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EuroMesCo: Connecting the Dots is a project co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) that is implemented in the framework of the EuroMeSCo network.

EUROMESCO PAPERS

Published by the European Institute of the Mediterranean

Academic Peer Review: anonymous

Editing

Jorge Piñera Álvarez

Design layout Maurin.studio

Proofreading Neil Charlton

Layout Núria Esparza

Print ISSN 2565-2419

DL B 27445-2011

Digital ISSN 2565-2427

February 2024



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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced European foreign policy-makers to reassess their view of international relations and reconceptualise the European Union (EU)'s approach to it. A broad consensus has emerged that the foreign policy of the EU needs to become more geopolitical. A sentiment echoed and championed by Ursula von der Leyen, who, since assuming the role of President of the European Commission in December 2019, has actively advocated for a more assertive and strategic EU presence on the global stage (Bayer, 2019). The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, has labelled these developments as "the awakening of geopolitical Europe" (Borrell, 2022). He further insisted that a more geopolitical European outlook on the world should not be temporary but should become the "new normal" (Borrell, 2022). This suggests a fundamental and lasting shift in the EU's approach to external relations. Given the ambiguity of the term 'geopolitics', which has at least five different meanings (Kundani, 2023), many questions about the EU's new normal remain to be answered:

What does a more geopolitical foreign policy entail? What would be the implications of such a new approach regarding the European Neighbourhood, in particular the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region? And how can such an approach be reconciled with the EU's liberal principles?

This paper aims to assess these questions from a realist perspective. The article proceeds as follows. The first part examines the different conceptualisations of geopolitics and assesses which of them EU policy-makers refer to. The second part examines whether a more geopolitical EU foreign policy towards the MENA region can be seen as a paradigm shift or rather

a continuation of existing policies. The third part considers how the "geopolitical awakening" can be reconciled with the EU's liberal principles. The paper concludes by drawing on the findings to develop concrete recommendations.

Realist theory and geopolitics

Despite its frequent use by policy-makers, academics and journalists, the term "geopolitics" lacks a clear definition. This complicates the debate as different actors have different understandings of the term. In order to assess what a "more geopolitical" EU foreign policy entails, it is therefore imperative to shed light on the different meanings of the term. As the next section shows, the term has been reframed and redefined several times, adding to the "geopolitical confusion" (Kundani, 2023).

Evolution of geopolitics

Geopolitics in its original sense refers to the relationship between geography and politics (Lacoste, 2012). The term was coined at the height of 19th-century colonial imperialism to describe great power competition on a global scale, with a particular focus on physical factors such as the stopping power of water or mountain ridges, the availability of strategic resources, and the control over important trade routes (Grygiel, 2006). Geopolitics is essentially a prism through which to make sense of world history and great power conflict, dividing global space into multiple theatres in which states compete. It is a way of thinking about international politics that links local and regional dynamics to the global system and provides the observer with a bird's eye view of the world map and its developments, the "grand chessboard" (Brzezinski, 2016). The chess comparison is apt, as geopolitics

is a game-inspired view of great power competition in which international politics follows clearly defined rules and objectives. Arguably, the key to the enduring influence and appeal of geopolitical thought, now over a century old, lies in its visual rather than verbal nature, and its apparent objectivity, as it appears to be detached from subjective and ideological reasoning (Tuathail & Dalby, 1998).

The concept of geopolitics has a long and problematic history, which also explains its many meanings, as the term has been redefined in each era to suit the zeitgeist or the interests of the great powers that needed to be legitimised, as critical geopoliticians would point out (Okur, 2014). Originally the concept was employed by policy advisers in the late 19th and early 20th century to guide great power politics and global competition over areas of influence and actual colonies, in particular the rivalry between land and sea powers (Østerud, 1988; Dodds & Woon, 2010). In the decades that followed, the term informed fascist imperial thinking and was used by Nazi ideologists to create and legitimise the conquest of "Lebensraum", a clear ideological catalyst for the Second World War (Herwig, 1999). Furthermore, geopolitical thinking, combined with the Social Darwinist beliefs of the Nazi elite, laid the ideological foundations that facilitated the "cleansing" of "Lebensraum" of undesirables, paving the way for the Holocaust (Doel & Clarke, 1998).

The bipolar post-war order structured along the spheres of influences of the two superpowers of the time, the United States (US), and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), produced a new kind of geopolitical thinking. From the US perspective, the world was then divided into friendly and antagonistic states. In other words, spheres of influence. Based on Nicolas Spykman's Rimland concept, the main goal

of US foreign policy was the containment of communism and the subsequent denial of Soviet expansionism (Krause, 2023). In formulating his geostrategy for the US, Henry Kissinger combined classical geopolitical thought with the relatively new realism. Again, geopolitical thinking contributed to a simplified view of international politics that legitimised US-led military interventions and wars, such as in Korea (1950-53), Guatemala (1954), the Dominican Republic (1965) and Chile (1973) (Dodds, 2003).

