

Policy Brief

The Atlantic Rim: a catalyst for Morocco-Latin America relations

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The Southern Atlantic Ocean, still an untapped geopolitical space, can be a new platform for dialogue between North and South. The Kingdom of Morocco is strategically placed in this space, and through its Atlantic coastline can breathe new life into the relationship with Latin America, boosting political and economic exchanges within the global South.

Relations between Morocco and the countries of Latin America recently saw a notable shift, and a new regional platform around the South Atlantic could encourage Latin American countries to trade with Morocco, as well as all African countries of the Atlantic area.

Moroccan leadership in building, conceptualizing and promoting the South Atlantic as a prosperous geopolitical space is a strategically-sound choice amidst the current radical change sweeping international relations and geopolitical alignments in the North.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past five centuries, the Atlantic Ocean was the epicenter of global economic activity. From 1500 onwards, with the discovery of the New World, Atlantic powers, first in Western Europe and then in the United States of America, grew into global powerhouses. Transatlantic trade played a key role in this development, transforming Western Europe from a peripheral region of the Eurasian landmass into a central global economic player.

Between the 1500s and 1800s, the countries of Western Europe saw unprecedented economic growth, culminating in the "first great divergence"¹, making the region considerably wealthier than Asia and Eastern Europe by the early 19th century.

Accordingly, transatlantic relations focused on North-North ties. Geopolitical upheavals sparked by the emergence of the South in international relations, and both the economic and demographic transformations at work in this space, make it timely to broaden our view of the Atlantic vertically² to the south.

This perspective provides the opportunity to examine the Atlantic region as a whole, beyond geography towards a geostrategic and geo-economic space with specific issues and challenges. In this sense, building a relationship between the Kingdom of Morocco and the countries of Latin America could revolve around this shared South Atlantic space, as a catalyst and driving force for political and economic exchanges.

While at one point in history a few Latin American states went against the Kingdom's territorial integrity, relations between Morocco and South America shifted significantly with His Majesty King Mohammed VI's visit to the region in 2004.

Visiting Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Chile, the Sovereign initiated renewed momentum to political, economic, commercial and cultural relations between Rabat and these countries. While a few Latin American countries support the Polisario, e.g., Cuba and Venezuela, most support the UN process, calling for a just and wise solution to the conflict. Arguably the revolutionary, anti-colonial South American ideologies of the 1960s, which aligned with the outdated ideology of the phantom "Sahrawi Republic", increasingly give way to a pragmatic discourse based on mutual respect and common economic interests, which this time align with the position of the Kingdom of Morocco. Today, political cleavages and internal dynamics in Latin America call for a case-by-case approach and more detailed insight into the region.

A common geopolitical space between Latin America and Morocco is also a strategy worth considering, in creating platforms for dialogue and shared identity markers. The unifying nature of the Atlantic and its political significance in terms of climate change, renewable energies and international security could prove to be a powerful vector for intensifying relations between Morocco and its neighbors on the other side of the Atlantic.

Strengthening transatlantic economic ties between Morocco and Latin American countries is a winning strategy for the Kingdom of Morocco, and the momentum is building. A number of Latin American countries are reconsidering their political stance towards Morocco in light of the country's recent geo-economic and geopolitical advances.

1. Acemoglu, Daron; Johnson, Simon; and Robinson, James. December 2002. "The Rise of Europe. Atlantic Trade, Institutional Change and Economic Growth," NBER Working paper, No. 93778, p. 1. 7 Smith, Adam. 177.

2. Dassù, Marta. 2012. "Why the West should be enlarged." <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/why-westshould-be-enlarged>

At the multilateral level, highlighting the shared Atlantic character is a catalyst for building a common future and creating a suitable cooperation space for economic and political exchanges with Latin America.

Rethinking and affirming Morocco's Atlantic allegiance is beneficial at the geopolitical level, in creating a shared framework for the two shores of this ocean to cooperate. Multiple strategic bottlenecks both east and south, further support developing an Atlantic doctrine at the political, military and socio-economic levels.

As we shall see, the development of sustainable industry and investment in high-potential Latin American countries could provide a great opening for Moroccan economic interests, and the foundation of a renewed relationship with Latin American countries. This enhances political and economic stability across the Atlantic area, as a prelude to conceptualizing the area as one of South-South cooperation and exchange.

