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## **MOROCCO, CHINA AND EUROPEAN UNION RELATIONS ON GREEN AND TRANSITION MINERALS**

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### **Abstract:**

This research explores how Morocco is strategically engaging with both the European Union and China to develop its mineral resources, crucial for the global energy transition and technological innovation. It examines Morocco's strategies to balance these partnerships, as well as the opportunities and challenges facing Chinese and European investors in the Moroccan mining sector. Through expert interviews and policy analysis, the study compares Chinese and European Union approaches to investment and highlights lessons for the European Union to strengthen its role as a key partner amid rising competition. It also assesses how regional integration in North Africa influences Morocco's mineral diplomacy and external relations. The findings offer insights into how Morocco leverages its resources to assert agency, advance sustainable development, and navigate global competition, contributing to debates on resource governance, foreign investment, and North-South partnerships.

**Keywords:** Critical Minerals, Energy Geopolitics, Energy Transition, Resource Governance

## **I. Introduction**

The accelerating global transition towards green and digital technologies is fueling an unprecedented demand for Critical Raw Materials (CRMs), indispensable for a wide range of strategic industries, including renewable energy, electric vehicles, and defense. Phosphates, cobalt, fluorite, and other CRMs are essential inputs in technologies such as batteries, wind turbines, and semiconductors. Against this backdrop, global powers such as the European Union (EU) and China are engaged in an increasingly intense competition to secure stable, diversified, and reliable access to these materials, which are crucial for their respective green and digital transitions, as well as for broader industrial sovereignty (European Commission, 2023).

This scramble for CRMs has ushered in a new era of resource geopolitics. Traditional patterns of global resource governance, once dominated by hydrocarbon-based dependencies, are now being reshaped by the competition for mineral sovereignty. Countries and regions such as the European Union (EU), China, the United States, and India are not only racing to secure long-term supply contracts and invest in upstream extraction, but are also reformulating trade, industrial, and environmental policies to reflect a growing concern over strategic autonomy and the weaponization of supply chains (European Commission, 2023). Within this context, the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) adopted by the EU and China's "Going Global" mining strategy exemplify a proactive reconfiguration of external economic relations, prioritizing resilience, risk mitigation, and geopolitical leverage.

Morocco occupies a pivotal role in this emerging landscape. The country possesses approximately 70 % of the world's known phosphate reserves, a resource critical for agriculture, but increasingly valuable for battery technologies and other industrial applications (OCP Group, 2022). Beyond phosphates, Morocco is also rich in other key minerals such as cobalt, barite, and fluorite. Its long-standing mining-friendly policies, political stability, and diversified trade agreements, notably with the EU and the United States, have further bolstered its position as a preferred partner for resource-hungry economies (World Bank, 2023). As both the EU and China seek to mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on single suppliers and volatile global markets, Morocco has emerged as a strategic node in their respective CRM supply chains. This shift not only

provides Morocco with opportunities to attract foreign investment and foster industrial development but also to strengthen its geopolitical leverage in a multipolar world economy (Benis, 2023).

In this geopolitical and economic context, both the European Union and China view Morocco as a key partner in their respective CRM strategies. For the EU, Morocco represents a reliable and proximate supplier with whom normative convergence on issues such as sustainability, human rights, and responsible mining practices is possible. Initiatives such as the EU–Morocco Green Partnership and the Global Gateway strategy reflect this alignment (Němečková & Malzi, 2024). For China, Morocco offers an opportunity to diversify sourcing away from more politically volatile regions, while deepening its presence in Africa’s mining and infrastructure sectors under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Chinese companies have already begun investing in Morocco’s mining sector and associated logistics infrastructure, including ports and industrial zones.

However, in this race, important questions arise: will Morocco be able to navigate and balance the competing interests of these two major global players? Can the EU and China, despite their rivalry, find areas of constructive cooperation in Morocco’s mining sector that support Morocco’s national development objectives? and how might Moroccan stakeholders perceive and shape the country’s evolving role in global CRM governance? To what extent does Morocco perceive its partnerships with the EU and China in the field of green and transition minerals as beneficial for advancing its strategic objectives, particularly in the context of its ambitions for renewable energy and industrial development? How do Moroccan stakeholders in the mineral sector evaluate the cooperation frameworks with these external actors, and what challenges or opportunities do they identify for future engagement?

