Détente Dynamics: A Neoclassical Realist Perspective on EU Foreign Policy in the MENA Region[*]

Konstantinos Zarras[1]

1. Assistant Professor of International and European Studies, University of Macedonia, Macedonia, Greece (kzarras@uom.edu.gr)   ⓘD 0000-0002-7151-9999

Abstract

In the post-2020 security environment of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, marked by the easing of Iranian-Saudi tensions, intra-Sunni reconciliation, the resolution of the Qatar blockade, and the signing of the Abraham Accords, the European Union (EU) sought to capitalize on the détente to advance its strategic interests. Compared to the other members of the so-called Western camp, the EU, which appears particularly vulnerable to its neighbouring region's instability, responded poorly to the emerging challenges and opportunities. Which factors explain the inefficiency of the EU to benefit from a permissive strategic environment and become more impactful in its broader neighbourhood? This article attempts to promote our understanding of EU's foreign policy towards the MENA region through a Neoclassical Realist theoretical approach. Structural changes alone cannot explain the EU's failure to have a more prominent role in the region. Intervening variables, such as the role of institutions, state-society relations, and strategic culture, can shed light on the lack of policy cohesiveness and the overall inability of the EU to promote its influence abroad.

Keywords: EU, Foreign Policy, Intervening Variables, MENA, Neoclassical Realism, Systemic Constraints

1. Introduction

The MENA region holds a top position in the EU's foreign policy agenda given its profound connections to vital interests encompassing security, economy, migration, and climate change. The future of the EU as a global political and economic actor is inextricably linked to the stability and prosperity of its broader neighbourhood. At present, European policymakers grapple with multifaceted concerns linked to this area, including the looming risk of a full-blown regional conflict and potential spillover effects, the escalating migration flows, the spectre of terrorist attacks on European soil, and adverse economic repercussions resulting from dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources. In addition, developments in the MENA shape the external strategic landscape in which the EU operates and significantly impact domestic political dynamics.

In light of the above and given its economic presence through trade relations, development assistance, and humanitarian aid, the EU is expected to have an impactful role in the MENA. Nevertheless, it has reduced leverage and enjoys little regional credibility (Colombo et al., 2019; Teti, 2012; Roccu & Voltolini, 2018). Which causal factors explain the EU's powerlessness and strategic irrelevance within the area? It can be argued that the position of the USA as the dominant external power did not leave enough room for manoeuvring for an independent and assertive policy of Europe in the MENA. Moreover, the complex set of conflicts and rivalries within the regional system, especially after the eruption of the Arab Uprisings, did not contribute to creating favourable conditions for exerting European influence. These systemic pressures at the global and regional levels created a restrictive environment for the implementation of

EU policies, and can be perceived as critical causal factors for their failure.

However, new dynamics have emerged throughout the region in the last few years. The impending "pivot to Asia" by the USA and, more importantly, a de-escalation of tensions in several rivalries in the Middle East modified the overall systemic stimuli on the EU and contributed to the creation of a permissive environment. This article examines the way in which global and regional systemic changes have affected EU's policy outcomes in the MENA. The central unit of analysis is the European Union, which is perceived as a unitary actor for the analysis. However, it is acknowledged that in reality, it operates not as a conventional state actor, but as a unique and non-fully unitary political entity (See Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). Member states wield substantial influence over the Union's foreign policy decisions and, in certain instances, adopt national policies that deviate from those endorsed by Brussels (Johansson-Nogués et al., 2020).

The central research question is whether structural changes that occurred between 2020 and 2023 and created a more permissive strategic environment led to more effective EU policies and increased the influence in the MENA. Neoclassical Realism constitutes an appropriate theoretical framework to shed light on this issue. It urges a closer examination by blending structural realist considerations with an understanding of the unique elements of decision-making processes in the EU. The Neoclassical Realist framework aims to provide a nuanced comprehension of the EU foreign policy in the MENA, which is the dependent variable of this analysis, and becomes a crucial tool for unravelling the complexities and dynamics that shape the Union's responses to a volatile and ever-changing geopolitical landscape. The independent

variable is systemic pressure, which can be translated as the distribution of capabilities at the global and regional levels, patterns of great power penetration, and regional powers' strategic interaction in the MENA.

