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## POLICY BRIEF

# MOROCCO'S PLACE IN A FRACTURED GLOBAL ORDER

TRANSATLANTIC TENSIONS, NATO'S FUTURE, AND THE NEW  
GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

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# List of Abbreviations

**EOP:** Enhanced Opportunities Partner

**GCC:** Gulf Cooperation Council

**HCP:** Haut Commissariat au Plan

**KFOR:** Kosovo Force (NATO Peacekeeping Mission)

**MINURSO:** Mandate of the UN Mission in Western Sahara

**GDP :** Gross Domestic Product (Produit Intérieur Brut)

**SIAs :** Strategic Impact Assessments

**CESE:** Conseil Économique, Social et Environnemental (Economic, Social and Environmental Council)

**INE:** Institut National de la Statistique et de l'Économie Appliquée

**COP:** Conference of the Parties (UN Climate Summit)

**DEPF:** Direction des Études et des Prévisions Financières (Directorate of Studies and Financial Forecasts)

**ECJ:** European Court of Justice

**ECOWAS:** Economic Community of West African States

**GCC:** Gulf Cooperation Council

**HRW:** Human Rights Watch

**ICG:** International Crisis Group

**IEA:** International Energy Agency

**MFA:** Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**NATO:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization

**OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**UNGA:** United Nations General Assembly

**UNSC:** United Nations Security Council



# Executive Summary

Morocco occupies a pivotal position in an increasingly fragmented global order. It is NATO's most consistently engaged partner on the southern flank, co-leading major military exercise African Lion, contributing to maritime security and counter-terrorism missions, and participating in cyber and peacekeeping cooperation. Yet a structural imbalance persists: Morocco delivers sustained operational value but remains outside NATO's core consultation and planning formats.

At the same time, foreign policy now carries clearer domestic expectations. The youth-led GenZ 212 mobilizations of September - October 2025 did not contest Morocco's international orientation - they questioned whether external partnerships generate visible improvements in health, education, and employment. Public legitimacy has become a strategic variable in the conduct of foreign policy.

The October 2025 UN Security Council endorsement of Morocco's autonomy plan created rare diplomatic momentum. Converting this into lasting strategic gains requires aligning external engagement with internal outcomes, particularly for the

## Key findings

- ◆ High operational contribution, limited institutional voice: Morocco is a dependable security partner but lacks structured access to NATO decision-shaping forums
- ◆ Strategic autonomy depends on domestic legitimacy: External partnerships must generate visible and equitable social returns to sustain public support.
- ◆ Youth engagement is an institutional gap, not a motivational one: Moroccan youth express a strong interest in global affairs, but they encounter few structured entry points into policymaking.
- ◆ Megaprojects require social accountability mechanisms: without provisions for employment, skills transfer, and regional development, projects risk being perceived as prestige-driven.

## Policy recommendations

This paper proposes a four-pillar framework to synchronize Morocco's external strategy with internal legitimacy.

- ❖ Upgrade NATO–Morocco cooperation through a structured partnership framework and a dedicated liaison unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).
- ❖ Institutionalize youth participation via competitive fellowships, structured delegation pathways, and pre-placement training.
- ❖ Embed Strategic Impact Assessments in major infrastructure, energy, and event-related projects (AFCON 2025, World Cup 2030) to ensure measurable domestic benefit.
- ❖ Strengthen public diplomacy and diaspora engagement to translate foreign policy into shared national understanding and purpose.

Morocco now operates within a narrow implementation window. NATO's southern posture review, the restructuring of the Euro-African energy corridor, and the lead-up to AFCON 2025 and the 2030 World Cup create both opportunities and pressure.

If Morocco institutionalizes influence externally while broadening participation internally, it can consolidate its role as a strategic architect within Euro-Mediterranean and African security orders.



