



The effects of strategic rivalries on non-rival neighbouring small states: Mauritania's political stability – shelter diplomacy to manage the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry¹

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Abstract:

This research sheds light on the remarkable political stability that has prevailed for more than a decade in Mauritania, a Sahelian country that has notably not been affected by the spill over effects of military coups in the Sahel. In understanding Mauritania's political stability; evidenced by the country's first peaceful and constitutional transition of power in 2019 and the absence of any coups since 2009; the paper offers an explanation based on the impact of strategic rivalries on non-rival small states. Specifically, it examines how Mauritania, which has been subject to pressures from the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry, deflected these pressures and achieved political stability through shelter diplomacy. Since 2010, Mauritania has managed to secure shelter with France, elevating its relations with Paris to the highest level in their bilateral history. This is evidenced by hosting the G5 Sahel headquarters, engaging in very active summitry with Paris, hosting French soldiers, and chairing the AU summits in 2018 and 2024, despite pressures from terrorism and the historically threatening Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry.

Keywords:

Small State Studies;
Shelter Diplomacy;
Strategic Rivalries;
Sahel; Coup d'état;
Mauritania; Political
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Introduction

Since the 1960s, Mauritania has found itself caught in the intersection of intense regional rivalries, particularly between Algeria and Morocco. Both nations have sought to influence Mauritania's alignment in their protracted conflict, undermining its domestic stability and jeopardizing its political, economic, and security interests on regional and international levels. This precarious position has defined Mauritania's post-independence trajectory, forcing it to navigate threats from its more powerful neighbors.

From its inception as a modern independent state, Mauritania's sovereignty faced significant challenges, particularly from Morocco. Under King Hassan II, Morocco claimed Mauritania as part of its historical domain, questioning its legitimacy as an independent state. In response, President Mokhtar Ould Daddah employed diplomatic measures to assert Mauritania's right to exist, culminating in Morocco's formal recognition in 1969. However, this recognition did not signify the end of territorial disputes. Moroccan figures, such as Hamid Chabat of the Istiqlal Party and Ahmed Raissouni, president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars (UIOM), revived similar claims in 2016 and 2022 (Quid, 2017). These assertions, alongside Moroccan educational narratives promoting the "Marocanité" of the Almoravid dynasty, continue to fuel an existential threat to Mauritania, alarming its political elites, including members of the ruling party (Bahri, 2024).

The rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has not remained confined to rhetoric. After the 1969 reconciliation with Morocco, Mauritania's alignment with Rabat during the Western Sahara conflict antagonized Algeria. This alignment triggered political instability, culminating in the ousting of President Mokhtar Ould Daddah. His memoirs recount a stark warning from Algerian President Houari Boumédiène: "If Mauritania signs the Madrid Agreement, Algeria will provide the Sahrawi fighters with all the material and human resources necessary to defend their territory. Since your country is the weakest link, it will be the first to be attacked" (Mauray Media, 2016). This underscores the threats Mauritania faced from Algeria, which sought to coerce it into aligning with its strategic objectives.

Mauritania's entanglement in these rivalries continued to destabilize its political landscape. In 1984, President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla was overthrown in a coup after overtly supporting the Frente Polisario and aligning with Algeria. His successor, President Maaouya Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya, oscillated between fragile alliances with Algeria and Morocco, attempting to mitigate external threats while maintaining internal stability. For instance, during the Mauritanian-Senegalese war, King Hassan II support for Dakar further polarized the region (Pazzanita, 1992). Similarly, tensions with Algeria occasionally flared, as demonstrated by the expulsion of an Algerian diplomat from Nouakchott in 2015 (Le Courrier International, 2015).



Historically, Mauritania's strategy of aligning with regional powers; whether Algeria or Morocco; has brought both instability and economic isolation (Pazzanita, 1992). These dynamics highlight the precarious position of a small state navigating the rivalries of more powerful regional actors. Both Algeria and Morocco have exploited Mauritania's geographic vulnerabilities and limited resources to advance their agendas, exacerbating its domestic political fragility and threatening its sovereignty.

However, recent administrations, particularly under Presidents Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (MOA) and Mohamed Ould Ghazouani (MOG), have pursued a more balanced foreign policy. This approach seeks to defuse the Algeria-Morocco rivalry and leverage Mauritania's position to secure stability and survival. A key element of this strategy is safeguarding Zouerate, the hub of Mauritania's iron production and an area deeply intertwined with the Western Sahara conflict. Rival powers have often used Zouerate's security as a bargaining chip, further complicating Mauritania's stability.

Since 2011, Mauritania has made tangible progress in managing these external pressures. This shift was epitomized in 2019 with the country's first peaceful constitutional transition, when President Ould Abdel Aziz stepped down, allowing Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to assume power (Bioforce, 2021). Remarkably, the Global Terrorism Index now classifies Mauritania as a very safe country. Additionally, Nouakchott has taken an active role in regional diplomacy, hosting summits, mediating conflicts, and participating in Sahel alliances. This is particularly notable given the destabilization of the Maghreb and Sahel regions since 2011, marked by the Libyan civil war, porous borders, rising terrorism, and frequent military coups in neighboring countries (Boukhars, 2020). Despite these challenges, Mauritania has witnessed a significant decline in coup attempts over the past decade.

This raises a critical question: how has Mauritania, a small state in a conflict-ridden region, managed to achieve domestic political stability despite constant pressure from powerful rivals? This research argues that Mauritania's stability is not a result of democratic governance or internal reforms but of its ability to strategically manage external support and rivalries. By securing political and military shelter from France and economic assistance from France, China, and international financial organizations, Mauritania has transformed the Algeria-Morocco rivalry from an existential threat into a manageable dynamic.

Ultimately, this study underscores the pivotal role of foreign policy in safeguarding the stability of small states. By focusing on external support and strategic diplomacy rather than internal factors such as governance or civil-military relations, Mauritania has successfully navigated the volatile regional landscape, ensuring its sovereignty and political continuity amidst persistent external threats.

The Predicaments of Small States: Mauritania

This article begins by positing that Mauritania, as a small state situated on the periphery of a strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, has had its foreign policy

profoundly shaped by these regional dynamics. To contextualize this analysis, the concept of "small state" must first be clarified.

Mauritania is classified as a small state. David Vital (1967) proposed a dual framework for defining small states, which incorporates industrial and economic capabilities, population size, and foreign policy choices. He argued that small states are either advanced industrial nations with populations of 10–15 million or underdeveloped states with populations of 20–30 million. While this framework originated during the Cold War, it remains relevant today (Périer, 2020).