The central thesis of this article is that despite creating a more permissive strategic environment in the post-2020 MENA for the EU, due to significant systemic changes at the global and regional level, Europe remained ineffective and a bystander in the face of significant developments. Therefore, in order to promote our understanding of the EU's strategic weakness in the MENA, we have to take into consideration the impact of intervening variables that affect the decision-making and policy implementation processes of the Union. Ripsmann et al. (2016, p. 117) point out that "the international system is an imperfect transmission belt because its influence on outcomes must pass through intervening domestic-level processes that can amplify, obstruct, or distort it". State-society relations, the role of EU institutions, strategic culture and, to a lesser extent, leaders' perceptions weigh heavily on the failure of European policies. This is the main reason behind selecting the Neoclassical Realist framework for examining the research question.

The MENA security environment renders Realism suitable for analysing the EU's foreign policy towards the region (Dionigi, 2021, p. 94). Specifically, Neoclassical Realism stands out as an apt analytical tool, shedding light on the interplay between systemic forces and domestic influences (Ripsman et al., 2016). The dynamic relationship between global international constraints and domestic factors helps better grasp the EU decision-making process. This theoretical framework posits that while the global system presents both limitations and opportunities,

foreign policy decisions are substantially shaped by domestic circumstances.

As mentioned above, the post-2020 period hinted at a de-escalation phase in Middle Eastern international relations. The resolution of intra-Sunni disputes, the normalization of Turkey's relations with various Arab actors, and the easing of tensions between Tehran and Riyadh fostered optimism for improved political conditions. Moreover, the impending US disengagement from the region and Washington's advocacy of burden-sharing and instigating its partners to contribute more actively to their neighbourhood's security seemed to pave the way for the EU to follow a more independent and decisive policy in the MENA. Its leadership viewed these conditions as an opportunity to advance their interests through mediating initiatives for peace-making, participation in joint investment projects—particularly in the green energy sector—and engagement in reconstruction efforts in war-torn areas. Tocci's (2009) insights underscore the EU's adaptive strategies in response to evolving regional dynamics. The Neoclassical Realist variant becomes particularly relevant, illustrating how, despite favourable developments, certain domestic factors -perceived as intervening variables within the theoretical framework- may limit the EU's ability to fully adapt to systemic changes, resulting in suboptimal or inconsistent foreign policy decisions.

2. Evolution of the EU Foreign Policy in the MENA

Before investigating the structural constraints that affect the strategic environment, a brief description of the historical background and the main instruments of EU foreign policy in the

MENA will be given. Among several Western discourses on the broader Middle East, we can trace several depictions of the region as a realm of conflict and instability juxtaposed against the EU, which is viewed as the embodiment of a normative, values-based actor (Manners, 2002; Cebeci, 2021). This oversimplifying narrative usually serves as a legitimizing argument for the more powerful part of an asymmetrical relationship to promote its material interests. As Dionigi (2021) highlighted, both regions have earned reputations as exceptional cases in international relations, albeit for different reasons. The historical interconnectedness between Europe and the MENA spans various epochs and materializes through complex people-to-people connections, cultural influences, as well as economic and political exchanges. The enduring legacies of colonialism and imperial ventures loom large, profoundly impacting current interactions between state actors in both areas.

How has the EU, formerly the European Community (EC), employed its diverse means and instruments to implement policies in the MENA effectively? Before adopting the Strategic Compass, it pursued its strategic interests by leveraging conventional foreign policy instruments of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. This framework sought to align member states' policies, fostering a unified approach. It involved the issuance of joint statements, the establishment of common positions, and the implementation of shared diplomatic actions. A diverse range of institutional mechanisms and strategic engagements marked the execution of Brussels' policies. The EU's diplomatic presence was consistently upheld through its Delegations, facilitating effective communication and underscoring the Union's commitment to diplomatic channels in the region. However, a significant drawback

of these foreign policy institutions was the absence of a dedicated agency comprehensively addressing the MENA region.

A discernible separation existed between the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean nations and the broader region encompassing the Persian Gulf. While this distinction may have served well in organizing cooperation and directing support mechanisms, it did not correspond to the emerging regional geopolitical dynamics (Colombo & Lecha, 2021). Instead, the EU adopted a distinct approach to its Southern Neighbourhood, encompassing Mediterranean countries within MENA and Jordan. The Union for the Mediterranean represented a more expansive framework, including all EU member states, Southern Neighbourhood countries, Turkey, and Mauritania, but still excluded an important number of essential states in the region. Notably, diplomatic ties with the Arab monarchies were structured through strategic partnerships established with the Gulf Cooperation Council. In contrast, diplomatic engagement with Iran was conducted within a framework of bilateral relations. In addition, a noteworthy high-level dialogue was maintained with the League of Arab States (LAS), exemplifying a commitment to multilateral engagements.

