Towards a More GRASSROOT EU Foreign Policy in the MENA Region? A Glossary

Emmanuel Cohen-Hadria
Director of the Euro-Mediterranean Policies Department
European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMED), Barcelona

If it is true that EU history is made of small steps and incremental integration, it is equally true that the EU has periodically needed to rely on shock therapy to keep moving towards an ever-closer union and avoid paralysis. How about EU foreign policy more specifically?

15 years down the road, contending that new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty have sufficed to spike EU’s foreign policy with the sort of upgrade it needed would be audacious indeed. If institutional reengineering has not produced the desired effect, the question then is whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the geopolitical shock that the EU needed in order to become more Geopolitical, Realist, Assertive, Strategic, Sovereign, Realistic, Operational and Transactional (GRASSROOT).

The EU’s foreign policy has started moulting in that direction, as evidenced by the decision to finance lethal military equipment to the benefit of Ukraine in the framework of the European Peace Facility. With the European Council’s decision in June 2022 to grant Ukraine candidate country status, another taboo has fallen and enlargement policy, that had become more cautious and conservative over the last years, has become the vehicle of the EU’s geopolitical ambitions.

However, it is far from clear that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a powerful enough shock to induce needed mutations in the EU’s foreign policy DNA beyond its Eastern Neighbourhood. This article will focus on the EU’s foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa region, seeking to uncover any development that would be tantamount to a more GRASSROOT EU’s foreign policy in that region. While doing so, it will seek to clarify the meaning of a series of concepts used discursively in reference to the EU’s foreign policy, but without always being properly defined.

Geopolitical

European leaders did not wait for the Russian invasion of Ukraine to call for a more “geopolitical” Europe. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen did so when taking office in 2019, pledging to lead a “geopolitical Commission.” The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell also did so on many occasions, including in a session of the European Parliament following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when he said “this is the moment in which geopolitical Europe is being born.”

The problem is that those who use the word “geopolitical” rarely define it, which creates confusion (Kundnani, 2023). This concept is often used with a broad understanding, covering different features that we will try to pinpoint in this article, including assertive, realist, strategic and transactional. Here, we will stick to a restrictive understanding of the concept, whereby a “geopolitical Europe” is defined through its ability to understand the changes in the global environment, to “go deeper than superficial assessments of current events,” and to factor “a more thorough political perspective” into the design of its foreign policy (Vimont, 2015).

This edition of the yearbook provides ample analysis of how the Mediterranean environment has changed,
including through the reconfiguration of the role of regional and global powers in the region, new conflicts, as well as new political and energy dynamics.¹ The EU has been trying to adapt to these changes and to acknowledge them in strategic documents. In May 2022, the High Representative and the European Commission adopted a Joint Communication on a “Strategic Partnership with the Gulf” with the aim to broaden and deepen the EU’s cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its member countries, acknowledging the need to “work more closely together on stability in the Gulf and the Middle East, on global security threats; energy security, climate change and the green transition, digitalization, trade and investment” (European Commission, 2022).

In March 2019, the High Representative and the European Commission adopted a Joint Communication on the “EU-China- A strategic outlook” where it clearly identifies that “China’s business and investment activity in third countries, including in the Western Balkans, the EU’s neighbourhood and Africa has become widespread” (European Commission, 2019).

Despite these efforts, the EU seems to struggle to act geopolitically, and emancipate itself from a scripted and rigid way of implementing its foreign policy. Efforts need to be enhanced to boost the geopolitical mindset of EU personnel, including EEAS staff. The European diplomatic academy could play a role in this regard, in proposing tailored training for newly appointed country desks.

