



North Africa Is Becoming A New Frontier For U.S.-China Competition

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Get ready. "Great power competition" is coming to the Maghreb.

During its time in office, the Trump administration elevated the concept of a strategic contest with the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as with Russia, to a central role in its foreign policy, codifying it into multiple strategic documents and national-level directives. That focus has since been embraced by the Biden administration as well, which appears to have understood the need for a "long term" strategy against Beijing.

This unfolding tug-of-war naturally has enormous implications for America's allies, all of whom have contacts with both nations. In recent years, many of these countries have attempted to balance the two relationships, with varying degrees of success. Even so, for some, such a balancing act is becoming more and more difficult to maintain.

Morocco provides a case in point. Despite its historic political ties to Washington, the Kingdom has assiduously tried to avoid entanglement in what it views as a bilateral U.S.-Chinese strategic contest. At times, officials have even gone so far as to joke that Morocco should revive the Non-Aligned Movement of the Cold War era as a way of avoiding having to make the difficult choice between Washington and Beijing. Rabat's anxiety is especially understandable given China's growing economic activism in Africa generally, and its sustained investments in recent years in Morocco in particular.

Yet the Kingdom's broader economic strategy is very clearly pulling it in the opposite direction. For roughly two decades, Morocco has pursued an ambitious approach to trade that is designed to transform it into a key logistical transshipment hub for goods entering and exiting Europe, as well as a facilitator of commerce throughout the African continent. The product of this vision, first articulated by King Mohammed VI in 2002, is the Tanger-Med port and industrial zone in the north of the country, which I had a chance to visit earlier this month when I traveled to the Kingdom at the invitation of the country's foreign ministry.

Situated some 30 kilometers to the east of Tangier along the Strait of Gibraltar, Tanger-Med was inaugurated in 2007 and has since blossomed into a global trade hub. Today, Tanger-Med ranks as the premier port in both Africa and the Mediterranean, and the 24th container port worldwide. The facility currently operates four separate terminals, and has a capacity of 9,000,000 containers annually. Moreover, construction of an adjunct facility, designed to store hydrocarbons for transshipment to Central and Eastern Europe, is now underway some 100 kilometers to the east. Notably, once that complex, officially known as the Nador West Med Port, becomes operational in approximately two years' time, it will have the potential to position Morocco as a potent antidote to Europe's current, deep dependence on Russia for its energy needs.

Tanger-Med is much more than simply a port, however. It is part of an "industrial platform" spanning 16 million square miles and designed to co-locate manufacturing for key global companies adjacent to export routes. The initiative has been ranked second in the world by the *Financial Times*, and encompasses six distinct zones of activity, including a free trade zone, an "automotive city" (dedicated to the manufacture of car parts), and the largest car plant in Africa, owned by French automaker Renault.

This sweeping economic venture promises to bring massive amounts of new business and investment to Morocco in the years ahead. Indeed, port officials are anticipating a surge of new activity as the pandemic subsides and global commerce picks up.

Yet this same dynamic is liable to become a double-edged sword for Rabat. In the United States, there is now growing attention from the federal government, Congress and the general public on the economic, political and strategic challenge posed by China. This focus, in turn, has been amplified by the course of the coronavirus pandemic, which has laid bare America's deep (and unhealthy) dependence on China for global commerce and vital goods. As the U.S. begins in earnest to consider "decoupling" its global supply chains from China, versatile facilities like Tanger-Med will inevitably grow in attractiveness.

All of which will make it more and more difficult for the Moroccan government to remain on the sidelines of the expanding global competition between the U.S. and the PRC in the years ahead. Officials in Rabat need to grasp this new dynamic – and to prepare for it.