The EC, later the EU, actively pursued diplomatic initiatives in its engagement with the MENA, having as stated objectives the fostering of cooperation, the mitigation of conflicts, and, not unexpectedly, the advancement of its core interests. Economic tools, particularly trade agreements, partnerships, and development aid, emerged as the primary instruments for amplifying its political influence. In addition, Brussels employed sanctions as a potent foreign policy instrument in response to challenges such as human rights violations, conflicts, and non-compliance with international

law. Notably, implementing sanctions was discerningly selective, aligning with the EU's strategic interests. In summary, the EU's pre-Strategic Compass foreign policy approach was characterized by a comprehensive array of instruments, combining diplomatic, economic, coercive, and soft power measures.

From the beginning of the European political integration process, the broader Arab-Israeli conflict was at the top of Europe's diplomatic agenda, as indicated by the fact that it had been the first issue over which the European Political Cooperation convened in 1970. It is crucial to notice that the member states of the EC have formed a common position on the issue on the premise of a two-state solution based on the Green Line (Bicchi & Voltolini, 2022; Miller, 2011). This orientation, which was translated into several policies in the sectors of trade and economy, including the legal distinction between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, persisted until the mid-2010s. In 2002, the EU members reiterated their commitment to the conclusion of a peace process that would end the territorial occupation and lead to the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state next to Israel.

Evolutions during the Arab Uprisings brought a discernible change in EU's foreign policy trajectory. Moving away from the democracy-promotion narrative, Brussels used a more pragmatist language. It aimed to implement different policies to address the surge in violence, particularly in light of the increasing significance of the migration issue in domestic political debates. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seemingly receded into the background as new geopolitical priorities have surfaced. The eruption of conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the heightened Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the intra-Sunni competition leading to the Qatar blockade, and the confrontational dynamics between the UAE and Turkey across

several fronts have taken precedence in EU's strategic considerations. Relations with Iran witnessed a transformative phase after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. This evolution led to the creation of the Iran Division within the EEAS, with the High Representative of the EU serving as the JCPOA coordinator (European Commission, 2016). However, the shift in the US policy during Donald Trump's presidency disrupted European endeavours to establish normalized relations with Tehran. Furthermore, a noticeable deviation from the previously united stance on the Palestinian issue has become evident, while national policies have become more relevant. The common front on the Israeli-Palestinian issue started to disintegrate from 2016 onwards as member states took unilateral initiatives in favour of Tel Aviv and obstructed declarations in the name of the EU supporting the two-state solution.

3. Interests, Threat Perception and Policy Failures

Given that EU foreign policy in MENA is considered as the dependent variable of this article, the main motives, interests and threat perceptions will be examined in this paper. EU's interest in the political dynamics of this region is driven by a combination of strategic, economic, energy and domestic political concerns. Foremost among these considerations is the perception that destabilization dynamics across the Mediterranean pose a direct threat to EU's security. The concept of the "security-stability" nexus encapsulates the link between security considerations and the pursuit of stability, emphasizing the understanding that addressing security challenges is crucial for achieving and sustaining stability, and vice versa (Dandashly, 2018). The MENA region is a key

region in the protection of the "global commons" that is listed at the top of the new European security agenda (GS of the Council, 2022, p. 22). In particular, the protection of the high seas is intertwined with stability in the littoral countries of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the strategic straits of the Suez, the Bab al- Mandeb and the Hormuz.

Brussels remains particularly apprehensive about the prospect of a full-scale regional war, recognizing the potential spillover of instability onto the European continent. The intricacies of interregional security dynamics further complicate the situation. The EU is committed to employing diplomatic means to alleviate tensions and promote stability, as articulated in the European External Action Service's (EEAS) report of 2016 (EEAS, 2016, p. 34). The recently articulated Strategic Compass underscores the significance of this approach, emphasizing that "active conflicts and persistent instability pose threats to our security and economic interests" in the broader Middle East and Persian Gulf regions. European decision-makers, in alignment with this perspective, place Iran at the core of regional security concerns. They stress the pivotal importance of a return to the full implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as highlighted in the 2022 publication (European Union, 2022, p. 20).

A second consideration that came to the forefront a decade ago is the issue of refugee and migrant flows originating from or passing through the MENA region towards Europe. The ambitious goal of establishing a "Fortress Europe" was inherently destined for failure, prompting European governments to resort to policies involving security outsourcing. The externalization of border control has become a pivotal element in migration management strategies (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). This approach resulted

in what is commonly referred to as a "pragmatist turn", signifying a shift in European states' discourse from a value-based policy, which traditionally involved the promotion of democracy and civil rights. Instead, there has been a noticeable pivot towards collaboration with both state and non-state actors, irrespective of their democratic credentials. The migration issue has prominently featured in domestic political discourse across European countries as well and emerged as a catalyst for the ascendance of populism and the rightward shift in the political spectrum within significant segments of the societies.

