

Chafarinas islands, insular border and new tourism promotion challenges

Islas Chafarinas, frontera insular y nuevos retos de promoción turística

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Abstract

The Chafarinas Islands is one of the Spanish enclaves located in the north of Africa, constituting the only border of the European Union in the area. It is an area that enjoys a natural environment of great ecological value. The research makes a historical tour, analyzing the elements that make up its problems until the second decade of the 21st century. It covers geographical, environmental and historical aspects that explain its history and the current status quo. Its location in the Mauritania-Tingitania area, together with its status as an island border, reveals a space not exempt from difficulties in political and economic relations, which should be analyzed, with the aim of finding ways to improve the relationship and cooperation between Spain (the EU) and Morocco, reducing the existing border conflicts. Its future options include cooperation with neighboring countries and the exploitation of its tourist resources within the framework of sustainability.

Keywords: Chafarinas Islands, borders, economic history, sustainable tourism, economy.

Resumen

Las islas Chafarinas es uno de los enclaves españoles situado en el norte de África, constituye la única frontera de la Unión Europea en la zona. Es un espacio que goza de un medio natural de gran valor ecológico. La investigación realiza un recorrido histórico y analiza los elementos que conforman su problemática hasta la segunda década del siglo XXI. Se abarcan aspectos geo-

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gráficos, ambientales e históricos que explican su trayectoria y el actual *statu quo*. Su ubicación en la zona de la Mauritania-Tingitania, unida a su condición de frontera insular, deja al descubierto un espacio no exento de dificultades en las relaciones políticas y económicas, que deben analizarse para encontrar vías que mejoren la relación y la cooperación entre España (la UE) y Marruecos y minoren los conflictos fronterizos existentes. Sus opciones de futuro pasan por la cooperación con países vecinos y la explotación de sus recursos turísticos en el marco de la sostenibilidad.

Palabras claves: Islas Chafarinas, fronteras, historia económica, turismo sostenible, economía.

Introduction

History shows that the different types of boundaries in a geographic space that share borders can bring associated conflicts (Lois & Cairo, 2011; Naranjo Giraldo, 2014), impacting a territory's ability to generate wealth and promote sustainable tourism.

The push and pull elements associated with border location are a focus of interest for the study of the possible relationships that can be established between the tourism industry and the boundaries marked between different states (Moral Cuadra et al., 2016; Hernández Ramírez, 2017; Timothy, 2001).

Specifically, tourism has become one of the pillars of development in today's society, configuring spaces and economic interests that have a direct impact, especially in island territories (Apostoulopoulos & Gayle, 2002). Therefore, geography imposes its rules on geopolitical issues, creating a more complex relation than the tourism-geography binomial (Bettoni & Giblin, 2009), so the study of the narrow strip of sea that separates Morocco and Spain and its adjacent territories is one of the borders that, due to its special conditions, are of greatest concern to the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance (García Hernando, 2008), a concern that leaves an open door to shared progress, since they can exploit its frontier status, for the sake of a common benefit not exempt from conflicts, making its study particularly interesting.

This geographical setting has been a friction point for millennia, where war, confrontation, trade, cultural diffusion, and accommodation (Bettoni & Giblin, 2009; Driessen, 1992) have shaped the current reality. This is not an isolated case; the North-South border or, following a more modern terminology, the so-called *global border*, which includes the Spanish-Moroccan border, shows great similarities with other border issues.

Since the 1990s, the tourism potential of island territories has been the subject of numerous studies from a general perspective (Briguglio et al., 1996; Conlin & Baum, 1995; Lockhart & Drakakis-Smith, 1997) or in case studies according to the typology of islands, whether tropical (Gössling, 2003) or cold water (Baldacchino, 2006), or small-sized islands (Grilli et al., 2021; Kurniawan et al., 2019) or with a high-level tourism profile such as the Balearic Islands or Hawaii (Bardolet & Sheldon, 2008).

The prime objective of the present research is to highlight the island border status of the Chafarinas Islands and their future options by reviewing the changing catalog of frontier functions that the islands have performed over time (Anderson, 1995; Calderón Vázquez, 2014; Driessen, 1996; Mariñas Otero, 1998; Newman & Paasi, 1998; Sharpley, 2012). In this matter, the territorial support of the Chafarinas,

even with its small size, is a space of rich biodiversity, has undoubted ecological value (Torres Gavilá, 2008; Verdú Baeza, 2014), and enjoys an excellent state of conservation of the environment of its original terrestrial, marine and underwater communities, so that the Chafarinas Islands could be considered a true Mediterranean ecological treasure, which increases its strategic value in the context of the Alboran Sea (Flores-Moya et al., 2021).

In addition, the reason for this almost perfect state of environmental conservation derives from its status as a border island, which implies very restricted access to the territory, given the military control to which it is subjected, and makes it a marine ecoregion for nature conservation (Olson & Dinerstein, 2002; Watson et al., 2014) that may be of interest for the economic development and the geopolitical future of the area.

The secondary objectives are the contribution of new empirical materials to the field of “island borders” and border islands by contributing new data and records to the debate on Spanish (and European) African borders.

Table 1 lists the authors who have analyzed the problems of the Chafarinas Islands and the different perspectives. History, politics, and geography come together to offer an overview that is an excellent starting point to observe the island group from a legal perspective, which considers aspects of daily life and the special biological and geological singularities of the environment. All these elements offer possibilities to assess the current situation of the island group, although they focus to a greater extent on those aspects that can help to reflect on a future that goes beyond its current depopulated state.¹

The structure of the research begins with the introduction, which includes a review of the literature. The following section describes the geographic and geophysical characteristics and the ecological and environmental aspects of the area. The third section describes the historical process of the constitution of Chafarinas as a Spanish territory, considering its inhabitants’ lifestyle and economic activities and the demographic evolution observed in the islands to try to discover the reasons that may explain the depopulation process. The fourth section analyzes the complex border problems it faces, paying special attention to the conflicts and frictions with Morocco and the migratory pressure, which is more potential than real but which causes some alarm to the Spanish authorities. The fifth section addresses, from a critical perspective, the archipelago’s possible future in terms of sustainable development and tourism, followed by the most pertinent conclusions.

