

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES BETWEEN SPAIN AND MOROCCO: GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE – A CASE STUDY OF SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

This article invites you to find out more about the Geopolitical tensions and Economic interests in Europe with a special attention to a case study on Spain: At disagreement, *sigue siendo mejor una relation individual Therapie* || NeuroVenture. The disputes over Spanish-held enclaves like Ceuta and Melilla, as well as Perejil Island and a host of maritime claims near the Canary Islands, have long been focal points of diplomatic and strategic friction. Using a multidisciplinary perspective in particular through the lenses of historical context, international law, and power politics, the research demonstrates the impact of such conflicts on bilateral ties, EU policy, migration management, trade, and regional security. Not only does Spain play a key role in managing the impacts of the wider fallout from the conflict due to its position as a geopolitical bridge between Europe and North Africa. It goes through, among other things, more recent developments including Spain recognition of Morocco's offer of an autonomy plan for western Sahara in 2022 and the changing landscape of EU-Morocco cooperation. Through crisis analysis, migration flow analysis and regional security response analysis, the study demonstrates how the territorial tensions between Spain and Morocco have profound implications for European stability. The paper ends with suggestions on EU policy, aimed at creating arenas for conversation, increasing regional integration, and improving the governing of EU borders.

Keywords: Spain–Morocco Relations, Western Sahara Dispute, Geopolitical Tensions, Strategic Border Management, NATO and EU Security, Migration Diplomacy, Economic Implications, Energy Cooperation, EU–Africa Trade Maritime Security, Bilateral Diplomacy, Regional Stability, External Powers in North Africa, Migration Pressures on Europe, Strait of Gibraltar, European Union Foreign Policy, Cross-Border Trade, Fisheries and Agricultural Agreements.

INTRODUCTION

After all, territorial disputes between both Spain and Morocco are one of the lasting and most complex geopolitical tensions of the Western Mediterranean. Central to the dispute are Spain's two enclaves, the two autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which are located on the North African coast, in addition to smaller territories such as Perejil Island and disputes

related to maritime boundaries within the waters by the Canary Islands. These territories are deemed as parts of sovereign Spanish land in the eyes of Spain but parts of colonial legacy on the eyes of Morocco that has launched many calls for an incorporation of that land into the Moroccan territory (Barbé and Morillas, 2021). It goes beyond a bilateral disagreement, raising

more questions about the future of the EU in light of border issues, irregular migration, trade, and regional diplomacy. Spain serves as both a physical and geopolitical frontier between Europe and Africa, making the stakes of these disputes particularly significant. Incidents such as the 2002 Perejil Island crisis, repeated mass crossings into Ceuta and Melilla, and diplomatic fallout following Spain's medical assistance to the Western Sahara leader in 2021 highlight how fragile and reactive the bilateral relationship can be (S. Carrera, J. Santos Vara, and T. Strik., 2022). This research aims to analyze the geopolitical roots and contemporary dynamics of the Spain-Morocco territorial disputes, assess their economic implications—especially for Spain—and evaluate how these tensions shape broader EU policies and stability. The study adopts a qualitative case study approach, incorporating primary data from government documents, official EU reports, and secondary sources including scholarly literature and media analysis from 2022 to 2025. Given Spain's role as a gateway for African migrants and its dependency on Moroccan cooperation in areas such as counterterrorism and migration management, the disputes also pose challenges for European external border governance and EU-African relations (Gillespie, 2022). As such, the implications of these tensions are not limited to the bilateral sphere but resonate across the broader Mediterranean geopolitical landscape.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the historical and legal bases of the territorial disputes between Spain and Morocco?
2. How do these disputes influence geopolitical and economic relations between the two states?
3. What are the broader implications for Europe, particularly in terms of security, migration, and trade?
4. What policy pathways exist for reducing tensions and enhancing regional cooperation?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORIGINS OF THE DISPUTE

