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What Next for the Western Sahara?

The Repercussions of Security Council Resolution 2797

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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On 31 October, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution¹ asserting that granting the Western Sahara "genuine autonomy" under Moroccan sovereignty "could represent a most feasible outcome" to resolve the nearly 50-year conflict over the territory. Resolution 2797 encourages parties to the conflict to enter negotiations on that basis, and confirms the Security Council's support for the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco to resolve the Western Sahara issue, a plan that was first presented to the body in 2007.

The resolution was tabled by the United States and supported by 11 of the 15 member states of the Security Council. Russia, China, and Pakistan abstained from voting, while Algeria did not participate in the voting process at all. Through the same resolution, the Security Council also renewed the mandate of the peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara (MINURSO) for one year. The resolution marks a significant development over the Western Sahara issue, reflecting a major international shift: away from advocating for self-determination through a referendum and towards supporting the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco, to the point of enshrining it in a UN resolution.

A History of the Conflict

The Western Sahara issue is one of the most intractable conflicts on the African continent. The region, historically known as Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, was under Spanish colonial rule from 1884 until 1975. In 1963, the UN placed Western Sahara on its list of non-self-governing territories, naming it "Spanish Sahara."² In 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion denying the existence of "any ties of territorial sovereignty" between Western Sahara and Morocco or Mauritania, while simultaneously emphasizing the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination.³

A few weeks after this advisory opinion was issued, Morocco responded by organizing what became known as the Green March, demanding recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory. In November 1975, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords, under which the administration of the territory was divided between the latter two countries. After Spain officially withdrew from the territory in February 1976, the Polisario Front declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), sparking a war between itself and both Morocco and Mauritania.

By 1979, Mauritania had withdrawn from the conflict, leaving Morocco in control of most of the territory.⁴ In 1991, the two sides reached a ceasefire agreement, and the Security Council established

¹ "With 11 Members Voting in Favour, 3 Abstaining, Security Council Adopts Resolution 2797 (2025), Renewing Mandate of UN Mission in Western Sahara for One Year," *United Nations Meetings Coverage: Security Council*, 31/10/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9BP8Q>

² "Western Sahara," *The United Nations and Decolonization*, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPUO>

³ United Nations, *Summary of Judgments, Advisory Opinions and Orders of the International Court of Justice (1948-1991)* (New York: 1992), accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPsX>

⁴ "The Madrid Accords on Western Sahara," *Al Jazeera*, 10/5/2016, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPuk>



the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), whose mandate was to supervise the organization of a referendum on self-determination.⁵ However, the process stalled due to disagreements over who was eligible to vote, and MINURSO's mission became limited to monitoring the ceasefire rather than organizing the referendum. This set the stage for a prolonged stalemate.

The Road to Resolution 2797

The last five years have seen several significant shifts in international positions on the conflict. Washington's December 2020 recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara, as a quid pro quo for Morocco's participation in the Abraham Accords and normalization of relations with Israel,⁶ constituted a crucial turning point. It paved the way for key European countries, such as Germany,⁷ Spain,⁸ and the United Kingdom,⁹ to declare their support for the autonomy plan Morocco had presented in 2007. France, too, continued to support the Moroccan position.

In November 2020, the Polisario Front resumed its fight against Moroccan forces, citing what it saw as a Moroccan violation of the ceasefire in the Guerguerat district in the far southwest of the territory.¹⁰ This led to growing regional tensions, particularly after Algeria announced in August 2021 that it was severing its diplomatic relations with Morocco.¹¹

Despite efforts by the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy, Staffan de Mistura, the issue continued to be dominated by political deadlock. In his report to the Security Council on September 30, 2025, Secretary-General António Guterres noted the absence of "progress towards a political solution to the conflict," and called for "a renewed effort for an accelerated resolution of this long-standing conflict [...] for the sake of the people of Western Sahara and their aspirations."¹² He also urged the renewal of MINURSO's mandate for a full year, until October 31, 2026. His report formed the basis for the Security Council to draft Resolution 2797.¹³

5 "The MINURSO Mission," *Al Jazeera*, 26/10/2015, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP8k>

6 "Normalization between Israel and Morocco: What do we know about the agreement?" *BBC Arabic*, 11/12/2020, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPPg>