The reflections and possible conclusions will be related to analyzing the changes in the border function of the Spanish possessions on the North African coast. An issue that has been occurring over time has led to the depopulation of these places and their progressive conversion into nature reserves, from which arises a debate on the possible sustainable tourism uses of island territories (Carlsen & Butler, 2011; Graci & Dodds, 2010).

¹ The works cited above reflect a set of topics and are based on the main contributions of the research collected.

Table 1. Review of the literature

Topic		Author
History	Prehistory	Bellver Garrido, J. A. (2013)
	Ancient and medieval	Gibaja, J. F., Carvalho, A. F., Rojo, M., Garrido, R. & García, I. (2012)
		Aragón Gómez, M. (2013)
		Gámez Gómez, S. (2013)
	19th and 20th centuries	Esquembri Hinojo, C. (2013)
	General	López Tirado, J. (2002)
Geography and history		
		Reclus, E. (1890)
Politics and history		Mir Berlanga, F. (1980)
		Quirós Linares, F. (1998)
		Mariñas Otero, E. (1998)
		Bellver Garrido, J. A., Bravo Nieto & Gámez Gómez, S. (2013)
		Esquembri Hinojo, C. (2013)
		Lechado Granados, M. C. (2013)
		Calderón Vázquez, F. J. (2014)
Architecture and infrastructure		
	Infrastructure	Narvárez López, F. (2013)
	Military architecture	Bravo Nieto, A. (2013)
Society and daily life		
		Lechado Granados, M. C. (2013)
Legal		
		Del Valle Gálvez, J. A. (2011)
		Verdú Baeza, J. (2014)
Biology-ecology		
		Villora Moreno, S. (1993)
		Tena Medialdea, J. (1996)
		Guallart Furió, J. & Afán Asensio, I. (2013)
		Birdlife International (n. d.)
		MAPA (2018)
Geology		
		Calderón, S. (1894-1895)
		Barrera, J. L. & Pineda, A. (2006)
Miscellaneous		
		Verdú Baeza, J. (2014)

Source: created by the authors

Nature, ornithological, and bird-watching tourism can be presented as an option for the future and constitute an instrument to overcome the current situation of border isolation and depopulation of the Chafarinas Islands, as well as the revitalization of economic activities (Calderón Vázquez, 2013).

Furthermore, the present study synthesizes previously scattered knowledge on the Spanish North African island territories to address its prospects. To this end, the quantitative aspects of the work have utilized the archival source of the official censuses of 1910 (vol. 4) and 1920 (vol. 5) for the labor market aspects and the trajectory followed by the population variable in the set of official population censuses (1877-1970), consulted at the National Institute of Statistics (INE). This information has provided the study with a research perspective that has been scarcely developed to date, which permits the observation of the demographic cycles and the transformation of the territory in terms of occupation.

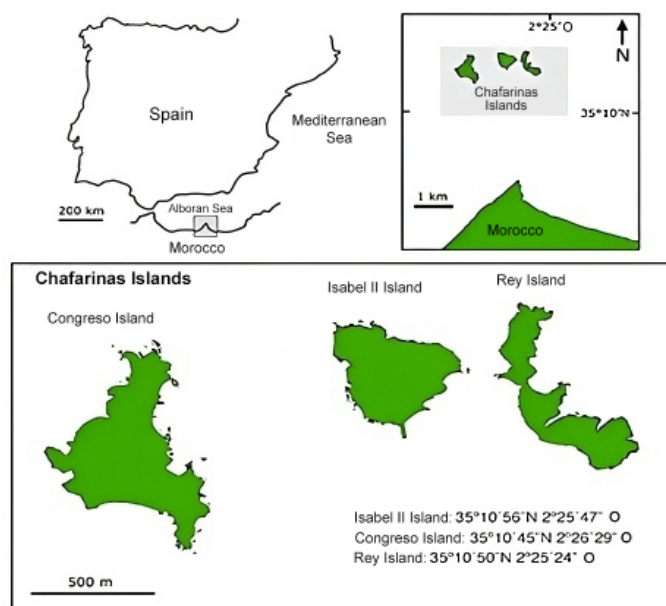
In any case, the complexity of the subject to be dealt with has meant using academic sources as far as the subject matter has made it possible, complemented by the opinion of experts and their publications in the press. It must be said that data from primary sources are due to the connotations that come with the use of figures compiled without the precision that files referring to population variables and professional activities have enjoyed in recent decades.

The island border territory. Geophysical characteristics of the Chafarinas, ecological and environmental aspects

The Chafarinas Islands are part of the territories under Spanish sovereignty located on the North African coast, known as *plazas de soberanía* (places of sovereignty) (Table 2). This set can be divided into two main groups. On the one hand, the *land areas* comprised the coastal border cities (Ceuta and Melilla) and the Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera. On the other hand, the *island areas* are composed of two archipelagos (Chafarinas and Al Hoceima islands). The *plazas de soberanía* are integrated into the European Union and constitute Africa's only European external border (Figure 1).

The archipelago is located in the Alboran Sea, 45 km east of the Spanish enclave of Melilla and 3.3 km from the Moroccan Mediterranean coast (Ras el Ma) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Location map of the Chafarinas Islands



Source: created by the authors based on the cartography of the National Geographic Institute (IGN by its acronym in Spanish)

Table 2. Spanish borders in North Africa

Territory	Typology	Area km ²	Height m	Length /width (m)	Distance to the coast	Geolocation	Population
Ceuta	Coastal border city	18.5	10/349	-	0	35°53'16.8" N 5°18'43.2" W	85 144
Melilla	Coastal border city	12.3	30/130	-	0	35°17'31.36" N 2°56'19.06" W	86 384
Peñón de Vélez*	Peninsula	0.019	90	260/100	0	35°10'20" N 4°17'58" W	35
Alhucemas Islands**	Peñón de Alhucemas	0.015	2	170/86	50m	35°12'54" N 3°53'47" W	35-50
	Mar Island	0.014	4				0
	Tierra Island	0.017	11				0
Chafarinas Islands	Isabel II Island	0.153	137	500/400	4 km	35°11'00" N 2°26'00" W	60-70
	Congreso Island	0.256					0
	Rey Island	0.116					0

Source: created by the authors based on data from the National Geographic Institute (IGN by its acronym in Spanish)

* The Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera was originally an island, but after a severe earthquake in 1934, it became a peninsula, joined to the coast by a small sandy isthmus. It is on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast, 126 km from Melilla and 117 km from Ceuta.

