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Is Morocco operating a grey zone in Ceuta and Melilla?

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ABSTRACT

Tensions between Spain and Morocco rose throughout 2021. However, they stem from decades-long conflicts over territory. One of Rabat's main claims relates to the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla, located on the north coast of Africa. The present article highlights the main clashes between the two countries and their respective positions. It then explores whether Morocco is operating a Grey Zone strategy to secure control over the two cities in the medium term and concludes that this is indeed the case.

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1. Introduction

The conflict between Spain and Morocco over possession of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla remains unresolved. Morocco claims the two as its own despite more than 500 years of Spanish presence in territories which, at the time, were not politically rooted in areas over which Maghrebi rulers enjoyed sovereignty.

Relations between the two monarchies are cordial[1] although the medical care provided recently (May 2021) by Spain to historic Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali has caused the above problem to resurface once more. The novelty on this occasion is the unusual response by Morocco, which allowed, and even encouraged,[2] several thousand young migrants (an estimated 6000 in total) to cross into Ceuta.[3] Although the figure is not spectacular if taken in isolation, it is of concern when placed in context. This is because the city of Ceuta is a mere 18 km^2 in size, with a population of just over 80,000.[4]

The incident has served to highlight the possibility that Morocco is adopting a non-war pressure strategy in the two enclaves with the aim of securing control over them in the medium term. This view is partly based on relatively recent historic antecedents, such as the Green March of November 1975 which saw thousands of Moroccans advance into what was than the Spanish Sahara. The course of action worked well for Morocco, who may seek to repeat it on a smaller scale in the cities of Ceuta and Melilla.

What has changed since then is that we now have an appropriate theoretical framework for a better understanding of such phenomena (and for more appropriate preventive monitoring). This was not an easy task given the tendency to think in terms of dichotomies: we are either at war or at peace. Cicero summed this up aptly in a well-known maxim in his 8th Philippic: *Inter pacem et bellum nihil est medium*. The conceptual labours undertaken to rise above this over-simplification are now bearing fruit.

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The concept to emerge from this debate is the "grey zone," a type of "hybrid threat or strategy" which does not quite reach the level of "hybrid war" (Koven 2016, 2; Freier 2016, 33; Mazarr 2015, 2–3; Votel et al. 2016, 102; Monaghan, Cullen, and Wegge 2019, 13–14). Put another way, it is a strategy which is put in place to avoid crossing the threshold of acts of aggression likely to be denounced and treated in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter, but which pursues aims similar to those of actual war (Mazarr 2015, 2; Freier 2016, 33; Echevarría 2016, 13). As some authors remind us, a grey zone (GZ) is ultimately always less problematical to deal with than a full-scale war (Kapusta 2015, 9), which paradoxically adds to its popularity.

The present article is divided into three parts. The first will set out the main arguments underpinning the grey zone conceptual framework, along with several associated developments that have emerged in recent years; the second will present a case study and assess whether it is accommodated by the framework; the third and last part will offer conclusions based on key aspects of the framework and some of its more recent elements.

2. Theoretical framework

Grey Zone (GZ onwards) theory has emerged in recent years to draw attention to situations where an actor (usually a state)[5] seeks to achieve key political aims without initiating a war, whether hybrid or conventional. The grey zone combines maximalist aims, similar to those which would require warfare in other circumstances, with strategies and tools that fall short of this threshold.

Three of these aims deserve mention (Baqués-Quesada 2021, 127–131). Firstly, to achieve the full or partial annexation of another state; secondly, to contribute to the independence of part of the territory of another state; lastly, to trigger regime change, provided that said change has geopolitical impact (for instance, if it causes a state to realign itself in the international power game).[6] These three scenarios form the basis of literature on the grey zone.

However, other authors have noted recently that the GZ may also serve other, less aggressive, ends, for example, a large-scale test to verify the extent to which the state targeted by the zone is willing to defend its rights. Kapusta (2015, 9) anticipated this possibility in referring to actors who engage in GZ activities but without taking a GZ to its ultimate consequences; other authors have suggested a possible aim of a GZ as a reputational campaign for a type of *probing behaviour* (Grygiel and Wess 2017, 60–61). In line with these authors, very recent contributions (Baqués-Quesada and Colom-Piella 2021, 50–51) have raised the possibility of a Limited Grey Zone (LGZ) being used to gradually erode the credibility of its victims, but without exhausting all the potential of the zone or envisaging a short-term outcome. In any event, this would make sense and fit the theoretical framework to the extent that the ultimate purpose of the test is to achieve one of the aims outlined above.

The states in question are revisionist in the sense that they wish to change the international *status quo*. Some experts add, however, that they are moderately revisionist; in other words, they do not interpret the initial situation as a problem for their own survival but rather one that is uncomfortable for them[7] and they aim to resolve it using a grey zone. As the situation is not one of desperation, states that activate a grey zone can invest more time to attain their objectives. Indeed, a key characteristic of the grey zone is

that short-term effects prove difficult to generate (Mazarr 2015, 58–60), medium to long-term effects being the norm. For this reason, grey zones are occasionally associated with gradualist practices, and the "strategic patience" required to reap rewards is often emphasised.

