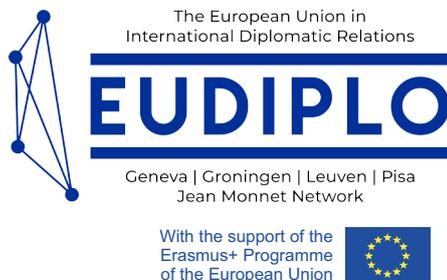


“Principled Pragmatism” Reset: For a Recalibration of the EU’s Diplomatic Engagement with the MENA Region

by Silvia Colombo



ABSTRACT

The launch of the EU Global Strategy in 2016 raised many expectations concerning the EU’s willingness and ability to reconcile its normative agenda with its interests. In setting out “principled pragmatism” as its *modus operandi*, the EU has attempted to bridge the existing gaps between values and principles, on the one hand, and interests on the other. Five years of implementation of the EU Global Strategy has unveiled significant shortcomings and has tarnished the EU’s credibility and leverage. This is mostly evident with regard to the EU’s engagement with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which has suffered from the most acute pragmatist turn in foreign and security policy. When addressing ongoing conflicts or looming crises in the region, the EU has not been able to conceive and lead coherent and effective diplomatic actions that live up to the expectations raised by the EU Global Strategy. Only by clarifying principled pragmatism by underpinning it with a fully-fledged rights-based approach anchored in international law and its underlying norms could the EU aspire to foster its credibility and leverage as a foreign policy player in the MENA region and in general.

European Union | EU Global Strategy | Middle East | North Africa | Sanctions

keywords

“Principled Pragmatism” Reset: For a Recalibration of the EU’s Diplomatic Engagement with the MENA Region

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The Network focuses on this central question: **What are the internal and external constraints and opportunities for the European Union to further its ambitions as an international diplomatic actor?** In dealing with this question, the Network aims to generate a stronger awareness on, and contribute to deeper insights with regard to, the European Union’s diplomatic activities throughout the world, in third States as well as at multilateral fora.

Both the European External Action Service and the Union delegations – and hence the European Union’s diplomatic institutional machinery – remain largely unknown to the public. Yet, the European Union not only has a worldwide network of more than 140 ‘embassies’, but at the same time it has assumed ‘state-like’ functions on the basis of the adoption of diplomatic rules that were originally created for states only. Many **challenges** do remain, but the deep and wide legal and policy powers – and the sheer size and universal network – of the European Union also offer **opportunities** that remain as of yet untapped.

Academic and policy analyses have pointed to a great number of **legal and political questions** related to the developing role of the EU in international diplomacy. EUDIPLO brings experts in this area together to focus on these questions in order to make public authorities at all levels (EU institutions, governmental institutions in Member States and in third countries, international organisations, international and national civil servants and diplomats), young professionals and students, as well as the public at large, aware of the challenges and opportunities in this area.



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by Silvia Colombo*

1. The EU Global Strategy at five

On 28 June 2016 the EU unveiled the Global Strategy for its foreign and security policy (EUGS).¹ In response to an increasingly complex, contested and conflict-prone external environment characterised by mounting pressures (e.g., the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the terrorist attacks on European soil in 2015) as well as to threats of internal disunity, the EU felt the need to significantly revise the strategic foundations of its common foreign and security policy and inject new coherence into its external action.² In contrast to the 2003 European Security Strategy, the EUGS significantly downscaled the transformative ambitions of the EU's foreign policy as a leading normative power willing and capable of exporting liberal values.³ Furthermore, it spelled out the direction guiding its external action, centred on the concepts of "principled pragmatism" and "resilience". Moving from a "realistic assessment of the strategic environment"⁴ as well as from the acknowledgement and projection of its own self-interests, the EU saw its primary role in the world to be fostering (its own) stability and security through pragmatic interconnections, thus joining up internal and external goals and policies ("The EU

¹ See European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, <https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx>.

² Pol Morillas, *Strategy-Making in the EU. From Foreign and Security Policy to External Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

³ Esther Barbé and Pol Morillas, "The EU Global Strategy: The Dynamics of a More Politicized and Politically Integrated Foreign Policy", in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 6 (2019), p. 753-770, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1588227>.

⁴ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 16.