## Introduction

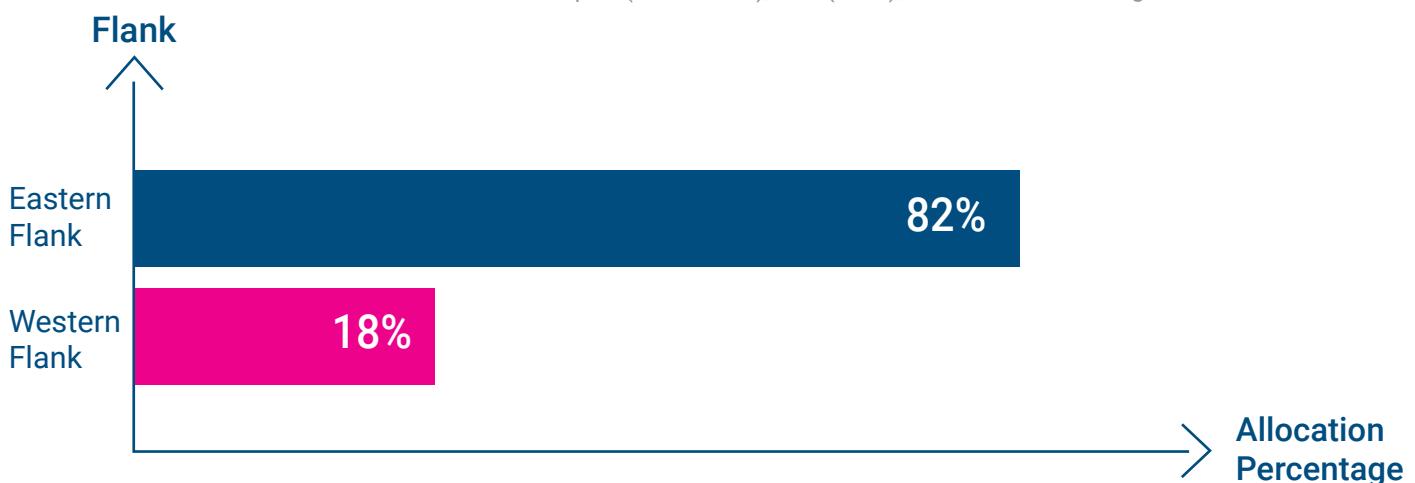


Morocco occupies a strategic position on NATO's southern flank. It co-leads African Lion, the continent's largest U.S.-led military exercise involving more than 10,000 personnel from over forty nations, and contributes to maritime security and counter-terrorism operations (U.S. AFRICOM, 2025). Yet Morocco, like other Mediterranean Dialogue partners, remains outside NATO's core consultation and planning formats (NATO, 2025).

This gap between high operational contribution and limited institutional voice has implications for Morocco's influence and for NATO's long-term stability in its southern neighborhood (Atlantic Council, 2025).

**Figure 1 : NATO's Strategic Prioritization:  
Eastern Flank vs. Southern Flank (2025-2023)**

Source: NATO Summit Communiqués (2025–2022); EDA (2025); national defense budgets.



Analysis of NATO summit communiqués from Vilnius 2023, Washington 2024, and The Hague 2025 shows that only 15–20% of named initiatives, exercises, and capacity-building lines explicitly target the southern flank, compared to 75–80% directed toward reinforcing the eastern flank (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2025; EDA, 2025). Morocco's level of engagement, therefore, exceeds the institutional attention allocated to its region, creating a structural participation gap.

In October 2025, the UN Security Council endorsed Morocco's autonomy proposal for Western Sahara as the most viable political solution, backed by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain, and without vetoes from Russia or China (UNSC, 2025; Reuters, 2025). While this decision does not directly affect NATO cooperation, it significantly strengthens Morocco's diplomatic position with key NATO member states, particularly those that championed the resolution. The ruling consolidates Morocco's strategic credibility as a stable and reliable regional actor, reinforcing its value within Euro-Atlantic security conversations. Together, these developments strengthen Morocco's bargaining position and create an 18–24 month implementation window to negotiate more structured consultation mechanisms, without raising the question of membership.

Domestically, the stakes are equally significant. Youth aged 15–34 constitute 31.9% of the population (HCP, 2023) and increasingly evaluate foreign policy not on strategic alignment alone but on whether it produces visible improvements in health services, education access, and employment opportunities. The Gen Z 212 mobilizations in late 2025 did not reject Morocco's external orientation; they exposed a governance dividends gap, a lack of transparent mechanisms demonstrating how external partnerships generate domestic benefits in everyday life. Sparked by a maternal health crisis in Agadir, where eight pregnant women reportedly died due to inadequate medical facilities, the protests spread to at least ten cities, including Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier (AA, 2025; Middle East Council, 2025). Protesters' slogans—most notably "Stadiums are here, where are the hospitals?"—coincided with heavy government spending on AFCON 2025 and World Cup 2030 preparations, reinforcing the perception that prestige projects outweighed social priorities (Reuters, 2025). This dissonance mirrors a broader regional pattern documented by the Carnegie Endowment (2017): across MENA, youth increasingly demand that state investments and foreign policy engagements yield tangible public benefits before granting political legitimacy.

While some states can project international influence without broad domestic support—such as Russia, whose power rests on military coercion, or Algeria, which leverages hydrocarbon sovereignty—Morocco's external strategy relies on predictability, diplomatic credibility, and investor confidence. These assets are inherently linked to social stability and public trust at home. Morocco's economic model is highly open, with trade representing over 90% of GDP (World Bank, 2023), and its foreign policy relies on sustained Foreign Direct Investment to finance infrastructure, renewable energy, and connectivity projects.

Empirical studies confirm that political stability and institutional legitimacy are decisive determinants of FDI inflows and long-term partnerships (Hashmi et al., 2020; Le et al., 2023). When foreign policy achievements fail to produce visible domestic dividends, public consent erodes, fiscal pressures rise, as illustrated by the \$15 billion social spending increase following the 2025 protests, and international credibility suffers. Research on diplomatic resilience similarly shows that states with weak domestic legitimacy face diminished trust from external partners who doubt their policy continuity (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2015; Cadier, 2024). In Morocco's case, internal legitimacy is therefore not a normative ideal but a functional prerequisite for sustaining durable international influence.

Morocco's strategic autonomy in a fractured global order, therefore, depends on synchronizing two priorities:

- 1** Securing structured and predictable access to Euro-Atlantic consultation mechanisms—to convert operational engagement into a strategic voice;
- 2** Ensuring that international partnerships generate visible domestic impact to sustain public trust, policy continuity, and national cohesion.