Size is understood here in a comprehensive sense, encompassing economic, military, and physical factors alongside the more common population-based criterion. Mauritania's population of 4.5 million aligns with Vital's definition, particularly as he established a higher threshold for underdeveloped states. As such, Mauritania's classification as a small state is justified (Maass, 2018, p. 74).

Economic indicators further reveal the fragility of Mauritania's economy. According to the World Population Review, the country's GDP is approximately \$8 billion—comparable to Kosovo's in 2020. This economic weakness is compounded by persistent regional instability in the Sahel, a condition that has worsened since the collapse of the Qaddafi regime (Bisson, 2013a, p. 27). Additionally, the 2022 Global Firepower Index ranked Mauritania 125th out of 142 countries. These indicators reinforce Mauritania's classification as a small state, despite its territorial size; twice that of France; which challenges conventional assumptions about the physical dimensions of small states.

Another lens through which Mauritania can be viewed as a small state is its limited ability to play a significant role in maintaining the international system, these lens suggest that states with minimal involvement in global affairs are inherently small. Vital's qualitative approach further emphasizes this, classifying states with restricted participation in international issues as small. For instance, Mauritania has not been entrusted with any continental leadership roles by the African Union (AU) or other regional institutions, despite being an active AU member, including its presidencies in 2018 and 2024

Despite these limitations, Mauritania strongly supports the principles of international organizations, which emphasize equality among states regardless of size. Its foreign policy reflects a commitment to international law, exemplified by its backing of a UN-led resolution process for the Western Sahara conflict, Africa's oldest decolonization issue (Rapidinfo, 2022).

Small states typically lack the capacity to project power beyond their borders and favor peaceful conflict resolution. In Mauritania's case, its limited ability to control its own territory and monopolize the use of force has reinforced its opposition to military solutions. This preference for diplomacy is evident in its stance on conflicts in the Sahel, such as the crisis in Mali and its responses to military coups in the region.

Combining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives underscores Mauritania's categorization as a small state. Its structural weaknesses are further evident in its

historically fraught relations with Senegal, Morocco, and the Frente Polisario, as well as its proximity to Mali, a country plagued by instability and insecurity since 2012. Domestically, Mauritania has experienced several coups, further solidifying its status as a small and fragile state.

Geographic Location Aggravating Size Limitations

Mauritania's challenges as a small state are compounded by its geographic location. Situated along Africa's Atlantic coast, it serves as a geographical and cultural bridge between the Maghreb and Western sub-Saharan Africa. Culturally, Mauritania represents a transitional zone between Arab-Amazigh populations in North Africa and sub-Saharan communities. Much of its territory is dominated by the Sahara Desert, and until the 1970s drought, a significant portion of its population was nomadic. The country's natural resources include substantial reserves of iron ore, copper, and gypsum, along with some oil deposits, which are currently being exploited (Toupet, Henry, 2015).

As in most social sciences, there is no consensus on the definition of "small state". However, the dominant approaches; quantitative and qualitative; are widely used in the literature. This article applies these approaches to Mauritania's context, highlighting its dual challenges of size and location.

Mauritania's geographic realities influence its high-level decisions in diplomacy, security, and economic strategy. Its small size, combined with its vulnerable position in a geopolitically volatile region, underscores the intricate challenges it faces in navigating its foreign and domestic policy choices.

Literature Review

Research on Mauritanian foreign policy remains significantly underdeveloped, with existing literature offering limited insights into its diplomatic strategies and practices. Despite Mauritania's membership in the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), established in 1989, it is often regarded as a peripheral player in the Maghreb. As a result, the country is frequently excluded from broader analyses of the region. For example, seminal works such as Samir Amin's *The Maghreb in the Modern World* (1970) and more contemporary studies like Lawless and Findlay's *North Africa: Contemporary Politics and Economic Development* (1984) make no mention of Mauritania (Seddon, 1996, p. 197). This notable omission underscores a significant gap in the scholarship on Mauritania's geopolitical and diplomatic roles.

Conceptualizing Mauritania's Political Stability

This study aims to explain Mauritania's remarkable political stability over the past 15 years, characterized by constitutional transitions and an absence of coups. Achieving this

requires an exploration of independent variables that interact to shape causality. To organize this analysis, the literature review is divided into two primary schools of thought: one emphasizing internal factors and the other focusing on external influences.

Understanding the Political Stability of Mauritania	
Internal factors	External factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personality of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz (Justine Spiegel) - Democracy - Good governance - Civil-Military relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foreign Policy of Mauritania (as outcomes of internal dynamics): The corporate interests of the Mauritanian military, political ideologies, and affinities of non-military elites. (Antony Pazzanita.) - “The necessity of considering the impact of strategic rivalries on the foreign policies of non-rival states: case of Tunisia” (Imad Mansour.) - Small States’ Search for Shelter: case of Iceland. (Baldur Thorhallsson)

Internal Dynamics and Political Stability

Antony Pazzanita’s foundational article (1992) provides key insights into Mauritania’s foreign policy and its relationship to political stability. According to Pazzanita, three internal factors shape Mauritania’s diplomatic behavior: the corporate interests of the Mauritanian military, the ideological leanings of political elites, and the affinities of non-military elites.

While Pazzanita does not explicitly link ideological affinities to the regional rivalries that influence training and education, these affinities are believed to shape regional preferences, ultimately impacting political stability. In *The Search for Protection*, Pazzanita argues that a foreign policy favoring alignment with one Maghrebi rival; such as Algeria or Morocco; inevitably disrupts Mauritania’s neutrality, leading to coups d’état and political instability. This perspective underscores the significance of internal factors in Mauritania’s stability, while implicitly acknowledging the impact of external pressures.

External Rivalries as Independent Variables

An alternative explanation focuses on the external context, particularly the influence of regional rivalries. Mansour’s (2020) study, *Explaining the Influence of Maghrebi Rivalries on Tunisian Foreign Policy*, critiques existing Rivalry Studies for neglecting the impact of regional rivalries on the foreign policies of non-rival states. Mansour argues that regional rivalries often shape non-rival states’ foreign policies as much as, or even more than, internal factors:



"The lack of explicit analysis on how the foreign policy of non-rivals is impacted or, perhaps, more accurately, constituted, by surrounding regional rivalries" (Mansour, 2020, p. 6).

While Mansour's analysis focuses on Tunisia's reliance on France to navigate the Algerian-Libyan rivalry and secure political stability, his findings are relevant to Mauritania. The country's geographical position and cultural ties similarly compel it to balance pressures from Algeria and Morocco, reinforcing its neutral stance as a key strategy for maintaining stability.