Another central focus of the EU foreign and security policy lies in dealing with terrorism originating from the MENA region. To effectively tackle this challenge, it employs a comprehensive approach spanning diverse domains. Diplomatically, the EU engages in efforts to ameliorate the political and social factors contributing to instability in the neighbouring areas. Concurrently, a commitment to strengthening border controls is pursued, as described above, with collaborative initiatives fostering increased cooperation on border management issues with MENA governments. The EU extends its support for capacity building, aiming to fortify the Middle Eastern states' capabilities in counterterrorism endeavours. This strategy encompasses intelligence sharing and law enforcement cooperation, acknowledging the integral role of such collaboration. Additionally, it has developed measures to monitor and rehabilitate individuals returning from conflict zones, complemented by legal mechanisms for prosecuting those implicated in terrorist activities.

An additional sector of the European strategic interest within the MENA pertains to the economic sector, encompassing a spectrum of dimensions including energy security, investments,

infrastructure development, trade and market access. The significance of Middle Eastern hydrocarbons for Europe has notably escalated, particularly in the aftermath of the renewed conflict in Ukraine in 2022. In response to its commitment to support Ukraine, Europe has undergone a deliberate shift away from reliance on Russian energy resources. It is noteworthy, however, that the EU's economic engagement in the MENA transcends the realm of energy resources. Brussels actively seeks participation in diverse economic projects, consistently contemplating avenues to advance its economic interests. A noteworthy facet of this engagement is the expressed intent to contribute to green energy initiatives, perceived as mutually advantageous for the societies of both regions (Prokopio & Čok, 2023). This nuanced approach underscores the EU's comprehensive economic strategy in the MENA, acknowledging the evolving geopolitical landscape and the imperative of sustainable, mutually beneficial economic collaboration.

An increasingly pressing concern that binds the destinies of governments in both regions revolves around the issue of climate change and its far-reaching consequences on societies. Effectively mitigating the impacts of climate change necessitates a concerted effort on a global scale. In this context, fostering inter-regional cooperation through the implementation of comprehensive projects becomes imperative to tackle the escalating intensity of climate-related hazards. Undoubtedly, the considerations mentioned above form a web of interconnected challenges that not only coexist, but also synergistically influence one another.

How can we evaluate the effectiveness and success of the EU policies in the MENA region during the era of the Arab Uprisings? In terms of promoting stability and peace, the EU's failure is

evident. Even in the case of the period's only success story, the signing of the JCPOA deal, Europe was sidelined by the US, and its efforts to save the deal did not bear fruit. The escalation of tensions brought the Middle East closer than ever to a full-blown regional war. Regarding the second consideration—the refugee and migrant issue—the EU, after facing a severe crisis, dedicated substantial effort and resources to improving the situation. However, the issue remains far from resolved, and new migrant flows could emerge depending on developments in key countries. Since 2015, the challenges of migration have become associated with terrorism due to an increase in terrorist attacks on the European soil. The terrorist threat mainly stemmed from European foreign fighters who travelled along migration routes to re-enter Europe undetected. In the economic realm, the EU has been more successful, but still faces significant challenges related to climate change.

A passage from the Strategic Compass document summarizes the aforementioned EU challenges by stressing that the Union's strategic environment "is a breeding ground for multiple threats to European security from terrorism, violent extremism and organized crime to hybrid conflicts and cyberattacks, instrumentalization of irregular migration, arms proliferation and the progressive weakening of the arms control architecture. Financial instability, extreme social and economic divergences can further exacerbate such dynamics and have a growing impact on our security. All of these threats undermine EU security along our southern and eastern borders and beyond. Where the EU is not active and effective in promoting its interests, others fill the space (European Union, 2022, p. 18). As the EU was less active than needed, it failed to fulfil its objectives. The EU committed to crafting a more effective common foreign policy to tackle global issues, and the war in Ukraine

seemed to be a turning point in the "awakening of geopolitical Europe" (Borell, 2022).

4. Systemic Stimuli and the Alteration of the Strategic Environment

Upon the eruption of the Arab Uprisings in late 2010, the modern history of the MENA entered a new phase characterized by the collapse of entrenched regimes, the outbreak of internationalized civil wars, and the evolution of new patterns in regional power dynamics and external intervention. The descent into civil conflict in Syria, Libya, and Yemen not only triggered humanitarian catastrophes, but also unleashed severe instability spillover effects. Over the decade of the Uprisings, noteworthy shifts unfolded in the Middle East at all levels. We can attribute the failure of the EU to be a more impactful actor during this period to the structural constraints that it faced. First and foremost, it was sidelined by the USA, which remained the most influential external power in the Middle East. Given its inferiority in the strategic sector compared to the USA, the EU proved powerless in the face of the developments on the ground and could not take the initiative to promote policies that would bring more stability. The de-escalation between Iran and the West, which reached its zenith with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement in 2015, was abruptly reversed by the Trump administration by imposing a "maximum pressure" policy.

