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Interests of the United States and the Soviet Union in Morocco during the Cold War

Key words: Morocco, Cold War, American interests, Soviet policy, Western Sahara Conflict

Summary

This paper examines the Kingdom of Morocco and the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union for influence during the Cold War. Before World War II, the United States played a largely passive role in the Maghreb. However, the war highlighted Morocco's geostrategic and economic importance, prompting a major shift in American foreign policy. During the same period, the Soviet Union became active in the region, pursuing its plans to expand influence. We analyze the reasons behind the growing American interest in Morocco after its independence, drawing on official decisions and correspondence of US presidents. The United States sought to counter Soviet influence in the region, while the Soviet Union maximized its foreign policy efforts and sought to strengthen trade relations. Communist parties in Morocco also grew in influence during this time. Despite Soviet efforts, the United States enjoyed a more privileged position, as Morocco largely pursued a pro-American course during the Cold War. The Western Sahara conflict serves as a clear example of Cold War rivalry. Our research, based on UN resolutions, international court advisories, and peacemaker mission briefs, demonstrates the conflict's complexity and multilateral involvement. Although the main actors did not always confront each other directly, they chose allies and sought to expand their economic and military interests in the region. Morocco benefited politically, financially, and socially from the competition between the superpowers, while simultaneously serving as a strategic point for their operations in the Middle East and access to regional resources.

**Amerikas Savienoto Valstu un Padomju Savienības intereses Marokā
aukstā kara laikā**

Atslēgas vārdi: Maroka, aukstais karš, amerikāņu intereses, padomju politika, Rietumsahāras konflikts

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā tiek pētīta Marokas karaliste un konkurence starp Amerikas Savienotajām Valstīm (ASV) un Padomju Savienību par ietekmi aukstā kara laikā.

Pirms Otrā pasaules kara ASV bija lielā mērā pasīva loma Magribā. Tomēr karš izcēla Marokas ģeostatēģisko un ekonomisko nozīmi, izraisot būtiskas pārmaiņas ASV ārpolitikā. Tajā pašā periodā Padomju Savienība kļuva aktīva reģionā, īstenojot savus plānus paplašināt ietekmi. Pētījumā analizēti iemesli, kas bija pamatā pieaugošajai amerikāņu interesei par Maroku pēc tās neatkarības iegūšanas, balstoties uz ASV prezidentu oficiālajiem lēmumiem un saraksti. ASV centās neitralizēt padomju ietekmi reģionā, savukārt Padomju Savienība maksimāli pastiprināja savus ārpolitikas centienus uzlabot tirdzniecības attiecības. Šajā laikā pieauga arī komunistu partijas ietekme Marokā. Neraugoties uz padomju centieniem, ASV bija privileģētāks stāvoklis, jo Maroka aukstā kara laikā lielā mērā īstenoja proamerikānisku kursu. Rietumsahāras konflikts bija spilgts aukstā kara sāncensības piemērs. Pētījums, kas balstīts uz ANO rezolūcijām, starptautisko tiesu ieteikumiem un miera uzturētāju misiju ziņojumiem, parāda konflikta sarežģītību un daudzpusējo iesaisti. Lai gan galvenie dalībnieki ne vienmēr tieši konfrontēja viens ar otru, viņi izvēlējās sabiedrotos un centās paplašināt savas ekonomiskās un militārās intereses reģionā. Maroka guva politisku, finansiālu un sociālu labumu no lielvaru konkurences, vienlaikus kalpojot par stratēģisku punktu to operācijām Tuvajos Austrumos un piekļuvei reģionālajiem resursiem.

Introduction

The superpowers entered the Cold War phase in 1946, although the Maghreb countries were not independent at that time, so the discussion of the manifestation of the Cold War began here relatively late. Morocco was a French-Spanish protectorate from the beginning of the 20th century, specifically from the first decade, and the country only managed to gain independence in 1956. The United States tried not to interfere in the affairs of the large European colonies. In fact, the United States played a passive role in the entire Maghreb region until World War II. The situation changed for both superpowers after Morocco's considerable geostrategic importance for the entire region became clear.

