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Morocco's Current Approach in Attaining International Recognition Over the Western Sahara (2020-2023)

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Abstrak

Sahara Barat telah menjadi wilayah perebutan antara Maroko dan gerakan pembebasan bernama Polisario Front selama puluhan tahun. Pasca tahun 2020, terdapat lebih banyak negara yang memberi rekognisi, atau dukungan terhadap upaya Maroko mempertahankan kedaulatan dan integritas wilayahnya atas Sahara Barat. Maroko terus memperkuat Autonomy Plan dengan melakukan beberapa pendekatan sehingga legitimasi eksternal dapat tercapai. Artikel ini bertujuan menganalisis upaya terkini pemerintah Maroko; yakni pendekatan dalam memperoleh rekognisi internasional untuk legitimasi eksternal dan integritas teritorial atas Sahara Barat. Metode penelitian adalah Kualitatif-Deskriptif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui Studi Pustaka. Analisis dalam artikel ini didasarkan pada teori Diplomasi dan Kepentingan Nasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan terkini pemerintah Maroko semakin asertif: normalisasi hubungan yang bernuansa tit-for-tat, leverage politics dengan negara-negara asing, ekspansi kehadiran secara tangible di Sahara Barat melalui pembangunan gedung-gedung diplomatik, serta berbagai kerjasama internasional. Berbagai upaya tersebut mengindikasikan semakin

pentingnya Sahara Barat bagi Maroko, dan juga tekadnya yang tak tergoyahkan untuk melindungi integritas teritorial.

Kata kunci: Maroko, Kedaulatan, Rekognisi, Sengketa Wilayah, Sahara Barat.

Abstract

Western Sahara has been a contested area between Morocco and a liberation movement called the Polisario Front for decades. Post 2020, there are growing numbers of countries who recognize, and are in favor of Moroccan efforts to maintain sovereignty, in addition to territorial integrity over the Western Sahara. Morocco continues to strengthen its Autonomy Plan by taking several approaches so that external legitimacy can be achieved. This paper aims to analyze the current efforts of the Moroccan government; that is their approach to attain international recognition for external legitimacy and territorial integrity over the Western Sahara. The research method is Qualitative-Descriptive, with data gathering technique being Library Research. Analysis in this paper is based on the Diplomacy and National Interest theories. The result indicates that the current approach of the Moroccan government is getting assertive: tit-for-tat normalization of relations, leverage politics with foreign countries, and expanding tangible presence in the Western Sahara through diplomatic building establishments, as well as setting up international cooperations. These efforts indicate the growing urgency of the Western Sahara for Morocco, and also its non-wavering resolve to protect territorial integrity.

Keywords: Morocco, Sovereignty, Recognition, Territorial Integrity, Western Sahara

Introduction

Morocco is a region bordering Western Sahara to the south. The latter was known as the Spanish Sahara for 18 years (da Vinci, 2023). Morocco and the Western Sahara share similarities: having a common religious majority namely Sunni Muslims; having ethnic Berbers and Arabs as majority; spoken languages using Arabic, French, and Spanish; gained revenue from phosphate mining and fishing; and being former Spanish colonies (Velisya, 2022). Geographical proximity can be said to be the initial cause of the conflict, which is fundamentally spurred by them defending their respective territorial integrity (Adwitama, 2022).

Prior to European colonization, they were under the Kingdom of Morocco's governance. When Spain and France had a feud, it caused them to divide their colonies.

Spain controlled the southern region, currently known as the Western Sahara, while France controlled the northern region. In 1959, this northern region was able to become independent and declared a sovereign state called Morocco. Morocco then began to fight for its territorial integrity by forcing Spain to return the territory they controlled and drive them out of Western Sahara. Simultaneously, an independence movement began to be formed by the inhabitants of Western Sahara under the name Polisario Front. It aimed to resist Spanish colonialism and establish a sovereign state. Confrontations were carried out by the Moroccan army against the Polisario Front. A protest called the 'Green March' was also carried out by Morocco to exert pressure on Spain. Through the Treaty of Madrid, Spain ceded Western Sahara to Mauritania and Morocco (Ariyati, 2020). Shortly after, Morocco annexed the territory.

The Polisario Front declared the formation of a new state Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), leading to the outbreak of territorial conflicts. In 1979, Mauritania entered into an agreement regarding the ceding of territory to the Polisario Front. Yet, the territory also became annexed by Morocco. The United Nations (UN) issued a special peace mission called UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Through the mission in 1991, the two conflicting sides struck a deal to stop the ceasefire and MINURSO promised to provide referendum facilities aimed at residents of Western Sahara (Ariyati, 2020). However, desire to complete their territorial integrity persists, even into the next century. Though there are several countries who recognized SADR, Morocco is not the least bit deterred. The Moroccan government still proceeds to gain external legitimacy, that is international recognition of its claim over Western Sahara, with the United States (US) as the all-time supporter. President Donald Trump's administration had formally submitted an official statement on recognition for Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara in late 2020 (Pelopor Wiratama, 2020) and this support was never revoked in the new Biden administration. They pioneered in gaining Morocco support from Israel. Support is also shown by many countries outside Africa, such as the EU (European Union) countries. Until October 2023, about 14

countries in the organization expressed their support for Morocco's autonomy plan and the latest was from the Czech Republic who signed a joint declaration in Prague together with Morocco (Kingdom of Morocco, 2023).