At the regional level, the ascendancy of the Arab monarchies, particularly evident in Saudi Arabia's foreign and security policy shift post-2015, represents a paradigmatic transformation. Simultaneously, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have

emerged as influential regional actors, exerting substantial influence on the geopolitical landscape. Moreover, discernible shifts in extra-regional dynamics have unfolded, as manifested by Russia's resurgent presence in Syria post-September 2015. Amidst the intricate web of overlapping regional confrontations, three central fault lines could be drawn, delineating divisions among the primary actors in the area. These fault lines encompassed: a. The Saudi-Iranian antagonism, periodically framed within a sectarian context, b. the intra-Sunni strife that pitted the UAE and Egypt against Turkey and Qatar, and c. the persistent rivalry between the Iran-led Axis and Israel.

Notably, each of these rivalries has undergone recent shifts, to varying degrees, propelled by dynamics of de-escalation. This rise of tensions within the Middle Eastern conflict formation created a restrictive strategic environment for Brussels. After a decade fraught with tensions and looming fears of a full-scale regional war, a sequence of developments has engendered optimism for a détente in the MENA. Concerning global structural constraints, the strategic reshuffling of US priorities, commonly referred to as the "pivot to Asia," emphasizing a heightened focus on China, was instigated during the Obama administration and gained new momentum after 2020. In addition, the confirmation of de-escalatory trends since 2020 was underscored by significant diplomatic breakthroughs, exemplified by the al-Oula summit that successfully terminated Qatar's blockade and the Baghdad Summit, which revitalized communication channels between Iran and its Arab neighbours (Cafiero, 2023). Additionally, the formalization of pre-existing relations between the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco with Israel through the Abraham Accords marked a pivotal transformation in the regional strategic landscape. The impetus

behind this shift is attributable to several causal factors operating at various levels.

In the context of the Saudi-Iranian rift, which held a central position in the regional dynamics during the Arab Uprisings, there were discernible indications of a reduction in tensions. This shift followed a critical juncture in 2019, when the rivalry between the two powers and their respective allies escalated to the brink of direct warfare. The attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019 significantly heightened the risk of an interstate war. However, the region escaped a full-scale conflict; a notable turning point appears to be the understanding, by the leaders of the Arab monarchies, that the United States was unwilling to fully support them in a scenario of significant escalation with Iran. This awareness prompted a reassessment by decision-makers, contributing to a shift in the trajectory of regional tensions.

Washington's inaction following the September 2019 attacks prompted Saudi Arabia and the UAE to initiate a diplomatic outreach to Iran. The realization that, in the event of a regional conflict, it was possible that they would need to undertake the war effort without US backing played a pivotal role in this diplomatic overture. Subsequently, the establishment of a communication channel proved to be crucial, providing a platform for rapprochement and significantly contributing to averting a full-blown war during the subsequent severe crisis in January 2020, triggered by the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Al-Quds Force of the IRGC, by US forces. Following these developments, an ongoing dialogue unfolded between regional adversaries, mostly through traditional mediators such as Oman and Kuwait, and sometimes even directly. Although

substantial differences over regional issues persist, the level of sectarian animosity has diminished, particularly compared to the peak witnessed during the first years of the Syrian conflict. This shift in dynamics was substantiated in August 2021 during the Baghdad Summit, where representatives from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE convened at the same table to discuss regional challenges, including the conflicts in Yemen and Lebanon.

A primary concern during the Uprisings era was the intra-Sunni rivalry, which pitted Turkey and Qatar, alongside their affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood, against the UAE, Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia. This rift unfolded as a classic regional competition for influence, characterized by a robust ideological and ideational dimension that manifested in a stark division between pro and anti-Muslim Brotherhood camps. The Sunni entities rejecting the political legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood in the broader region went so far as to impose a blockade on Qatar. The peak of this rivalry materialized in proxy confrontations across diverse arenas in the MENA, extending even to regions beyond, such as the Horn of Africa. In the summer of 2020, a significant turning point occurred when a decisive Turkish intervention thwarted forces led by Khalifa Haftar from seizing control of Tripoli and increased tensions with Abu Dhabi. Despite rising tensions, the involved powers preferred de-escalation at this juncture. Subsequently, a negotiated ceasefire agreement was reached, averting a more severe confrontation.