Meanwhile, the grey zone benefits from its inherent ambiguity. There is a structural element to this in that the scenarios in question are open to different interpretations by the parties, a situation defined as *perspective-dependent* by some (Kapusta 2015). In addition, a range of tactics used can make it hard for victims to attribute grey zone actions to their perpetrators, thanks to deception techniques and, in general, the small footprint of the actions (Mazarr 2015, 109–110; Chambers 2016, 27; Brands 2016, 1; Votel et al. 2016, 102). Thus, it becomes extremely difficult to denounce the events, which is probably why some authors – paraphrasing Clausewitz with some irony – refer to the "fog of peace" (Goldman 2010).

Turning to the tools of the GZ, it is commonly accepted that one of the main ones is a discourse capable of appealing to public opinion, particularly the population in the territory over which the grey zone is established. International public opinion is key also given that a GZ is usually a scenario of disputed legitimacy (Farwell 2012, 164). On some occasions, *lawfare* is used (Holmes 2013, 246; Halper 2013, 29; Echevarría 2016, 38) while on others such levels of technicism are not reached and an appeal is simply made to popular sentiment, drawing on a historic basis which may be more or less accurate and often in the context of *nation-building* processes (Kapusta 2015, 24; Brands 2016, 2 and Echevarría 2016, 32). This would suggest that the population constitutes the epicentre of the GZ conflict and hence the best GZ weapon is not a weapon of war (at least not conventional warfare) but words.

This leads us to the second tool required for a GZ to become a reality: propaganda. Without the necessary instruments, a narrative, no matter how brilliant, will not attain its objectives. It is not just a matter of strategic communication (STRATCOM): important also is everything that ultimately helps this STRATCOM to be understandable to public opinion. Accordingly, some authors (Ellul 1962; Beilenson 1972) believe that propaganda commences with the education system,[8] traditional mass media and even civil society organisations. To that list, we also need to add social media today. Recent works illustrate how propaganda techniques can alter public perception, particularly in GZ contexts (Bradshaw and Howard 2018; Polyakova and Boyer 2018). Similarly, well-established theories in the field of social sciences – especially social constructivism – show that, given sufficient time, the combination of an appropriate narrative and such means of propaganda can change the mentality of entire populations (Deutsch 1969 [1953]).[9]

If civilians are the centre of gravity of the GZ, they must be mobilised in support of the zone. Mass mobilisations in support of whoever creates the situation that alters the *status quo* are the best possible asset and may take different forms. Indeed, Gerasimov denounced the use of this approach by the Arab Springs to bring about regime changes in the Maghreb and Middle East without the need for intervention by the West (Bartles 2016), as several western theorists have also acknowledged (Mazarr 2015, 91).

China can be viewed as a prime example among more recent cases. The various facets of this singular deployment of the population can be seen in its GZ conflict with Japan. Take the Senkaku Islands, for example. When the conflict intensifies, thousands of Chinese take to the streets on the mainland to protest outside official Japanese buildings

and businesses.[10] In addition, fishing boats, ocean research vessels and even the Chinese Coastguard (which does not fall under Defence Ministry authority in peace time) sail through Japanese territorial waters and use their mere presence to assert their claim over them (Kennedy and Erickson 2017, 10). In neither case is there military involvement or armed aggression.

In the field of international relations, perhaps the theory that best explains the rise of the gray zone generation is Van Evera's offensive-defensive balance. Van Evera concludes that historical experience shows that the offense is as dangerous as it is rare. His analysis is raised as a warning, but also to put an end to some of the worst topics. Because an excessive and unfounded emphasis on the offensive is precisely what can generate wars that would have no reason to exist without that state of mind. In his own words:

> History suggests that offense dominance is at the same time dangerous, quite rare, and widely overstated. It further suggests that this exaggeration of insecurity, and the bellicose conduct it fosters, are prime causes of national insecurity and war. States are seldom as insecure as they think they are. Moreover, if they are insecure, this insecurity often grows from their own efforts to escape imagined insecurity *(Van Evera 1998, 42).*

For this reason, whoever generates a GZ intensifies in the rest of the measures, and only reserves his military effort to dissuade the defender of the status quo from responding with weapons.

In order to strengthen such measures, the creators of GZ often implement what the doctrine terms "economic warfare." As with the mobilisation of civilians, any measure that might be construed as *casus belli* is excluded (a blockade, for example). However, there is considerable scope for other types of pressure which are, in principle, legal (boycotts of certain products, selective politically-oriented subsidies, supply disruption, manipulation of prices of essential basic products), along with coercion of the buyers or sellers of certain products. Applied initially in small doses (Jacob 2017, 80), these measures are compatible with maintaining peace status and are difficult to denounce from the international law perspective. The literature offers a number of interesting explorations of the phenomenon, including case studies such as Russia's "gas war" (Posaner 2019).

