



# At the Crossroads of Different Worlds: How Morocco Uses its Central Position to Become an Influential Middle Power Country

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes Morocco's geopolitical strategy to become an influential middle power, with a focus on analyzing the strategic use of its central position. For this, it answers the question "*How does Morocco use its central position between the Middle East, Europe, and Africa to become an influential middle power country?*" using theories about middle powers and the regional security complex theory. This article concludes that Morocco uses its centrality to strengthen its position in the balance of power and gain support from various actors by exerting influence in all three regions and by using its "kingmaker" position to balance between the different states of these regions in order to gain leverage over all of them and assert itself on the regional and international level, establishing itself as an influential middle power.

**Keywords:** Morocco, Middle Power, Foreign Policy Analysis, Regional Security Complex Theory, Multipolarity, International Relations, Geopolitics, Europe, Africa, MENA.

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## Introduction

"Morocco is like a tree nourished by roots deep in the soil of Africa, which breathes through foliage rustling to the winds of Europe. Yet Morocco's existence is not only vertical. Horizontally, it looks to the East, with which it is bound by ties of religion and culture." That is how King Hassan II once described Morocco's place in the world.<sup>1</sup> This sentiment is all the more relevant if we look at Morocco's recent emergence as an important geopolitical player. Under King Mohammed VI, it has adopted an assertive foreign policy with which it aims to protect its interests, stimulate its geopolitical independence from great powers, and increase its regional dominance in order to strengthen its global position.<sup>2</sup> The case of Morocco is exemplary of the broader trend which has been the subject of much academic debate: middle power countries and their increasingly important role in the emerging multipolar world order. Although much has been written on the topic of Morocco as an emerging middle power, these academic works often focus on a specific aspect of Morocco's foreign policy and neglect an analysis of Morocco's broader geopolitical strategy.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I attempt to add to this gap

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<sup>1</sup> Messari and Willis, "Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe," 169.

<sup>2</sup> Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 1–5.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Messari and Willis, "Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe"; Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa,"; Fakir, "EU-Morocco Relations: Finding A New Balance,".

by answering the following question: How does Morocco use its central position between the Middle East, Europe, and Africa, and to become an influential middle power country?

For my research, I have constructed a theoretical framework that (1) conceptualizes middle powers and explains how to characterize countries as such, (2) explains the Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory, (3) defines the special place middle powers hold in RSC-theory and how middle powers act within their RSC(s). I will also give a brief overview of Morocco's country profile and an in-depth overview of Morocco's foreign policy strategies in its three adjacent regions: Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe, and Africa. I will then answer my research question by analyzing Morocco's foreign policy and based on my theoretical framework, argue why Morocco can be characterized as a middle power country and how it uses its central position as a crossroads between these three regions to strengthen its position and become an influential middle power. By answering this question, I hope to create a basis for further research on Morocco's status as a middle power country and add to the broader academic debate about the importance of middle powers in the emerging multipolar world order.

## Theoretical Framework

### Middle Powers

Middle powers are states that occupy a middle position between small- and great powers.<sup>4</sup> Middle powers have relatively high levels of power and can to some extent influence international relations, but are only able to exercise their power in a dominant way in their own region, due to their global power capabilities being constrained by factors such as population level, economic size, access to resources, and military capacity.<sup>5</sup> A middle power country can be identified according to the following characteristics<sup>6</sup>: (1) beneficial geographical position that allows for enduring regional importance, (2) strong military capabilities and economic power (relative to their neighbours), (3) having a significant cultural influence in the region and a developed cultural identity, (4) the ability to claim leadership on specific international and/or regional questions and the (modest) ability to help shape international politics, and (5) a regionally focused foreign policy aimed at maintaining influence in their surrounding region(s).

Out of these five characteristics, foreign policy behaviour is the most telling characteristic according to most academics, and thus deserves extra conceptualization.<sup>7</sup> Middle power foreign policies are generally based on a set of limited goals that stem from a focus on their vital interests, territorial sovereignty, and realpolitik, which leads to a foreign policy that can be characterized as a combination of moderate influence on the world stage (e.g., through multilateralism and international cooperation) and a focus on building/maintaining a sphere of influence in the immediate region.<sup>8</sup> Middle power foreign policy is very diverse, focusing on policy areas such as military power, security, economic cooperation, and development aid.<sup>9</sup> On the global level, middle powers act as stabilizers as they favour multilateralism for solving

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<sup>4</sup> Yilmaz, "Middle Powers and Regional Powers."