With the end of the Cold War, the end of history (Fukuyama, 1989) was proclaimed, with liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism seemingly emerging as unrivalled systems in the global arena. However, the following years have shown, as Donald Tusk, the former President of the European Council, put it, that history is back (Tusk, 2014). Instead of a world unified by Western, liberal principles, the 21st century has seen the emergence of a much more diverse international landscape. In line with this new reality, a new geopolitical mindset has taken hold. From a European perspective, the world is now divided into a post-modern camp of globalisation and liberal interdependence, a modernist realm where power politics and geopolitical calculations about the balance of power, hard borders, and war persist, and a premodern realm characterised by fragile or failing states and a fundamental lack of order (Browning, 2018). The EU traditionally sees itself at the heart of the postmodern realm, with the EU itself as a supranational entity, a product of liberal thought and, at least in its conceptualisation and self-image, the antithesis of geopolitics (Lehne, 2020; Guzzini, 2012). This core identity and *raison d'être* of the EU has been challenged over the past decade by increasingly vocal calls for a more geopolitical EU foreign policy, culminating in Borrell's declaration of the "geopolitical awakening"

(Borrell, 2022) of the EU. Given that the concept of geopolitics is so antithetical to the fundamental ideas of the EU, it seems odd to speak of an "awakening" in this regard, implying that something long dormant yet still present has only recently awakened. In many ways, it was precisely the absence of classical geopolitical thinking in post-Second World War Europe that enabled the creation of the EU and its predecessors.

EU conceptualisation of geopolitics

Given the problematic history of geopolitics and the fact that the whole project of the EU itself was based on the premise of overcoming and emancipating itself from great power competition, have European foreign policy-makers given up on the European project and called for a return to the modernist conception of international politics that has plagued Europe for the better part of the 20th century? How do EU foreign policy elites conceptualise the malleable concept of geopolitics?

The first notable observation in this regard is that EU politicians rarely use the term as a noun, preferring its adjective "geopolitical" (Von der Leyen, 2019; Borrell, 2022; Michel, 2022). This implies a deliberate attempt to create a distinction between how the term was used in the last century and how European policy-makers want it to be understood in the modern era. Indeed, the meaning of geopolitics has once again been adapted to the era in which it is used. When EU politicians talk about geopolitics, they do not mean the relationship between geography and politics, but rather an approach to foreign policy that focuses on the distribution of military and economic power and the resulting power dynamics between international actors (Lehne, 2020). This is evidenced by Josep Borrell's call for the EU to learn the language of hard power (Borrell, 2022) or the assertion

by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, that Europe needs to show itself as a power in order to become more geopolitical (Michel, 2022).

The terms of hard power, international power distribution and power dynamics resemble key concepts of the realist theory of International Relations. The assertion that the EU needs to acquire proficiency in the language of power is consistent with realist theory's emphasis on the primacy of military strength and coercive capabilities in International Relations. This is not a coincidence as there is a strong connection between realism and geopolitics. In fact, realism has incorporated geopolitics into its theory-building for centuries (Toft, 2005). Thus, geopolitics is understood as part of the realist family (Wu, 2018). Alternatively, it is seen as a variety of realism that puts more emphasis on spatial variables as strategic factors and sources of power (Østerud, 1998). Although realism and geopolitics, especially in the Anglo-Saxon context, share some key similarities and tend to be conflated into one set of ideas in the minds of some analysts and practitioners, it is important to emphasise that the two represent distinct concepts and epistemological undertakings. Hans Morgenthau developed his theory of realism in part as a reaction to geopolitics, which he saw as pseudoscientific and implicated in causing the two world wars (Morgenthau, 1954, p. 116ff.).

The conceptualisations of power described above clash with the liberal conception of the EU as a normative power that exerts influence on the international stage through the promotion of values, development cooperation and soft power. Therefore, when European foreign policy-makers call for the EU to learn to speak the language of power or to finally show itself as a power, they are actually referring to more traditional, realist forms of power (Kundani, 2023). For this

reason, in the case of the EU, a more geopolitical foreign policy would represent a shift from the liberal end of the axis towards the realist end. In fact, Zaki Laïdi, advisor to the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, explains that a more geopolitical foreign policy means a correction of the overly optimistic liberal assumptions about international politics and an adoption of "[...] a realist assessment of the international system—meaning greater acceptance of the conflictual nature of the world system" (Laïdi, 2023).

The resurgence of geopolitics is emerging as a sobering reality, challenging the aspirations of a liberal utopia that once flourished in the aftermath of the Cold War. The overly optimistic assumption that the global spread of liberalism would pave the way for a harmonious era of cooperation and shared values has proven to be a miscalculation. The intricacies of this geopolitical resurgence lie in the delicate interplay between the enduring forces of state-centric interests and the aspirational ideals of a liberal world order. As the world grapples with this complex interplay of realities and ideals, it becomes clear that a more nuanced understanding is required to navigate the evolving dynamics of international relations. The unfulfilled promises of the liberal dream have given way to a geopolitical landscape where pragmatism and national interests rule, inviting a reconsideration of the once-dominant narrative of a universally embraced liberal order. The "geopolitical awakening" is therefore a response and adaptation of EU foreign policy to the changing wider geopolitical context. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown in no uncertain terms that a high degree of interdependence does not necessarily prevent state aggression. On the contrary, economic interdependence risks being weaponised in certain contexts. Moreover, the US has become a less reliable partner for Europe in recent years due to its

America First policy and its reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific. The rise of middle powers and the recent autocratisation of many states, as well as the democratic backsliding of some EU member states, contribute to a picture of growing scepticism about the liberal utopia of lasting social progress in the international sphere. Rather, the notion that history is back is much closer to the cyclical nature of history that classical realists would propose.