Returning to the Senkaku Islands conflict, some demonstrations of support for the Chinese government have resulted in damage to the businesses and vehicles of Japanese entrepreneurs in Shanghai and other cities. It is a clear warning to Tokyo: if you want to keep the islands, you stand to lose more than you gain.

Not even NGOs are above suspicion given that they can play a key part in "economic warfare" due to the sizeable aid they distribute. They may be unwitting participants or may be coerced by local warlords in already-eroded contexts (Terry 2002, 244–245; Battera 2004, 17; Jarvik 2007, 217–238). These long-established dynamics can help exacerbate GZ situations where the warlords act as proxies of actors interested in creating the zones. In this regard, Gerasimov has repeatedly criticised western NGOs, although their Russian counterparts have also been accused of similar behaviour (Fedyk 2016, 3). Whatever the case, it is an aspect that merits more detailed academic analysis, including monographic articles.

Last but not least, grey zones require the participation of the armed forces of the state which creates the zone. The reason is very simple: manoeuvres against the GZ by the

aggrieved State need to be contained. In this way, the zone will continue to generate effects until it is probably too late to avoid them. In other words, the state that creates the GZ will seek to curb any possible escalation towards a war (which would probably be hybrid[11] in this context) until such a war is admissible or appropriate to its interests. It is important to bear in mind that a GZ can escalate to a hybrid war. Indeed, it cannot be ruled out that the zone has been planned as a first step towards subsequent escalation . . . provided this is in the interests of the promoter of the GZ.

In reality, a GZ resembles a "type of peace" more than a type of war. However, many authors rightly prefer the term *tertium genus*, a category that lies between the two situations (Schadlow 2014; Brands 2016). This is consistent with other statements of the theoretical framework. In such cases, rearming by the state that seeks to create a GZ is highly logical (Karber 2015, 27),[12] otherwise the grey zone could be crushed in its initial stages by the aggrieved party, irrespective of whether this is in accordance with public international law.[13]

Equally possible is some degree of *in situ* involvement in a GZ by intelligence personnel and even special operations forces from the state that creates the zone. However, these missions would need to be covert or even secret to make attribution[14] difficult and thus avoid a possible interpretation that Article 51 of the UN Charter had been breached. In such cases, the aim of the aforementioned involvement is to monitor the application of the other GZ instruments, detecting their strong and weak points in order to improve implementation.

As can be seen, all these measures aim to reshape the cognitive environment to influence both the GZ itself and international public opinion. The desired outcome is to achieve the political goals set for the GZ but without the need for escalation to war. Nonetheless, if escalation does eventually come about, the work already carried out to establish the GZ may prove decisive in terms of increasing the likelihood of victory for the promoters of the zone.

Having outlined the theoretical framework, the research question concerning the policy followed by Morocco in the dispute over Ceuta and Melilla can be set out as a hypothetical statement: Morocco is generating a grey zone in both cities to force a (preferably non-military) solution that obliges Spain to amend the *status quo* in Morocco's favour.

3. The case of Ceuta and Melilla

3.1. Background considerations

Ceuta and Melilla are two coastal cities under Spanish sovereignty. Ceuta has been Spanish since 1580, even though the Portuguese had already settled there in 1415[15] and the Aragonese had helped defend the city against the Muslims of the Kingdom of Granada at least one century earlier. Melilla was a Spanish possession as far back as 1497, after it was abandoned and destroyed following disputes between North African rulers. However, it was not officially incorporated into the Crown until 1556.

Spanish sovereignty over the two was disputed intermittently for centuries. Ceuta suffered various sieges from the late 17th century until the end of the 18$^{th.}$ For its part, Melilla successfully defended a siege in 1774–1775. The signing of the Treaty of Aranjuez in

1780 restored decades of peace to the territory, although this peace was broken (for both enclaves) in 1859–1860. A new treaty signed immediately after the ending of hostilities, the Traety of Wad-Ras, 1860 (Cánovas del Castillo, 1860: 209-215). established the definitive borders of the cities with respect to the neighbouring kingdom of Morocco. However, the 20th century proved more convulsive due to the Rif War, the bloodiest instalment of which took place in 1921 (the Battle of Annual), although the *status quo* was eventually restored by the Al Hoceima landing in 1925.

The two cities were never part of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco (1912–1958[16]) as they were considered to all intents and purposes part of Spain's administrative structure and Spanish society, probably because, when the Protectorate was created, they had already been military strongholds for centuries and the majority of their population was Spanish and was fully integrated at all levels. This situation was later further consolidated by the Spanish Constitution of 1978, under which both are considered "autonomous cities" with an organisational structure and devolved powers similar to – although not entirely the same as – Spain's self-governing regions ("Autonomous Communities").

They are equivalent in this regard to US states and, indeed, there is some similarity in terms of administrative status between Ceuta/Melilla and Hawaii, even if the two cities' links to mainland Spain and the Spanish customs of their populations go back much further. Another aspect to bear in mind in seeking to understand Spain's sovereign rights over the territories is that they are not considered colonised territories by the United Nations (Jordán 2018, 943) and there is no decolonisation process under way, among other reasons because they have self-government and democratic political institutions (Trinidad 2012, 969).

Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Morocco has not given up its bid for sovereignty over the enclaves despite the fact that the alleged historical continuity between the 16th-century rulers of the north coast of Africa and present-day Morocco is much less solid than Spain's claims in this regard. It is worth remembering also that the sultans of the day tended to stray beyond their dominions and were not averse to armed incursions into neighbouring territories or to subjugating the native populations, who were neither Arab nor Muslim but Berber and, to a large extent, Christian.

Following independence, Morocco has stepped up its nationalist discourse, in line with the Greater Morocco Project defended in the mid-20th century by Istiqlal – the country's most important political party and prime driver of independence –, in particular by one of its leaders, Allal al-Fassi. Contrary to what is often thought, relations between Istiqlal and the monarchy have nearly always been strained, with the two competing for power and influence (Storm 2007, 13–15). They aligned only at the height of the struggle for independence although divergences soon surfaced (Rinchart 1985, 65–66), which was unsurprising as Istiqlal controlled the senior ranks of the armed forces (El Bouchikhi 2018). As a result, the monarchy has been forced sporadically to accept Istiqlal's nationalist-irredentist agenda in order to avoid more serious problems.

Istiqlal itself is a reflection of an important sociodemographic split. For decades, it has been the party of the urban middle class, which is much more Arabised (that is, less sensitive to the Berber problem) than the rural population and is even partly secularised (Pennell 2000, 300–302). However, recent times have seen the emergence of other parties with more hard-line stances on religion (it should be recalled that *Justice and*

Development, the most voted party in recent years, has links to the Muslim Brotherhoods), as well as other groups (not parties) that question the figure of the king (*Justice and Charity* for example). The situation of Istiqlal thus exemplifies Morocco's extensive internal fragmentation, particularly as regards relations with the monarchy.

While all the above has been taking place, the Makhzen has set about creating political parties which are an extension of the interests of Morocco's Royal Household and have the primary function of preventing a parliamentary majority that might fall outside the control of the King (Abdel Ghafar and Jacobs 2017). This has led, however, to the creation of a multi-party political scenario which is as artificial as it is difficult to manage (Zartman 1988, 64),[17] with over 20 parties standing in elections despite not having any real solid voter base (Daadaoui 2010, 196). And all this against the backdrop of chronic economic troubles suffered by the country.

Due to the King's continued power, Morocco remains far below the standards of more advanced democracies. Moreover, as mentioned above, the country's social complexity makes it highly unstable. In short, its complicated domestic scenario reflects what Huntington has termed *The King´s dilemma*: modernise and lose control[18] or retain a wide-ranging capacity for coercion, to the detriment of modernisation?

In any case, Rabat's "Greater Morocco" designs include the Western Sahara, Mauritania, south-west Algeria and north-west Mali, in addition to the two Spanish cities.[19] These designs are not constant over time but rather are a kind of "hidden agenda" which is activated (or not) as it suits Morocco, particularly in the light of domestic issues such as those referred to above.

Since the earliest days of Moroccan independence, such claims have been activated to distract public opinion at times when the authorities have faced difficulties in imposing their rule. Consider, for example, the following view of its claim over Mauritania, which it pressed in 1958 (but not between 1956 and 1958):

> Although Morocco became independent in March 1956, the position of Mauritania did not play an important role in Moroccan politics until 1958 (. . .) politics is crucial to understanding the role of the irredentist question in internal affairs. It was during this interval that nationalist solidarity broke down, and groups within the Moroccan political system began to compete for popular and official support. The evidence suggests that the Mauritanian question became a national issue only when the difficulties of ruling a developing nation became fully apparent to Moroccan leaders, and when the complex problems of independence had become so numerous that distraction served a purpose *(Ashford 1962, 643).*

Morocco later launched the Sand War against newly-independent Algeria (1963), although it failed to secure a conclusive outcome. A further and well-documented example is its military occupation of the Western Sahara, despite UN calls for a referendum on the issue. In all cases, a domestic interpretation of its actions is possible given that irredentism can prove handy for blurring the differences between the main political parties in Morocco and even to deal with social conflict. In this regard, it is important to remember the demands of the Hirak movement (a largely Berber group which is very active in the Moroccan Rif, near Melilla) and the potential legitimacy problems of both the monarchy[20] and the Makhzen.[21]

3.2. Pressure exerted by Morocco

A military offensive against the two enclaves was formally ruled out by Hassan II (Ehrenreich 1985, 313) and military conquest of Ceuta and/or Melilla does not appear to figure in the plans of his son and successor either. A contributory factor to this position is the very different military potential of the two countries,[22] although Morocco's geopolitical situation also plays a part. In launching an offensive against one or both cities, Morocco would leave other flanks open. It is worth recalling the ongoing armed conflict in the Western Sahara with the Polisario Front, which is supported by Algeria. The GZ appears therefore a good option for Morocco to secure its aims. We have a motive that fits the possible GZ objectives perfectly and a moderately revisionist actor with the appropriate "strategic patience" and lack of desire to trigger a *casus-belli*. However, to gauge the possible existence of a GZ, we need to consider whether some or all of the GZ tools outlined earlier are being employed.

