




## Regional Power Competition in North Africa Since the Arab Spring

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**EN Abstract.** This study analyzes the geopolitical transformations experienced in North Africa since the Arab Springs, highlighting the rivalry for regional hegemony between Algeria and Morocco. Using the theoretical framework of offensive realism, the research examines how the regional landscape has been reconfigured in a multipolar and unstable environment, where major powers seek to project their power through their regional proxies. Methodologically, it combines historical-comparative analysis with case studies, highlighting the arms race, flexible alliances in the multipolar era, and proxy wars. The results reveal that the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry transcends bilateral disputes, encapsulating the competition between major powers for strategic influence, energy resources, and security. It concludes that the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco reflects competition between major powers on the international stage, which could lead to an escalation of indirect conflicts and profound regional instability in the medium and long term.

**Keywords:** North Africa, regional hegemony, Arab Spring, Algeria and Morocco, major powers.

## ES La competición por la hegemonía regional en el norte de África desde las Primaveras Árabes

**Resumen.** El estudio analiza las transformaciones geopolíticas que ha experimentado el norte de África a partir de las Primaveras Árabes, poniendo en primer plano la rivalidad por la hegemonía regional entre Argelia y Marruecos. Desde el marco teórico del realismo ofensivo, la investigación examina cómo el escenario regional se ha reconfigurado en un ambiente multipolar e inestable, donde las grandes potencias buscan proyectar su poder a través de sus proxis regionales. Metodológicamente, se combina un análisis históricocomparativo con estudios de caso, destacando la carrera armamentística, las alianzas flexibles en la era multipolar y las guerras proxis. Los resultados revelan que la rivalidad argelino-marroquí trasciende disputas bilaterales, encapsulando la competencia entre las grandes potencias por influencia estratégica, recursos energéticos y seguridad. Se concluye que la rivalidad entre Argelia y Marruecos constituye un reflejo de la competencia entre las grandes potencias en el tablero internacional, lo cual podría derivar en una escalada de conflictos indirectos y en una profunda inestabilidad regional a mediano y largo plazo.

**Palabras claves:** Norte de África, hegemonía regional, Primaveras Árabes, Argelia y Marruecos, grandes potencias.

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## 1. Introduction

More than a decade after the Arab Spring, the geopolitical landscape of North Africa is marked by instability and constant power reconfiguration.

Consistent with these factors, the current context is characterized by a chaotic regional order immersed in a setting of constant change, multiplying conflict scenarios. Although the Arab Spring made it possible to change leadership in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, the revolts failed (Cordesman, 2020; Hiltermann, 2019). Since then, a sense of pessimism and improbability about future scenarios in the region has been growing (Potter, 2019: 25). This context certainly had significant repercussions on the regional security environment, affecting the broader pattern of inter-state and intra-state conflicts (Brynen, 2019: 303). The entire region, from the Maghreb to the Mashreq, is immersed in a context of constant threats, where conflicts tend to protect the interests of key actors (Jägerskog, Schulz, and Swain, 2019: 9) and, consequently, the interests of the major powers competing for control in the region.

From a "realistic" perspective, we observe that the political, economic, and social situation in the Greater Middle East, North Africa, and the Near East has deteriorated in recent years. This is evident in a manifestation that goes far beyond conflicts, competing ideologies and beliefs, and insignificant power struggles among ruling elites (Cordesman, 2020). Indeed, we use the realist paradigm of international relations to offer an adequate explanation of the reality of recent developments in the region. It seems clear to us that traditional paradigms, which insist on *wishful thinking* about the Arab Spring, do not allow for a close and authentic understanding of the geopolitical transformations in the region. Therefore, no country in the area is a democratic country, nor does it resemble a liberal democracy like those in the West. For this reason, we will not base our theoretical reading on theories of democratic peace and models of transition to democracy, and we further reject this approach, which does not reflect the reality of North Africa and the Middle East.

Therefore, our research initially focuses on understanding the new context of North Africa following the Arab Spring, the influences of its neighbors: the Middle East and the Sahel, as well as the new geopolitical dynamics threatening the region. To achieve this, we first contextualize the chaos and regional instability that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring and its consequences on the distribution of power between the major powers and local actors in North Africa. The empirical examples used highlight the conflict-ridden, unstable, and multipolar landscape that characterized the region and its particularity, as the interests of the major powers manifested themselves through external military intervention in Libya and Syria (Potter, 2019). This caused the traditional order to be altered towards an imbalance of power and precipitated the emergence of new regional powers and non-traditional great powers in our subregion of study. The alteration of *the regional status quo*, the return to the conflictive nature of the region (Hiltermann, 2019: 34), with two proxy wars (Libya and Syria), the militarization of non-state actors, and the use of chemical weapons, have allowed for a new distribution of power and a new geopolitical landscape in the region.

This section will be key to clarifying the new distribution of power among non-traditional great powers, such as China and Russia, vis-à-vis the West and the former colonial powers in the North African region since the Arab Spring. In this context, Mearsheimer (2001: 34-35) reminds us of the logic of power distribution and the limits of its identification, noting:

*"States pay close attention to the distribution of power among themselves and make a deliberate effort to maximize their share of global power... Determining how much power is sufficient becomes even more complex... and it is often difficult to predict the direction and extent of changes in the balance of power."*

This inherent uncertainty, reflected in the difficulty of predicting the direction and scope of changes in the balance of power, confirms the analytical limitations that accompany any realistic assessment of state capabilities in the current era of multipolarity. In this context, the case study of our research seeks to shed light on the role of proxy ally that North African actors play for the great powers and their projection of power in this region. We use two empirical examples: Algeria and Morocco, within the context of their regional hegemonic rivalry.

