



Sleepwalkers into War

Are Algeria and Morocco on the Path to Conflict?

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Policy Paper

Luiss Mediterranean Platform

Issue 2025/05 – June 2025



Abstract

This paper argues that the likelihood of a direct military conflict between Algeria and Morocco has significantly increased and could occur at any moment. It examines key indicators/factors suggesting that the two nations are “sleepwalking toward war.” The factors include the mounting pressures within the international system, conflicting visions and perceptions of security, and the deepening regional security dilemmas that fuel an insecurity spiral. Additionally, the fragility of economic interdependence and the stagnation of regional institutions exacerbate the situation, while the weaponization of common culture further inflames tensions. Drawing on insights from International Relations (IR) theories, the paper emphasizes the urgency of addressing this escalating tension. It contends that failure to address these issues could lead both countries – operating under a dangerous illusion of control – into a catastrophic war, with devastating consequences for themselves and the broader region.

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1. Introduction

Sleepwalking, while primarily classified as a sleep disorder rather than a psychological one, has been studied by psychologists due to its complex behavioural aspects. It involves a state in which the individual is caught between wakefulness and unconsciousness, potentially – although rarely – engaging in harmful or aggressive actions toward themselves or others without awareness. Sleepwalkers thus remain oblivious to their actions until they are fully awake.

In International Relations (IR), scholars like Christopher Clark¹ use the metaphor of “sleepwalkers into war” to describe nations that, much like sleepwalker patients, may be drawn into irrational and destructive conflicts, driven unconsciously by what they perceive as rational and conscious decisions. The true gravity of their actions only becomes clear once they are already entangled in war.

This metaphor was originally used to describe the period preceding World War I². However, it seems particularly relevant to the escalating tensions between Algeria and Morocco in recent years. While there are significant differences between the conditions in Europe before 1914 and the current situation in North Africa, many of the key features of the pre-1914 era have been increasingly reflected in the relations between Algeria and Morocco over recent years. Tensions have been steadily accumulating, with far-reaching negative impacts on the region, including stalling the much-needed regional economic integration. The rise of nationalism in both countries, coupled with growing pride and stubbornness, has led to a decline in moderation and a tendency toward continuous escalation.

This paper argues that the likelihood of a direct military conflict between Algeria and Morocco has significantly increased and, as a result, that war could occur at any moment. It examines key indicators suggesting that the two nations are “sleepwalking toward war.” The factors include the mounting pressures within the international system, conflicting visions and perceptions of security, and the deepening regional security dilemmas that fuel an insecurity spiral. Additionally, the fragility of economic interdependence and the stagnation of regional institutions exacerbate the situation, while the weaponization of common culture further inflames tensions.

¹ Christopher Clark, [*The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*](#), UK: Penguin, 1st ed., 2012.

² As Joseph S. Nye explains, this metaphor was first introduced by historians and international relations scholars to describe the period preceding World War I, when the major powers believed that their “conscious actions and purely rational calculations” in contested regions like the Balkans, or in efforts to expand their influence—such as the naval arms race between Germany and Britain—would define and decide the emerging balance of power. They viewed these maneuvers as preferable to remaining in a state of uncertainty and confusion. Even if such actions resulted in war, they believed it would be a short and limited conflict that would ultimately shape a favorable balance of power. However, what transpired was that these competitive moves culminated in a catastrophic global war, the consequences of which were far beyond what anyone had anticipated. The actions of the great powers were driven by the pressures of the anarchic international system, making it impossible to place sole blame on any one actor for the war and its outcomes. Rather, through their actions, reactions, and interactions on the regional and global stage, all the rival powers became collectively responsible for the outbreak of the war. See: Joseph S. Nye Jr., [“How not to Deal with a Rising China: a US Perspective”](#), *International Affairs*, vol. 98, no. 5, September 2022, pp. 1641–1643.

Although tensions and disputes between Algeria and Morocco have persisted for decades, the two nations have thus far avoided direct military confrontation (except for the short Sand War of 1963). What makes the prospect of direct war between them more plausible today? Have the factors identified in this paper reached a tipping point that could propel Algeria and Morocco into open conflict? The analysis conducted in this policy paper suggests that the above indicators have reached a critical point never seen in the history of the Algerian-Moroccan relationship and which could trigger war between the two countries at any given moment.

Drawing on insights from IR theories, this paper emphasizes the urgency of addressing this escalating tension. It contends that failure to address these issues could push both countries—operating under a dangerous illusion of control—into a catastrophic war, with devastating consequences for themselves and the broader region.

2. International Systemic Pressures: Conflicting Visions and Security Perceptions

The international level of analysis helps explain why Algeria and Morocco diverge in their foreign and security perspectives. It is also useful in explaining how the structure of the international system has contributed to this outcome.

Indeed, Algeria and Morocco, like all states, are subject to what realists call the pressures exerted by the structure of the international system. In essence, the absence of a supreme authority above states to protect them in times of threat compels these nations to rely on self-help for their security and survival³. According to realists, this is the essence of “anarchy” as a defining feature of the international system's structure. Anarchy in this context does not mean disorder or violence but refers to the absence of a hierarchical order among the main actors (i.e. states) in the international system. In an anarchic world, states enjoy genuine political sovereignty. As a result, power calculations dominate state behavior, and competition for power often takes on a zero-sum nature, sometimes intense and unforgiving. While cooperation between states can and does occur, the underlying dynamic is one of conflict over interests rather than harmony.

This anarchic structure strongly influences state behavior, but it does not fully dictate their actions, as might be assumed. As Kenneth Waltz⁴ famously noted, the system “encourages states to do some things and to refrain from doing others.” States are free to act recklessly, but ignoring the systemic imperatives can pose serious risks. Ultimately, the climate in which states operate—marked by strategic uncertainty—plays a significant role in shaping their security perceptions and defining the friend-enemy dichotomy (or determining who may become a friend or foe in the future). These perceptions are guided by past experiences and heavily influenced by historical memory.