3.2.1. Narrative and propaganda

Morocco appears to be employing several GZ tools. Its narrative is a classic one: the typical anticolonial discourse. This is usually reinforced by a simpler one based on geography. The disputed territories border Morocco, which is why, at the time of independence, the then King Hassan II insisted that independence did not mean the country renounced its claims to "territorial unity" (Trinidad 2012, 964–965). Since 1966, Morocco has equated the situation of both cities with that of Gibraltar as a means of further emphasising its alleged right, although at the same time linking this right to dubious geopolitical questions (Tartter 1985, 294–295). It pursued its claim with the UN in January 1975, using the "colonial enclaves" doctrine as a basis (Crawford 2006, 637–647)[23] but, as noted earlier, the UN was unimpressed.

Following this diplomatic rebuff, Morocco has stepped up the use of "grey" strategies, for example in the field of lawfare. That key year (1975), a few months before the Green March and shortly before it lodged its first formal claim with the UN, domestic legislation enacted by Morocco (Decree 2-75-311, of 21 July) decreed that Ceuta and Melilla did not have their own waters, the entire coastline of North Africa being considered Morocco's "internal waters." In doing so, the authorities secured the patriotic support of the Moroccan population in neighbouring areas, even if through a calculated exercise in confusion (Barrada 2020, 105). However, it also marked the field of play in the event of a hypothetical blockade of the two cities, should the need arise.

Another method used by Morocco is the issuing of passports, even if these are of little actual use. In 2010, it was discovered that a number of people born in Ceuta and Melilla had Moroccan passports in which the two cities were described as a full part of the Kingdom of Morocco (Jordán 2020). This small-scale practice is highly reminiscent of that used by Russia in various states which it considers to be its satellites and wishes to keep on a short leash, including Georgia and Moldavia. It has become so widespread in GZ scenarios that it has come to be known as a *Passport Operation* (Herbst 2016, 200). Lastly, it is important to bear in mind also any diffuse support for the cause that might be provided via mosques in both cities.

3.2.2. The weaponization of the civilian population

This narrative aims to mobilise civilians to ensure the grey zone produces its desired effects. In this regard Morocco has an advantage: the marriage and birth rates of the Muslim population of Ceuta and Melilla are substantially higher than those of the native Spanish population (Trinidad 2012, 971; Arteaga 2014, 156–158).[24] This circumstance also makes the GZ logical in that Spain's possession of Ceuta and Melilla does not pose a threat to Morocco's survival, even if it is an inconvenience. However, demographic trends mean that Rabat can harness the "strategic patience" typical of the GZ. In other words, Morocco is not seeking short-term results but medium-term ones.

Nevertheless, even this population needs to be nudged in the right direction by Morocco. Nothing occurs automatically. Rabat has a vested interest in keeping the flame burning so that the Muslims of Ceuta and Melilla do not end up accepting the existing *status quo* through inertia. For this reason, symbolic occupations of sovereign Spanish spaces have taken place, the most famous being the occupation in 2002 of the tiny island of Perejil, 10 kms from Ceuta (the island is the source of dispute between the two countries). The occupation in this case was the work of approximately a dozen Moroccan gendarmes, who quickly hoisted their flag and deployed tents and other logistical support to show that they intended to remain indefinitely.

The Moroccan gendarmerie is a police force with military status but does not depend on the Ministry of Defence in peace time. This is coherent with the vocation of the grey zone to not cross certain red lines. Spain mobilised its land, sea and air forces to detain the gendarmes and return them to Morocco, and the incident ended without casualties.

What did Morocco intend with such an action? The tiny island serves no military purpose and it is therefore likely that the aim was to test Spain's resolve (political) and capacity (military) to defend not just Perejil but nearby Ceuta also. Some authors have drawn attention to the important detail that the occupation took place against the backdrop of the wedding of the current King, Mohammed VI, and also that, thanks to this political move, the Moroccans gained insight into other aspects of potential future interest: France, in theory Spain's NATO and EU ally, sided with Morocco (Jordán 2018, 946). In any event, the incident is a perfect example of the *probing behaviour* theory proposed by Grygiel and Wess (2017), as discussed above in the section on the theoretical framework.

Actions of this nature have continued although they have tended to be less spectacular and involve civilian activists only, which removes all suspicion from the Moroccan government (in principle at least). By way of example, 2011 saw a group of activists seize the Yasinen drinking water facility that supplies Melilla. They raised the Moroccan flag and sought to take over the management of the infrastructure but were ejected. The following year saw a similar occupation of the Spanish rock known as Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera, which also ended in the removal of the activists.[25]

In what appears to be a pattern of a deliberate "civilian offensive" every ten years, recent times (May 2021) have seen the arrival of thousands of young migrants in Ceuta, as described at the beginning of this article. There can be no doubting the political intentions of this move given that Rabat authorised their crossing in response to the medical treatment received by a senior Polisario Front leader in Spain. Here too, however, one needs to look beyond the most obvious explanation. Events precipitated the Moroccan response and the country revealed its hand: one of the best ways to

pressure Spain is to facilitate the mass arrival of thousands of Moroccan civilians. A full-blown, non-violent occupation, in keeping with Gene Sharp's wildest dreams, and a demonstration of Morocco's capacity for blackmail . . . without a shot being fired.