Thus, officials understand a more geopolitical EU foreign policy as a greater emphasis on realist principles. If the EU were to adopt a more realist foreign policy, what would be the implications of such a paradigm shift for Europe's external relations with the MENA region? Given the current state of the art on EU foreign policy research, is it even accurate to speak of a paradigm shift?

Several studies have shown that there is a discrepancy between the EU's officially proclaimed goals and the actual implementation of its foreign policy in the MENA region (Behr, 2012; Fernández-Molina, 2017; Pace, 2009; Seeberg, 2013; Von Soest & Wahman, 2015). These studies have identified a selectivity in the implementation of normative goals, which routinely take a back seat in cases where core strategic interests of the EU conflict with them. For this reason, the EU has been described as a "tragic actor" (Hyde-Price 2008) in the international arena, forced to pursue an ambiguous foreign policy that predictably fails to simultaneously satisfy its self-imposed normative and structurally imperative strategic goals. Authors argue that at the heart of this divide lies the conflict between the traditional realist interests of member states and the liberal ideals of the EU as a supranational entity (Nouredine, 2016). Following this line of logic, a more geopolitical EU foreign policy, and thus a shift towards realism, would not represent a fun-

damental change in the Union's behaviour towards the MENA region, since realist elements have already been very much present, if not dominant, in the implementation of European foreign policy. From this perspective, the EU's "geopolitical awakening" towards the MENA region would be primarily a conceptual and rhetorical shift on paper rather than a fundamental change in terms of actual policy choices. The following section aims to test this hypothesis by assessing the EU's normative goals, and contrasting them with its strategic interests in relevant foreign policies towards the MENA region.

Strategic and normative interests of EU foreign policy in the MENA region

The argument that there is a fundamental tension between normative, liberal and strategic, realist objectives at the heart of EU foreign policy towards the MENA region seems to imply a clear dichotomy between these two theoretical dimensions. However, normative and strategic interests are inter-related. They inform each other and are mutually constitutive (Casier, 2013). For example, an actor can promote a certain set of norms for more interest-driven reasons (Del Sarto, 2016). The EU's promotion of neoliberal reforms in Middle Eastern states speaks to this duality in that this policy is normatively justified but ultimately serves strategic (economic) objectives (Hinnebusch, 2012). This is not to say that the normative justification for such an action is necessarily invalid or exclusively superficial and rhetorical in nature. However, if there is a strong interest-driven motive behind a normative action, it cannot serve as an example of a policy that would distinguish the EU's conduct of foreign relations from that of most other actors in the inter-

national arena, as implied by the idea of a "Normative Power Europe" (NPE). In areas where strategic and normative interests lead to the same policy choice, no state in the world struggles to implement an "ethical" foreign policy. It is only in areas where the two dimensions are in conflict that the EU can truly emerge as a normatively driven actor.

Having shown that the dichotomy between normative and strategic interests is more theoretical than practical, and that there will be cases in which these dimensions merge to become virtually the same, it is relevant to the argument that the EU acts distinctly from other powers to once again try to untangle this Gordian knot. Assessing the strategic interests of the EU in the MENA region is further complicated by the fact that these can be more readily attributed to the national member states rather than to the supranational Union itself. The strategic interests of individual member states vary, and some are more successful than others in influencing the EU's common strategy towards the region (Lehne, 2012). Moreover, the EU Commission's powers in defence and military matters are very limited, as these remain national competences (Koenig, 2019). Whenever national competences and thus the Council's unanimity requirement come into play, the result is an EU foreign policy of the lowest common denominator (Keating, 2021). This pre-structures the EU's pursuit of interests and is one of the main obstacles to overcome in order to make the Union more geopolitical. It also symbolises the seeming impossibility of making a fragmented, supranational entity like the EU cohesive enough to be able to become more geopolitical unless its national member states are prepared to give up more of their sovereignty in foreign affairs.

Further muddying the waters between national and supranational interests is a pro-

cess called Europeanisation, which describes the emergence of foreign policies as a result of repeated interactions between national capitals and EU institutions (Wong, 2017). This can work both ways, with national foreign policies being exported to the European level and European foreign policies being imported to the national level through a process of norm adoption and assimilation. With these caveats in mind, it is possible to identify some broader strategic interests that are shared by most member states and thus by the EU itself.

Strategic interests

The first interest is stability and security. The EU seeks stability in the MENA region to prevent the spread of conflict, terrorism and extremism that could affect its own security. The EU's hesitant response to the Arab uprisings in 2011, its cooperation with authoritarian regimes on counterterrorism, and the official purpose of the ENP ("to enhance stability, security and prosperity in the EU's neighbouring regions") all testify to this fact (Behr, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2012). The pursuit of stability and security in the region, as conceptualised here, also encompasses other EU strategic objectives in the region, such as conflict prevention and resolution, counterproliferation, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts. The second strategic interest is energy security, as the EU is and has been highly dependent on energy imports from the MENA region. In 2013, around 26% of the EU's crude oil imports and 22% of its natural gas imports came from the MENA region (Youngs, 2015). Ten years later, with the planned and partially implemented emancipation from Russian energy imports, the importance of the MENA region for the EU's energy security is expected to increase (Villa, 2022). Indeed, energy import stat-