There had been many who proposed formulas to a peaceful, win-win solution. Yet, the dispute is far more intricate. Scholars throughout the year took a different approach in responding to the dispute to provide better understanding. Maghraoui (2003) studied Moroccan claims over the Western Sahara, as well as the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) 1975 rulings. He revealed that there were ambiguities enveloping the sovereignty principles by addressing the futility of neutral claims or high moral footings in dispute resolution that are based on shared interpretation of sovereignty. Maghraoui believed that foreign efforts to preserve self-determination for the people in the Western Sahara undermines Moroccan national sovereignty (Maghraoui, 2003). Daadoui (2008) conducted a constructivist study upon self-determination in Western Sahara. He finds that such practice fails to elaborate the entangled nature of the dispute, and abandons the historical legacy due to its dependence on the positivist legal framework. Daadoui suggests that constructivism should instead socially identify issues on the identity of the people in Western Sahara (Daadaoui, 2008). Nevertheless, Morocco always prevails to maintain and expand its recognitional legitimacy over the Western Sahara .

Aside from existing literature discussing possible solutions above, we also provide other perspectives such as the following. Jeffrey J. Smith analyzed the role of natural resources in the ongoing occupation of Western Sahara. He concluded that though phosphate and fisheries are the leading resources in the disputed territory, they do not exactly cover the cost of occupation. Rather, they are one of the leading means to preserve the status quo of Moroccan occupation. The role of natural resources, according to his research, is to become a validating power to Morocco's claim over Western Sahara. It means, the resources are used as the economic generator for the people in the territory, which is now dominated by Moroccan settlers. There are few purposes on this: First, to get as many Moroccan as possible into the territory, to become

settlers there, so that the self-determination solution proposed by the United Nations could be turned into their (majority inhabitants') favour; Second, making way for Morocco to avoid accusation of violating international law, by using the natural resources to enable Sahrawis to make a living, albeit with limited access to it. The Sahrawis' economic dependence on the Moroccan settlers is crucial, as the latter are the people who have more access to the resource exploitation and management; Third, to deter other states from intervening in the dispute, by leveraging natural resources exports from the territory as bargaining tools via trade agreements with Morocco. Consequently, the Western Saharan issue is in a deadlock (Smith, 2015). Smith's research has contributed greatly on resources-politik, in which the Moroccan government utilizes their de facto ownership of Western Sahara to exploit the natural resources for their own interest in such an intricate play.

Bahha Meryeme, et al (2023). discussed Morocco's active involvement in economic diplomacy in Sub-Saharan Africa through South-South cooperation. Since 1999, these efforts have resulted in numerous visits and agreements with more than 35 African countries, aimed at strengthening Morocco's position and promoting shared economic growth. Moroccan companies, particularly in the banking and telecommunications sectors, have expanded their operations in Sub-Saharan Africa, supporting the country's strategy to enhance its identity and influence on the continent. Morocco's economic diplomacy also plays an important role in Western Sahara, with initiatives such as negotiating autonomy status and investing in infrastructure and human resources. This strategy not only boosts Morocco's economic interests but also strengthens its soft power in the region (Meryeme et al., 2023). This research presented an exploration of how soft power gained through economic diplomacy and investment influences the international views of Morocco's claim over Western Sahara.

Yasmine Hasnoui analyzes the perspectives of the parties involved and Algeria's role in the conflict. This article provides insight into the challenges and complexities of conflict resolution efforts in Western Sahara. The UN has been deeply involved, aiming

to facilitate a settlement through various initiatives, including the UN Mission to Western Sahara (MINURSO). Despite these efforts, the dispute remains unresolved due to obstacles and differing perspectives on self-determination, autonomy, and integration. Key parties like Morocco, Polisario, and Algeria contribute to the complexities. Mediation efforts by figures such as James A. Baker III have not led to a final settlement. The article underscores the importance of dialogue and sustained diplomatic efforts for lasting peace (Hasnoui, 2018).

The failures of foreign communities to mediate and propose peaceful dispute resolution, as well as the growing importance of Western Sahara sovereignty might have induced the Moroccan spirit to take the reins themselves. These recent years, as the Moroccan assertiveness grow in their endeavour to win the international communities' recognition to the claim over Western Sahara, a shift in the external parties' demeanor could be observed. This shift is not unwelcome, insofar as they are in line with the Moroccan government's national interests. It could be a wind of change to the incessant impasse on the Western Saharan question. Despite Western Sahara being a regular topic in the existing literature on territorial disputes, there has yet to be any research on the efforts in obtaining international recognition, especially through diplomacy, of claims over a disputed territory. This paper attempts to identify the Moroccan government's current efforts (2020-2023) in an attempt to settle their territorial dispute in Western Sahara through winning international recognition. International recognition is crucial in such cases. Rationales of these Moroccan efforts to achieve it encompasses, but not limited to: (1) de facto recognition as the sovereign of the Western Saharan territory, (2) circumventing scenarios in which they are accused of annexation, (3) diminishing possibilities of an open armed conflict/war, that could also result in a larger, more complicated issue. Results from this paper contribute to the study of resolving territorial disputes, as could be seen from the Moroccan government's model, the strategy of employing diplomacy in order to gain international recognition. The Moroccan strategy

is a salient example of peaceful settlement: the use of diplomacy in achieving national interest of resolving territorial disputes, without requiring the use of military power.