3.2.3. Economic warfare

The economies of the two Spanish enclaves have always been closely bound up with those of their neighbouring Moroccan regions. In reality, northern Morocco is poor, with the bulk of the country's riches concentrated west of the Atlas Mountains, on the Atlantic coast. Over time, an informal trade developed that appeared to benefit both sides. In recent years, however, Morocco has suggested that this economy is damaging its own businesses, while the relaxation of border controls is encouraging drug trafficking, particularly cannabis.

This initial response by Morocco has little to do with the grey zone but is rather a long-term strategic move based on a new partnership with China. The development of the Tangiers area is being stimulated through investment agreements with the Chinese (Soto 2017) which, in just a few years, have led to the creation of Tanger-Tech-City next to the port of Tanger-Med, one of the most important in the Mediterranean. China's interests in Morocco and the Sahara include phosphates and rare earth elements (Tanchum and Álvarez-Aríztegui 2021). There is nothing excessively surprising in all this, including the logical strengths to be gained from Morocco's international position.

However, following the signing of its agreements with China, Morocco has unilaterally closed its borders with Ceuta and Melilla on several occasions (the first in 2018), in breach of the provisions of Treaties such as Fez (1866) and the agreements ending the Spanish Protectorate (1956). In February 2020, Marruecos banned the entry of fresh fish in Ceuta, seriously damaging the city's main market and the hospitality sector, which is one of few that stimulate the local economy. A number of reports published by the authorities in the two cities highlight a fall in the tax base (Chandiramani Ramesh and Bustillo 2020, 10–11), which has left the enclaves in a critical situation.

As some have noted, the neighbouring Moroccan region of Nador has benefited immediately from the above (Jordán 2020), although it is more likely that Morocco's ultimate motivation is to demonstrate to Spain that it is willing to make economic sacrifices provided that the economies of the two Spanish cities suffer even greater harm. Thus, Spain would have to invest considerable sums of money to support both or even accept that they might not be viable economically. This reinforces the impression that Morocco has chosen to forego the cities or even isolate them as long as they remain under Spanish sovereignty.

3.2.4. The rearming of Morocco

As noted earlier, Morocco's defence budget is much small than Spain's. However, if the aim is to isolate the two cities from the Iberian Peninsula should the need arise, this aspect may be less important. The difference would be crucial if a military offensive were needed but is less relevant in the scenario suggested here, that is, to prevent the arrival of reinforcements from across the Mediterranean. In such circumstances, the important aspect is whether Morocco has the means to create an A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area-Denial) which, from the military perspective, would render a hypothetical armed response by Spain excessively onerous.

One thing is certain: Morocco is rearming and the signs are that this is due to its rivalry with Algeria and the need to sustain its occupation of Western Sahara. It is no less true, however, that these new weapons systems could be used to help isolate Ceuta and Melilla. In this regard, the key factor is not so much the volume of weaponry acquired but whether it is capable of creating a A2/AD in two enclaves which, it should be recalled, are not explicitly protected by NATO.

The recent acquisition by Morocco of 24 F-16 Block 72 Viper fighters, coupled with the planned upgrading of its 23 F-16 Block 50/52[26] to the same standards, renders Spain's F-18s obsolete in comparison. Similarly, the recent acquisition of Chinese FD-2000 long-range SAM systems and their American Patriot PAC-3 equivalents[27] guarantees such effective cover of the Moroccan coast that Spanish fighters could be shot down as soon as they take off from their bases in Gando, Morón and Los Llanos. Moreover, Morocco has enhanced its electronic warfare capabilities considerably of late with the acquisition of four *Gulfstream G550s*, which afford the country an advantage over Spain in this area also.

For their part, the country's Chinese-made PHL-03 rocket launch systems (MRLS), with a range of over 600 km, could force the artillery systems of Spain's armed forces to remain far from the coastline given the former's greater range compared to the anti-battery firepower of the Spanish ATP *M*-109 and 155 mm SIACs (24 kms). Lastly, the acquisition of submarines, as already announced, would further hinder possible reinforcements reaching Ceuta and Melilla from the Spanish mainland given the inherent difficulties in submarine detection, all the more so bearing in mind that NATO doctrine, of which Spain is part, has excessively reduced the anti-submarine capabilities of member fleets following the demise of the USSR.

All the above may, of course, be part of – to use the current rhetoric – Morocco's "balanced" modernisation programme for its armed forces to "provide stability" in North Africa (Halimi 2020). Experts such as Cordesman (2020) also downplay the situation, although they focus on the competition with Algeria, whose defence spending continues to be higher than Morocco's. Here, however, we are suggesting a different interpretation, that is, the impact of the above-mentioned acquisitions on a hypothetical grey zone in Ceuta and Melilla.