istics for the first quarter of 2023 show that Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Qatar in particular, are replacing the loss of Russian energy imports (Eurostat, 2023a). Trade and economic relations are the third strategic interest. Including Turkey and Iran, the MENA region has consistently provided around 12% of all EU imports and over the same period around 14% of all EU exports (Eurostat, 2023b). This makes the region an important trading partner for Europe. The fourth strategic interest of the EU in the MENA region is the control of migration flows. Since the so-called migration crisis of 2015, the EU has established financial instruments to address a wide range of migration-related issues with surprising speed, prioritising security, and the fight against irregular migration in the southern Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa (Den Hertog, 2016). Further evidence of the centrality of this issue for European policy-makers are numerous agreements with MENA states, which represent an externalisation of border policing (Lehner, 2019; Picciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). The most recent example of this policy is the €1 billion agreement with Tunisia, also focusing on border management (Dempsey, 2023).

Normative interests

Several central documents have outlined the EU's normative goals and foreign policy objectives in the MENA region. These include the Barcelona Declaration, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the new Agenda for the Mediterranean. Recurring normative objectives expressed through these documents are founding principles of the EU itself. They encompass fundamental democratic values, such as the division of powers, the rule of law, a commitment to human and fundamental rights, equality, and good governance. More specifically, the EU aims at the implementation of democratic reforms, combatting corruption and all forms of discrimi-

nation (A new Agenda for the Mediterranean, 2021).

The EU sees itself as an active norm promoter and acts accordingly towards its perceived neighbourhood (Haukkala, 2008). The active promotion of normative interests thus aims at structuring the European Neighbourhood according to the EU's model. Scholars have pointed out that the actions taken in order to make the European Neighbourhood more like the EU is in itself a geopolitically-inspired policy (Browning, 2018). In this sense, the EU is already a geopolitical actor that seeks to influence the neighbourhood's sense of geographical affiliation and belonging by bringing it closer to the EU's norm-based order (Makarychev & Devyatkov, 2014). This seems to contradict the alleged neglect of "spheres of influence" on which the EU is nominally based. As the interests of the great majority of member states indicate, the spheres of influence concept is very much alive in European foreign policy thinking (Zerka, 2018). It is also worth pointing out that the normative objectives in the EU's declarations are not conceptualised as goals in their own right. Rather, they are seen as preconditions for "a safe and predictable business environment" (A new Agenda for the Mediterranean, p. 3), speaking to the often-criticised, predominantly neoliberal nature of European norm promotion (Günay, 2016; Huelss, 2019).

After having established the main strategic and normative interests of the EU, key European foreign policies towards the MENA region will be analysed with the aim of revealing the theoretical underpinnings of these policies as well as their implementation. The results of this analysis will allow for an evaluation of the concept of Normative Power Europe regarding the MENA region. This, in turn, will provide a basis for assessing whether a more geopolitical foreign policy would represent a fundamental

change in the Union's behaviour towards the MENA region.

The European Neighbourhood Policy

The ENP, initiated in 2004, represents a cornerstone of the EU's external relations framework. Since the so-called Arab Spring, the instrument of conditionality has been at the heart of the ENP's operational mechanism, whereby the EU uses economic assistance and preferential treatment to incentivise partner countries' adherence to democratic norms, human rights, and governance reforms (Crawford & Kacarska, 2019). The principle of conditionality within the ENP reveals a dual nature, combining normative aspirations with strategic pragmatism. On the one hand, conditionality is consistent with the EU's normative commitment to promoting democratic governance and human rights in partner countries, reflecting the Union's role as a promoter of shared values and regional coherence.

Conversely, the strategic facet of conditionality stems from partner countries' fears of being marginalised from European markets. Given the highly asymmetric nature of the EU's trade relations with the Southern Mediterranean (for example, the EU accounts for 49% of Morocco's trade in goods in 2022, while Moroccan goods account for only 1% of total trade with the world for the EU in 2022; regarding Tunisia, these numbers are at 56% to 0.5% [European Commission, 2023a, 2023b]), the prospect of market exclusion is a coercive instrument. While officially shedding the vestiges of colonialism, the EU has found itself in a position to benefit from the enduring structures left by its colonial past. In many ways, the EU has perpetuated a hub-and-spoke trade relationship with the MENA countries, with the EU serving as the central hub and the MENA countries as the spokes in a wheel of economic exchange (Fisher-Onar, 2022). This structure

is not accidental, but rather the product of a deliberate policy rooted in neoliberal economic principles (Hinnebusch, 2012; Onar & Nicolaïdis, 2013). Furthermore, scholars argue that the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and later the European Economic Community (EEC) was driven by a geopolitical concept known as "Eur-Africa", which sought to secure stable access to African resources for the dwindling European powers after the Second World War (Hansen & Jonsson, 2014). In this sense, the strategic practice of exploiting economic superiority vis-à-vis the post-colonial space is a constitutive feature of European supranationalism.

