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Morocco's pro-active diplomacy, two years after (re)joining the African Union

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On Jan. 3, 2017, thirty-three years after leaving the Organization for African Unity (OAU) over the acceptance of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SDAR) as a member state, Morocco's bid to rejoin the African Union (AU) was approved. And while Rabat presented this as a triumph, this move reflected in effect the failure of Morocco's 'empty chair' policy, designed to penalize its African partners for recognizing SDAR and the Polisario Frente. Morocco succeeded in persuading a large majority of AU members to vote in favor of its integration, but at the same time was forced to accept an AU which includes SDAR as a member state. Had Morocco renounced its 'sacred cause' of sovereignty over Western Sahara? Not in the least. But King Mohammed VI now estimates that this objective can be better achieved as a member of the AU.

Within the larger picture, Morocco's foreign policy under Mohammed VI is progressing along three parallel fronts: establishing itself as a bridge between Africa and Europe, turning into a continental economic power, and deepening its hold on Western Sahara. Joining the AU is considered by Rabat as an essential tool on the way to achieving these three goals.

The first Moroccan goal, that of establishing itself as a bridge between Africa and Europe, is obviously not a new one. But the reign of King Mohammed VI has marked a major shift in Morocco-EU relations, towards greater cooperation and partnership, culminating in the signature in 2000 of an EU-Morocco association agreement¹. This is an achievement which the Moroccan King was adamant to leverage, by turning Morocco into a diplomatic and economic bridge between AU members and the European Union. This could not be achieved without a return into the AU.

¹ "EU-Morocco Association Agreement", *European commission CHAFEA*, March 18, 2000.
<https://ec.europa.eu/chafea/agri/content/eu-morocco-association-agreement>

Rabat has been promoting this goal not only by expanding the reach of its industries, but also on the continental level, specifically on the issue of immigration. For many years, Morocco was considered by Europe as part of the problem, but in recent years Morocco has successfully established itself as part of the solution, or at least as the champion of an African global approach to immigration.

The 32nd African Union (AU) summit held on Feb. 10-11, 2019 in Addis Ababa, focused on issues of refugees and immigration, under the title “Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa.” Thus, the topic of the summit echoed the goals of the December 2018 international conference on migration held in Marrakech. In fact, in 2017, ahead of the AU’s 29th summit, Morocco’s King Mohammed VI addressed these issues in a message to participants, stating that “African population growth, African institutions, migration and youth issues are opportunities we should leverage together.”² Of course, the AU did not choose the topic of its 32nd summit solely in accordance with Rabat’s wishes, but this choice did attest to Morocco’s growing influence inside the AU and within other African forums. And it is this position exactly which should turn Morocco (so it hopes) into a valuable, perhaps even irreplaceable, partner of Europe.

Morocco has also enforced its image as a bridge between the two continents by successfully exporting the ostensibly moderate Moroccan brand of Islam to neighboring African countries. As part of this initiative, in 2015 King Mohammed VI inaugurated in Rabat the Kingdom’s first religious academy for the training of Imams, and offered full scholarships to Islamic scholars from countries such as Mauritania and Mali who wished to study at the academy. This strategy was tacitly supported by the West, especially France, where the preference is to see imams trained and influenced by Morocco rather than Saudi Arabia (as part of a larger counterterrorism approach and against the infiltration of extreme Islam into Europe).

The second Moroccan goal, that of becoming an economic power, might be the most challenging of the three. The Kingdom has been suffering in recent years from certain economic and social instability. Gaps between poor and rich has persistently expanded, and the middle-class sector has not grown at a rate expected from a country considering itself to be a regional economic power. Turning towards unexplored African markets (non-francophone countries which were not necessarily Morocco’s traditional trade partners), became a pressing necessity, hence the urgency of joining the AU and seeking ECOWAS membership.

These efforts included an unprecedented number of royal visits across Africa³, at an accelerated pace in the two years before joining the AU. In 2015⁴, for instance, the King concluded his third trip to West and Central Africa, visiting Senegal⁵, Guinea-Bissau⁶, Ivory Coast and Gabon. In

² "African Leaders to Gather at AU's 32nd Ordinary Summit February", *Morocco World News*, Jan. 7, 2019. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2019/01/262660/african-union-ordinary-summit/>

³ "Morocco's King Mohammed VI to African Union: "I am home at last"" (citing his 46 visits to 25 African countries), *Morocco on the Move*, Jan. 31, 2017. <https://moroccoonthemove.com/2017/01/31/moroccos-king-mohammed-vi-african-union-home-last/>

⁴ "Mohammed VI concludes four-country African tour", *The Economist*, June 17, 2015. <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=793261263&country=gabon&topic=economy&subtopic=forecast&subsubtopic=external>

⁵ "The Official Visit Of HM The King To Senegal, 2015", *Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Culture and Communication*, May 21, 2015. <http://www.maroc.ma/en/news/official-visit-hm-king-senegal-2015>

2017, immediately ahead of the AU accession, he visited Ivory Coast⁷, Zambia and South Sudan. On most of these visits, the King was accompanied by important economic delegations.