<sup>5</sup> Jordaan, "Middle Power in International Relations," 165.; Moeini et al., "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World", 4.; Yilmaz, "Middle Powers and Regional Powers."

<sup>6</sup> Moeini et al., "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," 1, 5–6.; Yilmaz, "Middle Powers and Regional Powers".

<sup>7</sup> Jordaan, "Middle Power in International Relations," 166.

<sup>8</sup> Jordaan, "Middle Power in International Relations," 167.; Moeini et al., "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," 1, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Jordaan, "Middle Power in International Relations," 169.

international issues and acting as bridge-builders, balancing between great- and small powers.<sup>10</sup> International/regional organizations have a particular importance for middle powers, as they can enhance their limited power and shape the rules and standard for global/regional order through these institutions, in particular if they take leadership roles on certain issues within these institutions.<sup>11</sup> On the regional level, middle powers aim to use their advantageous position in regards to their neighbours to stabilize the region and establish a regional sphere of influence.<sup>12</sup> When a middle power becomes an important power in their region, it can (help) shape the military, economic, political, and ideological characteristics of the region, which will boost its standing on the world stage.<sup>13</sup>

### Regional Security Complex Theory

The shift towards multipolarity has led to the emergence of middle powers as important power players competing for control over their respective regions. To properly analyze this, it is important to take a regional perspective: Regional Security Complex Theory.<sup>14</sup> This theory argues that analyzing security on the national level is too narrow, as the security of countries is always shaped by other countries (especially its neighbours), while analyzing security on the global level is too broad, as the world is not one interconnected security area. Instead, the theory argues for an analysis of security at the regional level, dividing the world into regional security complexes (RSCs). It defines an RSC as an area consisting of a group of states whose security concerns are interlinked to the extent that their individual security concerns cannot be analyzed without considering the security concerns of the other states in this RSC.<sup>15</sup> To fully understand the global order, it is thus important to study the relations within and between RSCs.<sup>16</sup>

RSCs are created when (usually adjacent) states have such high levels of overlapping security concerns in a variety of sectors (e.g., military, economy, environment, or migration) that they become interlinked.<sup>17</sup> Although security concerns are the factors that create an RSC, the power balance and relations within RSCs are primarily shaped by geography, culture, and history. Geography mostly shapes the power balance within RSCs, as physical realities (e.g., access to resources, proximity to trade routes, defendable terrain) influence the security concerns and capabilities of states, while culture and history help shape relations within RSCs, as these influence how states view themselves and the other states within their RSC.<sup>18</sup>

In some cases, states can have overlapping memberships within multiple RSCs. This happens in cases where a state is affected by security concerns related to multiple different (often close-by) RSCs.<sup>19</sup> Some security concerns (e.g. terrorism or migration streams) are not confined to a the geographic area they originate from and can affect states in other RSCs, causing these states to also become (semi) integrated into this RSC of origin.<sup>20</sup> In the case that a certain state shares the same security concerns with two or more RSCs, this leads to the formation of an interlocking regional security system.<sup>21</sup> The state at the “crossroads” between

<sup>10</sup> Bennis, “Middle Power Diplomacy”.; Jordaan, “Middle Power in International Relations,” 166.

<sup>11</sup> Jordaan, “Middle Power in International Relations,” 169, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Jordaan, “Middle Power in International Relations,” 177.; Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 6.

<sup>13</sup> Yilmaz, “Middle Powers and Regional Powers.”

<sup>14</sup> Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 28.

<sup>15</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 4.

<sup>17</sup> Buzan and Waever, *Regions and Powers*, 45.; Sadurski, “Regional Security Complex Theory,” 138.

<sup>18</sup> Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 5.

<sup>19</sup> Amable, *Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Lake, *Regional Security Complexes*, 50–51.

<sup>21</sup> Lake, “Regional Security Complexes,” 54.

these multiple RSCs will then have the potential to become a “kingmaker” between the states of these intersecting RSCs.