**Realist**

In international relations theories, realism is intrinsically linked with the concept of power and often defined as being in opposition to rules-based liberalism. The EU has been reluctant to see itself as a power. It has constructed itself as a liberal player, seeking to maintain its own commitment to a rules-based order and to encourage its partners to adhere to it. However, HR/VP Borrell has repeatedly made a plea for the EU to “learn to speak the language of power.” What this means is not entirely clear though. Despite claims that “speaking the language of power” should not be done to the detriment of the EU’s commitment to rules, norms and values, it appears that some trade-off is inevitable. Maintaining a normative and transformative foreign policy in the MENA region, where good governance and human rights would continue to be promoted as they are today, and at the same time aiming for a more realistic EU’s foreign policy is a very difficult balancing act.

Moreover, realism is most often associated with the way power is exercised, and more precisely with the possibility of resorting to the use of force. It is particularly the case in the MENA region where “regional actors and external powers use military means as a key instrument to pursue their political agendas and address perceived security threats” (Wezeman, 2016).

The EU is still far from being, and from being perceived as, a credible military power in the region

In that sense, the EU is still far from being, and from being perceived as, a credible military power in the region. The limited scope of the only military mission under the Common Security and Defence Policy in the region (EUNAVFOR Med Irini) falls short of convincing regional powers of the military strength of the EU in the region. Likewise, the quasi absence of the EU in conflict resolution mechanisms in theatres such as Syria, Libya, Yemen, Western Sahara or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict due to the lack of political appetite, capacities or internal divisions, have not helped to build the case of a credible military power.

**Assertive**

“Speaking the language of power” does not exclusively require using, or the threat of using, military power. It may also be done through the assertive use of soft power instruments, including trade policies. Assertiveness is not as popular as realism in international relations theories. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies provided a useful definition. “Objective assertiveness” is defined “as any increase in at least...

¹ See for instance the articles in this edition on the Chinese presence in the Mediterranean or on the role of Russia and Turkey.
one of the following two aspects of “power”: the power an actor manifests through its actions (factual assertiveness) and the power it rhetorically claims to possess (rhetorical assertiveness).” “Subjective assertiveness” is defined in relation to “situations where an actor is perceived by others – whether or not based on objectively observable realities – to have increased its either factual or rhetorical assertiveness” (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2014).

There is a risk that EU domestic politics, and in particular pressure from populist forces in some of its Member States, complicates its quest to uphold its strategic vision.

If we now apply this definition to EU foreign policy in the MENA region, we find that the EU is not factually assertive overall, being reluctant to manifest its power through actions. There are indeed cases where the EU could possibly mobilize some of its soft power instruments to address conflicts, but has been reluctant to do so. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU could theoretically adopt trade sanctions and push for a more pro-active implementation of its differentiation policy between Israel within its 1967 borders and entities beyond these borders, but has been unable or unwilling to do so.

There are also situations, whereby the EU has been reluctant to be rhetorically assertive. This has been the case when, subject to aggressive or hostile verbal declarations from partner countries, it has not responded with the firmness that such declarations should probably require. For instance, in a statement issued in 2017, in reaction to a judicial development concerning the EU-Morocco agriculture agreement, the Moroccan Ministry of Agriculture addressed a rather explicit threat to the EU, that went unanswered. Being rhetorically assertive also means stepping up efforts that the EU has started to make to beef-up its strategic communication, in particular through the work of the position of Arabic Spokesperson, created a few years ago and operating from Beirut.

As a result of this ailing factual and rhetorical assertiveness, the EU also lacks subjective assertiveness as defined above.

Strategic

Of all the adjectives enumerated in this article, “strategic” is probably both the most frequently used in the context of EU’s foreign policy and the most difficult to define. EU’s foreign policy jargon is indeed replete with expressions including this word, e.g. strategic partnerships, strategic communication, strategic planning or strategic compass.