These questions are crucial for understanding Morocco’s future role in global mineral value chains. In this context, this research aims to examine Morocco’s position in the global supply chain of CRMs, with a particular focus on its relations with the EU and China. The objective is to identify areas of convergence and divergence in EU-Morocco and China-Morocco cooperation, explore Morocco’s strategic agency in navigating these partnerships, and assess how these dynamics can contribute to sustainable economic development in the country. By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide

valuable insights for Moroccan policymakers and their European and Chinese counterparts to better align their strategies, improve cooperation frameworks, and enhance mutual benefits in the context of the evolving global demand for critical minerals.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of Morocco's mineral wealth and its evolving national strategies for CRM governance, which lays the groundwork for understanding the mutual interests of Morocco, the EU, and China. Next, we present our research methodology, followed by an in-depth analysis of our findings regarding Morocco's partnerships with both actors. We conclude by discussing policy implications and offering recommendations for fostering balanced and sustainable CRM cooperation in Morocco.

## **II. Research methodology**

To address the questions presented in the previous section, this research adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, drawing on 25 official Moroccan, European, and Chinese policy documents, including strategies, partnership agreements, and public statements from key actors in the mining sector. In addition, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Moroccan policymakers, business leaders, and academic experts to gain insights into their views on Morocco's role and strategic choices in the evolving landscape of CRM geopolitics. The research was conducted in 2023–2024, a period marked by rising global tensions over resource security, intensified trade competition, and renewed emphasis on strategic autonomy in both Europe and China, factors that have inevitably shaped the perceptions and policies of Moroccan actors.

The theoretical framework underpinning this research is critical constructivism (Hopf, 1998; Cho, 2009; Simmerl, 2011; Dias, 2013). This approach emphasizes the role of discourse, power relations, and identity construction in shaping actors' interests and behaviours. Specifically, critical constructivism highlights the analysis of language and communication, the importance of discursive structures, and the embeddedness of power asymmetries within these discourses (Simmerl, 2011). In our context, the discourses surrounding Morocco's relationships with the EU and China on green and transition minerals provide the interpretive framework to understand how Moroccan actors construct their strategic priorities, define their interests, and position themselves towards

these international partners. Discourse, as reflected in official documents, public statements, and interviews, will thus constitute the key analytical category of this research.

We applied a mixed qualitative research design, consisting of desk research, thematic analysis, and stakeholder interviews, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic from multiple perspectives. First, desk research was conducted to establish a solid empirical foundation. We reviewed a wide range of reports, data, and case studies on Morocco's mining sector, with a focus on its partnerships with the EU and China. Secondary data sources included foreign direct investment statistics, trade flow data, and sectoral performance indicators to contextualize the macroeconomic dynamics of Morocco's mineral sector. Furthermore, we examined comparative case studies from other African countries (e.g., Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Namibia) that have engaged in mineral partnerships with either China, the EU, or both. These comparative examples provide relevant insights for understanding the trajectories and strategic considerations shaping Morocco's evolving relationships in this field. Second, thematic and qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the collected documentary sources. Thematic analysis enabled us to identify and interpret key themes, narratives, and strategic interests within Moroccan discourses on green and transition minerals. Qualitative content analysis was used to systematically code and categorize recurring topics, helping to reveal dominant perceptions and priorities expressed in relation to the partnerships with China and the EU. Third, we conducted semi-structured stakeholder interviews to complement and deepen our understanding of the discourse. Interviews were carried out with key players in Morocco's mineral sector, including: representatives from Moroccan public authorities involved in mining and renewable energy strategy, investors and business actors from Europe and China active in Morocco's mineral sector, and EU stakeholders engaged in energy transition and mineral diplomacy.

Interview questions (see Annex) focused on key areas such as foreign investment experiences, de-risking mechanisms, regulatory challenges, collaboration potential, and Morocco's strategic objectives. In total, we interviewed 4 representatives from public authorities, 6 private sector representatives (European and Chinese), and 4 experts from academia and think tanks. In line with ethical research principles, participants were given

the option to remain anonymous, especially given the geopolitical sensitivity of the topic. The field research and interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024.

By combining these methods, our research design allows for a nuanced and multidimensional analysis of Morocco's positioning between China and the EU in the emerging green and transition minerals landscape. The insights gained are expected to contribute to better-informed strategies and policy dialogues between the involved actors.

### **III. Results and discussion**

This section presents the findings of our research and analyses them around five core themes that emerged from the desk research and stakeholder interviews. These themes reflect the diverse and sometimes competing interpretations of Morocco's evolving partnerships with China and the EU in the mining and transition minerals sector.