The roots of the territorial disputes between Spain and Morocco are deeply embedded in the

colonial history of North Africa and the strategic competition among European powers during the 15th to 20th centuries. Spain's presence in North Africa dates back to the late Middle Ages, with the capture of Ceuta in 1415 (by Portugal and later transferred to Spain) and Melilla in 1497, long before the formation of the modern Moroccan state. These territories remained under Spanish control through the colonial era and were formally integrated into Spain as autonomous cities following the 1978 Spanish Constitution (Fernández-Molina, 2016). The end of colonialism and Morocco's independence in 1956 marked a turning point. Morocco's post-independence policy has been characterized by a strategy of "territorial recovery," which includes claims over not only Ceuta and Melilla but also the Spanish-controlled islets (e.g., Perejil, Alhucemas, and Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera) and, more recently, maritime zones around the Canary Islands (C. González-Enríquez, 2020). From the Moroccan perspective, these territories are perceived as relics of colonialism and symbols of incomplete decolonization. Conversely, Spain considers these regions as integral parts of its national territory, supported by the presence of democratic institutions and Spanish citizenship rights for their residents (Aixelà-Cabré, 2019). One of the most notable flashpoints occurred in July 2002, when Moroccan soldiers occupied the uninhabited Perejil Island (known in Morocco as Leila Island). Spain responded by deploying military forces to expel the intruders in a brief but highly symbolic operation. Although U.S. mediation de-escalated the crisis, the incident underscored the latent volatility of the bilateral relationship (E. Barbé and P. Morillas, 2021). The Western Sahara conflict has further complicated matters. Spain, as the former colonial power, has historically maintained a cautious stance. However, in 2022, Madrid shifted its position by endorsing Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, sparking backlash from Algeria and internal political debate within Spain (Martínez, 2022). This move was widely interpreted as a strategic concession to normalize relations with Rabat, particularly in light of heightened migratory pressures and energy security concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Overall, the territorial disputes between Spain and Morocco are rooted

in overlapping historical narratives, conflicting legal interpretations, and post-colonial identity politics. They continue to evolve within the framework of international law, domestic political constraints, and regional power dynamics.

3. GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The territorial disputes between Spain and Morocco are not merely bilateral issues but are embedded within a wider geopolitical context involving European security, North African regional dynamics, and global strategic interests. The strategic importance of the contested territories—especially Ceuta, Melilla, and the Strait of Gibraltar—amplifies the geopolitical stakes for both countries and their allies.

3.1 Spain's Strategic Role in NATO and the EU

Spain holds a pivotal position within both NATO and the European Union, serving as the southern flank of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Ceuta and Melilla, though geographically in Africa, are considered part of EU territory and represent the only land borders between Europe and Africa. This makes them critical nodes in EU migration and security frameworks (Sarto, 2017). However, the ambiguous legal status of these enclaves within NATO raises questions about collective defense commitments under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. While Spain insists, they are covered, neither NATO nor the U.S. has issued a definitive statement affirming this (Martínez, José, and Torreblanca, José Ignacio, 2023)

3.2 Morocco's Regional Aspirations

Morocco, on the other hand, has emerged as a regional power in North Africa, expanding its influence through economic diplomacy, religious outreach, and military modernization. The kingdom has positioned itself as a reliable security partner for the EU in counterterrorism and migration control, giving it substantial leverage in negotiations with Spain and Brussels (Zisenwine, 2022). The diplomatic crisis of 2021—sparked by Spain allowing Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali to receive medical treatment—demonstrated how quickly Rabat can retaliate by loosening border controls, leading to

thousands of migrants entering Ceuta in a matter of hours (Barbé, Esther & Morillas, Pol, 2021). This tactic of "border weaponization" illustrates Morocco's capacity to use migratory pressure as a geopolitical tool.

3.3 Military and Security Implications

Both Spain and Morocco have made substantial investments in border militarization, especially around Ceuta and Melilla, with high fences, surveillance systems, and military garrisons. The Strait of Gibraltar, only 13 kilometers wide, remains one of the most strategically significant maritime chokepoints in the world, essential for NATO naval operations and international shipping. Spain's military presence in the Canary Islands and North African territories, along with regular naval patrols in the Strait, underscores its defensive posture. Morocco, meanwhile, has increased its naval capabilities and defense cooperation with actors like the U.S. and Israel, which has geopolitical implications for regional alignments (Tramond, Olivier & Guerreiro, João, 2022)

3.4 Migration and Border Management as Strategic Leverage

Migration is one of the most significant dimensions of Spain-Morocco geopolitical tensions. The enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla are frequent entry points for irregular migrants and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa, and Morocco often controls the flow depending on the political climate. This gives Rabat a powerful bargaining chip in negotiations over aid, trade, and diplomatic recognition (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). In turn, Spain has advocated for stronger EU border control mechanisms, including a greater role for Frontex, and increased funding for external border partnerships, particularly with Morocco. However, such cooperation comes with ethical and political trade-offs, particularly regarding human rights violations at the borders (International, 2023)

3.5 Role of External Powers

External actors also shape the strategic landscape. The United States maintains close security relations with both Spain and Morocco but often balances its support based on broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

interests. France remains an influential post-colonial power in the region, often aligning diplomatically with Morocco. Internal wrangles within the European Union center on the best way to deal with conflicts at the external borders, as well as migration crises, especially amidst the rise of right-wing populism across several member states.

4. DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND BILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS

Diplomatic ties between Spain and Morocco are complex and rest on close historical ties, interdependence and recurrent tensions. Despite the crucial strategic and economic interests, the bilateral relations are in most cases surrounded by issues such as territorial claims (e.g. Ceuta, Melilla, Western Sahara), irregular migration, border security and political sensitivities concerning sovereignty. In this section the authors have addressed how Spain-Morocco relations have developed especially focusing on the spheres of cooperation and conflict and examines the broader implication of this to the European foreign policy and Mediterranean security.

4.1 Historical Context and Legacy

The history of Spain and Morocco since the colonially-driven period to the postcolonial era has been that of tension and geopolitical reasoning. Ceuta and Melilla are two autonomous cities in the North African coast still under the rule of Spain, claimed by Morocco as its territory. Both of these claims reflect Morocco in its anti-colonial rhetoric, and Spain referring to long-term legal and administrative rule (E. Barb and P. Morillas, 2021). Additionally, Spain's historical involvement in Western Sahara—a former Spanish colony—continues to influence its diplomatic posture, especially as Morocco seeks broader international recognition of its sovereignty over the territory.

4.2 Key Moments of Diplomatic Crisis

2002 Perejil Island Incident: A brief military standoff occurred when Moroccan forces occupied the tiny, uninhabited islet of Perejil (Leila), prompting Spain to deploy special forces. Though the conflict was resolved quickly, it underscored the volatility of territorial

sensitivities. **2021 Brahim Ghali Affair:** Spain's decision to allow Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front, to enter the country for medical treatment under a false identity provoked severe backlash from Morocco, including the withdrawal of its ambassador and the loosening of border controls in Ceuta, allowing thousands of migrants to cross into Spain (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). These incidents demonstrate how fragile the relationship can be, especially when it involves core sovereignty concerns or Western Sahara-related issues.

4.3 Diplomatic Recalibration and Agreements

Despite frequent disputes, both nations recognize the strategic value of their bilateral ties. Spain and Morocco have signed numerous cooperation agreements in areas such as migration, counterterrorism, trade, education, and judicial cooperation. The 2023 Spain-Morocco High-Level Meeting (RAN) in Rabat marked a thaw in relations, with both sides pledging to improve coordination on immigration control and economic development, and Spain reiterating support for Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara (Torreblanca, 2023). This rapprochement was partly driven by Spain's desire to ensure border stability, resume economic collaboration, and enhance energy connectivity, particularly through the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline and renewable energy projects.

4.4 Migration Diplomacy and Conditional Cooperation

Migration management has become a central pillar of Spain-Morocco diplomacy. Morocco acts as a gatekeeper of migration flows into the EU and uses this leverage to extract political and economic concessions (Zisenwine, 2022). Spain, meanwhile, balances domestic political pressure to reduce irregular migration with the need to maintain cordial relations with Rabat. This has led to a transactional approach in diplomatic engagement, where cooperation is often contingent on favorable political gestures from both sides. The EU supports this relationship by funding external border management projects and development assistance to Morocco, making Spain an intermediary between Brussels and

Rabat (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022).

4.5 Influence of Third Parties and Regional Institutions

Third parties also affect Spain-Morocco diplomacy. Even the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara under the Trump administration, changed the diplomatic equations, placing Spain in a tight spot over its policy of neutrality. In addition, France being traditionally close to Morocco, tends to have a silent, yet important role in cooling down the tension and nurturing dialogue. Also the role of Spain in the European Union makes the situation even more complicated. Although the EU promotes collaboration with Morocco in the fields of border and security issues, it also proposes standards regarding human rights issues to its member states, which sometimes generates tension regarding border control policies and protection of refugees (International, 2023).

5. ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR SPAIN AND EUROPE

The economic impact of the territorial and the shifting diplomatic relations between Spain and Morocco is much larger and bilateral relations are not the only aspect affected within the bigger picture of the European Union (EU). These consequences are experienced within some key areas which are trade, labor markets associated with migration, energy security, fisheries as well as infrastructure investment. The section focuses on the impact of the geopolitical tensions and mechanisms of cooperation between Spain and Morocco on the economic stability and strategic interest, both at national and regional levels.

5.1 Trade and Cross-Border Economic Activity

Morocco trades a lot with Spain, and vice versa, considering the latter to be one of the largest partners. The two countries trade in agricultural produce, textile, machinery, and automobiles. The physical closeness of the southernmost point of Spain and the northernmost point of Morocco allows considerable cross-border trade, especially in Ceuta and Melilla, that act as trade zones and free economic zones. However, diplomatic crises, such as the 2021 Brahim Ghali incident, have shown that political

tensions can disrupt economic flows. During this period, Morocco restricted commercial customs at the Melilla border and increased inspections on Spanish products, slowing trade and harming local businesses in both regions (Barbé and Morillas, 2021)

5.2 Migration and Labor Market Dynamics

Irregular migration from Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa into Spain significantly affects the Spanish labor market, particularly in the agricultural, construction, and service sectors. While this migration addresses labor shortages, it also places pressure on social services and contributes to political debates about integration, security, and resource allocation. The EU's strategy of outsourcing border control to Morocco—via financial incentives and bilateral deals—reflects an economic trade-off: reduce immediate migration pressures in exchange for long-term development aid and infrastructure support in origin countries (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). However, this arrangement risks instability when cooperation breaks down or is used as leverage by Morocco.

5.3 Energy Cooperation and Infrastructure Projects

Spain and Morocco are increasingly linked through energy interdependence, particularly in renewable energy and gas transport. Two major pipelines—the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG) and the Medgaz pipeline—serve as strategic energy corridors. Although MEG was disrupted in 2021 due to Algeria-Morocco tensions, Spain continued to re-export Algerian gas to Morocco, further complicating regional diplomacy (José Martínez & José Ignacio Torreblanca, 2023). Additionally, Spain and Morocco have signed agreements to boost green hydrogen and solar energy cooperation, supporting the EU's Green Deal and climate goals. Disruptions in bilateral relations could endanger these initiatives and slow the EU's energy diversification strategy in light of the war in Ukraine and reduced Russian imports.

5.4 Fisheries and Agricultural Agreements

Fishing rights in Moroccan waters are crucial to Spanish coastal economies, especially in Galicia and Andalusia. The EU-Morocco Fisheries

Partnership Agreement allows Spanish vessels to operate in these waters, in exchange for financial compensation and development aid to Morocco. However, the legal controversy over the inclusion of Western Saharan waters in these agreements has created diplomatic and legal tension. In 2021, the European Court of Justice ruled that such agreements required the consent of the Sahrawi people, putting their renewal in jeopardy (Zisenwine, 2022). Spain's agricultural exports to Morocco are also substantial, and trade disruptions—either due to political conflict or border closures—can significantly affect supply chains and rural economies.

5.5 Impact on EU Budgeting and Policy Alignment

Spain's position as a frontline state in EU migration and security policy means that economic disruptions with Morocco often trigger broader EU concerns. The EU has allocated substantial funding to support:

Border infrastructure, Refugee facilities, Development aid to Moroccan authorities for migration control. Any deterioration in Spain-Morocco relations risks budgetary inefficiency in EU migration policy and could weaken Brussels' leverage in the Southern Neighborhood (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022).

5.6 Tourism and Investment Flows

Tourism between Spain and Morocco is also economically relevant. Border closures or security concerns directly affect Spanish enclaves like Ceuta and Melilla, which rely on Moroccan visitors for daily commerce. Political instability also discourages foreign investment in border regions and shared ventures in logistics, renewable energy, and transport infrastructure (Olivier Tramond & João Guerreiro, 2022)

6. ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

6.1 Spain as a Gateway to Africa and Impacts on EU-Africa Trade

Spain's geographical proximity to North Africa makes it a key intermediary in EU-Africa relations. Through ports such as Algeciras and Barcelona, Spain plays a central role in the EU's Mediterranean trade and acts as a logistical hub connecting European markets with Morocco

and other African countries (Algeciras, 2023). Initiatives like the Spain-Africa Strategy 2023–2028 further underscore Spain's ambition to lead Europe's engagement with Africa (Spain, 2023). In line with this, the EU's Global Gateway strategy—launched in 2021—commits up to €150 billion in investment toward African infrastructure, sustainability, and connectivity projects, many of which rely on Spanish logistical and institutional channels (European Commission, 2012).

