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Evaluating the dynamic interaction between the Defence / Security policy of the US, UN, and Western Sahara

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ABSTRACT

The Western Sahara region has been a source of complex political dispute between Morocco and other parties regarding its control. This issue arose subsequent to the decolonization era, and it is obvious that the process of decolonization has encountered various challenges throughout history. Despite the various approaches proposed by global leaders to address such issues and mitigate potential conflicts that could jeopardize regional security, certain methods such as mandates or the exercise of self-determination may be considered. The issue of Western Sahara has an extensive history of disputes and contentions among three primary parties: The Kingdom of Morocco, Mauritania, and the Polis Ario Front. Each of these parties has advanced claims over Western Sahara that align with their respective interests. On the other hand, the territorial dispute garnered the attention of various key players, including the United Nations and Spain, the former colonizer of the region, among others ("Western Sahara | Facts, History, Conflict, Map, & Population," 2023). This study will centre on the interplay between the defence and security policies of the United States and the United Nations in this multifaced issue.

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Introduction:

The Western Sahara region has been a source of complex political dispute between Morocco and other parties regarding its control. This issue arose subsequent to the decolonization era, and it is obvious that the process of decolonization has encountered various challenges throughout history. Despite the various approaches proposed by global leaders to address such issues and mitigate potential conflicts that could jeopardize regional security, certain methods such as mandates or the exercise of self-determination may be considered. The issue of Western Sahara has an extensive history of disputes and contentions among three primary parties: The Kingdom of Morocco, Mauritania, and the Polis Ario Front. Each of these parties has advanced claims over Western Sahara that align with their respective interests. On the other hand, the territorial dispute garnered the attention of various key players, including the United Nations and Spain, the former colonizer of the region, among others ("Western Sahara | Facts, History, Conflict, Map, & Population," 2023). This study will centre on the interplay between the defence and security policies of the United States and the United Nations in this multifaced issue.

Literature review:

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding the region commonly referred to as Western Sahara, as well as the involvement of global powers and international organizations in this matter, it is essential to conduct a historical analysis of key past events that have contributed to the current state of this dispute. The majority of interventions by foreign nations have been of a diplomatic nature which is backed by interest in the region which will be discussed.

The historical background of the region:

Located on the northwestern coast of Africa, Western Sahara is an area that lacks self-governance and is bounded by the countries of Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. In the year 1976, Spain relinquished control of its previous colony of Spanish Sahara. Subsequently, Morocco proceeded to annex the southern two-thirds of the Western Sahara region and asserted sovereignty over the remaining portion of the territory in 1979, following Mauritania's withdrawal. Following a period of guerrilla warfare in which the front known as the Polis Ario challenged Morocco's sovereignty, a ceasefire was reached in 1991 and a United Nations peacekeeping mission was subsequently established. As a component of its endeavour, the United Nations endeavoured to provide the inhabitants of Western Sahara with the option of selecting between self-governance (which was preferred by the Polis Ario Front) or assimilation into Morocco. The proposed referendum concerning the matter of independence was not conducted owing to the absence of consensus on the criteria for determining voter eligibility. The Moroccan government constructed a buffer zone of sand berm spanning approximately 1,600 kilometres from 1980 to 1987, which effectively divides the forces in conflict. Presently, Morocco exercises control over approximately three-quarters of the territory situated to the west of the berm. Intermittent ethnic conflicts arise between the indigenous Sahrawi populace and Moroccan migrants. The territory is subject to a significant security presence maintained by Morocco. In December 2018, the United Nations reinitiated direct negotiations regarding the region situated between Morocco, the Polis Ario Front, Algeria, and Mauritania ("Western Sahara | World Factbook," 2023).

