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BETWEEN HEDGING AND BANDWAGONING - INTERPRETING THE REACTIONS OF MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN STATES TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

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The Russian aggression against Ukraine affected the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in a delicate manner from political, economic and social perspectives. While the outbreak of the war had dire consequences in the region (especially concerning food security and economic stability), most governments regard Russia as an important player in international politics. Moreover, the armed conflict was connected to different forms of resentment expressed by both governments and societies towards 'Western' policies, including biased judgement, prejudice or hypocrisy. Consequently, the reactions of MENA states (including the members of the League of Arab States, Iran, Turkey and Israel)² have been mixed and somewhat ambiguous: whereas the United States (US) and the European Union (EU)³ expect members of the international community to take a clear stance by standing up against Russia, most actors in the region conducted a more nuanced strategy often labelled as hedging⁴ or neutrality.

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² As voting in the UN General Assembly is used as a primary variable, Palestine is excluded from the investigation.

³ Among others, see the speeches of President Biden on 22 February 2022 (White House, 2022), or the statements made by High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borell on 26 February 2022 (Twitter, 2022), and on 21 and 28 September 2022 (EEAS Press Team, 2022; VOA News, 2022).

⁴ While many criticise the usage of the term 'hedging', especially in the MENA context, this research utilises the term in order to maintain substantive coherence with the various research programmes focusing on alignment policy.

The present policy brief features a structural analysis of the various reactions of MENA states to the Russian-Ukrainian war by the end of 2022. While most observers take a case-by-case approach to interpret a single government's behaviour in its national context, this study assesses if a systematic explanation can be provided using a handful of explanatory variables. To do that, the paper starts with the conceptualisation of the main forms of alignment (bandwagoning, hedging and neutrality) and their operationalisation in the current geopolitical context. Afterwards, a systematic categorisation of state reactions will be provided in the MENA region from a transatlantic perspective, which will be followed by the investigation of possible explanatory variables, including state size, political system or specific EU policies. The paper will be concluded with recommendations for the EU to better manoeuvre in the MENA region in this era of intensifying great power rivalry.

Hedging, neutrality and bandwagoning – Possible reactions to superpower competition and international crisis

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is a turning point in the transformation of the global political order. By starting an illegal war against a smaller neighbour with the clear intention of undermining the basic tenets of the international system and Western supremacy, Moscow exacerbated the intensification of great power rivalry. As both the outcome of this rivalry and its effects on the rules of international politics is yet to be crystallised, secondary and tertiary members of the international community, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, found themselves in a particular situation. While many small states and middle powers of the region learned how to capitalise on the quasi-unipolar international order, the growing influence of Russia and China has been politically and economically beneficial for many of them, especially since maintaining close relations with more than one superpower has been tolerated. Nevertheless, the Russian attack on Ukraine increased the pressure exercised by great powers to define their alignment – namely, “the manner and extent to which a state chooses to position vis-à-vis (align with or away from) a powerful player(s) in the regional and international system” (Kuik, 2016, p. 2) – more clearly.

In such a strategic context, states can follow different types of strategies. Firstly, maybe the most widely analysed behaviour is bandwagoning; namely, following the lead of a single great power unambiguously. Such behaviour can be interpreted as a response to avoiding an external threat (Walt, 2000) or as a way of profit-maximisation (Schweller, 1994) by joining the team which is perceived to be stronger. While bandwagoning can produce security, it usually comes with accepting a sub-ordinate position and sacrificing a degree of autonomy (or, in the worst-case scenario, sovereignty) (Murphy, 2017; Kuik, 2016).