Leadership and Sovereign Behavior

A third explanation attributes Mauritania's political stability to the leadership of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz. Justine Spiegel (2014) describes Abdelaziz as an "électron libre", an independent actor who asserts Mauritania's sovereignty unapologetically. Unlike his predecessors, who sought to balance relations between Algiers and Rabat, Abdelaziz maintained a distinct position of neutrality, refusing to align with either rival. This diplomatic independence is seen as central to Mauritania's stability during his tenure.

However, Spiegel's account of Abdelaziz's behavior raises questions about the structural factors that enabled such sovereign conduct. Observers could argue that his leadership was bolstered by systemic guarantees, such as strong civil-military relations and strategic governance frameworks, which supported his ability to maintain neutrality despite regional pressures.

This literature review identified two primary frameworks for understanding Mauritania's political stability: the internal dynamics emphasized by Pazzanita and the external influences highlighted by Mansour. Both perspectives converge on the significance of Mauritania's strategic neutrality, bolstered by the leadership of Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz, as a crucial factor in maintaining stability. However, the scarcity of scholarly work on Mauritania's foreign policy underscores the need for further research to integrate domestic, regional, and leadership dimensions into a comprehensive analysis of its stability and diplomatic strategies.

Building on these insights, this article provides an explanation rooted in the concept of rivalries, focusing on how Mauritania's adept "shelter diplomacy" effectively managed the historically threatening nature of surrounding strategic rivalries. This nuanced management, which incorporates elements from the reviewed literature, has played a key role in achieving and sustaining political stability in the country.

Rivalry-Based Analysis

The relationship between Algeria and Morocco exemplifies a strategic rivalry. According to this framework, strategic rivals perceive each other as: (a) competitors, (b) sources of actual or potential threats that may escalate to militarization, and (c) enemies. Furthermore, such rivalries are often exacerbated by internal challenges, such as regime security concerns. Key factors that define strategic rivalries include expectations of threat, cognitive rigidity, and domestic political dynamics (Thompson, 2001a: 562). In the case of Algeria and Morocco, these criteria are fully met.

First, Algerian policymakers consistently view Morocco as a significant threat to their nation's territorial integrity, a perception rooted in historical tensions. Conversely, Morocco regards Algeria as a supporter of separatist movements, allegedly intent on dividing the Moroccan Kingdom. Second, cognitive rigidity extends beyond the political elite to the national elites in both Algiers and Rabat, perpetuating a narrative of hostility. Finally, domestic political processes, including regime security mechanisms and pressure groups advocating for the status quo, further entrench animosity. Algeria and Morocco thus "create and sustain dyadic relationships of structured hostility, with or without a great deal of continuous, external reinforcement" (Thompson, 2001). This rivalry has constructed significant barriers to cooperation and conflict de-escalation. For example, persistent border closures and the lack of direct communication between Algerian presidents and Moroccan kings reinforce norms of distrust.

The strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco exerts considerable pressure on neighboring non-rival states, such as Mauritania, complicating their foreign policy and stability. Mauritania, a highly strategic state for the two rivals, occupies a critical position as an observer in the Western Sahara decolonization process and serves as a vital corridor linking North Africa with Sub-Saharan Africa (Mondafrique, 2018).

A rivalry-based analysis posits that Mauritania's foreign policy; particularly its management of the Algeria-Morocco rivalry through strategic partnerships with major powers like France; represents a key factor in its political stability. Historical evidence underscores the impact of this rivalry on Mauritanian politics. For instance, the coups d'état against Ould Daddah in 1978 and Ould Haidallah in 1984 occurred during periods when Mauritania aligned itself with one of the two rivals.

Pazzanita's assessment indirectly highlights the influence of this rivalry on Mauritania's unstable foreign policy. He notes that the ideological orientations and political preferences of Mauritania's military elites, which have shaped the country's foreign policy, are linked to the rivalries of Algeria and Morocco. This influence is particularly evident in the education and training of Mauritanian elites during the early stages of training, as discussed in this paper's section on alumni networks.

Furthermore, Algiers and Rabat actively compete to increase their influence in Mauritania. For example, Taleb (2018) notes that "the Algerian-Moroccan rivalry in Africa has Mauritania as a starting point". Mauritania's reliance on iron exports from Zouerate; a region near the Algerian and Western Saharan borders; has heightened the country's focus on securing this economically critical area. Any shift in Mauritania's

foreign policy risks escalating threats from either rival, jeopardizing these extraction activities.

The rivalry's influence extends to Mauritania's relationships with its southern neighbors, Mali and Senegal, where Algeria and Morocco are believed to exert significant influence. Despite these challenges, Mauritania has managed to maintain a stable and consistent foreign policy. Remarkably, the country has avoided the instability typically associated with small states caught between strategic rivals. Instead, Mauritania has emerged as a bastion of stability in the region.

Over the past six years, Mauritania has hosted French-led counterterrorism summits, countering efforts by Algeria and Morocco to dominate the regional counterterrorism agenda (De Larramendi, 2018 a: 518). It has also taken a leading role in mediations, modernized its military (particularly in the north) with French assistance, and fortified its borders. Most notably, Mauritania recently witnessed its first peaceful and constitutional transfer of power between two elected presidents, further consolidating its stability.

To conclude, Mauritania's adept management of the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry, supported by strategic partnerships and an emphasis on neutrality, has been instrumental in maintaining its political stability. This rivalry-based analysis highlights the intricate interplay between external pressures and domestic resilience, offering valuable insights into the broader dynamics of small-state survival in geopolitically contested regions.

Shelter Theory: Explaining Mauritania's Rivalry-Evading Politics

Small states, due to their inherent vulnerabilities compared to larger states, must adopt strategies to mitigate their military, political, economic, and societal weaknesses. One key approach involves forging alliances with larger states and seeking membership in regional and international organizations. This often entails sacrificing some degree of sovereignty and incurring greater costs than larger states, all in exchange for enhanced military security, political stability, economic prosperity, and societal security (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 6). According to Thorhallsson, small states must compensate for their structural weaknesses to ensure survival and prosperity. These weaknesses typically include smaller populations, limited domestic markets and GDP, smaller territorial size, and reduced military capabilities compared to larger states. However, the theory posits that small states can offset these vulnerabilities through specific domestic and/or external measures (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 384).

With regard to domestic arrangements, the theory suggests that small states can introduce internal reforms or concessions to foster stability and ensure survival. For instance, aligning their internal political systems with those of neighboring or regional powers can enhance stability and strengthen beneficial relations with surrounding actors. While this paper does not explore this internal dimension in detail, it is worth noting that Mauritania has implemented such measures as part of its broader political strategy.

The focus of the present research, however, is solely on the external dimension of building or receiving shelter.

