CHAPTER 11

Implications of Trump's Foreign Policy on the Spanish-Moroccan Conflicts and the Western Sahara Situation

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Introduction

The complex and evolving relationship between the United States (US) and Morocco (rooted in centuries-old diplomatic ties) has acquired renewed geopolitical significance in recent years. From Morocco's early recognition of American independence in the eighteenth century to the strategic alliances of the post-World War II and Cold War periods, US–Moroccan cooperation has been a constant thread in North African diplomacy. This historical continuity took a pivotal turn under the administration of Donald J. Trump, whose foreign policy marked a sharp departure from prior multilateral approaches, favouring bilateralism and the promotion of US strategic interests (particularly in relation to energy security, critical minerals and regional stability).

This chapter examines how Trump-era foreign policy altered the geopolitical landscape in the longstanding disputes between Spain and Morocco, particularly in relation to the Western Sahara conflict and the maritime claims involving the Canary Islands. The US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020, in exchange for Moroccan normalisation of ties with Israel, represents a watershed moment that challenged international legal norms surrounding self-determination and colonial borders. This recognition, reaffirmed during Trump's second term, not only solidified US strategic alignment with Morocco, but it also directly implicated Spain's diplomatic posture, natural resource interests and maritime claims in the Atlantic.

Furthermore, this analysis situates Trump's actions within a broader context of global resource competition, particularly the race for rare earth elements and deep-sea mineral exploitation. The US interest in Morocco and Western Sahara is not solely diplomatic, but deeply economic and strategic, as evidenced by recent executive orders aiming to boost domestic access to critical minerals. As Spain asserts its maritime rights west of the Canary Islands (overlapping with Morocco's claims grounded in its assertion of sovereignty over Western Sahara), Trump's foreign policy complicates European Union (EU) and United Nations (UN) efforts to mediate the dispute. Through a legal, geopolitical and economic lens, this study explores the broader implications of US engagement in North Africa, focusing on how Trump's recognition policy reshapes not only bilateral relations but also the international legal and normative frameworks governing decolonisation and resource sovereignty.

The US and Morocco: A long history of friendship

The relationship between Morocco and the US is older than one might think. In fact, Morocco was the first country to recognise the independence of the American colonies in 1777, which led to the signing of a treaty of friendship in 1786 (The Adam Papers, 2016), the longest-standing treaty in history for the US (Pérez Triana, 2022; Vagni, 2009). However, it was not until World War II that relations between the two nations really began to grow closer.

During this war, Morocco was part of the French and Spanish protectorates, with the former comprising most of the territory, while the Spanish protectorate was limited to the northern part of the Rif Mountains. In 1942, when France was divided between Free France and Vichy France, Operation Torch took place, led by General Dwight Eisenhower, with the aim of liberating Morocco from Axis influence. The focus of the operation was the Moroccan cities of Safi and Casablanca, which resulted in the liberation of the Moroccan region. For its part, the United Kingdom, which also participated in this operation, focused on the regions belonging to Algeria and Tunisia, as it did not consider the liberation of Morocco a priority. This US intervention gave the American

giant a wide popularity in Moroccan society that would last for years and decades to come. Moreover, one of the main consequences of this intervention was the rise of nationalist and independence movements in Morocco, mainly led by the Istiqlal party. The enmity against a France that was absent and unconcerned about the interests and needs of the Moroccan population, as evidenced by its absence during the famine crisis of 1945, only grew over time, while friendship with the US only grew stronger (Valentin, 2018). In 1943, a year after Operation Torch, a conference was held in Casablanca to coordinate allied actions in the war effort. The event brought together the American (Franklin D. Roosevelt), British (Winston Churchill) and French (De Gaulle) leaders in the Moroccan city and was hosted by the Alawite monarch, Mohammed V.

Once the Second World War ended and the new Cold War period began, Morocco maintained a policy of neutrality, as did other African countries, such as Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan and Ghana. This implied, therefore, the removal of five US military bases from Moroccan territory in 1959, which suggested that, despite the deep gratitude towards the US and the long-standing friendship between the two nations, the Alawi monarch preferred to maintain a neutral policy, far from the possibility of being involved in a war between the two superpowers (Valentin, 2018).