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Global Strategy starts at home").⁵ As such, the EUGS has been widely regarded as embodying a paradigm shift concerning the EU's foreign policy.⁶

Historically, the literature investigating the identity and actorness of the EU has assigned it many roles. The debates about the EU's nature as a "civilian power", "normative power" and "transformative power" have all tended to underscore the centrality of values and principles in the EU's pursuit of its external engagements.⁷ In contrast to that, with the EUGS the EU renounced spreading its norms and values through "Europeanisation" and instead declared its willingness to act pragmatically in a wider space, acknowledging diversity and differentiation as strategic elements. In this respect, the release of the EUGS was part of the internal self-questioning process that aimed to remedy and overcome the flagrant failures of the West's democracy-promotion agenda and the export of liberal institutions epitomised by the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the dysfunctions of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) of 2004 in the broader context of the fraying liberal order.⁸ Acknowledging the existence of a broad spectrum of threats associated with the fragility and instability of states and societies (first and foremost within its own borders), the EUGS has held the potential of a less ideological stance and of a more pragmatic external approach that does not endorse a grand strategy for the EU's external project and that calls for fostering resilience instead of promoting democracy.⁹

The potential of the EUGS is first and foremost represented by the interplay between the two concepts of "(principled) pragmatism" and "resilience". While neither concept is new, their application in the realm of the EU's foreign and security policy is an innovation.¹⁰ Pragmatism in politics has a long philosophical

⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶ Nathalie Tocci, *Framing the EU Global Strategy. A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁷ See François Duchêne, "Europe's Role in World Peace", in Richard Mayne (ed.), *Europe Tomorrow. Sixteen Europeans Look Ahead*, London, Fontana, 1972, p. 32-47; Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 2002), p. 235-258; Tania A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, "The Transformative Power of Europe: The European Union and the Diffusion of Ideas", in *KFG Working Paper Series*, No. 1 (May 2009), https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/international/atasp/Publikationen/4_artikel_papiere/2010_TR_the_transformative_power_of_europe/index.html.

⁸ Serena Giusti, "The European Union Global Strategy and the EU's Maieutic Role", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 6 (November 2020), p. 1452-1468.

⁹ Wolfgang Wagner and Rosanne Anholt, "Resilience as the EU Global Strategy's New Leitmotif: Pragmatic, Problematic or Promising?", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2016), p. 414-430.

¹⁰ The concept of resilience appears in previous official EU documents, such as European Commission, *The EU Approach to Resilience: Learning from Food Security Crises* (COM/2012/586), 3 October 2012, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0586>; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on EU Approach to Resilience*, Brussels, 28 May 2013, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/foraff/137319.pdf; European Commission, *Action Plan for Resilience in Crisis Prone Countries, 2013-2020* (SWD/2013/227), 19 June 2013, <http://aei.pitt.edu/58235>; European Commission and European External Action Service (EEAS), *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (JOIN/2015/50), 18 November 2015, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52015JC0050>.

tradition dating back to the old concept of “Realpolitik” coined by Rochau in 1868 in opposition to “Idealpolitik” and utopianism, but not in antithesis to liberal ideals themselves.¹¹ In the words of the EUGS itself, “In charting the way between the Scylla of isolationism and the Charybdis of rash interventionism, the EU will engage the world manifesting responsibility towards others and sensitivity to contingency. Principled pragmatism will guide our external action in the years ahead.”¹² In practical terms, it means that the EU should engage in the external context for what it can realistically achieve rather than for what is desirable. This entails a sort of flexible external activism that, while not neglecting values and principles and conceiving them as tools for handling reality, does not raise unrealistic expectations.

Resilience has acquired the status of the conceptual architrave of the EUGS thanks to its being malleable enough to be applied in different contexts and answer to several policy needs.¹³ Beyond general definitions that highlight reactivity, learning, flexibility, reflexivity, innovation, multilevelness and proactivity as key features of a resilient individual or system,¹⁴ in the context of international relations resilience has quickly become one of the most-used (and abused) concepts in light of the fact that it evokes and is connected to democracy, security and good governance without being exhausted by any of them. The EUGS defines it as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises”.¹⁵ Resilience and principled pragmatism are strictly linked, the link being represented once again by the fact that both concepts try to bridge the gap between values and principles, on the one hand, and interests, on the other. In the words of the EUGS, only “living up consistently to our values¹⁶ internally will determine our external credibility and influence”.¹⁷ In concrete terms, among the factors that help enhance resilience and strengthen local communities’ agency and states’ performance, and ultimately guarantee stability and security, are trust in institutions, respect for human rights, and vibrant and inclusive societies.