Secondly, states can attempt to maintain neutrality by “abstaining from participating in armed conflicts” or great power competition (Radoman, 2021, p. 3). Such a position enables the government to maintain relations with competing sides, decrease the chances of involvement, or even contribute to solving the conflict itself (Reiter, 2016, p.235; Ingebritsen, 2006, pp. 279-281). By being neutral, states can maintain leverage in their foreign relations in exchange for giving up on superpower protection. Neutrality can only serve security if certain assumptions are met (Radoman, 20121, p. 4), especially if the political and legal norms surrounding the neutral status are respected by great powers. Consequently, this behaviour is more likely in a safe and low-risk security environment (Reiter, 2006, p. 254). In the post-bipolar context, the viability, practicality and, consequently, the relevance of neutrality are highly questioned (Joenniemi, 1993, p. 291), especially since the term has often been used only as a rhetorical stance.

Thirdly, besides these clear strategies, practically states can choose to adopt a particular alignment policy which is often labelled as ‘hedging’. This kind of policy has three elements (Kuik, 2016, p. 5): an insistence on not taking sides among competing powers, the practice of adopting opposite and counteracting measures, and the use of opposite acts and instruments to pursue the goals of

preserving gains while cultivating a 'fallback' option. In practice, hedging means a balancing act between maintaining leverage and security at the same time, especially in an uncertain environment in which the outcome of a conflict of competition is not clear. By sending positive signals to both sides instead of aligning with one, hedging actors want to avoid dependence on a single actor and maximise their political and economic profits. When done poorly, hedging can lead to diminishing trust and even worsening security.

In the current geopolitical environment, secondary and tertiary actors have to pick a variation of these three alignment policies. When it comes to the Russian attack on Ukraine and the subsequently emerging Western push-back against Moscow, members of the international community are faced with several decisions through which their alignment is expected to be expressed. Such decisive moments included various votes in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), joining the campaign to isolate Russia financially and politically or helping one side or the other in the conflict. Therefore, while international media tend to overemphasise rhetoric, the present research will investigate the following variables:

- Voting patterns in the UNGA regarding specific resolutions condemning Russia (A/RES/ES-11/1; A/RES/ES-11/3; A/RES/ES-11/4);⁵
- Economic sanctions imposed on Russia;⁶
- Military help provided to Russia or Ukraine;⁷
- Bilateral diplomatic activity with the Russian government since February 2022 (including known inter-governmental communication at ministerial level and above);⁸
- Humanitarian help was provided to Ukraine.⁹

These five variables are useful for the investigation because they are empirically observable and the three strategies are easily identifiable. First, all three UNGA resolutions expressed condemnation of Russian actions (firstly regarding the attack itself, secondly, regarding suspending Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council (HRC), and, thirdly, in relation to the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories in October), consequently, a 'yes' vote expresses alignment to the West, a 'no' to Russia, while abstaining or refraining from voting could be interpreted as neutrality. Second, the US and its allies invited members of the international community to help Ukraine by providing humanitarian, financial and military aid to Kyiv and to join the sanctions against Russia, all measures of which represent a pro-Western stance, while refraining from doing so can be regarded as neutrality. Providing the same kind of help to Russia, naturally, represents bandwagoning to the other side. Third, conducting high-level diplomatic communication with Russia shows that Moscow did not discredit itself with its attack on Ukraine, and bilateral relations did not systematically change. Using the above-described definition, hedging can be spotted by contradicting stances in the different variables, e.g., voting two out of the three times to condemn Russia, but continuing to engage Moscow diplomatically.

The four main alignment strategies in the MENA region

Investigating the five variables, the most important observation to make is that Western expectations have been hardly met by MENA states. The dimension in which regional actors were the closest to the European and American viewpoints was the third UNGA vote in

⁵ Based on official UN data.

⁶ Based on a Reuters database (Funakoshi et al., 2022) supplemented by own database.

⁷ Based on a Politico database (Gedeon, 2022), supplemented by own database.