This policy of neutrality was to change completely with the accession to the throne of his son, Hassan II, who succeeded him as monarch after his father's death in 1961. From then on, Morocco's position in the Cold War became manifestly pro-Western, based on its intentions to improve relations with both France and the rest of the West. This was evidence of one of Morocco's main characteristics: an African country, but with an eye on Europe and the US, which also kept it away from membership of the African Union for several decades.

A decade later, in early November 1975, the Green March took place, a civilian mobilisation aimed at taking control of the then Spanish Sahara and its capital, El Aaiún (Weiner, 1979). A week later, a Tripartite Agreement was signed in Madrid between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania, by which Spain undertook to withdraw from Western Sahara, thereby ending its responsibilities and powers over the territory. This agreement, however, did not foresee the transfer of sovereignty to Morocco or Mauritania,

but an agreement had to be reached in which the opinion of the Sahrawi population was taken into account in this regard (United Nations Treaty Series, 1975); that is, a process of self-determination was to be carried out so that the Sahrawi people themselves could decide on their future and the possible formation of an independent Sahrawi state. This, however, never happened, and Morocco became a colonising power that maintains its de facto administration over Western Sahara today. In the years following Morocco's occupation of the territory, the US acted as a provider of arms, military training and constant diplomatic backing. In return, Morocco would act as a supporter of US interests in North Africa and the Middle East, as manifested, for example, in Morocco's role in the conclusion of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt (Valentin, 2018).

After the death of King Hassan II and the accession of his son, Mohammed VI, to the throne in 1999, US–Moroccan relations entered a new phase marked by the war on terror and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. On 16 May 2003, shortly after the invasion of Iraq in which Morocco participated, terrorist attacks took place in Casablanca, resulting in more than 100 wounded and 45 dead, including the twelve suicide bombers. Since 2001 and especially since 2003, Morocco has positioned itself as a geostrategic enclave of utmost importance for the US in terms of its influence in North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East (Vagni, 2009). Thus, relations between the two countries were further strengthened in 2004 by two events: the inclusion of Morocco as a major non-NATO ally and the conclusion of a free trade agreement with the US.

In the years to come, the US considered Morocco a key strategic partner in the fight against terrorism and the maintenance of stability in North Africa, being included in November 2007 in the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a regional body of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), focused on combating money laundering and terrorist financing (FATF, n.d.). Morocco had proven to be the most stable of all the states in the region, especially after the events of 2011. In the context of the Arab Spring, Morocco was one of the few Arab states that remained stable; however, the Alawi monarch was forced to carry out a series of democratic and liberalising reforms, including a constitutional reform that limited the powers of the monarch

and extended the powers of the Moroccan legislature. Subsequently, in the context of counterterrorism, the US and Morocco joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in 2014 and jointly launched the Initiative to Address Homegrown Terrorism in September 2017, which aimed to bring together government officials, academics, criminal justice practitioners and non-governmental representatives from more than forty countries to share expertise and identify best practices in counterterrorism (Global Counterterrorism Forum [GCTF], n.d.).

Another sign of affinity between the two countries is their manifest enmity towards the state of Iran. In 2018, Morocco cut diplomatic ties with the Shiite country over its alleged financial and logistical support for the POLISARIO Front. In other areas, however, the two nations have not been entirely aligned, such as on the Israeli–Palestinian issue, where Morocco advocates the two-state solution and, in December 2017, criticised the Trump administration's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Moreover, in 2013 and 2016, with Barack Obama at the helm of the US government, there were sporadic moments of tension between the two countries due to pressure exerted by the US on Morocco at the UN over the situation in Western Sahara.

The latest sign of friendship between the two nations was the US president's decision in April 2025 to impose reciprocal tariffs on almost all countries in the international community. Of the list of countries presented, Lesotho ranks highest with 50 per cent tariffs, followed by Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia (49 per cent), Laos (48 per cent), Vietnam (46 per cent) and Myanmar (44 per cent). The EU, for its part, imposed tariffs of 20 per cent, while Morocco is one of the countries to which the lowest percentage has been applied: 10 per cent (along with others such as Argentina, the United Kingdom and Ukraine). In contrast, its neighbour, Algeria, has imposed a tariff of 30 per cent (The White House, 2025c). This list demonstrates the state of US political and economic relations with the rest of the world, especially in terms of the closeness or remoteness of the different states towards China (to which tariffs of 34 per cent have been imposed).