** The Al Hoceima archipelago is located on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast, in the bay of Al-Hoseima, 155 km east of Ceuta and 100 km west of Melilla.

The Chafarinas Islands are a small archipelago of volcanic origin formed by three islands named Congreso, Isabel II (the only one inhabited), and Rey. They are located south of the Iberian Peninsula, in the southern part of the Alboran Sea, about 27 nautical miles east of Melilla and 1.73 miles from the Moroccan coast (MAPA, 2018).² Historically, the proximity of this island group to Morocco has marked its development, as noted in the historical text by De Sangroniz y Castro (1924).³

Congreso is the westernmost island, the largest, and the highest above sea level. Isabel II (Figure 2) is located between the other two, separated 1 km from the previous one and about 175 m from Rey Island. This easternmost island is the smallest and the lowest, as seen in Tables 3 and 4. Human presence dates back to the Neolithic, as attested by archaeological remains, such as Cardial pottery, and has remained more or less stable until recent times despite the changes experienced throughout history (Gibaja et al., 2012).

Figure 2. Isabel II Island as seen from Cabo del Agua (Morocco)



Source: González Novo, M. CC0 License

The archipelago enjoys a dry Mediterranean climate, strongly influenced by the prevailing winds (east or west). The orography in Chafarinas is characterized by its rugged surface, and its coastal profile is of abrupt morphology, with an abundance of cliffs that are difficult to access. The absence of springs or sources of drinking water makes human life difficult (Table 3).

² A detailed physical description of the Chafarinas Islands can be found on the website of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge: <https://www.miteco.gob.es/es/parques-nacionales-oapn/centros-fincas/chafarinas/descripcion.aspx>

³ *Las Islas Chafarinas*, the title of the aforementioned work, responds to the interests of the author, as a scholar of the environment, who had the capacity to influence from the position he would go on to hold in 1928, when he became head of the General Directorate of Tourism. During his term of office, hotels and residences were renovated; roadside inns, information offices and interpreters' corps were created; and hotel credit was introduced (De Quintana Bermúdez de la Puente, n. d.).

Table 3. Geographical characteristics of the Chafarinas archipelago

Climate		Area	Height (m)	Coordinates	Distance	Location
Maximum temperature	41.1 °C	0.525 km ² , 55.5 ha	137	35°11' N	3.3 km to the African coast	Alboran Sea, in front of the mouth of the Muluya River
Minimum temperature	5.2 °C			2°26' W		
Relative humidity	76.9 %				45 km E. Melilla	
Atmospheric pressure	1 017.8 hPa.					
Rainfall	297.2 mm/year					

Source: created by the authors with data from MAPA, 2018

Precisely, this situation and the knowledge of the following aspects are of great significance insofar as they have been generators of multiple conflicts throughout history, which means they should be taken into account to plan their future options better.

In any case, it is interesting to observe the evolution of the environmental protection of the species, as shown in Table 4, as it shows the marine wealth of these unique places in this area of the Mediterranean.

Historical and demographic aspects: the road to social and economic depopulation

The settlement of the Chafarinas Islands can be traced back to the Paleolithic. On the island of Congreso, archaeological structures of great interest define a small habitat with traces of agriculture and livestock, and evidence of mollusk harvesting. Subsequently, the Romans knew the islands as Tres Insulae, listed in the *Itinerario* of the Emperor Antoninus (Verdú Baeza, 2014).

The Chafarinas appear in the oldest portolan charts on record, such as those of Pietro Visconti de Geres (1314), the Catalan Chart of Tastu and Buchon (1375), the portolan chart of Andrea Bianco (1436), and that of Juan de la Cosa (1493), a proof of their importance as the only sheltered port in the area in case of bad weather or heavy seas (Gámez Gómez, 2013).

Although the Chafarinas Islands were functionally linked to Melilla since the Spanish occupation of this North African settlement in 1497 (Bravo Nieto, 1990), the official seizure of the islands took place in 1848. Given the strategic nature of its position, its official possession by Spain would arouse the misgivings of France, among other European powers, which would try to occupy it because of its territorial ambitions in the area (Mir Berlanga, 1980).

Table 4. Evolution of environmental protection typologies in the Chafarinas Islands (1982-2018)

Type	Year	Regulations	Features
National Game Reserve	1982	Royal Decree 1115/1982 Royal Decree 17/4/1982 BOE 1/6/1982	The largest colony of Audouin's gulls in its worldwide distribution area Presence of monk seals (<i>Monachus monachus</i>) Existence of some interesting reptile species (Chafarinas skinks, among others) Endemic species of flora Seabed in magnificent state of conservation
Special protection area (AEP)	1989	<i>Birds Directive</i> 79/409/EEC 1979 + Directive 2009/147/EC	Part of the Natura 2000 Network Special areas for bird conservation
Places of community significance (LIC)	2006	SCI ES6300001 Chafarinas Islands	The LIC includes new habitats and species of community interest: <i>Posidonia oceanica</i> meadows that host the endangered giant limpet (<i>Patella ferruginea</i>)
Special conservation area Natura 2000 Network	2018	EU directive (92/43/EEC) Royal Decree 190/2018 Royal Decree 6/4/2018	Special conservation areas

Source: created by the authors with data from MAPA, 2018

Initially, the Chafarinas archipelago was an insular extension of the enclave of Melilla. The islands were used as a recreational area for nautical and leisure activities, as a quarry for materials, as a military site, and as a place of confinement for prisoners after the installation of the garrison and the criminal detachment on the island Isabel II (Mir Berlanga, 1980). Likewise, in addition to the military and prisoners, the various public works conducted in Chafarinas, especially the construction of the port (Narváez López, 2013; Ruiz Romero de la Cruz, 2004), attracted workers, civilians, fishermen, and merchants (Mariñas Otero, 1998).