¹¹ Sven Biscop, “The EU Global Strategy: Realpolitik with European Characteristics”, in *Security Policy Briefs*, No. 75 (June 2016), <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/?p=19958>.

¹² EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 16.

¹³ It goes without saying that being vague has also represented a limitation of the concept of resilience. In the attempt to overcome this shortcoming and to clarify how this concept can be integrated into its existing policy tools and approaches, in 2017 the EU published the Joint Communication of the European Commission and EEAS: *A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU’s External Action* (JOIN/2017/21), 7 June 2017, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017JC0021>.

¹⁴ See, for example, Keith Shaw, “‘Reframing’ Resilience: Challenges for Planning Theory and Practice”, in *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (June 2012), p. 308-312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2012.677124>.

¹⁵ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 23.

¹⁶ “Including respect for and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law and encompassing justice, solidarity, equality, non-discrimination, pluralism, and respect for diversity”. Serena Giusti, “From a Regional to a Global Power, in Potency: The EU’s Global Strategy”, in Serena Giusti and Irina Mirkina (eds), *The EU in a Trans-European Space. External Relations across Europe, Asia and the Middle East*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 30.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

Five years after the unveiling of the EUGS, much of the potential of the strategy remains unfulfilled due to three sets of problems linked to both external constraints and endogenous developments. Starting from the external level, it is clear that important changes and transformations have been taking place globally with ramifications for the EU’s capability, sense of purpose and overall results in performing its foreign policy. The implementation of the EUGS largely coincided with the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States, China’s assertiveness in spreading its influence globally, the West’s growing confrontation with Russia and the persistence of unsettled conflicts linked to authoritarianism, rising poverty, the competition for resources and the coming to fruition of asymmetrical weapons including cyber tools. This international situation has led to the “geopoliticisation” of alliances and rivalries and to a growing sense of encroachment experienced by the EU due to the conflictual dynamics straddling the internal-external divide and linked to migration, energy and climate governance, the backtracking of democracy in some countries (and the need to further cooperation with authoritarian regimes), and the erosion of multilateralism and international law. At the same time, and due to mounting external challenges, rising expectations regarding the EU’s foreign and security role have deepened the rhetoric-practice and the expectations-capabilities gaps.¹⁸

At the EU internal level, in addition to severe internal crises such as those linked to the United Kingdom’s exit from the Union and the spread of right-wing nationalist populism, both conceptual and operational factors have constrained the implementation of the EUGS. Conceptually, the EUGS portrays “democracy, the rule of law and human rights not as values in themselves but as components of the EU’s peace-, resilience- and multilateralism-building agenda”.¹⁹ This raises the risk of an ad-hoc, inconsistent and incoherent pursuit of values and principles in the framework of the EU’s foreign and security policy. Criticisms of a far too marked abdication of the EU’s transformative role in favour of narrow self-interest – sometimes the minimum common denominator found among the multiplicity of the member states’ interests – have been repeatedly voiced.²⁰ More specifically,

¹⁸ Nathalie Tocci, *Framing the EU Global Strategy*, cit.

¹⁹ Maryna Rabinovych and Zuzana Reptova, “The Future of Values in the EU Global Strategy 2020”, in *Analyses of the Elcano Royal Institute (ARI)*, No. 112/2019 (19 November 2019), p. 2, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari112-2019-rabinovych-reptova-the-future-of-values-in-the-eu-global-strategy-2020.

²⁰ See, for example, Sven Biscop, “A Strategy for Europe’s Neighbourhood: Keep Resilient and Carry On?”, in *Analyses of the Elcano Royal Institute (ARI)*, No. 4/2017 (16 January 2017), http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari4-2017-biscop-strategy-europe-neighbourhood-keep-resilient-carry-on; Ana E. Juncos, “Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?”, in *European Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), p. 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809>; Annegret Bendiek, “A Paradigm Shift in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy: From Transformation to Resilience”, in *SWP Research Papers*, No. 11 (October 2017), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/eus-common-foreign-and-security-policy>.

criticisms have pointed to the lack of clarity about the possibility to reconcile a self-interest-based pragmatic agenda with the EU’s values and principles. While the EUGS states clearly that values and interests are reconcilable, a significant degree of fuzziness exists as to the extent to which values actually guide actions and, as a result, actions become intrinsically values-oriented.