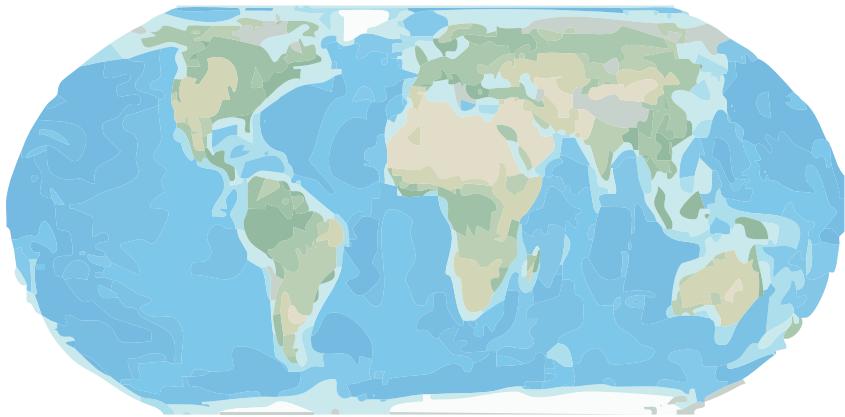
This paper addresses two guiding questions:

How can Morocco convert sustained operational contributions into a predictable institutional role within NATO's southern policy processes, without triggering membership debates?

Which practical mechanisms, such as youth delegation quotas, paid policy fellowships, and Strategic Impact Assessments, can ensure that external engagement strengthens domestic legitimacy?

Section 3 examines Morocco's current security role and the participation gap. Section 4 analyzes the domestic legitimacy dimension and pathways for meaningful youth inclusion. Section 5 proposes a sequenced four-pillar framework for implementation, including milestones and measurable indicators. Section 6 concludes with risks, contingencies, and a realistic roadmap for Morocco to move from dependable operator to recognized strategic actor.

# 1. Morocco's strategic position: Hedging in a fractured order



## A. A shifting strategic environment: NATO's southern flank at risk

The Russia–Ukraine war has required NATO to reinforce its eastern flank, but this rebalancing has reduced sustained strategic attention to the southern neighborhood. While public and media debates often emphasize irregular migration and violent extremism, NATO's core mandate in North Africa remains the stability of state security institutions and the protection of maritime and energy corridors, not the management of social or humanitarian dynamics (NATO, 2024). Strategic pressures on the southern flank continue to grow. The Sahel is facing accelerating state fragility and expanding jihadist networks, while Russia's Africa Corps has consolidated its footprint through security assistance agreements and paramilitary deployments (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). At the same time, China's infrastructure diplomacy through its Belt and Road Initiative is reshaping port, rail, and digital connectivity across North Africa, altering logistical influence and technological dependency patterns (Draissi et al., 2025).

Despite these developments, Mediterranean Dialogue partners remain largely peripheral in NATO's consultation and planning mechanisms (Atlantic Council, 2025; NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2025). The result is a structural imbalance: the South is a central focus of NATO's threat assessments, yet it remains marginal in resource allocation, strategic prioritization, and agenda-setting.

## B. Morocco's operational role: High contribution, limited voice

Within this complex environment, Morocco has solidified its role as NATO's most operationally capable and engaged African partner (NATO, 2025). This is demonstrated by its central role in Exercise African Lion—the continent's largest U.S.-led military drill, which it hosts and co-directs, involving over 10,000 personnel from more than 40 nations (U.S. AFRICOM, 2025).

Beyond this flagship exercise, Morocco contributes naval assets to Operation Sea Guardian for maritime security, maintains liaison officers within the Kosovo Force (KFOR), and engages in regular cybersecurity and civil emergency planning through NATO's Science for Peace and Security Programme (NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2024; NATO SPS, 2025). The table below compares Morocco's engagement level to other Mediterranean Dialogue partners.

**Table 1: Comparative NATO Engagement of Mediterranean Dialogue Partners (2025-2023)**

Source: Authors' analysis of NATO communiqés, SPS program participation records, and national statements.

Engagement Area	Morocco	Tunisia	Algeria	Jordan
<b>Major Exercises</b>	Host & co-lead	Participant	None	Limited participant
<b>Maritime Security Ops</b>	Active	Irregular	None	Limited
<b>Liaison Postings</b>	Yes (KFOR)	None	None	Yes
<b>Summit Participation</b>	None	None	None	Limited (EOP)

Morocco does benefit from this cooperation: joint training improves force readiness, interoperability facilitates coordinated maritime surveillance, and access to defense technology and procurement channels strengthens military modernization. However, these benefits remain largely technical and operational.

The strategic challenge lies elsewhere; Morocco has limited influence over:

- ❖ How NATO defines threats in the southern neighborhood;
- ❖ How resources are prioritized between the Eastern and Southern flanks;
- ❖ How security cooperation is linked to political and economic stabilization.

Without a more predictable institutional voice, Morocco's contributions remain "reactive" rather than "co-shaping" alliance priorities. This matters because strategic decisions made in Brussels directly affect regional maritime monitoring, counterterrorism coordination, and infrastructure protection, core components of Morocco's national security and energy strategy. In short, this dynamic establishes Morocco as a tactical contributor without a strategic voice. It delivers consistent operational value but is absent from the forums where policy is shaped and long-term strategy is decided.

This gap also carries domestic implications: Afrobarometer (2025) shows that Moroccan youth increasingly distrust institutions when public policies, especially external partnerships, do not translate into visible social benefits. In such conditions, foreign policy is perceived as elite-driven, not citizen-serving, and becomes harder to justify publicly.