After Algeria and Morocco succeeded in expelling foreign colonial powers from their territories in the 1950s and 1960s, the newly independent states pursued different strategic paths, shaped by the constraints of the bipolar international system of that era. Their independence coincided with the early phases of the Cold War, a period marked by sharp polarization between the Eastern and Western blocs. Algeria aligned itself with the Soviet Union, in opposition to Western imperialism, driven by a desire to break free from the legacy of French colonialism and Western influence. Conversely, Morocco moved closer to the Western bloc.

³ In this context, self-reliance manifests in forming alliances, building up military strength, and maintaining constant preparedness for war, especially in a volatile regional environment rife with crises that heighten the ever-present fear of potential aggression from other states, particularly those with historical precedents of invasion or hostility. See: John Mearsheimer, [“Realism, the Real World, and the Academy”](#), in *Realism and Institutionalism in International Studies*, University of Michigan Press, pp. 25–26.

⁴ Yuan-Kang Wang, [“Offensive Realism and the Rise of China”](#), *Issues & Studies*, 40(1): Institute of International Relations, National Chengchi University, Taiwan, 2004, p. 194.



Figure 1. Political map of Algeria, Morocco, and the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

Source: [Deutsche Welle \(DW\)](#), 2017.

These initial strategic choices represented a significant crossroads for both countries in the modern era. Over time, these decisions led to the development of distinct military doctrines and arsenals: Soviet-Russian for Algeria and Western-American for Morocco. Moreover, these choices shaped differing perspectives among the ruling elites of both states on global alignments, alliances, and sources of threat. They fostered contrasting security perceptions regarding the friend-enemy dichotomy. As a result, these early strategic decisions created security frameworks and perceptions that were sometimes entirely contradictory, despite the shared geography, history, language, culture, and religion of the two countries.

Despite the end of the Cold War and the decline of Algerian-Soviet relations in the 1990s – as well as Algeria’s efforts in the early 2000s to develop strategic ties with the United States (U.S.)⁵, effectively signaling a partial alignment with the Western-oriented security outlook embraced by Morocco—these shifts failed to meaningfully narrow the strategic divide between Algiers and Rabat. As discussed in the second part of this paper, enduring tensions and disputes—particularly the Western Sahara conflict and the prolonged border closure since 1994⁶— have continued to strain bilateral relations, leading to increasingly divergent security outlooks between the two countries.

In the early 2000s, Algeria rekindled its strategic partnership with the Russian Federation (the Soviet Union’s successor). By 2006, Russia and Algeria had finalized Moscow’s largest arms deal with a foreign country since the fall of the Soviet Union⁷. Additionally, Russia’s resurgence on the international stage

⁵ Arslan Chikhaoui, [“Algeria-U.S. Strategic Partnership”](#), *NESA Center Alumni Publication*, September 2, 2022.

⁶ Abdul Razzaq bin Abdullah, [“Timeline of Turbulent Algerian-Moroccan Relations”](#), *Anadolu Agency*, August 26, 2021.

⁷ Timofey Borisov, [“Russian Arms Exports in the Middle East”](#), ed. Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018), 38.

at the end of the first decade of the 21st century further strengthened⁸ its strategic ties with Algeria. This renewed relationship contributed to the reinforcement of Algeria's longstanding security perceptions, traditional military doctrine, strategic armament sources, and foreign policy orientations, which are clearly divergent from – and in competition with – Morocco's. Consequently, this deepened the divide between Algeria and Morocco, with each country's security perspective and military orientation becoming increasingly distinct.

Meanwhile, Morocco plays a crucial role in U.S. foreign policy in North Africa and the Sahel⁹ and has been designated a Major Non-NATO Ally since 2004¹⁰. Its NATO-oriented foreign and security policy¹¹ has positioned it in direct opposition to the core principles of Algeria's foreign and security doctrines¹², such as the right to self-determination and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

Morocco has supported Western-led military interventions in various regions, including the 1991 Iraq War¹³, the 1999 Kosovo conflict¹⁴, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015¹⁵, and the U.S. position on the Syrian conflict since 2012¹⁶. In contrast, Algeria has consistently opposed these interventions, as they conflict with its strategic interests – particularly in the African Sahel – and with the foreign policy principles mentioned above.¹⁷

Moreover, Morocco's attempts to assert sovereignty over Western Sahara since 1975 – at the expense of the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination – and its normalization of relations with Israel in 2020 – at the expense of Palestinian rights – directly clash with Algeria's commitment to the principle of self-determination for all peoples.

Today, amid significant global geopolitical shifts, the strategic outlooks of Algeria and Morocco are increasingly at odds. Algeria is drawing closer¹⁸ to the “emerging Eurasian powers”¹⁹ on the global stage, actively seeking membership in the BRICS²⁰ bloc led by Moscow and Beijing. In contrast, Morocco is once again positioning itself as a key player in the “free world” strategy spearheaded by Washington²¹–

⁸ Yahia Zoubir, “Algeria's Balancing Act between Historical Partnership with Russia and Independence”, *Institute for International Political Studies*, Italy, September 4, 2024.

⁹ Yahia Zoubir, “[American Policy in the Maghreb: The Conquest of a New Region?](#)”, *Real Instituto Elcano*, Spain, July 24, 2006, p. 25.

¹⁰ Yahia Zoubir, “[American Policy in the Maghreb: The Conquest of a New Region?](#)”, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *The Moroccan American Center for Policy*, “[Morocco's Military and Security Alliance with the United States](#)”, 2014.

¹² Yahia Mohamed Lamine Mestek, “[The Algerian Foreign Policy Facing Upheavals in the Mediterranean Region](#)”, *Voice of Law Journal*, vol. 7, pt. 2, Algeria, 2017, p. 96.

¹³ *The Moroccan American Center for Policy*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Reuters, “[Morocco Backs Saudi Coalition in Yemen](#)”, March 27, 2015.

¹⁶ France 24, “[Morocco Expels Syrian Ambassador](#)”, July 16, 2012.

¹⁷ Geoff D. Porter, “[Questioning Algeria's Non-Interventionism](#)”, *Politique Étrangère* 3: 2015, pp. 2–3.

¹⁸ Malek Mousli, “[Algerian-Russian Cooperation: True Strategic Partnership?](#)”, *Vestnik Rudn International Relations* 19(2): 284–292, 2019.