Western Sahara and the US position

What is known today as Western Sahara was once a colony and later a province belonging to the Spanish state, the capital of which was the city of El Aaiún (Gobierno de España, 1958). The coup d'état in Portugal in 1974, which resulted in Lisbon's decision to grant independence to its colonies, prompted King Hassan II to put pressure on Spain to do the same with Western Sahara and withdraw from the territory. In August 1974 the Spanish state notified the UN Security Council of its intention to hold a referendum on self-determination for Western Sahara, which Morocco opposed, considering that before colonisation, the territory was part of the Alawite Kingdom. Shortly afterwards, Mauritania also expressed its interest in the future of the Spanish territory, and in December 1974, the UN General Assembly requested the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to issue an advisory opinion on the sovereignty rights that both states might possess with respect to Western Sahara. On 16 October 1975, the Court ruled that the existing ties between Western Sahara and the states of Morocco and Mauritania did not give rise to the assertion of sovereign rights over the territory, even stressing the need to respect the principle of self-determination of the Saharawi people in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) (ICJ, 1975). However, ignoring the Court's ruling, Morocco went ahead and, in early November, mobilised large numbers of civil society in what would become known as the Green March, as a way of asserting its sovereign rights over the territory and forcing Madrid to leave.

A week later, Spain ended its domination of the territory and, through the Madrid Accords, handed over administrative responsibility to Morocco and Mauritania. These agreements were intended to fulfil the UN's objective of decolonising Western Sahara, putting an end to Spain's role as the territory's administering power by 26 February 1976. However, the text also offers some elements to bear in mind regarding the decolonisation process in Western Sahara. Firstly, it expressed the obligation to respect the opinion of the Sahrawi people, in accordance with the principle of self-determination of peoples. Secondly, it established the creation of a temporary administration in which Morocco, Mauritania,

and Yemen were to participate, the body through which the Saharawi people could express their opinions (United Nations Treaty Series, 1975). However, especially after Mauritania's withdrawal from possession of part of Western Sahara following a coup d'état in 1978, Morocco took over two-thirds of the northern part of the territory and the phosphate reserves at Bou Craa. Mauritania, for its part, settled for control of the fishing industry in Dakhla (formerly known as Villa Cisneros) and iron ore reserves in Agracha (García Pérez, 2019). For its part, the POLISARIO Front announced the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on 27 February 1976. Today, SADR is internationally recognised by 82 states, most of them from the African continent. It has also been a full member of the African Union since 1982 (then the Organisation of African Unity).

During the negotiation of the Madrid Accords, the US played an important role in convincing Spain, and this is sometimes overlooked. Thus, the American giant pressured Spain to accede to Morocco's territorial demands, arguing that there was a possibility that King Hassan II would be deposed from the throne. Likewise, faced with the possibility of an independent state susceptible to Soviet-communist ideas from nearby countries such as Algeria, the US preferred the option of a Sahara close to Morocco. Through the interdiction of General Vernon Walters, the US combined Spain's need for cooperation with the renewal of contracts for US military bases on Spanish soil (Zunes, 1987).

The first two US administrations following Morocco's takeover of Western Sahara, the Carter administration (1977–1981) and the Reagan administration (1981–1989) increased military aid to Morocco, albeit moderately, due to their refusal to officially recognise Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, as this could lead to a breakdown in relations with Algeria, an important US economic partner, and the internationalisation of the conflict. This arms trade was carried out in accordance with a ban passed in 1960, which prohibited the utilisation of US arms outside recognised borders, and the US Arms Export Control Act (1976), which prohibits their use in all non-defensive activities. By 1979, however, it became clear that the US knew of and tolerated the use of these weapons on Sahrawi territory (Zunes, 1987). All this took place in a historical context marked by the 1979 Iranian revolution and the

increasing destabilisation of the Middle East.