Leaving the values-interests trade-off unaddressed conceptually has eventually undermined the EU’s normative appeal, soft power and leverage. The EUGS is a strategy and as such it has to be translated into sub-strategies, policies and concrete actions. The main obstacle related to implementation concerns the lack of specific instruments to pursue the broad objectives of the EUGS in line with the emphasis on principled pragmatism. While identifying five relatively clear strategic priorities – (1) advancing the security (and defence) of the EU itself; (2) fostering state and societal resilience in the Neighbourhood and beyond; (3) developing an integrated approach to conflicts and crises; (4) promoting stable regional orders across the globe; and (5) defending and strengthening effective, rules-based, multilateral global governance – the EUGS falls short of pointing to the exact instruments to be used to pursue these aims. In spite of the alleged pragmatist turn of the EUGS, the foreign policy instruments that the EU actually continues to use remain to a great extent anchored in its liberal values-oriented agenda. Scanning through the founding strategy and implementation documents reveals that references abound to the human rights and rule of law promotion agenda, outreach to local civil society and the implementation of both positive (in the form of additional cooperation funds and rewards) and negative (mainly with sanctions) conditionality, and that such approaches constitute the Union’s key tools to influence domestic affairs abroad. Links between the promotion of values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights, on the one hand, and sustainable development, anti-corruption, peace and stability, on the other, are also openly stated. However, although these links are omnipresent in the EU policy documents, the implementation of sectoral policies, from the external agriculture policy to development assistance, from energy cooperation to security sector reform, still suffers from gaps and inconsistencies in terms of the promotion of basic rights, values and principles.

These EU internal obstacles have been particularly evident at the level of specific contexts and issues rather than in declaratory terms and grand abstractions. The EU’s foreign and security role in the MENA region in the past five years has highlighted both problems, pointing to the need for more conceptual clarity concerning the interplay between values and interests and the instruments to pursue the stated goals and priorities. Uncovering the perceived values-interests dilemma in the context of the EU’s decades-long diplomatic engagement to the region is key to identify policy options as well as to ensure that the potential of the EUGS is fully exploited and that the EU’s credibility and leverage in the MENA is increased. Only a renewed emphasis on values and principles not only in theory but also, and most importantly, in practice can boost the EU’s diplomatic role in such a strategic region.

2. The EU’s engagement with the MENA: Principled pragmatism in theory

In accordance with the EUGS’s intention to target those countries “where we can make a meaningful difference”,²¹ the MENA region appears as the perfect terrain to undertake this exercise. In light of its geographic proximity to Europe and of the intense historical, political and economic relations that exist between some MENA countries and European ones, the stability and prosperity of the macro-region spanning from Morocco to the Persian Gulf has always been of great strategic importance to the EU.

In trying to prevent the turning of instability into security threats for its own citizens, the EU has over the years deployed a number of instruments and launched various policies. Yet, the EU’s record has been mixed to say the least or outright frustrating compared to the ambitions nurtured by Brussels. In its common foreign policy, the European Economic Community (EEC) and then the EU have historically reacted to changes happening in the MENA region with high-profile initiatives on paper while being able to deliver much less in practice.

After the two Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1973, the European Community developed the Global Mediterranean Policy focused on trade and the (albeit short-lived) Euro-Arab Dialogue. After the Camp David Accords in 1978, the EEC foreign ministers came out with the Venice Declaration that placed the issue of Palestine at the forefront of newly reinvigorated diplomatic efforts during the 1990s. After the Cold War, the European Union built on the new momentum in international relations and attempted to forge a security community in the Mediterranean region by launching the Barcelona Process. In the early 2000s, it developed the ENP in response to both its enlargement to the East and new security challenges emerging in the South in the form of terrorism or irregular migration.²²

The outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011 was a watershed with regard to political and security dynamics in the region. The EU’s response, however, was modest, reactive and short-term-oriented in spite of the magnitude and unprecedented nature of the changes taking place in almost each and every country in the region. The initial response was framed along the lines of heightened conditionality and differentiation to account for growing differences across the region in terms of stability and democratic reforms, and thus varied rewards through less or more

²¹ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 25.