¹⁹ John Calabrese, “[“The New Algeria” and China](#)”, Middle East Institute, US, January 26, 2021.

²⁰ Reuters, “[Algeria Applies to Join BRICS, Would Contribute \\$1.5 Billion to Group Bank](#)”, July 21, 2023.

²¹ Alexis Arieff, *Morocco: Background and U.S. Relations*, US: Congressional Research Service, September 30, 2021.

much like it did during the Cold War.²² This growing divergence is likely to deepen the strategic rift between the two neighbours, heightening the risk of serious tensions as global polarization between competing blocs—the USA/West versus China/Russia—intensifies.

²² Algeria's pursuit of BRICS membership reflects its firm commitment to a geopolitical alignment with the emerging powers bloc—chiefly China and Russia—by deepening its security, military, and economic ties with these key players, rather than pivoting toward the United States and the Western bloc. This strategic choice gains greater relevance amid intensifying international polarization, particularly between Russia and the West due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, as well as the looming prospect of a renewed trade war between China and the U.S. following the return of Donald Trump. In contrast, Morocco has continued to strengthen its strategic relations with the United States and key Western European countries, especially France and Spain. Furthermore, since the 2020 Abraham Accords, Morocco has normalized diplomatic ties with Israel—while Algeria neither recognizes nor trusts Israel, viewing it as a potential threat. Since then, Rabat has signed a series of security and military agreements with Israel and expanded bilateral trade—moves that Algeria perceives as part of a hostile strategy aimed at gradually encircling it along its western frontier. See: Yahia H. Zoubir, Xuanrong Wu, [“Algeria at the BRICS’ Doorstep: A Journey of Aspirations and Opportunities”](#), *The Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, December 17, 2023; and: Djallel Khechib, [“The Guerquerat Crisis: Why Does Algeria Feel the Threat of War?”](#), *Afaq DZ Center*, February 15, 2021, p. 4.

3. Escalating Regional Security Dilemmas and Insecurity Spiral

At the regional level, the divergence between Algeria and Morocco is more apparent. This divide is reflected in their foreign and security strategies across North Africa, the Sahel and the broader continent. The rift is particularly evident in their respective policies towards the Western Sahara conflict.

After Morocco gained independence in 1956, its political borders remained fluid and undefined. The country laid territorial claims to what is now Mauritania, the Western Sahara, as well as aspirations to annex the neighbouring Algerian regions of Tindouf and Béchar, both rich in resources. Morocco's ambitions even extended as far south as the Senegal River and parts of modern-day Mali, reflecting the vision of a "Greater Morocco"²³ theorized by Allal al-Fassi, a politician from the Istiqlal Party, in 1949. This vision was later embraced by King Mohammed V in 1958, who invoked historical narratives to legitimize these claims, asserting that these territories had once belonged to Morocco under the Sharifian Sultanate (the Sultanate of Morocco) during the 17th century, before European colonization of North Africa, or even earlier under the Almohad dynasty in the 12th century and the Almoravid dynasty in the 11th century.

In contrast, Algeria recognized the political borders encompassing the territories it had liberated from French colonial rule as its fixed and legitimate boundaries. It firmly adhered to the principle of respecting inherited colonial-era borders,²⁴ seeing this as the most effective way to ensure stability across Africa. From Algeria's perspective, reviving ancient claims to territories that belonged to former empires was seen as "political fantasy," a dangerous notion that could lead to endless conflicts and instability in various parts of the world.²⁵

In 1963, Morocco launched a war against Algeria, known as the Sand War²⁶, with the objective of seizing the Tindouf region, a resource-rich area in western Algeria. This occurred just a year after Algeria gained independence, as Morocco sought to take advantage of Algeria's vulnerable, newly formed military, still recovering from a brutal 130-year colonial period. Algeria viewed Morocco's actions as an act of aggression, marking this conflict as the first major negative event in its modern relationship with

²³ Konrad Banaś, ["An Independent Country or a Part of Morocco? The Issue of the Independence of Mauritania"](#), *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 2020; Adriana Kalicka-Mikołajczyk, ["The international legal status of Western Sahara"](#), *Opole Studies in Administration and Law, Uniwersytet Wrocławski* 18(4), 2020; UN Department of Political Affairs, Trusteeship and Decolonization, ["The Question of Western Sahara at the United Nations"](#), Publication No. 17, October 1980; and Robert E. Handloff (ed.), ["Background to Mauritanian Policy"](#), in *Mauritania: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1988.

²⁴ Hamid Zaidi, ["Principle of the Intangibility of Colonial Borders in the Face of the Challenges of Legal and Political Stability of the States of North Africa"](#), *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences*, 14(1), April 2023, pp. 58–71.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 63–65.

²⁶ Karen Farsoun and Jim Paul, ["War in the Sahara: 1963"](#), *Middle East Research and Information Project*, March 1976, pp. 13–16.

its western neighbours. This war continues to shape Algeria's political elites' perceptions, who view Morocco as a "predatory neighbours with unstable borders"²⁷.

The 1963 Sand War concluded with an African Union (AU)-brokered ceasefire, leading to a mutual withdrawal of forces and the release of prisoners. While Morocco held temporary control over strategic locations like Hassi Beida and Tinjoub, it failed to secure lasting territorial gains. Algeria, despite its military disadvantage, emerged diplomatically strengthened and more unified domestically. The conflict entrenched deep-rooted tensions between Algeria and Morocco, setting the stage for future disputes, most notably over Western Sahara.²⁸

The Sand War of 1963 also marked a key turning point in the military and strategic direction of both countries. It became a significant factor driving them toward military buildup, either to safeguard national security or to prepare for a potential future conflict. This dynamic pushed both countries into what security studies scholars call the "security dilemma". In such a scenario, security measures taken by one state (such as the acquisition of arms for defensive purposes) are perceived by the other as offensive moves, threatening its national security and prompting reciprocal actions. In this context, the security perceptions of decision-makers play a decisive role. The security dilemma has been a defining feature of Algerian-Moroccan relations since the 1960s and has intensified over time. Tensions escalated further when Morocco declared Western Sahara as an inseparable part of its territory and organized the "Green March"²⁹ in 1975 to assert this claim. Since then, the two neighbours have remained locked in a cycle of mutual distrust and rivalry.

