

# **Beyond formal membership: Morocco’s Shadow Alignment with core BRICS members**

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## **Abstract**

In the current multipolar international order, navigating amid emerging blocs and traditional alliances becomes a primary concern of middle powers. This study addresses the theoretical gap concerning the explanation of how countries such as Morocco achieve strategic benefits through engagement with BRICS bloc without any formal political commitment by offering a new concept of “Shadow Alignment”. This concept is characterized by three main empirical pillars: Functional Proximity strategy, the effective implementation of the Balancing Act with traditional allies and the maintenance of Non-Committed Autonomy. The main objective of this paper is to define and empirically examine this framework by analysing the engagement of Morocco with selected core BRICS members: China, Russia, India, Brazil, employing both quantitative and qualitative case study methodology that entails process tracing and comparative analysis, drawing on bilateral trade and arms transfers data, technological data, and diplomatic communiqués. The analysis revealed a significant Strategic Depth across economic, technological, security, and soft power dimensions, confirming high Functional Proximity. Concurrently, Morocco successfully managed the Balancing Act with western allies, notably United States (USA) and European Union, while preserving a Non-Committed Autonomy by maintaining institutional distance from the BRICS bloc, exercising diplomatic divergence, and safeguarding its sovereign international cooperation. The results indicate that “Shadow Alignment” provides a superior explanatory framework for such proactive statecraft, offering a strategy that can be replicated by the Global South, and signalling to traditional powers the necessity to adapt according to this subtle type of interaction.

## **Keywords**

BRICS; Morocco; Non-Committed Autonomy; Shadow Alignment; Western allies.

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## Introduction

With the emergence of new major power, the contemporary international regime become increasingly identified by deepening multipolarity, which placed major hegemonic power especially United States of America and European Union in a challenging status. A central alliance among these dynamics is the BRICS bloc whose economic, geopolitical, and soft power influence steadily persists in rising. In this regard, a detailed examination reveals that the founding quartet identified as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) remains the heart and the fundamental primary structure expanding substantial influence across the world. This term BRIC was essentially coined by Jim O’Neill in 2001, but the formal bloc was not established till mid-2000s.

In parallel, Morocco has expanded its own cooperation and diplomatic relations with this core bloc as early as 1958, positioning the country one of the first African Arab states to institutionalize partnership with Republic of China. Thereafter, China-Morocco ties has intensified to include multidimensional sectors especially economy, that notably increasing in recent year through large-scale initiatives and infrastructure networks within the framework of belt and road initiative (BRI).

Similarly, Morocco's relations with India extend back to the 1950s: India recognized Morocco shortly after independence (June 1956), and formally established diplomatic relations in 1957. This partnership has since included technology transfer and development cooperation with some common projects in 2017, like the establishment of the Centre of Excellence in Information Technology (CEIT) in Casablanca, which is operated jointly with Indian R&D institutions. In the same vein, the history of relations with Russia is also significant and have been long-established. While regular trade grew considerably in the 2000s, especially in the energy and agricultural sectors, bilateral visits and cooperation related to economic projects have been ongoing since at least the mid-2000s. On the same lines, the case of Brazil, even though high-level strategic formal frameworks in the technological domain are less documented, trade data in recent years indicate that economic exchanges are growing markedly, emphasizing Morocco’s increasing interest in broadening its partnerships within the BRIC core.

In this context, the foreign policy of Morocco an example of a middle power that historically has been allied to the west is an interesting analytical puzzle. On the one hand, Morocco is strongly connected with European and American partners; on the other hand, it actively develops high Strategic Depth with BRIC countries by means of economic, technology, and infrastructural interactions. This move is not typical hedging or simply non-alignment: it is a purposive, benefit-maximizing action which we call Shadow Alignment.

This research paper aims to dissect the ability of middle powers especially Morocco considered as a gateway of global powers to Africa, in maintaining strong and deep relations with emerging core BRIC countries threatening the hegemonic regime established by U.S.A and European Union in most crucial sectors such as trade, defense, technology and soft power diplomacy, without compromising its sovereignty by a formal integration within the Bloc, or creating tension with traditional allies, ensuring balancing act, and Non-committed autonomy.

Existing frameworks fail to elucidate and unequally defined the way Morocco develops multidimensional ties with BRIC countries without compromising its independence. Scholarship focuses on BRIC dynamics, member approaches or middle-power hedging, and fails to provide insight into the way these middle powers like Morocco maintains high functional proximity across different sectors, all without a formal membership. This strategic fact underscores the necessity of a more specific analytical approach.

For all these reasons, this paper not only broadens the perspective of the middle-power statecraft in the multipolar world, but also fills a major research gap by revealing the manner in which a state can forge firm partnerships with emerging powers without losing its official status of non-alignment and beyond a formal integration. From a theoretical standpoint, it puts forward Shadow Alignment, from an empirical standpoint, it investigates Morocco's BRIC deep relations through economic, technological, security and soft power dimensions. On a strategic level, it portrays Morocco's Balancing Act with traditional allies essentially with USA and the EU, to clarify partners selection, complementarity and policy-relevant insights for middle powers. These aspects together contribute to the analytical worth of establishing the connection between Morocco's involving partnership and the overall shift of global power structures.

The structure that drives the research is built on these foundations and is mirrored in these research questions:

**Conceptual-Analytical:** In what ways does the Shadow Alignment framework of Strategic Depth, Balancing Act, and Non-Committed Autonomy provide a better explanation of Morocco's relations with BRIC nations than the traditional IR concepts?

**Empirical-Strategic:** What economic, technological, security, and soft power indicators show Morocco's Strategic Depth and Balancing Act with each BRIC country, and how are these relations, along with ties with the West, managed to maintain Non-Committed Autonomy?

**Policy-Oriented:** What lessons from Morocco’s Shadow Alignment experience can inform middle-power strategies and future interactions with the major power?

In line with this trend, this paper develops three hypotheses:

H1: The involvement of Morocco in the BRIC nations indicates the presence of Strategic Depth on the economic, technological, security and soft powers levels.

H2: Although Morocco has reached Strategic Depth, the country remains non-committed and avoid formal to the BRIC membership, while retaining strong ties with the United States and the European Union.

H3: The interaction of high Strategic Depth, effective Balancing Act with Western powers, and maintenance of non-committed autonomy can be best described using the Shadow Alignment framework, but not traditional theories of hedging, soft balancing, or strategic Autonomy.

