**CONCLUSIONS**

Marc Finaud[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here are a few concluding remarks after the examination of three cases of external relations of autonomous regions (in Canada, the Caribbean, and in Europe) and their comparison with the Moroccan Initiative on the Sahara Region.

1. An autonomous region can function well, including with regard to its external relations, irrespective of the constitutional system of organisation of the central state: it can be a federal system as in the case of Québec in Canada, a twin-island system within the Commonwealth as in the case of the Caribbean, or a regional autonomous region within a unitary but decentralised state as in the case of South Tyrol in Italy. In the case of Morocco, an autonomous Sahara Region would also operate in the framework of a unitary but decentralised state.
2. Two sets of broad criteria have been recognised for justifying the specific status of autonomous regions, including with respect to their external relations:
   1. One set of criteria related to identities, whether linguistic (Québec, South Tyrol), religious, ethnic, or geographical (twin islands on the Caribbean); in the Moroccan Initiative, detailed provisions aim at protecting and preserving the specificities of the Sahara Region (in economic, social, linguistic, cultural, etc. terms);
   2. Another set of criteria relates to history: the imperial (South Tyrol) or colonial (Québec, Caribbean) heritage still shapes the status and current life of autonomous regions. The Moroccan Initiative refers to the pre-colonial past to confirm a historical sovereignty.
3. The impact of the above-mentioned criteria on the external relations of autonomous regions can vary depending on the relationship established with the central state: it can be extensive as in the case of Québec (that is authorized to conduct advanced external relations – short of separation – thanks to the recognition of its specificity by the federal Constitution and practice); it can be restricted as in the case of the Caribbean twin islands (but external relations in that case can function in a pragmatic manner); it can also be part of a broader regional trend of decentralisation as in the case of European autonomous regions. By comparison, the extent of external relations granted by the Moroccan Initiative to the Sahara Region looks more advanced. Indeed, although the autonomous region would operate within the national sovereignty of Morocco, there would be a legal obligation for the central state to consult the region on international matters related to its affairs, and the region would have a voice in the adoption of any international agreement affecting its interests.
4. The potential fields of external relations of autonomous regions or transboundary cooperation between autonomous regions from several states are also related to the main above-mentioned criteria justifying their autonomy: they may apply to linguistic criteria (as in the case of Québec with French-speaking states or regions or in the case of South Tyrol with Austria or other German-speaking states or regions); they may also apply to the colonial heritage (as in the case of Caribbean islands cooperating with each other across state borders). More generally those fields of cooperation relate to the areas affecting the lives of the autonomous regions’ populations such as the promotion of their economic, trade, tourism, or cultural interests (for example through trade offices or representations outside or within national offices such as embassies or trade missions). They can also take the form of joint regional cooperation projects in fields of common interests such as public health, education, preservation or exploitation of natural resources, etc. These are certainly areas in which an autonomous Sahara Region could usefully cooperate with other regions in North Africa or the northern shore of the Mediterranean as it is already the case for Moroccan local entities within decentralized cooperation.
5. The development of external relations of autonomous regions is fully consistent with the current process of globalisation characterised by new forms of international relations in which non-state actors and infra-state entities play an increasing role. As already mentioned in the Introduction, this phenomenon of multi-stakeholder cooperation is considered as legitimate by the United Nations and should not be seen as a form of competition for central states but rather as a means of ensuring win-win, comprehensive solutions.
6. In order to succeed and satisfy both the central state authorities and the autonomous regional authorities and populations, including with regard to external relations, the process of autonomy is never fully achieved and requires constant interaction, consultations, negotiations, consensus building between the two “sides”. In addition, in order to avoid any misunderstandings or abuse of unclear commitments on either side, detailed legal norms on power sharing, in particular with respect to revenue sharing or control over natural resources, are required. The Moroccan Initiative offers a broad framework, but the experience of other regions shows that, when the time comes, more detailed provisions must be negotiated among the parties and possibly adapted to new circumstances or a changing environment.

1. Senior Programme Advisor, Emerging Security Challenges Programme, Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), expressing personal views. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)