It is important to note that RSC-theory is a state-centric theory focused on “security issues,” which means that phenomena like economics and religion—which most international relations theories consider as influences on state policies in their own right, separate from security concerns—are framed through the lens of security in RSC-theory. In this paper, religion and economics are thus treated as security interests of the state *and* as part of its power politics, instead of as separate factors.

### **Middle Powers and RSCs**

Middle powers have a special position within RSCs. Due to their (mainly) regional power, an analysis of middle powers cannot be complete without factoring in the RSC(s) in which they operate. The geographical, historical, and cultural ties which bind a middle power to its RSC will help explain its position within the RSC and the way it can function as an anchor around which other states in the region can coalesce. Furthermore, when studying middle powers through the lens of RSCs it is important to keep in mind that power in international relations is (often) relative. This means that an analysis of the power of a middle power country can only be done when taking into account its relations with other states (in its RSC) and its relative advantages within its RSC when compared to these other states. The extent to which a middle power can achieve its goals is dependent on its position in the balance-of-power of the RSC, which means that any attempt to strengthen itself within the RSC requires the balance-of-power to be changed.<sup>22</sup> States can do this by engaging with their RSCs security concerns in different sectors, such as expanding their military, strengthening their economic relations, or engaging in regional governmental cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Another way middle powers can re-shape the balance-of-power in their RSC is by aligning with a great power that operates in the region. In this process, a middle power will agree to support the great power in achieving its goals in the RSC, in exchange for the great power’s support for the middle power’s goals in the RSC. This will help strengthen the middle power in two ways as (1) the middle power now has great power support for achieving its goals and (2) it gives the middle power a powerful ally in its competition against other small- and middle powers in the RSC.<sup>24</sup>

### **Context: Morocco’s Country Profile**

Morocco is located in the Western Maghreb region of North Africa, in between Africa, Europe, and the Middle East and with access to both Atlantic and Mediterranean coastlines and mountain ranges. This gives Morocco an advantageous geographic position, as its central position has made it a crucial linkage between the three regions and its terrain ensures it has both access to international trade and protection from foreign land-based threats.<sup>25</sup> Morocco’s centrality has also helped shape its unique identity and culture—a mix of Arab, Berber, European, and African characteristics—due to which Morocco is not just a geographical crossroad, but also a cultural one. Historically, Morocco has always been an important country in the region, dominating it for centuries before becoming a French colony for four decades.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 2–6, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Sadurski, “Regional Security Complex Theory,” 142.

<sup>24</sup> Moeini et al., “Middle Powers in the Multipolar World,” 1, 11, 29.

<sup>25</sup> BBC, “Morocco country profile”.; Daguzan and Moissoner, “Morocco’s Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 3.

<sup>26</sup> BBC, “Morocco country profile.”

Since gaining independence, Morocco has been modernizing, seeing steady population growth (reaching ~37,5 million in 2023), being on the path to becoming a middle income country, and building up an army that is one of the strongest in the region, only rivalled by its main competitor and neighbor Algeria, Egypt, and its European neighbours.<sup>27</sup> Morocco's foreign policy after independence was characterized by its important role in both Africa and the Middle East, its role as mediator and peacekeeper, and its good relations with the West.<sup>28</sup> Its main foreign policy issue since the 1970s had been gaining international support for its claims over the Western Sahara.<sup>29</sup> After the Western Sahara gained its independence from Spain, Morocco claimed it as part of their historical territory and annexed most of the region, leading to an armed conflict between Morocco and the Saharawi (the natives of the Western Sahara) who organized in the Polisario Front and are supported by Algeria, Morocco's direct eastern neighbor and main geopolitical rival.<sup>30</sup> This ended in a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 that was supposed to lead to a referendum about the status of the Western Sahara, however, due to disagreements about who should be allowed to vote, this referendum has not taken place and Morocco has remained in de-facto control of the region, even though the international community does not recognize this.<sup>31</sup> For a long time, the Western Sahara question was the main foreign policy issue that shaped Morocco's relations with other countries.<sup>32</sup> However, over the past two decades, this has changed as Morocco has adopted a foreign policy strategy that is more assertive and diverse, as it is not solely based on the question of Western Sahara but rather on a broad range of foreign policy objectives, aimed at its three surrounding RSCs: Europa, Africa, and MENA.<sup>33</sup> I will further analyze this in the following section.