7 "Germany declares the Moroccan proposal a 'good basis' for resolving the Western Sahara conflict," *France 24 Arabic*, 26/8/2022, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPLi>

8 "Spain's recognition of the Moroccan nature of the Sahara boosts the volume of trade with Rabat," *Al-Arab*, 1/3/2024, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPK2>

9 "Britain supports Morocco's plan regarding the disputed Western Sahara," *BBC Arabic*, 3/6/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOXo>

10 Andrei Popoviciu, "The failed diplomacy between Morocco and Polisario", *Al Jazeera*, 18/11/202, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOSA>

11 "Algeria decides to sever diplomatic relations with Morocco: What are the reasons?" *CNN Arabic*, 24/8/2021, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPeu>

12 United Nations Security Council, "Situation concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General," 30/9/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/612>

13 "Security Council Resolution 2797 of 2025 on Western Sahara," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 31/10/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP7r>

The Course of Negotiations on the Draft Resolution

On 22 October, the US tabled an initial draft resolution. Negotiations on its final wording were contentious, leading to two revisions. Several members of the Security Council, including Algeria, expressed reservations about the draft resolution, describing it as biased in favour of the Moroccan position, particularly in its characterization of the autonomy initiative as "the most serious, credible, and realistic solution." They also objected to the proposal to extend MINURSO's mandate for only three months. Washington then introduced amendments to this draft, including extending MINURSO's mandate for six months and softening some of the language, to indicate that "most" (not all) states had expressed support for the Moroccan autonomy plan. Algeria then demanded the inclusion of references to other frameworks for negotiations, including the Polisario Front's "expanded proposal."¹⁴

The US subsequently presented a second, revised draft resolution, omitting the phrase describing the Moroccan autonomy initiative as "the most serious, credible, and realistic," but continuing to present that plan as the basis for negotiations. Algeria broke the Council's silence on the draft, objecting to the absence of any reference to the Polisario's proposal, which necessitated further consultations. Several Council members shared Algeria's view that the text still lacked balance.

The US then tabled a third, revised draft on 30 October, in which it renewed MINURSO's mandate for one year. A final draft was presented, stating that "many Member States" had expressed their support for the Moroccan initiative as a basis for "a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable solution," while acknowledging that "genuine autonomy could represent a most feasible outcome", a departure from previous, more definitive formulations. Thus, the third draft of the resolution represented a compromise, written in more moderate language compared to the previous versions.¹⁵

The Content of the Resolution

The resolution, as it was finally adopted, affirmed the Security Council's commitment to assisting the two parties to the conflict – Morocco and the Polisario Front – in "reaching a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, and consistent with the principles and purposes of the United Nations Charter, including the principle of self-determination." It cited the support expressed by many member states for the 2007 Moroccan autonomy proposal as "a basis for a just, lasting, and mutually acceptable solution to the conflict."

However, in its preamble, it describes "genuine autonomy" as representing "a most feasible outcome." This leaves the text open to interpretation, as it mentions the principle of self-determination alongside support for option of autonomy. At the same time, it urges both parties to "engage in good faith in negotiations" based on the Moroccan proposal and without preconditions, "with a view to

¹⁴ "Western Sahara: Vote on a Draft Resolution Renewing MINURSO's Mandate," *Security Council Report*, 31/10/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOV1>

¹⁵ Ibid.

achieving a final and mutually acceptable political solution that provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara."

This point, too, leaves room for interpretation, as it makes negotiations contingent on the Sahrawi side relinquishing the option of independence and accepting the option of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the only possible form of self-determination – especially given that the resolution extends the mandate of MINURSO, the mission responsible for the referendum on the self-determination of the Sahrawi people, for a full year.

Positions of the Main Parties

The resolution was adopted after 11 members voted in favour (the US, as sponsor of the draft, France, the UK, Japan, South Korea, Denmark, Greece, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Guyana, and Somalia). Three countries – Russia, China, and Pakistan – abstained from voting, while Algeria did not participate in the voting process at all.¹⁶

1. Morocco

Morocco is the biggest beneficiary of Resolution 2797. The Kingdom succeeded in kicking any referendum on self-determination into the long grass and mobilizing international support for the option of negotiated autonomy. It welcomed the resolution immediately after it was issued: King Mohammed VI said the decision constituted "a new breakthrough in the process of consolidating the Moroccan identity of the Sahara," and said that the resolution had laid the foundations for a final political solution. He added that Morocco would work to update its autonomy plan and officially submit it to the UN as the sole basis for negotiation. He also expressed his gratitude to Morocco's allies who had backed this approach, specifically mentioning the US, in addition to France, Britain, and Spain, as well as the Arab and African countries that had expressed their continued support for the Moroccan identity of the Sahara.