## C. Euro-Atlantic alignment and diplomatic recalibration

While Morocco's strategic alignment with NATO has deepened, its relationship with the European Union has experienced periodic strain. The October 2024 European Court of Justice ruling affecting trade involving Western Sahara-origin goods generated political friction and temporarily slowed structured dialogue (ECJ, 2024).

However, diplomatic conditions shifted significantly in late 2025:

- ❖ On 31 October 2025, the UN Security Council voted in favor of Morocco's autonomy plan as the most viable political solution, backed by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Spain, and without a veto from Russia or China (UNSC; Reuters, 2025).
- ❖ In September 2025, the European Commission reaffirmed Morocco as a "special partner" in the renewed Mediterranean cooperation framework (European Commission, 2025).

This alignment strengthens Morocco's bargaining leverage and creates a realistic basis for incremental institutionalization, rather than abrupt reform or formal membership debates.

This alignment strengthens Morocco's bargaining leverage in specific strategic domains where the EU has clear dependency, and Morocco has a comparative advantage:

<b>Energy corridors</b> (Green hydrogen + Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline)	<b>Critical Supply Chain Relocalization</b> (Automotive, Aerospace, Fertilizers)
<b>Migration governance and labor mobility</b>	<b>Maritime and border security</b>

In sum, Morocco's advantages in these strategically relevant sectors allow it to negotiate predictable consultation mechanisms, co-financing commitments, and technology transfer partnerships, reinforcing a pragmatic convergence of interests.

## D. Domestic legitimacy at risk: The youth inclusion

The Gen Z 212 mobilizations (Sept–Oct 2025) highlighted the domestic dimension of strategic autonomy. Demonstrations across multiple provinces focused on healthcare quality, education access, and employment, triggered by a widely publicized maternal health incident in Agadir (Reuters, 2025; HRW, 2025).

The slogans "**Stadiums are here, where are the hospitals?**" did not reject Morocco's global role. They exposed a governance dividends gap:

**The absence of transparent mechanisms showing how external partnerships improve everyday life.**

This posed a legitimacy risk specifically to public confidence in its domestic benefits

### **Government response (19 October 2025).**

The government announced a \$15 billion increase in health and education funding in the 2026 budget (+%16) and introduced political reforms lowering candidacy age thresholds to under 35 and subsidizing youth campaign expenses (Morocco Official Gazette, 2025; Le Monde, 2025). These measures were not foreign policy instruments per se, but they mattered strategically: they aimed to restore domestic trust at a moment when Morocco was seeking to consolidate diplomatic gains internationally. By stabilizing the social environment and responding to youth grievances, the reforms reduced legitimacy pressures that could otherwise undermine Morocco's ability to sustain long-term foreign policy commitments.

## **E. Domestic legitimacy at risk: The youth inclusion imperative**

Morocco thus faces a dual challenge that defines its position in the fractured global order: it is simultaneously an engaged yet institutionally peripheral to Euro-Atlantic structures, and pursuing external hedging while facing internal legitimacy pressures. The country's strategic autonomy depends on synchronizing these two dimensions.

External Imperative	Internal Imperative
Convert operational contributions into an institutional voice	Ensure foreign policy delivers visible social benefit
Transition from "tactical partner" to "strategic architect"	Embed youth in foreign policy design and execution
Deepen structured partnerships without dependency	Renew public consent and democratic legitimacy

When these dimensions are synchronized, Morocco advances as a sovereign strategic actor. When they diverge, external gains weaken at the point of domestic legitimacy. This participation gap is not sustainable unless foreign policy demonstrates tangible domestic benefit, particularly for youth. Section 4 explores this internal legitimacy dimension.

## 2. Morocco's strategic response

Morocco's foreign policy operates in a complex environment shaped by shifting NATO priorities, expanding influence from Russia and China, and persistent instability in the Sahel. In response, Rabat has pursued a strategy of calibrated hedging: maintaining strong engagement with Euro-Atlantic partners while diversifying security, economic, and diplomatic ties to avoid dependency and preserve strategic autonomy.

This strategy is sustainable only if external partnerships generate visible internal dividends. The government's October 2025 reforms demonstrated that Morocco's institutions can adjust in response to public demand, but also reinforced the need to systematically link strategic engagement to domestic benefits. The task now is to institutionalize that linkage.

### A. Security cooperation and NATO engagement

As Euro-Atlantic security recalibrates in response to the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, Morocco has quietly consolidated its role as NATO's most engaged African partner. Its leadership in African Lion—with 10,000+ participants—demonstrates interoperability and regional credibility (U.S. AFRICOM, 2025). Contributions to Operation Sea Guardian, KFOR, and SPS cyber cooperation further reinforce this position (NATO Allied Maritime Command, 2024). Since joining the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994, Morocco has sustained high-level political dialogue and practical cooperation, distinguished by operational interoperability and regional credibility (NATO, 2025).

Policy-wise, Morocco co-shapes NATO's Southern Neighbourhood Action Plan, and deepened cybersecurity and counter-terrorism cooperation with the NATO School in Oberammergau. Admiral Rob Bauer's 2024 visit affirmed Morocco as a "haven of stability" and "key southern partner" (Hespress, 2024).