#### **Morocco is actively balancing partnerships with both China and the EU to strengthen its minerals sector**

Our research shows that Morocco is pursuing a pragmatic and multi-vector strategy to leverage both Chinese and European partnerships in its mineral sector. Official documents and interviews with Moroccan officials emphasize the country's ambition to position itself as a regional leader in the extraction and processing of transition minerals such as cobalt, phosphate (crucial for batteries and fertilizers), and rare earth elements.

Morocco's national mining strategy (2021–2030) highlights collaboration with both actors. On the one hand, with the EU, Morocco has signed memoranda of understanding to secure investment and technology transfer, particularly in sustainable mining practices and green hydrogen applications tied to mineral processing. On the other hand, Morocco is deepening infrastructure-oriented partnerships with China, exemplified by joint ventures in battery-grade phosphate production and planned rare earth mineral processing facilities supported under the Belt and Road Initiative. Interviews with officials from the Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development, and from the National Office of Hydrocarbons and Mines (ONHYM), reveal a clear intent to avoid over-dependence on one partner, positioning Morocco as a neutral and reliable supplier for global green technology value chains.

### **Opportunities and challenges differ remarkably for EU and Chinese investors**

Stakeholders from both Moroccan private sector firms and foreign investors identified key opportunities and risks. For Chinese investors, the advantages include fewer regulatory hurdles, faster project approvals, and attractive financing terms linked to state-backed companies. However, they face challenges around local content rules, concerns about environmental standards, and occasional resistance from civil society actors wary of overexploitation.

For EU investors, Morocco offers regulatory alignment (e.g., adherence to EU sustainability norms), proximity to European markets, and political stability. However, EU actors highlight slower bureaucratic processes, higher upfront costs tied to compliance with environmental and labor regulations, and growing competition from Chinese firms offering lower-cost packages.

### **The EU can draw lessons from China's flexible, infrastructure-driven approach**

Interviews with Moroccan policymakers and independent analysts underline several lessons the EU could take from China's approach. First, the speed and flexibility since Chinese projects often move faster due to centralized decision-making and bundled infrastructure deals. Second, integrated investment; because China offers "package deals" that include roads, ports, and processing facilities alongside mining projects, something EU actors rarely offer at scale. Finally, long-term presence as Chinese firms maintain consistent engagement at both national and local levels, cultivating long-standing relationships even outside formal agreements.

Moroccan experts suggest that EU initiatives, while highly structured and rule-based, could benefit from adopting more adaptable financing mechanisms and bundled infrastructure support in mineral-related investments.

### **Regional integration shapes Morocco's leverage in external partnerships**

Regional dynamics in North Africa significantly influence Morocco's external mineral partnerships. Morocco is a leading player in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and maintains informal ties with neighboring countries, such as Mauritania and Tunisia, in mining-related cooperation. These regional networks enhance Morocco's

bargaining power with both China and the EU, as it positions itself not merely as a national actor but as a gateway for mineral resources across North and West Africa.

Interviews confirm that cross-border infrastructure projects, like the planned Atlantic port in Dakhla and trans-Sahel transport corridors, strengthen Morocco's role as a regional hub, an element that both China and the EU recognize and seek to integrate into their strategies.

### **Maintaining EU relevance requires strategic recalibration**

Our findings suggest that to maintain its role as a key partner, the EU must enhance infrastructure financing linked to mining value chains, offer more competitive and flexible investment tools, particularly in mineral processing and downstream industries (e.g., battery manufacturing), expand capacity-building programs focused on sustainable mining technologies and workforce development and deepen political dialogue with Morocco, acknowledging its regional leadership ambitions rather than approaching it solely as a resource supplier. Moroccan stakeholders emphasize that partnerships perceived as equitable and respectful of Morocco's development objectives are more likely to succeed, especially in light of China's growing footprint.

Our findings suggest that Morocco is actively pursuing a dual-track strategy, engaging both the EU and China to diversify its partnerships, maximize leverage, and safeguard national interests. On the one hand, Morocco maintains long-standing, institutionalized ties with the EU through numerous bilateral agreements and its "Advanced Status" partnership. Recent EU strategies, such as the European Critical Raw Materials Act and the Global Gateway initiative, emphasize secure and sustainable access to transition minerals, positioning Morocco as a key supplier and strategic partner. The EU has thus sought to deepen cooperation, offering financial support, technology transfers, and joint ventures focused on sustainable mining practices, supply chain integration, and infrastructure development. On the other hand, China has significantly increased its footprint in Morocco's mining sector over the past decade. Leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative and its dominance in mineral processing technologies, China has secured several high-profile investments and partnerships. Chinese firms offer Morocco attractive financing terms, rapid project execution, and expertise in downstream processing, areas where the EU is perceived to lag. Furthermore, China's growing engagement in



infrastructure (ports, railways, industrial zones) and its willingness to couple mining investments with broader economic cooperation (as seen in phosphates and fertilizers) have resonated with Moroccan policymakers seeking diversification and technological advancement.