Theoretical Framework

Diplomacy

Diplomacy in this case becomes the main role to the Moroccan interest. Morgenthau defines diplomacy in a broad sense and a narrow sense. The former, diplomacy is the formation and implementation of foreign policy at all levels, be it the highest level to the lowest level. The latter, diplomacy is a channel, media, or way in which official relations between governments occur (Setiawan, 2016). No matter the form, nor tool, diplomacy is one of the most used means to achieve and end since ancient times, apart from war. Though diplomacy is often seated on the very opposite side of war, contemporary cases often show that it is not caused by diplomacy being a peaceful means. Perhaps it is more accurate to perceive diplomacy as the more peaceful way of the two, as it does not require the usage of tangible or military force. In fact, diplomacy as the primal method to curb chances of war had also been an underlying war trigger. Consequently, scholars of international relations also identified a coercive type of diplomacy. It entails the usage of limited force and pressurizing on others to shape the wanted outcome: be it to compel the opponent to change their conduct or to deter the occurrence of an action (Jonsson & Aggestam, 2009). The aforementioned usage of force in coercive diplomacy is limited due to its nature entailing communication to pressure the opponent, and not involving violence.

In this paper, diplomacy is used by the Moroccan government in their effort of lobbying other governments for international recognition over Western Sahara being a territory belonging under the sovereignty of Morocco. International or diplomatic recognition being principal in this endeavour due to it being associated with external legitimacy in the context of international relations. When a state is internationally recognized, it tends to be viewed as a legitimate actor in the global arena, meaning they

are subjects to the international laws and are equal to their peers. Thus, the external legitimacy highly affect diplomatic relations. Unrecognized states generally fail to achieve international recognition of their sovereignty; they do not become part of sovereign states and, consequently, do not acquire legitimacy which enables them the legal capacity to enter into diplomatic relations and practices (Casperen, 2015). In other words, recognition is precondition to reciprocity in international relation exchanges. Krasner (1999) phrased it as the “ticket of general admission to the international arena” (Jonsson & Aggestam, 2009).

As recognition is pertinent to statehoods, the government is the sole actor both to obtain and to grant it. Hence, this paper will focus on First-track diplomacy, in which the diplomacy is conducted on statelevels , from government to another government (G to G). First-track diplomacy is usually carried out by high-ranking government officials, diplomats, or heads of state who aim to exert influence on political power structure. It is secretive and is usually used as an effort to end a conflict. It emphasizes the country's important role in negotiating and maintaining peace. In this case, it relates to the ability of a country's soft power to influence the behavior of. The advantages of first-track diplomacy itself are the ability to influence the direction of negotiations and their outcomes by using political power, the capacity to access material and financial resource which can provide flexibility and high leverage in a negotiation, the ability to use various intelligence sources, and the ability to use extensive knowledge related to foreign policy of the country and parties who are conflicted (Mapendere, 2016). That is to say, first-track diplomacy could use either the positive relation-building or coercive mannerisms to achieve their objectives.

National Interest

There are many interpretations of national interest, possessing similarities in their essence. Vernon Van Dyke's take on national interest is “that which states seek to protect or achieve in relation to each other” (Basu, 2012). In his definition, it is clearly

implied that national interest can be obtained through the establishment of relations with other countries. This relation is established to achieve mutual or otherwise, overlapping national interests, as Robert Cantor stated, “the concept of national interest implies that there can be a coherent foreign policy representing interconnected national concerns” (Basu, 2012). Likewise, Hans J. Morgenthau’s definition of national interests as “the goal that might be pursued by nations in their foreign policy can run the gamut of objectives any nation has ever pursued or might possibly pursue” (Van Dyke, 1992). Hence, as long as the national interest still exists or yet to be accomplished, it shall be the agenda of foreign policy or diplomatic relations, as stated by Charles Lerche and Abdul Said, national interest is “a general long term and continuing purpose that the state, the nation and the government all see themselves as serving” (Basu, 2012). This concept will be used as the main foundation of the research on Moroccan government’s efforts, as they are all in an attempt to achieve Morocco’s national interests to solidify its legitimacy over Western Sahara by gathering international recognition.

It is the peak of a national security agenda to uphold territorial integrity, such as in the Moroccan case. Preserving one’s territorial integrity is closely related to sovereignty. In this regard, when said territorial integrity and by extension, state’s security, is threatened by another’s overlapping claim, a dispute is inevitable. Most often than not, these territorial disputes are what diplomatic barriers are built upon. Thus, the ups and downs of the dispute processes bear significance to inter-state relations, whether it's to worsen and eventually break off relations to the point of an open conflict or to gradually be resolved and dispel animosity (Choi & Eun, 2017). Resolving a territorial dispute by forming consensus between the disputing states is not the only plausible course of action. Resolved territorial disputes does not necessarily mean a satisfactory, win-win outcome where the states concede to their own fair share of said territory either. At times, only one state is victorious and takes complete possession of the disputed territory. This victory is not limited to military efforts, and instead could be grasped through gaining support of international recognition for legitimacy. The methods and

lengths of which the victorious state is aspiring to gain said recognition from, reflects the characteristics, as well as the values of the state. In other words, a state's identity shapes the way it behaves, even in the face of this threat against territorial integrity (Fierke, 2015).