The first state to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara was the US. In December 2020, then (and current) US President Donald J. Trump announced the official US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory of Western Sahara and offered his support for the autonomy solution proposed by the Alawite Kingdom (The White House, 2020). This support was manifested in the visit of the US Ambassador to Morocco, Mr David T. Fischer, to the Saharawi town of Dakhla with the intention of initiating the process for the installation of a consular office (US Embassy and Consulates in Morocco, 2021). In return, Morocco would strengthen ties with Israel by signing a treaty normalising relations between the two countries (Pérez Triana, 2022; US Department of State, 2020) (which would form part of the so-called 'Abraham Accords' that also involved Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Sudan). This US position could set an important precedent in relation to actions aimed at limiting the right to self-determination of peoples and respect for the rule of intangibility of colonial borders, known as *uti possidetis iuris*, which is clearly rooted in African countries, and could provoke a domino effect in other parts of the continent.

On 6 November 2023, King Mohammed VI delivered a speech commemorating the 48th anniversary of the Green March, the peaceful invasion of the then Spanish Sahara that led to the signing of the Tripartite Agreements on 14 November 1975 between Spain, Mauritania, and Morocco. In the words of the Alaouite monarch, this event enabled Morocco to assert its territorial integrity, claiming the territory as the Moroccan Sahara. The monarch repeatedly stressed the need to continue development work in this area, not only for national purposes, but also for regional ones, thus enabling the other Sahel states to obtain an outlet to the Atlantic. He also referred to Western Sahara as an important area in relation to the exploration of offshore natural resources and the renewable energy agenda. Finally, Mohammed VI welcomed the fact that many countries recognised the Sahara as a sovereign Moroccan territory and that others have declared that the autonomy solution proposed by Morocco in 2007 is the best viable option for resolving the conflict (Kingdom of Morocco, Head of Government, 2023).

An important political shift in this direction came in a letter from Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to Mohammed VI in which he stated that the autonomy solution proposed by the Kingdom of Morocco (United Nations Security Council, 2007) was the most feasible solution for resolving the Western Sahara conflict. This event represented a complete reversal of the policy of neutrality maintained by the various Spanish governments since their withdrawal more than 45 years ago (Jiménez García-Carriazo, 2025). Other states that have backed Morocco's proposal have been the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recently declared that its office in El Aaiún and Tindouf will close by the end of September 2025. This political context is paving the way for the recognition of Western Sahara as part of Moroccan territory and eliminating all chances of achieving independence.

The Spanish-Moroccan conflict over the waters off the Canary Islands: Why might it be important for the US?

On 17 December 2014, Spain submitted to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), in accordance with Article 76 and Annexe II of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a request for the extension of the outer limits of its continental shelf in the area west of the Canary Islands. In its request, Spain asserted that there were no disputes with another coastal state or states in the extension of its continental shelf, and that its submission did not prejudice or prejudice the rights of third states that might eventually be claimed.

By communication submitted on 10 March 2015, Morocco underlined that part of the area claimed by Spain concerns an area whose sovereignty had not yet been delimited between the two countries. The question of whether there is a dispute of sovereign rights in the enlargement area is important, as it would deprive the CLCS of any possibility of hearing the matter unless otherwise agreed. While Morocco did not object to the CLCS being able to hear the case, it argued that the principle that should govern the delimitation of the outer limits of the continental shelf should be that of equity and not that of equidistance. Consequently, based on

the application of the first principle, Morocco would obtain a substantial advantage over Spain in the delimitation task. In its reply of 22 April 2015, Spain undertook to delimit the limits of its continental shelf in accordance with the recommendations to be issued by the CLCS in the future and through an agreement with those states that have adjacent or opposite coasts. However, although Morocco's claims are based on the extent of the coastal waters of Western Sahara, Spain omitted any reference to this territory (CLCS, 2015).

This, however, changed when, in August 2015, in its presentation on the 2014 submission, the Spanish delegation spoke of a possible overlap with a future submission regarding the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles measured from Western Sahara, a non-self-governing territory pending decolonisation. In this case, Spain expressed its willingness to negotiate, not with Morocco, but with the entity that would have sovereign control over the coasts and territory of Western Sahara once its decolonisation process was completed (CLCS, 2015). In Figure 11.1, the area of overlap, to the south, can be seen with the potential area of Western Sahara.