This research is structured into three axes: the first axis is about Integrative Functional Proximity and Coordinated Alliance Dynamics, which investigates the strategic depth and balance in Morocco across various policy dimensions; the second axis shed light on Alliance Flexibility and Limited Commitment, which evaluates how Morocco remains autonomous and balances the BRIC and Western interests; while the last axis highlights Systemic Interpretation of the Moroccan Shadow Alignment Trajectory synthesizing the functional depth, balance and non-committed autonomy to understand the overall strategy of the Moroccan posture.

### **The importance of BRICS bloc partnerships in recent literature:**

One of the main topics voiced in contemporary literatures is the importance of BRICS bloc. The debates about middle powers’ roles in a competitive international scenario have been influenced by studies that show the adaptations of these countries to the pressures of the great powers’ rivalries, especially in the case of the new emerging countries aiming to implement a multipolar model, and traditional power which objective is to maintain the unipolar regime leading by U.S.A.

The key point in this discussion is hedging (Hardy & Lyon, 1923), a theory that was formulated in East Asian IR and that was formalized in the early 2000s by Evelyn Goh (2005-20026), Kuik Cheng-Chwee (2008-2016), and recently by Murray and Gries (2012-2014). The Hedging is a tactical model according to which the states do not fully side with any of the great powers and can selectively interact to contain risks and reap advantages. It integrates bandwagoning (collaboration with more powerful countries) and balancing (preparation in case of threats), which enables middle powers to be flexible as

they interact with powerful countries.

Most recently, strategic autonomy has also been explored as an analytical lens rooted in European Union studies and broader international scholarships, which gained success in the 2000s and 2010s (Vitor Bento, 2023), describing the ability of states or regional actors to act independently in security, foreign policy, and defense without excessive reliance to external powers.

In connection with this, soft balancing represents a complementary analytical framework. Coined by Robert Pape and other IR theorists. It is a strategy where weaker or middle powers attempt to counteract powerful states, not by military means, but by other means such as economic engagement, alliances, or selective participation in institutions. Consequently, in their article *Papa and Han (2025), "The Evolution of Soft Balancing in Informal Institutions: The Case of BRICS" (International Affairs)* (Mihaela Papa, Zhen Han, 2025), depicted BRICS as an informal coalition that enables cumulative cooperation, without an actual formation of an alliance.

On a broader regional scale, *Mansour and Baiche (2025) in their research paper "BRICS expansion and its Implications for the Global South and North Africa"* (Imad Mansour & Abdelhadi Baiche, 2025), published in *Journal of Global Policy Studies*, evaluate the effects of BRICS expansion on the Global South and North Africa, showing how middle powers can expand their strategic possibilities as the distribution of global order become more diffuse and fragmented.

Policy-oriented institutional studies also add insights: On one hand, the report *"BRICS Expansion and the Future of World Order: Perspectives from Member States, Partners and Aspirants"* Carnegie Endowment (2025) (Carnegie endowment., 2025) highlights the opportunities of non-members to participate in BRICS governance reform, On other hand, the *chapter 6 "Digital statecraft of Middle Powers: Digital Sovereignty in the BRICS Countries"* by the Cambridge University Press (2025) (Doshi & Delgado, 2024), on digital statecraft provide insights on how non-members can use technological infrastructure to manoeuvres middle-power politics.

Although the extensive diversity of literature, there are still some obvious gaps at both theoretical and empirical levels. The Hedging theory deals with the management of risks and the selective involvement, but fails to provide the description of how to achieve a multidimensional level of strategy while maintaining the balance with Westerns partners. Soft Balancing which is about non-military coalition measures fails to explain how functional relations with BRICS can be established without official interactions. Strategic autonomy argues decision-making independence, but does not take into

account the simultaneous engagement with emerging powers and preservation of traditional alliances in an inclusive manner.

On an empirical level, the articles remain limited in examining the way middle powers navigate multipolar arena. Studies focused on a specific dimension related to emerging coalitions, regional impacts, governance reforms, and digital capacities. Without clarifying how a non-member middle power can engage deeply with the BRICS bloc without a formal engagement and preserving autonomy.

With respect to this matter, this research paper addresses these gaps by adopting a new concept which is Shadow Alignment, enabling the assessment of multidimensional functional proximity epitomized in strategic depth across four essential chosen sectors: economic, technological, security; and soft power. This methodological model figures out how middle powers like Morocco can leverage their strategic benefits via its cooperation with both western allies and BRICS bloc beyond formal membership.

### **Theoretical framework**

Addressing the gaps concerning middle-power interactions with BRIC countries identified in the literature, this research turns to the Shadow Alignment (SA) framework as a specific analytical instrument, which refers to a model, where a middle power has a high level of functional proximity and cooperation with a major power block (the BRIC states) on a variety of dimensions, without formally joining or becoming a subordinate member of the power block, to preserve its sovereignty, balanced partnership, and non-committed autonomy.

This concept is singled out by three core empirical pillars:

1. Functional proximity epitomized in Strategic Depth: Engagement could be across different main and selected dimensions, but in this study considers the most influential dimensions economic, technological, security, and soft power to demonstrate the areas where Morocco generates the greatest strategic leverage.
2. The Balancing Act: The conscious management of relations with traditional Western partners so as not to become strategically overdependent, along with maintaining a degree of autonomy, and decreasing political risks.
3. Non-Committed Autonomy: The maintenance of independent decision-making and policy discretion in regional, diplomatic, and institutional affairs, thus not taking on any obligations that compromise sovereignty.

The mechanisms of Shadow Alignment are based on strategic reasoning, that the BRIC bloc values the middle power's geographic position, regional influence, and non-aligned status more than formal membership. This, in turn, creates a successful negotiating position enabling Morocco to get the most out of the engagement without ceding political control or making compromises in its relations with traditional Western allies. Shadow Alignment, through the integration of these pillars, constitutes a single, empirically verifiable framework for the study of middle-power agency in multipolar environments, thus providing a well-defined methodology for operational analysis, and at the same time addressing the gaps left by the existing IR theories.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of this paper is based on the new theory of Shadow Alignment, that has been formulated to clarify how a middle power (Morocco) can be substantially involved in major power blocs (BRIC) without being institutionally subordinated. This framework is innovative in the sense that it operationalizes the concept of Shadow Alignment as a multidimensional analytical prism that explicitly connects the engagement of Morocco into BRIC, its relations with Western powers (USA and EU), and its ability to make independent policy decisions. In this way, it contributes crucially in filling a substantial gap in the literature on middle-power strategy, providing a systematic framework that supports empirical research and informs policy decisions.