This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the forces driving the region from the Arab Spring towards a scenario of conflict and dependency, and how these dynamics may influence long-term stability and security. Furthermore, based on the existing theoretical framework, the research constructs an innovative narrative that reinterprets the dynamics of conflict in North Africa in light of the transformations following the Arab Spring, integrating geopolitical, security, and regional interdependence dimensions not previously articulated in this approach. This underscores the importance of redefining the power dynamics in the Maghreb in this new multipolar order.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Our theoretical interpretation is based on John J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism extrapolated to the North African subregion in the timeframe following the the Arab Spring. It is essential to remember that the structure of the international system is anarchic and non-hierarchical, which means that liberalism applied to international politics is not viable (Mearsheimer, 2018: 3). Furthermore, there is a considerable gap between the liberal discourse that underpinned Western foreign policy, largely that of the United States of America, and the practice of that policy, which is governed by a realist logic (Mearsheimer, 2005). It is not surprising that the political elite responsible for designing foreign and, above all, security policies primarily uses the jargon of power, rather than principles and values (Mearsheimer, 2011: 25).

Ultimately, the choice of this theoretical framework is justified by realism's ability to capture the essence of regional hegemonic competition in an anarchic international system, where actors such as Algeria and Morocco act to maximize their power and seek security (De Larramendi, 2018). We consider it the appropriate paradigm because it explains the dynamics of material power and security in a context marked by structural instability and asymmetric multipolarity (Mearsheimer, 2001). In this sense, the empirical experience following the less-than-spring-like effects of the Arab Spring (Brynen, 2019; Ghanem, 2016; Robinson & Merrow, 2020) highlighted the limitations of the neoliberal and democracy-centric theoretical framework that has dominated much of the interpretation of democratic expansion beyond the West. Given the absence of liberal democracies throughout the region and the failure of interventions based on principles such as the "Responsibility to Protect," which exacerbated conflicts in Libya and Syria, liberalism and democratic peace theory prove inadequate to explain the reality of North Africa.

That said, these theoretical currents start from the assumption that democratization and inter-state cooperation are sufficient mechanisms to mitigate conflicts (Ikenberry, 2011), which is hardly relevant in a region dominated by non-democratic regimes and where the narrative of democratic peace clashes with the realities of historical conflicts and structural security dilemmas (Azaola *et al.*, 2022; Smolka, 2019). On the other hand, as Western hegemony in the region began to decline in the face of the new multipolar distribution and competing geopolitical agendas, Western foreign policy in the region weakened considerably (Kausch, 2014: 11). In this regard, Mearsheimer reminds us that a liberal foreign policy is not a formula for cooperation, but rather for instability and conflict (Mearsheimer, 2018; Diesen, 2019), even though it was a successful model for European regional integration after World War II. The specific nature of our case study reveals that the *de facto* regional autonomy that the West had achieved after the end of the bipolar moment (Kelly, 2007: 200) was eroded, particularly in North Africa after the uprisings that took place in early 2011 in Tunisia.

The constructivist school, although it provides useful analytical tools for understanding how identities and interests are constructed and transformed in the international arena, tends to relegate the primary role of power and anarchy and does not prioritize material interests (Wendt, 1999), as in the example of the Western Sahara conflict (Fernández Molina, 2015; Thieux, 2020). These key elements are essential for explaining the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry, as well as the influence of extra-regional actors in a context of multipolarity (Delkâder, 2021). Lehne (2024) pointed out that one of the main challenges in the coming years will be to determine whether a multipolar world can continue to be governed by rules or whether, on the contrary, it will descend into an unrestricted struggle for global hegemony, accompanied by arms races and the instrumentalization of economic relations. From a *realpolitik* perspective, the answer seems obvious to us, since, as Mearsheimer (2001: 12) defined it, "*power is the currency of politics among great powers, in which states compete with each other for its acquisition.*" Ultimately, it is important to emphasize that the purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts that have become confusing (Clausewitz, 1984). Furthermore, the South, as a group of former colonies, is emerging from centuries of external control (Kelly, 2007: 201), making it increasingly evident that our structural theories need to be revised to adequately fit our reality.

### 3. Research question and methodology

The research, in its realist understanding of the multipolar regional context post-2011, adopts the hypothesis that the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria is a subregional projection of the rivalry between great powers in their pursuit of power maximization and build alliances. To this end, the second section of this document is devoted to presenting our research question and case study: how does the competition between Algeria and Morocco for regional hegemony reflect the rivalry between the great powers in their pursuit of power maximization in North Africa? Algeria is an ally of Russia and China, while Morocco is an ally of the West: the United States and Europe, together with Israel. It is essential to note that this apparent bipolarity should not be interpreted in an exclusionary manner but rather used as an analytical tool to highlight the prevailing geopolitical dynamics in the region before and after the Arab Spring.

In the multipolar era, alliances are flexible, overlapping, and not mutually exclusive (Kamrava, 2018). Far from being a dichotomous simplification, the designation "ally of the West" applied to Morocco does not imply exclusivity in its international relations, given that the Kingdom maintains important military and commercial ties with Russia and China (Chaziza, 2018; Fulton, 2019; Meneses, 2022). Similarly, Algeria, despite its historical distancing from France and its skepticism towards US foreign policy in the region, maintains functional relations with European countries such as Italy and Spain, especially in terms of gas supply (Bhattacharya, 2022) and cooperation against terrorism in the Sahel (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018). Our research acknowledges this complexity inherent in the current international scenario and highlights the pragmatic nature of the foreign policy of the Maghreb states, which, far from adhering to rigid blocs, balance their partnerships according to strategic interests at any given time (Kausch, 2014). Throughout the text, we detail the historical origins of these alliances, as well as the concept of shifting alliances in the context of asymmetric multipolarity.