However, Morocco remains outside NATO's structured planning and consultation bodies. The late-2025 diplomatic window—marked by the UN Security Council vote supporting Morocco's autonomy plan and renewed EU-Mediterranean cooperation—creates a realistic basis for incremental institutionalization, not membership debates. Practical steps include:

- Observer access to selected southern-flank working groups,
- Regular political-military staff talks,
- Issue-specific contributions in maritime security, Sahel stabilization, and cyber resilience.

Morocco's response has been both assertive and autonomous. While enhancing NATO interoperability, Rabat advances its 2021 African Strategy, prioritizing trans-Saharan security coordination, border stabilization, and African-led counter-radicalization (ICG, 2024). It plays active roles in Mali talks, Libya mediation, and G5 Sahel intelligence cooperation.

Political obstacles remain. Algeria views deeper Morocco-NATO cooperation with suspicion; some NATO members worry about setting a membership precedent; and eastern-flank states prioritize Russia deterrence. Morocco can mitigate these concerns by framing the request as thematic and functional, and by clearly affirming that institutionalization does not imply a membership trajectory. The Jordan Enhanced Opportunities Partner model (2014) provides a relevant and feasible precedent.

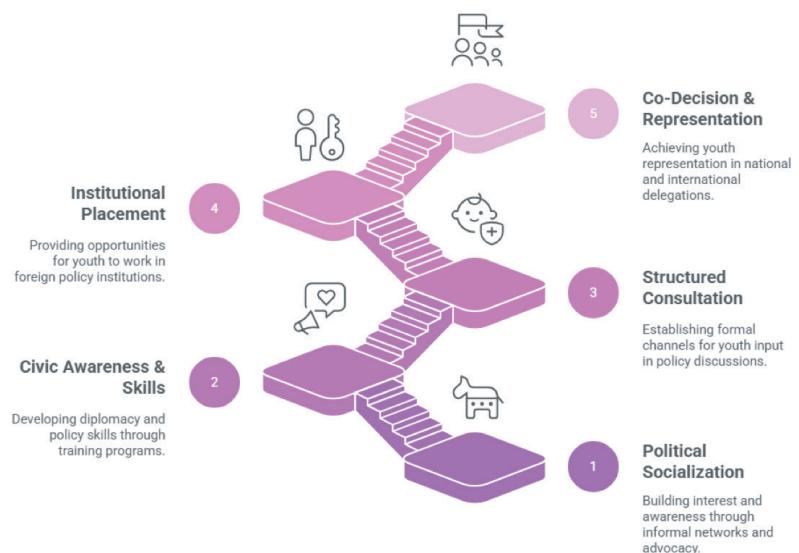
## B. Youth engagement: From periphery to policy

Youth aged 15–34 represent 31.9% of Morocco's population, placing them at the center of the country's demographic future (HCP, 2023). Yet their role in shaping foreign policy remains limited. This exclusion reflects a broader pattern of constrained youth access to institutional decision-making, despite recent reforms lowering candidacy age thresholds and providing financial support for young political candidates. The issue is not one of disinterest, but of structural barriers to meaningful participation.

Across the region, young people demonstrate high engagement with international issues—climate, migration, digital rights, and global governance—but formal pathways into foreign policy institutions remain narrow. Comparative cases offer useful reference points: Tunisia's municipal youth councils and Jordan's gradual diplomatic academy reforms show how structured entry channels can broaden participation (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2021). Morocco has yet to implement similar institutional mechanisms.

**Figure 2 : Youth Engagement Ladder: Transitioning from symbolic inclusion to institutionalized influence.)**

Source: Author's analysis



Afrobarometer (2024) shows that many Moroccan youth report strong interest in national and global issues, but describe limited opportunities to contribute to policymaking, reinforcing the view that foreign policy is elite-managed and distanced from social priorities. This engagement-access gap is becoming a legitimacy concern, not merely a representation issue.

Existing youth participation channels, such as COP youth delegations, Erasmus+ exchanges, and thematic youth initiatives, remain ad hoc and primarily representational rather than decision-shaping. The CESE (2024) notes:

**"Youth inclusion is acknowledged rhetorically but rarely institutionalized into policymaking processes."**

Meanwhile, independent networks such as the Moroccan Youth Council for Diplomatic and International Cooperation and the Youth Diplomats Initiative have demonstrated organizational capacity and policy fluency. However, without formal integration, these networks remain peripheral to strategic decision-making.

The GenZ-212 mobilizations in September–October 2025 made this gap visible. Protesters did not reject Morocco's international ambitions (World Cup 2030); they questioned the absence of clear mechanisms linking external strategy to domestic social development, especially in health, education, and employment (Reuters, 2025; HRW, 2025). The core demand was what this paper defines as a governance dividends gap: a call for transparency in how foreign policy and economic diplomacy produce tangible benefits for citizens.

The government's response on 19 October 2025—a 16% increase (~\$15B) in health and education spending for 2026 and reforms designed to expand youth access to elected office demonstrates institutional responsiveness and adaptive capacity (Morocco Official Gazette, 2025; Le Monde, 2025). These reforms have opened a new political opportunity structure for youth participation.