The King stressed that Morocco does not seek victory over anyone, but rather aspired to a solution "in which there is neither victor nor vanquished." He called on the Sahrawis in the camps in Tindouf, Algeria to "seize this historic opportunity" and return to their homeland to take part in the development of their regions, within the framework of autonomy that guarantees their ability to manage their affairs freely and with dignity, within a unified nation.¹⁷ The Moroccan monarch also extended an invitation to Algeria to hold a "direct and fraternal dialogue" with Morocco, in order to overcome their differences and build new relations based on trust and good neighbourliness, affirming his keenness to revive the Maghreb Union on the foundations of cooperation and integration among its five member states.¹⁸

¹⁶ United Nations, "Security Council Adopts Resolution 2797 (2025)," and "UN Security Council Approves Resolution Backing Morocco's Plan for Western Sahara, in a Major Shift," *Associated Press*, 31/10/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPJF>

¹⁷ Kingdom of Morocco, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Residing Abroad, "His Majesty King Mohammed VI, may God assist and protect him, addressed a royal speech to his loyal people this evening, Friday," press release, 31/10/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOZv>

¹⁸ Ibid.

2. The Polisario Front

The Polisario Front, for its part, welcomed the extension of MINURSO's mandate, saying it was "evidence of the Security Council's continued commitment to finding a just and lasting solution in accordance with its relevant resolutions on the Western Sahara." The Front also reiterated its "ongoing readiness to engage constructively with the UN-sponsored peace process in Western Sahara." However, it declared its refusal "to be a party to any political process or negotiations based on any 'proposals' aimed at 'legitimizing' the illegal Moroccan military occupation of Western Sahara and depriving the Sahrawi people of its inalienable, non-negotiable and imperishable right to self-determination and sovereignty over their homeland."¹⁹

Despite the decline in international support for the Polisario's cause, and several countries' withdrawal of recognition of the Sahrawi Republic, the Polisario Front continues to rely on the ICJ's advisory opinion of 1975 and on UN General Assembly resolutions classifying the Western Sahara issue as one of decolonization – as well as European Court of Justice rulings on natural resources in the Western Sahara covered by economic agreements between the European Union and Morocco.²⁰

However, the Polisario's adherence to these legal instruments and its willingness to negotiate do not negate the Front's harsh tone in expressing its position on the resolution: "The decisive elements in the equation for resolving the conflict in Western Sahara are the Sahrawi people and the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army, who must confront the conspiracies of the Moroccan enemy, which took this step with the help of influential parties in the Security Council."²¹ This indicates that significant challenges lie in the way of negotiations on a final solution, including the possibility of a collapse of the ceasefire and a return to military clashes between Moroccan and Sahrawi forces.

3. Algeria

Algeria, the main supporter of the Polisario Front, refrained from taking part in the vote on the resolution, despite having successfully lobbied for the postponement of a vote on an earlier draft that Algiers considered "unbalanced," "blatantly biased towards Morocco," and "practically aimed at liquidating the Sahrawi issue" by enshrining the autonomy proposal as "the only framework for negotiation."²²

Algeria refrained from participating in the vote for several reasons. Firstly, voting in favour of the resolution would have been interpreted as an implicit endorsement of the autonomy proposal,

19 "The Polisario Front affirms the Sahrawi people's strong commitment to its inalienable right to self-determination and independence, and to defending its rights and sovereignty by all legitimate means," *Sahara Press Service*, 31/10/2025, accessed 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPME>

20 "Morocco 'is not concerned' with the European Court of Justice's annulment of the agriculture and fisheries agreements because of the Sahara issue," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 4/10/2024, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOZN>

21 "Morocco and the Polisario Front: Will the Security Council resolution resolve the Western Sahara issue or complicate it further?" *BBC Arabic*, 2/11/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPrt>

22 "Despite the pressures and maneuvers, Algeria restores balance to the Security Council resolution on Western Sahara," *Algerian Press Agency*, 31/10/2025, accessed 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPh5>.