The second part of this document is devoted to explaining, from a realist perspective, the historical context of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco for regional hegemony in North Africa. The analysis focuses on understanding regional security dilemmas, such as the case of Western Sahara, which has been a source of open conflict and a strategic lever for zero-sum games between the two regional powers. We will also examine the new geopolitical dynamics that are pushing the region toward a more chaotic state of nature. Due to the fragile neighborhood and influential regional environment, the dilemmas facing North Africa multiply the incentives for rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, which, supported respectively by a major power, aspire to project their hegemonic power in the region and achieve recognition as regional security powers.

The research is conducted within a spatial framework covering North Africa and its immediate neighbors, the Sahel and the Middle East, and a temporal framework focused on the period following the Arab Spring of 2011. The variables of the study include, on the one hand, regional security dilemmas between Algeria and Morocco and, and on the other, the strategies of power projection and alliance building by major powers through local actors. The sources used combine academic and empirical literature. Our research concludes with a series of reflections on future scenarios for the region. Due to the current context, which highlights indirect conflict and rivalries between major powers through their proxies, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco for regional hegemony means that North Africa continues to be embroiled in ongoing power struggles.

## 4. The Arab Spring and the *balance of power* in North Africa

### 4.1. The shift in the balance of power and the end of the unipolar moment

The first quarter of the 21st century was marked by the emergence of a multipolar global system (Flockhart & Korosteleva, 2022), centered on the rivalry between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (Lehne, 2024). There are solid grounds for considering that, with the rise of China (Coetzee, 2013) and the resurgence of Russian power (Diesen, 2019), politics between major powers have once again taken center stage on the international agenda (Mearsheimer, 2018: 7). In this context, and given that Russia and China have increased their power (Mearsheimer, 2001), it is more reasonable to support their change of status as emerging powers and recognize them as great powers within the international system, which implies an alteration of the balance of power established since the end of the Cold War. Likewise, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and even since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 confirmed Russia's return to the international geopolitical stage to maximize its power (Diesen, 2019) and guarantee its security (Flockhart and Korosteleva, 2022). In this regard, Mearsheimer explains that the growing influence of China and Russia in the international system, as well as their competition with the United States, is the inherent logic of any great power seeking to survive on the international stage (Mearsheimer, 2018). and this will undoubtedly drive both the United States and China to compete for broader strategic alliances within this structural conflict for international leadership (Xuetong, 2013: 165).

Within this framework, both the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation seek to position themselves as global leaders, exercising power and influence over other countries (Mearsheimer, 2001). Mearsheimer defines this multipolar configuration as the dominant basis of international anarchy, in which three major powers compete: the United States of America, the People's Republic of China, and the Russian Federation (Mearsheimer, 2023). The return to this multipolar structure coincides with a paradigm shift in international relations, where Western dominance on the international stage is in decline (Todd, 2024). *"The West must recognize that the existing order is far from satisfactory, as it does not take sufficient account of the rise of emerging powers, especially China, and therefore it is not enough to defend it unconditionally"* (Powell, 2017: 5). In the words of Mearsheimer, *"It is imperative for the US foreign policy establishment to assume that the liberal international order, far from being a viable horizon, was a failed project"* (2019: 50). Since the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar world, the West has been the traditional hegemon in both North Africa and the Middle East (Ikenberry, 2011), thus guaranteeing its interests in the region. In this regard, Mearsheimer (2001) argues that a regional hegemon seeks to prevent other great powers from acquiring that status in other regions, as this would alter the distribution of power and compromise its security (42).

However, despite the events of December 2024, which were celebrated in the West as a victory, the failure of Western powers in Syria during the Arab Spring should not go unnoticed (De Castro García, 2023: 127). This is undoubtedly another empirical example that shows that the response of the United States and its allies to the Arab Spring uprisings should have been based on a realistic strategy, rather than prioritizing liberal-inspired approaches, whose abstract principles proved dysfunctional in the face of the complexity of the regional context. This approach would have involved prioritizing their own security and stability through the implementation of containment and deterrence policies, with the aim of minimizing adverse reactions and safeguarding their position in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). We argue that, within this context of a new multipolar era, marked by the decline and end of US leadership and the acceleration of China and Russia's presence in their recognition as great powers, the alteration of the balance of power in North Africa coincided with the *outbreak* of the Arab Spring in 2011.

Since then, the former Soviet power has managed to promote its interests in Libya (Feur *et al.*, 2019), which are not limited to Moscow's alleged interest in establishing a military base or participating in the sale of military equipment. Rather, Russia's interest lies in projecting power in an area of critical importance to Western interests and, in this way, frustrate the very actors in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) who are challenging Moscow on its eastern front (Merzan & Miller, 2017: 4). Indeed, the Russian and Chinese presence in the region was consolidated by the power vacuum left after the fall of Gaddafi, which provided a timely opportunity to shift the centers of stability throughout the region (Brynen, 2019: 23), since the very system of international relations encourages states to seek opportunities to maximize their power vis-à-vis other states (Mearsheimer, 2001: 29). This is what is known in realist jargon as a "power vacuum." This logic is based on the premise that if there are two or more great powers on the international stage, they have no alternative but to act in accordance with realist principles and engage in competition and struggle for security among themselves (Mearsheimer, 2019: 12). In the case of North Africa, this idea was reflected in the ease with which the Wagner Group entered the region in 2019 (Feur *et al.*, 2019). Its presence in Libya took the form of mercenaries supporting the military ambitions of General Haftar's government in the east of the country (Volk and Gasseling, 2021). Since the end of 2021, the Russian

Federation's interests in the region have begun to consolidate and its military presence in both Africa and the Middle East has been reinforced (Kausch, 2014). Russia consolidated its naval base in Tartus, Syria, the only naval post outside the former Soviet bloc and one that gives it direct access to the Mediterranean (Ibid.). Despite the fall of Bashar Al-Assad in December 2024, Russia continues to maintain both its naval base in Tartus and the area in Khmeimim, both in Syria (Rosenberg, 2024).