However, opportunity alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Without structured pathways to develop diplomatic competence and translate participation into policy influence, youth inclusion risks remaining symbolic. The objective, therefore, is to create gradual, professionalized entry points into Morocco's foreign policy ecosystem that support long-term strategic capacity. Three concrete mechanisms would enable this:

- ◆ Professional development pathways: Countries that successfully integrate youth into foreign policy (Canada, Finland, Tunisia) provide structured training and exposure to diplomatic procedure, ensuring that young representatives can contribute substantively rather than symbolically.

- Observer-level access to policy arenas: Meaningful engagement typically begins through observer or advisory roles in multilateral delegations, where youth gain familiarity with negotiation environments while operating within defined decision-making boundaries.
- Institutional anchoring in Academia and Civil Service: University-based diplomacy labs, foreign policy fellowships, and research assistantships help create a pipeline linking academic expertise to state institutions, ensuring continuity and avoiding reliance on informal networks.

In Morocco, the post-19 October reforms expanding youth eligibility and campaign support open the political opportunity structure, but the effectiveness of youth participation will depend on how these enabling conditions develop. The strategic significance is not simply representational: linking external policy to the generation that will inherit its consequences strengthens long-term legitimacy and Morocco's capacity to formulate sovereign strategic positions.

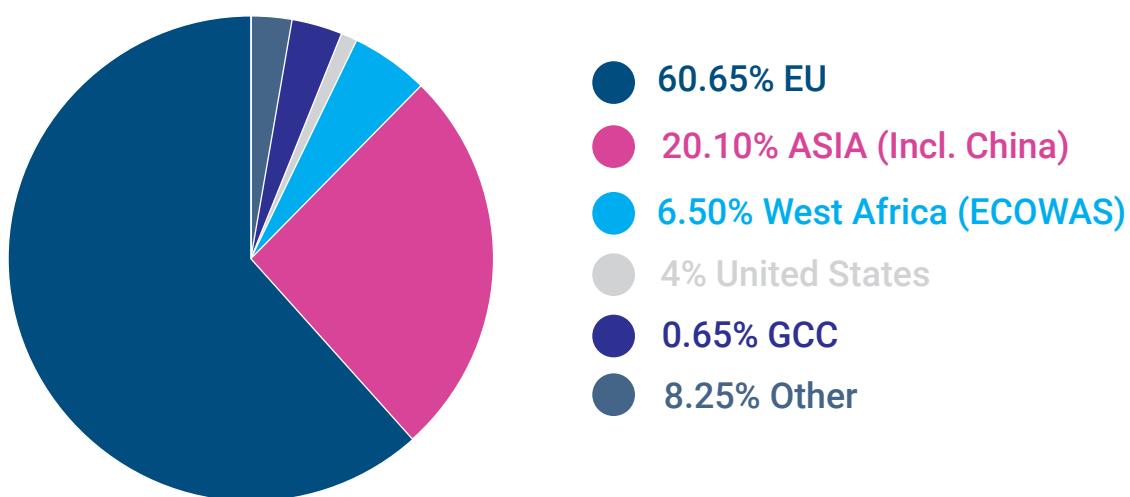
This approach forms the basis for the synchronization framework developed in Section 5.

## C. Economic diplomacy and energy diversification

Morocco's economic diplomacy mirrors its security approach: diversification without rupture. The objective is to expand strategic autonomy by reducing overdependence on any single partner while maintaining stable access to trade, investment, and strategic markets.

**Figure 3 : Morocco's Economic Diversification: Trade Partners as a Share of Total Volume (2024) (goods only)**

Source: Office des Changes (2024).Direction des Études et des Prévisions Financières (2024).



The data confirms strategic diversification: The European Union remains Morocco's dominant economic partner, accounting for 59–62% of total merchandise trade in 2024—€60.6 billion in exchange flows—with 67.7% of Moroccan exports destined for the EU and 54% of imports sourced from it (European Commission, 2025; Office des Changes, 2024). This structural link provides market depth, regulatory alignment, and investment flows, but also exposes Morocco to EU regulatory and geopolitical shifts, as illustrated by the 2024 ECJ ruling.

At the same time, Asia's share of Moroccan trade is growing, particularly with China, whose bilateral merchandise trade amounted to \$8.24 billion in 2024, representing approximately 5–6% of Morocco's total goods trade (OEC, 2024; Office des Changes, 2024). When adding services, technology cooperation, and infrastructure financing, China's overall footprint is closer to 9–10%, especially in solar manufacturing, digital infrastructure, and logistics corridors. This expansion increases Morocco's industrial diversification options, but also introduces sensitivity around technology standards and supply-chain dependency.

Trade with West Africa (ECOWAS) represents approximately 6–7% of Morocco's total trade, anchored by banking, construction, telecommunications, and fertilizer partnerships (DEPF, 2024; AfDB, 2025). This reflects Morocco's strategy to consolidate its African economic leadership and supports its longer-term objective of formal ECOWAS integration. This vector is central to Morocco's South–South diplomacy and forms part of its Atlantic Africa strategic positioning.

By contrast, trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) remains modest at 0.6–0.7% of total trade, concentrated in petroleum products and targeted capital investment (GCC-STAT, 2024; Arab News, 2025). The GCC's significance to Morocco is therefore primarily financial and strategic, rather than commercial: investment, sovereign funds, and strategic project financing matter more than trade volume.