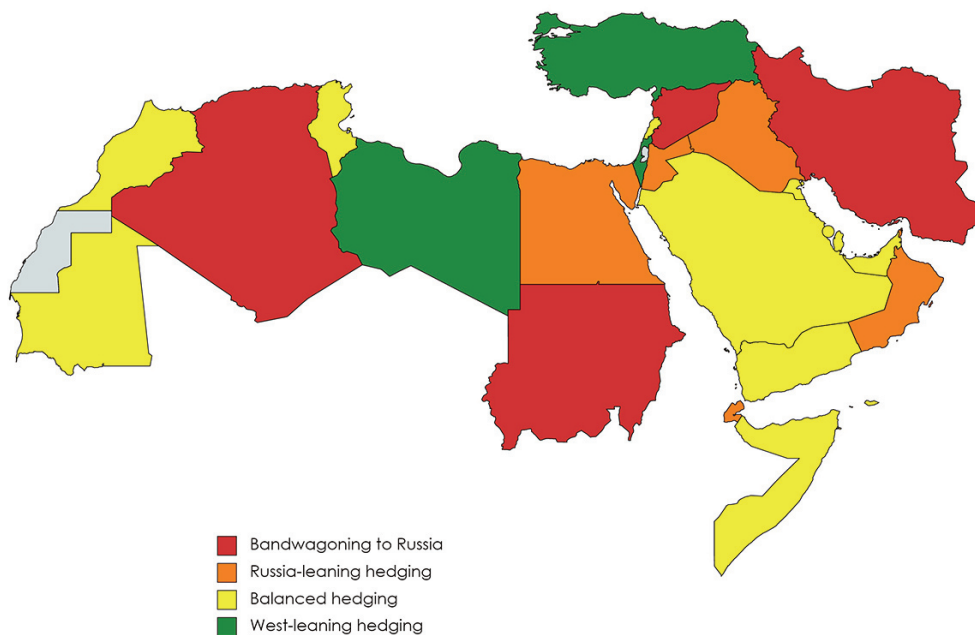
⁸ Based on own database using media sources.

⁹ Based on a database by Kiel Institute for the World Economy (Antezza et al., 2022) supplemented by own database.

October 2022, when 19 out of the 24 states condemned the Russian annexation of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. The fact that only one state (Syria) voted no (and only Algeria and Sudan abstained, while Iran and Djibouti did not participate) shows the strength of the norm of territorial integrity in the region. The first UNGA vote on the 2 March also enjoyed the support of 18 MENA states.¹⁰ In sharp contrast, the second UNGA vote about the suspension of Russia's seat in the HRC only enjoyed the support of four countries (Comoros, Israel, Libya and Turkey), was rejected by three (Algeria, Iran and Syria), while more than two-thirds of states abstained or refrained from voting.

When it comes to other variables, the picture is even more problematic from a European perspective. None of the MENA states proclaimed bilateral sanctions on Russia or provided financial help to Kyiv, only three states supported Ukraine militarily (Turkey, Morocco and Israel),¹¹ while only seven provided humanitarian aid (Bahrain, Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]). Out of the 24 governments, 14 are known to engage in high-level diplomatic consultation with Russia.¹² Neutrality was exercised only as a rhetorical stance, while hedging has been the dominant behaviour.

Map 1. The four alignment strategies of MENA states



Source: mapchart.net

Based on this data, we can set up four categories showing different alignment policies in the MENA region depending on how much they are aligned with great powers' expectations (see Map 1). Four countries, namely Algeria, Iran, Sudan and Syria, have shown varying levels of

¹⁰ Morocco was the only country which changed its stance significantly: Rabat did not vote in the first two rounds, while it voted "yes" for the October resolution.

¹¹ While the military equipment, including the Bayraktar drones, has been clear for international observers (Chausovsky, 2022), Israel's case is more complex. The Middle Eastern country has been said to refrain from providing weapons to Ukraine (Kramer, 2022) and has rejected Ukrainian requests, but it did send military help in various ways. Tel-Aviv provided defensive equipments, the Israeli military funded strategic materials to the Ukrainian army, and it also allowed North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members to supply Ukraine with materials including Israeli components (Melman, 2022). Recently, Israel also offered to contribute to the development of the Ukrainian air defence system (Rose, 2022).