Following the resolution of tensions, noteworthy developments ensued on this matter. Firstly, the intra-GCC rift was conclusively addressed during the al-Oula summit in January 2021, leading to the decision to lift Qatar's blockade. Subsequently, the Erdogan administration orchestrated a significant diplomatic shift, catching

many by surprise. In an endeavour to mend fences after years of intense competition, Ankara initiated outreach efforts to its regional adversaries. This diplomatic recalibration resulted in a series of bilateral agreements with the UAE in November 2021, marking a notable departure from previous hostilities. Furthermore, Turkey embarked on reconciliatory measures with the Saudi royal family, starkly contrasting its earlier stance, particularly concerning Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his alleged involvement in the Khashoggi murder case. Among the Sunni powers, Egypt also responded affirmatively to Turkey's diplomatic overtures, following a series of conciliatory initiatives by Ankara.

About the third fault line, the enduring conflict between Israel and the Iran-led axis has proven to be the least affected by the de-escalation trends observed among regional powers from 2020 to 2023. Within the context of Iran's "forward deterrence" policy (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019), the presence of Hezbollah and pro-Iran groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and the West Bank was still perceived as posing significant security challenges for Israel and its Western allies. Despite this entrenched hostility, the change in leadership at the White House has breathed new life into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) process, with key officials in the Biden administration underscoring Iran's pivotal role in establishing a stable order in the region. The Vienna rounds, aimed at reinstating the pre-withdrawal status quo initiated by President Trump, have gained momentum, and the crisis in Ukraine after 2014 and subsequent sanctions on Russia's energy sector have provided an additional impetus for reconciliation between Iran and the West. Nevertheless, this trend failed to materialize.

In summary, there has been a discernible shift towards reduced tensions during the last years in the volatile region of the MENA,

in which the EU had to operate. From a structural perspective, the causal factors behind this development are a blend of systemic pressures and the dynamic recalibration of regional power balances. Central to this transformation is the perceived disengagement of the United States from the Middle East. This strategic shift has prompted regional actors to reassess and adjust their policies, anticipating a post-US era in the Middle East. The impact of the US disengagement is particularly pronounced in the strategic manoeuvres of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi concerning their geopolitical standoff with Tehran. This recalibration influenced their regional policies and played a pivotal role in diplomatic efforts to revisit a nuclear deal pertaining to the Iranian program.

At the regional interstate level, the profound exhaustion stemming from prolonged periods of heightened tensions and suboptimal outcomes served as a catalyst for de-escalation. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, and Qatar have invested substantial resources directly and indirectly to advance their interests across the region. However, the returns on these investments have, for the most part, fallen short of expectations. Faced with the unanticipated outcomes of their assertive policies, administrations contemplated diverse alternatives, including fostering cooperation and coordination with erstwhile adversaries. For instance, the suspension of hostilities in the Libyan conflict and the emergence of a new crisis in Ethiopia have provided the impetus for the UAE and Turkey to identify shared interests, initiate dialogue, and transcend a decade-long era of antagonistic competition.

Additionally, a crucial explanatory factor for the détente can be discerned at the domestic level. A clear example can be found in Turkey, where economic crises and internal political challenges

prompted a significant shift in Ankara's MENA policies under the Erdogan administration. Confronting many economic and political setbacks, Turkey retracted from its previously maximalist agendas and embarked on reconciliatory overtures toward former adversaries, seeking to mend strained relationships.

In sum, the independent variable of this analysis, systemic pressures, has been significantly altered after 2020. Developments contributed to the modification of the strategic environment within which the EU had to operate, from restrictive to permissive. According to the logic of causal relations, we expect an increase in the EU activity and more effectiveness in its regional foreign and security policy after this change. Nevertheless, several arguments support the idea that the EU did not improve its position and have a more decisive impact within the area.

5. EU's Failure to Adapt to the Altered Strategic Environment: Turning to the Intervening Variables

The post-2020 shift in systemic pressures at both global and regional levels has provided the EU with an opportunity to actively shape its engagement and enhance its influence in the MENA region. A primary objective has been to proactively prevent the eruption of a regional war, aligning with the overarching interest in averting any spillover of insecurity. Additionally, the EU has sought to forge cooperative partnerships with local governments, recognizing this as a crucial step in effectively managing the intricate issue of migration—a matter with profound implications for European security and social cohesion. Moreover, the EU has acknowledged the imperative to counteract the influence of violent extremist groups that pose potential threats of terrorist attacks on

the European soil. In this context, the EU envisioned collaborative efforts with MENA nations to collectively address shared security challenges and promote a unified vision of peace and stability.