## Morocco's Foreign Policy Strategies: Three RSCs

### Strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Morocco is the most northern state of the MENA-region and is tied into the RSC through shared security concerns, such as terrorism, political instability caused by the Arab Spring, migration challenges, and (civil) wars.<sup>34</sup> Besides that, Morocco also shares cultural and historical ties with the region through its Islamic faith and Arab and Berber identity. Morocco's main goal in the Middle East is to shift the balance of power in its favour, in order to gain recognition of Western Sahara, compete with its main rival Algeria, and become an important regional power. Morocco has tried this through direct competition with Algeria in the Maghreb area. Morocco and Algeria have clashing histories and identities, leading them to compete for dominance in the Maghreb, with Western Sahara being the main point of contention.<sup>35</sup> In practice, this means that Morocco follows a policy aimed at protecting itself against threats

<sup>27</sup> GDI, "Country Brief: Morocco", 6.; World Bank, "Morocco."

<sup>28</sup> BBC, "Morocco country profile"; Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 4.

<sup>29</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 3.

<sup>30</sup> Allison, "The Impact of the Green March on Modern Moroccan Society", 225–228.; Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate?*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate?*, 2–3.; Al Jazeera, "Western Sahara conflict in 500 words".

<sup>32</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 3.

<sup>33</sup> Messari, *Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI*, 1–5.

<sup>34</sup> Messari and Willis, *Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe*, 163.; Allesandri et al, "Morocco's New Geopolitics," 16–19.

<sup>35</sup> Messari and Willis, *Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy, and Relations with Europe*, 159–163.

posed by Algeria, both in the Western Sahara but also against spillovers from Algerian political instability (e.g., Islamic extremism), and undermining Algeria's power in the region.<sup>36</sup>

Another way Morocco has tried to shift the balance of power is by building ties with other players that are active in the region. For regional players, Morocco has always aligned itself most closely with the Gulf monarchies due to their shared conservatism, skepticism of Arab nationalism, and pro-Western outlook.<sup>37</sup> Through these relations Morocco receives beneficial economic and diplomatic support, which helps legitimize its goals in the region.<sup>38</sup> However, Morocco's most important partner in the MENA-region is arguably the United States. Since its independence, Morocco has had good relations with the US, as the US views Morocco as a strategic partner in the region.<sup>39</sup> Morocco sees its alignment with the US as an opportunity to achieve great power support for its claims on the Western Sahara.<sup>40</sup> It managed to achieve this in 2020, when Morocco normalized ties with Israel in exchange for US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Through this mutually beneficial deal, Morocco gained great power support for its claims over the Western Sahara, while the US has managed to strengthen the ties between two of its important regional partners (Morocco and Israel), thus furthering its interests in the MENA-region. Furthermore, this deal has improved Morocco's relations with its aforementioned Gulf allies, as most of them had already normalized their ties with Israel before Morocco did so.<sup>41</sup> However, Morocco also maintains support for the Palestinian cause, having consistently argued for a two-state solution that benefits both sides. By playing both sides Morocco manages to strategically balance the different players in the region, in order to assert itself as an important regional mediator.<sup>42</sup>

In Libya, Morocco has shown another important strategy: establishing itself as a mediator that guarantees stability and security in the region.<sup>43</sup> Morocco has consistently sided with the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and facilitated meetings aimed at reconciliation and unification between the different factions, even if some of its regional allies tried to convince it to do otherwise.<sup>44</sup> With this, Morocco has proven its assertiveness in providing peace and stability in the region, which has improved its international prestige and its value to the EU and the UN as a MENA-partner. It has also strengthened Morocco's influence in the region and improved ties with Libya which helps curb Algeria's growing regional power.<sup>45</sup>

### Strategy towards Europe

Due to its close proximity to Europe—being located closely to Europe's Spanish border and adjacent to Spain's African enclaves Melilla and Ceuta—and its central position on the Western Mediterranean migration route, Morocco shares many security concerns with the European RSC.<sup>46</sup> These security concerns are diverse, including terrorism, migration, international

<sup>36</sup> Allesandri et al., "Morocco's New Geopolitics," 18.