This diversification strategy is reinforced by strategic infrastructure and mega-event investments:

- ❖ The Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline (~\$25B; 5,660 km) positions Morocco as an Atlantic energy corridor (AfDB, 2025).
- ❖ Tanger Med, Africa's largest port platform, handled 7.3 million TEUs in 2024, consolidating Morocco as a tri-continental logistics hub (Tanger Med Authority, 2025).
- ❖ Morocco's renewable energy portfolio, solar, wind, and green hydrogen, is expanding toward export capacity (IEA, 2024).

Additionally, Morocco is undertaking significant infrastructure investment in preparation for hosting AFCON 2025 and the 2030 World Cup. Government and parliamentary budget reports indicate:

- ❖ AFCON 2025 preparations include stadium renovation, regional transport upgrades, and service infrastructure expansion.
- ❖ 2030 World Cup co-hosting investments are projected at 50–60 billion MAD (~\$5–6 billion) over 2025–2030, focusing on: Stadium construction and modernization, inter-regional rail and road connectivity, in addition to tourism, hospitality, and airport capacity expansion (Official Budget Report, 2024; Ministry of Finance, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

These investments aim to boost tourism, urban development, and national branding, while deepening Morocco's diplomatic visibility and economic partnership networks. However, the GenZ-212 protests revealed that public perception hinges on whether such projects deliver visible improvements in essential services and regional development.

Morocco's external economic strategy is coherent and forward-looking, but it requires institutional mechanisms that translate foreign investment, mega-project spending, and international partnerships into equitable social outcomes. Without this linkage, economic diplomacy risks being understood as prestige-driven rather than development-driven. Moreover, the concentration of major infrastructure projects along the Atlantic axis (Tangier–Casablanca–Rabat–Marrakech) creates the additional risk of uneven regional development, where coastal and metropolitan regions benefit disproportionately while interior and southern provinces lag. Ensuring that the gains of external economic partnerships are spatially distributed through regional industrial zones, workforce training pipelines, and local procurement requirements will be essential to public legitimacy and to sustaining Morocco's strategic autonomy in the long term. Uneven development weakens national cohesion, which in turn reduces the domestic consensus required to support Morocco's assertive foreign policy posture.

## D. Economic diplomacy and energy diversification

Morocco's strategic posture rests on three interrelated dynamics: security cooperation, external economic partnerships, and the domestic legitimacy required to sustain them. Each of these elements is individually coherent. The challenge is that they often operate in parallel rather than in coordination. The result is of policy linkage, the mechanisms that connect external engagement to internal benefit.

Foreign policy cannot remain an elite domain. Its outcomes must be legible and socially meaningful: employment pipelines tied to trade agreements, training linked to defense partnerships, and participatory channels that allow citizens, not only political intermediaries, to engage with strategic priorities. The GenZ-212 mobilizations made this point clear: the question was not whether Morocco should pursue global partnerships, but how these partnerships translate into everyday improvements in key sectors.

External strategic domain	Required domestic linkage	Mechanism
Security cooperation and NATO engagement	Visible connection to regional employment and education	Defense-sector vocational programs, cybersecurity scholarships, military-civil research partnerships
Societal inclusion (including youth participation)	Training + structured participation, not symbolic presence	Regional youth consultative councils linked to MFA + rotating observer seats in delegations
Economic diplomacy and diversification	Visible and equitable social return across regions	Strategic Impact Assessments + local procurement rules + regional training centers aligned to trade sectors

Thus, the core strategic challenge is one of synchronization: ensuring that Morocco's international engagement reinforces domestic trust. When the three domains are aligned, Morocco builds the stable legitimacy required to act as a sovereign strategic actor in a fractured global order. When they diverge, foreign policy risks becoming politically fragile, regardless of diplomatic achievements.

Section 5 develops the institutional mechanisms required to achieve this synchronization.



### 3. Policy recommendations

Morocco's external relevance is increasing, yet legitimacy pressures at home highlight the need to align foreign policy gains with visible societal benefit. The following four pillars provide an integrated approach to institutionalizing Morocco's strategic role, mainstreaming youth participation, linking megaprojects to welfare outcomes, and strengthening public diplomacy.

#### A. Shift NATO cooperation from operational to structured institutional engagement

##### Objective

Secure predictable access to consultation and planning mechanisms without triggering membership debates, while ensuring that Morocco's security cooperation generates visible domestic benefits, particularly in training, skills development, and employment opportunities.

##### Actions

- ❖ Negotiate an Enhanced Partnership Framework modeled on Jordan's Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP) status.
- ❖ Establish a NATO–Morocco Liaison Unit inside the MFA, staffed with 5–7 personnel (diplomats, defense analysts, and policy officers) to coordinate defense, diplomatic, and intelligence workstreams.
- ❖ Co-lead Southern Neighborhood working groups on: Sahel stabilization, maritime surveillance, cyber defense, and counter-disinformation

Political Feasibility Strategy: Frame the request as functional and thematic, explicitly not linked to future membership, mitigating Algeria/Turkey and eastern-flank sensitivities.

##### Internal dividends mechanism (Domestic Dimension):

- ❖ Link every NATO cooperation track to skills and employability outcomes through:
- ❖ Cyber and digital security training programs co-funded under NATO's Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme, with priority access for Moroccan university graduates.