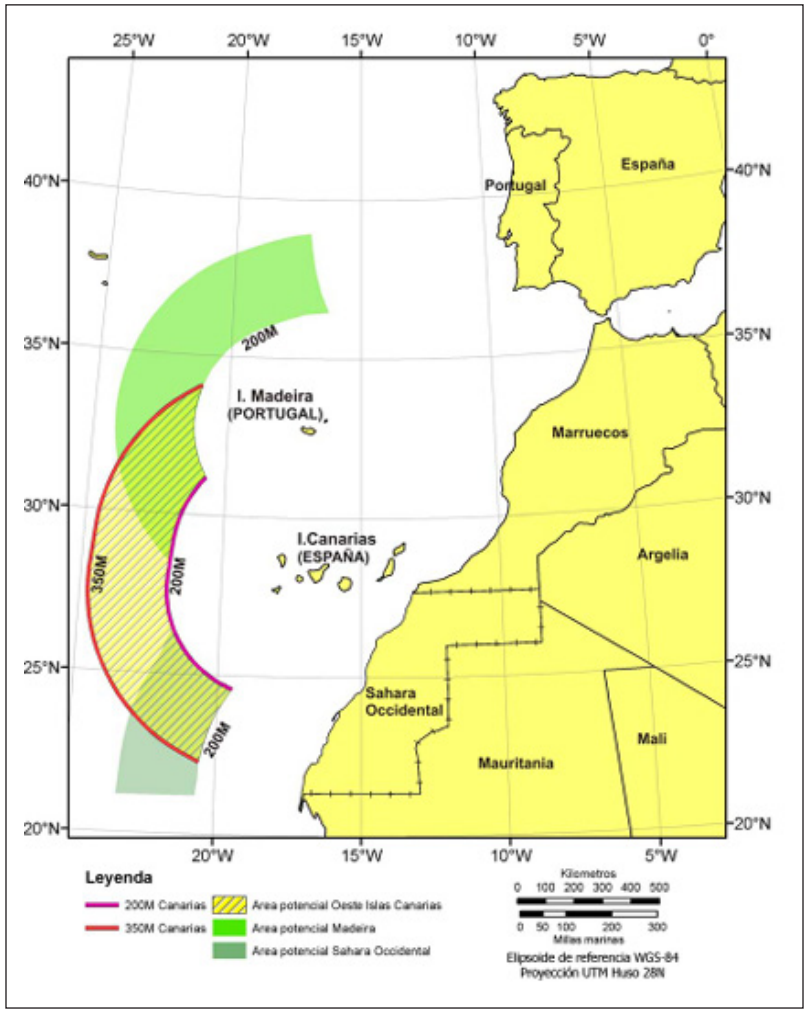

Figure 11.1. Overlapping areas of continental shelf extension to the west of the Canary Islands

Source: García Pérez, R. 2019. Canary Islands and the foreseeable expansion of its continental shelf: the difficult balance between Spain, Morocco and Western Sahara. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos (Journal of Mediterranean International Studies)*, 26: 125.

According to Morocco's National Office of Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM), the Alawi Kingdom is willing to extend the limits of its continental shelf both in its sovereign zone and in the maritime zone of Western Sahara (Jiménez García-Carriazo, 2025), as shown in the image below. These waters are considered by Morocco to be part of its sovereign territory, having enacted two laws that integrate them into its exclusive economic zone (Laws No. 37.17 and 38.17). The main reason why Morocco considers the extension of these limits important is related to the mining and energy industries.