The Moroccan government's persistence over the Western Sahara is not unfounded. They have the ideological, historical, political, as well as economic values that shape their actions (Schwikowski & Flotat-Talon, 2020b). Wafa's research (2019) unveils that expanding trade and economic power is one of the most significant paths for Morocco to win the Western Sahara dispute. Therefore, such factors could direct the way states behave. As an underlying base in their effort, elements of economic and political (world order) interests influence the direction of Moroccan foreign policies, as when they rejoined the African Union (Wafa, 2019). Nowadays, the Moroccan government has become even more progressive in their governance towards their national interests in Western Sahara to the point where they are not shy to leverage politics with bigger and powerful countries to their advantage. It is clear that the Western Saharan territory, which the Moroccan government has painstakingly paid great dispute costs for, is growing in value. After all, a territory one would go so far as to struggle, holds great significance inferred by those who longs for it (Wiegand, 2011). Hence, states including Morocco are willing to pay a high price to obtain complete sovereignty over a disputed territory. In the international arena nowadays, the Moroccan government is stepping up the game to gain as much recognition as possible to their claim. One cannot overlook the possibility that state behaviour can also alter other's attitude in response to territorial disputes, such as the shift from refusal to recognize sovereignty to favourable recognition. This recognition is pertinent to consolidate claim over disputed territory, especially when it is derived from powerful states.

Research Method

This paper uses a Qualitative Research model. Strauss and Corbin (2009: 4) defined Qualitative Research as a type of research whose findings are not obtained by statistical means or various other types of calculations. In other words, it has power that lies in description, not in data or statistical analysis. It also has advantages in explaining events that enable room for deeper interpretations (Rianto, 2020,). Due to the research question being a “How” question, the authors employ a qualitative-descriptive display. It is intended to describe events that occur, both made by humans and naturally.

Data collection is done through Library Research technique. Some sources such as reports, journal articles, official websites, or books related to the topic and research question are explored to extract the necessary materials. Then the data used in this research paper is then processed through 3 stages formulated by Miles’ and Huberman’s (1992) Qualitative Research, which consists of Data reduction, Data presentation, and Drawing conclusions (Rijali, 2019).

Result and Discussion

The International Communities’ Approach and Perspective Pre-2020

This section presents a brief overview of some international communities’ perspectives and proposed resolutions towards Morocco’s claim and the Western Sahara dispute prior to 2020.

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (UN MINURSO)

Ever since Spain relinquished its possession over the Spanish Sahara, now known as the Western Sahara, the United Nations has been formulating dispute settlement plans. The UN Secretary General held hands with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1985 to establish a mission of good office to do just that. The proposals were accepted on August 30th 1988 by both Morocco and the Polisario Front. Few years later in 1991, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 690 that mandated the establishment of the

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. In the past, UN MINURSO's principal duty was solely to verify the ceasefire and the hostility cessation. Almost two decades later, the UN MINURSO maintained its monitoring, and on top of it, sustained various aid programmes regarding the Sahrawi's displaced people and separated families (UN MINURSO). Aside from these monitoring activities, the UN MINURSO also attempted to contribute to resolving the dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara via creating proposals such as the Settlement Plan. It contains a referendum to Western Sahara's option of self-determination; either to integrate itself into Morocco or be independent (Yoga, 2017).

European Union (EU)

The EU and its member states have never recognized Morocco as the sovereign of Western Sahara. Instead, they supported the UN's plans to solution proposals, and the Moroccan Autonomy Plan. They had declared that Western Sahara isn't a part of Moroccan territory in 2016. Yet, they have been, though de facto, implementing the EU-Morocco Liberalisation Agreement and Fisheries Agreement towards the waters adjoining the Western Saharan territory (Van der Loo, 2018). It can be observed that the EU response to the Western Sahara question is selective, in which it inclines to recognize Moroccan de facto sovereignty over the territory when it is convenient for them, economically and politically.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

The Moroccan side's argument against the no man's land status of the territory was rejected by the ICJ in an advisory consultation in 1974. The ICJ ruled that lawful historical religious tie between the Moroccan sovereign and the Sahrawi are negligible, as do the Moroccan claims of tribal allegiance towards them. Hence insufficient for allowing Morocco to possess sovereignty over the Western Sahara (Maghraoui, 2003). To base their rebuttal, the ICJ in turn argued that the allegiance claim should have been reinforced by actions of acceptance towards political authority to indicate an effective

sovereignty, especially the internal sovereignty (ICJ, 1975). In summary, the ICJ approach to this dispute is as Roussellier stated, that it emphasized “the emergence of a principle that combines internal sovereignty (proof of effective display of state authority) and external sovereignty (based on recognition expressed in international treaties) as the basis for a determination of sovereignty, even though the Court upheld self-determination for Western Sahara” (Roussellier, 2007).