²² For a complete and detailed discussion of the main cooperation frameworks advanced by the EU vis-à-vis the MENA region, including some conceptual takes on the making of the Mediterranean/Southern Mediterranean/MENA region in the EU’s foreign policy making, please see Silvia Colombo, Eduard Soler i Lecha and Marc Otte, “A Half-Empty Glass: Limits and Dilemmas of the EU’s Relations to the MENA Countries”, in *MENARA Working Papers*, No. 32 (2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10141>. For a critical assessment of the applicability and usefulness of this increasingly contested concept, see Bernardo Venturi and Silvia Colombo, “Rethinking EU Leadership in the ‘Neighbourhood’: Limits and Ambitions”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|01 (January 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12598>.

“money, market and mobility”.

However, in 2015 – two decades into the Barcelona Process and with a new round of revisions of the bilateral ENP – it became clear that the transformative potential of the EU’s engagement with the MENA, in support to endogenous processes of change, had lost traction. Confronted with the increased interdependence of internal and external crises – first and foremost epitomised by what started to be perceived domestically as a migration emergency in most of the EU countries and by the jihadist attacks on European soil – the pragmatist turn of the EU’s foreign policy became visible. The ENP revision of November 2015, prompted by developments in the Eastern Neighbourhood, such as the events in Ukraine of 2014, already spoke of the “need for a new approach, a re-prioritisation and an introduction of new ways of working” to account for new security challenges and threats.²³ It therefore emerges that when the Global Strategy was unveiled in late June 2016, the EU was in the midst of a broader process of rethink and revision of its engagement with the MENA based on pragmatic concerns. Next to pragmatism, the culmination of this process has been a certain downgrade of the MENA in the EU’s list of priorities, mostly as an attempt to protect itself from the spill-over of insecurity coming from the region itself.

If the multilateral and bilateral cooperation frameworks and policies implemented during the 1990s and until the mid-2010s, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings, were largely unsuccessful in promoting values (democracy, the rule of law and the respect of human rights), the past five years have pointed to an even greater emphasis on pragmatism in the name of promoting resilience, which has ultimately contributed to widening the perceived chasm between interests, on the one hand, and values and principles on the other.

On paper, when seeking to foster resilience in the MENA, the EU ultimately aims to support states and societies in their long-term goals of embarking on locally driven processes of socio-economic and political reform as a means to withstand looming crises and attain a more equitable and sustainable distribution of power and opportunities. In other words, the EU has tried to distance itself from the worn-out and ill-fated perceived dichotomy between democracy and stability that has tended to bedevil its external approach to the region.²⁴ Concretely, however, this perceived dichotomy has not been overcome. On the contrary, it has been reinforced, leading to a sub-optimal implementation of the EUGS. As such, the EUGS has emerged primarily as a framework focusing on the security of the Union

²³ See European Commission and EEAS, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, cit., p. 2.

²⁴ See EEAS, *Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Final Conference of the MENARA and MEDRESET Projects, “The Middle East and the EU: New Realities, New Policies”*, Brussels, 6 March 2019, <https://europa.eu/Wq48tq>. Two further dichotomies have characterised the past EU frameworks of cooperation towards the MENA: the first is that between working with the governments, on the one hand, and supporting civil society on the other; and the second concerns the tension between bilateral and multilateral tools and policies. For more analysis and context, see Silvia Colombo, Eduard Soler i Lecha and Marc Otte, “A Half-Empty Glass”, cit.

and its citizens against irregular migration, Islamic terrorism and instability spilling over from the MENA, while the “reconciliation” of the EU’s interests and values has remained unfulfilled.

This tension between theory and practice has been particularly acute with regard to the EU’s engagement with the MENA region. This is due to a number of factors that pertain to different levels but tend to act simultaneously, thus triggering mutually reinforcing dynamics. At the intra-EU level, a certain degree of competition among the different institutions (the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union) has severely prevented the EU from speaking with one voice and, even more so, acting united and resolutely. This trend has been made more acute by the incoherence and lack of coordination between the multilateral EU foreign policy and security stances and policies, on the one hand, and the individual positions and actions of the member states, on the other.