Shelter Theory draws on literature on small states and International Relations, which often highlights the vulnerability of such states to external threats. The concept of "shelter" is based on three interconnected aspects: first, reducing the risk of potential threats through political or military backing; second, assisting in absorbing shocks during crises; and third, providing support in the aftermath of crises, particularly in the economic domain. David Vital argues that small states struggle to manage crises independently and thus rely on the political, economic, and societal shelter provided by larger states or multilateral institutions (Thorhallsson, 2018a: 385).

Shelter can manifest in several forms. The first, political shelter, involves direct and visible diplomatic or military support, or strategic protection from another state or international organization. Second, economic shelter can take the form of direct financial assistance, participation in currency unions, support from external financial institutions, favorable loans, preferential market access, or membership in a common market. Third, societal shelter may involve cultural exchanges, norms, ideologies, and symbolic acts that reinforce the identity and legitimacy of the small state. These different forms of shelter will inform the structure and analysis of the subsequent sections of this article.

Political Shelter with France

High-Level Political Meetings and Declared Alliances: France as a Priority

For small states, political shelter primarily involves forming coalitions, establishing political alliances, obtaining membership in international organizations, and adhering to internationally accepted norms. These measures are essential for securing diplomatic support during critical moments. This section examines the frequency of high-level political meetings as an indicator of robust political support. It aims to outline how Mauritania prioritizes its political partners, identifying those with whom it aligns most closely to ensure strong diplomatic backing during times of crisis, when shelter becomes crucial. This analysis highlights the political commitments Mauritania has made in pursuit of its strategic interests.

Summitry between Mauritania and Algeria (2010/2024)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to Algeria	Visits of Algerian Presidents to Mauritania
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2011: State visit of President Ould Abdelaziz to Algiers. (Nawal, 2011) - A decade without summits (2011/2021) - 2021: State visit of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to Algeria. (RFI, 2021) - Multilateralism: Visit of President Ghazouani to Algiers. (Arab Summit: bilateral discussions at the sidelines) - January 2024: President Ghazouani visits Tindouf in Algeria and meets with his counterpart. - February 2024: Ghazouani heads to Algiers to participate at the GECCF summit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No visits.

Figure I. 1: Summitry between Algeria and Mauritania. (Source: different articles).

Summitry between Mauritania and Morocco (2010/2023)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to Morocco	Visits of Moroccan Kings to Mauritania
No visits	No visits

Figure I. 2: Summitry between Morocco and Mauritania. (Source: different articles).

Summitry between France and Mauritania (2010/2023)	
Visits of Mauritanian Presidents to France	Visits of French Presidents to Mauritania
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - April 2017: Ould Abdelaziz visits the outgoing President François Hollande. (YouTube, 2017) - December 2017: Summit on the Sahel: President Ould Abdelaziz visits France. - October 2018: Official visit of President Ould Abdelaziz to France. (elhadath, 2018) - June 2019: Last official visit of President Ould Abdelaziz. (Nawafid, 2019) - January 2020 : State visit of President Ghazouani to France and participation at the Pau Summit. - Mai 2021: Official visit of President Ghazouani to Paris and participation at the “Summit on Financing African Economies” (AMI, 2021) - June 2021: Private visit of President Ghazouani to France. (Chezvlane, 2021) - Mai 2024: Macron receives Ghazouani in Paris. (Elysée, 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Macron, July 2018. (RAF, 2018) - 2019: Visit of François Hollande, as a former President. - Emmanuel Macron June 2020 : Attending the G5S Summit. (Larcher, 2020)

Figure I. 3: Summitry between France and Mauritania. Source: (different articles and websites 2010/2024).

While frequent meetings between Mauritania and its immediate neighbors might suggest amicable relations, they contrast sharply with the country's engagements with France. Mauritania has developed a strategic partnership with France, which enables it to manage its relations with Algeria and Morocco more autonomously. Mauritanian presidents regularly meet with their French counterparts in Paris and receive them in Nouakchott, demonstrating the prioritization of France in its foreign policy. In contrast, Mauritania shows far less commitment to cultivating relationships with its Maghreb neighbors. The frequency, intensity, and nature of these high-level political meetings, as outlined in Tables I.1, I.2, and I.3, serve as key indicators of the source of Mauritania's shelter and its efforts to strengthen its position amidst regional pressures. A small and economically vulnerable Sahelian state like Mauritania would likely be more eager to develop its relations with Algeria and Morocco if it did not have such strong and frequent ties with a major power like France, which has supported Mauritania's leadership and sovereignty, particularly after President Ould Abdelaziz's coup against Ould Cheikh Abdallah in 2008; a strong indicator of shelter during the Mauritanian ruling regime's critical moments (Djerad, 2017).

Mauritania's ties with France have been particularly evident in the frequency of visits by French officials. Former President François Hollande's visit to Atar, a city in northern Mauritania near the Western Sahara conflict, in 2019 is a notable example. This visit, particularly by a former president, can also be seen as a symbol of political shelter. The presence of a high-ranking French official in a region of strategic importance sends a clear message to the northern belligerents.

The most significant and revealing aspect of Mauritania's foreign policy is the low intensity of its relations with its Maghrebian neighbors. For example, the last visit by an Algerian president to Mauritania occurred in 1997, when Liamine Zeroual visited. Similarly, Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz, who ruled Mauritania for a decade, visited Algiers only once, in 2011. Relations with Morocco have been even more distant, with the last visit by a Mauritanian president to Morocco occurring in 2004, and the last visit by a Moroccan king to Mauritania taking place in 2001. These infrequent interactions underscore the lack of significant political engagement between Mauritania and its neighboring rivals.

Despite these strained relations, Mauritania has managed to resist pressure from Algeria and Morocco due to its strong political relationship with France. Table 1.3 illustrates the tangible benefits of this shelter, with Nouakchott's close ties to Paris providing significant protection against regional pressures. The intensity of high-level contacts between Mauritania and France has consistently favored the French-Mauritanian side, with Mauritanian presidents showing considerable enthusiasm for visiting France. Notably, the French Foreign Ministry played a key role in preventing Mauritania from facing international isolation following President Ould Abdelaziz's 2008 coup. The United States, the European Union, and the African Union sought to isolate Mauritania diplomatically, but France publicly defended the country in international forums, signaling the start of a new phase in their bilateral relationship (Ould Islek, 2018).

This high level of political engagement between France and Mauritania is considered a form of shelter for several reasons. At the end of press conferences between French presidents and their Mauritanian counterparts, as well as in most partnership and cooperation agreements, statements are often made to the effect of: "France, as Mauritania's primary political and strategic partner, supports Mauritania within the international community and, in particular, the European Union, as well as in its regional environment." The "regional environment" referred to here undoubtedly refers to the Maghrebian rivalry and its regional implications, as evidenced by events such as Opération Lamentin and the instability in Mali. These special relations foster significant cooperation in defense and security. For nearly four years, France has supported Mauritania's logistical and training efforts to counter the threat posed by terrorism and AQIM (Diplomatie.fr, 2023).