Trade as a basis for Morocco's inroads into Latin America

South-South cooperation is now a strategic choice for Morocco, as it builds political relations and diversifies partnerships with countries of the South, particularly in Africa. South America holds a no less important place in Morocco's foreign policy vision, as it further opens the Kingdom to countries in other geopolitically important territories.

Morocco's recent diplomatic breakthrough in Latin America is neither anecdotal nor fortuitous. It is the result of a long-winded process of official, side and economic diplomacy driving Morocco's positions and assets in countries of the region.

Uruguay is the first Latin American country to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Morocco in 1959. After yielding to the sirens' tune from the Polisario, Montevideo embarked on a new phase in relations with Rabat, viewing Morocco's strategic geographical position as a gateway to African markets and the Arab world. Morocco's breakthrough was made possible by enterprising, multidimensional diplomacy.

Beyond efforts by the Kingdom's embassies on the ground, sustained and long-term parallel diplomatic initiatives were initiated by both Houses of Parliament and civil society representatives. In the case of Brazil, a Latin American giant and historic ally of Morocco, Moroccan exports rose sharply from US\$ 655 million in 2016 to US\$ 2.05 billion in 2022.

The Morocco-Brazil relationship-model should be replicated with other Latin American countries as a foundation for building mutually beneficial interdependence. As for Argentina, trade in 2022 reached US\$ 1.5 billion, up 48% on 2021. As Morocco's industry matures, these trade flows still hold great promise.

This strategy of building healthy relations based on trade can prove fruitful with Latin American countries that are not traditionally on Morocco's side. Peru is an example of how political dynamics and relations with Morocco gradually change in response to Morocco's advances and enhanced opportunities.

After a political about-face on the Moroccan Sahara question in 2022, Lima withdrew its recognition of the pseudo-SADR, only to recognize it again a month later. This imbroglio ultimately led to the resignation of Peruvian Foreign Minister Michel Rodríguez Mackay.

And yet, according to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), published in August 2022, half of Peru's population is moderately food insecure, i.e. 16.6 million people. And over one in five, i.e. 6.8 million people, are severely food insecure. Political common sense would therefore dictate that Peru, in the midst of a food crisis, should turn to reliable partners capable of helping resolve this issue.

Morocco, as the standard-bearer for food security, with solid fertilizer export capacity and soil management expertise, should be a crucial partner for Lima. Just as Morocco was ready to come to Peru's aid on this issue and prevent it from sinking into a major food crisis, the South American country took an incoherent step backwards on the Sahara question.

Building reliable partnerships and highlighting Morocco's economic usefulness for South American countries are central to Morocco's strategy of diplomatic and political reconquest of the continent. The Sahara issue is central to Morocco's approach. It is somewhat of a compass that guides the Kingdom's foreign policy.

In Latin America, the building of economic ties has made it possible to redraw the lines in a number of countries. This positive momentum is supported by active official and parliamentary diplomacy. It should be complemented by efforts to bring peoples closer together, and by sustained cultural exchanges, particularly around the Spanish-speaking Moroccan community, which can rapidly transcend the linguistic frontier on this continent. With more than one and a half million Spanish speakers in 2018, Morocco ranks second only to the USA as the country with the highest number of non-native Spanish speakers.

The South Atlantic: a region of the future for Morocco-Latin America relations

The South Atlantic naturally ties South America to Africa. It is a strategic area for political, technical and commercial exchanges between both continents.

Historically seen as a trading region linking Europe, Latin America and Africa, the Atlantic Ocean regains geo-economic and geopolitical importance driven by (i) its vast natural resources, and (ii) a Southward shift in geopolitics and a growing interest among countries of the region in South-South cooperation.

Reaffirming the sovereignty of countries of the South over territorial waters, maintaining oceanic security for navigation and blocking any initiative to militarize maritime spaces through extra-regional power- action are therefore essential prerequisites for building the space into a catalyst for relations between Africa and Latin America.

Accordingly, in addition to being an important trade route and geo-economic space, the South Atlantic is also a development hub. It should be noted here that the projection of South America, especially Brazil, towards Africa and Asia is trailed by that of China and India towards Africa and South America.