Table 1. List of Countries and Their Stance on Morocco’s Claim Over Western Sahara (Pre-2020)

No	Country	Stance	Explanation
1	United States of America (US)	Neutral	The US didn’t recognize Morocco’s sovereignty claim over Western Sahara. They instead supported several international proposals such as the Baker Plan, Autonomy Plan, and Self-Determination for the Sahrawis.
2	Algeria	Opposition	Algeria has always supported the Polisario Front and SADR, striving for Western Sahara’s independence and opposed any action that is in favour of Morocco.
3	Austria	Neutral	Austria didn’t give their recognition to Morocco’s claim, but supported the latter’s Autonomy Plan. They viewed it as the peaceful foundation to a solution acceptable and respectful to all.
4	Czech Republic	Neutral	They are reserved towards the dispute, and generally synchronized with the EU. They officially stated their respect for the lead role of the UN and the MINURSO mission despite not providing material nor personnel support (Machalová, 2024).
5	France	Neutral	France supported the UN-backed solution, and never gave recognition to the Moroccan claim. Yet they are somehow close to Morocco, shown by their support of the Autonomy Plan, deeming it reasonable. As a former colonial power in the North African region and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, France is valuable to the Moroccan government in regards to supporting its sovereignty claim on the Western Sahara. France had claimed neutrality, yet it had been an avid ally for Morocco. Former French Presidents, Valery Giscard D’Estaing and Jacques Chirac were amicable with King Hassan II. France had even aided in the invasion on Western Sahara both by diplomatic means and by selling arms. Even so, the French government had never expressed

recognition for Morocco over the Western Sahara, only expressing their support for a UN solution (Benabdallah, 2009, 429). Nonetheless, in 2013 France signed a joint statement with Morocco in display of strengthened support for “Moroccan ambition to adopt reformation and openness” and its autonomy plan (Perhimpunan Persahabatan Indonesia-Maroko, 2013)

6	Germany	Neutral	Germany never grants recognition to Moroccan claims. They are in sync with the UN proposals. Yet, Morocco, being a former protectorate, expected more from Germany. The dispute has strained their diplomatic relations.
7	Italy	Neutral	Italy doesn't recognize Moroccan claim over the Western Sahara sovereignty but has always supported the Autonomy Plan.
8	Spain	Neutral	Spain has been neutral, and supports the UN assistance to provide a peaceful solution. However, they seem to be regarding Morocco as the de facto ruler of Western Sahara, evidenced by the trade agreements over the exporting of Western Sahara's natural resources between the two. Throughout the decades, Spain experienced internal contestation over the territory. In 1961 General Franco discussed with King Hassan II and never came to terms with Morocco's claim over Western Sahara, yet had no reservations about going into war, should it occur. Former Foreign Affairs Minister Miguel Nadal even viewed the dispute as a deadlock, further complicated by the increasing number of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara. (Benabdallah, 2009, 427-428). Thus, Spain had been viewing Morocco as the one occupying Western Sahara (Africanews, 2022).

Note. Adapted from multiple resources

Previous Approaches and Strategies of the Moroccan Government Towards Western Sahara

The International Court of Justice (ICJ)

King Hasan II ruled with iron fists. His son King Mohamed VI endeavored to patch things up through the establishment of the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation Commission (ERC) in 2004. ERC functions as an investigator of past human rights offenses and provides some compensation for the victims and family (Opgenhaffen & Freeman, 2005). ERC perhaps served to better Morocco's national image in the

international community (Kochenburger, 2022), which has been highlighting and criticizing its continuous human rights violations in Morocco and Western Sahara (Amnesty International, 1996; Human Rights Watch, 2005). Former US Ambassador to Morocco, Edward Gabriel is of the opinion that the ERC is Moroccan government's display of "commitment to democratic values and justify demands for stronger support from the US" (Kochenburger, 2022). Concerning the freed prisoners that were abruptly punished for authoritarian reasons such as *lèse-majesté*, an anonymous commenter stated that this royal pardon is also political, "each prisoner has been chosen to placate one section of disgruntled Moroccan society or international opinion" (Al Jazeera, 2004). King Mohammed VI had also established the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS) in 2006, a consultative body of proposals to defend Moroccan Southern provinces, with emphasis on the Western Sahara. CORCAS might as well signal Moroccan exhibition of power and authority over the Western Sahara.

Autonomy Plan

In April 2007, Morocco proposed an Autonomy Plan. King Mohammed VI affirmed Morocco's commitment to a solution to the deal aimed at ending Western Sahara disputes. It formed the basis of negotiations regarding granting a greater degree of autonomy addressed to the population of Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty, and provided balance to the needs of the people to govern their own affairs with the territorial integrity of the kingdom. The main point is the provision of solutions related to the "expansion of autonomy" that meets the aspirations of the Sahrawi population. It is intended to respect the cultural identity of the Sahrawi people as well as the unity of the Moroccan region. In this plan, Morocco will retain its sovereign identity such as currency, national anthem, and national flag. There was also national security, external relations and defense, the royal judicial system, and the king's religious prerogatives. The autonomous territory will be equipped with both a Head of Government and a Parliament responsible for casting votes on local laws in alignment with the nation's

constitution. Furthermore, the autonomous territory will be granted the authority to govern its matters democratically, utilizing legislative, executive, and judicial institutions with distinct powers. They will process the necessary financial means for the development of the territory across various sectors and actively engage in the country's economic, social, and cultural activities (Morocco World News, 2018).