Despite subsequent diplomatic and cooperative efforts to prevent further deterioration of relations,³⁰ deep-seated mistrust has continued to shape the security perceptions of both nations' elites, influencing their policies and interactions. As a result, disputes between Algeria and Morocco have escalated, further widening their strategic divide.

Over time, this divide has evolved into a regional rivalry for influence and status, particularly in neighbouring countries and across Africa. This competition intensified after Morocco's return to the AU in 2017, following a recognition of the futility of the long-standing "empty chair" policy that the country had followed since 1984. By adopting a new, more proactive African policy, Morocco re-entered the

²⁷ Hasni Abidi and Aboubakr Jamai, "[Western Sahara Figures Prominently in Algeria-Morocco Tensions](#)", Arab Center Washington DC, November 4, 2021.

²⁸ Djallil Lounnas and Nizar Messari, "[Algeria-Morocco Relations and their Impact on the Maghrebi Regional System](#)", MENARA Working Paper No. 20, Institute of International Affairs, October 2018, Italy, p: 5; See also: Ana Torres-Garcia, "[US diplomacy and the North African 'War of the Sands' \(1963\)](#)", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 18(2), 2013, pp. 328-29.

²⁹ Gabriel Davis, "[Morocco's Double Infallibility: The Intergenerational Peril of the 1975](#)", *Jadaliyya*, August 11, 2020.

³⁰ Efforts such as (i) the establishment of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989, aimed at "reinforc[ing] the bonds of fraternity binding the member states and their peoples [and] contribut[ing] to the maintenance of peace based on justice and equity." One of its core objectives was "to achieve concord between the member states and promote close diplomatic cooperation based on dialogue"; and (ii) the inauguration of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG) in 1996, which transported Algerian natural gas to Morocco, Spain and Portugal. This strategic infrastructure was intended to consolidate the western Mediterranean through shared interests and foster trust among neighbours, especially Algeria and Morocco. See: Haizam Amirah-Fernández, "[The Maghreb: Regional Disintegration and the Risks of the Zero-sum Logic](#)", *Real Instituto Elcano*, July 20, 2023.

continental stage, further escalating its rivalry with Algeria. The tension became more pronounced as Algeria had been pursuing an active African policy since President Bouteflika came to power in 1999. As a result, both the AU as an institution and the continent as a whole have once again become key arenas for geopolitical rivalry between Rabat and Algiers. Each state has cultivated distinct alliances with conflicting interests, and their strategies have diverged into open opposition.³¹

This situation threatens to erode the already fragile regional system, driving both nations into prolonged diplomatic, economic, and intelligence clashes—possibly even military conflict. The escalating arms race between Algeria and Morocco is a clear indicator of this dynamic. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), which tracks global arms transfers, from 2017 to 2021, Algeria and Morocco ranked 11th and 25th worldwide in terms of major conventional arms imports³². Together, the two countries import more arms than the entire African continent combined. This surge in militarization only serves to intensify the “security dilemma”, as both countries perceive each other’s buildup as a threat, leading to further escalation.

The most critical issue arises when diplomatic solutions and proposed compromises lose their effectiveness, resulting in stalemates with little hope of resolution. In such cases, one or both parties may become disillusioned with diplomacy, believing that the time has come to end the deadlock through more assertive actions or alternatives. They may think these moves will shift the power balance in their favour. This scenario is what Joseph Nye refers to as “dissatisfaction with peace”³³, which he identifies as a key factor that led to the unravelling of moderation in power dynamics among the great powers before World War I, ultimately culminating in war. At that time, despite several intense crises, the great powers had not fought a direct war against each other for forty years. However, they began to see diplomatic settlements as increasingly frustrating, with many leaders coming to believe that swift, decisive victories in wars by the stronger side could bring about welcome change.

This psychological pattern is now observable in the dynamics between Algeria and Morocco. The two countries have not engaged in direct conflict since the brief Sand War of 1963, but over time, frustration has mounted over the lack of progress in resolving their long-standing disputes through diplomatic means. Frustration reached its peak in 2021 when Algeria severed diplomatic ties with Morocco after the latter normalized relations with Israel in exchange for U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara under the Trump administration. Algeria viewed this move as Morocco leveraging great power influence to impose its will, bypassing diplomatic norms and international law. As a result, Algeria has become increasingly convinced of the need for a stronger, more assertive foreign policy³⁴, adopting a firmer alignment with the Moscow-Beijing axis, while still rhetorically emphasizing its non-aligned stance.

³¹ Haizam Amirah-Fernández, [“Morocco Returns to the African Union amidst Unresolved Issues”](#), op. cit.

³² Haizam Amirah-Fernández, [“The Maghreb: Regional Disintegration and the Risks of the Zero-sum Logic”](#), op. cit.

³³ Joseph S. Nye Jr., [“How not to Deal with a Rising China: a US Perspective”](#), op. cit., p. 1642.

³⁴ Djallel Khechib, [“Why Algeria’s Foreign Policy Should be More Restrained”](#), *Middle East Eye*, July 9, 2023.

This shift reflects Algeria's belief that strategic decisiveness, and a tougher stance are necessary in the face of what it perceives as an increasingly imbalanced regional power dynamic. Thus, the two neighbours have essentially fallen into what Joshua Shiffrin and Emma Ashford describe as the "Insecurity Spiral"³⁵, a phenomenon that often culminates in war. It ensues when the choices one country makes to advance its interests end up imperilling the interests of another country, which responds in kind. The result is a potentially vicious cycle of unintended escalation.

History has seen this dynamic before³⁶, most notably in the early 20th century when Germany's attempt to build a global navy threatened Britain's maritime dominance. Britain responded by bolstering its own naval forces, which in turn prompted Germany to increase its naval capabilities further. This escalating competition contributed to the outbreak of World War I. A contemporary example of this phenomenon is the current state of U.S.-Russia relations. Since the end of the Cold War, both nations have engaged in a gradual escalation, each seeking to reshape European security according to their own interests while trying to limit the other's influence. These developments contributed to the escalation of the Ukraine conflict in 2022, a crisis with increasingly serious implications for global security.