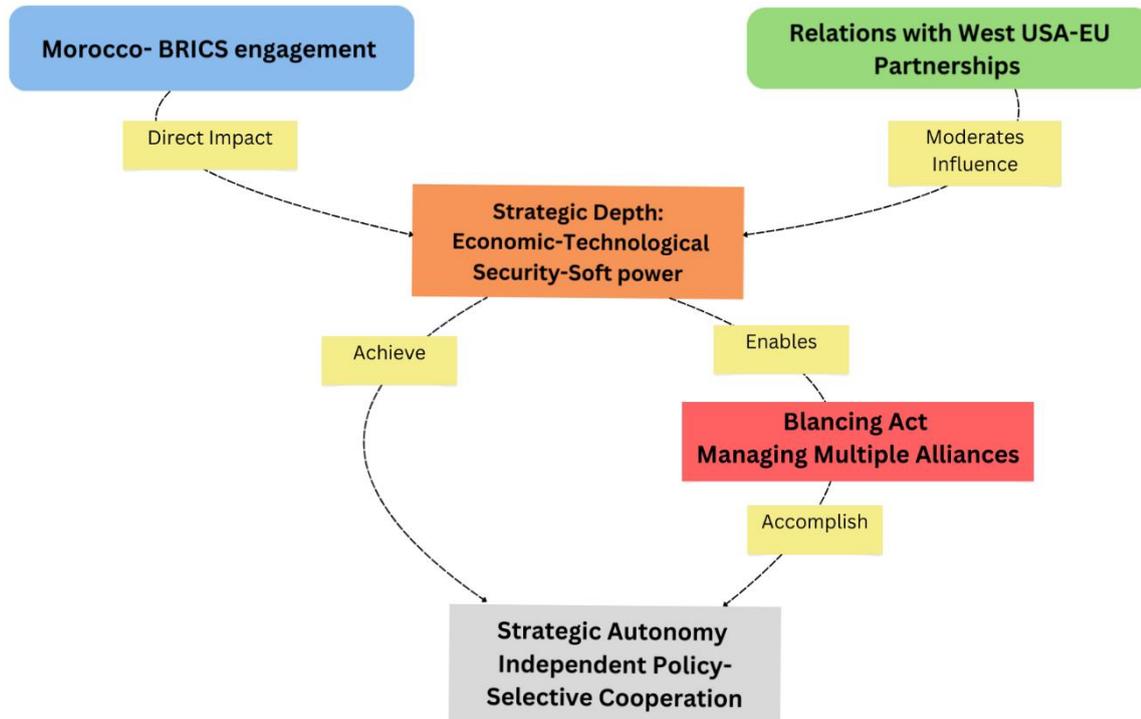
This framework comprises three main interrelated groups of concepts:

1. The involvement of Morocco in BRIC: this is the main and independent variable which comprises trade, investment, infrastructure, technological collaboration, defense relations, and soft power influence.
2. Relations with Western powers (USA, EU): this symbolizes the intermediate variable that determine strategic impact and influence of BRIC engagement.
3. The dependent variables manifested through:
  - Strategic Depth: operationalized in the economic, technological, security, and soft power spheres.
  - Balancing Act: the ability to maintain relations with both BRIC and Western allies.
  - Non-Committed Autonomy: degree of autonomy of decisions and selective involvement.

We could translate the relationship between these three variables as following:

On the one side, the Interaction with BRIC will improve Strategic Depth which will be moderated by

the ties of Morocco with Western powers. On the other side, the level of Non-Committed Autonomy is determined by Strategic Depth in conjunction with the Balancing Act, which clarifies the potential of Morocco to achieve the best strategic benefits without infringing on its sovereignty (**Figure1**).



**Figure1.** conceptual Framework of research variables and their intersection.  
Source: Author’s analysis

## Methodology

This research is based on dual methodological approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative analysis, underpinned by a structural-deductive approach that generates the concept of Shadow Alignment using secondary data. A comparative case study design from 2020 to 2025, which would enable longitudinal evaluation of evolving strategic dynamics, with a focus on bilateral and multilateral relations between Morocco and BRIC states China, Russia, India, and Brazil considered as the original core of the group later to be renamed BRICS. This study would illustrate the strategic relations that Morocco maintains with these four countries, which are more in depth and consistent than subsequent members.

- **The qualitative approach:**

The qualitative aspect is based on primary and secondary documentary literature, such as national and international news, official governmental reports, policy briefs, research papers and diplomatic statements. The formulation of Shadow Alignment concept was based on the abductive reasoning,

which enables the conceptual framework to be formulated from the convergence of the existing theories and empirical data. Data were arranged using thematic coding to determine patterns and categories pertinent to the Moroccan intermediate position, such as trade, investment, technological cooperation, balancing policies, and practices that reflect autonomy such as UN voting behaviour. This assessment is relied on Selective Depth Analysis with a focus on countries that tie a strong strategic relation with Morocco across various dimensions, combined with a critical discourse analysis facilitating the explanation of policy language and diplomatic distancing of Morocco regarding BRICS bloc. Consequently, these analytical tools facilitate the explanation of the status of Morocco between BRICS four core countries (Brazil, Russia, China, India) and traditional powers (the United States and Europe) while maintaining its strategic balance.

- **The quantitative approach:**

The quantitative approach considers measurements of the numerical aspects of strategic depth of Morocco and balancing calibration with BRIC nations through secondary data of WTO trade and UN Comtrade. On the one part, a descriptive statistic was used to estimate the trade, investment, while time-series analysis was employed to track the development of Morocco-BRIC relations throughout the years especially between 2020-2024, emphasizing the cumulative character of functional proximity. On the other part, a Correlation analysis was adopted to compare the involvement of Morocco with BRIC to its relations with the USA, and European Union. In addition to that, Strategic Depth is measured using composite indices, through economic, technological, security, and soft power dimensions. While, the Balancing Act is assessed based on the active involvement of Morocco with BRIC, USA, and EU, as well as joint projects. Simultaneously, Non-Committed Autonomy was evaluated through Moroccan independent policies and non-membership of BRIC. In the discussion part a SWOT analysis is employed to analyse different focal point of strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats dissecting internal and external actors of this strategy. All these data sources were cross-verified through triangulation, which confirm that the quantitative indices accurately reflect strategic intent.

This study is subject to different methodological limitations: firstly, the research is limited to the examination of only four original BRIC countries. Secondly, the study relies especially on publicly available data, which is in the realm of diplomacy and strategic cooperation, as sensitive topic related to defense, intelligence remain difficult to obtain. Secondly, the special focus on Morocco as a case study still limited despite its deep and significant analysis, which necessitates an examination of other middle powers cases. Thirdly, the rapid expansion of BRICS bloc could make the study time bounded, which call for future deep research. Finally, due to the different methodologies, reporting standards,

and re-exporting issues related to commercial exchanges, creates a slight disparity between the percentages. Although these limitations, this study point out an important foundational analysis of a meaningful and evolving perspectives of Morocco’s foreign Policy.