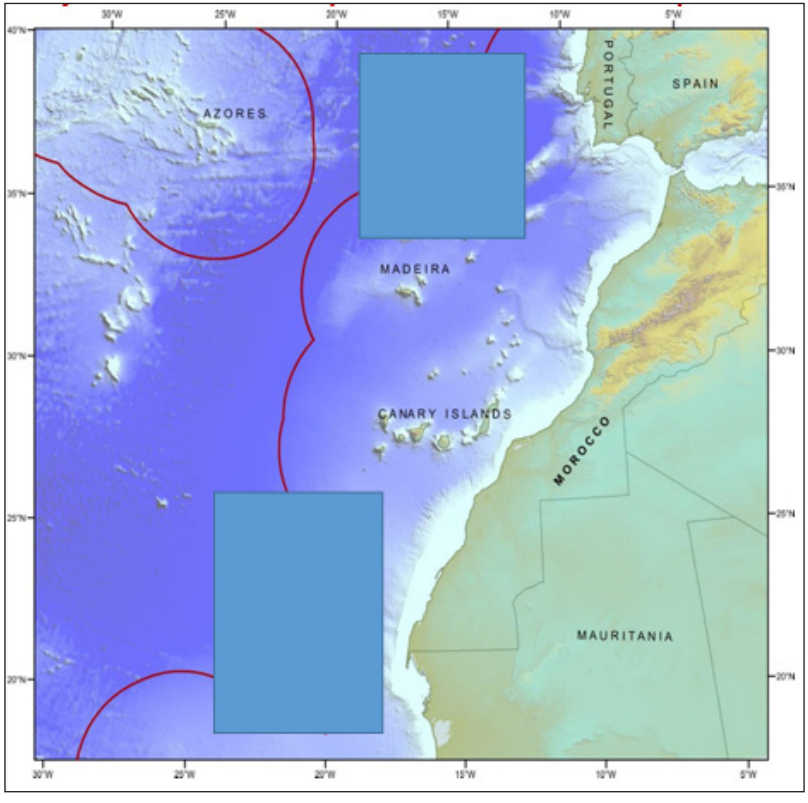

Figure 11.2. Moroccan Atlantic continental shelf extension project
Source: ONHYM. 2019. *Aperçu sur le rôle et les missions de l'ONHYM et état des lieux de l'exploration pétrolière en offshore au Maroc*, p. 17.

Figure 11.2 shows and overview of the role and missions of ONHYM and current status of offshore oil exploration in Morocco. A state having rights over its continental shelf may exercise its sovereignty for the purposes of exploration and exploitation of its natural resources in accordance with Article 77 UNCLOS. The continental shelf overlap area between Spain and Western Sahara includes a mountainous area within which seamounts rich in mineral resources have been found. Among these, the one known as Mount Tropic, where the highest concentration of polymetallic mineral deposits is found, stands out. Mount Tropic (Algora Weber, 2021) is known to be the world's largest tellurium deposit with up to 2 600 tonnes, which may represent up to 10 per cent of the world's reserves of tellurium, a key element in the manufacture of solar panels and thermoelectric generators. In addition, the extension of sovereign boundaries in this area could provide positive benefits for the oil and gas extractive industry. In 2005, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) offered to grant licences for the exploration of oil and gas fields, both inland and offshore. The map below (Figure 11.3) shows that some of the areas affected by the licensing correspond to Moroccan aspirations. However, resolving the issue of Western Sahara's sovereignty remains a priority over the rights that either state may have to delimit its maritime zone.

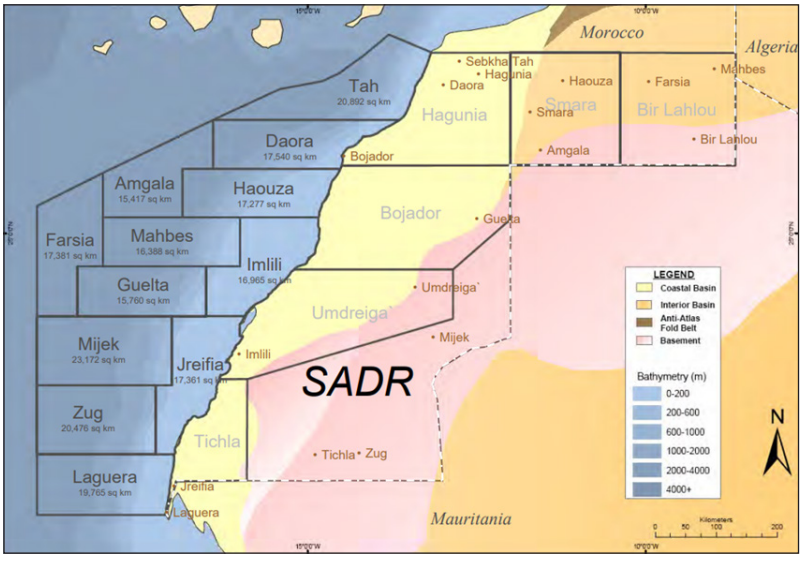

Figure 11.3. Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic 'SADR'

Source: García Pérez, R. 2019. Canary Islands and the foreseeable expansion of its continental shelf: the difficult balance between Spain, Morocco and Western Sahara. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos (Journal of Mediterranean International Studies)*, 26: 130.