The negative interactions between Algeria and Morocco over the years, and the subsequent responses, suggest that both countries are ensnared in a similar security spiral. This dynamic sets the stage for a potential conflict, as each nation's actions and reactions contribute to an escalating cycle of insecurity.

4. Fragility of Economic Interdependence and Stagnation of Regional Institutions

The fragile nature of interdependence between Algeria and Morocco reflects not only the weakness of their economic and trade ties but also a troubling lack of strong deterrents against conflict escalation or the outbreak of war. Historically, mutual interdependence has served as a powerful incentive for states to avoid confrontation, as both sides seek to preserve the shared benefits such ties bring. Proponents of liberal theory in international relations argue that "interdependence in world politics would be [a] war-preventive force. A policy of growing interdependence, therefore, is supposed to lead to a situation characterized by 'stable peace'; which means the absence not only of war, but also of the threat of war, the preparation for war and the expectation of war."³⁷

When the economies of two or more states are interconnected and mutually dependent, their leaders are more likely to prioritize diplomatic solutions to resolve political tensions, as the prospect of war would be an irrational choice that could harm all parties involved.

³⁵ Emma Ashford and Joshua Shiffrin, "[How the War in Ukraine Could Get Much Worse](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, March 8, 2022.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jaap de Wilde, "[Promises of Interdependence: Risks and Opportunities](#)", *Bulletin of Peace Proposals*, 1988, p. 159.

Those scholars offer several empirical examples³⁸ from both historical and contemporary contexts. A prominent example is the intricate economic interdependence between China and Taiwan,³⁹ which is seen as a significant factor preventing Beijing from launching an invasion despite its superior military power. Another example is the current relationship among the industrial capitalist nations of Western Europe,⁴⁰ where the prospect of war is almost inconceivable, in stark contrast to the centuries before World War II. This is due to the complex economic and trade relationships and interdependence established through the European integration process.

In contrast, scholars point to the relationship between the West and Russia as an example of the opposite dynamic. The interdependence between these two parties is relatively limited.⁴¹ With no complex network of economic relations between Western Europe and Russia, enmity prevails, and mutual deterrence serves as the primary form of interdependence—while the possibility of war remains a constant concern.

Proponents of liberal institutionalism share a similar viewpoint⁴². They reject the notion of inevitable international anarchy—an idea endorsed by realists—which leads to unavoidable conflict and security dilemmas among rival states. Instead, they argue that international and regional institutions (such as the United Nations and its agencies, the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations—ASEAN—and others), by increasing interstate cooperation, have the capacity to mitigate uncertainty and mistrust between states, thereby reducing the intensity of conflicts among competitors. Consequently, the absence or dysfunction of such institutions is believed to heighten the risk of severe crises and wars.

For example, Margaret Pearson's analysis of China's integration into major global and regional economic institutions reveals that these organizations have effectively engaged China, encouraging it to "play by the rules" and avoid aggressive behaviour towards its neighbors.⁴⁶ These institutions serve as platforms for states to demonstrate their peaceful intentions and commitment to build stable relations with other major powers, as argued by Goldstein, Zhand, and Tang.⁴⁷

Examining the state of economic interdependence between Algeria and Morocco (or North African countries more broadly) and evaluating the effectiveness of existing regional institutions presents a discouraging picture. To start, the Arab Maghreb Union⁴⁸ has been in a state of stagnation since its last

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Jeremy Mark and Niels Graham, [“Relying on Old Enemies: The challenge of Taiwan’s Economic Ties to China”](#), Atlantic Council, November 17, 2023.

⁴⁰ Floris de Witte, [“Interdependence and Contestation in European Integration”](#), *European Papers* 13(2), 2018, pp. 475–509.

⁴¹ Jaap de Wilde, op. cit.

⁴² John J. Mearsheimer, [“The False Promise of International Institutions”](#), *International Security* 19(3), Winter 1994–1995, pp. 5–49.

⁴⁶ Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, [“Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities”](#), *International Studies Quarterly*, 2012, pp. 156–164.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Established in 1989, the Union aimed to “reinforce the bonds of fraternity binding the member states and their peoples, contribute to the maintenance of peace based on justice and equity... and achieve concord between the member states and promote close diplomatic cooperation based on dialogue.” See: Haizam Amirah-Fernández, [“The Maghreb: Regional Disintegration and the Risks of the Zero-sum Logic”](#), op. cit.

summit in 1994. Regional trade between the five member states in 2021 stood at a mere 2.4% of the group’s total trade, one of the world’s lowest percentages of intra-regional trade.⁴⁹

Trade dynamics between Algeria and Morocco are currently at a low point, especially when compared to trade levels with the three northern Mediterranean countries: France, Spain, and Italy. Over the past 5 years (2018-2023), annual exports from Algeria to Morocco have decreased from \$742M in 2018 to \$64.2M in 2023.⁵⁰ Over the same five-year period, Morocco's exports to Algeria have fallen from \$174M in 2018 to \$64.5M in 2023⁵¹.