As for the third goal, the issue of Western Sahara⁸ has shaped Morocco's diplomacy for over three decades⁹. Ever since quitting the OAU, Morocco's diplomacy has focused on pressuring African states to renege on their recognition of SADR; this is a policy which carried a dear cost. The case of its ties with South Africa makes a perfect example. Morocco's ambassador to South Africa left the country in 2004, when Pretoria recognized the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. South Africa withdrew its ambassador to Morocco shortly thereafter, a situation which remains unchanged. South Africa had made it clear recently to Morocco that the ball is now in Rabat's court.¹⁰

But it was only after a successful campaign¹¹ championed by Algeria and South Africa in 2014 to appoint a special African Union envoy in charge of the Western Sahara¹², that a political willingness to reassess that policy was clearly expressed in several circles. Rabat concluded that its "empty chair" policy had failed.¹³ Despite all of its efforts from the outside, a majority of AU members, including South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola and others, rejected its demands to cancel the SADR's membership.

This change of strategy should also be considered in a wider perspective, namely the global vision of Morocco espoused by King Mohammed VI since his accession to the throne in 1999. Over the years, the King has expressed his belief in an independent African identity and in the ability of Africa to care for itself. South-South Cooperation for enhancing capacity building in the LDCs became the principal pillar of Morocco's foreign policy.

Furthermore, Morocco's territorial ambitions over the Western Sahara generated a significant conflict with Algeria and also with Mauritania, thus rupturing the Maghreb alliance and unity.

⁶ "HM King Mohammed VI Receives Guinea Bissau's President on Private Visit to Morocco", *Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Culture and Communication*, Jan. 7, 2015. www.maroc.ma/en/royal-activities/hm-king-mohammed-vi-receives-guinea-bissaus-president-private-visit-morocco

⁷ "King Mohammed VI in Abidjan for Second Visit to Cote d'Ivoire in 2017", *Morocco World News*, Nov. 26, 2017. <https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2017/11/234879/king-mohammed-vi-cote-divoire-au/>

⁸ Yasmine Hasnaoui, "Morocco and the African Union: a New Chapter for Western Sahara Resolution?", *Arab center for Research & Policy Studies*, June 14, 2017. https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/ResearchAndStudies/Pages/Morocco_and_the_African_Union_a_New_Chapter_for_Western_Sahara_Resolution.aspx

⁹ Sarah Feuer, "Delicate Diplomacy in Western Sahara", *The Washington Institute*, Oct. 18, 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/delicate-diplomacy-in-western-sahara>

¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Cornish, "Morocco returns ambassador to SA", *Reuters*, March 14, 2018. <https://ewn.co.za/2016/07/25/Morocco-returns-ambassador-to-SA>

¹¹ "Morocco Accuses AU Chief of Obstructing Readmission", *Reuters*, Nov. 30, 2016. <https://www.voanews.com/a/morocco-african-union-western-sahara/3617800.html>

¹² Aziz El Yaakubi, "Morocco asks to rejoin African Union as seeks backing over Western Sahara" (In 2014, Morocco rejected the AU's decision to appoint a special envoy for the Western Sahara), *Reuters*, July 18, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/morocco-africa-westernsahara/morocco-asks-to-rejoin-african-union-as-seeks-backing-over-western-sahara-idINKCN0ZY1PU>

¹³ Liesl Louw-Vaudran, "The meaning of Morocco's return to the African Union", *ISS Institute for Security Studies*, January 2018. <https://issafrika.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/nar-1.pdf>

Endorsing an African identity, by joining the AU, rather than promoting Maghreb-regional forums, made sense for Rabat. By doing so, Morocco replaced its longtime Maghreb ideal with an African one, and made a clean break with the Muslim/Arab oriented approach that had been advanced by King Hassan II.

Yet, two years after the accession of Morocco into the AU, the balance sheet reflects mixed results when compared against the objectives originally set by Rabat. On the plus side of the ledger, Morocco was accepted back into the AU with open arms by a large majority of countries, and since 2017, has managed to establish an influential status within the organization. Moreover, from the very beginning, Morocco made no secret of its ambitions inside the AU. As early as his first speech to the assembly, King Mohammed VI referred to the need of deep reforms within the AU, and indicated that Morocco would champion such reforms.¹⁴ On January 2018, Morocco was voted onto the African Union Peace and Security Council, and on January 2019 it was elected as president of the African Union's Special Technical Committee for Trade, Industry and Mining Resources.