Be it in the case of the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya, the 2020 escalating tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean for the control of key resources or the backsliding of countries such as Egypt and Morocco²⁵ into growing authoritarianism and illiberalism, the EU has not succeeded in upholding a coherent and proactive common diplomatic position.²⁶ With regard to specific policies, in spite of the fact that the EUGS calls for a comprehensive and joined-up approach that includes diplomacy, security, humanitarian aid, development, migration, trade, investment, infrastructure, education, culture, youth, health and research components to foster state and societal resilience, the matrix of the EU’s engagement with the MENA has trailed well-consolidated stability-oriented paths while tending to avoid much more daring foreign policy actions.

This has meant that the EU has played a leading role in humanitarian assistance and displacement relief when it comes to the management of the impact of conflicts and crises in the MENA region in the noticeable cases of Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. This leadership role applies both in relation to other international donor organisations but also with regard to the actions of the individual member states. Similarly, the EU has gained a lot of experience in implementing and funding projects in different domains mostly related to development cooperation

²⁵ The case of Morocco is also sensitive in EU diplomatic terms in view of the contested issue of the self-determination of Western Sahara. On the one hand, the EU formally supports the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi population and the UN peace efforts and is committed to international law. On the other, it places significant importance on the bilateral relation with Morocco as a cornerstone of the ENP, a key trading partner and a gatekeeper of unwanted migratory flows. For more information, see Chiara Orlassino, “The Role of the European Union in the Western Sahara Conflict”, in *CESI Analyses*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.cesi-italia.org/en/articoli/892/the-role-of-the-european-union-in-the-western-sahara-conflict>.

²⁶ Nathalie Tocci et al., “From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe’s Role”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 21|12 (March 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13022>.

(trade, capacity building, judicial reform, support to electoral processes, women’s empowerment, youth inclusion, agriculture, energy transition and more) that are directly connected to the goal of fostering state and societal resilience. Yet, their results – captured by good governance indicators and MENA citizens’ satisfaction statistics²⁷ – have not always been positive. This can be linked, partly, to the limited absorption capacity of the MENA administrations and societies themselves but also to the EU’s hyper-bureaucratisation of development assistance, its relative few resources compared to other competitors (particularly from the MENA region itself, such as the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf), an often incoherent implementation of conditionality across the different countries of the region and misleading narratives related to the EU’s example and role.²⁸

All this combined, the EU’s contribution is still limited, considering that the region is undergoing a phase of protracted turmoil with hard and human security challenges intertwining with one another and ranging from ongoing inter-state conflicts and civil wars to radicalisation and socio-economic and climate-change-related pressures.²⁹ Such challenges – which are the result of ongoing dynamics of competition, conflict and contestation happening at the local/national, regional and international levels – in turn manifest at each of these levels.

Although these levels are equally important to understand the transformation of the geopolitical and geoeconomic order of the MENA region,³⁰ it appears that the regional and the interregional levels are the most heavily charged due to the spill-over of insecurity – also reaching Europe – and of the repercussions of ongoing conflicts and crises. In this respect, the EU has failed to come up with and deliver coherent and sustainable geopolitical strategies towards the region; as a result, competitors have taken advantage. Countries such as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia but also Russia and China have made significant inroads not only into the conflicts and competition affecting the region (Syria and Libya *in primis*), but also in the mediation attempts, domestic political processes, the restructuring of the MENA countries’ economies, as well as deploying and exploiting cultural and ideological connections and forms of aggressive penetration.³¹

²⁷ See Michael Robbins, *What Arab Publics Think. Findings from the Fifth Wave of Arab Barometer*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/?p=6109>.

²⁸ Maria Cristina Paciello and Daniela Huber, “Towards a More Reflexive EU in the Mediterranean. Final Policy Recommendations of MEDRESET”, in *MEDRESET Policy Papers*, No. 10 (July 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10585>.

²⁹ Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì, “Collective Security and Multilateral Engagement in the Middle East: Pathways for EU Policy”, in Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessì (eds), *Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) / Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), November 2020, p. 223-247, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12507>.