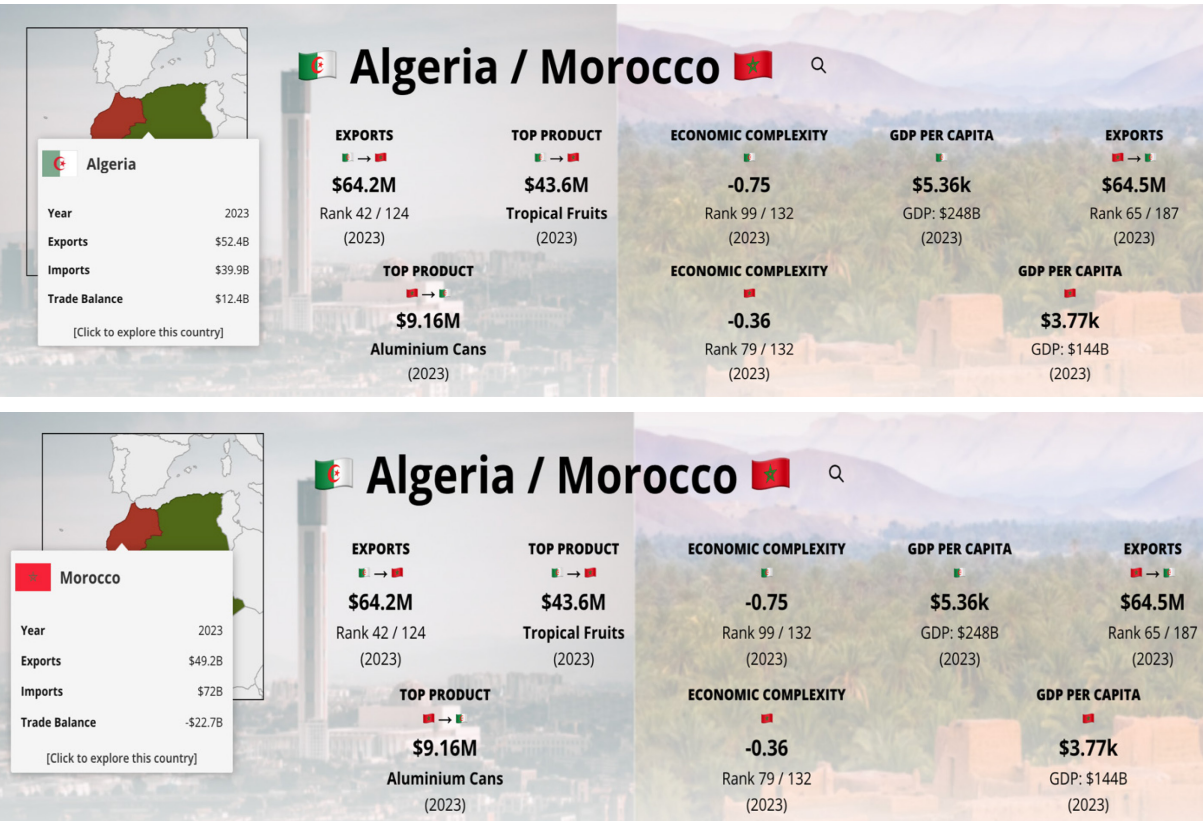


Figure 2. Algeria-Morocco exports and imports.
Source: [The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), 2025.

⁴⁹- Ibid.
⁵⁰ “[Algeria/Morocco](#)”, The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025.
⁵¹ Ibid.

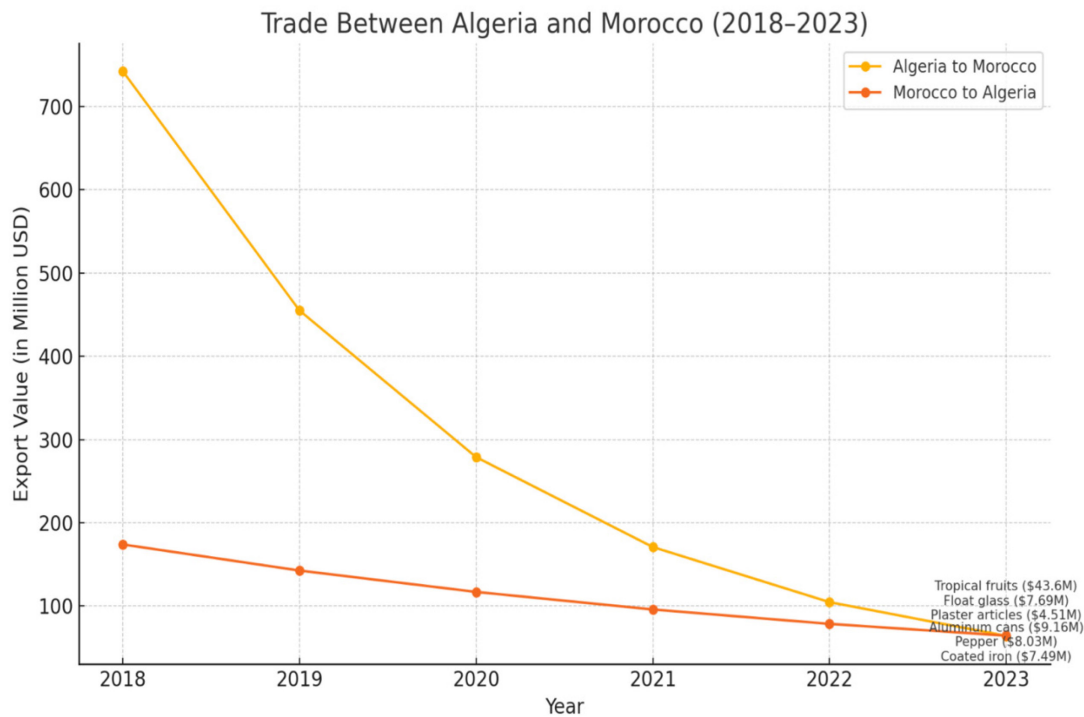


Figure 3. Trade between Morocco and Algeria.

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from [The Observatory of Economic Complexity](#), 2025.

These figures clearly show that both Algeria and Morocco have significantly broader trade and economic ties with northern Mediterranean countries—France, Spain, and Italy—compared to their mutual trade and economic interactions with each other. Trade volumes between Algeria and Morocco and Europe far surpass the economic exchanges between the two neighbouring countries. According to data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in 2023, Morocco imported \$64.2 million worth of goods from Algeria, while its imports from France totalled \$7.32 billion; from Spain \$11.7 billion, and from Italy \$3.73 billion. Conversely, Algeria imported \$64.5 million worth of goods from Morocco, while its imports from France amounted to \$4.63 billion, from Spain \$356 million; and from Italy \$3.03 billion. Yet, in 2023, France imported goods worth \$7.29 billion from Algeria and \$8.23 billion from Morocco; Spain imported \$6.73 billion worth of goods from Algeria and \$9.8 billion from Morocco; and Italy's imports from Algeria amounted to \$15.2 billion, while imports from Morocco were \$2.18 billion in the same year.