**1. Integrative Functional Proximity and Coordinated Alliance Dynamics**

This analysis examines four primary dimensions of the external outlook of Morocco in the changing external position of the country; economic (particularly, in respect of trade), technological, security and soft power. These dimensions allow us to realize the intensity and arrangement of the partnerships of Morocco. We analyse them based on two lenses: strategic depth (functional proximity) and balancing act, to view how Morocco approaches its relations with BRICS and Western countries. The data reveals that Morocco's partners are involved in varied ways and in different extents through the four major fields of interaction which are economic (mainly trade), technology, security, and soft power. Each partner, despite the differences, has a particular function that is supportive and complemented to the others. In unison, they provide Morocco with a wider range of strategic options, and thus maintain a balanced and effective global cooperation alliances.

we have grounded this analysis on the principle of *Selective Depth Analysis*, including countries that have strong strategic relations with Morocco in each dimension. This method assists in comprehending how Morocco’s acts as a middle ground state between the BRICS countries and the Western allies (the United States and Europe), and also how it balances its strategic position within a Shadow alignment framework. **The table 1** below was developed based on different sources and reports (especially the ones released by foreign ministries of each country), and reflect three indicators which vary from high to medium to low, related to the intensity and depth degree of Morocco’s strategic relations between 2020 to 2024, to demonstrates the way relations vary across the four dimensions for each BRIC country and western partners (U.S.A and E.U).

<b>Country/dimension</b>	<b>Technology</b>	<b>Economy (Trade)</b>	<b>Security/military</b>	<b>Soft Power (Culture and Education)</b>
<b>Brazil</b>	Low-Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
<b>Russia</b>	Medium-Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
<b>India</b>	High	Medium-high	Medium	Medium
<b>China</b>	Medium-High	High	Medium	High

<b>United States</b>	Medium-High	High	High	Medium-High
<b>European Union</b>	Medium-High	High	Medium	High

**Table1. Reference table for Morocco’s Strategic Relations between (2020-2024)**

Source: Visualized by the Author.

According to the results presented in (**Table 1**), Morocco has balanced and diversified relationships with the BRICS nations, Europe, and the United States. Morocco is technologically and economically involved with China and India and is economically supported and stable by Europe and the United States. In trade, Europe is Morocco’s largest partner, While India, Russia and Brazil cooperate moderately. At the level of security United States is the strongest one, followed by Russia, whereas Europe and other countries are more limited. For soft power, China and Europe lead in cultural exchange and educational partnership, complemented by other countries by medium to high partnership. By diversifying its partnership with multiple stakeholders across various dimension, Morocco becomes less dependent on any single country, thereby enhancing its bargaining power on the international scale.

**1.1. Economic dimension (Trade)**

This study emphasizes the economic aspect in particular by the examination of trade dynamics, which is recognized as the most efficient indicator for measuring connectivity and spotting interest areas among others. The reasoning behind this is that trade is by far the most stable and measurable channel in bilateral economic relations, thus it is a good reflection of the partners’ ability to establish sustainable strategic depth. Correspondingly, the results are presented in (**Table 2**), which demonstrates the trade value evolution (2020-2024), these data are complemented by a (**Table 3**) representing the performance and growth averages, along with a (**Table 4**) concerning the relative share and coverage rates in the same period between Morocco-BRIC, United States, and Europe.

<b>Year/ Blocs</b>	<b>BRIC (Brazil; Russia; India; China)</b>			<b>Western Powers (U.E/U.S. A)</b>		
	<b>Imports</b>	<b>Exports</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Imports</b>	<b>Exports</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>2020</b>	8.485.5	2.800.1	11.285.6	25.465.3	18.686.2	44.151.5
<b>2021</b>	10.809.7	4.387.8	15.197.5	32.505.1	22.873.7	55.378.8
<b>2022</b>	12.400.4	4.804.4	17.202.8	38.366.9	25.417.6	63.784.5

<b>2023</b>	11.436.9	2.870.2	14.307.1	40.002.9	28.198.7	68.201.6
<b>2024</b>	11.400.8	2.772.5	14.173.3	39.469.4	27.845.6	67.315.0

**Table 2. Morocco’s Trade with BRIC vs Western Powers (2020-2024, Million dollars)**

Source: Author’s analysis based on WTO Trade data and Comtrade

<b>Bloc</b>	<b>Avg. exports (%)</b>	<b>Avg.Imports (%)</b>	<b>Avg.Coverage (%)</b>	<b>Imports Growth (%)</b>	<b>Total Growth (%)</b>
<b>BRIC</b>	9.41	17.47	36.06	+34.35	+25.59
<b>United States</b>	3.20	7.53	26.48	+123.41	+98.68
<b>European Union</b>	61.81	48.69	76.68	+46.52	+48.12

**Table 3. table of performance and growth averages (%) (2020-2024).**

Source: Author’s analysis based on WTO Trade data

<b>Year/Bloc</b>	<b>BRIC</b>			<b>United States</b>			<b>European Union</b>		
	<b>Export Share (%)</b>	<b>Import Share (%)</b>	<b>Global Share (%)</b>	<b>Export Share (%)</b>	<b>Import Share (%)</b>	<b>Global Share (%)</b>	<b>Export Share (%)</b>	<b>Import Share (%)</b>	<b>Global Share (%)</b>
<b>2020</b>	10.11	19.06	15.18	3.56	6.28	5.09	63.89	50.91	56.33
<b>2021</b>	11.99	18.38	15.61	3.02	6.35	4.95	59.51	48.92	53.39
<b>2022</b>	11.39	17.09	14.62	3.35	7.42	5.76	56.90	45.45	50.27
<b>2023</b>	6.76	16.18	12.13	2.95	8.45	6.09	63.46	49.59	55.73
<b>2024</b>	6.81	16.66	12.37	2.12	9.13	6.59	65.29	48.56	55.90

**Table 4. Evolution of relative shares table (2020-2024)**

Source: Author’s analysis based on WTO Trade data.

Based on the depth analysis shown in these figure and tables related to Moroccan trade data between 2020 and 2024 reveal significant findings, indicating considerable success in the establishment of a multipolar trade model. This achievement is the fruit of Morocco's excellent diplomatic and commercial skills in international economic relations.

This success has been also reflected in the extensive and cohesive network of strategic partnerships

developed by Morocco, through which it has been able to secure and maximize the most economic advantages within a multipolar international system.