The EU's ability to shape the terms of trade in its favour is a calculated strategic advantage. Utilising the fear of exclusion from its markets against economically struggling states is a very tangible form of hard power (Hyde-Price, 2008). As Josep Borrell himself made clear, hard power in the context of a more geopolitical EU foreign policy does not necessarily refer to coercive military capabilities (Borrell, 2022). On the contrary, he argues for coercive capabilities situated in the civilian realm. As evident from the above, the conditionality mechanism of the ENP fits this description neatly. This, in turn, suggests that Europe's "geopolitical awakening" can hardly be seen as a recent event when it comes to the MENA region, given that the conditionality mechanism has been a core part of the ENP since its inception (Haukkala, 2008). What is new is that the trade cooperation offered by the ENP has become increasingly unattractive with the emergence of competitors in the region that do not implement conditionality clauses, which in turn gives the southern partners more alternatives. Moreover, the overall effectiveness of EU conditionality clauses in promoting social progress is questionable. Scholars argue that the market integration incentive in the

ENP actually undermines democracy promotion by focusing on short-term economic goals at the expense of long-term democratic development (Theuns, 2017). The market assimilation strategies that the ENP entails also serve to advance the EU's energy security needs by facilitating trade with countries such as Libya and Algeria, both ENP partners, which are important energy suppliers to Europe (Eurostat, 2023a).

The economic gains and the geopolitical nature of the EU's norm promotion within the framework of the ENP are evident. Norm promotion does, however, also allow for the pursuit of other strategic interests: security and stability in the Southern Neighbourhood. The ENP states that the economic development of the partners also serves the purpose of rendering these states and societies more resilient, which in turn leads to enhanced security and stability, not just for the MENA region but also for Europe. The conditionality mechanism, amplified after the events of the Arab Spring in an attempt to harness the democratic momentum, has failed to deliver real change and security, and stability concerns have soon re-emerged as the EU's main concerns (Dandashly, 2015). The ENP also provides direct financial assistance to partner countries to strengthen security-related issues such as counterterrorism and counterextremism. These policies clearly reflect the EU's strategic interests. However, they are cloaked in normative interests, as it is pointed out that "[...] human rights and good governance [remain] at the centre of this cooperation" (European Union External Action 2020, p. 1). This claim was, however, scientifically disproved, with findings indicating that the counterterrorism cooperation is very much guided by a "security-stability" master frame, routinely sacrificing normative convictions when they conflict with strategic interests (Durac, 2020, Skare 2023). De facto, state

resilience is prioritised over societal resilience in the implementation of this counter-terrorism cooperation (Kaunert, Léonard & Wertman, 2020), reflecting the prioritisation of strategic over normative interests. Furthermore, since the primary driver of policy implementation now appears to be the promotion of security interests, democracy and human rights are not seen as goals in themselves, but rather as subordinate to the overarching goal of security (Crawford & Kacarska, 2019).

Energy security policies

The primacy of strategic over normative interests in the implementation of EU foreign policy towards the MENA region is perhaps most visible in the area of energy security. In its search for new energy suppliers in the face of the planned emancipation of Russian gas supplies, the EU has turned its attention to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In a joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Josep Borrell proposed his vision of a strategic partnership with the Gulf. The document outlines the principles of this new strategic partnership focusing on mutual prosperity, sustainable energy, and regional as well as global security. In contrast to the conditionality clauses of the ENP, the pursuit of normative interests with regard to the strategic partnership with the Gulf states remains rather toothless. While acknowledging that human rights issues remain a challenge, it is simply pointed out that the EU "can" cooperate with the Gulf monarchies regarding their reform efforts (European Commission, 2022, p. 13). Furthermore, the EU aims to strengthen human rights dialogues with Gulf partners, focusing on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment (European Commission, 2022, p. 15).

For two reasons, it is unsurprising that the EU takes a quasi-non-existent stance on

normative interests vis-à-vis the Gulf states. First, the EU does not have the same economic leverage over the Gulf states as it does over ENP members. On the contrary, it could be argued that the EU is, especially after the loss of Russian gas, economically much more dependent on the Gulf states than vice versa due to the scarcity of major energy suppliers in the world. Second, the Gulf is not in Europe's immediate neighbourhood, which makes a geopolitical, neo-liberal restructuring of these states less strategically imperative than in the case of the ENP partners. The EU evidently needs to abandon the pursuit of its normative interests when they are conflicting with strategic imperatives. In the field of energy security, this is not a new trend, but a consistent feature of European foreign policy over the last two decades (Del Sarto, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2012; Zoubir, 2009). In addition, research on EU trade agreements shows that Europe's commercial interests hinder the full pursuit of normative interests (Borchert et al., 2021).

Migration management

Another area where the tension between normative and strategic interests is evident is the EU's controversial migration policy. The EU has a long history of cooperating with authoritarian leaders with rather poor human rights records in so-called migration management (Zoubir, 2009; Cassarino, 2014). Until the Arab Spring, EU migration policy towards the MENA region was security-focused, with normative concerns taking a back seat (Colombo & Tocci, 2012). Despite different intentions, which also gave rise to the concept of conditionality in the ENP, the EU's migration policy did not change fundamentally after the Arab uprisings and remained security-focused. This is evidenced by the rapid rapprochement between the EU and the new Egyptian regime under President Al-Sisi (Tsourapas, 2020). The EU has once again found