The creation of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989 aimed at fostering economic cooperation among North African countries. Today, however, there is very limited hope of revitalizing the AUM due to escalating crises, particularly between Algeria and Morocco. Relations between the two countries were severed because of a profound lack of trust, rendering the dream of regional integration increasingly distant. Current data on trade volumes and the level of economic interdependence between the two countries not only suggest diminishing prospects for regional integration but also highlight that decision-makers in both countries face minimal economic consequences from deteriorating relations, as there is no substantial interdependence to deter potential conflict.

The situation between Algeria and Morocco, as well as in the broader Maghreb region, worsened significantly after the Guerguerat crisis in the fall of 2020⁴³ and Morocco's normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel around that same period.

One of the most significant measures was the Algerian announcement in November 2021 of the closure of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline (MEG), which transported Algerian natural gas to Morocco, Spain, and Portugal. Established in 1996,⁴⁴ the pipeline was intended to enhance cooperation in the western Mediterranean by focusing on mutual interests, building trust among neighbours, and particularly between Algeria and Morocco. According to some scholars⁴⁵, “if that was the Maghreb’s equivalent of the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, (given the importance of that organization to the formation of the EU), the closure of the MEG after a 25-year transit deal between the two neighbours expired without renewal represented, in a way, the death certificate of that attempt of region-building through shared prosperity.”

As of June 2025, the gas pipeline between Algeria and Morocco remains closed, along with the land borders and airspace, and diplomatic relations between the two countries have been severed. Tensions are rising, with each side seizing any opportunity to accuse the other of hostility. In February 2022, Morocco established a new military zone along its border with Algeria⁴⁶, while Algeria conducted numerous live-fire military exercises near the Moroccan border. In March 2023, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared in an interview that relations between the two countries had “practically reached a point of no return”⁴⁷.

⁴³ Djallel Khechib, “[The Guerguerat Crisis: Why Does Algeria Feel the Threat of War?](#)”, op. cit.

⁴⁴ Haizam Amirah-Fernández, “[The Maghreb: Regional Disintegration and the Risks of the Zero-sum Logic](#)”, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

5. The Perils of Weaponizing Culture

Culture, in its broadest sense, can play a pivotal role in alleviating tensions between nations when it is leveraged to shift negative perceptions. This is particularly true when the nations in question share common cultural ties. However, the final section of this paper illustrates how even the shared cultural heritage between Algeria and Morocco has become a source of tension and contention.

Hans Gullestrup defines culture as: “the worldview and the values, rules, moral norms, and actual conduct –as well as the material and immaterial products and symbols related thereto- that are inherited from the previous ‘generation’; which they try to pass over to the next ‘generation’ and which in one or the other form differentiates them from human beings belonging to another culture.”⁴⁸ Samuel Huntington adds that culture encompasses: “the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society.”⁴⁹

In theory, shared cultural elements provide a strong foundation for cooperation and reconciliation, while the likelihood of conflict or war between them remains relatively low. Many scholars in international relations present compelling arguments supporting this view. For example, regional integration theorists emphasize the role of culture in forming and reinforcing regional unions, noting that regions with greater cultural and value-based homogeneity are more likely to achieve successful integration and institutional cohesion. A clear example is how Arabic language and culture contribute to the relative cohesion of the Arab League, despite the political divisions among its members. Similarly, shared Western liberal values have played a crucial role in maintaining the cohesion of the European Union since its founding. In addition, regional unions often invoke shared culture or common values in their rhetoric during major crises and conflicts. This has been evident in the European Union's discourse since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war⁵⁰. Thus, culture can play a positive role not only in building regional integration but also in strengthening and maintaining its cohesion during crises.

Karl Deutsch, a leading theorist of integration, along with other scholars, identified five “essential requirements” for establishing an *Amalgamated Security Community* (ASC), with shared values being one of them. In their case studies, they “found in all our cases a compatibility of the main values held by the politically relevant strata of all participating units... Values were most effective politically when they were not held merely in abstract terms, but when they were incorporated in political institutions and in habits of political behaviour which permitted these values to be acted on in such a way as to strengthen people’s attachment to them. This connection [...] we call a ‘way of life’, and it turned out to be crucial”⁵¹.

⁴⁸ Søren Dosenrode, [“On Culture and Regional Integration”](#), *Center for Comparative Integration Studies (CCIS)*, Aalborg University, Denmark, 2008, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Maxime Lefebvre, [“The European Union and the war in Ukraine: Liberal Power and its Limits”](#), The Robert Schuman Foundation, January 9, 2023.

⁵¹ Søren Dosenrode, op. cit., p. 15.

In the case of North Africa, particularly between Algeria and Morocco, the two countries share deep-rooted cultural bonds, including Islam, the Maliki school of thought, the Arabic and Amazigh languages, and ethnic identities. Even their mentalities are strikingly similar. In many ways, they resemble one people divided by two neighbouring states. However, rather than fostering unity, these shared values and cultural ties have increasingly become sources of division, fuelling tension instead of reconciliation. Politicians, elites, and media outlets on both sides have weaponized these shared cultural elements, a trend echoed even among ordinary citizens on social media. What ought to be a unifying force capable of easing political tensions has instead been exploited to deepen divisions.

Moreover, shared cultural heritage has become a battleground for regional competition. Both governments have increasingly instrumentalized culture as a tool in their rivalry—a dynamic that can be described as “weaponization of culture”⁵². For example, both Algeria and Morocco have submitted competing claims to UNESCO,⁵³ seeking exclusive recognition of certain dishes, traditional clothing, or art forms as part of their national heritage. Examples include disputes over the origins of Couscous, the Caftan,⁵⁴ Raï music,⁵⁵ and Zellige tilework,⁵⁶ etc.⁵⁷ This ongoing competition promotes the idea that such cultural symbols are the sole property of one country, exacerbating tensions and risking the escalation of so-called “cultural wars”⁵⁸. Instead of being a bridge between the two countries, this shared heritage is becoming a wedge, threatening to further divide them.