<sup>37</sup> Messari and Willis, *Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> Martínez and McGinn, "Morocco and the GCC: between Saudi Arabia and Qatar."

<sup>39</sup> Fillali, "Morocco's New Geopolitical Journey."

<sup>40</sup> Messari and Willis, "Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe," 153.

<sup>41</sup> Abouzzohour, "Morocco's Partial Normalization with Israel Comes with Risks and Gains."

<sup>42</sup> Fillali, "Morocco's New Geopolitical Journey."

<sup>43</sup> Allesandri et al., "Morocco's New Geopolitics", 14.; Fillali, "Morocco's New Geopolitical Journey".

<sup>44</sup> Abouzzohour, "Libya's Tangier Talks: Why is Morocco getting involved?"; Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 4.

<sup>45</sup> Abouzzohour, "Libya's Tangier Talks: Why is Morocco getting involved?"; Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 4.

<sup>46</sup> Teevan, "EU-Morocco: a Win-win Partnership?", 8.; Messari and Willis, "Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe, 167.

security, crime and economics.<sup>47</sup> Besides security concerns, Morocco also has historical cultural and political ties with Europe.<sup>48</sup> The EU sees Morocco as an important partner in North Africa and their partnership encompasses many sectors, such as trade, economics, diplomatic relationships, migration cooperation, security, and financial support.<sup>49</sup> In recent years, migration cooperation has become the focus of the partnership. Due to its central location on the Western Mediterranean migration route, Morocco serves as the lynchpin between Europe and Africa, which has made Morocco the key mediator between Europe and Africa in terms of migration governance.<sup>50</sup> This has made Morocco a crucial ally for Europe in North Africa.

However, as Morocco's importance has grown, its desire to assert itself as an independent equal towards the EU has also grown. Although Morocco still seeks to cooperate with Europe, it wants to show that its partnership should not be taken for granted and instead comes forth through recognition of its interests.<sup>51</sup> To this end, Morocco has started to leverage its important position on security and migration cooperation to demand concessions from Europe, such as economic concessions and recognition of its claims on Western Sahara.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the two best examples of this were Morocco's reaction to the European Court of Justice (ECJ)'s decision in 2015 to suspend the EU-Morocco agreements on fishing and agriculture and the 2021 Ceuta border crisis. In 2015, after the ECJ suspended the EU-Morocco fishing/agriculture agreements because these included Western Sahara as Moroccan territory—which the ECJ does not acknowledge—Morocco suspended all cooperation with Europe. Due to the EU's reliance on this cooperation, it was forced to give in and explicitly include Western Sahara in the final agreements.<sup>53</sup> In 2021, as a response to Spain's decision to treat Polisario leader Brahim Ghali in a Spanish hospital, Morocco opened the borders with the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, letting through thousands of migrants and completely destabilizing the city. Although they closed the border again after one day, the incident left such a mark on the Spanish government that it decided to abandon its support for Polisario/Algerian claims of an independent Western Sahara and recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the area.<sup>54</sup> These actions show that despite its weaker position compared with the EU, Morocco can leverage its strategic position to extract concessions from Europe which increase its power both within the European RSC as well as in Morocco's other adjacent RSC's (Africa and MENA).

### Strategy towards Africa

Morocco is deeply tied to the African RSC (West Africa in particular) through shared security concerns including economic issues, (civil) wars, climate change, religious terrorism, and political instability.<sup>55</sup> Besides shared security concerns, Morocco also has historical and cultural ties to the region through historical trade relations, a shared colonial history, and the African component of Morocco's identity.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, since independence, Morocco has focused more on its position in the European and MENA RSCs due to its focus on the Western Sahara conflict and the overwhelming support for Algeria and the Polisario Front amongst

<sup>47</sup> Fakir, "EU-Morocco Relations: Finding A New Balance," 53; Messari and Willis, *Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe*, 161–162.

<sup>48</sup> Messari and Willis, "Analyzing Moroccan Foreign Policy and Relations with Europe," 152.