Military Shelter with France: Overcoming the Pressures of Algeria-Morocco Rivalry

This section examines how Mauritania, as a small state, has mitigated pressures stemming from the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry and terrorism in the Sahel region. This has been achieved through reliance on French-backed security initiatives, strategic agreements with Paris, military cooperation, and other mechanisms to secure military shelter.

Military Presence in Mauritania

Historically, Mauritania has been caught in the crossfire of Algeria-Morocco rivalries. During the 1975 Sahrawi offensive against Nouakchott, Algeria supported the Frente Polisario, while Morocco; seen as a key instigator of several coup attempts; provided Senegal with arms and support during its war with Mauritania. Since the breakdown of the ceasefire between the Polisario and Morocco in 2020, tensions have escalated, with Morocco targeting Mauritanian gold seekers in the north using drones, sparking several low-profile diplomatic crises ([The North Africa Journal, 2024](#)).

Given these challenges, Mauritania's poorly equipped and inadequately trained military heavily depends on foreign support for technical, logistical, and operational assistance, which France has consistently provided. The presence of a major power's military forces symbolizes security assurance for small states like Mauritania. France's Operation Serval (2013–2014) aimed, according to the Quai D'Orsay, to halt the advance of jihadist groups, protect European and French nationals in Mali, and restore Mali's territorial integrity. Mauritania actively supported this intervention, fearing the spillover effects of instability from the Malian Azawad region, which heightened security threats along its borders.

Similarly, Operation Barkhane offered counterterrorism training and advisory support to the armed forces of Mali and other G5 Sahel member states, including Mauritania. It also worked to combat armed terrorist groups in collaboration with local and international forces, providing critical relief for Mauritania's 2,273-km-long border with Mali (Baudais, 2021, p. 22). Although limited information exists on French military presence during Operation Serval, Operation Barkhane saw the establishment of a French military base in Atar, northern Mauritania ([Boolumbal, 2014](#)).

Strategic Agreements and Pacts

Mauritania's military shelter extends beyond direct military presence to strategic agreements and mutual defense pacts. The Franco-Mauritanian independence agreements represent a cornerstone of this relationship, articulated in bilateral and legally binding terms. These agreements outline mutual aid commitments for defense

preparedness, granting Mauritania the right to call on France under specific conditions for internal and external security.

Accompanying the main text of the agreements are two annexes: one concerning the functioning of defense committees and the other addressing cooperation in raw materials and strategic products. Additionally, the Technical Military Assistance Agreement (AMT) sets out the framework for collaboration between the two militaries, aimed at strengthening Mauritania’s defense capabilities.

Despite attempts by Mauritania to independently secure technical, material, and logistical support; often constrained by French pressure; the longstanding sovereignty costs associated with French military assistance persist. Since 1963, this assistance has been underpinned by diplomatic, cooperative, and military collaboration mechanisms. Mauritania has strategically maintained beneficial agreements with France during periods of intensified rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, ensuring its survival amidst threats from regional powers.

For instance, Operation Lamentin, in which French forces supported Mauritania against the Frente Polisario, exemplifies France’s commitment to backing Mauritania during periods of war and tension. In recent years, bilateral military relations have deepened, as evidenced by the frequent meetings between Mauritanian and French military officials and the 2023 visit of Chief of Staff Général Thierry Burchard to Nouakchott.

By leveraging military shelter through strategic agreements and French presence, Mauritania has successfully navigated the complexities of regional rivalries while bolstering its defense posture.

Offered Training Programs: Alumni Influence

Backgrounds of the Mauritanian Presidents	
President	Graduate of
Mokhtar Ould Daddah 1960-1978	Nice (France) Dakar (<i>Colonie du Sénégal, France</i>)
Moustapha Ould Mohamed Saleck 1978-1979	Ecole Nationale des Sous-officiers Actives, Saint-Maixent, France
Mahmoud Ould Louly 1979-1980	France
Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah 1980-1984	Académie Militaire de Saint-Cyr, France
Maaouiya Ould Taya 1984-2005	Ecole Supérieure de Guerre, Paris, France
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall 2005-2007	Meknes, Morocco
Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi 2007-2008	Grenoble, France
Mamadou Ba 2008	Paris, France
Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz	Morocco, Algeria, France
Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	Morocco, Jordan, France

Figure II.1: Backgrounds of the Mauritanian Presidents (1960-2024). (Source: website of the Mauritanian presidency).

From a constitutional perspective, the President holds the highest position in Mauritania's security decision-making hierarchy, serving as the supreme commander of the National Army. Analyzing the data presented in Table II.1 reveals that most Mauritanian presidents have been graduates of French military academies, underscoring



France's significant role in shaping the country's national elite. This observation suggests that French military education not only provides security shelter but also acts as a form of political and cultural shelter by imparting norms and values or sympathy.

Choosing France as a destination for military training is not inherently problematic; Mauritania's elites could have selected alternative pathways after independence. However, studying in France often involves immersion in French language and culture, which may predispose political leaders to adopt Francophone or Francophile tendencies; or both. This cultural influence might help explain the frequent private visits of Mauritanian presidents to France, as noted earlier.

Mauritanian Commitment to French-Led Security Initiatives

This section explores Mauritania's involvement in subregional security organizations led by France, highlighting its commitment to French-backed initiatives and their implications for its national security.

G5 Sahel and Mauritania's Role

To address security and development challenges in the Sahel, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger established the G5 Sahel (G5S) during a summit in Nouakchott on December 19, 2014. This French-backed initiative emerged as a regional platform to coordinate efforts against terrorism and promote development. In response to escalating unrest, the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S) was created in 2017 as a counterterrorism task force. Supported by the United Nations and the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), this force operates primarily in the Liptako-Gourma border area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (Baudais, 2021, p. 27).

The headquarters of the G5 Sahel is permanently based in Nouakchott, reflecting Mauritania's strong commitment to the initiative (Internet Archives, 2017). Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz is often regarded as the "main architect" of this coalition due to his military expertise in counterterrorism and his diplomatic leadership in forging this partnership (*Jeune Afrique*, 2017).

The G5 Sahel faces several critical challenges, including limited funding, insufficient institutional capacities among member states, and fragmented political cooperation. While France championed the initiative and Morocco welcomed its creation, Algeria viewed it as a French attempt to circumvent its proposed Joint Military Staff Committee of the Sahel Region (CEMOC). Additionally, fostering collaboration among member states, coordinating with other stakeholders, and gaining the trust of local populations remain significant hurdles.