The range of border functions of the Chafarinas was expanded to include the reception and quarantine of crews coming from Spanish America, as well as a convalescent hospital for the wounded and sick from the African wars (Eastern Rif campaigns), to relieve pressure on the overcrowded hospitals of Melilla (Iglesias, 2010; Martínez, 2016).

After the Spanish victory of Wad Ras (1859) and its consequences, the Tetuan Peace Treaty (1860) and the Madrid Trade Treaty (1861), a free port regime was established in all the North African territories of Spain (Garrido Guijarro, 2014). A colonial bias was thus introduced in the catalog of border functions of the North African enclaves, which from 1863 served as platforms to expand commercial activities and strengthen the Spanish presence on African soil, to increase, in the case of the

Chafarinas, commercial activities with the neighboring coasts, which were opening up to Spanish influence.

This new role differed from the traditional frontier function assigned to the old Spanish presidios in North Africa, the so-called “African border” of Spain. From then on, the old presidios were no longer seen as mere palisades intended to “detain, contain and control” Berbers and Turks. Henceforth, their mission was to open the Maghreb market to Spanish exports. In addition, the increase in the frequency-destinations of maritime transport and the improvement of communications (connecting Melilla by cables and telegraph) broke the almost total isolation that characterized life in these island peripheries (Calderón Vázquez, 2014).

The increase in housing, educational, health, and administrative services and the flourishing of commercial activities in all enclaves, especially visible in 1900-1920, favored population growth. So important was this new frontier function for the Spanish government that it proceeded to close the prisons in all the North African possessions, which positively impacted the appreciable improvement of living conditions (Quirós Linares, 1998).

The rollout of economic activities in the Chafarinas Islands brought with it an “explosion” of urban life, with a “white village” emerging almost out of nowhere on Isabel II Island, with a church, stores, a theater, casino, telegraph, postal services, school, etcetera. This was a locality where a particular military-civilian community resided, as shown in Table 5 and Table 6, which faithfully reflect the stage of greatest population and urban vitality in the Chafarinas.

Numerous testimonies speak of an integrated community, despite the existing differences, a Spanish-Catholic society in which there was a certain social life based around culture and sports (Lechado Granados, 2013, p. 89)⁴ and that reflected the economic prosperity resulting from the increase of certain activities such as construction, fishing, and trade with the ports of French Algeria (Nemours and Kis, mainly) and the neighboring Quebdana coast.

Table 5. Characteristics of the resident population in the Chafarinas Islands (1910-1920)

	Population		Literate		Illiterate		Single		Married		Widowed	
	Men	Women	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W
Census 1910	567	169	370	85	188	78	458	110	102	53	7	6
Census 1920	187	131	124	85	39	38	115	72	44	41	4	8

Source: created by the authors based on Calderón Vázquez, 2013. Data from INE, n. d.-a, n. d.-b

As for *irregular* trade, smuggling was a common resource in the area of influence of the enclaves (Pastor Garrigues, 2006); it was a commercial flow tolerated by

⁴ There is evidence of the performance of plays every week and the interest aroused by the soccer matches held between the local team Español de Chafarinas and the crews of the ships that took refuge in its harbor, some of them French.

the Spanish authorities. In the case of Chafarinas, the main products trafficked (as in the enclaves of Alhucemas and Vélez) were firearms, Winchester and Remington rifles, which had large profit margins, for which the uninhabited Congreso island was used to hide the shipments until their subsequent sale to the Moroccans (Esquembri Hinojo, 2013).

The establishment of the Franco-Spanish Protectorate (1912-1956) in Morocco structurally changed the situation and status of the Spanish enclaves in North Africa since the continental urban centers (Melilla and Ceuta) began a period of vertiginous socioeconomic expansion as a consequence of their status as coastal urban centers, endowed with the only appropriate port infrastructures in that stretch of the North African coast. On the other hand, the arrival of the Protectorate meant a gradual abandonment and depopulation of the island enclaves, given the better socioeconomic prospects on the European continent for the inhabitants of the islands.

According to available data (Figure 3), the turning point in the presence of civilians in the Chafarinas occurred during the period 1910-1930, after the end of the Rif War (1927), which had economic and political consequences (Díaz Morlán, 2015; Moga Romero, 2010; Paniagua López, 2018), when its depopulation began to accelerate, going from 730 inhabitants (1910) to 173 (1930), which meant the loss of 77% of its population. Only military personnel, civilian officials, and their families remained on the islands. The loss of inhabitants peaked in the 1950s when the population of the Chafarinas amounted to about a hundred people.

Between 1952 and 1953, there were some attempts to halt the economic and demographic decline of the Chafarinas; a media campaign was launched called “Revitalization of the Islands” aimed at the socioeconomic revitalization of the islands, with a series of projects and works to be conducted. These included the restoration of the church and several buildings and other works to enable the entry of large ships, tuna vessels, and facilities for promoting the fishing industry. The construction of a tourist hostel and the reestablishment of a weekly shuttle service to Melilla were also proposed for “the many tourists” expected to visit the islands (Esquembri Hinojo, 2013).

The end of the Protectorate and the independence of Morocco in 1956 meant the Spanish island enclaves recovered their full border status. The garrison and their families were reinforced, as well as the presence of some civilians, generally public employees, with trades such as lighthouse keepers, telegraphists, letter carriers, teachers, bakers, mechanics, etcetera.

Maritime communications between the islands, the cities of Ceuta and Melilla, and the mainland were conducted through a marine line that put supply ships into service to link Ceuta and Melilla with the islands and other small territories. This line was maintained until the mid-1980s, at which time, with the entry into force of the “Plan Meta” (1985), supply was conducted weekly by military helicopters, supplemented by Spanish Navy ships when necessary.