### **A. An integrated model of strategic partnerships**

The **(Table 2)** of trade exchanges clearly reflects the quantitative and qualitative growth of Morocco's economic relations. In this regard, trade with the European Union has increased significantly from \$40.37 billion in 2020 to \$59.80 billion in 2024, thus achieving a total increase of \$19.43 billion. In addition to that, the United States has witnessed a drastic shift in its relationship with Morocco. Trade exchanges fluctuated from \$3.78 billion to \$7.52 billion, accompanied by a staggering increase of \$3.74 billion. This acceleration reflects the success of Morocco's strategy in establishing a foothold in the US market and thus diversifying its export base.

One of the most notable achievements is reflected in relations between BRICS countries and Morocco, which saw total trade grow from \$11.29 billion to \$14.17 billion, with a total increase of \$2.88 billion. This development therefore demonstrates the effectiveness of Morocco's strategy to strengthen its economic independence and diversify its trading partners.

### **B. A careful balance in the distribution of relative shares**

The analysis of **(table 4)** regarding relative shares indicates that Morocco is very cautious in managing its trade. The country has maintained an effective relationship with the European Union, with its percentage of total imports and exports remaining at an average of around 54.32 %, in parallel with the positive development in the trade balance structure.

Concerning this point, Morocco has developed very tight relations with BRIC core countries (China, Brazil, Russia, India), which account for an average of 13.98% of its total trade.

This figure shows a delicate balance between maintaining old partners and developing new ones. As for the United States which has seen a significant increase in its relative share, from 5.09% to 6.59%, demonstrating its success in penetrating the dynamic Moroccan market without disrupting overall trade relations.

### **C. Advanced analysis of performance and efficiency indicators**

A comprehensive analysis of performance indicators **(Table 3)** during the study period allows for the development of an integrated model for managing international trade relations. For the Analysis of

BRIC core countries, data highlights Morocco's success in developing a balanced strategic partnership, with average exports 9.41%, whilst recording strong imports growth of 34.35% indicating increased reliance on these markets for production inputs. The coverage rate of 36.06%, illustrates the nature of this partnership, which relies on strategic imports, while maintaining stable exports despite international fluctuations and challenges.

In the case of the United States, the analysis shows very significant growth dynamics, with exports recording remarkable growth of 28.66%, while imports rose by 123.41%, indicating a deepening of trade relations and an increase in the number of products exchanged. The coverage rate of only 26.48% indicates the need to achieve greater balance in trade exchange with this important partner.

As it concerns the European Union, the analysis testifies the robust nature of the strategic partnership, indicated by the very high average of export coverage at 61.81% and a corresponded balanced growth in the exports and imports at 50.14% and 46.52%, respectively. The extremely high coverage rate of 76.68% indicates that the partnership is highly effective and capable of achieving near-complete trade balance.

#### **D. A comprehensive strategic vision and integration between Poles**

Together these findings form an integrated model of Morocco's trade policy, which demonstrate the interdependence and functional interaction between countries. The European Union constitutes the pillar of trade stability, a steady market for Moroccan exports, and a reliable source of advanced technologies and capital goods.

Whilst, the BRICS group represents an ally for diversification, providing sources of energy, raw materials, fuel, fertilizers, chemical products, wide mechanical and electrical equipment, along with agriculture and industrial products.

As regards this matter, The United States acts as an engine for future economic growth, as evidenced by the significant growth in the trade exchange rate, which reinforces the prospects for high development, particularly in the field of technological innovations and high-value services. This integration between the two poles allows Morocco to benefit from the comparative advantages of its partners, while maintaining the strategic flexibility necessary to overcome international economic shocks.

#### **Key findings:**

The in-depth trade analysis (2020-2024) yielded the following key conclusions regarding Morocco's strategic trade position:

**A. Strategic depth through functional proximity:** the findings confirm that Morocco has been able to create a significant strategic depth through its functional proximity with different economic blocs. This is shown through the partnership with the EU, and United States characterized by deep integration (average share 60,02%, coverage 68,12%) which provides predictability, stability, and economic efficiency. Complemented by the exchange trade partnership, with the BRIC countries (average share 13.98%, coverage 36,06%) that ensures the import of energy and goods from different sources, providing geopolitical options, alternative sources and safeguard against the state's external economic shocks.

**B. Masterful balancing Act:** Morocco strikes an optimal equilibrium, enabling it to coordinate competing partnerships perfectly without forfeiting the endorsement of its traditional allies, translated in its ability to preserve its main alliance with the West avoiding any undermining of its partnerships with BRIC core countries.

### 1.1) Technological dimension

The findings indicate full-scale support from both BRIC and Western allies, based on the reference table compiled and compared with several official reports, presents a picture of Morocco technological partnerships with key players in the world. Morocco comes out as a strategic middle ground, with the deployment of selective depth in its interactions with the BRICS nations, especially China, and India, along with the conventional Western actors, including the United States and Europe. The technological aspect shows a subtle system of interactions, comprising of industrial, digital, and innovation-oriented projects in order to achieve the best strategic benefits.

In its partnership with China, Morocco has established Tangier Tech City, a model smart industrial city, which was inaugurated in the period between 2019 and 2022, and has more than 200 Chinese enterprises, occupying more than 2,100 hectares of space designed for industrial and service projects (mcinet, 2025). There are major projects such as the Gotion High Tech gigafactory (2024) with the initial capacity of 20 GWh and possible extension to 100 GWh, manufacturing lithium-ion batteries, cathodes, anodes, and battery components (reuters, 2025). These initiatives combine advanced technological production with infrastructural buildup, making Morocco one of the supply chain centers in the manufacturing of electric vehicles, given its closeness to Europe and its access to strategic raw materials like phosphate and lithium.

The partnership with India, though less tangible at the level of industry scale, it is more focused on the digital transformation and information technology. In this regard, in Casablanca, the Centre of Excellence in Information Technology (CEIT) was founded in 2017 and has trained more than 675 Moroccan experts in software engineering and IT, and continues to exchange experience in digital public infrastructure and governance (Centre of Excellence in Information Technology, 2022). Although there are no large-scale industrial undertakings, India plays a key role as one of main source of software, IT services, and digital expertise that might sustain the emerging tech ecosystem in Morocco.

In addition to this, Technological infrastructure, and innovation are fully supported by European Union. The European Investment Bank funding, as well as the involvement in projects like PRIMA (2025-2027) (ec.europa.eu, 2010), increases the Moroccan research potential, digital skills, and ecosystem of innovations. While Collaboration with AI leader's firms such as Mistral AI also enhances the digital governance, smart city projects, and entrepreneurship of Morocco (telquel, 2025). According to that, the European initiative has extended to education, rural digital infrastructure, and startup support which providing a framework of sustainable, standards-compliant technological development.