Being strategic means “looking ahead, not into the distant future, but beyond the vision of the operating officers caught in the smoke and crises of current battle; far enough ahead to see the emerging form of things to come and outline what should be done to meet or anticipate them.” (Acheson, 1969)

In the context of EU foreign policy in the MENA region, being strategic therefore means trying to make sense of the megatrends at play in the region that will transform it in the medium and long term and affect the EU’s interests, and then acting accordingly. These megatrends can be clustered into three categories: politics and security, energy and climate and socioeconomic development. A number of experts claim that this latter category is not ranked prominently enough in the list of priorities and are alarmed by the state of some indicators compiled in the Arab Human Development Report. Accordingly, they invite policymakers to integrate into their strategic planning the possibility that such a critical socio-

---

2 «...de telles nuisances mettent en péril un édifice de coopération construit sur de nombreuses années ne laissant de choix au Maroc que de s’en détournar au profit d’une accélération de partenariats initiés dans des pays et régions diverses notamment la Russie, la Chine, l’Inde, le Japon, les pays du Golfe ainsi qu’auprès de nos voisins africains [...] toute entrave à l’application de cet accord est une atteinte directe à des milliers d’emplois d’un côté comme de l’autre dans des secteurs extrêmement sensibles ainsi qu’un véritable risque de reprise des flux migratoires que le Maroc, au gré d’un effort soutenu, a réussi à gérer et à contenir.” www.maroc.ma/fr/actualites/ministere-de-lagriculture-lunion-europeenne-doit-assurer-le-cadre-necessaire-pour.

economic situation may lead to further popular uprisings in the region.\textsuperscript{4}

Some of the relevant megatrends do feature quite prominently in EU strategic documents, including climate change. Since the creation of the EU Green Deal, its external dimension has been developed at a high pace and mainstreamed across all EU foreign policy regional approaches, including in the MENA region. Likewise, the New Agenda for the Mediterranean, which is the latest policy document to frame the EU’s approach to its Southern Neighbourhood, gives considerable prominence to the concept of inclusiveness and incorporates a stronger social dimension than previous similar documents (European Commission, 2021).

However, it is also true that both domestic pressures in EU Member States and unfolding events such as the war in Ukraine result in the EU having to sometimes partly derail from or compromise on its strategic vision. Above, we argued that some trade-off is inevitable between the EU’s commitment to rules, norms and values on the one hand and its quest to speak the language of power on the other. Similarly, a trade-off seems to be inevitable between the EU’s commitment to strategic objectives on the one hand and short-term political or economic realities on the other. The recent deal between the EU and Tunisia illustrates for example how the EU seems, to some extent, to have paused its strategic commitment to human rights and good governance in Tunisia, in favour of more pressing interests regarding the role Tunisia plays for containing illegal migration to the EU. To put it differently, there is a risk that EU domestic politics, and in particular pressure from populist forces in some of its Member States, complicates its quest to uphold its strategic vision.

**Sovereign**

The term “strategic sovereignty” was introduced by the French President Macron in a speech in 2017. It is used as a synonym of strategic autonomy, a term coined earlier and included in the Global Strategy released by the EU in 2016. It refers to the “capacity of the EU to act autonomously – that is, without being dependent on other countries - in strategically important policy areas” (EPRS, 2022).

Diplomats tend to perceive the mechanisms of EU foreign policy as rigid and bureaucratic and unable to produce off-script initiatives.

Both the Covid pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have further revealed some of these dependencies and, as a result, have further strengthened the case for the EU's strategic sovereignty. The EU also realized that partnering with its southern Mediterranean countries would be a pivotal part of its quest to reduce its dependency on third countries. The disruption of value chains with the pandemic boosted calls for “nearshoring,” i.e. the transfer of business processes to companies in nearby countries such as Morocco, instead of far-away countries. Similarly, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Algeria became a pivotal element of the EU’s energy diversification strategy.

**Realistic**

For the purpose of this article, we could define a realistic foreign policy as one that adjusts its objectives to evolving realities and perceptions. “It is obvious that Europe’s geopolitical environment and its role in the world are changing. The EU cannot simply dismiss such changes without the risk of undermining Europe’s credibility” (Vimont, 2015). The ENP, which remains the main policy framework guiding EU foreign policy towards its Southern Neighbourhood, was conceived 20 years ago, under very different circumstances as those that prevail now. The ENP has been revised a few times since, in an attempt to adapt to those circumstances. However, the 2004 footprint remains. One of the most striking impressions one gets when reading the 2004

documents that introduce the ENP, is that it was built on the assumption that the EU was almost an exclusive partner for southern Mediterranean countries. Countries in the region no longer see the process of getting closer to the EU as their only perspective, as other options have become available, with regional and global powers increasing their presence in the region.

