

**Taking the long view - Morocco's maritime dimension****GEOPOLITICAL MONITOR**

The maritime domain is becoming more important and more complex across the world. Sea lanes, ports, and the infrastructure beneath the sea now carry ever greater economic value. Recent disruptions to global shipping and to undersea cables have shown how much modern economies depend on the smooth functioning of the maritime domain. These developments give renewed importance to Morocco's maritime position. Morocco is the only African state facing both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It also holds the southern shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, one of the busiest maritime passages in the world. For as long as the state has existed, the sea has shaped Morocco's trade, its revenue, and its engagement with the wider world. The sea has long been central to how Morocco builds its economy and engages with the world. That role is expanding.

As Morocco's ports, energy links, and maritime trade grow, the maritime domain is taking on greater weight in the country's economic and security thinking. This brief examines the maritime dimension of Moroccan statecraft. It traces the historical foundations of Morocco's engagement with the sea, looks at the growing importance of maritime issues today, and considers the technologies likely to shape the maritime domain in the years ahead.

**Signals to Decode**

Morocco's relationship with the sea reaches back many centuries. Its ports and coastal cities have long connected it to the wider Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds. The Strait of Gibraltar, the link between the two seas, was a center of commerce and contact across the western Mediterranean. Control of harbors and coastal approaches shaped trade and revenue. Coastal cities were Morocco's gateway to Europe and to wider maritime exchange. Their management was a continuous part of Moroccan governance. Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah, Mohammed III, ruled from 1757 to 1790. He turned the sea into an instrument of government and development.

Morocco had long looked toward its interior. He opened it to Atlantic trade. Beginning in 1760, he ordered the building and revival of royal ports. Essaouira came first, built in 1764, followed by Safi, El Jadida, and Casablanca. The aim was both economic and political. Trade managed by the state gave the sultan a

steady source of revenue and strengthened central governance. The same approach guided his opening to the United States. In December 1777, he opened Moroccan ports to American ships. This made Morocco the first state to recognize American independence. It led to the 1786 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, the oldest unbroken treaty in American history. For Mohammed III, opening the ports was the path into the new Atlantic order of trade and diplomacy. Maritime activity in this period also took the form of corsairing, which the state regulated and drew revenue from. From the seventeenth century, the ports of the Bou Regreg, Salé and Rabat, together with Larache and Tétouan, were active centers of seafaring. Many of their communities traced their origins to Andalusian Muslims who had settled there from Iberia. The sultan's authority to grant safe passage to foreign shipping became an instrument of diplomacy, as his 1777 opening to American and other vessels made clear. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the royal ports formed a coherent system. Their sqala fortifications at Essaouira, Rabat, Larache, and Tangier brought together coastal administration, trade, and diplomacy. Across these centuries, the sea was inseparable from how the state raised revenue and engaged with Europe.



## Does Morocco have a Role to Play?

Morocco's maritime position today rests on the same geography. It is the only African country facing both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, with over 3,500 kilometers of coastline. It also holds the southern shore of the Strait of Gibraltar, the gateway between the two seas and one of the busiest shipping lanes anywhere. This gives Morocco a central place in trade between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. The waters off its coasts are among the most active in the world, which adds to both the importance and the complexity of its maritime environment. Tanger Med turns this geography into commercial weight. It is now the leading container port in the Mediterranean and in Africa, and it anchors a growing industrial base in the north. The forementioned eighteenth-century opening has a modern parallel: a port program of similar ambition. The National Port Strategy 2030 organizes the system around Morocco's main ports. Tanger Med leads it. Nador West Med, a deepwater hub on the Mediterranean, is due to open in late 2026. Dakhla Atlantique, on the southern Atlantic coast, passed sixty percent completion in mid-2026 and should be commissioned later in the decade. Dakhla anchors the Royal Atlantic Initiative, launched in November 2023. The initiative offers the landlocked Sahel states access to the Atlantic through Moroccan roads, railways, and ports. It also frames wider cooperation along Africa's western seaboard.