an authoritarian strongman with a dubious commitment to human rights and the rule of law to "manage migratory flows for mutual benefit", as the document on the priorities for the EU-Egypt partnership 2017-2020 puts it (European Union External Action, 2017, p. 8). Other examples include the controversial EU-Turkey deal at the height of the 2015 "refugee crisis", which raised serious doubts about the normative dimension of EU foreign policy (Gürkan & Coman, 2021). If anything, geopolitical notions have already taken hold in the EU's migration management, as so-called "push-backs" against migrants at the EU's borders appear to have become more frequent and systematic since Ursula von der Leyen took office (Christides et al., 2021). The cooperation between the Libyan coastguard and the EU further shows the limitations of a Normative Power Europe. The former has been described as abusive militias that commit systematic and widespread human rights abuses including torture, arbitrary detention, forced labour, and sexual assault (Salah, 2023). Yet this so-called coastguard is co-funded by the EU with millions of euros as part of an effort to slow the flow of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, despite internal budget documents warning as early as 2017 of a medium to high risk that additional funding would lead to more human rights violations against migrants (Michael, Hinnant & Brito, 2019). These actions are diametrically opposed to the EU's normative interests and can only be explained by the primacy of strategic interests.

A shift in rhetoric

This analysis of EU foreign policy behaviour in the MENA region has shown that normative convictions have traditionally played a subordinate role in policy areas where the EU has a strong strategic interest. In these strategically important areas, normative interests are only pursued when

they coincide with the strategic imperative. Strategic interests can therefore either help or hinder norm promotion. In the MENA region, the EU has not only acted according to realist, self-interest driven imperatives, but has also incorporated typical geopolitical considerations into its foreign policy, such as the existence of a sphere of influence ("neighbourhood") that needs to be reshaped according to the image of the empire. Civilian hard power elements have been strongly embedded in EU foreign policy towards the MENA region. Substantial military hard power elements have not been a realistic option in the past and will not be so in the short to medium term. This is because the latter remain within the competence of the member states and the Council, not the EU Commission. While it is true that there has been a partial supranationalisation of the EU's international security policy (Haroche, 2023), these developments are still in their infancy.

This is not to say that the EU's foreign policy is generally realist-inspired and fundamentally devoid of genuine normative efforts to make the world a better place, or that it would constitute an "unethical" foreign policy per se. Assessing these issues is far beyond the scope of this analysis. Rather, the aim was to show that the concept of NPE reaches its limits when confronted with the reality of EU foreign policy choices in areas of core strategic interest. This, in turn, calls into question the notion of a "geopolitical awakening" of the EU in the context of the MENA region, as hard power elements and realist thinking have been very much present in European foreign policy in the region in the past. Norm promotion and liberal policies such as the creation of interdependence through the intensification of trade relations have ultimately served strategic interests. In this context, it is debatable whether the EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region can even be regarded as liberal-inspired in

the first place. This, in turn, suggests that the realist shift which the "geopolitical awakening" theoretically represents is more rhetorical in nature as far as the MENA region is concerned.

A mere change in rhetoric might seem inconsequential and quite the opposite of a fundamental shift in EU foreign policy. It might, however, deliver some important advances in the long term. The following section aims to outline why such a shift in rhetoric and potentially also in attitude might very well be beneficial for EU-MENA relations.

Countering negative perceptions of the EU through classical realism

The EU presents its core values as universal, meaning that they apply at all times and in all circumstances. As the above analysis has shown, the universal applicability of these values does not stand up to scrutiny in the light of the empirical facts of EU foreign policy in the MENA region. As the following section will explore, this discrepancy between words and deeds has led to a perception of hypocrisy and double standards among MENA stakeholders.

Hypocrisy – MENA perspectives

Before the Arab Spring and the increased use of conditionality in EU policy towards the MENA region, the term "double standards" was commonly used by activists, intellectuals, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the region to describe the Union's foreign policy behaviour (Hinnebusch, 2012). However, recent research shows that, despite the nominally greater focus on norm promotion in EU foreign policy after the Arab Spring, this image has not really changed. In fact, interviews with MENA civil society representatives have

shown that perceptions of double standards in EU policy towards the region remain strong (Brasseur, Pachta & Grigolo, 2023). From a European perspective, this is problematic as the perceived application of double standards undermines the EU's credibility as a normative actor in the region. Polling data from MENA countries on democracy promotion shows that the EU has in fact little credibility as a normative power in the region (Teti, Gervasio & Abbott, 2021). Furthermore, interviews conducted with MENA stakeholders suggest that the EU is increasingly seen as an interest-driven actor in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean that prioritises security and stability over democracy and human rights in the region (Cebeci, 2019). These developments also fit into a wider picture in which experts warn that public opinion in the region is sceptical of normative demands from the West in general, which could render the promotion of human rights ineffective (Báli, 2022).

Given the results of the juxtaposition of the EU's strategic and normative interest pursuit in the MENA region, it is argued that the EU's lack of credibility as a normative actor in the region is not simply a product of potentially flawed perceptions, but rather rooted in the apparent contradiction between the EU's rhetoric as a force for good in the world and its actual behaviour. In almost every foreign policy area in which the EU engages with the MENA region, the primacy of interests over the norms and values the Union seeks to promote can be observed (Cebeci, 2019). For this reason, it is not surprising that there is a perception of European hypocrisy in the region. When acting according to realist imperatives in a normative cloak becomes evident, it leads to a loss of credibility and trust, which in turn unnecessarily damages relations between the EU and the MENA countries. It is to be considered unnecessary, as research has shown that there is an under-

standing among MENA stakeholders and the broader public that the EU also has to pursue its strategic interests in a competitive international arena, as long as those actions are balanced out with norm promotion over the long term (Brasseur, Pachta & Grigolo, 2023; Teti, Gervasio & Abbott, 2021).