The type of armament acquired leaves little room for doubt as to Rabat's new capabilities. It is not so much a case of obsolete systems simply being replaced with new ones as a change in the philosophy underpinning acquisitions. In fact, Morocco is immersed in the medium-term modernisation of its armed forces, in which new investment to the tune of $22 billion, partly financed by Saudi Arabia, is envisaged (Colom, Pulido, and Guillamó 2021, 19).

One possible interpretation is that all this is designed to act as a deterrent to Algeria. While it may be part of the reason, it is also true that the acquisitions are equally useful for isolating the two cities from the rest of Spain. As is well known, ambiguity is part of the GZ. Such ambiguity is not unfounded but based on data (such as the information offered here), even if it then remains open to interpretation.

We can give an interesting example. Morocco is strengthening its capacity to establish an A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) over the strait, which would make it difficult to help both cities from the peninsula. Thus, its F-16 Block 70 fighters had the C-7 version of the AIM-120 AMRAAM missile, with increased range, before the Spanish F-18 did,

which had shorter-range versions in their arsenals. That was corrected by Spain, to match, at least, the Moroccan potential, in the entire arc that goes from the Canary Islands to the African coast.

It is a very clear case of acquiring new capabilities that, although they may be designed in relation to Algeria, will decisively influence the balance with Spain, which is in a situation of structural weakness, having to reach Ceuta and Melilla only by naval route and aerial.

Whatever the case, in the current circumstances Spain is further away than at any time from putting in place a preventive military operation against a possible Moroccan GZ. If such a zone exists in Rabat's mindset, it may well generate its effects slowly but decisively in pursuit of one of the most characteristic aims of the grey zone: the annexation of the two cities. At worst, it could help the cities gain independence from Spain, which would be a first step towards absorbing them . . . as is occurring *de facto* in the Sahara.

4. Conclusions

The present article shows that Morocco's position with respect to Ceuta and Melilla displays many grey zone characteristics. This is natural bearing in mind Rabat's aims, its lack of urgency in pursuing them, the lack of likelihood of a war with Spain, and the fact that it holds various advantages that are clearly favourable to its intentions (the demographic trends of the two cities, for example). The scenario is therefore perfect for a grey zone.

The article shows further that Morocco is employing almost all the typical GZ instruments: narrative and propaganda (including lawfare and the issuing of passports); mobilisation of civilians (both the general population, including young persons, and state officials); economic warfare (to isolate both cities, to the extent that they become extremely costly for Spain or even non-viable); and, lastly, the modernisation of its armed forces well beyond the requirements of replacing obsolete weaponry, with everything pointing also to the creation of an A2/AD with the two contested cities at its epicentre. The synergies derived from the coordinated use of these instruments would suggest that there is indeed a plan, perhaps even an official policy.

Incidents such as the occupation of the tiny island of Perejil (2002) demonstrate that Morocco has been probing Spain's behaviour for years, laying down challenges to examine the capacity and resolve of the Spanish government. This approach is perfectly coherent with several of the parameters of the grey zone identified in the theoretical framework. In short, as the article has set out to illustrate, there are sufficient signs that Morocco is indeed using a grey zone strategy to bring the two Spanish cities under its sovereignty in the medium term. An entirely separate issue is whether this grey zone will succeed fully or partly.

Notes

1. In the stage of Mohammed VI and Juan Carlos I, both brothers will be respected. In fact, it is known that the King of Morocco referred to the King of Spain as "Juanito" (affectionate diminutive of his name). That level of friendship may not be as strong between their respective children, and current monarchs. However, beyond that, it must be taken into account that the Spanish monarchy (as an institution) maintains an excellent relationship with the Arab world, beyond Morocco, and including Saudi Arabia itself, or the United Arab Emirates, which -Let's not forget- it is the place that the emeritus monarch has chosen to

reside, in addition to being -both States- one of the main allies and sponsors of Morocco. In fact, perhaps it is an asset that Spain, as a State, could exploit more than it does.