This paper aims to examine the policies of the United States and the Soviet Union in Morocco during the Cold War, focusing on their strategies to influence Moroccan independence and political development. We think that the research is relevant because it sheds light on the intersection of decolonization and superpower competition in North Africa, a region often overlooked in Cold War historiography. Within the framework of the study, we review and analyze the existing primary and secondary sources. We use the historical comparative method. Through comparative analysis, we examine the common and distinctive features of the policies of the United States and the Soviet Union in Morocco during the Cold War.

While working on the paper, we used primary sources – official documents, records, interviews, press materials, as well as secondary sources – existing articles and literature related to our research topic, along with analyzed statistical data. Most of the sources are in English and a small part are in Russian and French. Additionally to empirical analysis, the framework of Henry Kissinger's arguments in "Diplomacy" is

relevant to understand the exact competition and its nature between the United States of America and the Soviet Union in Morocco during the Cold War – the time when international system was shaped by the balance of power politics. According to Kissinger, great powers operate within diplomacy and economic and military support pragmatically to secure influence over the secondary powers. This framework clarifies the U.S.–Soviet competition in Morocco as the United States secured Morocco with long-term aid and diplomacy to set it as the pro-Western ally while the Soviet Union attempted to counterbalance American influence using direct and indirect engagement and limited support.

In 1943, with the support of the United States, the Independence Party was formed in Morocco. Moroccan nationalists lobbied and tried their best to end the colonial rule. It was the Independence Party that led the subsequent nationalist movement in the country. The United States feared that there was a great chance and possibility that communist parties would achieve great success and seize power, so it was decided by the United States to use all means to prevent the above. It mainly utilized aid packages, both financial and technical, resorted to a form of propaganda policy, and also employed military intervention. Many decolonized countries tried to avoid joining any blocs and supporting them, to stay out of the Cold War but, in reality, they did not succeed.

In 1942, the United States and its allies sent troops into Morocco and Algeria in an attempt to prevent an Axis invasion of North Africa. Franklin Roosevelt (1933–1945) in correspondence with Sultan Mohammed V, expressed confidence that the Allies' victory in World War II would foster peace and prosperity across North Africa, positively impacting both Moroccan and French populations (History of the U.S. and Morocco n.d.).

In Casablanca, Morocco, in January 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, and de Gaulle met to discuss the postwar strategy. Before the Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt had been visiting African countries, which further convinced him of the need for decolonization. Naturally, the Sultan of Morocco, Mohammed V and his son Hassan II (1961-1999) were present at the conference. Morocco played an important role, more in the implementation of decisions than in their adoption. Franklin Roosevelt personally hosted the Sultan and his son. The recognition of Morocco as a sovereign state, which hosted the conference and Roosevelt's recognition of Mohammed V as an independent ruler gave even more credibility to Morocco's aspirations for independence. The president promised support to Sultan in his quest for independence from the French. He also offered Mohammed V the opportunity to educate Moroccan scientists, teachers, and engineers in America and to promote their qualifications. Roosevelt stated that Morocco's wealth, its natural resources and its strategic importance should not be exploited by others and that the country should manage everything on its own (Welles 1957). The Sultan probably did not expect all this; at the end of the meeting, he declared that a new future lay ahead for his country (Morocco) in which, it is clear, he saw the support and alliance of the United States.

Moroccan Anti-Colonial Policy

The most powerful anti-colonial process in the Maghreb region was taking place in Morocco. The main centers of the independence movement were the cities of Fez, Rabat, and Casablanca. However, the small northern city of Tetouan also played an important role. Tetouan found itself at the crossroads, dividing the wide Mediterranean world between the French and Spanish protectorates and a kind of connecting node for nationalists who were in touch with their compatriots abroad (Stenner 2016, 28).