Without renouncing to its strategic and geopolitical ambitions, the EU should undertake a reality check when redesigning its policy framework, not only taking into account that the way it is perceived may have changed and that this calls for a reshaped methodology, but also that the goals set 25 years ago may need to be revised. Both the objective “to share the benefits of the EU’s 2004 enlargement with neighbouring countries in strengthening stability, security and well-being for all concerned” and the vision of “a ring of countries, sharing the EU’s fundamental values and objectives, drawn into an increasingly close relationship, going beyond co-operation to involve a significant measure of economic and political integration” look clearly outdated.

Operational

An operational foreign policy can be defined as a flexible and creative policy where actions and results-oriented initiatives prevail over the implementation of standard and pre-arranged mechanisms and the reliance on declarations and statements. The EU would gain in sponsoring more risky and discrete initiatives in the MENA region, in particular in relation to conflicts. A more hands-on approach to the Middle East Peace Process could be a good candidate.

In order to do this, the EU not only needs to find a way to overcome the unanimity rules in EU foreign policy, but also the EEAS needs to prove to both its partners in southern Mediterranean countries and the EU Member States alike that it is capable of producing “a steady flow of creative policy initiatives and proposals…” (Vimont, 2015). Diplomats from EU Member States and counterparts of the EU in southern Mediterranean countries tend to perceive the mechanisms of EU foreign policy as rigid and bureaucratic and unable to produce off-script initiatives. The EEAS is often seen as a secretariat tasked withshouldering and running existing bureaucratic frameworks that underpin the EU’s relations with its southern Mediterranean neighbours, including a web of committees and councils as part of the ENP. These meetings, together with a web of bilateral political dialogues at different levels, generate a number of tasks for EEAS officials, who routinely complain about the amount of briefings they are asked to produce. These scripted formats generate secretariat-like tasks that prevent EEAS country desks from thinking more creatively, off-script and operationally. This likely needs to be taken into account if a revamping of the ENP is to be considered in the upcoming years.

Transactional

The concept of transactionalism has attracted a lot of attention during the Trump Presidency, whose foreign policy was analysed as fundamentally transactional. A transactional foreign policy “favours bilateral to multilateral relations, focuses on short-term wins rather than longer-term strategic foresight, adheres to a zero-sum worldview, where all gains are relative and reciprocity is absent, rejects value-based policymaking, and does not follow a grand strategy” (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020).

Like realism, transactionalism is focused on interests rather than values and norms. Unlike strategy-oriented foreign policy, transactionalism is not concerned with long-term strategic calculations and planning, since it involves operational and pragmatic deals.

Another important characteristic is that “a transactionalist foreign policy is inherently connected to domestic policy concerns” (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). This explains why a transactional foreign policy is more exposed to criticism. This has been the case with two developments that illustrate a transactional trend of EU foreign policy. One is the deal between the EU and Turkey signed in March 2016, regarding the management of migrants and refugees, whereby Turkey committed to control flows from Syria to the EU, in exchange for financial disbursements from the EU and promises to accelerate visa liberalization and accession negotiations (Council of the EU, 2016). The other example is the more recent deal signed on 16 July between Tunisian President Saied on the
one hand and the President of the European Commission von der Leyen, Italian PM Meloni and Dutch PM Rutte on the other, under which the EU pledged €105 m to support Tunisia’s border control capacities and €150 m as direct budget support, in addition to the promise of an additional €900 m should the IMF deal be concluded.

References

ACHESON, Dean. Present at the creation. My years at the State Department. Norton, 1969.
WEZEMAN, Pieter D., “Military Spending and arms transfers to the Middle East and North Africa.” in Armed conflict and instability in the Middle East, SIPRI, 2016.