Morocco has also defined its maritime zones in law. Laws 37-17 and 38-17 of 2020 set out its territorial sea, its exclusive economic zone out to 200 nautical miles, and its continental shelf out to 350 nautical miles, along the country's full coastline. Morocco's naval capabilities have advanced alongside the growth of its maritime economy. In a previous edition of Morocco Radar, we noted that, relative to the land forces, the naval dimension has historically received less emphasis in capabilities and equipment. The growing importance of the maritime domain gives that finding fresh relevance and strengthens the case for continued naval development. Today, the Royal Moroccan Navy operates a modern fleet across both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Its principal vessels include the FREMM frigate Mohammed VI, SIGMA-class corvettes, and Floréal-class frigates. Avante 1800 offshore patrol vessels, built by Spain's Navantia, joined the fleet in 2025 and 2026. Continuing modernization includes interest in submarines and maritime patrol aircraft, which would further extend awareness and endurance across Morocco's maritime space. These investments support maritime surveillance, the safety of shipping, and the protection of Morocco's growing economic interests at sea, from fisheries to energy infrastructure.



## Points of Vigilance

The economic value of Morocco's maritime space is rising steadily. Ports, fisheries, offshore energy, and undersea links all add to it. As these activities expand, the maritime domain becomes a more central part of national economic life. This makes the sea an area of growing importance for Morocco, and one that merits close and continuous attention.

The range of activities at sea is also widening. Commercial shipping, energy interconnections, undersea cables, and offshore industry now share the same maritime space. This diversification makes the environment richer and more complex. It also raises the importance of maritime awareness, the ability to understand and keep track of activity across Morocco's waters. As maritime activity grows, comprehensive awareness becomes increasingly valuable. Morocco's location adds to this importance. The Strait of Gibraltar and the western approaches to the Mediterranean form one of the world's principal maritime corridors. A large share of global trade passes close to Morocco's coasts. This places the country at a central node of international shipping and connectivity - and reinforces the value of its maritime position. Developments along these routes are therefore of natural and continuing interest to Morocco.

## OPPORTUNITIES & RISKS



### Opportunities



#### **An Atlantic platform for regional integration**

Morocco is becoming an organizing point for trade and connectivity across the Atlantic-facing parts of Africa. Several developments drive this. Its deepwater ports, led by Tanger Med and soon joined by Nador West Med and Dakhla Atlantique, give it growing capacity and reach. The Royal Atlantic Initiative, launched in 2023, might offer landlocked Sahel states access to the ocean through Moroccan roads, railways, and ports. Together, these turn coastline and infrastructure into a connectivity offer that few in the region can match. For Morocco, the implications are considerable. It can act as a convening power for regional integration and a gateway between West Africa and global markets. The initiative also supports the development of its southern provinces and deepens cooperation across the continent. As these links mature, Morocco's relevance as an Atlantic and African partner continues to grow.



#### **A diversifying blue economy**

The maritime economy is broadening and rising in value. This blue economy spans fisheries, coastal tourism, ports and logistics, offshore energy, shipbuilding and repair, and a widening set of services. The scale is significant. The World Bank estimates that Morocco's coastal areas account for close to 60 percent of GDP and about half of national employment. Fisheries alone sustain some 700,000 direct and indirect jobs, and with production of about 1.4 million tons in 2024, Morocco is Africa's leading fish producer. Dedicated policies guide this growth, from the Halieutis strategy for fisheries, launched in 2009, to the National Port Strategy 2030 and the aquaculture program led by the National Agency for the Development of Aquaculture. For Morocco, the blue economy offers a broad and durable foundation for growth. Because it rests on several sectors, it spreads benefit across regions, links coastal areas including the southern provinces into national development and turns the maritime domain into a central engine of the economy.



#### **Transcontinental connectivity**

Morocco is increasingly a node that links continents through maritime and undersea infrastructure. Its electricity grid is the only one in Africa connected to Europe, through high-voltage cables to Spain, and further connections are planned. The African Atlantic Gas Pipeline is designed to run partly offshore. Fiber-optic cables that join Europe, Africa, and the Americas come ashore on Moroccan coasts, and proposals exist for power links reaching across the ocean. These developments are driven by Morocco's location, its energy ambitions, and growing demand for connections between markets and regions.