³⁰ Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler i Lecha, “Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011”, in *MENARA Final Reports*, No. 1 (February 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10019>.

³¹ Sebastian Sons, *A New “Pivot to the Maghreb” or “More of the Same”? The Transformative Shift of the Gulf Engagement in North Africa*, Tunis, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/poldimed/single-title/-/content/a-new-pivot-to-the-maghreb-or-more-of-the-same>.

In spite of the much stronger awareness of the indispensability of a credible military instrument, since “soft and hard power go hand in hand” (as former High Representative and Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, stated in the Foreword of the EUGS),³² the EU appears hesitant in entering the geopolitical fray and equipping itself with the necessary instruments. The EUGS states that the EU should “protect human lives, notably civilians” and “be ready to support and help consolidating local ceasefires”.³³ This is ambitious insofar as it might entail the deployment of troops on the ground with both defensive and offensive functions. While acknowledging that the EU’s military dimension does not necessarily contradict the essential civilian power vocation of the EU and its newly designed role of resilience supporter, EU has not concretely and effectively taken on responsibility for or engaged with military instruments and actions to tame the several wars that are ongoing in the MENA. Therefore, of the five strategic priorities of the EUGS mentioned above, advancing the security (and defence) of the EU itself against the backdrop of an increasingly conflictual and multi-polar MENA region appears rather underdeveloped.³⁴

However, when push comes to shove and where old and new conflicts are ingrained and spiralling – as in many parts of the MENA region from the Israeli-Palestinian and the Western Sahara disputes to the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni conflicts – falling back onto limited-scale diplomacy (for example, the imposition of sanctions) or the conflict-prevention level has not proven successful.³⁵ Overall, the EU has been rather reactive on the diplomatic front in spite of boasting the successful example of the Iran nuclear negotiations (at least before the US 2018 withdrawal from the deal) and could have thus been more ambitious in this area. This again goes back to the issue of leadership (or the lack thereof) whereby the EU has tended to follow the diplomatic lead of other players and international organisations – for example, strengthening the peace-making and peace-keeping actions of the United Nations also with a view to defending effective, rules-based, multilateral global governance, the fifth strategic priority of the EUGS.

The failure to live up to an ambitious diplomatic agenda is well documented by the eye-catching lack of decisive diplomatic initiatives in Syria or Libya at the peak of the conflicts there, which has enabled other powers, Russia and Turkey for

³² EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*, cit., p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁴ A few months after the unveiling of the EUGS, the HRVP presented an Implementation Plan focusing on Security and Defence launching the process that would lead, just one year later, to the “Permanent Structured Cooperation” (PESCO), established on 11 December 2017 by a decision of the Council. See Council of the European Union, *Defence Cooperation: Council Establishes Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), with 25 Member States Participating*, 13 December 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/12/11/defence-cooperation-pesco-25-member-states-participating>.

³⁵ Silvia Colombo and Daniela Huber, “The EU and Conflict Resolution in the Mediterranean Neighbourhood”, in *IEMed/EuroMeSCo Papers*, No. 27 (March 2016), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/6105>.

example, to take the lead. The same goes for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where the EU, after decades of being a key player, has recently been silent and complicit in the face of intensifying violations of international law, spiralling violence and the ostensibly definitive burial of the two-state solution.³⁶ Deep divisions among the member states have prevented the EU from endorsing a common position or even a statement in view of the recent escalation of violence: the EU is powerless in foreign policy on this delicate dossier.

In the Persian Gulf region, the lack of a clear, comprehensive strategy to deepen dialogue with Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to launch a new vision on the future regional order in the Middle East is also part of this picture.³⁷ This tallies in principle with the stated focus on "cooperative regional orders" (the fourth strategic priority of the EUGS) and reflects the awareness of ongoing geopolitical competition between different global and regional powers. However, the promotion of regionalism and of multilateral cooperation to address crises and foster stability has been prominent more in declaratory terms than in actual substance and concrete results.

All in all, the net and visible result of the implementation of the EUGS in the context of the EU's engagement with the MENA has been negative for the Union's credibility and influence in the region.³⁸ This is clearly exemplified by the case of sanctions imposed by the EU as part of its toolbox to deal with instability, unrest and conflicts in the MENA.

