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Thailand-Africa Initiative 2.0: Morocco's untapped potential for deepened cooperation

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First introduced in 2013 and relaunched in December 2025, Thailand's Africa Initiative aims to be a more structured, sustained and result-oriented vehicle for engaging countries in Africa. Underlying this initiative is the effort to revive the spirit of South-South cooperation, but with more practical emphasis and concrete deliverables.

Having long perceived Africa's inherent potential, Thailand has accumulated knowledge of the continent through inbound and outbound development projects and technical assistance programs with at least 15 countries in Africa, including Morocco, through Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), which has been integrated into the Thai Foreign Ministry since 2004 and has existed in various institutional setups since 1950. Its main mandate is to share Thailand's expertise and best practices with developing countries around the world in areas like sustainable

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agriculture, public health, and human development. Especially popular are its annual training courses, scholarships, and postgraduate programs that offer participants the opportunity to travel to Thailand. Recently, TICA is also exploring trilateral cooperation with its Moroccan counterpart, AMCI.²

While TICA has been successful as a vehicle for development cooperation, Thailand-Africa Initiative is a different policy that seeks to deepen engagement beyond technical assistance and towards actual mutual economic benefits. To start with, bilateral relations with individual African countries may need added substance to overcome the stall or frigid progress that has prevented partnerships from translating into more tangible results. Already, the Initiative has focused on cooperation with Nigeria on rice production and trade. But it also aims to increase economic exchanges with other countries on the continent in sectors like renewable energy, mining and natural resources, agribusiness, tourism, and digital innovation, with the hope of increasing market access on both sides. The initiative has been conscious about its emphasis on peer-to-peer collaboration, so the task at hand is to steer the mentality of agencies and agents concerned away from donor-recipient semblance.

For Thailand, the initiative reinforces its aim to serve as a bridge between Asia and Africa. For African nations, the initiative is envisaged to offer improved access to Asian markets, applied technologies, and development expertise, particularly in sectors where Thailand has accumulated considerable practical experience.

² L'Agence Marocaine de Coopération Internationale

Morocco as a key player in Africa with potential for Thai investors

Morocco, a key member of the Arab Maghreb Union, is geographically located in North Africa. It has a rich identity blending African, Arab Maghreb, and local indigenous heritage. Over the past decade, Morocco has emerged as a powerful player regionally and globally. However, due to geographical distance, several of Morocco's achievements over the past recent years may have been overlooked in Southeast Asia, which has been preoccupied with geo-political challenges of their own on top of domestic political complications.

Vis-à-vis Thailand, Morocco has a lower GDP per capita, but it managed to have high-speed rail line (Al Boraq), with more routes under expansion, and impressive road infrastructure. Its Tanger Med port, located in Tangier in the Northern tip, is also consistently ranked among the elite Top 20 in the world. Morocco is also known to accelerate large-scale, private-public partnership (PPP) projects towards green and solar energy, high-speed rail, desalination, and global logistics, as well as substantial investments in anticipation of co-hosting the 2030 FIFA World Cup.

Regionally, Morocco has been consistent in orienting itself as the gateway to Africa, contributing to key Trans-African routes along the Atlantic coast into West Africa, like the Cairo-Dakar highway and Tiznit-Dakhla Expressway that serve as logistical corridor connecting mainland Europe and North Africa to sub-Saharan West Africa.

Thailand-Morocco Relations: good but need a boost

In light of Morocco's significant potential, Thailand would benefit from some rejuvenation of the existing bilateral relations. Last year, Thailand-Morocco bilateral ties reached their 40th anniversary, but the two countries are yet to enter a new phase of cooperation. Following a relatively quiet period during COVID-19, both sides have gradually ramped up activities, mostly in economic, educational, tourism, and cultural domains, like business delegations, technical

cooperation projects, and cultural events. A recent Muay-Thai masterclass workshop in Rabat in May drew over 900 participants from across Morocco, while several Moroccan athletes have won Muay-Thai championships in several weight categories and titles, a clear proof that both countries share many common interests. Thailand's visa-free campaign, albeit temporary, also saw a sharp rise in the number of Moroccans visiting Thailand. The two countries share many similarities, from culinary popularity, excellence and passion in sports, to being among the world's top tourism destinations. Most crucially, both countries are Kingdoms with relative stability and share many values and ways of life, despite some superficial differences in cultural and religious terms.

While all things are going well, the Thailand-African Initiative should not miss the chance of adding increased political will to engage with Morocco at a higher level. From the beginning, the conventional narrative has been that each sees the other as gateway to their respective continents. But substantive changes that significantly increase market access and joint ventures are yet to come out.

Beyond the surface of narratives, both sides can aspire to be more specific in identifying early-harvest prospects to boost. Many possibilities are worth considering. In tourism, each side can be each other's 'off-the-beaten-path' destination, particularly among tourists searching for new discoveries beyond Europe. Exploring a bilateral agreement on short-term visa exemption should therefore be back on the agenda. In more strategic views, Morocco's drone industry offers interesting opportunities for Thailand's security and defense ecosystems. In trade, Morocco's expertise in doing business with Sub-Saharan Africa can prove valuable to Thailand's renewed interest in the continent as a whole, especially in terms of access to West and Central African markets and given Thailand's strength in halal food industry. As a net importer of phosphate and given the centrality of Thailand's agriculture to its economy, Thailand cannot underestimate

Morocco's importance for having the largest phosphate reserves in the world, particularly now that it is increasingly seen as a critical mineral with indispensable roles in supply chains, food security, and national defense.