Moroccan students founded the “Association of Muslim Students of North Africa” (AEMNA) in Paris in 1927 with the main goal of solidarity and assistance to Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian youth. This association proved to be a prerequisite and basis for the emergence of the nationalist movement, since later this intellectual elite represented the very group that fought for independence in Morocco (Ageron 1983). During this period, students in Paris and Cairo were actively engaged in propaganda. The process was also supported by Shakib Arslan (1869–1946) and his newspaper “La Nation Arabe” functioned as a communication channel for Moroccans with the entire Muslim world.

The Cold War in Morocco

Sultan Mohammed V was exiled to Madagascar and replaced by the unpopular Mohammed Ben Arafa (1953–1955) in 1953, which was met with great resistance from the nationalists. The French had intended to crush the nationalists’ and, more generally, the public’s dream of independence. However, they had the opposite effect, as the Moroccans became even more resilient and determined to achieve national sovereignty.

On 2 March 1956, Morocco threw off the French colonial yoke and gained independence. In April, France officially withdrew from its protectorate in Morocco (Kasraoui 2023).

The United States recognized Morocco’s independence on 7 March 1956 in its congratulatory statement to the kingdom, in connection with the Franco-Moroccan Declaration of 2 March, in which France recognized Morocco’s independence (Department of State n.d.). It should also be noted that Morocco was the first country in North Africa to recognize the newly independent United States of America as a sovereign state in 1777.

Mohammed V was happy to be allied with the United States and he even wrote to President Eisenhower that Morocco would be their strong ally in the fight against communism in the region. The latter was vital for America since it not only supported independent nations but also protected them from communist propaganda and the proliferation of communist parties. Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961) inherited Truman’s foreign policy course towards the Maghreb region and he followed this course, although his accession to power coincided with a new political context characterized by the internationalization of issues in the Maghreb (Hadhri 2014, 98-101). In 1957, the United States and Morocco exchanged ambassadors, which laid the foundation for full diplomatic relations.

In 1957, Mohammed V visited Washington and in 1959, then-Vice President Richard Nixon (1953–1961) visited Rabat. During the Cold War, Morocco, unlike other Arab countries, was pro-Western. This is also explained by the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco was the main recipient of American aid during the Cold War. In 1957–1963 it received up to half a billion dollars in aid from the United States (History of the U.S. and Morocco n.d.). John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1961–1963) always actively called for help for oppressed and poor nations. He especially focused on protecting nations suffering from European imperialist countries during colonialism. Kennedy also argued that economic growth, both in the South and the North, could be a catalyst for political democracy (Kennedy 1961, 5-6).

Important programs were the American–Middle East Educational and Training Services and the American Field Service, which contributed greatly to the popularization and dissemination of the American model and American lifestyle among young people, specifically in the Maghreb region and the Arab elite of the Middle East. As a result, Kennedy’s image and popularity increased and both in Morocco and in the region he was, in a way, an “icon of hope” (Hadhri 2014, 104). As for the military, France remained Morocco’s main source of arms and other military equipment in the 1960s and 1970s, although the United States also began to increase its military supplies to the kingdom in the 1970s. During this period, Morocco signed contracts to receive more than \$800 million worth of weapons from the United States, in addition to purchasing \$100 million worth of commercial military equipment. All this took place within the framework of the United States Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program, which also included the supply of armored vehicles. In addition, in 1977, the official Rabat signed another contract which included the provision of air defense radar installations, control towers and auxiliary communication systems worth \$220 million (United States General Accounting Office 1978, 8-9). Again, according to the Washington Post, in 1978, the US presidential administration requested a \$45 million credit and \$800,000 in military aid for Morocco (Lescaze 1977, 38).

In the next phase, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981), relations between Washington and Rabat became quite tense, the reason was Western Sahara conflict. America protested against the inappropriate use of American weapons supplied by them to Morocco, instead of the weapons intended for legitimate defense and internal security. When the United States saw that Morocco was already in danger and attacks began inside the country, the Carter administration approved of a \$235 million arms package for Morocco. In January 1980, this decision of the president was naturally followed by the need for defense in Congress, which stated that the main interest of the United States was to prevent the defeat of their ally – Morocco (Burton 2017, 772-780).