On the other hand, in the Sahel, the successive withdrawals of French, European, and international forces, driven by military juntas, coincide with the growing influence of Russia and China in the region (Gogny, 2025). In this regard, both Russia and China are the main suppliers of weapons to the arms market throughout North Africa and its neighborhood (mainly the Sahel). In short, they have the potential to alter the fragile security balance in the region by supplying weapons (Hill & Cavatorta, 2019). In this multipolar context following the Arab Spring, the object of our research aims to focus on the role of great powers and their local allies in North Africa. Therefore, we will focus our case study on the rivalry for regional hegemony between Algeria and Morocco, as a reflection of the rivalry between great powers in their maximization of power and allies in North Africa since the Arab Spring.

## 4.2. An unstable and multipolar regional context

North Africa, as a conflict-ridden region (Brynen, 2019) and one of considerable interest to major powers (Atarodi, 2019: 16), has always been one of the key regions for competition in power maximization (Hiltermann, 2019: 27), in both economic and military terms (Pavia *et al.*, 2022: 32). In a region marked by growing insecurity and competitive multipolarity (Kausch, 2014: 11), the post-Arab Spring era brought new challenges and conflicts, which have opened the door to rivalries between major powers through their local allies (Brynen, 2019: 304). In essence, the Arab Spring has provided *momentum* for the transformation of the regional order in North Africa and the establishment of multipolarity.

In this sense, transformations of the international order are often associated with shifts in power, as well as the latent risk of violence or armed conflict (Flockhart and Korosteleva, 2022: 468). First, the disruption of the North African regional order began in Libya. External intervention following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011 opened the door to a new phase of internal clashes, with various regional and international actors beginning to promote their own interests in the country's emerging political order (Feur *et al.*, 2019; Merzan & Miller, 2017). This civil war was intensified by growing external involvement, showing that the real objective of NATO's intervention<sup>1</sup>, led by the United Kingdom and France, and the United States with its strategic stance of "*leading from behind*" (Hiltermann, 2019: 43), went beyond the protection of civilians, seeking the collapse of the Gaddafi regime (Brynen, 2019: 309).

Among regional powers, the United Arab Emirates aligned itself with US interests by supporting Haftar's regime, in a traditional policy of *bandwagoning* (Feur *et al.*, 2019). Turkey also played a crucial role, both financially and diplomatically, with the backing of the NATO mission. In contrast, Qatar took a different stance, supporting Islamist factions in their fight against Gaddafi as part of a power projection strategy, seeking to establish like-minded regimes in strategic areas (Merzan & Miller, 2017). The role of Qatar and Turkey, and even Saudi Arabia in supporting the US, is a direct consequence of structural changes in the nature of regional alliances (Kausch, 2014: 10). The increased interest of large and medium-sized regional powers, in constant rivalry for power, reinforces the multipolar competitive scenario in North Africa, where various actors are vying to maximize their influence in a context of global tensions (Brynen, 2019: 304).

The Libyan scenario is perhaps the best example of this dynamic of constant tension for power: where a local conflict becomes a proxy war, that is, a battlefield for the great powers through local actors to achieve a common goal against a common rival (Fox, 2021: 4). In this case, what happened in Libya not only reflects the rivalry between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia against Qatar, but also reflects the broader confrontation between the West and Russia through their proxy allies (Hiltermann, 2019: 41). Since the fall of Gaddafi, Libya has been the scene of clashes between great powers seeking to maximize their power in North Africa by taking advantage of the chaos generated by war (Lounnas, 2014: 48).

<sup>1</sup> Based on the principle of *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P).

Although the best example of how a civil war becomes a proxy war is the case of Syria (Hiltermann, 2019), involving multiple actors, including radical Islamist groups, the Syrian regime, Iraqi militias, and Hezbollah (Fox, 2021). The case of Syria became the biggest battleground for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Kausch, 2014: 8). The war destroyed the country, with half a million civilians killed and more than 10 million people displaced (Potter, 2019: 26). Together with the war in Yemen, these are two cases that exemplify the worst humanitarian catastrophes experienced so far in the 21st century (Brynen, 2019: 303).

On the other hand, the outbreak of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in January 2011 completely transformed the regional security environment in North Africa and affected the entire regional system in the Sahel (Hill & Cavatorta, 2019). Indeed, the jihadist threat from the Sahel, with the presence of terrorist groups in Mali (Gogny, 2025), increased territorial and border insecurity in Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia, which were increasingly unable to address these challenges (Kausch, 2014: 11). It is important to emphasize that the nature of permeable borders between North African states reinforces the transnational nature of threats such as arms proliferation, terrorism, trafficking, and other crimes (Hiltermann, 2019). The security interdependence between the Sahel and the Maghreb poses increasing transnational threats (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018), and the reciprocal influence between the two neighboring subregions is considerable (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2021). This regional instability and the interaction between the Sahel and North Africa had an immediate impact on Tuareg rebel movements in northern Mali, particularly the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL), a key non-state actor in the proliferation of terrorist militias between Libya and Algeria. Together with groups such as AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and MUJAO (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda in West Africa), these actors played a decisive role in the expansion of terrorist activities in the region, even affecting Tunisia, especially on its western border with Algeria, in the Al-Chaanbi mountain range (Lounnas, 2014: 47-48). These factors strongly confirm the dynamism of the North African-Sahelian context (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 4).

