The Western Sahara Conflict

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The Western Sahara conflict is one of the longest-running and most intricate territorial disputes in contemporary history. Emerging from the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century, this conflict has eluded many attempts at resolution. Recent geopolitical developments, including significant shifts in international support, have added new dimensions to the debate over the region's future. What do these shifts mean for the future of Western Sahara and the broader geopolitical landscape?

Historical Context: From Spanish Colony to Moroccan Contention

Once under Spanish colonial rule, Western Sahara became a focal point of conflict as decolonization movements swept across Africa.

Morocco and Mauritania opposed Spain's 1974 plans for a self-determination referendum of its colony, both claiming the territory. In 1975, the International Court of Justice found insufficient grounds for Moroccan sovereignty despite acknowledging historical ties. Morocco's "Green March" in November 1975, involving 350,000 Moroccan civilians, asserted control over Western Sahara. The subsequent Madrid Accords, which divided the territory between Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania, bypassed the UN's referendum call. The Algeria-backed Polisario Front, representing the Sahrawi people, declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976, leading to a prolonged conflict with Morocco. Despite a 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire, the conflict has persisted, with Morocco currently controlling around 80% of the territory, including key cities like Laayoune and Dakhla.

Recent Developments: Shifting International Support

The geopolitical landscape of Western Sahara has shifted notably in recent years, with Morocco's diplomatic strategy achieving significant milestones. A pivotal moment occurred on July 30, 2024, when French President Emmanuel Macron publicly endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan as "the only basis for a lasting resolution". This plan, first proposed by Morocco in 2007, offers a framework for Sahrawi self-rule under Moroccan sovereignty, maintaining Moroccan control over foreign affairs, defence, currency, and especially access to its natural resources, holding one of the world's main phosphate reserves.

France's endorsement is part of a broader trend of international support for Morocco's claim. The United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020 as part of a deal involving Morocco's normalization of relations with Israel. Spain supported Morocco's plan in 2022, and Israel's support is aligned with the Abraham Accords. This growing international backing strengthens Morocco's global position and puts pressure on the Polisario Front, which Algeria backs.

France's and Spain's shifts reflect not only a diplomatic alignment but also strategic interests. Morocco plays a crucial role in managing migration flows to Europe. According to the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces, the country prevented around 87,000 migrants from crossing into Europe in 2023. The King knows how to leverage its position, effectively using migration control, for example, as a strong bargaining chip in its negotiations to gain political support for its claims over Western Sahara.

In addition to France and the United States, a growing number of countries, mainly from Africa and the Middle East, have shown support for

Morocco's autonomy plan by establishing diplomatic missions in Laayoune and Dakhla.

On August 6, 2024, Finland became the latest European country to endorse the autonomy plan, describing it as a "good basis for a solution." While officially recognizing the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination, Germany's foreign minister acknowledged the importance of Morocco's plan, indicating only "nuanced differences" between the German and Moroccan positions in August 2022. This shift followed Germany's increased interest in cooperation with Morocco in the field of renewable energy after its energy supply from Russia was disrupted.

The Geopolitical Landscape: Russia, Iran, and Algeria

Despite Morocco's growing international support for its autonomy plan, significant challenges remain, particularly in the geopolitical arena. The path to a UN Security Council resolution recognizing Moroccan sovereignty is complicated by the entrenched positions of key players like Russia and Algeria.

In recent years, Morocco has strengthened its ties with Western countries, positioning itself as a critical ally in North Africa. However, with its veto power on the Security Council, Russia has traditionally supported a UN-led self-determination referendum for Western Sahara and is likely to oppose any resolution that benefits a Western-aligned nation like Morocco.

Algeria, a staunch supporter of the Polisario Front, has enshrined the independence of Western Sahara as a strategic state goal. The growing international endorsement of Morocco's plan is seen by Algeria as a direct challenge to its regional influence. This situation is further complicated by Europe's increasing dependence on Algerian gas, particularly in the wake of the Ukraine conflict. Algeria, once a gas supplier to Europe through a pipeline that passed through Morocco for a 10 % fee, severed this arrangement in 2020, bypassing Morocco in response to the U.S. recognition of Morocco's autonomy plan. This diplomatic rift has only deepened since then.

Algeria's strategic importance to Europe as an energy supplier has made it a focal point for external influences, particularly from Iran. Recognizing Algeria's pivotal role, Iran, which shares Algeria's interest in countering Western influence, has allegedly sought to expand its foothold in North Africa by supporting the Polisario Front through its proxy Hezbollah. This move aims to strengthen ties with Algeria and challenge Western regional dominance.

As international backing for Morocco's autonomy plan continues to grow, Algeria may increasingly align itself with Russia and Iran. Should Algeria and its allies perceive that diplomatic avenues are closing, there is a risk that the Algerian-backed Polisario Front could escalate its military

actions, further destabilizing the region and complicating efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Looking Ahead: An Uncertain Future

A path to resolving the Western Sahara conflict would require deep diplomatic efforts and compromise from almost all key players worldwide. While Morocco has made significant strides in garnering international support, powers like Russia, Iran, and the Polisario Front will likely not give up on their positions. Therefore, especially in light of the current dynamics in world politics, the conflict is unlikely to be resolved soon. Nonetheless, with it not being a global priority, Morocco will likely continue promoting its autonomy plan and economically benefitting from the region without many headwinds.

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