Still, its successful re-integration did not grant Morocco full satisfaction on the Western Sahara issue. Currently, 35 out of 54 African states do not recognize SADR (20 countries worldwide have withdrawn their recognition from the late 1990s, with Malawi being the last, when it withdrew its recognition in May of 2017), but Rabat did not manage to block SADR's participation at the AU-EU summit held in Ivory Coast on November 2017.¹⁵ To avoid losing face, over the past two years Rabat has adopted a somewhat pragmatic approach, which treats the SADR as an "invisible" or "nonexistent" entity. AU bodies did not withdraw their decisions on the SADR that had been approved prior to Morocco's entry into the organization, but decision 653¹⁶ adopted on July 2017, presents a more nuanced AU policy, which welcomes a reduction in tensions and commends the by the Secretary General of the United Nations of a new Special Envoy accepted by the parties to the conflict.

Economically speaking, Morocco has also registered mixed results. Rabat's 2017 bid for ECOWAS membership, launched in parallel to the AU integration process, has been halted. The June 2017 ECOWAS Conference held in Monrovia gave its agreement in principle¹⁷ (and not yet an immediate approval) to Morocco's request to join. It seems that economic rivalry motivates some anti-Morocco apprehensions, specifically on the part of Nigeria and Ghana.

¹⁴ "Texte intégral du Discours prononcé par SM le Roi Mohammed VI devant le 28ème sommet de l'Union africaine (UA) à Addis-Abeba", *Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Culture and Communication*, Jan. 31, 2017. <http://www.maroc.ma/fr/discours-royaux/texte-integral-du-discours-prononce-par-sm-le-roi-mohammed-vi-devant-le-28eme-sommet>

¹⁵ "5th African Union - EU Summit", *European council of the European union*, 29-30/11/2017. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2017/11/29-30/>

¹⁶ "Decision on the Issue of Western Sahara, Dec 653", *Assembly of the Union Twenty-Ninth Ordinary Session 3 - 4 July 2017 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*, 3-4/7/2017. http://www.usc.es/export9/sites/webinstitucional/gl/institutos/ceso/descargas/AU_assembly_au_dec_653_xxix_en.pdf

¹⁷ "Fifty-First Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, 4 June 2017, Monrovia, Republic of Liberia (final communique)", *ECOWAS*, June 4, 2017. <http://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2017-51st-Session-June.pdf>

On the brighter side, a 2017 report produced by the Ernst and Young firm called Morocco one of the first five key hub economies on the continent (together with South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Egypt), and it is a top African beneficiary of foreign direct investment (FDI) projects.¹⁸ A 2016 report by the African Development Bank (AfDB) commended Morocco, stating the Kingdom geared 85% of its foreign direct investments to the continent.¹⁹ Morocco has wisely interconnected its economic aspirations with investing in LDC, becoming a continental leader of South-South cooperation projects. This is, in fact, an issue which Morocco is now leading, also within the AU.

To sum up, two years are obviously too short a time to estimate the economic repercussions of Morocco's AU accession, and data published over the past year and a half shows little advancement in terms of Moroccan growth globally. According to World Bank data²⁰, Morocco's GDP growth decelerated from 3.5 percent in the first quarter of 2017 to 3.2 in the same period during 2018. King Mohammed VI continues to promote structural reforms, but many of the country's assets remain in the hands of a small and privileged group. Commercial power is concentrated in their hands, and so regulation reforms have limited effect on the market. Still, the country's decades-long experience in business with the European Union, its developed banking industry and strong commercial ties with markets and transport sectors in both West and Central Africa, offer Morocco a unique position. Coupled with its new AU membership and a prospect for membership in ECOWAS, Morocco's ambition of becoming a regional power cannot be overlooked.

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¹⁸ "EY's Attractiveness Program Africa", *Connectivity redefined*, May 2017.

[https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-attractiveness-program-africa-2017-connectivity-redefined-france/\\$FILE/ey-attractiveness-program-africa-2017-connectivity-redefined.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-attractiveness-program-africa-2017-connectivity-redefined-france/$FILE/ey-attractiveness-program-africa-2017-connectivity-redefined.pdf)

¹⁹ "AfDB and Morocco, a model of partnership for nearly half a century", *African development Bank Group*, July 22, 2016. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/afdb-and-morocco-a-model-of-partnership-for-nearly-half-a-century-15973/>

²⁰ "Morocco's Economic Outlook", *World Bank*, October 2018.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/morocco/publication/economic-outlook-october-2018>
<https://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/753731538076857347/mpo-am18-morocco-mar-ks-9-13-fin.pdf>