Despite the existence of these minerals on the controversial seabed, it is necessary to point out that their future extraction is not assured, as there are many drawbacks and many factors to be considered when even considering the possibility of extracting them (García Pérez, 2019). Firstly, although it is a scarce element, tellurium can also be obtained from the earth's surface, the process of obtaining it being less costly. While it is an important element for the renewable energy industry, in particular, for the manufacture of solar panels and offshore wind turbines, its viability and profitability are not assured. Secondly, the implementation of an extraction project on this scale could have serious impacts on the marine environment. There is currently a clear lack of knowledge about the environmental implications of such projects, particularly deep-sea mining projects, and numerous environmental impact assessments would need to be carried out to ascertain the best ways to mitigate the effects. Finally,

one must refer again to the fact that Western Sahara remains a non-self-governing territory whose decolonisation is still pending. Therefore, the opinion and consent of the Saharawi population itself should be sought when exploiting the natural resources located in this area. The Court of Justice of the EU ruled in 2024, that products obtained in Western Sahara and marketed by Morocco on the EU internal market could not be covered by EU–Moroccan trade agreements, since without the consent of the Sahrawi population, their right to self-determination would be violated (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2024).

The interest of the US and, specifically, the Trump administration in taking over the trade of these strategic elements for industries such as defence or renewable energy was made clear to the world, both with the negotiation with Ukraine for the signing of the famous rare earths agreement (whereby the US would continue to provide military aid to Ukraine and in exchange, would have rights over areas rich in Ukrainian rare earths), and with the signing of the executive order of 20 March 2025, which seeks to increase US production of these strategic minerals (The White House, 2025b) (thorium would fall under the definition of 'critical mineral' in 30 U.S.C. 1606). This executive order would later be complemented by the one signed on 24 April 2025, by which the US president intends to promote deep sea mining both in its own waters and abroad. Through this measure, Trump seeks to 'establish the US as a global leader in seabed mineral exploration and development both within and beyond national jurisdiction' (The White House, 2025a), thus bypassing the International Seabed Authority (ISA) and undermining multilateralism.

The Middle East and Maghreb region is home to 57 per cent of the world's oil and gas reserves, and the largest accumulation of rare earth elements is in Western Sahara. Morocco, for its part, has sovereignty over territory that is rich in phosphates, which are used for fertilisers, as well as radioactive elements such as uranium 238 (Algora Weber, 2021). All these elements not only make the Middle East and Maghreb region an ambitious territory in relation to the extractive industry, they also position Morocco and Western Sahara in the Trump administration's sights. The decision to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020

could be seen as a step forward in the trade of these elements between Morocco and the US.

Conclusion

The US–Moroccan relationship has always enjoyed a relative harmony, as the two nations' common interests have always tended to coincide (security, migration, energy, diplomacy), to such an extent that the US has become, especially since Donald J. Trump's arrival in the White House, a loyal ally when it comes to Western Sahara. The likelihood that this territory will be able to have an effective process of self-determination in the short term is dwindling. A possible move by Trump to reaffirm the 2020 US policy shift could involve opening a consulate in Dakhla and curtailing the role of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), thereby reinforcing Morocco's claims over the disputed territory. Nevertheless, the potential costs of this increased American backing for Morocco's territorial ambitions remain uncertain. Also, having already normalised relations with Israel, Morocco may leverage its growing and strategic partnership with the Israeli government to strengthen its diplomatic influence, particularly regarding its regional priority—the Western Sahara.

The struggle for the strategic mineral resources needed to power certain industries and compete with other markets, such as China, means that the waters adjacent to the territory of Western Sahara are in the sights of both Morocco and the US. This will also have consequences for relations between the Kingdoms of Morocco and Spain, which have been strained at times over migration, security and Moroccan interests in the waters claimed by Spain. The executive orders signed by President Trump in March and April 2025 show his intention to undermine multilateralism and even bypass environmental protection legislation to promote and advance deep sea mining abroad. Pending a decision on the question of sovereignty over the waters claimed by Spain south of the Canary Islands, a reaction from the international community is needed on the process of self-determination in Western Sahara and the protection of the seabed.

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