<sup>49</sup> Teevan, "EU-Morocco: a Win-win Partnership?," 5–6.

<sup>50</sup> Bennis, "Middle Power Diplomacy."

<sup>51</sup> Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 3.

<sup>52</sup> Teevan, "EU-Morocco: a Win-win Partnership?," 6.

<sup>53</sup> Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 4.

<sup>54</sup> Minder, "Spain, Seeking Better Ties With Morocco, Shifts Stance on Western Sahara."

<sup>55</sup> Anouar and Hamann, "How Morocco's Multi-Faceted Diplomatic Approach in Africa is Winning."

<sup>56</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa", 3.; Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 1.

African states. In recent years however, due to its growing domestic problems, Algeria's capability to act as a regional power player has declined, leaving it to become increasingly isolated both internationally as well as in its adjacent regions.<sup>57</sup>

Morocco has sought to fill this void. It has expanded its diplomatic networks across Africa and King Mohammed VI has made yearly visits to diverse African states, with the goal of finding new regional partners. It has also re-joined the African Union and attempted to join ECOWAS, with the goal of promoting Moroccan positions (e.g., on Western Sahara) and counteracting Algeria's dominance within these institutions. Besides diplomacy, Morocco has also increased both its hard- and soft-power in Africa through diverse forms of cooperation. Its hard power influence is mainly based on economic, migration, and security cooperation. In the economic sphere, Morocco has sought to find new export markets, strengthen the position of its companies in the region, invest in regional infrastructure, increase its investments in African states, and help the weaker African states through development aid.<sup>58</sup> Morocco is also particularly interested in economic projects that strengthen its position in the world, such as the proposed Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline, through which it could export gas from Nigeria to Europe, possibly replacing Algeria as EU energy partner.<sup>59</sup> On security issues, Morocco has positioned itself as a peacekeeper and moderate actor willing to engage with the wider international community to ensure peace in Africa.<sup>60</sup> With regards to migration, Morocco has used its position as regulator of Africa-EU migration to establish itself as Africa's leading representative on migration issues.<sup>61</sup> Morocco has also engaged in religious cooperation with African Muslim countries, spreading its unique form of Islam by expanding its religious networks and building mosques throughout Africa. This has increased its soft power influence and helped curb radical forms of Islam throughout the region.<sup>62</sup> With these policies, Morocco has attempted to shift the balance of power away from Algeria, gain regional support for its goals, and establish itself as an important regional player. Furthermore, by positioning itself as an important representative of Africa, Morocco has strengthened its position on the world stage.<sup>63</sup>

## Analysis

To answer the research question *How does Morocco use its central position between the Middle East, Europe, and Africa to become an influential middle power country?* it is first necessary to explain why Morocco can be characterized as a middle power. I argue that, when Morocco is analyzed using the five characteristics to identify a middle power, Morocco should indeed be identified as a middle power because: (1) it has a beneficial geographical position strengthening its regional importance, namely its central position between three important RSCs and a geography that allows for both access to the sea and protection by mountains, (2) it is an emerging middle-income country with strong military and security capabilities relative to its neighbours, (3) due to its deep historical ties with its surrounding regions, its cultural

<sup>57</sup> Allesandri et al., "Morocco's New Geopolitics", 14, 18.; Boukhars, "The Power of Regional Security Providers," 246.

<sup>58</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 3–11.

<sup>59</sup> Fillali, "Morocco's New Geopolitical Journey".

<sup>60</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 4.

<sup>61</sup> Bennis, "Middle Power Diplomacy".

<sup>62</sup> Daguzan and Moisseron, "Morocco's Regional Ambitions in Sub-Saharan Africa," 8–10.