For Morocco, the implications reach well beyond trade. This infrastructure embeds the country in transcontinental energy and data networks and raises its standing as a bridge between Africa, Europe, and the Atlantic. It attracts long-term investment and places Morocco at the meeting point of several major flows. As these networks expand, the maritime domain becomes central to Morocco's wider international role.



## **Risks:**



### **The accelerating pace of maritime technology**

Maritime and undersea technologies are advancing at an unusual pace. Autonomous systems, advanced sensors, and AI-enabled tools are maturing quickly, and new entrants reshape the field year by year. This acceleration is driven by global research, falling costs, and rising demand for maritime awareness around the world. It is a global transformation that affects every country active at sea. For Morocco, this rapid change brings both promise and uncertainty. It is not yet clear which technologies, platforms, or standards will define the coming decade. Solutions adopted today may evolve quickly, and the most useful capabilities may emerge from unexpected directions. The implication is that adaptability matters. Following the field closely, building flexible capabilities, and keeping options open will help Morocco turn fast-moving technological change into a durable advantage.



### **Deepening reliance on maritime infrastructure**

A growing share of Morocco's economy now moves through maritime and undersea infrastructure. Most foreign trade passes through its ports. Electricity travels along subsea cables, gas through offshore-linked pipelines, and data through fiber-optic cables on the seabed. This deepening reliance is driven by the expansion of trade, the integration of energy systems, and the spread of digital connectivity. As more activity depends on these links, their continuous and reliable operation becomes more important to the economy as a whole. This is a structural feature of a modern, connected economy, shared by many states. For Morocco, the implication is that resilience and continuity grow in value. Planning for the long-life cycle of ports, cables, and pipelines, building redundancy where it is practical, and maintaining strong awareness of the maritime environment all help ensure that this infrastructure keeps delivering. The more central these links become, the more attention their smooth functioning deserves.



### **An evolving framework of maritime governance**

The international rules that shape the maritime domain are developing quickly, and Morocco already operates within them. Its maritime zones rest on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to which Morocco is a party. Shipping is governed by the International Maritime Organization and its conventions on safety and pollution, and increasingly by new rules to decarbonize the sector. Morocco takes part in the Mediterranean Memorandum on Port State Control, in regional fisheries bodies such as the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean and ICCAT in the Atlantic, and in the Barcelona and Abidjan Conventions for the marine environment. This framework is expanding as undersea infrastructure and sustainability rise the agenda. For Morocco, the implication is that alignment with emerging standards, and active participation in the bodies that set them, grow in importance as its maritime activity expands. Engagement also gives Morocco a voice in shaping rules that affect its interests.

Over the next decade, the seabed will become an increasingly important part of the maritime domain. Undersea infrastructure now carries much of what modern economies rely on. Fiber-optic cables move most of the world's intercontinental data. Power cables link national grids. Pipelines carry gas. As this infrastructure grows, so does the importance of understanding and monitoring the seabed. New technologies are making this possible. Uncrewed underwater vehicles, advanced sensors, and AI-enabled systems are rapidly expanding the ability to map the seabed and maintain awareness of activity beneath the surface. Investment is following. NATO's Operation Baltic Sentry, launched in January 2025, and the United Kingdom's Atlantic Bastion, launched in late 2025, both use autonomous systems to monitor the seabed continuously. In May 2026, the AUKUS partners agreed to develop uncrewed undersea vehicles to support the security of undersea infrastructure. Across governments and private industry alike, seabed awareness has become one of the most dynamic areas of maritime technology.

For Morocco, these developments carry particular weight, because its maritime economy increasingly extends to the seabed. As noted earlier, its power links to Europe, the offshore segments of the African Atlantic Gas Pipeline, and the data cables that land on its coasts already place national infrastructure on the seabed. The idea of intercontinental power links has also been explored, though the proposed Morocco-United Kingdom cable did not secure British government approval in 2025. Over the coming decade, the ability to understand and monitor the seabed will become an increasingly valuable part of maritime capability. Morocco's long maritime tradition, its growing role in undersea connectivity, and its engagement in international maritime bodies place it well to develop this awareness, and to do so alongside European and Atlantic partners that share the same waters. The sea has shaped Moroccan statecraft for centuries. The seabed is emerging as its next frontier, and the states that learn to read the maritime environment early will be best placed to benefit from it.

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