6.2 Migration Pressures and Fiscal Burden on EU States

Spain, along with Italy and Greece, bears a disproportionate share of migration flows into Europe. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum seeks to redistribute asylum responsibilities, yet many member states remain reluctant due to fiscal pressures (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). Migrant arrivals have led to increased spending on border management, housing, education, and social integration—costs primarily absorbed by frontline states and later reimbursed through EU funds (International, 2023). Moreover, as demographic decline looms across Europe, particularly in Eastern and Southern Europe, managed migration is increasingly seen as essential for maintaining labor markets and welfare systems (Guardian, 2025).

6.3 Energy Security and Maritime Trade Routes through the Strait of Gibraltar

The Strait of Gibraltar is a critical chokepoint through which over 100,000 ships pass annually, including vital energy shipments—such as LNG and oil—from Africa and the Middle East (Martínez, José, and Torreblanca, José Ignacio, 2023). It is also the site of the Spain-Morocco electricity interconnection, vital for the EU's southern energy grid resilience and part of the broader EU energy diversification strategy in response to Russian supply disruptions (International Energy Agency, 2023). With Morocco's growing role in renewable energy (especially solar and green hydrogen), Spain serves as a gateway for transmitting clean energy to Europe via the Mediterranean corridor (Barbé and Morillas, 2021).

6.4 EU Cohesion and Border Policy Implications

Spain's land borders in Ceuta and Melilla—the only land borders between the EU and Africa—are flashpoints for EU border and asylum policy. Incidents at these borders, such as the 2022 Melilla tragedy, have raised human rights concerns and challenged the EU's commitment to humane border management (International, 2023). Tensions between northern and southern EU countries over migration responsibilities have also exposed fault lines within the EU, threatening cohesion and mutual trust (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). Nevertheless, Spain's leadership in advocating for cooperative frameworks with Morocco reflects a pragmatic approach to shared regional security and economic interests (Martínez, José, and Torreblanca, José Ignacio, 2023).

7. CASE ANALYSIS: SPAIN'S DIPLOMATIC AND STRATEGIC RESPONSE

7.1 Recent Policy Shifts and Agreements (2022–2025)

Between 2022 and 2025, Spain has recalibrated its foreign policy toward Morocco and North Africa, placing renewed emphasis on diplomatic normalization and regional stability. A key turning point was the 2022 letter from Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to King Mohammed VI, in which Spain endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara. This marked a departure from Spain's previously neutral stance and was intended to reset bilateral ties after a diplomatic crisis in 2021 (José Martínez & José Ignacio Torreblanca, 2023). This policy shift led to resumed cooperation on migration, economic partnerships, and counter-terrorism. Spain's "Africa Focus 2023–2028" Strategy also seeks to deepen institutional, economic, and cultural relations with African countries, particularly Morocco and the Sahel.

7.2 Military Readiness and Border Control Measures

Spain has increased surveillance and defense infrastructure along its borders with Morocco, particularly in the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In response to mass border crossings in 2022, Spain expanded the deployment of Guardia

Civil units and invested in "smart border" technology, including advanced surveillance systems and facial recognition (Amnesty International, 2023). The Spanish military has also participated in joint naval operations with NATO in the Strait of Gibraltar to maintain control over this strategic maritime chokepoint, enhancing southern flank security (Guerreiro, 2022).

7.3 Public Opinion in Spain and Political Party Positions

Public opinion in Spain has been divided on issues related to Morocco, border control, and migration. Surveys conducted after the 2022 Melilla border incident show a growing demand for more humane border management (International, 2023), though right-wing parties like VOX have advocated for stricter border closures and reduced diplomatic concessions to Morocco. Meanwhile, left-leaning parties such as Unidas Podemos have criticized Spain's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, arguing it contradicts international law and human rights commitments (Esther Barbé and Pol Morilla, 2021). The ruling Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) has defended the move as necessary for regional stability.