Important key dates:

The conflict in Western Sahara is a complicated territorial dispute that has drawn the attention of the United Nations and other international actors. The colonization of Western Sahara by Spain in 1884 displaced the indigenous Berber peoples who had lived there for centuries. The region formerly known as Spanish Sahara became a province of Spain in 1934. Newly independent Morocco made its territorial claim over Western Sahara known in 1957. The United Nations first called for Western Sahara's independence in 1965. The Sahrawi people founded their own self-determination movement, the Polis Ario Front, in 1973. In 1975, Moroccan King Hassan II contested a Hague decision that had granted independence to the Saharawi people. However, he instead organized the "Green March," which brought 350,000 Moroccans to Western Sahara. Spain has opted to pull out of the agreement ("Western Sahara profile," 2023)

The demographics of the area:

Comprehending the demographic characteristics of a particular region can significantly aid various academic inquiries, including those pertaining to security, The Western Sahara is a region that lacks self-governance and is currently under the control of Morocco, with an estimated 75% of its territory falling under Moroccan jurisdiction. The region was initially occupied by Sahrawi pastoral nomads whose customary migration routes were not consistent with the colonial and global boundaries. The adoption of a sedentary lifestyle in urban areas by the majority of Sahrawis was influenced by various factors, including but not limited to fighting, minefields, drought, and the construction of a defensive berm. The

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Moroccan government promoted swift urbanization with the aim of enhancing surveillance and security measures, leading to a situation where urban areas are inhabited by more than 80% of the populace, with over 40% concentrated in the administrative hub of Laayoune. The demographic and structural makeup of Western Sahara has been notably impacted by the arrival of Moroccan immigrants, alongside the continued maintenance of a substantial military presence. Since the 1950s, Sahrawis have migrated to Europe, with Spain being a particularly popular destination. The Polis Ario asserts a populace of approximately 155,000 individuals residing in the Tindouf refugee camps situated in Algeria. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) employs a numerical value of 90,000 owing to the absence of an autonomous census. Since the mid-1990s, Western Saharan coastal towns have become significant transit points for migration to Spain's Canary Islands. This phenomenon has been primarily motivated by increasingly strict visa regulations and the European Union's exertion of pressure on Morocco and other North African nations to manage illegal migration ("Western Sahara | World Factbook," 2023).

The Western Sahara conflict and the role of the United Nations:

Since the Spanish withdrawal in 1976, the United Nations has been committed to resolving the ongoing dispute in Western Sahara. To this end, the United Nations Security Council has issued numerous resolutions aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution and avoiding conflict. In 1991, the Security Council passed Resolution 960, which established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The mission's objective was to oversee a transitional period during which representatives appointed by the Secretary-General would be responsible for all matters related to the referendum. The people of Western Sahara were given two options: independence or integration with Morocco ("Background," 2016).

The MINURSO was assigned several tasks, primarily focused on facilitating a referendum for the self-determination of the people in the region. These tasks included monitoring the ceasefire between the involved parties, verifying the withdrawal of Moroccan troops from the designated referendum area, registering eligible voters for the referendum, ensuring security during the referendum process, monitoring the location of troops from both sides, and mitigating the risk of mines (Mandate, 2016).

Despite the MINURSO's partial success in fulfilling its mission, the ultimate objective remains unattained due to several factors, including the absence of consensus between Morocco and the Polisario Front regarding the referendum and insufficient funding that hindered the MINURSO's potential progress. Nevertheless, the MINURSO's presence has played a significant role in this conflict by maintaining a ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and ensuring the security of the Sahrawi people. The mandate has been consistently renewed during UN meetings addressing this issue. The success of the mission and its ultimate goal will depend on the ability of both parties to reach an agreement on the terms they will accept in the referendum.

The involvement of the Unites States in the conflict over the western Sahara region:

Throughout history, the United States has been involved in global affairs, particularly in matters of defence and security. However, in the specific context of the Western Sahara conflict, it remains unclear why the United States would align with Morocco over the Polis Ario, despite its professed commitment to promoting democracy. The United States has a range of potential national interests in the region, including human rights concerns, which are frequently cited as a priority. Additionally, from a geopolitical standpoint, the Western Sahara's strategic location along shipping routes and proximity to the Strait of Gibraltar, a significant chokepoint, may also be of interest.

According to Stephen Zunes' scholarly paper, the United States made several claims regarding their endorsement of Morocco. However, Zunes also presented counterarguments to these claims, which will be expounded upon in the following paragraph.