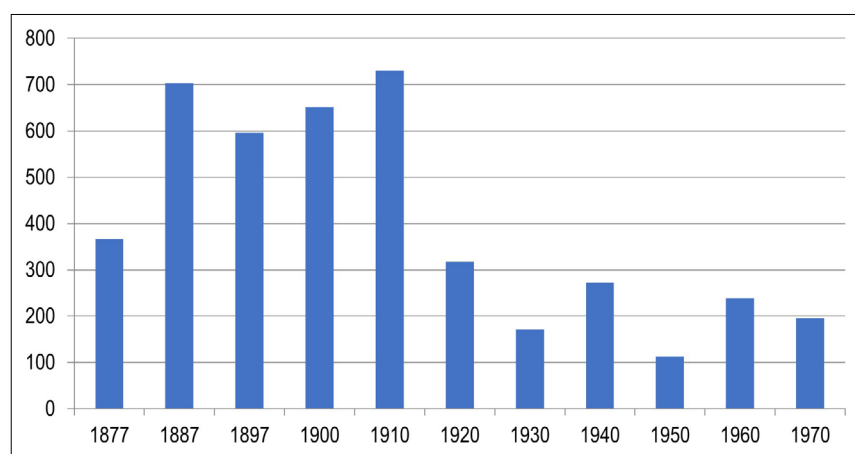
Table 6. Labor market and occupations in the Chafarinas (1910-1920)

	1910		1920	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Economic activities				
Agriculture, fishing, and hunting	4		1	
Manufacturing industries				
Food industries	3		2	
Apparel (clothing and headwear)	2		1	2
Construction (buildings)	15		5	
Energy	1			
Tertiary and services				
Trade			4	
Exports, commission agents, and brokers				
Pharmacies and the sale of chemical products			1	
Hospitality and tourism				
Other stores	4		3	
Post, telegraphs, and communications	3		3	
Transportation				
Maritime transportation	10			
Trails, streets, and roads	1			
Security Forces				
Army	319		43	
Navy	81		17	
Chaplains	3		10	
Catholic Chaplains	1		1	
Other services	1		1	
Liberal professions				
Physicians			3	
Teachers	2	1	1	2
Copyists and translators	4			
Architects and engineers	1		1	
Landlords			1	2
Domestic workers				
Family members		122		70
Domestic servants	1	6	1	1
Generic allocations				
Merchants	1			
Retail clerks	1			
Cashiers and accountants	1			
Employees	2			
Warehouse clerks				
Mechanics	2			
Laborers and farmhands	33			
Unproductive				

Children	19	29	31	27
Primary pupils	43	30	11	15
Students	8		6	
Beggars and prostitutes	1		18	
Occupation unknown (unqualified)			22	12
Total	567	192	187	131

Source: created by the author based on Calderón Vázquez, 2013; data from INE, n. d.-a, n. d.-b

Figure 3. Evolution of the population of the Chafarinas islands (1877-1970)



Source: created by the authors based on Calderón Vázquez, 2014; Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), Censo de Población (1877-1970), <https://www.ine.es/inebaseweb/71807.do?language=0#>

In the last decades of the 20th century, technological advances and the automation of lighthouses and communications increased the loss of the civilian population. They left the Chafarinas during the 1980s, and the military streamlined or replaced their jobs (Calderón Vázquez, 2014).

Specifically, in 1986, the maritime line linking Melilla and Chafarinas was closed (Esquembrí Hinojo, 2013), resulting in Chafarinas losing its civilian population and equipment. The reduction of military personnel had a particular impact on the Sea Company, which affected the availability of ships when the last of the so-called “mixed ships” serving the islands were withdrawn in the mid-1990s. For this reason, maritime communications with the Chafarinas were limited to Navy ships, transporting materials and supplies, especially drinking water, to supply them. The effects of the profes-

sionalization and modernization of the Spanish Army have been strongly felt in this regard (Esquembri Hinojo, 2013).⁵

Since 2012, a Civil Guard brigade specialized in the fight against drug trafficking has been present in the Chafarinas. A group of archaeologists is conducting important research at the Neolithic site of Zafrin. Occasionally, Port Authority operators and temporary work camps combine archaeological research with the cleaning and repair of old roads (Narvárez López, 2013, p. 85).

Border islands: conflicts and migration pressures

The Chafarinas, in the context of the Mediterranean and particularly of the Mauritanian-Tingitanian area, has been a disputed space in the past, where the great tectonic plates, in this case, economic and cultural, have collided with two worlds, the traditionally opposed North and the South (Braudel, 2001).

Phenomena such as the African and North African demographic timebomb (Swedenburg, 2007) or the clash between the two Mediterranean shores, which are very different in terms of religion, ethnicity, culture, and lifestyle, stimulate and enhance conflicts. Added to all this are the problems of drug trafficking, irregular immigration, and other security issues (Bramwell & Lane, 2012).

Border conflicts

The instability of the Strait of Gibraltar area is still a fact, and nothing seems to indicate that it will cease to be so in the future (Calderón Vázquez, 2013). This geographical space is where key aspects of Spanish foreign policy are concentrated (Del Valle Gálvez, 2019). The Strait of Gibraltar area is a crucible of conflicts that combine and overlap, albeit latently, from the confrontation between North and South or wealth and poverty (Carling, 2007; Gold, 1999; Velasco, 2007). Table 7 presents the factors involved in disputes on the Spanish-Moroccan border from the perspective of conflict.

The most important border conflict trigger currently corresponds, among other causes, to the differences in wealth between Spain and Morocco, which are obvious in numerous indicators, not only in GDP per capita.⁶ Thus, the differentials are also evident in the HDI (human development index). Morocco, with a value of 0.686, is a country of medium human development, while in Spain, the value is 0.904, which indicates very high human development. This helps explain why so many migrants attempt to climb over the metal fences of Ceuta and Melilla.

⁵ In recent years, the islands' population has consisted of a military detachment composed of an infantry platoon (between 25 and 30 soldiers) and a platoon of the Army's maritime services (the Sea Company). Normally, some military personnel from the communications and logistic support services are in charge of surveillance and guarding the territory and small groups of scientists (biologists from the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas). There is also a facility of a permanent public agency, the Parques Nacionales, with a small number of environmental technicians.

⁶ This indicator is €2 718 for Morocco and €23 690 for Spain—data collected from <http://macro.com> 2020 (accessed December 14, 2021).