The above analysis reinforces our realist reading of the geopolitical scenario in North Africa. Therefore, as Mearsheimer (2001) suggested, as the redistribution of power continues, the major emerging powers will fill the power vacuum left by the regional hegemon. Since the Arab Spring, these attempts to fill the power vacuum have led to a juxtaposition of multipolar power with ideological multipolarity, which in turn is a source of greater instability (Kamrava, 2018). In this context, rather than consolidating cohesive blocs and lasting alliances, both regional and external actors, of varying sizes and weight in the system, tend to participate in shifting and overlapping alliances, in a constant competition for influence (Kausch, 2014: 11). This is an asymmetrical multipolarity defined by a system of inter-state relations marked by tensions arising from geopolitical competition between the two great powers, while at the same time being exposed to pressures and dynamics driven by a group of countries occupying the second level of the international hierarchy (De la Corte Ibáñez, 2024: 11).

## 5. The competition for regional hegemony in North Africa

### 5.1. Understanding the historical context of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco from a realist perspective

During the Cold War and in the decades following decolonization, newly independent nation-states quickly understood the bipolar division of the new order (Pavia et al, 2022: 31). The international system was divided between those ideologically close to the United States and those aligned with the Soviet Union. The new ruling elite, including the opposition, understood the logic of power very clearly, and their decision-making was based on the configuration of power and its regional balance (Hiltermann, 2019: 41). The Kingdom of Morocco positioned itself to the West, as an ally of the United States, a major power on the international stage, while the Algerian Republic aligned itself with the Soviet Union and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Pavia et al., 2022: 31; Meneses, 2022: 165). This division, inherited from the Cold War, conditioned the regional position of each state, placing them in constant rivalry for regional hegemony (Saddiki, 2020: 106; Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 7). Furthermore, this dependence would lead states to align themselves over time, with those offering the best opportunity for long-term benefit (Krasner, 1976: 320), which would require states to align themselves with the major powers on the international stage.

The traditional rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has its origins in the border dispute inherited from the French colonial period (Fernández-Molina, 2020; Thieux, 2017), which both perceive as an arbitrary border division (Saddiki, 2020: 106; Potter, 2019: 28). In Agnew's words, these are political borders with no economic or geopolitical meaning (2005: 64), as the French administration established borders between the different units that made up its colonial empire without taking into account the concerns of those units (Zoubir, 2000; Lounnas & Messari, 2018). Observing a map of Morocco published in Rabat, we see that the land border with Algeria is only marked from the Mediterranean coast to the port of Téniet Sassi to the south, covering approximately 150 kilometers. However, the remaining section, more than 1,400 kilometers long, is not shown, suggesting that this part of the border does not exist or is not recognized by Morocco. In any case, its demarcation remains an unresolved issue (Torres García, 2013).

Indeed, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is part of a quest for geopolitical balance (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018), where each one aspires to project its power and political influence (Pavia et al., 2022). In this sense, the growing arms race between the two neighbors is due to mutual distrust (Lounnas & Messari, 2018; Guerrero Martin, 2023). This seems logical to us, as the states have multiple reasons not to trust other states and to be prepared for war against them (Mearsheimer, 2001: 32). On the other hand, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco for the status of regional power in North Africa goes far beyond ideological differences over one form of politics or another (Dworkin, 2022), whether it be a populist republic or a conservative monarchy (Lounnas

& Messari, 2018). Rather, it is a conflict in the quest for power maximization linked to the struggle for regional hegemony (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018; Amirah-Fernández, 2004). In this context, Mearsheimer reminds us that political competition between states is a considerably more dangerous undertaking than mere economic exchange (2001: 32). Buzan defined regional security complexes as mini-anarchies (2004: 4), suggesting the need to maintain anarchy and polarity (Kelly, 2007: 207).

Indeed, the real conflict between Algeria and Morocco stems from a historical and post-colonial evolution dominated by "*power politics*" (Zoubir, 2007), acting as a major blocking force (Mearsheimer, 2019: 8). The security dilemma arising from this latent geopolitical tension pitting Morocco against Algeria, a kind of North African version of the "Arab Cold War" (Lefèvre, 2016: 735), is Western Sahara (Dworkin, 2022). This is a colonial issue still unresolved (Meneses, 2022). It is a conflict that has been at the center of the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco since Spain withdrew from the territory in 1976 (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018: 5). Spain is the former colonial power that administered the Sahara territory and is responsible for the current *status quo* of the Sahrawi territory, leaving the organization and holding of the referendum under the responsibility of the United Nations (Pavia *et al.*, 2022: 30).

Long referred to as "Africa's last colony," the Western Sahara conflict unfolded within the spheres of influence of the Cold War and bloc politics in the region (Fernández-Molina, 2015, 2020; Urrita, 2022). Boukhars highlights the importance that regional powers attach when perceiving of the regional security environment (2019: 242). In this context, the perception of the Western Sahara conflict as a security dilemma (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018) is perhaps the reason that could lead Algeria and Morocco to direct confrontation. A *full-scale* confrontation (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 6) such as the 1963 Sand War, the clashes in Amghala in 1976, the suspension of diplomatic relations between 1976 and 1988, and the closure of the land border since 1994, all combined with periods of *détente* (Amirah-Fernández, 2004). In short, the Sahrawi question has been the contentious element in Algerian-Moroccan relations since their inception in 1975 (Saddiki, 2020: 107; Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 7; Thieux, 2017). Mearsheimer defines the security dilemma as the logical basis of offensive realism: "The essence of the dilemma is that actions taken by one state to enhance its security tend, in general, to reduce the security of other states" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 36).

In this regard, Hernando de Larramendi (2018) points out that the analysis of the evolution of intra-Maghreb relations shows how Algeria and Morocco tend to seek *détente* when the ruling elites of both countries share a perception of vulnerability in the region. Algeria's real fear lies in its interpretation of Morocco's annexation of the Sahara as a transformation of the regional balance of power in North Africa (Fernández-Molina, 2015; Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 7), which would imply a huge extension of Morocco's territorial and maritime power in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic (Smolka, 2019). If Morocco annexes Western Sahara, its increase in relative power (Mearsheimer, 2001) will be crucial in determining its regional hegemony and thus challenging Algeria's position, and even surpassing it (Saddiki, 2020: 107). It is important to remember that since 1976, the Kingdom of Morocco has desired effective international recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara, as a former Spanish colony (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 7). Therefore, Algeria's support for the Polisario Front in its self-determination over the territory of the Sahara is based on this perception of threat in the face of Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara (Pavia *et al.*, 2022, 29). In this context, Morocco's counteroffensive strategy seems evident to us, as since 2021 it has shown its support for the Algerian separatist movement in the Kabila region (Dworkin, 2022).