For this to materialize, the status quo of bilateral relations will need some reboost. As things stand, Thailand needs to understand Morocco's zeitgeist, the issue of Western Sahara and the Atlantic Initiative and the importance it carries in Morocco's body politic. Thailand's Africa Initiative cannot overlook the social currents in individual countries on this continent, nor can it ignore the security dimension of regions like the Sahel in which Morocco is having increasingly active role. Indeed, the Atlantic Coast of Africa is an area of relative stability—and commercial prospect via maritime access—compared to other areas plagued by militant violence, displacement, active conflicts and natural disasters. As such, Morocco's Atlantic Initiative has a potential to improve political stability and regional integration among countries with common challenges that are seeking new partnerships, provided that it translates into focus on agricultural, food, and pharmaceutical industries that benefit public health and well-being, and carried out within responsible and ethical frameworks. For Thailand's re-engagement with Africa, in the wake of pulling out by traditional Western partners, the objectives of the Atlantic Initiative may help sharpen the analyses on complex rivalries and regional challenges and opportunities facing external partners, and how the latter could connect with such an initiative while being mindful of regional power plays.

Western Sahara: an African elephant in ASEAN's room

At this point, it remains uncertain if Thailand's Africa Initiative will include taking a new look at the Western Sahara file. Mainly due to geographical distance, many countries in ASEAN and Asia more broadly have yet to review their position on the issue, which has gone through

important evolution. Indeed, Morocco's diplomatic standing on this subject has sharply escalated over recent years. Now, many more countries have endorsed or expressed support for, with varying degrees, Morocco's Autonomy Plan as a basis or reference point for solving the dispute. The growing international consensus, albeit not entirely free from counter-arguments, partly came from fatigue over the frozen conflict, resulting in a choice in favor of a more realistic, feasible, and politically negotiable approach. Transactional positioning of powerful countries is also at play. But there is no denial that broader international alignment is emerging in support of prioritizing stability and actionable processes over long drawn-out stalemate.

To what extent is this issue relevant to Thailand or ASEAN's engagement with Morocco and Africa is largely an unknown quantity subjected to how much decoupling is possible among political, diplomatic and trade and economic dealings in the inter-relations. However, following the historic United Nations Security Council Resolution 2797, Japan has recently decided to give clear credit to Morocco's Autonomy Plan as basis for mutually acceptable solution, setting itself apart from other countries that still hold on to careful neutral posturing. This development is important and cannot be overlooked.

Despite the visit to Rabat by the ASEAN Secretary General in June 2025 and the fact that Morocco, which signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and was the first and only African nation to be ASEAN's Sectoral Dialogue Partner since 2023 as well as having observer status in the ASEAN-Inter-Parliamentary Assembly, ASEAN has not formally discussed or issued joint declarations regarding Western Sahara, possibly in anticipation of some final outcomes at the UN level. The bloc's official diplomatic engagements have therefore focused on fostering economic, educational, and political partnerships with Morocco, mostly on individual basis.

On balance, geographical distance may play a part in the priority given by ASEAN countries to this file. From general observation, countries with significant distance from Morocco have tended to opt for official stance rooted in support for the UN process and the mandate of MINURSO. For example, whereas several countries in Africa, Europe and the Americas, or those with relative proximity such as the United Kingdom, have warmed up to Morocco's Autonomy Plan, neither Australia nor New Zealand has officially changed position towards endorsing it and continues to align their policies with the United Nations, the same approach taken by Thailand. However, the fact that several countries have finally shifted their positions on this issue should not be seen lightly. Powerful, consistent diplomatic efforts may have been a factor, but the trend is also a reflection of broader readings of changing international dynamics, and perhaps growing acceptance of reality. It should also be noted that MINURSO's mission has now come under strategic review—and significant pressure. As such, it is important to weigh other considerations, such as quality and substance of bilateral relations and degree of diplomatic engagement, such as having a physical Embassy, into the equation, especially when international legal process leaves certain areas in limbo. With an ASEAN Trilateral Meeting with Morocco scheduled for the third quarter of 2026 under the Philippines' Chairmanship, it will be interesting to see if the parties can achieve further progress in their relations.

Chicken and Egg: economic entanglement and diplomatic closeness

For one thing, ASEAN and Thailand have been exposed and vulnerable to the recent geopolitical shocks. Therefore, governments in ASEAN will be wise to prioritize diversifying economic risks and seeking new markets, particularly those in North Africa. Private sector's investment decisions may precede and help add weight to foreign policy calculations. With the current scenario of cold war-like tension, active war zones, and general erosion of the international

rules-based order, Thailand's Africa Initiative is a step in the right direction of strengthening South-South cooperative spirit, using trade and investment as trailblazers. After all, the tangible measure for economic success beyond any signing of MOUs is real investment projects and perceptible increase in trade. And the measure for diplomatic success beyond exchanges of visits is the ability to occasionally adapt foreign policy views to the changing landscape, and sometimes, reality on the ground. Governments nowadays place importance on crafting narratives, it is equally important to make sure these are frequently refreshed to reflect new dynamics and seize the momentum to further deepen cooperation with a more sustained and structured focus. With Morocco for example, it may be time Thailand clearly identifies areas to push for strategic interests as part of its aspiration for closer connection with Africa as a whole.

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