Table 7. The main factors of friction between Spain and Morocco

Factors	Topics and authors
Anthropological	Europe vs. Africa and the Maghreb (Vives, 2011).
Cultural	Western Christians versus Maghrebi Muslims (Loureiro Souto, 2015; Vives, 2011).
Colonial	Spain as an ex-colonizer versus Morocco as an ex-colony (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008; Ferrer Gallardo, 2008).
North-South factor	Existence of great socioeconomic inequalities (in terms of income, wealth, and standard of living) between the two sides of the Spanish-Moroccan border (Carling, 2007; Gold, 1999; Velasco, 2007) since Spain's GDP per capita is 13 times that of Morocco, while the United States and Mexico had an average ratio of 7.1 between 1970 and 2001 (Moré, 2003). As a result, it is one of the most unequal borders in the world.
Migration pressure	Socioeconomic inequalities attract large irregular migrant flows from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, or even other parts of the world, which generates enormous migration pressure in the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla and, to a lesser extent, in the archipelagos of Al Hoceima and Chafarinas (Carling, 2007; Naranjo Giraldo, 2014).
Morocco's claims to the Spanish territories in North Africa	Constant claims of Moroccan sovereignty over Spanish sovereign territories. Diplomatic and political claims are combined with border frictions at different levels: endemic border hostilities or even border violence. Morocco invokes geography (and its logic of territorial continuity) in its territorial claims but seems to ignore history (Del Valle Galvez, 2011, 2021).
Conflicts and cooperation	Conflicts and difficulties in Morocco's relations with Spain have not always been limited by cooperation, which is becoming increasingly necessary to achieve improvements in the territories on both sides of the Mediterranean (Ferrer Lloret, 2017; García Hernando, 2008; González García, 2012; Iglesias, 2010; Moreno García-Cano & Fernández de Bobadilla Fernández, 2019). Conflicts have been considerably reduced with the linking of both States to the European Economic Community (EC)/European Union (EU), Spain with its membership, and Morocco with its Advanced Status in the EU (Calderón Vázquez et al., 2023; Del Valle Gálvez, 2022).

Source: created by the authors

In recent centuries, the Mediterranean basin has had a borderline character, constituting a border zone between the European-Western world and the Arab-African world, understood as ethno-cultural blocs of a conflicting and exclusionary character.

The fact of being a European border, coupled with the existing strong inequalities in terms of income, wealth, and standard of living between the European and African shores of the Mediterranean, generates migration pressures from the southern Mediterranean coast to the north, which becomes migrant flows that lead to the Spanish Moroccan border territories, and try to reach Europe (Wolf, 2018).

Migration pressures in the Chafarinas Islands

The incorporation of the Kingdom of Spain into the European Union (EU) has meant that all Spanish territories on the North African coast have become external borders of the EU (Driessen, 1996; Ferrer Gallardo, 2008). In addition, Spain's inclusion in the Community Space or Schengen Area⁷ brought with it the closure and fortification of the land border perimeter.⁸ This measure was justified by the need to control immigration and illegal human trafficking (Ferrer-Gallardo, 2008). At that time, the *border fences* were built, which constituted the *first image* of both cities in many international media, reinforcing the increasingly widespread concept of a *European fortress* (Castan Pinos, 2008; Geddes, 2000); in a sense, both cities are the southern boundary of the “European wall” (Zurlo, 2005, 2011).

In this context, the archipelagos of Chafarinas and Al Hoceima, which were already part of the Spanish-Moroccan maritime border, also became an “external European border”, thus having to assume all the consequences of the “Europeanization” that Chafarinas has undergone, from 2012, the appearance of migration pressure, previously unknown (Sánchez-Montijano & Zaragoza Cristiani, 2013), with a more frequent arrival of smaller boats, the so-called “pateras” or “cayucos” on the coasts of Chafarinas (Caro, 2019; EFEdata & *La Razón*, 2012). This phenomenon seems to respond more to the *diversification* of entry routes into Melilla, given the enormous difficulty of accessing the city through the land border after the fortification of its land border perimeter (Sánchez-Montijano, 2012).

The prolongation in time of this migration crisis has led to the activation of border migration control functions in the Chafarinas and reinforced police and military presence (EFE, 2012). Likewise, the presence of maritime rescue teams, normally the vessels of the Sociedad de Salvamento y Seguridad Marítima,⁹ the so-called *Salvamar*, belonging to the coordination centers of the strait area, normally based in the port of Almería, has become common in the area.

At this point, reflecting on the so-called migration pressure in Chafarinas is necessary, understood as “pressure exerted on certain borders by the massive or continuous arrival of migrants” (Tesauro de Migraciones Internacionales Contemporáneas, 2010). This issue has become a pretext to generate a very unassertive official

⁷ The Schengen Agreement (signed in the Luxembourg city of Schengen in 1985 and in force since 1995) marks a common area—called the Schengen Area—comprising a large part of the European continent. The following countries are currently members: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. <https://www.interior.gob.es/opencms/ca/servicios-al-ciudadano/tramites-y-gestiones/extranjeria/acuerdo-de-schengen/index.html>

⁸ Under the Schengen Agreement, internal border controls (i.e., the borders between EU member countries and signatories to the agreement) were abolished and transferred to external borders (with third countries).

⁹ Salvamento Marítimo is a public business entity attached to the Ministry of Transport, Mobility, and Urban Agenda through the Directorate General of the Merchant Marine. Created in 1992 by the *State Ports and Merchant Marine Law*, it became operational in 1993, and its essential purpose is protecting life at sea in the area of Spanish salvage responsibility (Salvamento Marítimo, 2020).

response to migration and migrants, aimed simply at maintaining the official *status quo* in the territory.

The arrival of small boats and people on an island territory, a hitherto unknown phenomenon, had little impact on the region. Its environmental effects were quite limited, given the small number of arriving groups (several dozen people at most) and the short duration of their stay in Chafarinas (24 to 48 hours maximum) until the arrival of the Salvamar vessel on duty.¹⁰

“Migration pressure” is more like media pressure or, it could be said, media noise. The truth is that this situation generates alarm to the extent that these islands and islets become hot spots on the illegal migration routes that aim to reach European territory. Moreover, these arrivals occur on islands literally “glued” to the Moroccan coast, again demonstrating these small archipelagos’ enormous border vulnerability (Soto, 2020).