Neocolonial tendencies

As argued above, the discrepancy between rhetoric and action in the EU's foreign policy is damaging its international relations at a general level, as it costs credibility and, in turn, creates an image of limited reliability. However, it is only when this discrepancy is contextualised in the light of the colonial history between Europe and the MENA region that the full extent of the damage becomes apparent. The parallels between the justifications and actions of the 19th-century great powers of Europe and the EU towards the MENA region are striking. First, 19th-century colonialism was also characterised by a discrepancy between rhetoric and action (Gozzi, 2021). The European powers claimed that their foreign policy was for the benefit of the people of the MENA region (normally justified), while in fact they exploited the region and its people (strategic interest pursued). Second, it can be argued that, to a certain extent, European decision-makers and legal and political scholars of the time did indeed believe their own falsehoods that the exploitative, colonial foreign policy towards the countries of the MENA region would (also) benefit the "others". A situation not too dissimilar to today, where many European scholars and politicians uncritically accept the normative nature of EU foreign policy (Manners, 2006; Hyde-Price, 2008; Kobaysashi, 2021; Mogherini, 2016). Third, cloaking strategic interest in normative rhetoric is a common thread of empires throughout history, especially for those that engage in a civilising mission of some sort,

linked to a normative perception of themselves (Del Sarto, 2016). By, once again, universalising European values and acting on a self-imposed mission to "civilise" its external environment, while simultaneously acting according to realist principles, the EU runs the risk of repeating the mistakes of the past (Stivachtis, 2018). Fourth, by postulating that the EU has reached a higher state of moral development, as implied by the idea of being at the heart of the post-modern realm, while other regions are still stuck in history, social Darwinist ideas are also repeated.

This is not to say that the EU would act no differently in the region today than the European powers did in colonial times. Nor should it be taken as a call for the EU to abandon all norm promotion in the region because of the colonial legacy. Rather, the argument is that the discrepancy between rhetoric and action in the EU's foreign policy in the region is damaging not only on a general level in terms of resulting in a lack of trust and reliability, but also on a more specific level in terms of resembling a flawed civilising mission, which has caused so much harm in the past. This notion is also supported by two recent findings. First, public opinion data from the region shows, that there is a mismatch between the kind of democracy the EU wishes to promote, and the kind of democracy people and activists want (Teti, Gervasio & Abbott, 2021). This speaks to the flawed civilising mission the EU has imposed on itself and to the notion of Normative Empire Europe. Instead of listening to the needs and aspirations of the people of the region, the EU promotes a ready-made, one-size-fits-all solution: Its own values and its own system of government and economics, i.e., liberal democracy coupled with neoliberal capitalism. Second, survey data from the region show that the EU is seen as a neocolonial actor (Huber, Noura & Paciello, 2018), suggesting that the discrepancy between the EU's rhetoric

and actions is also perceived in terms of its similarities to the colonial past.

Overcoming the discrepancy

Having established that the discrepancy between words and deeds in the EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region is doubly damaging, the question arises as to how it can be overcome. If we continue to associate the promotion of norms with the liberal end and the pursuit of strategic interests with the realist end of the theoretical axis of International Relations, then in order to overcome the discrepancy, either the EU's rhetoric must become more realist, or its actions must become more liberal. Given that the EU's "geopolitical awakening" implies a long-term shift of its foreign policy towards the realist end, the latter seems unlikely in the current political climate. The "geopolitical awakening" could, however, provide an opportunity to make the rhetoric of the EU more realist, or less liberal, respectively.

Injecting more realism into the EU's public statements and self-understanding does not mean (rhetorically) giving up norm promotion or the EU's core identity as a liberal actor altogether. Rather, (classical) realism argues for a distinction between the desirable and the possible in foreign policy (Morgenthau, 1954), on the assumption that every state has strategic interests to pursue. The EU would benefit enormously in terms of its external image if it acknowledged that a truly normatively guided foreign policy in its neighbourhood is always desirable, but not always possible. A first step in overcoming notions of double standards and hypocrisy in the region is to acknowledge that, in a difficult, competitive geopolitical environment, strategic and normative interests may at times clash.

This does not imply a nihilistic view of international politics in which strategic inter-

ests always trump moral considerations and humanitarian progress. As classical realism suggests, power over principle is a losing strategy in the long run because it weakens the international order that constrains great power competition (Morgenthau, 1954). This is particularly true for the EU as a supranational entity that relies on the rule of law and a common identity and political culture based on shared core values for internal cohesion. Core values that must also be represented in its foreign policy.

The recognition of the pursuit of self-interest as part of foreign policy rather allows for an encounter on equal footing with the respective other, as the presumptuous notion of one's own higher state of enlightenment, implicit in the division of the world into postmodern, modern and premodern spheres, is diminished. Instead of declaring itself a normative power and a force for good in the world in a self-loathing, narcissistic manner, the EU should take a step back and adopt a humbler approach to international politics. The aim should be to navigate the dilemmas and balancing acts of foreign policy as well as possible in order to set an example to the world through deeds, not words. In this way, perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards can be addressed and countered.