Discussion

Moroccan Geopolitics of Western Sahara (National Interest)

Morocco views the Western Sahara region as an important part of the nation's history, economic efforts and land of abundant resources. This can be seen from the strengthened efforts on its narratives where the territory of Sahara and people of Sahrawis are Moroccan (Turner, 2022). They abided the Sharifian Empire so that it created an identity of Morocco. It is also often referred to as The Great Morocco or Al-Maghrib Al-Kabir (Turner, 2022). Moreover, Western Sahara also has few resources that have become the main geopolitical aspect of the Moroccan government. The region is rich in three main natural resources, namely phosphate, fishery, and oil. Phosphate has been used by the Moroccan government since 1920 and it represents 77 percent of global production and reserves (Nagar, 2021). The resource is maintained by the Moroccan company called Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP) and has a subsidiary of Phosphate de Bou Craa S.A or Phosboucraa to manage the mining in Western Sahara. Phosboucraa has also been internationalized to create a sustainable value chain of productions and distributions to the whole of Africa and other regions (Nechad et al., 2023). Fisheries is also another important resource in the region. Morocco utilizes it by holding an agreement with the European Union (EU) called Fisheries Partnership Agreement (FPA). The agreement has been established since 1995, expiring in July 2023, and there are still negotiations on renewing the agreement to this day. The oil sector is also a major resource in Western Sahara but there have been no such activities since 2018 when an American Company, Kosmos, decided to withdraw its mining operations from the

region. The Moroccan government is also using another tool to strengthen its legitimized position in Western Sahara that is greenwashing. It is an effort to use development of renewable energies and the creation of environmental-friendly activities. Greenwashing involves resources in the form of wind and solar energy so that Morocco can reduce its dependence on energy imports. The Moroccan government has used this effort since a decade ago and there have been enormous foreign investments from various international companies since 2020 (Turner, 2022).

Table 2. Project Investments of Greenwashing in Western Sahara and Its Companies

Projects	Year	Companies
CIMAR (Ciments du Maroc) (5MW (MegaWatt))	2011	Italgen (Italy), HeidelbergCement (Germany)
Boujdour (500 MW)	2021	Siemens Energy (Germany), Enel Green Energy (Italy), Nareva (Morocco), Siemens Gamesa (Spain)
Dakhla Desalination (40 MW)	2021	ENGIE (France), Nareva (Morocco), International Power SA (Belgium)
Harmattan Dakhla Wind (900 MW)	2021	Harmattan Energy Ltd (United States)
Tiskrad (100 MW)	2022	Siemens Wind Power (Germany), Enel Green Energy (Italy), Nareva (Morocco)
Foum El Oued (50 MW)	2013	Delattre Levivier Maroc, EuroGrues Maroc, Enerlog (Italy), Lahmeyer International (Germany), IKA Enerji (Turkiye), Techniprojet (Morocco), Ormazabal (Spain), Global Wind Service (Denmark), Briese Schifffahrts (Germany)

Note. Adapted from The United States’ foreign policy and enabling interstate aggression: a case study of the Moroccan annexation of the Western Sahara (<https://nmbu.brage.unit.no/nmbu-xmlui/handle/11250/3034055>, 2021)

Morocco has also used its economic efforts of cooperations with another country in the Western Sahara region. Since the recognition of the US' Trump Administration on Morocco’s Western Sahara in 2020, there has been quite a large amount of bilateral trade cooperations between the country and the US itself and mostly European countries. The

House of Representatives (US) issued H.R. 2855, stating that there is a bilateral economic assistance to Morocco (Arieff, 2021). Germany also expressed its interest in cooperating with Morocco in Western Sahara, stating that Sahara is the best economic interest for both parties in the sustainable development, economic development and employment, renewable energies, climate, and water (Kasraoui, 2022b). Spain stated its normalization with Morocco on the support of the Autonomy Plan of Western Sahara and trade cooperation (Minder, 2022). These efforts also open a gateway where natural gas supply can be gained through the Maghreb pipeline (Turner, 2022). France, who is a valued ally in almost all aspects, supports the Moroccan Autonomy Plan.

Moroccan Government's Current Approach Towards the Western Sahara

The Moroccan Government is expanding their diplomatic bargaining power in the international arena by exerting authority as a sovereign state. In August of 2022, King Mohamed VI stated to utilize the Western Sahara dispute as a “prism” to filter its international environment onwards. It is apparent that Morocco is no longer threading through cautious diplomatic means, they will use the opportunity to distinguish true allies from the fakes. In a famous speech, “the King called on the kingdom's "partners" whose "positions on the Sahara issue are ambiguous" to "clarify" them” (Bobin, 2023). This section will briefly describe the ways in which the Moroccan government uses diplomacy, including the coercive ones (carrot and stick treatment), in order to exert international recognition.