Despite these obstacles, Mauritania's commitment to the G5 Sahel framework is evident. As shown in Table II.1, Nouakchott has actively participated in meetings, secured international support, and benefited from France's backing as a great power.

Notably, the absence of the disruptive Algerian-Moroccan rivalry within this framework has also contributed to the initiative's relative success in offering Mauritania a robust security shelter.

Mauritania's consistent support for French-led security initiatives underscores its status as a key beneficiary of France's military and political support in the Sahel. Many observers regard Mauritania as a unique case in the region. Its proactive engagement and effective use of French security shelter have even led to its removal from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' list of unsafe travel destinations (Périer, 2020). Yet, Mauritania's ability to maintain stability, despite regional chaos in Mali and strategic rivalry to its north, is not solely due to external security shelter, the country has also implemented significant reforms and enhancements to its armed forces. According to Périer (2017):

"The number of soldiers has been increased, salaries raised, equipment adapted, and training and tactics updated with the assistance of the French and the Americans, albeit according to a purely Mauritanian vision."

These reforms have strengthened Mauritania's national defense capabilities, complementing its reliance on external security support.

In conclusion, Mauritania's robust commitment to French-led security initiatives, coupled with its internal military reforms, has enabled it to navigate the complexities of the Sahel region effectively. This unique approach highlights the interplay between external security partnerships and domestic military development in ensuring the survival and stability of a small state in a volatile region.

Mauritanian Commitment to French Security Initiatives	
2017	<p>Mali: Bamako Summit.</p> <p>French and Mauritanian Presidents attend the G5 Sahel meeting (RFI, 2017).</p> <p>Additionally, France organizes a second Summit to support G5 Sahel funding. Saudi Arabia, Emirates, and the EU promise respective funding amounts of 100 million USD, 30 million USD, and 50 million USD (RFI, 2017).</p>
2018	<p>Participation of President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz in the Niamey G5S Summit in Niger (AMI, 2018) and in the Brussels Summit of support for the G5 Sahel's Funding (France24, 2018). During that summit, the EU declared its intention to increase its contribution to the G5S's budget to 100 million USD.</p>
2019	<p>Participation of Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz in the Ouagadougou Summit in Burkina Faso (Essahraa, 2019).</p>
2020	<p>Attendance of the newly elected Mauritanian president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, at the Pau Summit in France (Elysée, 2020).</p> <p>Mauritania hosted a G5S Summit in Nouakchott, where President Ghazouani and President Macron co-chaired the meeting (AMI, 2020).</p>
2021	<p>Nouakchott G5 Summit, where the Malian Prime Minister participated but not the President, amid a crisis between Mali and France. (Anadolu, 2021).</p>
2022	<p>Crisis in Mali: Bamako withdraws from the G5 Sahel (Douce, 2022). CEMOC became the only platform where Malian military officials could hold Sahelian multilateral meetings, which is significant for Nouakchott.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coup d'état in Burkina Faso. - Spread of the Anti-Françafrique sentiment across the Sahel, facilitating involvement of new actors: Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, and Russia (including Wagner).
2022	<p>France' crises with Mali: Bilateral meetings between France and Mauritania</p>
2023	<p>France' crises with Mali and Niger: the first G5 Summit since 2021 is scheduled, but without Mali.</p>

	Ghazouani attends the meeting (RFI, 2023).
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Figure II. 1: Mauritanian Commitment to French Security Initiatives. (Source: Journals and Newspaper Articles, 2017-2023).

The assertions regarding Mauritania's preference for the French-backed initiatives and frameworks over others such as the Algerian-offered CEMOC (Comité d'Etat-Major Opérationnel Conjoint) military backing can be substantiated by the following noticeable factors:

When chiefs of staff and even generally their deputies lead Mauritanian and other members' delegations to CEMOC sessions, Presidents Aziz and Ghazouani consecutively participate with their Sahelian counterparts in the alternative French-backed G5S meetings. Similarly, while French high officials take the lead on their initiatives, Algiers sends its (Armée Nationale Populaire) ANP's number three to the CEMOC sessions. Institutionally, G5S relies more on semi-annual high-level summitry than on yearly ordinary sessions, and given that non-democratic regimes are typically governed by the high executive power or the strongman, the participation of the president himself is a strong indicator of engagement and commitment.

Finally, the commitment Mauritania is showing is defined as strong due to the low engagement Nouakchott has with Algeria, especially towards its CEMOC initiative. This could be explained by a fear of Algerian hegemony over the region and a preference to deal and compromise with a great power rather than to submit a percentage of sovereignty into a geopolitically-motivated platform launched by a regional actor maintaining a strategic rivalry with another neighbor of Mauritania. Additionally, Mauritanian commitment to French-backed initiatives is also aimed at protecting the country from what Djallil Lounnas describes as tacit agreements between states and armed groups or rebels, particularly between Algerian intelligence services and Azawad top leaders. This card that Algiers could use as pressure over Nouakchott would have been surpassed by reliance on France. (Lounnas, 2014).

To conclude, Mauritania, as a small state, has successfully obtained comprehensive security shelter with France, a major power, while managing to avoid entanglement or dependency towards the Algeria-Morocco strategic rivalry. This evidence supports the principles of shelter theory, demonstrating how Mauritania could be considered a genuine protégé of France in the region. While Mauritania's primary focus appears to be on hosting the French-backed G5 Sahel summits and serving as its headquarters, the country prefers signing clear military agreements with France, sending its soldiers for French training, facilitating French military presence, and participating in various cooperation platforms led by France. The strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco has apparently taught Mauritania the importance of self-protection and avoiding dependency on either side. Instead, for small states like Mauritania, maintaining sovereignty by engaging with great powers and international organizations may be a better option than risking sovereignty amidst a surrounding strategic rivalry between two actors competing for the status of the main regional power.

Economic Shelter with Great Powers and International Organizations

Mauritania, a small state with a GDP of \$9.8 billion; comparable to that of Kosovo; faces several structural economic weaknesses. Using Thorhallsson's terminology, external actors providing economic shelter to Mauritania have targeted key areas of vulnerability within its economy. The country remains heavily reliant on traditional extractive industries, including iron, gold, and copper, as well as agriculture and fishing. This dependence on primary sectors underscores a significant structural weakness.

Efforts toward economic diversification have led to the emergence of new resources, such as oil and gas, and the development of new sectors, including telecommunications. Since 2001, the telecommunications sector has grown at an impressive average annual rate of 26% (Sobh, 2023; Iraqi, 2017). Despite these developments, Mauritania's economic structure remains fragile and highly susceptible to external shocks.