The migration challenge has increased in recent years. Small groups, especially of women and children, arrive in Chafarinas (Ikuspegi, Observatorio Vasco de Inmigración, 2019) after a short night crossing from the nearby Moroccan coast (only 3-4 km from Ras el Ma, or Cabo de Agua) (Soto, 2020). This means that the longed-for arrival on land can be “dramatic” due to the circumstances of disembarkation (Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado [CEAR], 2021; EFE, 2019).

Until 2018, the arrival of small boats in Chafarinas had a rather episodic pattern. It was in 2012 that small boats began arriving on the islands (Verdú Baeza, 2014).¹¹ It occurred again in 2014 but not in subsequent years.¹² Nevertheless, throughout 2019, constant landings occurred (Soto, 2019), with a peak during Christmas 2019 (Europa Press, 2019; Ikuspegi, Observatorio Vasco de Inmigración, 2019)¹³. After that, the arrival of new vessels seemed to slow down markedly in recent years, both in 2020 and 2021 (Ministerio del Interior, 2020, 2021). This trend continued during 2022, according to the data provided in the *biweekly report Irregular Immigration 2022* of the Ministry of the Interior (Ministerio del Interior, 2022), which includes data from January 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022, where only 71 maritime arrivals were recorded in Melilla in 12 small boats (reference port of Chafarinas).

¹⁰ Exceptions may occur in case of a storm or unavailability of the two operational Salvamar vessels in the area (Varo, 2019). Likewise, the docking points are located in very specific places on the island’s perimeter, normally the steep southern coast of Congreso Island, more specifically in the area known as Playa Larga (Long Beach). The possible environmental impact of migrant groups is therefore slight.

¹¹ Between May 3 and 15, 30 immigrants aboard three boats arrived at Congreso Island, the closest to Moroccan territory (Redacción El Faro, 2012).

¹² When seven sub-Saharan immigrants who were returned to Morocco by Spanish authorities arrived on the islands (EFE, 2014).

¹³ From August to the end of December, 790 people arrived in the Chafarinas in 42 small boats. In total, according to the biweekly reports on irregular immigration by the Ministry of the Interior, in 2019, 906 people arrived in 48 small boats, while in 2018, 918 did so in 34 boats (Ikuspegi, Observatorio Vasco de Inmigración, 2019; Ministerio del Interior, 2019).

The noticeable slowdown in arrivals is due to greater control of the maritime perimeter of the islands both on the Spanish side (through the Civil Guard¹⁴ and the Navy troops present in the area) and on the Moroccan side (the Gendarmerie and the Royal Navy), which control the sea and the Moroccan coast to prevent any vessel from approaching the perimeter of the Chafarinas (Público & EFE, 2022), showing a zeal uncommon in other Spanish-Moroccan border locations.¹⁵

In addition to the *reinforced control* by both states, the common practice of the so-called “hot return”¹⁶ in the Chafarinas area (Entrepueblos Org., 2020) discourages the arrival of small boats to the islands (Zuloaga, 2021). These practices on the island border of Chafarinas, and therefore in the rest of the Spanish Moroccan border areas, have generated controversy among institutions such as ACNUR and the United Nations and important non-governmental organizations defending human rights, as well as Amnesty International, CEAR, etcetera, and the Spanish Ombudsman himself. Spanish public opinion is also vocal on this matter, considering it a repeated violation of human rights, precisely of the most vulnerable people, such as irregular migrants and refugees.¹⁷ The Jesuit Migrant Service (sjm) and the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) report that since 2020, migrants arriving in Chafarinas, instead of being taken to Melilla (regular procedure), are handed over to Moroccan patrols for their return, which would imply a high level of *de facto* Spanish-Moroccan complicity (Público & EFE, 2022).¹⁸

¹⁴ In addition to migration concerns, this control has the clear purpose of hindering the action of drug traffickers, who tend to take refuge in the coves and enclaves most protected from the strong easterly winds common in the area. Accordingly, a February 5, 2018, report by the Team against Organized and Anti-Drug Crime of the Civil Guard Command of Melilla considered that “The Chafarinas Islands, due to their location, distribution and orography of the terrain, are a favorable place for the shelter of vessels used for drug trafficking” (Zuloaga, 2021).

¹⁵ As recently shown by the “Ceuta migration crisis” in May 2021. This was probably a deliberate act of interference toward Spain, with the aim of modifying its foreign policy on a point of critical interest for Morocco: the recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara (Del Valle Gálvez, 2021, p. 10).

¹⁶ Thus, on January 3, 2020, a group of 42 migrants, including women and children, arrived on the island of Congreso in the Chafarinas archipelago early in the morning. That same afternoon, the Civil Guard conducted the summary return of the 42 migrants (Entrepueblos Org, 2020). “Hot return” can be conceptualized as the border management practice by state security forces and bodies of expelling an irregular immigrant from the country (in this case, Spain) at the moment they attempt to cross the border without applying any of the legal protections and guarantees existing and in force in the national territory. In short, the expulsion of migrants or refugees immediately, without due protection or guarantees.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, neither the European Court of Human Rights (TEDH, by its acronym in Spanish), which ruled on the subject in February 2020 nor the Spanish Constitutional Court itself has condemned or prohibited openly and generically this practice, which since 2015 has been “legal” as it is included and in force in the “First Final Provision” of the 2015 *Law on Citizen Security*.

¹⁸ Until 2019, the Civil Guard transferred migrants who disembarked in Chafarinas to Melilla, where they were identified and provided with assistance. Those who applied for official protection stayed at the Temporary Immigrant Stay Center.

Discussion and reflections: the Chafarinas Islands and their future challenges

The Chafarinas Islands (together with the Al Hoceima Islands) constitute the insular and maritime section of the Spanish-Moroccan border. In territorial terms, these small archipelagos are characterized by their vulnerability and fragility as they are practically “embedded” in the Moroccan coast, in the case of Al Hoceima, or at a very short distance, as in Chafarinas. This makes them militarily indefensible and, more importantly, complicates the definition of their territorial waters, their limits, and sometimes even the border line itself (as in the case of the Peñón de Vélez de la Gomera) unless the other side of the border shows a positive and cooperative attitude.