7.4. Use of Multilateral Forums (UN, EU, African Union)

Spain actively engages with multilateral institutions to address regional security and migration challenges. Within the European Union, it has pushed for enhanced border cooperation and funding under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022). It also supports EU–Morocco Association Agreements that link trade and development aid to cooperation on migration control. In the United Nations, Spain continues to endorse a political solution to the Western Sahara issue, though its support for Morocco's autonomy plan has strained its traditionally multilateralist stance (Barbé and Morillas, 2021). Spain has also increased coordination with the African Union, especially on issues like counter-terrorism in the Sahel and cross-border human trafficking.

8 FUTURE OUTLOOK AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Pathways for Conflict Resolution and Confidence-building Measures

To avoid recurrent tensions over Ceuta, Melilla, migration surges, and the Western Sahara dispute, Spain and Morocco must institutionalize confidence-building mechanisms. These may include bilateral crisis hotlines, regular diplomatic summits, and third-party mediation by the European Union or United Nations. A transparent legal framework on territorial claims and mutual respect for sovereignty can prevent escalation. The Western Sahara issue remains a fundamental obstacle to long-term trust. Spain's recent support for Morocco's autonomy plan (Martínez, 2022) could be balanced by reaffirming its support for UN-led processes, ensuring a dual-track approach that promotes both diplomacy and stability.

8.2 Enhancing EU-Morocco-Spain Triangular Cooperation

A key recommendation is to enhance triangular cooperation between the EU, Spain, and Morocco on migration management, energy transition, and regional security. This can be modeled on the EU Global Gateway investment framework (European Commission, 2012) where Spain plays the role of an intermediary and facilitator for North African development projects. Joint investment in renewable energy, especially solar and green hydrogen from North Africa, can strengthen energy interdependence and reduce Europe's vulnerability to global energy shocks (European Commission, 2012)

8.3 Reforming EU Border Policies and Addressing Asymmetries

The EU's current border policies often place disproportionate responsibility on frontline states like Spain. Future strategies should include binding relocation mechanisms, greater financial solidarity, and legal migration channels, as emphasized by (Carrera, Sergio; Santos Vara, Juan; & Strik, Tineke, 2022) Spain can lead in advocating for a more equitable Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and challenge ad hoc outsourcing of border controls to third countries. Addressing asymmetries in burden-sharing will also reduce internal EU

friction and improve human rights conditions at external borders (International, 2023).

8.4 Sustainable Economic Integration Strategies for North Africa and Southern Europe

Long-term regional stability hinges on inclusive and sustainable economic development. Spain should champion projects that enhance infrastructure connectivity, SME growth, and youth employment in North Africa. The Spain-Africa Strategy 2023–2028 (Algeciras, 2023) is a step forward, but implementation must involve local stakeholders and be insulated from geopolitical volatility. A case in point is the Strait of Gibraltar, which is a primary trade route and energy transit way (Guerreiro, 2022), and it deserves joint maritime management and environmental protection policies.

9 CONCLUSION

The Spanish-Moroccan territorial issues, revolving around Ceuta and Melilla, as well as the larger Western Sahara conflict, are emblematic of more than a two-sided dispute; they represent a confluence of historical resentments, geostrategic necessity, and regional power shifts. These tensions, as we have seen in this research, lie deep in the colonial times, the territorial nationalism and the present-day security issues. However, they also cut across key transnational concerns like the management of migration, energy security and the European strategic place on its southern periphery. As a country located at the geopolitical juncture of Europe and Africa, Spain assumes an influential role in defining the European Union southern neighborhood policy. Its reaction to the regional aspirations of Morocco, including diplomatic re-balance to the securitization of the borders, showcases the intricacy of the national sovereignty, humanitarian duties, and European unity. The strait of Gibraltar and related trade routes make Spain economically significant as a land connecting continents. The financial costs of policing the borders, population stress caused by migration, and the increasing energy dependence on North Africa serve as examples of how local conflicts can have continent-level consequences. As we go into the future, the future is in collaboration rather than conflict. Spain should further encourage triangular

relations between Morocco, the EU and themselves, enhance multilateral interaction and encourage fair and sustainable policies that would encourage stability in the region. The reformation of EU border and asylum policy, investment in cross-Mediterranean infrastructure, and inclusively developing the North African countries are the necessary measures in the reduction of the sources of the conflict. Conclusively, how Spain manages to work through these geopolitical tensions by fostering economic vitality and human security will not only dictate the stability of its bilateral affair with Morocco, but also its capacity to exert its influence in the European Union southern maritime frontier over the long-term.

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