Mauritania's reliance on commodity prices significantly exacerbates its vulnerability to economic crises. For instance, the decline in global metal prices in 2015 and the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted its economy, leading to a pronounced slowdown in growth between 2014 and 2016. This downturn also magnified Mauritania's debt burden, which stood at 78.4% of GDP in 2014. A major portion of this debt includes unresolved loans from Kuwait, further complicating the country's fiscal stability (Manciaux, 2015).

Adding to these vulnerabilities is the depreciation of the national currency, the Ouguiya, which has contributed to an increased risk of debt default. According to international standards, Mauritania's risk of non-repayment has escalated from "moderate" to "high." Additionally, structural issues such as poorly distributed economic growth, limited diversification—where the extractive sector accounts for approximately 70% of exports and 30% of government revenues (Fujas, 2015)—and an unfavorable business climate continue to weaken the economy.

Development Assistance as a Dimension

International and economic aid to developing countries, such as Mauritania, often aims to accelerate the pace of those nations' economic progress until they are capable of sustaining growth at a satisfactory rate. In a development program, the role of outside capital is not to immediately improve living conditions in the recipient states but rather to help them transition from economic stagnation to self-sustaining economic growth (Rosenstein, 1961a:107). Aid involves economic assistance from one country to another, usually from the developed world to less developed countries (LDCs). Aid can take various forms, such as: a- debt Relief; forgiving debt can save LDCs annual interest payments and provide them with more resources for internal investment. b- direct aid; providing food, money, and healthcare supplies directly to countries in need. c- indirect

Aid; financing the construction of infrastructure and communication networks, enabling countries to develop (Tejvan, 2023).

According to the website of the French Ministry of Finance, France is the largest bilateral donor in Mauritania. In fact, French development aid amounted to close to \$40 million between 2019 and 2020, surpassing Saudi Arabia's \$34.5 million, Germany's \$23.5 million, and the United States' \$17 million.

The aid consisted of grants. For example, the AFD (French Agency for Development) and the French Embassy in Nouakchott are implementing around thirty projects and actions in 2023, with a total amount of €180 million.

Trade as a Dimension: Insights from 2017 to 2021

It is important to see with which countries Nouakchott trades more.

	Main Import Partners	Main Export Partners
2017	South Korea 18.08% Emirates 8.91% Norway 7.84%	China 35.02% Switzerland 15.02% Spain 11.00%
2018	Emirates 14.40% Spain 10.99% Belgium 10.91%	China 31.25% Spain 15.04% Switzerland 9.42%
2019	Emirates 13.30% Spain 11.40% China 10.74%	China 38.63% Spain 15.19% Japan 8.40%
2020	Spain 14.58% Emirates 14.22% France 8.44%	China 33.93% Switzerland 17.99% Canada 10.00%
2021	China 20.00% Turkey 11.71% France 11.4%	China 42.51% Spain 9.34% Canada 8.14%

Figure III. 1: Main Trading Partners of Mauritania (2017/2020). (Source: World Integrated Trade Solution Website).

As illustrated in Table III.1, Mauritania has maintained diverse trade relationships with multiple partners from 2017 to 2021. On the import side, the most notable observation is the steady and stable trading relationship with the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, imports from China have demonstrated remarkable growth, doubling between 2019 and 2021 (Table III.2). Surprisingly, France; a key political and security ally of Mauritania; does not feature prominently among its top trading partners, as previously emphasized in this analysis.

On the export front, a particularly significant trend is the sustained growth of Mauritanian exports to China. By 2021, China accounted for 42.51% of Mauritania's total exports, representing \$1.76 billion out of the country's estimated \$4.14 billion in export revenues. This data highlights Mauritania's success in diversifying its trade partnerships while fostering a robust trading relationship with China.

The data contradicts initial expectations regarding France’s potential as a primary economic shelter for Mauritania. In 2021, trade between France and Mauritania amounted to €223 million. French exports to Mauritania totaled €178 million, giving France a market share of 11.4% and positioning it as the country’s third-largest supplier. This outcome challenges the assumption of France’s dominance in economic shelter provision, suggesting instead that China has emerged as a preferred economic partner. This preference exists even over regional neighbors like Morocco, which has historically leveraged the Guerguerat border passage to exert political pressure on Mauritania.

The analysis aligns with the shelter theory’s assertion that great powers often act as shelter providers. However, it is China, rather than France, that fulfills this role in Mauritania’s trade landscape. This finding resonates with the Icelandic case foundational to shelter theory, which demonstrated that while the United States offered extensive diplomatic and military backing to Iceland, the Nordic states and international organizations provided substantial economic and societal shelter.

Despite its secondary role in Mauritania’s trade relationships, France’s position as a key political and military shelter provider remains unchallenged. France continues to offer development assistance and maintains its influence through military and security cooperation. This multi-dimensional presence ensures that Paris remains a vital partner for Mauritania, even if its role as an economic shelter is limited. Finally, while Mauritania has successfully diversified its trade partnerships and strengthened economic ties with China, France retains its importance as a political and military ally. This duality underscores the nuanced nature of shelter theory, demonstrating that economic shelter can be decoupled from political and military reliance on a single great power.

Favourable Loans as a Dimension

Favourable loans are a form of economic shelter that Nouakchott considerably needs. Indeed, the following tables list most of the loans that Nouakchott has been delivered during the last six years. An emphasis is put on the amount and the country or organization of origin.

The Year	Context	The Credit’s Amount
2017-2018-2019 Extension request, 2017/2021	According to the IMF website, Mauritania had to adjust. The context was a plunge in metal prices, the necessary budget cuts, currency depreciation, and borrowing resulted in low growth, higher external debt, and higher risks to financial stability.(IMF, 2023)	IMF Executive Board Approves US\$ 163.9 MillionArrangement.
2022	Covid 19 Crisis.	The IMF Executive Board approved 42-month arrangements in the amount of US\$ 86.9 Million for The Islamic Republic of Mauritania..

Figure III.2: Loans to Mauritania from the IMF. (Source : Homepage of the IMF, 2023).

Year	Institution	Credit’s Amount	Context
2017	World Bank and IMF	7 Billion Ouguiya	Building of a clean energy station.