¹² Most notably, Russian president Vladimir Putin met with his Turkish and Iranian counterparts in Astana (Cook – Sanner, 2022), while his minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov had personal consultation with all GCC states and also conducted an African tour during which he visited Tunisia and Egypt, among others (Middle East Monitor, 2022; ISPI, 2022).

support to Moscow by not voting positively in any of the UN votes, not providing any kind of help to Ukraine, and maintaining consultation with the Putin government. Moreover, two members of this group (Iran and Syria) are known to provide some sort of military help to Russia.¹³

The second category is constituted by five states (Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Oman) with a Russian-leaning hedging strategy. Their voting record is mixed in the UNGA,¹⁴ they did not provide support to either side, and they did not implement any kind of change in their relationship with Russia. Moreover, Egypt, Jordan and Oman are known to have engaged the Russian government since February 2022. While from their perspective their actions might be seen as neutral, they send some signals to both sides, and their practical actions help Russia to maintain its role in the international community and to make the invasion of Ukraine normatively accepted, which is strongly against the interest of the transatlantic community.

The third category, which includes countries conducting a balanced hedging strategy, has the most members. The behaviour of these 11 states is the closest to the classic definition of hedging – they conducted counteracting measures and sent opposing signals to great powers almost without a clear preference. While almost all of these states condemned the Russian attack and the Russian annexation of the four Ukrainian territories, they took a neutral position regarding the membership of Moscow in the HRC. Five of the balanced hedgers (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) provided humanitarian help to Ukraine but conducted high-level consultation with Moscow, while five others (Lebanon, Mauritania, Somalia, Tunisia and Yemen) did exactly the opposite (refrained from diplomatic consultation but did not provide humanitarian help). Maybe Morocco's case is the most intriguing – the behaviour of Rabat might have been the closest to traditional neutrality¹⁵ until the end of the year, when it was announced that Rabat will send 20 T-72B armed vehicles to Ukraine, becoming the first African nation to provide military help to the country (Military Africa, 2022).

Lastly, four states can be seen as Western-leaning balancers. They (Comoros, Israel, Libya and Turkey) and implemented a strategy which is the closest to the Western mainstream. They all condemned Russia in all UNGA votes while supporting Ukraine or stepping up against Russia in at least another way. Comoros and Libya did not engage in high-level diplomatic dialogue with Moscow. Israel and Turkey did, but they both provided military and humanitarian help to Ukraine. They also offered their role as a mediator between the two sides, while Turkey also managed to do so.

It is important to highlight that membership in the fourth category does not mean that a government is completely in line with Western strategic expectations. A case in point is Turkey, with which the United States and European Union have many disagreements, even in connection with the current crisis (see the question of NATO expansion or the close Turkish-Russian ties). It is telling that despite these points of divergence, Turkish foreign policy is still one of the closest to the expectations of the US and the EU, at least according to the used criteria.

¹³ Iran has provided drones to Russia and reportedly agreed to help Moscow build drones on Russian territory, (Warrick et al., 2022) while the Syrian government allowed Russia to recruit Syrians to fight in Ukraine (Chulov 2022).

¹⁴ Djibouti and Iraq voted in favour of anti-Russia resolutions once; Egypt, Jordan and Oman twice. In the other cases, they either abstained or did not participate.

¹⁵ Morocco has been incentivised by the closeness of Russian-Algerian relations to not cut its ties with Russia, while, on the other hand, economic interests connected Rabat to Ukraine and the EU as well (Hamann, 2022). Such balancing efforts led to refraining from two UN votes (except for the one concerning the territorial integrity of Ukraine) and the lack of any meaningful reaction to the situation, while also declining the Russian request of helping to circumvent sanctions (Benazizi, 2022).

Geopolitics, political systems, EU policies – What explains alignment choices?