The South Atlantic could thus be a platform for building strategic partnerships between bordering countries, and between them and Asian states, a decisive factor in the development of South-South cooperation policies. The African continent is seen as a point of convergence for Southern coalitions in the flow of political routes.³

3. The South Atlantic, Southern Africa and South America: Cooperation and Development Analúcia Danilevicz Pereira Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations | e-ISSN 2238-6912 | ISSN 2238-6262| v.2, n.4, Jul-Dec. 2013 | p.31-45.

The South Atlantic offers an untapped geopolitical space that can be a new platform for dialogue between North and South. As distances shrink with global maritimisation and tremendous expansion in international trade, the Atlantic Ocean is a metaphorical river for new conversations to emerge around new narratives and postures on development and the developing world.

Synergies between economic growth and energy transition, and the new paradigms of migration, call for a pan-Atlantic approach to such issues, and stronger commitment to dialogue and cooperation between North and South Atlantic.

As such, dialogue between Morocco and Latin America, and more broadly between Africa and Latin America, is of paramount importance to the new global geopolitical order. Challenges of climate change and reshaping the global economic system on a more ecologically-sound basis project the Atlantic area as a region of the future, where trade and cooperation between the southern shores of the ocean might write a new chapter to its history.

On security, there is no Atlantic equivalent to the risk of nuclear war in the Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pakistan conflict or strategic competition in the China Sea. Yet, in the future, Beijing's growing diplomatic activism and maritime security interests in other areas of tension are likely to attract new powers to South Atlantic waters, either as a precaution or in anticipation. The point here is that economic development in the South Atlantic is a prerequisite for global stability and the promotion of peace in the region. Security challenges should always be addressed by tackling instability and violence at its source.

The Kingdom of Morocco, particularly in the wake of strategic gains made in Africa, adheres to a pragmatic vision of building economic interdependence based on bilateral and regional economic pacts that are both sustainable and in the mutual interest. Economic relations with Latin America fit perfectly with Morocco's emphasis on South-South cooperation and establishing new areas for cooperation e.g., the South Atlantic. As His Majesty the Moroccan Sovereign underlined at the 4th World Arab-Latin American Summit:

"Arab-South American relations must establish the foundations of a multi-dimensional partnership, and promote a judicious exploitation of the natural wealth and human potential of countries in both blocs. To achieve this, we need measures to encourage investment, promote trade and strengthen the role of economic operators, in both the public and private sectors, to breathe new life into the partnership we so earnestly desire".

Based on this shared agenda, the objectives will be to build a model of South-South cooperation, establish a win-win economic partnership and launch joint projects for human and social development.

Morocco is well aware of this potential, and a several forums and initiatives are underway to deepen Morocco's Atlantic identity. It should be noted that Latin America's share of Morocco's foreign trade is still low, and that for some countries of the region, Morocco is practically "terra incognita".

The creation of South-South transatlantic forums and initiatives can become a powerful lever in strengthening the Morocco-South America relation.

For instance, the revision of the 2009 Atlantic Tricontinental Initiative could be a good normative step towards thinking of the Atlantic Ocean as a single, defined geopolitical space.

The international forum held in Morocco already underlined the systemic rupture our world faces, and how this calls for shared responsibility; it calls for concerted solutions from principal system players, from whom a renewed collective governance needs to emerge.

This governance, based on a new South that asserts itself as an active player in international relations, must manifest itself in the Atlantic area, where North American and European powers have often played the leading role.

About the author, Youssef Tobi

Youssef Tobi joined the Policy Center for the New South in 2017. He is currently working on politics and governance in the Maghreb Region; his areas of expertise are geopolitics, political risk, and nation building.

Youssef Tobi obtained a Master's degree at Sciences Po Lyon where he wrote two theses on "The role of Moroccan Bank in Africa, a non-state actor in service of the Diplomacy" and the "Chasm between the mediatic and associative representation of refugees: a case study." Prior to working at the PCNS, he participated in a Social Entrepreneurship Project in Beirut, Lebanon and conducted an internship at an NGO based in Marseille where he assisted refugees and helped raise funds.

About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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