However, at the time of writing this research, in 2025, the balance of power favors Morocco, as Spain's change of position significantly altered the legitimacy of the Alawite dynasty over Western Sahara, causing the *status quo* to lean more towards Morocco than Algeria (Bhattacharya, 2022). In July 2022, the Moroccan royal family leaked to the local Spanish press a letter from Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez sent in March of that year to King Mohammed VI of Morocco.

The text marked a historic shift in Spain's policy on the Western Sahara conflict, stating that "Spain considers the Moroccan autonomy initiative to be the most serious, realistic, and credible basis for resolving the conflict" (González, 2023). At the same time, it represents a break with Spain's tradition of always aligning itself with United Nations resolutions (Delkáder, 2021) in the search for a solution to the dispute over a territory awaiting decolonization (Meneses, 2022: 161).

In short, Algeria and Morocco are the two main states in the Maghreb, both in terms of geographical area and population size (Stora 2003), and their constant rivalry prevented the construction of the Maghreb and any initiative for regional integration or cooperation (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018), making North Africa the least integrated region in the international economy (Torres García, 2013: 14), when everything pointed to the success of the Arab Maghreb Union (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 2). In conclusion, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco is claims to be quest for regional hegemony over the region's security dilemmas, and the example of Western Sahara demonstrates this realistic logic. The juncture offered by the Arab Spring was decisive in reshaping this local rivalry to suit the interests of the major powers in North Africa since the establishment of multipolarity after 2011.

## **5.2. The Algerian-Moroccan struggle since the Arab Spring: the transformation of the regional balance of power**

The Arab Spring disrupted the order in several North African countries. While Tunisia and Libya underwent profound changes in their power structures, in Algeria and Morocco, these movements did not achieve regime change, and their political configurations remained intact (Ghanem, 2016; Hernando de Larramendi, 2018). The security apparatus in Algeria and Morocco was more consolidated than in neighboring Libya and Tunisia, which is why police repression worked better, making it impossible for a military uprising to gain momentum (Volpi, 2014: 38). In this context, since 2011, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has adapted to a region in transformation, characterized by increasingly fluid geopolitical divisions (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018). In addition, the Arab

Spring has triggered a deterioration of the strategic environment, thus exacerbating the security dilemma in North Africa and its main states (Lounnas, 2014: 48). In this regard, the competition between Morocco and Algeria in the Maghreb in its reflection of the struggle for regional hegemony, takes different forms and shapes, including security, diplomatic relations, and energy resources (Meneses, 2022: 157). Perhaps the most categorical example is the persistent closure of land borders between Algeria and Morocco since 1994 (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 10). Furthermore, in August 2021, Algeria once again broke off all diplomatic relations with Morocco and interrupted the supply of gas that previously transited through Morocco to Spain (via the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline connecting Algeria, Morocco, and Spain), and closed its airspace to Moroccan aircraft (Dworkin, 2022: 2).

Next, let us take a closer look at the configuration of material power, mainly military, of Algeria and Morocco, and, consequently, the interests at stake for the great powers in North Africa since the Arab Spring in the context of multipolarity.

On the one hand, Morocco offers an interesting case study on how an aspiring regional hegemon responds to regional security dilemmas by activating *soft power* mechanisms in effective instruments of regional influence (Boukhars, 2019: 249). Considered a medium-sized power, Morocco has increased its military budget by 54% since 2011, reaching \$5.5 billion in 2022 (Dworkin, 2022: 9). Its long-standing close relationship with the United States has allowed it to enjoy the status of "major non-NATO ally" (Pavia *et al.*, 2022), making Morocco one of the United States' strongest allies in the region (Meneses, 2022: 164). The turning point in its position on the international stage came after the normalization of relations with Israel following the signing of the peace agreements, known as the "Abraham Accords," in 2020. The rapprochement with Israel, on one hand, has allowed Morocco to finance key military acquisitions, which has been perceived by Algeria as a direct threat (Dworkin, 2022: 7), especially since Morocco's acquisition of F-16 Block 70/72s from its Western partners (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2024). On the other hand, the Abraham Accords have represented a turning point in Morocco's diplomatic positioning as an ally of the West, as they involved the unilateral recognition of Western Sahara by the United States, contradicting United Nations resolutions (Meneses, 2022: 158). At the same time, they commit Morocco and Israel to cooperate in information exchange, joint projects, and arms sales, thus strengthening Morocco's military capacity in the region (Pavia *et al.*, 2022). These diplomatic and tactical maneuvers made it possible to encourage Morocco's military modernization process, which began in 2011, giving rise to a dynamic of action-reaction in the quest for military hegemony in the region (Guerrero Martin, 2023). As a result, Morocco has supplied its military arsenal mainly through purchases from the United States and, to a lesser extent, France (Ibid.). In addition, it has remained firmly aligned with its Western allies and considers Russian influence in the region a threat to its territorial integrity (Pavia *et al.*, 2022: 32), thus aspiring to be a regional leader (Meneses, 2022: 165).