		(203 Million \$)	(Royapost, 2017)
2020	World Bank	The World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved three grants for a total of \$133 million from the International Development Association (IDA), including funding from the Refugee and Host Communities IDA.	According to the World Bank homepage, the credit was to help improve access to basic infrastructure and services for poor and vulnerable communities in the southern regions of Mauritania. (World bank, 2023)
2021	African Development Bank.(BAD)	The African Development Bank grants 10 million euros to BCI (Banque du Commerce et d'Industrie Mauritanienne).	According to the bank's homepage, the aim was to strengthen the role of SMEs (Startups) in economic recovery. (AFDB, 2023)
2022	World Bank	83 Million \$	For economic development. (mauriact.info, 2022)
2023	IFAD: InternationalFund for AgriculturalDevelopment.	The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania have signed a loan agreement for 5 million euros.	To finance the "Joint Sahel Program in response to the Challenges of COVID-19, Conflicts and Climate Change" (ReliefWeb, 2023)
2023	African Development Bank BAD	Mauritania: The African Development Bank and the Bank for Trade and Industry Group (BCI) sign aUS\$485.000	Finance Action for Women in Africa (AFAWA) technical Bank for Trade and Industry Group (BCI) sign aUS\$485.000

Figure III. 3: Loans to Mauritania from External Financial Institutions. (Source: Homepages of different banks.).

The Year	The Country	The Amount	Declared Objective
2017	Kuwait	34 Million Dollars.	To develop electricity Programs.(KUNA, 2017)
2018	NA	NA	NA
2019	Kuwait	176 Million Dollars.	Modernizing infrastructures between Mauritania and Mali.(Anbaa, 2019)
2020	Emirates	2 Billion Dollar (GDP of Mauritania in 2020: 5,2 BillionDollar)	Economic Development and Counterterrorism (Jeuneafrique, 2020)
2020	Kuwait	32 Million Dollars.	Routes construction. (Essahraa, 2020)
2022	Saudi Arabia	Loan (Crédit) of 300 Million Dollars.	For adjusting the annual budget. (Ecssrae, 2022)

Figure III. 4: Loans from States (Gulf Monarchies). (Source: different articles 2017/2023).

The data presented in Tables III.2, III.3, and III.4 demonstrates that Mauritania has strategically sought economic shelter by securing favourable loans from a diverse range of international partners. These loans primarily originated from external financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as from Gulf monarchies.

Tables III.2 and III.3 indicate that external financial institutions have provided Mauritania with approximately \$700 million in loans over the past six years. In contrast, loans from Gulf monarchies were significantly higher during the same period, totaling around \$2.8 billion (Table III.4). Unlike politically charged bilateral aid, loans from international organizations tend to carry fewer political costs (Ruttan, 1989). This distinction is crucial, as it reduces the risks of political interference, such as those historically associated with Mauritania's foreign relations, which have occasionally contributed to political instability, including coups d'état.

The IMF, according to its official mission statement, "does not provide loans for specific projects, unlike development banks. Instead, it offers financial assistance to countries affected by crises, granting them breathing room to address challenges". For Mauritania, critical periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2014–2015

commodity price crash highlighted the IMF's role as a vital economic shelter. Over four years, Mauritania secured nearly \$500 million in loans from the IMF (Table III.2).

The leadership of Christine Lagarde, a French national close to President Nicolas Sarkozy, during her tenure as IMF Managing Director was notable in this context. Lagarde, who held the position during politically tumultuous times following a coup d'état, visited Nouakchott in 2013 to reinforce Mauritania's economic engagement with the IMF, as documented on the organization's official website.

Table III.4 further highlights Mauritania's success in obtaining substantial financial support from Gulf monarchies over the past six years. Key contributors include Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, which collectively provided loans and financial assistance totalling \$2.8 billion. This financial support aligns with the strategic alliances between France and its Gulf partners in the MENA region, reinforcing Mauritania's ties to France's broader network of influence (Colombo, 2021).

Mauritania's approach to securing economic shelter underscores the importance of diversifying financial partnerships. By relying on international financial institutions for less politically intrusive loans and leveraging the generosity of Gulf monarchies, Nouakchott has been able to address critical economic vulnerabilities. The combination of these financial sources reflects Mauritania's adeptness in navigating its economic challenges while minimizing political risks.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper began by highlighting two critical points: the historical pressures on Mauritania's political stability posed by its northern neighbours and its previous struggles in managing the strategic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco. These factors significantly heightened Mauritania's vulnerability as a small and weak state. The analysis then detailed how Mauritania has effectively mitigated these pressures and threats by adopting a strategy of shelter diplomacy, which has strengthened its stability and resilience across various sectors.

Mauritania's strategic alignment with France has been central to its shelter diplomacy. By granting France a military presence, training its soldiers under French guidance, supporting French-led initiatives, and signing highly strategic agreements, Nouakchott has secured political stability and safety. This approach has exempted Mauritania from engaging seriously or forcefully in initiatives like Algeria's CEMOC (Joint Operational Staff Committee) or Morocco's African Lion exercises. Furthermore, it has reversed the dynamic with its northern neighbours, positioning Mauritania as a challenging actor for Algerian and Moroccan political leaders, rather than the reverse. Mauritania's favourable relationship with a permanent member of the UN Security Council further bolsters its position, adding significant diplomatic leverage.

In the economic sphere, Mauritania has pursued a balanced and diversified approach to sheltering. It has cultivated trade relations with China, received development assistance from France, and secured loans from international organizations and Gulf

countries. This diversification has shielded Mauritania from economic pressures by Algeria and Morocco, preventing either from exploiting its vulnerabilities or imposing costly dependencies. For instance, Nouakchott effectively neutralized potential economic threats, such as Morocco's use of the Guerguerat passage as leverage or Algeria's strategically motivated humanitarian aid and financial generosity.

Notably, while France has played a dominant role in providing political and security shelter, economic shelter has been more diversified, involving international organizations, China, and Gulf monarchies. This multifaceted approach aligns with the premises of shelter theory, which does not require dependence on a single major power. Instead, Mauritania's nuanced shelter strategy demonstrates its diplomatic sophistication. While France's influence remains significant across political, security, and economic dimensions, the inclusion of China as a key trading partner and Gulf monarchies as substantial financial supporters complicates a strict interpretation of the theory, particularly in its economic application.

Mauritania's well-executed shelter diplomacy has delivered remarkable political stability, as evidenced by the country's first peaceful transfer of power between elected presidents in 2019. Additionally, it has enabled Nouakchott to disengage politically from regional rivalries while focusing on economic development and prosperity, avoiding dependency on either Algiers or Rabat. Importantly, Mauritania has transformed its surrounding regional rivalry from a source of danger into a strategic advantage, marking a significant departure from its historical challenges.

In conclusion, for non-rival states encircled by strategic competition, shelter diplomacy emerges as a highly effective strategy for survival and political advancement. Mauritania's case underscores this approach's potential, offering a valuable model for other small states in similar geopolitical contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors' knowledge.

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