- Joint Defense-Industry-University research labs (e.g., cybersecurity, maritime surveillance, satellite imaging) located in regional universities, not only Rabat/Casablanca.
- Military-to-civilian transfer pathways, enabling trained personnel to transition into Morocco's aerospace, port security, telecommunications, and critical infrastructure sectors.

These measures convert NATO cooperation from technical exercises into tangible opportunities for Moroccan youth, reducing regional employment disparities while strengthening domestic legitimacy.

### **Internal dividends mechanism (Domestic Dimension):**

- Frame institutionalization as functional, not aspirational, explicitly not linked to future NATO membership, mitigating concerns from Algeria, Türkiye, and eastern-flank members.
- Emphasize regional security burden-sharing, which reduces European defense pressure and supports NATO's Southern outlook without shifting alliance identity.

## **B. Institutionalize youth participation through competence-based pathways**

### **Objective**

Convert high civic engagement into structured policy participation, with preparation and accountability. This ensures that foreign policy engagement translates into skills acquisition, career pathways, and civic trust, moving youth participation from symbolic to outcome-generating.

### **Actions**

- Establish a National Youth Foreign Policy Fellowship:
  - 12 fellows (one per region),
  - selected competitively based on:
    - Geographic diversity
    - Language proficiency (Arabic/Tamazight + English/French)
    - Demonstrated foreign policy engagement
  - Fellows are placed across MFA, embassies, PCNS, and AU/UN desks.

- ❖ Launch a UN & Multilateral Youth Delegate Track.
- ❖ Require 15% youth representation in delegations for climate, digital governance, migration, and soft power diplomacy.
- ❖ Provide pre-placement training and diplomat mentorship to ensure substantive participation.

Implementation anchor: Leverage AFCON 2025 and World Cup 2030 for youth-led public diplomacy campaigns.

## C. Align economic diplomacy with domestic priorities through strategic impact assessments

### Objective

Ensure large-scale external partnerships produce visible benefits in employment, regional development, and social services. This mechanism guarantees that foreign investment and mega-project partnerships generate regional employment, SME integration, and sectoral upskilling, rather than reinforcing geographic inequality or elite concentration.

### Actions

- ❖ Require Strategic Impact Assessments for all projects exceeding \$500 million, including:
  - Nigeria–Morocco Gas Pipeline
  - Green Hydrogen Industrial Zones
  - AFCON 2025 infrastructure regions
  - World Cup 2030 regional development clusters
- ❖ Create an SIA Unit within the Haut Commissariat au Plan (HCP).
- ❖ Negotiate Local Content & Skills Transfer Clauses in foreign investment agreements.
- ❖ Publish an Annual Foreign Policy Outcomes Review assessing domestic development impact.

## D. Strengthen strategic communication and diaspora public diplomacy

### Objective

Build domestic understanding and international narrative power.

Strengthening narrative capacity builds domestic understanding and consent for Morocco's strategic direction, while enabling the diaspora to function as multipliers of influence in key global capitals.

### Actions

- ◆ Launch a Youth Digital Ambassadors Program producing multilingual explanatory content.
- ◆ Create Public Diplomacy Labs at UM6P, Mohammed V, and Al Akhawayn.
- ◆ Build a Moroccan Diaspora Global Policy Network in Paris, Brussels, Madrid, Montreal, and Washington.
- ◆ Publish an Annual Foreign Policy Transparency Report (MFA + CESE).

## Conclusion

Morocco's role in the evolving global order is increasingly significant, yet structurally constrained. Its contributions to NATO's southern security, expanding Atlantic and African cooperation networks, and diversified economic partnerships underscore its emergence as a strategic middle power. However, the events of September–October 2025 clarified a core vulnerability: external projection cannot be sustained without internal legitimacy. Foreign policy gains must translate into visible public benefit, particularly for Morocco's youth, who constitute nearly one-third of the population and are increasingly shaping civic and political discourse.

This paper has shown that strategic autonomy is not secured through alignment choices alone, but through the capacity of state institutions to ensure that external engagements yield equitable domestic dividends. The current gap lies in the translation of diplomatic and economic partnerships into shared national value. The proposed four-pillar framework directly addresses this synchronization imperative:

- ❖ Structured institutionalization with NATO to shift from influence through presence to influence through voice.
- ❖ Competence-based youth participation pathways that move participation beyond symbolism.
- ❖ Strategic Impact Assessments to ensure megaprojects such as AFCON 2025 and the 2030 World Cup generate employment, skills, and regional development.
- ❖ A coherent public diplomacy strategy that communicates purpose, progress, and accountability in accessible terms.

These reforms do not require ideological rupture, only organizational coordination and transparent performance tracking. The coming years present a narrow implementation window. The October 2025 UN Security Council endorsement of Morocco's autonomy proposal, NATO's reassessment of its southern posture, the reconfiguration of Euro–African energy corridors, and preparations for AFCON 2025 and the 2030 World Cup converge to create both opportunity and pressure. These milestones will test whether Morocco can demonstrate that international partnerships yield tangible improvements in health, education, and employment.

If Morocco succeeds in aligning external strategy with domestic inclusion, it will consolidate a model of middle-power diplomacy rooted in agency, continuity, and shared purpose. If not, external gains may become politically fragile and strategically reversible. In a fractured global order, the states that endure are those that convert international engagement into national legitimacy. Morocco has the foundations to do so, if foreign policy becomes a project shaped with its citizens, not merely carried out on their behalf.

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