Even if understanding each government's motivation regarding their alignment strategy requires a national-level investigation, the question can be raised about whether there are key explanatory variables which help us interpret the factors that push states towards leaning towards Russia. This is an especially crucial endeavour when it comes to reviewing existing European strategies towards the MENA region and formulating new ones.

The results of the investigation show that while geopolitics themselves do not explain state behaviour completely, some geographical aspects do matter. For instance, there is a notable difference between the three sub-regions of the MENA region. The Gulf region almost solely consists of balancing states with the notable exception of Iran, which maintains the closest relations with Russia in the region, manifested as military help provided to Moscow. In comparison, the countries of the Mashreq and North Africa regions show all kinds of state behaviour with states leaning to both sides or balancing. According to theory, such a constellation shows that Gulf states feel less threatened by recent developments and wish to maintain their independence and leverage, even if great power rivalry is to be intensified (Ardemagni, 2022).

Besides geopolitics, state size, both in the quantitative and qualitative senses, also plays a huge role in alignment. Big countries possessing severe economic and/or military power, including Turkey, Iran, Israel or Algeria, are more likely to lean towards one side or the other. In contrast, smaller countries almost exclusively conduct balanced hedging (except for Comoros). This phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways but, in general, one can argue that there is considerably less attention devoted to how smaller actors behave; therefore, the pressure to pick a side is much less significant. On the other hand, as small states are theoretically expected to prioritise their security over leverage, the lack of clear alignment on their side could mean that they do not regard the outcome of the present crisis clear and cannot see an apparent 'winner' so far.

Turning to domestic factors, three variables need to be taken into account. First of all, governments in countries which suffer from internal armed conflicts are more likely to align themselves more with their foreign sponsor. This is clearly seen in the case of Syria and Libya, where the officially recognised regimes cannot feel safe without Russian and Western support. Using this perspective, one can argue that the Yemeni, Iraqi or Somali governments do not regard any great powers as single guarantors of their survival.

Second, the nature of the domestic political system unequivocally affects alignment. Juxtaposing state behaviour with the Freedom House (2022) democracy index, a clear pattern can be established: less democratic countries are more likely to be closer to Moscow. All countries that either bandwagon to Russia or lean towards Russia are categorised as 'not free', while 83% of 'partly free' countries chose balanced hedging (the only country recognised as free, Israel, is West-leaning). Nevertheless, while it is clear from this data that more democratic countries are less likely to lean towards Russia in the conflict, we cannot say that an autocratic system will definitely make governments side with Moscow. 'Only' about 56% of not free countries support Russia or lean towards it, which practically means that they make up the majority of balanced hedgers and half of West-leaning countries too.

Third, dependence on oil and gas production also creates an incentive for maintaining cooperation with Russia, although it does not push countries to align themselves with it. Except for Libya and Iraq (two countries which undergo varying levels of domestic turmoil), all oil-producing states have engaged in high-level diplomatic discussions with Moscow since February. Nevertheless, even among regional members of the OPEC+ format, hedging has been the dominant behaviour with only Algeria and Iran bandwagoning with Russia.

While trade relations with Moscow might seem logical to dictate government decisions, in itself, the structure of foreign economic relations works as an insufficient explanatory variable in the region. Russia's trade footprint had been modest in the region, with its most visible regional partner being Turkey (Rumer, 2019). Bilateral imports and exports have also been growing with Israel; nevertheless, this did not outweigh other considerations by the Turkish and Israeli governments. The intensity of the arms trade (SIPRI, 2022) shows more tangible patterns – many of the biggest buyers of Russian weapons in the past 20 years, including Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Sudan and Syria, lean towards or bandwagon with Moscow. On the other hand, deep connections in this sector did not fundamentally change Turkey's position, although it incentivised maintaining relations with the great power.

The effectiveness of EU policies is hard to measure. Participation in institutional formats of comprehensive cooperation with the EU (e.g., the European Neighbourhood Policy [ENP], or Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements) does not make it more likely that states follow the Western lead. It would be logical to think that states under EU sanctions (EU Sanctions Map, 2022) would have more incentive to move closer to Russia, but this cannot be verified at first glance. There are EU sanctions on countries that are West-leaning (Libya, Turkey), balanced hedgers (Tunisia) or Russian bandwagoners (Sudan, Syria, Iran).