The de-escalation phase in the MENA coincided with the conflict in Ukraine, marking a pivotal juncture for the EU. In response to the security challenges arising from the conflict, the conceptualization of a "geopolitical Europe" emerged as a strategic imperative for the survival and relevance of the European political experiment. This shift was particularly pertinent in the current multipolar world era, as the EEAS (2022) underscored. The significance of the MENA region in this recalibration cannot be overstated, as it is instrumental for the EU to assert and enhance its influence on the global stage. Amidst the MENA's evolving dynamics, the EU perceived an opportune moment for advancing its overarching political objectives.

How can we assess the EU's policy outcomes during this phase? Notably, the only successful external intervention in promoting peace and stability came from China, which mediated the Iran-Saudi rapprochement. The EU did not manage to revive the Iran deal or promote the two-state solution within the stagnant Palestinian-Israeli peace process—two core issues at the centre of regional security interactions. Despite its substantial resources and comparative advantages, the EU has encountered numerous challenges in designing and implementing a decisive and effective common foreign policy toward the MENA region. The Neoclassical Realist framework helps explain why the alteration of systemic stimuli, which created a permissive strategic environment for the EU, did not lead to a more effective foreign policy in the MENA region. The intervening variables influencing decision-making and policy implementation have contributed to the

unexpected policy outcomes. The most important domestic factors that are perceived as intervening variables that function as a transmission belt between the constraints of the strategic environment and the EU's foreign policy outcome are described below.

5.1. Institutional Constraints within the EU Foreign Policy Mechanisms

One of the primary challenges facing the EU in its foreign policy is its unique governance structure, which requires consensus among member states that retain significant autonomy. This necessity for unanimity often hinders decisive action, especially during crises (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). For instance, the EU's response to the Syrian refugee crisis has been criticized for being slow and fragmented due to these institutional constraints. EU's foreign policy is further complicated by its multi-layered decision-making processes involving the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, and the European External Action Service (EEAS). These bodies have distinct roles, leading to overlaps, redundancies, and inefficiencies. The European Council, comprising heads of state or government, provides strategic direction, but requires consensus. Meanwhile, the European Commission, the EU's executive body, implements policies in coordination with the EEAS.

Additionally, the EU lacks a centralized executive authority to enforce foreign policy decisions uniformly across member states. This absence of strong centralized leadership contrasts sharply with nation-states, where executive branches can swiftly and decisively implement foreign policy (Smith, 2018). The High Representative

of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, intended to act as the EU's chief diplomat, often faces limitations in authority and resources. In summary, institutional constraints—stemming from the need for consensus, complex decision-making processes, and policy fragmentation—significantly hinder its ability to develop and implement a unified and effective foreign policy. These challenges underscore the need for potential reforms to enhance the EU's capacity to act decisively and coherently on the global stage, particularly in volatile regions like the MENA.

5.2. Policy Fragmentation

The EU's foreign policy is often fragmented due to the diverse historical backgrounds, geopolitical interests, and domestic political climates of its member states. This diversity results in incoherent and inconsistent policy positions, weakening the European strategic coherence and effectiveness internationally. For instance, while some member states may pursue strong diplomatic engagement with certain MENA countries based on historical ties or economic interests, others may adopt a more cautious or critical stance, undermining the EU's collective leverage. Furthermore, the intergovernmental nature of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which remains primarily within the domain of national governments, means that national interests frequently take precedence over collective EU goals. This leads to compromises that dilute the effectiveness of foreign policy initiatives.

5.3. Lack of a Shared Strategic Culture

The EU faces a significant challenge in its foreign and security policy due to the absence of a common strategic culture. This

deficiency stems from its complex multi-level governance structure, which is incompatible with the need for cohesive executive authority. With 27 member states, each with distinct historical experiences and national interests, there is a lack of unity in approaching security threats, foreign policy goals, and defence strategies. Consequently, policy-making often reflects compromises among divergent national interests, leading to fragmented actions, especially in regions like the MENA (Tocci, 2018). This lack of a common strategic culture also affects the EU's defence capabilities. While initiatives like the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) aim to enhance collaboration, the absence of a shared vision hampers their potential. Member states prioritize national defence policies over collective EU objectives, resulting in inefficiencies and gaps in defence posture. This fragmentation undermines the EU's ability to present a united front in international affairs, hampering its effectiveness in diplomacy, conflict resolution, and security cooperation. Addressing this issue requires significant structural and cultural changes within the EU. It entails fostering a collective identity among member states, aligning national interests with broader EU objectives, and streamlining decision-making processes for more decisive actions. Without such transformation, the EU's effectiveness on the international stage will continue to be undermined, highlighting the need for a shared strategic vision and streamlined governance mechanisms to assert its influence as a cohesive global actor.