Normalization of Relations as Tit-for-Tat Approach

Former US President Donald Trump had facilitated the Abraham Accords. Published on August 13th 2020, it entails agreement on formal normalization of diplomatic relations between Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with Israel. Each party has their own national interest that can only be forwarded through normalization of relations (Khaerunnisa et al., 2023). On December 22nd 2022, Morocco joined as a signatory. There are two important points: Morocco's sovereignty

of Western Sahara and normalization of relationship with Israel (U.S Department of State, 2020). The US stated in the declaration its support to Morocco, recognizing its sovereignty over Western Sahara. A strong commitment also infused in that declaration by its statement of supporting Morocco's autonomy plan of the territory by stating it's "credible, serious, and realistic". Moreover, it also stated that the US will establish a consulate in the Western Sahara territory of Dakhla to promote economic and business opportunities as a form of better development for the socio-economic sector in the region (U.S Department of State, 2020). This particular deal assists Morocco to strengthen its position towards the claim of Western Sahara, due to it signifying that the US supports the historical claims of Western Sahara and it can provide opportunities for Morocco to invest more and utilize natural resources in the region (Murphy, 2021). Indirectly, this results that there were several large-sized arms deliveries to Morocco with 24 combat aircraft and 24 combat helicopters from the US at the end of 2020 (Wezeman et al., 2021). In the economic sector, the US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) had launched a project called Prosper America and an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) to invest \$3 billion for projects both in Morocco and the Sub-Saharan Africa region.

In regards to normalization ties with Israel, Morocco continued to have a full diplomatic relationship with the country after several years of "lost contact". Both of the countries agreed to grant a direct flight between Israel and Morocco, an innovative and dynamic bilateral economic cooperation, to pursue another cooperation in trades, finances, technologies, and other sectors, and a re-establishment of liaison offices in Tel-Aviv and Rabat. As the exchange, Israel was also expressing its support of recognition of Morocco's claim of Western Sahara and establishing a consulate in Dakhla (Eljechtimi, 2023). Prior to Israel's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, Morocco refused to open an embassy in Israel (Harb, 2023). While the normalization with Israel was achieved, the commitment of Morocco on Palestine matters remains

unchanged. Morocco keeps supporting for two-state solution and frequently promotes negotiations to create peace.

On July 17th 2023, the Moroccan Royal Palace announced an official statement on Israel' recognition. Despite the Abraham Accords' normalization of relations did not require Israel to give such recognition, "the issue received prominent mention in the third paragraph, with the United States declaring its recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara – indeed, one of the main incentives for Morocco to renew relations with Israel." Nevertheless, the fact that there was a signing procedure undeniably signals agreement over its content, including the support of recognizing Morocco in the Western Sahara. The significance of the Western Sahara is reiterated by King Mohamed VI by stating that "Morocco gauges its relations with other countries through the prism of the Saharan question" (Link & Baruch, 2023).

Leveraging Politics to Bolster Claim on Western Sahara

The European Union (EU) has yet to participate in efforts to formulate peace within the Western Sahara dispute. Their absence is contributed by the Union's "desire to develop and maintain close bilateral relations with Morocco" (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). The EU had always referred to, in particular, France and Spain for political directions. It is to be noted that while trade with Western Sahara is miniscule, EU treasures access to the Western Saharan waters (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). The Moroccan government is not holding back on its leverage politics, as seen in their leverage of European countries' interest (Lovatt & Mundy, 2021). In exchange for mutual benefits, partner countries must adhere to Morocco's rule of the game: that is support, or even better, recognition for a Moroccan Western Sahara. It signifies the Western Sahara dispute as a priority in Moroccan national interest that has been securitized. This section provides brief country examples of the phenomenon.

France, who is a valued ally in economics, culture, politics, security, tourism, and trade. Morocco had also supported France religiously in aiding Imam training to counter

radicalism. In turn, the Moroccan Autonomy Plan is supported by France. When France took the Presidency in the Council of EU in 2022, it provided opportunities for reciprocities between France and Morocco (Alkinani, 2022). Morocco pressured France to follow Israel's step towards the Western Sahara. Some right-wing politicians and diplomats had done just that, and urged French President Emmanuel Macron to resolve the issue (Arredondas, 2023).

Germany, who got its contact with Morocco was terminated in March of 2021. Additionally, the Moroccan ambassador in Germany was recalled home due to the feud resulting from Germany criticizing the Trump administration's declaration of recognition for Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara (Dahm, 2022). After diplomatic meetings between the two countries' ministers, the German Foreign Affairs Minister expressed the country's support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan, calling it "serious and credible". It was also declared that Germany is in support of the UN-led solutions to the dispute (Aamari, 2022).

The bilateral relations between Spain and Morocco soured when the former hosted Polisario Leader Brahim Ghali in April 2021. Even though it was for medical purposes, the lack of official notice to the Moroccan government was not appreciated. As a response, Morocco eased its border surveillance with Ceuta, which led to an influx of thousands of migrants and humanitarian crisis there (Eljechtimi et al., 2022), as well as recalling its ambassador home from Madrid (Harb, 2023). At Moroccan invitations, the Spanish government desired for them to face "common challenges", with "cooperation in the management of migratory flow in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic" specifically in mind (Parra, 2022).