Contrary to this position, with the largest defense budget on the entire African continent, 9.7 billion dollars in 2020 (Dworkin, 2022: 9), Algeria is the leading regional military power in the Maghreb and the Sahel (Boukhars, 2019: 244). Seventy percent of its arsenal comes from Russia and the rest from China (Guerrero Martin, 2023). It also has numerous assets, including a very powerful army and networks of influence that, although weakened, remain significant in Africa (Lounnas, 2014: 63). In addition to its military ties, Algeria has developed a strong economic relationship with China, which has been a key partner for its infrastructure (Pavia *et al.*, 2022). As well as the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative in North Africa and the Mediterranean route (Chaziza, 2018; Fulton, 2019; Bourekba, 2023). In this sense, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the restrictions imposed on the former Soviet Union provided Algeria with a new opportunity to strengthen its influence as the main exporter of gas to Europe (Bhattacharya, 2022). Europe's heavy dependence on Algerian gas supplies gives Algeria a strategic advantage in energy supply negotiations, reinforcing its dominance over regional affairs (Pavia *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, Algeria's close relationship with the Kremlin culminated in February 2021, when Russia conducted a joint military exercise with the Algerian navy in the Mediterranean (Volk and Gasseling, 2021).

The arms race between Morocco and Algeria reflects a pattern of action-reaction, in which both countries increase their military capabilities in response to their rival's arms acquisitions (Guerrero Martin, 2023). This is, of course, a new dynamic of war that is being reactivated in North Africa (Meneses, 2022: 166). It reaffirms the logic of rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, which is formulated around the regional hegemonic aspirations of both countries.

As for the current *status quo* in the Sahara, as we mentioned previously, the shift in traditional Spanish foreign policy not only allowed Morocco to obtain recognition from the former colonial power of Moroccan sovereignty over its former territory, but also managed to send waves of migrants to Spanish territory from Ceuta and Melilla (Dworkin, 2022), putting pressure on Pedro Sánchez's government (Sanz, 2023). These factors encourage the projection of Moroccan power over regional actors and its deterrent capabilities as a regional power. In this context, the power shift caused by the vacuum left in Libya and Algeria's resistance to involvement beyond its borders have offered Morocco the opportunity to promote proactive diplomacy in the region. In this way, it has sought not only to strengthen support for its position on Western Sahara, but also to consolidate its status as a regional power in Africa, reinforcing its image as a stabilizing force in the eyes of its Western allies (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018).

Another geopolitical dilemma that has given rise to new areas of rivalry between the two neighbors is the Sahel. The subregion is considered Europe's new security frontier (De Castro, Gogny & Gaona-Prieto, 2025). The Sahel is another regional arena where both countries compete for the roles of stabilizing force and regional mediator. The growing interdependence in security matters between the Sahel and the Maghreb generates increasingly significant transnational threats (Hill & Cavatorta, 2019). However, the asymmetrical perception of this situation by Algeria and Morocco (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018) tends to intensify the rivalry between the two states in their competition for regional power (Dworkin, 2022). Both states have adopted divergent strategies in the Sahel. However, both have shown a tendency to block each other's initiatives in the region (Saddiki, 2020), especially in the Sahel, thus preventing its stabilization (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 4). On the one hand, Morocco, taking advantage of the

instability in Libya and Mali, has repositioned itself as a key player in the region, challenging Algeria's traditional role (Hernando de Larramendi, 2018). On the other hand, Algeria has reemerged in the fight against terrorism following the Arab Spring and has supported French operations in Mali, consolidating its position as an important partner in the region (Lounnas, 2014: 60). France's withdrawal from the Sahel (Gogny, 2025) reinforces this role and allows Algeria to reposition itself as a key player in the fight against terrorism and to become a partner of the major powers, a partner whose interests are taken into consideration (Lounnas, 2014).

In conclusion, we can state that the future of the entire region depends largely on the relations between Algeria and Morocco (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 13). Their competition for regional leadership is reflected in their ability to influence their neighbors, reduce the dynamics of the security dilemma with other powers in the system, and limit intrusions by extra-regional powers (Boukhars, 2019: 242). This logic responds to the very foundation of regional hegemony defined by Mearsheimer (2001: 42) in this competition for domination and leadership, which, on a smaller scale, can lead to the development of rivalries between states as they seek new ways to gain prominence locally and position themselves as the hegemon within their region.

### 5.3. Reflections on future scenarios in the region

Since the Arab Spring, we have witnessed Morocco and Algeria consolidate their status as 'swing states': "These states tend to combine a certain political influence and economic capacity with a proclaimed and firm autonomy in foreign policy. This gives them significant potential to exert decisive influence in certain crises or international affairs" (Kaush, 2014: 10). Which adds an additional level of complexity and unpredictability of the geopolitics of North Africa.

The recent collapse of diplomatic negotiations between Morocco and Algeria has deepened tensions between the two neighbors (Urrita, 2022) and made reconciliation, or at least normalization of relations, even more impossible. The compromise proposed by Rabat is to separate negotiations on Western Sahara from the process of normalizing bilateral relations (Torres García, 2013: 13). In Algiers, this request has been ignored, as Algeria does not consider the reopening of borders to be a priority for its national interests. However much Algerian diplomacy is described as a manifesto of rigid doctrine (Boukhars, 2019: 244), its lack of response *vis-à-vis* Morocco is due to the widespread opinion within the Algerian regime that Morocco will emerge as the winner or the party with the most to gain from the reopening of the border, and not Algeria (Torres García, 2013: 13).

In this regard, this research revealed that the eternal conflict between the two neighbors allows us to sift through Morocco's attempts to challenge Algeria for regional supremacy, and at the same time how Algeria has tried to prevent Morocco from gaining dominance over its neighbors. However, it should be borne in mind that both states operate in a highly interdependent world, in which they undoubtedly share some obvious common interests (Mearsheimer, 2019: 3), such as the fight against terrorism and smuggling in the Sahara, and also have historical, social, and cultural ties, as well as a common colonial legacy (Lefèvre, 2016:

735). Notwithstanding the above, Algerian-Moroccan relations are a kind of "controlled" anarchy, reflected in the struggle for regional hegemony (Saddiki, 2020: 107), causing the North of Africa being in constant turmoil, especially since the end of 2020 (Meneses, 2022: 161). Along with the respective increase in their military capabilities, which is presented as a deterrent technique by both sides, there is an increased risk of miscalculation with consequences that could be catastrophic and uncontrollable (Guerreo Martin, 2022).