<sup>63</sup> Messari, "Moroccan Foreign Policy Under Mohammed VI," 5.



identity is a blend of all three, which strengthens its cultural connections with these regions, (4) it has claimed leadership on specific international/regional questions (e.g., EU-African migration management and peacekeeping and conflict resolution in Africa and MENA) and has displayed a modest ability to help shape international politics (supporting normalization of Arab-Israeli ties), and (5) it follows a diverse regionally focused foreign policy aimed at strengthening its regional power and increasing its moderate international influence.<sup>64</sup>

Having characterized Morocco as a middle power allows us to analyze how it uses its central position between the MENA, European, and African RSCs to strengthen its position and become an influential middle power. In the MENA RSC, Morocco has positioned itself as a partner towards the US (an external great power) by normalizing ties with Israel, helping the US achieve its goals in the region, in return for which Morocco has received great power recognition of its claims on the Western Sahara. Morocco has also sought cooperation with ideologically similar regional players (e.g., the Gulf monarchies) and proved itself as an assertive mediator in Libya, which has increased Morocco's regional and international importance and legitimacy. In the European RSC, Morocco has pursued a policy towards Europe that balances between confrontation and cooperation. By leveraging its important role as EU-partner in North Africa and its ability to control migration from Africa to Europe, Morocco has shown that its cooperation with Europe does not come for free, which has enabled it to gain concessions that strengthen its position in the other RSCs (e.g. Spanish recognition of Morocco's claims in Western Sahara). In the African RSC Morocco has strengthened its ties with African countries through diverse forms of cooperation and becoming an important member of African regional institutions, which has weakened the position of Algeria, increased African support for its claims over Western Sahara, and established Morocco as an important international representative of Africa. Besides pursuing specific goals in each RSC, Morocco also uses its role as a crossroads between the RSCs to strengthen its strategic position in all three regions by taking lead on cross-regional security issues (e.g., migration), which it is perfect for due to its central position between Africa, MENA, and Europe. By applying the RSC-theory we can explain this strategy.

As mentioned, the extent to which a middle power can achieve its goals depends on its position in the balance of power within its RSC, which means a middle power has to strengthen its position within this balance-of-power in order to achieve its goals.<sup>65</sup> In some cases however, a country can be part of multiple RSCs or even become "kingmaker" between RSCs, in case it is at the crossroads of two or more RSCs with which it shares security concerns.<sup>66</sup> Both are the case for Morocco. By playing into both its overlapping membership with its three RSCs as well as its "kingmaker" position between Europa, Africa, and MENA (e.g. on migration control), Morocco can strengthen its position in the balance of power, as it can exert influence on all three regions and balance between the different states of the different RSCs in order to gain leverage over all of them. Essentially, Morocco uses its central position to obtain support for its foreign policy interests from various actors. Through this strategy, Morocco increases both its regional power in all three RSCs as well as its international importance, as its central position

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<sup>64</sup> Moeini et al., "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," 1, 5–6.; Yilmaz, "Middle Powers and Regional Powers".

<sup>65</sup> Moeini et al., "Middle Powers in the Multipolar World," 2, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Amable, "Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions," 6.; Lake, "Regional Security Complexes," 50–51, 54.

makes it key in managing cross-regional and international security concerns, establishing its status as an influential middle power.

## Conclusion

To conclude, by answering the research question *How does Morocco use its central position between the Middle East Europe, and Africa to become an influential middle power country?*, I have shown that Morocco uses its centrality to strengthen its position in the balance of power and gain support from various actors, by exerting influence on all three regions and using its position as “kingmaker” to balance between the different states of the different RSCs in order to gain leverage over all of them. With this strategy, it seeks to increase both its regional power in the three RSCs as well as its international importance, which will help Morocco establish itself as an influential middle power. By answering this question, I aim to have added to the academic debate about the importance of middle powers in the emerging multipolar world order through providing a basis for further research on both Morocco as an emerging middle power and on the geopolitical role of central states with overlapping memberships to different RSCs. Future research on Morocco should focus on the development of its foreign policy in the face of shifting regional politics. Although as of 2024, the war in Gaza has not caused a shift in Morocco’s policy towards Israel and the MENA-region, this might change due to increasing domestic discontent over these policies and changing regional dynamics. When it comes to future research with regards to the Regional Security Complex Theory, most existing research that uses this theory—including this paper—accepts its state-centric outlook. However, given the increasing role of non-state actors in most RSCs, research that adopts a critical view of the theory’s state-centric nature could offer interesting insights, for example through analyzing the role that these actors (e.g., terrorist organizations, NGOs, faith organizations, business elites) can have in directly and/or indirectly shaping the political dynamics of their RSCs.

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