2. It must be borne in mind that this massive entry occurred just a week after the Moroccan government warned, in typical diplomatic language, that the medical care offered in Spain for the benefit of the leader of the Polisario Front would have "serious consequences." All of which allows us to think, logically, that in addition to an (obvious) correlation, there is a (very probable) causation. Above all, taking into account the historical background, from the successful Green March in the Sahara, to the recent attempts (although unsuccessful) to occupy islets and/or rocks of Spanish sovereignty on the African coast. It is not, in short, a strange or improvised modus operandi.
3. Some sources put the number to enter Ceuta from Morocco at approximately 8000, of whom 6000 are aged under 18.
4. Melilla is smaller (12 km^2) and less populated (approximately 75,000 inhabitants).
5. Several experts have sparked debate as to whether these zones can be generated by terrorist groups also. The problem is that the activities of such groups tend to be excessively black for a GZ (Brands 2016). It is nonetheless true, however, that the territorial aims of certain groups make this a plausible option to strengthen acquiescence by the civilian population (Olson 2016; see also, among others, Kapusta 2015, 20 and Freier 2016, 4). Some argue also that intra-state actors can create grey zones (e. g. Freier 2016, in the case of Basque nationalism in Spain). However, as these situations are less frequent, we will focus here on grey zones promoted by a state.
6. Imagine, for example, an outcome such as a state withdrawing from a Treaty or International Organisation, or the opposite case: joining one.
7. If the situation were desperate, the aggrieved state would normally initiate a war even knowing that it might lose. A case in point is Japan in the summer of 1941.
8. Ellul distinguishes between medium-term propaganda, which he defines as sociological, and direct propaganda, which calls on the population to mobilise (Ellul 1962, 10). However, without the continuous work of the former, the latter would carry little weight.
9. Among other aspects, Deutsch notes how the United Kingdom persuaded the vast majority of Scottish people to feel British throughout the 19th century and much of the 20th. It can be inferred from his work, however, that with appropriate leverage, the regional government can reverse the situation – as indeed has happened.
10. It is important to note that, before the concept of grey zone emerged, some authors had already referred to the use of popular mobilisations, in principle non-violent (but nearly always bordering on illegality), to force the political establishment that defends the *status quo* to take decisions it would not wish to take. One such example is Gene Sharp, for whom the disobedience tactics and "non-violent action" he advocates are "a means of combat, as is war" (Sharp 1990) but without the weaponry of armed forces.
11. For all intents and purposes, in this article, whenever I speak of hybrid warfare, I refer to Frank Hoffman's definition, that is to say, it is a type of war in which "Any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the battlespace to obtain desired political objectives" (Hoffman 2012, 3). Consequently, It is important to note that hybrid wars include a conventional component.
12. This author recalls the movements of Russian troops when it has been in the Kremlin's interests to defend its grey zones, particularly in Ukraine. Similar situations have also arisen in Georgia, however.
13. Think, for example, of the US invasion of the island of Grenada in 1983. In a highly controversial political manoeuvre by Marxist-Leninists, the presence of Cubans on the island had increased noticeably from 1979 onwards. They included workers hired to build an airport which was much too large for just commercial flights, as well as members of the Cuban intelligence services. Interventions of this kind are difficult for the United Nations to accept but the insufficient deterrence offered by the USSR in its latter years (and by Cuba itself) allowed the United States to nip the problem in the bud in its early stages.

14. This is an important issue, because whoever raises a gray area does so in order not to stir up his rival. Therefore, it will try to achieve the maximum possible effects without raising suspicions, and without offering reasons to the affected party to denounce these maneuvers as if they were an act of aggression At least until the revisionist state is in a position to defeat militarily the defending status quo state. Hence the importance of controlling the escalation.
15. It should be recalled that Spain and Portugal were part of the same kingdom from 1580 until 1640. After 1640, the city opted to remain with Spain.
16. The year 1956 is occasionally given as the end point as it marked the end of the Protectorate in the main, northern part.
17. This author refers to the existence of a "manipulated pluralism" in Marruecos.
18. Huntington (1968, 175–188) notes that, if the leader suggests a limited number of reforms (following a top-down model), the population usually makes new demands for increasingly far-reaching reforms (bottom-up model). He adds that, ultimately, efforts to consolidate a monarchy via reform tend to lead to the demise of the monarchy. Mohammed VI is likely very aware of this.
19. And also a range of small islands, archipelagos and rocky outcrops located close to the African coast and largely uninhabited today, even if some have itinerant Spanish garrisons.
20. It should be recalled that, unlike Spain and elsewhere in Europe, Morocco does not have a parliamentary monarchy. The opposite is true: its monarchy still holds extensive political and economic power. However, it already felt threatened by the Arab Spring and is attentive to any wave of change that might arise in the Maghreb.
21. This is the name given to the nucleus of power in Rabat closest to the King.
22. According to SIPRI, Morocco's defence spending amounts to approximately 4.8 billion dollars (SIPRI 2020), whereas Spain's exceeds 17 billion. .
23. A consequence of this theory is that the decolonised territory does not achieve independence but is incorporated ("absorbed") by the neighbouring state in which it is enclaved, Morocco in this case.
24. According to Arteaga, at the end of the 1980s Muslims represented approximately 32% of the total population of Melilla, compared to 18% in Ceuta. In 2020, however, 75% of births in Melilla were to parents with Arab names. At present, Muslims already account for the majority of the population in Melilla and almost 50% in Ceuta.
25. Responsibility for these actions was claimed by the self-proclaimed Coordination Committee for the Liberation of Ceuta and Melilla, led by Yahya Yahya, a Melilla-born Moroccan and, paradoxically, a staunch defender of Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara. Needless to say, this paradox is resolved by appealing to the notion of Greater Morocco, discussed above.
26. One of the fighters acquired in 2011–12 was lost in the war in Yemen.
27. Details from SIPRI (https://www.sipri.org/databases) except for the most recent acquisitions, such as the Patriot PAC-3 SAMs, which SIPRI has not recorded yet. In this last case, the information has been obtained from OSINT.

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