region.

For more than 45 years, there has been a simmering war over Western Sahara, where the country finds itself in a unique position. UN rejected Madrid Accord as the subject of transfer of sovereignty over the territory is carefully ignored, and no signatories have been bestowed with the

administering power. On the other hand, the International Court of Justice doesn't recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Hence, as per international law, Spain remains the ruling authority and needs to end decolonisation by initiating a free referendum to respect the principle of self-determination by the locals.¹³⁴

While the most significant endorsement for Western Sahara came from its recognition of the African Union as a member in 2002, several countries have changed their position since then, derecognising Western Sahara. Even in 2004, 82 countries recognised the independence of Western Sahara.¹³⁵ Currently, only 46 nations recognise SADR as an independent nation. And for the United Nations, it is still a "territory under an unfinished process of decolonisation."¹³⁶

Thus, four decades later, SADR remains Africa's only territory awaiting decolonisation. MINURSO has been in operation since 1991, yet Sahrawi self-determination remains elusive, and the monitoring of the ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario is underwhelming. It took two years to find a replacement since the departure of the last UN envoy to the region.

Going forward, even though a solution based on the strict application of the self-determination right appears the most appropriate, it would not be possible. As self-determining SADR will be detrimental to Moroccan and European interests, France could veto it in the UNSC. It is also true that in the absence of political institutions, self-governance would be extremely difficult for the locals. Moreover, they may plunge into a civil war similar to another newly created nation, South Sudan. Besides, the internal stability of Algeria is highly questionable. In this situation, the only way to avoid the risk of instability is to maintain the status quo, which also means refusing the Sahrawis their right to referendum. Instead, a peace process proposed by Morocco is more likely now. However, this would give Morocco undue veto power over how the Sahrawi people exercise

their internationally recognised rights. Unless Sahrawis get to decide their future, whether it's complete independence or autonomy as proposed by Morocco, this long-fought battle will amount to nothing.

From here, Western Sahara can go in one of four directions:-

1. A democratically elected government in SADR that is backed by the West.
2. Algeria accepts Moroccan design.
3. Tensions between Morocco and Algeria continue to brew, and diplomatic imbroglio in the region continues
4. A violent clash takes place between Algeria and Morocco

As many scholars, including Noam Chomsky, consider a series of non-violent protests in Western Sahara sparked the Arab Spring, it is critical that international communities, particularly the UN, recognise the aspirations of the region's indigenous people.¹³⁷ The UN has failed the people of Western Sahara in providing the groundwork for self-determination and decolonisation.¹³⁸ The outcome of the Western Sahara dispute is highly crucial to a few hundred thousand indigenous Sahrawis and their kin in southern Morocco, northern Mauritania and western Algeria. The Western Saharan conflict is one of the world's most underlooked conflicts. Finally, as the European and American interests seem to have intertwined in the conflict, the North African standoff must be resolved this time.

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