The weaponization of culture has deepened over time, extending beyond official discourse and state actions to permeate the social fabric of both Algeria and Morocco. This dynamic is evident in the accusations and insults exchanged between citizens on social media platforms⁵⁹, as well as in rap songs⁶⁰ viewed by millions of young people on YouTube. Whenever political tensions or incidents arise between the two countries, individuals on both sides take to these platforms to express their anger, often accusing the other of appropriating elements of their exclusive national heritage. This quickly spirals into populist debates filled with insults and accusations about the other country’s history or its dubious relationships with the region and the world. Even intellectuals, artists, and social media influencers from both countries have been drawn into these exchanges, often overlooking the possibility

⁵² For more, see: James Miller, [“Weaponized Culture: Problems With Soft Power”](#), University of Westminster, London September 2013.

⁵³ Idriss Jebari, [“Couscous, Kaftans, and Culture Wars: Algeria and Morocco at UNESCO”](#), *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, November 4, 2024.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Leela Jacinto, [“Algeria, Morocco Sing a Rival Song for Possession of ‘Raï’ Music”](#), *France 24*, France, September 8, 2016.

⁵⁶ [“Algeria Showcases Zellige Exhibition, Amid Adidas Jersey Row with Morocco”](#), *Middle East Monitor*, UK, October 12, 2022.

⁵⁷ Tamara Ryzhenkova, [“Loathing in the sands: Provoked by European Colonizers, These two African Nations are Now at Each other’s Throats”](#), *Russia Today*, Russia, August 17, 2024.

⁵⁸ For more, see: Zora Hesova, [“Three Types of Culture Wars and the Populist Strategies in Central Europe”](#), *Politologický časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science*, 28(2), June 2021. Poland, p.130-150.

And : Irene Taviss Thomson, [Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas](#), The University of Michigan Press, 2010, USA.

⁵⁹ Fadwa Islah, [“Algeria–Morocco: Is Cultural Heritage the New Battleground?”](#), *The Africa Report*, France, November 17, 2021.

⁶⁰ [“Clash Rap DZ vs Rap Maroc”](#), *Jow Radio on YouTube*, Algeria, October 20, 2021.

that they are being manipulated by fake news or incitement campaigns orchestrated by third parties or those with narrow interests. The outcome is a growing atmosphere of hostility and distrust, not only between the Algerian and Moroccan governments, but also between the two peoples.

6. Conclusion: Is War on the Horizon? and Are there Still Ways to Avoid it?

International relations scholars often liken war to a devastating earthquake: while experts can estimate its potential magnitude, location, and resulting damage, they cannot predict its exact timing.

The prospect of a direct military confrontation between Algeria and Morocco exists, the key indicators, factors, and dynamics explored in this paper suggest that the likelihood of such a conflict is growing. A war could potentially erupt at any moment. Even minor incidents or seemingly insignificant events could act as catalysts, given the deeply entrenched and escalating tensions at both the official and popular levels. The foundation for such a conflict has been in place for some time.

The growing rift between Algeria and Morocco is evident across all dimensions. Their grand strategic interests are fundamentally opposed, their perceptions of allies and enemies are nearly irreconcilable, and mistrust is at a high point. The Western Sahara issue remains unresolved, and there is no complex economic interdependence between the two countries that could act as a deterrent, compelling policymakers to pause before considering armed conflict. Furthermore, the shared cultural heritage and common values that should have been sources of unity between the two peoples are now being weaponized by politicians. Rather than fostering reconciliation, these cultural ties have become tools in a regional rivalry, fueling narrow nationalist sentiments. This growing antagonism contrasts with the hope of intellectuals and some elites who still believe that these shared ties could bridge the gap and undo the political damage.

The cumulative effect of these tensions points toward the two countries sleepwalking toward war. While both may be unaware of the destructive trajectory they are on, the factors identified in this paper have reached a critical point where war seems increasingly likely.

Despite this grim outlook, there remains an opportunity for de-escalation. A course correction is still possible if both countries' leaders can rise above entrenched positions and reconsider their relationship. By rethinking their approach, recognizing the immense potential for cooperation, and embracing a shared vision in the face of pressing regional challenges and shifting global geopolitics, Algeria and Morocco could move beyond their current rivalry, contributing to a more stable and prosperous future for both nations and the broader region.

Several scholars of international relations have argued that war is not an inevitable outcome for rival states, regardless of the intensity of their competition. One of the most notable contemporary contributions to this debate is Graham Allison's "Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?", in which he argues that war -especially between great powers- has not been historically inevitable. At the end of the book, Allison proposes 12 ideas for peace and conflict prevention, offering practical, historically grounded measures to avoid confrontation between today's

major powers, particularly the U.S. and China.⁶¹ He also leads a research project at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government focused on "Avoiding Great Power War,"⁶² underscoring his belief that conflict is ultimately a matter of political choice, not historical determinism.

Furthermore, the leadership in Algeria and Morocco could benefit from Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), which began to develop in the 1970s, initially within the context of managing Cold War tensions in Europe. These measures included military-diplomacy, economic, cultural, and social exchanges aimed at reducing mistrust and promoting dialogue. Since then, CBMs have been adapted to various regional conflicts, and many have yielded tangible success. CBMs are designed to mitigate uncertainty, prevent both deliberate and inadvertent escalation, and foster mutual confidence among states. They can be formal or informal, unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral, and may involve military, political, or non-governmental actors.⁶³ CBMs are especially relevant in protracted political stalemates, where they help make state behavior more predictable and accountable, enabling parties to anticipate each other's actions with greater clarity and reduced suspicion.⁶⁴ CBMs give each party assurance that the other is not preparing for surprise military action or pursuing policies associated with such future action. Mutual confidence is crucial to reducing the likelihood of violent confrontations. In addition, such measures can allow for new institutional arrangements that pave the way for more peaceful relations. Also, confidence-building measures can be crucial tools in preventive diplomacy. Parties who mutually recognize existing boundaries and work together to build confidence are far less likely to enter into deadly conflict.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014, pp. 182-207.

⁶² Graham Allison, *Avoiding Great Power War Project Paper Series*, Harvard Kennedy School, December 2021.

⁶³ "Confidence-Building Measures", Center for Strategic and International Studies-CSIS, accessed: April 11, 2025.

⁶⁴ Holly Higgins, "Applying Confidence-Building Measures in a Regional Context", Institute for Science and International Security, p. 109.

⁶⁵ Michelle Maiese, "Confidence-Building Measures", The Conflict Information Consortium (CIC), September 2003.

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