In 1981, Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) became President of the United States and on the very next day after taking office, he approved of Morocco’s request for 180 M-60 A3 tanks. This request had previously been rejected by the Jimmy Carter administration and had been shelved indefinitely. The next assistance from the United States came in late 1981 when Morocco requested additional military assistance to

counter the Soviet SA6 missiles used by the Polisario¹ during the war (Damis 1985, 194). During the Cold War, rivals tried in every way to support their allies and here, too, America provided Morocco with the requested resources. In this way, it also tried to defeat Soviet interests in the region. As Kissinger notes, “power is the ultimate arbiter in the international relations” (Kissinger 1994, 23).

King Hassan’s visit to Washington in 1982 had great consequences for Morocco. Military cooperation reached a new level and ties deepened. All this was beneficial for the United States, especially given the still “Hot Cold War”. The United States, under the new agreements signed with Morocco, was allowed to use two air bases in Morocco for its military aircraft in emergencies in the Middle East and Africa. The aircraft had the right to land at these bases, undergo technical inspections and refuel. As Kissinger notes in “Diplomacy”, control over the strategic locations plays a key role in great power diplomacy; especially, when the position makes the opportunity for the rapid deployment capabilities (Kissinger 1994, 20-21). There is a reasonable suspicion that the United States planned to use this opportunity for the “rapid deployment of forces” in the future. However, it is noteworthy that Morocco reserved the right to veto the transit of American aircraft if they were to be directed against Arab countries. King Hassan II tried not to spoil relations with the Arab world and this agreement was generally a very sensitive issue for the country, so the parties agreed to keep it secret (Damis 1985, 195-196).

The data testify to the fact that, between 1982 and 1984, aid to Morocco gradually tripled, reaching \$600 million in 1984. The United States provided for the renovation of two airports that were part of the aforementioned agreement. It also provided more than \$200 million in agricultural loans and up to \$150 million was spent on expanding the Voice of America facilities in Tangier. In fact, powerful radio transmitters were used as a tool for espionage and highly effective communication in the Western Mediterranean, something that Hassan II was well aware of.

As concerns relations between the Soviet Union and Morocco, the Soviet influence on Morocco was weaker and less compared to that of the United States. Shortly after Morocco gained independence, the USSR recognized the kingdom’s independence and since 1958 it had also established political ties with it.

In Morocco, both before and for several years after independence, there was a Communist Party and its supporting associations. Communist groups emerged in the country in the early 1920s leading to founding of the Moroccan Communist Party in 1943. Strong communist groups existed in Rabat and Casablanca. In order to gain the support of the population, the newly formed Communist Party focused on Morocco’s right to independence and, at the same time, called on society to consolidate against fascism (Marokkanskaja Kommunističeskaja partija). Of course, the party had local ideological expressions, although it was initially a branch of the French Communist Party. For example, by 1945, the party had about 10,000 members, of which 8,000 were European. The situation changed in 1946 when the party officially assumed the

¹ Polisario – an acronym standing for “The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro”

name “Moroccan Communist Party”; most of the European members left the party and active Moroccanization was underway in the ruling circles.

From the beginning of the 1950s, the Communist Party intended to gain more influence on society and began publishing newspapers in French and Arabic. The newspapers published in French were “La Nation” and “L’Espoir”, in Arabic – “Al-Jamahir” and “Hayat al-shaab”. The Communists actively and sharply criticized the French colonial authorities, demanded the abolition of the French protectorate to which the Resident-General reacted and began to restrict the Communist Party. The activities of the Communists as well as propaganda rallies were banned and the persecution of communist leaders, in a way, their repression, began. As a result, many communists were arrested, expelled from the country, or killed. Among those expelled from the country was Ali Yatta (1920–1997), the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Moroccan Communist Party (Zisenwine 2010, 50-55).