These dynamics create both opportunities and challenges for investors from China and the EU. European investors benefit from regulatory convergence, established diplomatic frameworks, and shared commitments to sustainable and ethical mining practices. However, they face stiff competition from Chinese actors who can offer more flexible financing, bundled infrastructure deals, and lower costs. Additionally, European companies must navigate complex bureaucratic and regulatory landscapes in Morocco and align with evolving environmental and social governance (ESG) standards. Chinese investors, meanwhile, are welcomed for their speed and capital but face scrutiny over sustainability, transparency, and long-term strategic intentions.

From our investigation, key lessons emerge for the EU. First of all, adopting a more flexible, comprehensive investment strategy. The EU should streamline procedures, accelerate funding mechanisms, and consider integrated packages that combine mining investment with infrastructure, technology, and skills development, similar to China's BRI approach. Secondly, enhancing local value addition. European partnerships should prioritize joint ventures and technology transfers that strengthen Morocco's domestic processing and manufacturing capabilities rather than focusing solely on raw mineral extraction. Third, prioritizing visibility and sustained engagement. Continuous diplomatic, economic, and technical dialogue is needed to counterbalance China's growing influence and reassure Moroccan stakeholders of the EU's long-term commitment. Finally, strengthening sustainability leadership. By leveraging its expertise in ESG standards and green mining technologies, the EU can differentiate its approach and align with Morocco's own ambitions for sustainable development.

Moreover, regional integration in North Africa, both formal and informal, emerges as a crucial factor shaping Morocco's external mineral partnerships. Morocco's active role in regional platforms, including the African Continental Free Trade Area, bilateral agreements with Mauritania and Senegal, and informal ties with Sub-Saharan African nations, enhances its leverage as a hub for mineral trade and processing. These connections not only diversify Morocco's markets but also position it as a regional leader

capable of consolidating mineral supply chains, thereby increasing its bargaining power towards external partners such as the EU and China.

In light of these findings, we offer the following policy recommendations to strengthen Morocco's role and ensure balanced partnerships:

- **Promote balanced, mutually beneficial partnerships:** Morocco should continue to diversify its partners while safeguarding national interests by ensuring local content, technology transfer, and fair value distribution in all agreements.
- **Facilitate inclusive stakeholder engagement:** Moroccan policymakers should institutionalize consultation mechanisms involving mining companies, civil society, regional partners, and academic experts to ensure transparent and inclusive decision-making.
- **Enhance sustainability and resilience:** both Morocco and its partners should prioritize water-efficient mining technologies, robust ESG frameworks, and circular economy practices to mitigate environmental and social risks.
- **Leverage regional integration:** Morocco should capitalize on its regional influence to create integrated mineral corridors, harmonize regulatory frameworks, and position itself as a gateway for African minerals to global markets.
- **Strengthen strategic communication:** To navigate great-power competition, Morocco must clearly articulate its long-term vision, red lines, and expectations to external partners, ensuring alignment with its broader economic and geopolitical objectives.

By implementing these recommendations, Morocco can solidify its status as a critical node in global green and transition mineral supply chains, while balancing the competing influences of China and the EU in a way that maximizes national benefits, fosters sustainable development, and strengthens regional leadership.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This article set out to critically investigate Morocco's evolving role at the intersection of global competition and collaboration surrounding green and transition minerals, focusing

particularly on its relations with two key external partners; the European Union and China. Our objective was to explore how Morocco engages with both stakeholders to develop its mineral resources, identify opportunities and challenges for Chinese and European investors, assess lessons the EU might draw from China's approach, and evaluate how regional integration in North Africa shapes Morocco's minerals sector and external partnerships.

Morocco occupies a strategically significant position in the global value chain for transition minerals, particularly phosphates, cobalt, manganese, and rare earth elements, all of which are critical for clean energy technologies, including electric vehicles, batteries, wind turbines, and green hydrogen production. With its vast reserves, modernized mining sector, and proximity to both Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa, Morocco has emerged as a pivotal player in global supply chains essential for the green transition. Against this backdrop, Morocco's foreign partnerships, notably with the EU and China, have become increasingly complex, competitive, and consequential.

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