As this is a *sine qua non* issue, Spanish-Moroccan cooperation, or the lack of it, has significantly marked the vicissitudes and life of both archipelagos and the rest of the Hispanic border areas in North Africa in recent decades. Given the dynamics of the constant border friction between the two countries, the archipelagos of Chafarinas and Al Hoceima and the rest of the North African territories under Spanish sovereignty are a continuous source of confrontation with the Kingdom of Morocco.

For a significant group of authors, adequate implementation of sustainable tourism should emphasize the systematic management of the following aspects: environmental degradation, generation of economic benefits for host communities, and residents’ perceptions (Cole, 2012; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Kim et al., 2013; Tosun, 2000).

The current critical thinking rejects the use of the term *sustainable tourism*, as it suggests that its use can be instrumentalized by political actors whose real objective is somehow to “green” what is simply economic growth (Bramwell & Lane, 2012; Higham, 2007; Honey, 2008; Hunter, 2002; Sharpley, 2010; Weaver & Oppermann, 2000).

It should be taken into account that the increase in visitor arrivals due to tourism activity on the islands, especially on the small islands, which tend to have limited stocks of natural resources, can push the use of these resources to their limit of viability or even beyond sustainable levels, as has happened in the context of mass tourism in the Mediterranean, where an enormous impact on its islands and coastal areas has been observed (Bramwell, 2004; Obrador Pons et al., 2009). In any case, studies on the impact of tourism on island destinations should be considered, as they have demonstrated the positive and negative externalities it generates (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000; Briguglio et al., 1996; Conlin & Baum, 1995; Gössling, 2003; Lockhart & Drakakis-Smith, 1996).

The truth is that after the debate on the tourist interest in areas where nature is of essential value, with options for economic exploitation, the designation of Chafarinas as a National Hunting Refuge in 1982 marked a point of no return in the life of these islands, initiating a new cycle of activities related to the environment and sustainable development, which can favor their conservation and revitalization.¹⁹

Therefore, issues related to the environmental impact of tourism, waste management, and biodiversity conservation can be much more sensitive on islands than in other tourist destinations. Consequently, it is said that there is a “paradox of tourism

¹⁹ Considering that the biological station had its corresponding staff of scientific and administrative personnel, under the authority of the Autonomous Organism of National Parks.

in the islands” (Hall, 2010) since the arrival of large-scale tourist flows could alter the fragile ecological balance of the islands and negatively affect those natural and cultural resources that have awakened tourist interest in the island territories.

Conclusions

The problem of the Chafarinas Islands is quite complex because, as Varela recognized in the last quarter of the 20TH century, it enjoys a privileged location but with an uncertain future (Varela, 1981). The Chafarinas, Al Hoceima archipelagos, and, in general, the rest of the Spanish territories in North Africa are a constant source of confrontation with the Kingdom of Morocco. This issue is important in the policy and management of the region insofar as it is currently one of Spain’s main trading partners, so that, with a view to a prosperous future, the sensitivities of the neighboring country should be considered. It should be involved in the initiatives that can be carried out, particularly those that can become vectors of sustainable local development.

The absence of economic activities, the military management of the islands, and their increasing environmental protection have laid the foundations for creating a unique natural area in the Mediterranean Sea that is highly degraded by pollution and the destruction of habitats. Therefore, this natural resource, probably one of the last in the Mare Nostrum, must be studied deeply, and the research results must be disseminated. Otherwise, these border islands will be a unique ecological sanctuary, but with no contribution to the society that has created it.

Accordingly, resolving conflicts on the island border of Chafarinas requires adopting a series of measures based on *sustainable tourism*, as proposed for small island developing states by the World Tourism Organization, which promotes the blue economy, in accordance with target 14.7. of the sustainable development goals (ODS, by its acronym in Spanish) to avoid the negative effects of tourism degrading the existing environmental resources, which is especially important for micro-islands such as the Chafarinas. To this end, the creation of a large international research center specialized in Mediterranean marine ecology, managed and sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA, by its acronym in Spanish), the European Union, and UNESCO, with the participation of Morocco, which would allow access to the islands for researchers, scientists and biologists from all over the world and help to spread the sanctuary worldwide, could be a good start to get the islands out of their *impasse*.

For these proposals not to end up being as mere pious aspirations, it is essential to review Spain’s traditional positioning in the North African region since the current situation has much to do with the decisions taken in the past, not only in the sense of actions and decisions observed in the long term—such as the emptying of the islands, or their conversion into mere military bases—but also in the sense of omissions, such as the vague policy of maintaining a presence in Africa, but without a clear perspective or vision of the future.

Therefore, offering a development based on sustainable tourist activity, requiring the necessary cooperation of Morocco, which integrates this area within a wider tourism program, including the neighboring country, could be the embryo of a policy that helps the gradual dissolution of existing conflicts in the perspective of a mutual

benefit in the medium and long term, even considering the difficulties involved, due to the always delicate situation of Ceuta and Melilla, without forgetting the role played in this context of geographical proximity by the Canary Islands archipelago. Public investments will be necessary to regenerate housing, transport, and communication infrastructures in the Chafarinas, with special emphasis on digital technologies, to make life easier for residents.

Overcoming this *impasse* means addressing the socioeconomic gap since, with productive economic activities and a civilian population to carry them out, it seems easier for the Chafarinas to regain a role in today's society. It is known that society is increasingly demanding spaces to have experiences of contact with nature and tourism that provides for environmental protection, which would be a possible way out of economic stagnation.

In any case, it is necessary to raise awareness so that Europe and Spain in general are aware of the importance of these territories in the present and, above all, the role they can play in the future of the region, as the EU border in Africa, by adopting a realistic view of border relations and the geopolitical position of the Chafarinas. Offering sustainable development based on tourism requires the necessary cooperation with Morocco, integrating this area into a broader tourism program that includes the neighboring country. In this way, border conflicts could be diluted with a view to mutual benefit in the medium and long term.

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