Throughout our analysis, we have expressed with details how Algeria and Morocco, in their aspirations and actions as regional powers, reflect and channel the interests of the major powers in North Africa: Morocco aligns itself with Western interests, while Algeria maintains strategic ties with China and Russia. This configuration is part of a broader dynamic in which conflicts are no longer limited to state-sponsored insurgencies in politically peripheral areas but can unfold anywhere on the conflict spectrum (Fox, 2021: 4). As Fox (2019) explains, environments in which great powers pursue their objectives through proxy actors dominate the contemporary war scene, thus shaping proxy wars. These are wars designed to promote the political and strategic interests of the great powers, rather than those of local, generally small states, using some or all of the manpower, resources, and territory of those states as a means to achieve those ends (Barsimantov, 1984: 264). Mearsheimer defines *proxy wars* as wars by proxy in which the allies of the great powers fight each other, backed by their respective allies (Mearsheimer, 2001: 393). Proxy wars originated during the Cold War, when the two superpowers, due to the nuclear threat, avoided direct confrontation, preferring to use smaller states as proxies to advance their strategic interests (Fox, 2019, 2021).

In this context, North Africa becomes a key arena for indirect geopolitical competition, where regional rivalries between Algeria and Morocco take on a global dimension (Fernández-Molina, 2015), as they are affected by the interests of extra-regional powers. This idea revolves around the support provided by the major powers to Morocco and Algeria in their projection of regional power. It follows that, as long as the competition for regional hegemony continues to be marked by the confrontation between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara, Algeria will adopt positions that favor the *continuation* of the conflict as an opportunity to undermine Morocco (Mearsheimer, 2001: 5). and, as the interest of the great powers increases with mutual support for their local allies, since the goal of any great power is to achieve regional hegemony (Ibid., 143), there is a strong likelihood that a proxy conflict or confrontation will take place in North Africa between Algeria and Morocco. However, reflection is required. On one hand, the great powers are rational actors and take into account the preferences of other states and how their own behavior may affect the behavior of those other states, and thus how the behavior of those states may affect their own survival strategy (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31). Secondly, the complexity of the Greater Middle East region and its respective subregions, in this case North Africa, makes it even more difficult to define the umbrella of conflicts or the type of confrontation that may arise. As we have seen in the first part of the research, since the Arab Spring, *mainstream* international actors, such as the US and European states are losing their traditional influence over countries in the region, while Russia and China are taking on a more active role supported by direct foreign action.

In addition to the above, it should be noted that the network of proxy allies is a veritable geopolitical spider's web that makes instability a constant variable in North Africa. In this regard, we note the proximity of Algeria to Iran and Morocco to Saudi Arabia as another source of friction in the regional hegemonic rivalry (Lounnas & Messari, 2018: 4). At the same time, it is a regional reflection of how local actors deal with global tensions at the regional and subregional levels (Kausch, 2014). This multipolar diversification of the region means that the current range of key actors influencing regional events allows for a fragmentation of the international response and a convergence of interests among the major powers when it comes to managing conflicts and crises in North Africa (Held & Coates Ulrichsen, 2014). This contributes to a profound disconnection between the intensely transnational nature of contemporary political problems and successive power vacuums, which intensify confrontation and escalate conflicts on the international stage and its subregional ramifications. It is therefore even more difficult for us to determine the undoubtedly unstable future of the region and the scope of research into whether a conflict between Algeria and Morocco over regional hegemony is possible, as a form of proxy war in North Africa.

## 6. Conclusions

This research addresses the complex geopolitical dynamics in North Africa, particularly after the Arab Spring. The study focuses on analyzing the competition for regional hegemony between Algeria and Morocco from a realistic and multipolar perspective in order to understand how the major powers on the international stage influence the balance of power in the region through their local allies.

The research was designed to explore the dynamics between Morocco and Algeria, which align with the interests of major powers such as Russia and China in the case of Algeria, and the United States and Europe in the case of Morocco. Through an approach based on offensive realism, the research contextualizes the long-standing conflict between the two regional powers and its projection on the geopolitical table of their neighborhood, manifested mainly in the conflict over Western Sahara.

The analysis highlighted that the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria is not only due to historical issues but is also a struggle for the maximization of power and regional control, with profound implications for security in the Maghreb and the Sahel. This situation, caused largely by the events of the Arab Spring, is a consequence of the power vacuum in Libya and the spread of jihadism in the Sahel, combined with a decline in the power and influence of Western powers, traditionally hegemonic in the region, in the face of the consolidation of the unprecedented presence of Russia and China in the region.

The results of the research confirm that competition over Western Sahara remains the security dilemma in this rivalry. Both Algeria and Morocco use their alliances with major powers to project regional power, increasing tensions and the risk of indirect conflicts, or proxy wars. Furthermore, the deterioration of diplomatic relations between the two countries has transformed the Maghreb into one of the least integrated regions in the world, where regional security dilemmas and multipolar dynamics deepen instability. This reality, marked by an unstable balance of power and the inability to cooperate regionally, raises serious doubts about the future stability of North Africa and its possible international consequences.

In conclusion, the research offers a realistic perspective on the future of the region, highlighting the role of the great powers in projecting their power in strategic environments through their local allies, in an unstable and volatile context. The final reflection underscores the complexity of the interactions between local actors, regional powers, and major powers, suggesting that the region will remain in a state of tension and uncertainty, playing a central role in geopolitical struggles.

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