With United states of America, Morocco has strengthened its AI, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and e-government capacity. This advancement was additionally supported by the new agreements of scientific and technical cooperation 2023-2033 and above-level negotiations in March 2025, which are intended to unify the digital sovereignty of Morocco by means of secure data infrastructure and all-encompassing AI systems. As a result, U.S. activity guaranteed the access of Morocco to the cutting-edge technologies, professional skills, and effective forms of governance, which supplemented the industrial and digital investments of other foreign partners (maroc.ma, 2025).

Overall, this multi-vector strategy illustrates a balancing act under the shadow alignment model. Through its multiple active interactions with competing BRICS and Western powers, Morocco effectively neutralizes their effects, implementing Western standards to balance Chinese industrial scale.

This allows it to stand as a regional hub, maneuvered through complexed geopolitics, and solidify its position as a central node in the global technological networks, as well as keep its strategic independence and operational flexibility.

## 1.2) Security and military dimensions

As the analysis shows, Morocco's international relations include an important strategic aspect in military and security cooperation, and there is a clear desire to improve and modernize its air capabilities. The existence of such a network of relations reflects a multidirectional diplomatic strategy in which the United States is a traditional partner, China a new power, and India a new strategic partner in defense, with Morocco maintaining a balanced alliance. In the case of the United States, this cooperation is manifested in a long-term relationship.

The strategic framework was established by a defense cooperation roadmap (2020-2030), followed by a series of major agreements in 2024-2025. These included high-tech air-to-air missiles (AIM-120C-8) worth \$88.37 million, precision bombs (GBU-39/B) worth \$86 million, and Javelin anti-tank missiles (612 units) in June 2025 (dsca, 2024). This culminated in a colossal \$25 million contract in 2025 for 25 F-16C/D Block 72 fighter jets, 36 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters, 18 HIMARS rocket launchers, and FIM-92K Stinger Block I air defense missiles worth \$825 million. Other forms of cooperation also include various forms of military support and assistance between 2013 and 2025, amounting to \$478 million.

Other forms of cooperation also include various forms of military support and assistance between 2013 and 2025, worth \$478 million, as well as training worth \$32 million. This partnership is supported by a sophisticated fleet of combat drones, including MQ-9 Reapers and RQ-4 Global Hawks, and is reinforced in practice by periodic joint exercises, including African Lion (since 2007) and amphibious exercises in Al Hoceima (November 2025) (Foreign military sales, n.d.).

Similarly, the results confirm that China and Morocco partnerships is more focused on strengthening air capabilities by providing medium- and long-range drones. In 2022, Morocco acquired Wing Loong II drones at a comparable price of \$280,000, and in March 2025, TB-001 (Twin-Tailed Scorpion) drones were acquired at an estimated cost of \$280,000 per unit (.military.africa, 2022). these aerial vehicles (UAV) are characterised by a versatile reconnaissance and attack platforms capable of flying for 35 to 40 hours. to further empower the security cooperation Morocco took the initiative to acquire Wing Loong X drones, specialized in electronic warfare, in 2025, in order to diversify weapons sources and increase defense technological capacities.

To consolidate these schemes, Collaboration with India gained considerable strategic importance in September 2025, when India signed a comprehensive defense memorandum of understanding (MoU).

This collaboration is not limited to the field of security (counterterrorism, maritime security, cybersecurity), but also covers important industrial aspects in the form of a defense industrial agreement. An agreement with Tata Advanced Systems to build a factory in Berrechid to manufacture 400 WhAP 8x8 armored vehicles (investment), including technology transfer and training for 100 Moroccans in India (September 2024), is evidence of this (pib.gov, 2025). Ultimately, Morocco's strategy is based on strategic depth within the framework of diversified military partnerships. It is developing its main base using advanced American technology, acquiring rapid deterrence capabilities through specialized Chinese drones, and localizing its industry by collaborating with India. This reflects a complex balancing act between competing powers around the world. Morocco has strengthened its security sovereignty, minimized its unilateral dependence, and established its status as a key players and flexible regional partner by balancing American technological superiority with Chinese flexibility and Indian industrial cooperation, reflecting a high level of diplomatic pragmatism.

### **1.3) Soft Power dimensions**

As the results reveals, Morocco's international relations in the fields of education and culture exchange constitute a flexible, multipolar network of strategic relationships based on consideration of the comparative advantages of its partners.

Concerning China, collaboration focuses on improving academic and linguistic interactions. Chinese language courses and cultural activities are offered at three Confucius Institutes in Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. The Chinese government scholarship (CSC) covers all tuition fees, accommodation, and a monthly allowance (2,500-3,500 yuan), and seven scholarships are awarded to Moroccans for the 2025-2026 academic year. Others are also considering cooperation, such as a joint program between Beijing Foreign Studies University and Mohammed V University to train tour guides, and cultural events such as Chinese Cultural Weeks and the Shanghai Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition in Casablanca (2025) (Fatima Zohra ALAOUI MAHREZ, 2023).

With regard to European Union, thanks to the Erasmus+ program, students can study in 27 European countries with full coverage of tuition fees and a living allowance (from €500 to €900). Full or partial funding is available in countries such as Switzerland (University of Bern scholarships), Sweden (SEK 10,000 per month), and Germany (DAAD/Humboldt scholarships). Engineering scholarships are funded by France through ONOUCS engineering scholarships (MAD 1,750 allowance, MAD 500 housing allowance). This collaboration is supported by initiatives such as the partnership agreement

for vocational training (2025), with a budget of €75 million, the FORCAP program (2020), and the advanced status agreement (2008), which provides for cultural and educational cooperation.

In cooperation with the United States, the Moroccan-American Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange (MACECE) was created in 1982 and is at the forefront of promoting exchange programs such as the Fulbright Program, which offers 50 scholarships to Moroccans annually, and the Global UGRAD and YES programs, which target young people. Under the AFCP, up to 11 projects worth up to \$860,000 are funded, including English language instruction in eight Moroccan cities and celebrations for former Fulbright scholars.

Cooperation in the case of Brazil is not very active, but it still strategic and appropriate. There is a joint declaration on strategic dialogue (2024) and collaboration between tourism and cultural cooperation as part of the “Brasil Soft Power” campaign (2025). It also includes participation in COP30, where it has a Moroccan pavilion 8.9 million dirhams, a digital cooperation agreement (2025) (maroc-diplomatique, 2025), and a military education memorandum of understanding (2023) between the Royal College of Higher Military Studies and the Brazilian Defense School.