Opening More Diplomatic Representative Offices in the Western Sahara Territory

The Moroccan government is solidifying its position in the Western Sahara territory by establishing more Moroccan diplomatic buildings, such as the one in El-Aaiun. There are 10 African countries' diplomatic or consulate buildings in the city (Schwikowski & Flotat-Talon, 2020a). Morocco reported that Jordan will also open a

consulate in Western Sahara as support for them post Polisario Front’s statement of a U-turn to armed conflict (Eljehtimi, 2023). This move might pose a hindrance towards Western Sahara, precisely SADR’s efforts to establish its own diplomatic network (Bilhikam et al., 2022, 113). This action is clearly a violation of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on The Right and Duties of States, in particular articles 8 and 9 (Bilhikam et al., 2022). Professor Yahia Zoubir notes that this is indeed an act of illegal occupation by Morocco, and that the supposedly supportive African countries have strings attached to Morocco, which puts them in debt (Schwikowski & Flotat-Talon, 2020a). Until late 2023, there are a total 28 foreign consulates that have been opened in Western Sahara (United Nations, 2023).

Table 3. Updated International Stance and Recognitions from Various Countries on Morocco’s Sovereignty of Western Sahara (Post-2020)

No.	Country	Achievement
1.	Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov expressed his country’s commitment to Morocco’s territorial integrity and its sovereignty over the Sahara (Autonomy Plan) (Guessous, 2018).
2.	Bahrain	The Bahraini Minister welcomed " <i>this historical step that shows the profound relations between the two countries, and confirms the full support of Bahrain with Morocco in its historical and legitimate rights over its Sahara</i> ". Established a consulate in Laayoune (Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Foreign Affairs African Cooperation and Moroccan Expatriates, 2020).
3.	France	France reaffirms its consideration of the 2007 Moroccan Autonomy Plan as a serious and credible basis for discussions (Eljehtimi et al., 2024).
4.	Germany	Germany reiterated its position on the issue of Western Sahara, considering the Autonomy Plan " <i>as a serious and credible effort by Morocco and as a good basis for a solution accepted by both parties,</i> " as expressed in the Joint Declaration of August 25, 2022 (Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Foreign Affairs African Cooperation and Moroccan Expatriates, 2023).
5.	Israel	The establishment of an Israeli consulate in Dakhla (Eljehtimi et al., 2023).

6.	Jordan	The establishment of Jordanian consulate in Laayoune (Eljehtimi A., 2023).
7.	Netherlands	The Netherlands views Morocco's Autonomy Plan for Western Sahara as serious and credible (Eljehtimi et al., 2022).
8.	Qatar	The Qatari ambassador reaffirmed that the Autonomy Plan presented by Morocco is <i>“a constructive initiative and the basis for any realistic solution to this issue (Haskouri, 2021).”</i>
9.	Saudi Arabia	Hassan Ben Mohammed Al Amri, Saudi Arabia’s representative at the UN, expressed his country’s “support for the autonomy initiative in the Moroccan Sahara within the framework of Morocco’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Zouiten, 2024). The Saudi Royal Court has also issued an urgent directive instructing government entities in the country not to use the name “Western Sahara” or display a divided map of Morocco.
10.	Spain	Spain endorsed a plan for limited autonomy for the territory of Western Sahara (Minder, 2022). The country also signed as many as 20 agreements to boost trade and investment, including credit lines of up to 800 million euros (\$873 million) (Carreño & Eljehtimi, 2023).
11.	United States	The country recognizes Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and reaffirms its support for Morocco’s serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, 2020). The US also opened a consulate in Dakhla, to promote economic and business opportunities for the region.

Note. Adapted from multiple resources

Observing the brief examples of how the Moroccan government strives to obtain favour to their claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara, as well as the table listing the shift in foreign state’s stances above, we can infer that the current diplomatic efforts had brought positive results. Despite still being steps away from obtaining official recognition from the other foreign states, Morocco’s coercive diplomatic methods had triggered international responses to their favour. The growing assertiveness in mannerism to distinguish allies and foes had been clearly received by those who consider themselves allies, or at least those who desired to maintain positive relations with Morocco. The coercive diplomacy is being actively carried out by the Moroccan

government, with them having no problem in leveraging bilateral relations and national interests. Even though the foreign countries has yet to formally grant recognition, the establishment of diplomatic offices in the Western Saharan territory signals their acceptance to regard Morocco as the de facto sovereign of Western Sahara, and in return, the latter as a territory belonging to Morocco.

Conclusion

Morocco had always endeavoured to preserve authority over the Western Sahara region as an integral part of their territorial integrity. Their persistence had gained them recognition, such as by validating their claiming foundation through not historical, political, and economical motifs. It is also infused with the concern of national interest. The attempts prior to 2020 illustrate the Moroccan government's efforts to better its national reputation, especially regarding human rights violations and welfare in the disputed territory. They even tried to rekindle regional relations by rejoining the AU. Meanwhile, post 2020 up to 2023, the current approach to attain international recognition for Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has shifted a little. They stepped up their game and exerted even more diligence.

Following recognition by Trump's administration in 2020, Morocco garners wider support from other EU countries, such as France and Spain. However, the intensity of threats given by the Polisario Front and Algeria is getting tricky. Nowadays, the government resorted to a more assertive diplomatic approach: normalization of relations in exchange for support or recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, using the issue as a leverage in their foreign policies and politics, strengthening its presence in Western Sahara by establishing diplomatic buildings, utilizing natural resources, as well as conducting environmental projects alongside companies and states. Thus, the Moroccan government is able to shift other countries' opinion and stance of the Western Sahara dispute to its favour, albeit brazenly, by compromising others' national interest and diplomatic ties.

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