which contradicts Algiers' traditional commitment to the option of self-determination. Secondly, and conversely, voting against it would have been understood as a rejection of the extension of MINURSO's mandate, which would amount to abandoning support for a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people – the organization of which was the main purpose for which the mission was established. Voting against the resolution would also have placed Algeria in direct confrontation with the US, the sponsor of the resolution, thus threatening the relative rapprochement in US-Algerian relations since Donald Trump's return to the White House.²³

International Positions

The US has put its weight behind accelerating the search for a final resolution to the Western Sahara conflict. It has intertwined motives in this regard. From one perspective, it sees the conflict as a source of chronic tension that threatens regional stability in North Africa and the Sahel, a pivotal region in the counter-terrorism strategy of Washington, which thus jeopardises vital US interests on the African continent.

Moreover, US support for the Moroccan position, which was clearly reflected in the text of the resolution, can be seen in the context of the Abraham Accords of 2020, under which Morocco normalized its relations with Israel in exchange for American recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Sahara. While American support for the resolution affirms the strategic alliance between the Washington and Rabat, it also reveals the limitations of the US rapprochement with Algeria in recent years, and exposes the unease with which the US views traditional Algerian-Russian-Chinese relations. Furthermore, neither the US role in pushing through the resolution nor US pressure for a swift resolution of the conflict can be separated from President Trump's personal desire to enhance his image as a peacemaker capable of resolving chronic conflicts that others have failed to solve.

In contrast, Russia and China abstained from voting on the resolution, expressing their reservations about the initial draft, which enshrined autonomy for the Western Sahara as the sole basis for negotiations. However, neither country used its veto power, in order to avoid obstructing the UN-sponsored political process. They made do with registering a symbolic objection to the Western approach. The same applies to Pakistan, which took a reserved position consistent with its historical stance on the Kashmir issue. As for China, it took a stance that aligned with its growing desire to maintain its economic influence in Morocco, and in Africa in general, which have become important links in the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing is also keen to avoid any direct confrontation with Western powers at the Security Council, especially given its preoccupation with other issues to which it attaches greater importance (such as the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and trade wars with the US).

Moscow's position appears not to be isolated from the growing coolness in Russian-Algerian relations since the start of Russia's war on Ukraine in 2021, when Algeria refrained from fully backing Russia,

²³ "Algeria and the United States: A New Era Towards a Strategic Partnership (Report)," *Anadolu Agency*, 31/7/2025, accessed on 11/11/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPbB>.

preferring instead to balance its relations with both Russia and the West. Accordingly, Algiers quickly cooperated with EU countries to increase its gas exports to them to compensate for shortfalls in the European market due to Western sanctions on Russia. In 2022, it abstained from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution demanding that Russia cease its use of force against Ukraine (rather than voting against it, as Russia had expected from its "strategic ally").

This coolness was further demonstrated by the BRICS bloc's rejection of Algeria's request for membership in 2023. Furthermore, the increasing Russian presence in the Sahel region, in the form of Wagner Group mercenaries, and Algeria's perception of that presence as a threat to regional stability, is driving another wedge into the growing gap between Moscow and Algiers.

However, there is another reason that prompted Russia to adopt this position: namely, its desire, since President Trump's return to the White House, to de-escalate tensions with Washington, especially over the question of Ukraine. Accordingly, Moscow appears to have been unwilling to enter into a confrontation with the US over the Western Sahara, an issue it sees as secondary to its core interests, especially at the risk of antagonizing President Trump, who may be on the verge of accepting Russia's territorial gains in Ukraine in exchange for a final settlement of that conflict.

Conclusion

Resolution 2797 represents a turning point in the course of the conflict in Western Sahara. It reflects a shift in the Security Council's discourse, exchanging calls for self-determination through a referendum for the principle of self-determination within the framework of the Moroccan autonomy plan. This represents a diplomatic gain for Morocco, while the Polisario Front faces increasing challenges, particularly given the erosion of its international recognition. The UN, meanwhile, faces the difficult task of translating the resolution into an effective negotiating process able to foster reconciliation between the two parties to the conflict and prevent a breakdown of the ceasefire. The US, for its part, is likely to exert pressure on the Polisario Front to engage constructively in forthcoming UN-led negotiations under Resolution 2797.