5.4. Leaders' Perception at the Member State Level

The role of leaders' perceptions at the member-state level is a critical factor in understanding the dynamics of EU foreign policy, particularly within the context of the MENA region. Populist

leaders, in particular, have often imprinted their perspectives on national foreign policy agendas, posing significant restrictions on the cohesion and effectiveness of EU foreign policy. Populism, characterized by its appeal to the general populace, often in opposition to established elites, has seen a surge across various EU member states in recent years. This political trend has brought to power leaders who prioritize national sovereignty and unilateral decision-making over collective EU strategies. Consequently, these leaders often pursue foreign policy agendas that reflect their domestic political imperatives, rather than align with the broader objectives of the EU. For instance, they may adopt more hardline stances on immigration and security, driven by the necessity to respond to their electoral base's concerns. This approach can lead to unilateral actions or refusals to participate in collective EU initiatives to manage migration flows or engage in diplomatic efforts in the MENA region. The divergence in national policies creates fragmentation, weakening the EU's collective bargaining power and ability to present a united front in international affairs. Moreover, the personalization of foreign policy under populist regimes means that these leaders often engage in rhetoric and actions that can be at odds with EU values and long-term strategic goals.

5.5. The Influence of Public Opinion and Media on EU Foreign Policy

The complex interplay between public opinion, media, and state-society relations presents challenges to the European Union's foreign policy coherence (Strohmeyer & Vincent, 2020). Public sentiment acts as both a driving force and a constraint in shaping EU foreign policy. It pressures political leaders to align policies

with public values and concerns, such as humanitarian crises or environmental issues, prompting proactive engagement in international affairs. Conversely, divergent public views across member states, influenced by historical context and cultural backgrounds, hinder policy coherence. The 2015 refugee crisis exemplifies this divergence, with Germany and Sweden advocating welcoming approaches contrasting sharply with Hungary and Poland's resistance. Media outlets play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse and opinion. Through framing issues and prioritizing narratives, they sway public sentiment and perception, particularly in matters of international relations. Digital and social media amplify this influence, democratizing information flow, but also facilitating the spread of misinformation. The EU faces challenges in navigating this digital landscape, impacting its foreign policy decisions and member states' unity. In summary, public opinion and media significantly impact state-society relations within the EU, influencing how foreign policy is formulated and executed.

6. Conclusion

Drawing from the Neoclassical Realist framework, this study contends that the structural changes that created a permissive strategic environment have not translated into enhanced efficacy of EU policies or increased influence in the MENA region. Despite alterations in the strategic landscape, the outcomes of EU policies have been primarily influenced by intervening variables. Neoclassical Realism suggests that while systemic pressures set the stage for state behaviour, domestic-level factors can prove pivotal, under specific circumstances, in shaping foreign policy outcomes. In the context of EU engagement with the MENA region, various

domestic factors have undermined the potential impact of structural changes, posing significant challenges to effective foreign policy implementation. The prominence of intervening variables has overshadowed the advantages offered by these changes. Consequently, the EU continues to grapple with formidable obstacles, hindering its effectiveness and diminishing its sway in the global arena. While de-escalation efforts presented strategic pathways for achieving political, security, and economic objectives, emerging challenges have laid bare internal divisions, necessitating a holistic strategy to fortify its presence on the world stage.

The recent eruption of violence in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of persisting regional instabilities and underscores the urgency of resolving the Palestinian issue comprehensively. This development underscores the intricate nexus between regional security dynamics and the Palestinian conflict, urging renewed international commitment to peace-building endeavours. Moreover, it exposes internal rifts and deficiencies within the EU, posing significant hurdles to cohesive foreign policy decision-making. The EU's inability to present a unified response jeopardizes its credibility, particularly in its relations with the Global South. Europe finds itself at a critical juncture amidst escalating violence in the Middle East. Its waning influence, internal discord, and missed opportunities have relegated Brussels to a politically marginalized position. To restore credibility and contribute to regional stability, the EU must prioritize initiatives such as the two-state solution, revive the Iran deal, and engage proactively with Middle Eastern actors to develop viable peace plans. Leveraging its diplomatic instruments, the EU should engage Middle Eastern stakeholders in mitigating tensions through dialogue. Only through concerted and proactive measures, the EU can reaffirm itself as a credible and influential global actor.

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