All of this indicates that Morocco is in a position to gain strategic depth in its educational and cultural policy, which consists of diversifying its partners. While China offers language teaching facilities and fully funded scholarships, Europe provides comprehensive institutional support for academic exchanges and multinational research agreements. The United States offers elite exchange programs and endowment funding, while Brazil as a new partner in cultural tourism and digital collaboration offers different opportunities especially in the field of military education. These relationships constitute a new form of alliance balancing, in which Morocco is keen to maintain relationships with rival educational and cultural systems. Long-standing relationships with traditional blocs (the United States and Europe) are counterbalanced by strategic alliances with emerging players (China and Brazil). This intelligent distribution helps Morocco extend its cultural sovereignty, reduce its dependence on a specific model, create versatile human resources, and consolidate its role as a cultural intermediary between continents and the global system.

## **2. Alliance Flexibility and Limited Commitment**

To substantiate these policies, empirical analysis of Morocco's implementation of a Non-Committed Autonomy approach towards BRICS countries has been demonstrated at three levels of application: 1) non-institutional membership, but pursuing a selective economic cooperation; 2) Diplomatic autonomy through strategic divergence in voting processes in multilateral forums; and 3) Management of

regional partnerships through sovereign initiatives. These results confirm the success of Morocco's economic balancing, security partnership preservation, and soft power cooperation promotion.

#### **A. Non-institutional membership and structural rejection of integration**

The results confirm the existence of a consistent policy of informal institutional orientation. On 19 August 2023, the official statement of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the Kingdom had not submitted a formal application for membership of the BRICS group, but had sought selective economic cooperation rather than full political cooperation. This structural rejection was also evident in the attendance of the Minister of Industry and trade, Riad Mezzour, at the BRICS 2024 Forum on Partnership for the New Industrial Revolution in Xiamen, where there were no interactions other than industrial and technical ones. This distance has been seen as a strategic move to ensure its financial and political independence, particularly with regard to the case of Moroccan Sahara region, which is more reliant on United States and the European Union support.

#### **B. Diplomatic Divergence in Multilateral Forums**

The analysis indicate that Morocco is likely to pursue a calculated, nuanced diplomatic approach, A major example is demonstrated through the stance of Morocco towards conflict between Russia and Ukraine, reflected in taking a neutral positive epitomized in its absence during the vote in the UN General Assembly on a resolution condemning the Russian invasion in March 2022. Furthermore, the results show that Morocco has not taken any steps at the UN to condemn Chinese policies in Xinjiang. Similarly, both countries recently acted the same way during the vote on the security council Resolution 2797 (30 October 2025) regarding the autonomy plan for Western Sahara, so, both countries abstained from voting. This one-sided tendency proves that Morocco relies on multilateral forums to protect its national interests, especially with regard to Western Sahara, and does not take a hardline approach towards BRICS members on other geopolitical issues.

#### **C. Sovereign Regional Leadership Amidst Cooperation**

The results highlighted that Morocco can enter into economic partnerships with BRICS members without losing control over the region, this pattern is essentially reflected in the ports of Nador and Tangier Med, which have seen Chinese and Russian technological participation and investment. More specifically, the results point to the launch of the Royal Atlantic Programme in November 2023, which represents a sovereign policy for Morocco allowing landlocked countries in the Sahel region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad) to benefit from its maritime infrastructure. This line was institutionalised during the ministerial meeting held in Marrakesh in December 2023, led by Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, demonstrating that Morocco has the independent capacity to set its own agenda. This project will serve as a compensatory variable in long term, as bilateral cooperation with

BRICS countries will enhance, rather than undermine, Morocco's strategic freedom and leadership in West Africa and the Sahel.

Overall, the results of these three indicators attest the functioning of the parallel convergence model. Systematic engagement with BRICS countries is beneficial to the Moroccan economy, while political integration is structurally rejected, leading to diplomatic overreach on serious issues, while regional sovereign initiatives reinforce sovereign autonomy.

### **3. Interpreting Morocco's Shadow Alignment Strategy**

The results presented in this paper constitute comprehensive evidence supporting the validity of the new theoretical framework of shadow alignment, as validated by the independent confirmation of the three empirical pillars. The cumulative data confirm that functional convergence in the case of the four core BRIC countries (Russia, India, China and Brazil) on a multidimensional scale was not achieved at the expense of traditional allies, as Morocco did not experience any significant negative consequences or decline in its relations with the EU or the US, and its ability to manoeuvre strategic adaptation without provoking punitive reactions indicates that it has mastered the art of maintaining a balance between diplomacy and strategic management.

Above all, Non-Committed Autonomy preservation is also affirmed as a third autonomous pillar. Declining full membership of the BRICS, the obvious lack of convergence in voting patterns on contentious matters and the demand to impose its sovereign agenda in Africa indicate that functional depth has not been converted into political dependency, which is the real meaning of the Shadow in the strategy.

Findings of the current research point to Morocco's involvement in intersecting spheres of influence, which is supported by convergent results of previous research, thus contradicted by others. The research paper presented by Linggarwati and Hadiansyah (2025) (Tundjung Linggarwati, Nabil Hadiansyah, 2025) which frames BRICS as a bloc capable to balance the hegemonic system implemented with westerns countries, totally confirms and aligns with the results highlighted through both functional proximities reflected in the four strategic depths dimensions .In the same vain, both Bamidele (2024)(Seun Bamidele, 2024) and Mansour and Baiche (2025)(Imad Mansour & Abdelhadi Baiche, 2025) in their studies revealed that the cooperation promote a diversified partnerships across Africa especially North Africa, which intersect with the balancing acts previously mentioned in the results part. Yet, according to Delcourt (2024) study(Delcourt, 2024), the cooperation with of the BRICS+ can replicate the process of dependency and unequal extraction of resources, posing a

strategic threat, which diverge from the Non-committed Autonomy clarified in the analysis, as Morocco represents middle powers that could effectively and successfully tie strong relations with BRICS countries without any formal membership.

These findings have geopolitical implications for some major actors in the international system. The achievement of the Shadow Alignment policy proves that the impact of BRICS is not limited to its formal membership countries, as it can also have a powerful economic and security effect through functional partnership with intermediary states. In addition, the case of Morocco can serve as an example that other middle powers can follow to maximise their benefits in a multipolar system without relinquishing their sovereignty when making decisions. Conversely, these results, indicate to traditional Western allies that they need to reconsider their policies, since traditional methods of deterrence or dictation will not be effective against states that adopt versatile and smart means of calculation by focusing on practical and sovereign decisions instead of narrow ideological commitments.