Claim 1:

The United States claimed that they provided Morocco with military and financial support against the polis Ario front because the front is backed by the former Soviet Union which is against what the US intended in the region (Zunes, 1987). In the 1970's former Soviet Union always portrayed itself as the hero of liberation movements and they had their operation in Africa in places like Angola and Mozambique however they never showed any commitment in the case of western Sahara (Zoubir, 1987)

Claim 2:

According to the United States, the Polis Ario is purportedly an Algerian construct that receives backing from Algeria with the aim of securing entry to the Atlantic Ocean. Nonetheless, there exists no substantiating evidence to corroborate this assertion. The acquisition of Atlantic Ocean access is not deemed

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necessary by Algeria, and the country has a lengthy record of endorsing the self-determination of the Sahrawi people (Zunes, 1987).

Claim 3:

The sole plausible rationale behind the United States' backing of Morocco is its vested interest in the economic prospects of Western Sahara. The region of Western Sahara is known to possess substantial reserves of phosphates, uranium, and various other minerals. Nevertheless, the financial expenses associated with financing the Moroccan conflict are substantial, and there is no assurance that the United States would be capable of capitalizing on these resources in the event of a Moroccan triumph (Zunes, 1987).

Defence/security policy of the US in the region:

The aforementioned claims have yet to be substantiated due to their significant divergence from reality or their unfavourable risk-to-reward ratio. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the authentic defence and security policies of the United States concerning the region in question. The Moroccan claim to Western Sahara may be deemed reasonable from a Moroccan standpoint, while the Polis Ario Front has a legitimate claim to Western Sahara, which is primarily cantered on their right to self-determination. However, the United States' support of Morocco is based on strategic interests that are mutually beneficial to both Morocco and the United States.

The Kingdom of Morocco has extended its assistance to the United States in preparation for the potential deployment of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). The assistance offered involves granting entry to Moroccan bases and ports, in addition to carrying out collaborative military drills. The US has expressed interest in utilizing Morocco as a surrogate base for the RDF due to its strategic location and friendly government. Morocco and the United States have maintained a longstanding military partnership. During the 1960s, the United States maintained a number of military bases in Morocco; however, these installations were subsequently decommissioned in the 1970s. Notwithstanding, the United States has maintained the privilege to utilize these bases for emergency transit, staging, and refuelling purposes. Moroccan ports are also utilized by the United States for the purpose of naval ship visits. The United States has expressed its intention to increase its military footprint in Morocco. The reason behind this phenomenon can be attributed to the advantageous geographical position of Morocco, coupled with the amicable political regime. Morocco is categorized as a non-aligned country, indicating a lower probability of exhibiting hostility towards the United States in comparison to other nations in the region. The augmented military collaboration between Morocco and the United States is perceived as advantageous for both parties. The United States has established a strategic base in North Africa, while Morocco has been granted access to U.S. military technology and training (Zunes, 1987).

US Threat assessment in the region of western Sahara:

The protracted Western Sahara conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front has endured for more than four decades, with prospects for resolution remaining unresolved Nevertheless, there exists a significant likelihood of heightened tensions in this conflict, which could result in an upsurge of violence and instability in the region. Such an escalation may potentially pose a degree of risk to US personnel and their interests in the area. Political instability in the region poses a significant threat to US interests, potentially leading to a cascade effect and the emergence of new terrorist organizations. The geographical characteristics of Western Sahara make it conducive to becoming a second Afghanistan, and as such, it could serve as a safe haven for terrorist groups, which is contrary to US interests in the area.

Another potential scenario in which the United States may perceive a sense of threat is the emergence of China as a dominant power in the region. The increasing economic and political influence of China on a global level has rendered the United States powerless. The US perceives China's growing influence, particularly in Africa, as a threat. The presence of China in Africa could potentially lead to a competition for natural resources, particularly in the Western Sahara region, which is packed in natural resources.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the long and complicated conflict in the western Sahara is a product of the aftermath of colonialism. The involvement of the United Nations in the conflict is relatively limited and constrained. On the other hand, the intervention of the United States in the issue is driven by self-interest and serves the interests of both Morocco and the United States, while disregarding the Polis Ario. To achieve security in the region and avoid the need for external parties, a mutually agreed-upon resolution between the conflicting parties is necessary. Historical evidence has demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of territorial conflicts, both in terms of economic losses and human lives. The process of establishing stability and peace could take an extended

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period, reliant on the intentions of the parties involved in the conflict.

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