Arguably, aid policy might be the most effective to determine alignment in the region, although only to a limited extent. In the last 10 years, the Western-leaning group received the most aid from the EU in total, followed by the balanced hedging countries (EDRIS Database, 2023). Nevertheless, if we exclude Turkey (which received by far the most aid from the EU), the remaining three Western leaners received less than the Russian supporters. Moreover, on average, this latter group received more funds than the balanced hedgers and the Russian-leaning hedgers.

Conclusion and recommendations

As the Russian-Ukrainian war represents a major threat to both European and international security, understanding the motivations of specific countries in the neighbouring regions is crucial for the EU to formulate adequate strategies. The results of the present research show a complex picture – 20 out of the 24 states in the MENA region adopted a hedging strategy, almost half of which tried to balance between the two sides, while the other half leaned towards Russia or the West. The remaining four have adopted a pro-Russian stance, explicitly or implicitly supporting Moscow's efforts. Genuine neutrality was not seen in the region, the term was only utilised in governmental rhetoric, and itself can be seen as a hedging tool.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming support of MENA states behind condemning Russia's actions in both UNGA votes suggests that the choice of alignment was not made by normative sympathy towards the Putin government, but rather a balancing effort between different kinds of incentives. On the regional level, none of these systematic incentives become dominant, as state size and power, the nature of the domestic political system, geopolitical position, existing relations with Russia and the EU, as well as weighting between security and leverage, all played a role. To shape regional states' perception of the war more efficiently, the EU has to utilise its toolkit of political, economic and security-related incentives and disincentives and should not rely on expressing moral or political pressure. The re-evaluation of aid and sanctions might be the most useful, as the former might have more potential to be used as an incentive, while the latter could be less effective than conventional wisdom would suggest.

Providing a candidate or potential candidate status for accession has been a strong incentive for states of the Eastern European region and the Balkans to lean at least somewhat to the EU's side. While accession is not on the table for MENA countries, providing institutional possibilities to have access to common policies and programmes by updating the existing platforms might work well. The new strategic documents published in the last years (including the New Agenda for the Mediterranean and the Strategic Partnership with the Gulf) could potentially serve this purpose. Nevertheless, by themselves, they do not represent a fundamental step forward.

Moreover, the results of the research indicate that most MENA states prefer both security and leverage in the current situation and do not consider great power rivalry as particularly undermining their survival. The EU has to accept this fact and has to become a player more independent from the US and a more effective competitor to Russia and China in the region. To achieve this aim, the EU has to put more emphasis on projects in the security sector, similarly to the European Maritime Security Mission in the Strait of Hormuz. Putting security in focus would also help avoid overemphasising the role played by the democratic-autocratic cleavage, which, in itself, does not explain why governments chose one strategy or the other.

Uneven voting patterns in the UNGA also indicate that framing is crucial. The lacking support of MENA states behind the suspension of Russia's seat in the HRC indicates that connecting the Ukrainian question to the realm of human rights is not attractive for the governments of the region. On the other hand, when Russia's actions are interpreted as a threat to values like territorial integrity and the prohibition of aggression, more than two-thirds of MENA states are lined up. Identifying the norms shared on both shores of the Mediterranean and framing the crisis in their contexts might be an optimal way to foster joint understanding and gather support.

The behaviour of MENA states also shows that despite the recent tensions, Turkey and Israel are still among those countries with which the EU shares geopolitical concerns to the greatest extent. Even if neither states follow the European lead in the case of Ukraine, their strategy in the current situation does not harm European interests, contrary to many other countries. Naturally, this does not mean that the existing concerns about either state should be forgotten, it is just important to bear this perspective in mind when it comes to formulating regional strategy.

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