The strategic implications of this research encompass an important theoretical aspect. Ideologically, the shadow alignment theory makes a qualitative contribution to the literature on international relations by providing a more precise analytical framework for the actions of middle powers in a multipolar system. It not only reveals the conceptual shortcomings of terms such as 'Hedging' or 'soft balancing', but also proposes a dynamic model showing how these states can transform their non-engagement, a source of weakness, into a means of negotiation, thus filling the gap in the theoretical explanation of effective and profitable strategies that avoid formal political commitments.

In order to strategically define these implications, a SWOT analysis of the model can be provided, with internal factors considered in terms of the nature of the strategy itself (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors in terms of the presence of the geopolitical environment (opportunities and threats):

<b>Internal Factors</b>	<b>strengths</b>	<b>weaknesses</b>
	-The maximization of material and strategic gains with full preservation of sovereignty. -Diversifying partners so as to improve bargaining power and lessen dependence on one pole.	-Strong reliance on diplomatic skill and quality of governance, which made it vulnerable to internal political risks. -Refusal of the full benefits of membership in institutions affiliated in the

	-Flexibility and strategically dealing with various problems without being bound to a formal membership.	blocs like access NDB financing. -Threat of the rising of internal policy disputes due to the engagement with numerous partners that have conflicting interests.
<b>External Factors</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
	-Taking advantage of the multipolar geopolitical context to maximize benefits of the rivalry among great powers. -Establishing flexible, short-term partnerships with different actors around specific issues with different actors. -Demonstrating a model in term which attract new partnerships where countries value active neutrality.	- Major powers moving towards more aggressive policies to coerce states to choose a side. -Growing uncertainty of global policies, making it difficult to maintain balance. - Danger of intensifying competition between great powers, diminishing the maneuvering space available to the middle powers.

**Table 5. SWOT Analysis of shadow Alignment Model**

Source: Author’s Analysis

**Limits of the Study and Future Prospects**

Despite the theoretical and practical contributions of this study, it is not without methodological limitations. First, although the data analysis demonstrates a strong relationship between the “Shadow alignment” strategy and the observed outcomes, establishing causality conclusively remains challenging. Inferring strategic intent behind state behaviour necessarily relies on deduction and interpretation within the framework of qualitative research. Second, the study encountered obstacles related to the lack of transparent data on certain aspects of cooperation, particularly in sensitive security and military areas or details of technology transfers with Russia and China, necessitating reliance on secondary sources and proxy data that may not provide a complete picture. Finally, the empirical testing of the proposed concept is limited to a single case study of Morocco, which limits the possibility of generalising the results to other contexts. Overall verification of the validity of the "Shadow alignment" concept remains contingent on its subsequent subjection to comparative studies in diverse regional and political contexts.

In order to overcome these constraints, it is necessary to identify future research paths to guide this

ambitious strategic project:

### **1. Comparative studies:**

- A comparative analysis of shadow alignment in different regions: The theoretical framework has to be applied to other countries that may adopt similar strategies, such as the UAE, Vietnam, Turkey, or Singapore, and compare similarities and differences in implementation and outcomes.
- Evaluating the Shadow alignment with other Blocs: Determine whether the concept can be applied to other middle power relations with bloc other than BRICS, like relations with European Union or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and

### **2. Theoretical and Conceptual Formulation:**

- Intersection with international relations theories: Deeper intersection of the concept with other well-known theories in international relations, such as constructivism (to analyze the construction of the “Non-committed partner” identity) or complex interdependence theory, in order to strengthen the theoretical basis of the concept.
- Develop more accurate quantitative indicators: Developing more sophisticated and more complex quantitative measures of strategic depth and Non-committed autonomy, perhaps using network analysis or big data, in order to overcome data limitations.

### **3. Research on limits and implications:**

- Examine the implicit costs of the shadow alliance approach: systematically examine the forfeited opportunities or political or economic losses to the state by its failure to give full commitment (e.g., its refusal to provide funding to large projects via the BRICS New Development Bank).
- Strategic limits and risks boundaries: Exploration of instances where this strategy has failed or collapsed, with the aim of inferring the circumstances in which a shadow alignment is sustainable and unsustainable.

### **4. Geopolitical consequences in the long term:**

- Effects of the strategy diffusion on the equilibrium of the international system: Investigate the effect of the diffusion of the “Shadow alignment” model across a number of middle powers on the equilibrium of the traditional alliances and the balance of power in a multipolar system.
- Response of the great powers: Examine how the major powers (Western and within the BRICS group) develop their mechanisms and instruments to manage the phenomenon of the Shadow alignment, either to promote it, or to restrain its effectiveness.

These avenues allow future research to build on the findings of this study and transform the concept of “Shadow Alignment”, which until now has been a descriptive observation of a specific phenomenon, into a well-developed theory capable of describing one of the most widespread and significant trends in international behavior in the 21st century.

## **Conclusion**

This research fills a theoretical gap in understanding how middle powers such as Morocco can establish deep functional relationships with geopolitical blocs such as BRICS without entering into formal political commitments a phenomenon that is not explained by existing concepts such as hedging or non-alignment.

The main objective was to test and validate the “shadow alliance” framework empirically, which examines how Morocco can create strategic depth, balance, and non-Committed autonomy in its interactions with BRICS countries. The assessment confirms the validity of the three pillars of the shadow alliance: Morocco has already demonstrated considerable strategic depth in terms of trade, technological cooperation, diversifying its sources of arms, and exchanging soft power. It has already achieved balance by strengthening relations with BRICS countries without provoking punitive reactions from traditional Western partners; and non-committal autonomy by refusing to join BRICS, engaging in diplomatic deviation in the context of UN voting, and imposing its sovereign agenda in Africa.

These results have three implications. In theoretical term, the hidden alliance provides a better analytical approach to understanding the politics of middle powers in a multipolar world. In practical terms, the Moroccan model offers a template that can be replicated by countries in the Global South that aim to diversify their partnerships without losing sovereignty, while the brief strategic analysis highlights the model's strength in maximising benefits and relying on effective diplomacy. For traditional allies, these findings point to the need for a policy shift toward more flexible models of engagement. Thus, this study has limitations, including fundamental issues of causality in qualitative analysis, data constraints on sensitive security and technology agreements, and the narrow scope of a single case study that makes immediate generalisation difficult, it does provide directions for future research. Future research should conduct comparative studies of shadow alliances in other regional contexts, develop quantitative measures of strategic depth and autonomy, and examine the potential costs of declining membership in formal blocs. In conclusion, shadow alliances are an advanced and effective approach to foreign policy in the complex geopolitical circumstances of the contemporary

world, demonstrating that strategic non-alignment, if professionally managed, can be an important source of strength and influence for medium powers in a multipolar world.

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