The Istiqlal Party was also a rival and opponent of the Communist Party since they were a more nationalist-bourgeois union and, most importantly, with anti-communist views. They also had the support of the United States since it was not in America’s interests to see the communists gain power and win. The communists were often accused of insulting Islam, being atheists, and preaching the destruction of the monarchy (Yata, Paul 1977, 16). In 1959, the Moroccan government launched a campaign against the Communist Party; initially, a temporary ban was imposed and in 1960 the party was finally banned.

In 1961–1962, the Soviet Union even supplied Morocco with weapons, although under Hassan II, Morocco pursued a more pro-Western policy, which led to a change in the circumstances. The Soviet Union tried to offer Morocco extensive military and economic support in order to, if not reduce, at least balance American strategic interests in the Kingdom of Morocco. In 1966, King Hassan visited Moscow, after which economic agreements were made (Zoubir 1987, 21).

The Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973 had a negative impact on American influence, since anti-American sentiment was easily aroused and strengthened in society, which the Soviet Union took advantage of not only in Morocco but throughout the region and presented itself as a friend and supporter of the Arab people. In Morocco and Algeria, anti-American propaganda had even taken on a large-scale form.

By 1978, Morocco had become the Soviet Union’s largest trading partner in Africa. Paradoxically, the United States had previously been Algeria’s number one trading partner. Rich trade agreements were concluded between Morocco and the USSR over phosphate, as exemplified by the agreement of 10 March 1978. In the next stage, the Soviet Union itself discovered a new phosphate deposit and provided Morocco with a \$2 billion loan to develop the mine (Albright 1980, 37). There are unconfirmed speculations that the Soviet Union was even secretly, through some means, supporting Moroccan interests in Western Sahara.

In 1984, in Rabat, the USSR and Morocco signed another trade partnership agreement. The Soviet Union would supply the kingdom with oil, timber, machinery and equipment and in return would import citrus, textiles, cork, and other products from Morocco. The parties also reached another agreement on phosphate. Trade

turnover between them over the next 5 years increased by 150% (Zoubir 1987, 25). Since both parties benefited from this trade and economic cooperation, the Soviet Union did not directly assist the Polisario, although it supported the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic at international meetings, but at the same time, it often added that the interests of each party should be taken into account when resolving the issue. Although Morocco was well aware of the Soviet diplomacy, their relations with Algeria and the kingdom did not express a radical position on this issue, except for the statement of Hassan II in 1980 that “Morocco and the Soviet Union are at war... and the Kremlin knows full well that their weapons are causing the bloodshed of a friendly nation.” (Sheldon 1980, 6). This referred to the supply of weapons by the USSR to Algeria, which were then sent to the Polisario Front. However, as noted above, economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and Morocco continued after this fact since it was a matter of big money and profit.

Western Sahara Conflict

In 1971, a group of Moroccan students formed the Polisario Front, aiming to liberate Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro. While seeking regional support, only Algeria and Libya backed them. The group launched an armed struggle against Spain in Western Sahara, prompting Spain’s withdrawal in 1975 and the controversial Madrid Agreement. This agreement divided the territory between Morocco and Mauritania, and the countries shared the principles of peace and took responsibility to protect the people of the region, to ensure security and stability (Declaration 1975). However, later the International Court of Justice denied both countries’ sovereignty over the region. The UN later rejected the agreement, supporting the Sahrawi people’s right to independence.

In response, the Polisario Front declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 and waged war against Morocco and Mauritania. Algeria provided significant support, including arms, training, political backing, and the establishment of Polisario headquarters and refugee camps in Tindouf. Though Algeria denied direct involvement, it played a key enabling role. The Soviet Union, via Algeria, also provided indirect support to the Polisario.

To counter Polisario attacks, Morocco began constructing a 2,700 km defensive wall in 1980, known by the Polisario as the “Wall of Shame.” The wall separated Moroccan-controlled areas from those held by the Polisario. Morocco was also accused of illegally extracting phosphate from occupied territories. By 1991, both sides had reached a stalemate and, under UN mediation, agreed to a ceasefire, leading to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission – MINURSO (Chograni 2021).