Realism as a school of thought is sceptical of declaring one's own values as universal and sees the modelling of the periphery in light of a great powers own image as an imperial technique (Hyde-Price, 2008; Morgenthau, 1954). As is evident from the above, the EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region can be conceptualised in such a manner, expressed in the notion of Normative Empire Europe (Del Sarto, 2016). If the EU would, as a result of the "geopolitical awakening", incorporate some of this scepticism into its identity, it could be a valuable step towards the decolon-

isation of the relationship with the MENA region. Moreover, the incorporation into the EU's identity and rhetoric of a distinction between the desirable and the possible, combined with a healthy scepticism towards the proclamation of particularist values as universal by great powers, could lead to a greater recognition of the need of local solutions to local problems. Meaning, that such a shift in the EU's mindset and self-image would allow to abandon the liberally inspired, paternalistic and neo-orientalist stance, which suggests the EU needs to pursue some sort of civilising mission in the MENA region. As shown above, there is a mismatch between the kind of progress the EU wishes to promote and what kind of progress the people in the region actually want. In this sense, a stronger incorporation of realist principles could lead the EU to listen more to the needs and desires of MENA societies, rather than promoting a one-size-fits-all solution in a neocolonial manner. This, in turn, would be a further step towards decolonising relations, while allowing the EU to pursue a truly normative foreign policy.

It is important to qualify that the incorporation of elements of classical realism into EU foreign policy and rhetoric will not lead to a fully realised decolonisation of EU-MENA relations. For this to happen, Europe would need a "decolonial project" (Bhambra, 2022), which implies a redressing of the injustices associated with exploitative colonial practices through postcolonial reparative action. Classical realism would not encourage such action, nor is it likely to happen as a result of the "geopolitical awakening". If anything, EU foreign policy would become more realist as a result. This would perpetuate neocolonialism, as realism justifies the pursuit of national interest, whereby the West benefits from the international economic structure and the status quo of de-development in other regions of the world. Furthermore, realism is ahistori-

cal (though modelled on the European history of conflict) and state-centric and therefore does not take into account subaltern perspectives (Ayoob, 2002). Rather, coming from a realist perspective, it is argued here that the EU will in any case pursue strategic interests in the MENA region, whether cloaked in liberal rhetoric or not. The "geopolitical awakening" is an opportunity for the EU to take off the mask of a benevolent force for good in the world and replace it with a more modest, nuanced image based on reality rather than idealism. This, in turn, would have decolonising properties for the reasons outlined above.

Recommendations

In order to reconcile the "geopolitical awakening" with the EU's core identity as a normatively guided actor and to use it as a vehicle for advancing EU-MENA relations, EU foreign policy towards the MENA region should incorporate four principles: humility, honesty, flexibility and reflexivity.

Humility – The EU should adopt a more modest approach to its self-image and the promotion of norms. The self-congratulatory attitude that Europe is somehow more morally advanced and enlightened than other regions of the world needs to be abandoned. As this analysis has shown, there is a noticeable gap between the EU's rhetoric and its actions. The same is true of its self-image and its external perception. The EU should continue to strive to be a role model for the world, but through its actions, not its statements. Soft power does not work by declaration or coercion, it works by attraction. Attraction is not something that can be forced or demanded, it can only be won in a humble, yet self-assured way.

Honesty – To address the discrepancy between rhetoric and action and the resulting perception of double standards in

its foreign policy towards the MENA region, the EU should use the geopolitical momentum to acknowledge and openly communicate the pursuit of self-interest in a competitive, anarchic international arena. The EU should openly and honestly differentiate between the desirable and the possible in complex and multifaceted foreign policy dilemmas. It would benefit from acknowledging that it needs to balance its normative with its strategic goals to be competitive and relevant in the long run. Successful norm promotion requires a strong and credible actor, which in turn requires the pursuit of strategic interests.

Flexibility – The EU in principle seeks to promote the right core values, as in human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. It does so, however, in too rigid a way, closely modelled after the EU's own image. This analysis has shown that this directive is not only a hegemonic technique used by empires throughout history (something the EU, *qua raison d'être*, seeks to overcome), but also clashes with the aspirations of the people of the MENA region. The EU must therefore hold on to its core values and continue to promote them, but in a more flexible and locally derived way. Instead of

insisting on a one-size-fits-all solution with a paternalistic undertone, EU decision-makers should listen more carefully to MENA stakeholders and pragmatically adapt norm promotion to local contexts.

Reflexivity – In order to address perceptions of the EU as a neocolonial actor in the MENA region, the EU needs to abandon its "amnesiac attitude" (Huber, Nouira & Paciello, 2018) towards Europe's colonial past in the region. A real awareness of the similarities between the colonial attitudes of the 19th century European powers and the neocolonial attitudes of the 21st century EU needs to be developed. These similarities include a (misguided) humanitarian impulse, the postulation of different levels of development, the universalisation of European values, a self-imposed civilising mission, and European encroachment on the sovereignty of MENA states. These dynamics highlight the need for a reassessment of the EU's approach to its relations with the region, one that prioritises the agency of MENA states, more equitable and mutually beneficial economic cooperation, while recognising and addressing the historical and structural imbalances that remain.

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