The Soviet Union found itself in a diplomatic bind. While it valued its strategic relationship with Algeria, it was also keen on potential trade with Morocco, particularly phosphate deals. A 1975 Moroccan delegation to Moscow emphasized their anti-colonial efforts in Western Sahara, suggesting shared ideological ground. However, despite this alignment, King Hassan II eventually halted the phosphate deal, showing Moscow’s limited influence (Solarz 1979, 295).

Publicly, the USSR endorsed UN resolutions on Western Sahara but did not openly back the Polisario. Soviet-aligned figures like Ali Yata downplayed the Polisario's legitimacy, labeling it a puppet of Spain and Algeria. He argued Soviet-Algerian ties were overstated, citing that only 8% of Algeria's trade involved the USSR. Despite this, rumors of Soviet arms reaching the Polisario through Algeria persisted, although direct involvement remained unconfirmed (Yata, Paul 1977, 17). The United States, meanwhile, supported Morocco. Although initially concerned about American weapons being used against the Polisario, Washington ultimately prioritized its alliance with Morocco. Congressional resistance to foreign entanglements delayed military aid, but strategic concerns about the Soviet expansion in North Africa led the U.S. to assist Morocco, as a staunchly pro-Western nation during the Cold War, was seen as a bulwark against communism.

Although the U.S. publicly supported UN resolutions and upheld the principle of self-determination, its support for the Sahrawi people was more symbolic than substantive. Political and strategic interests consistently outweighed moral concerns. The Polisario, despite lacking direct Soviet support, was viewed by the West as being in the Soviet-aligned camp – largely due to Algeria's involvement. In contrast, Morocco maintained strong Western ties and was viewed as a key regional ally. As Henry Kissinger stated, "America is opposed to having another Angola in Africa"² (Binder 1975). In our opinion, this makes everything even clearer.

The United States was also concerned by the fact that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Polisario Front was seen to be allied with Libya and other enemies of the United States. This was accompanied by the fact that Morocco's non-radical position towards Israel gradually became apparent, while Israel was a friend and ally of the United States. In general, Morocco belongs to the small group of Arab countries that have relatively friendly relations with Israel. Accordingly, all this played an important role in choosing the United States' position. It does not apply to our research period, although at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, relations between the United States and Algeria warmed up significantly, even at the political level. Still, this did not change the support of the United States for Morocco (Zoubir 2018, 58-59).

Conclusion

During the Cold War, there was no direct, open confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union in Morocco, although both superpowers competed vigorously for influence through military, economic, and diplomatic channels. This rivalry reflected their broader geopolitical goals: Washington sought to consolidate a pro-Western alliance at the gateway to the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and Africa, while Moscow sought to establish a position that would reduce American dominance in North Africa.

Both powers were drawn to the Maghreb's vast resources and strategic location, with Morocco serving as a crucial point for operations in the Middle East and beyond.

² Meaning Angola Civil War and the involvement of Soviet Union in the conflict

From the 1960s onward, this interest intensified – the KGB expanded intelligence activities across Africa and the Middle East, while the United States deepened its military, economic, and cultural presence. The Soviet Union sought to limit Western economic influence and promote its anti-colonial image; The United States aimed to strengthen the newly independent states and protect them from communist expansion. Morocco's pro-American orientation placed Washington in a much more privileged position. The United States and its NATO allies maintained military bases and strategic access in the Mediterranean, while the USSR focused on trade, cultural exchange, and educational outreach. However, Moscow's implicit support for Algeria and the Polisario Front created a lasting political obstacle. In contrast, despite occasional concerns about Morocco's military actions, the United States consistently prioritized its alliance with Rabat as part of a broader strategy to block Soviet influence in the Maghreb.

Ultimately, Morocco emerged as a net beneficiary of this competition, extracting political, economic, and security gains from both sides while anchoring itself firmly in the pro-American camp. This outcome underscores how smaller states in the Cold War could maneuver between superpowers to maximize their national interests – a pattern visible in Morocco's Cold War diplomacy.

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