3. Principled pragmatism in practice in the MENA: The case of sanctions

Since the Arab uprisings, the EU has resorted to sanctions in response to actual or potential conflicts and crises in the MENA countries. EU restrictive measures or "sanctions" are framed in the context of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).³⁹ According to the latest "Guidelines on implementation and evaluation of restrictive measures", first adopted by the European Council in 2003, they are used by the EU "as part of an integrated and comprehensive policy approach involving political dialogue, complementary efforts and other

³⁶ Andrea Dessi, "It Is High Time for Europe to Change Its Approach to Palestine", in *Al Jazeera*, 8 June 2021, <https://aje.io/csddgx>.

³⁷ Silvia Colombo and Andrea Dessi (eds), *Fostering a New Security Architecture in the Middle East*, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) / Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), November 2020, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12507>.

³⁸ Michael E. Smith, "Implementing the Global Strategy Where It Matters Most: The EU's Credibility Deficit and the European Neighbourhood", in *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2016), p. 446-460.

³⁹ For a general outlook on EU sanctions, see Francesco Giumelli, Fabian Hoffmann and Anna Książczaková, "The When, What, Where and Why of European Union Sanctions", in *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2021), p. 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2020.1797685>.

instruments”.⁴⁰ Sanctions, targeting governments, entities (companies), groups or organisations, or individuals, seek to bring about a change in the policy or conduct of those targeted, with a view to promoting the objectives of the CFSP, namely: safeguarding the EU’s values, fundamental interests and security; preserving peace; consolidating and supporting democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law; and resolving conflicts and strengthening international security. In the MENA regional context briefly recalled above, imposing sanctions has emerged as an instrument of diplomacy that has been frequently used by the EU to make its voice heard and achieve its goals.⁴¹ However, digging below the surface of this practice reveals a number of inconsistencies and shortcomings related to both the rationale and the effects of sanctions in the different contexts. Furthermore, this practice uncovers seeping intra-EU tensions both the vertical, i.e., the various institutions, and the horizontal, among the different member states, levels.⁴²

In the initial phase of the Arab uprisings, sanctions were imposed on targets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. Sanctions were adopted for different purposes and answered to different logics in each case depending on the context, the specific interests of the EU and its bargaining power vis-à-vis local, regional and international stakeholders. Against this backdrop, I will briefly refer to selected aspects of the sanction regimes on misappropriation of public funds in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt and Syria.⁴³

In the wake of the unseating of the Ben Ali dictatorship in Tunisia, the EU targeted the former president, his family members and close associates with the freezing of assets they held in European accounts. These sanctions were renewed at the end of January 2021 for an additional year. In the context of the country’s transition, the Council has made use of sanctions as a way to reaffirm its full solidarity with

⁴⁰ See Council of the European Union, *Guidelines on Implementation and Evaluation of Restrictive Measures (Sanctions) in the Framework of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (5664/2018)*, 4 May 2018, p. 46, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5664-2018-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁴¹ Assem Dandashly, “The EU Response to Regime Change in the Wake of the Arab Revolt: Differential Implementation”, in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015), p. 37-56.

⁴² Francesco Giumelli, “How EU Sanctions Work: A New Narrative”, in *Chaillot Papers*, No. 129 (May 2013), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/822>.

⁴³ With regard to Libya, EU sanctions, which were coordinated with the UN’s sanctions, were aimed to prepare the ground for the multinational military intervention that followed in March 2011 and in which the EU as such played a minimal role. In view of the seriousness of the situation in Libya, on 26 February 2011 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1970, introducing restrictive measures in relation to persons and entities involved in serious human rights abuses against persons in Libya. On 28 February 2011, the Council implemented the first UN Resolution and listed the individuals and entities involved. Since then the EU has been monitoring the situation on the ground, particularly in the context of the UN’s arms embargo, to identify potential situations calling for the introduction of “new measures against individuals who threaten the peace, security or stability of the country, impede the completion of Libya’s political transition and are responsible for serious human rights abuses”. See UN Security Council website: *Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1970 (2011) Concerning Libya*, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970>; and Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Libya*, 17 July 2017, p. 6, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23951/st11155en17.pdf>.

and support to Tunisia and its people in their efforts to establish a new stable polity based on the rule of law, democratic pluralism and full respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. EU sanctions are imbued with principles and values. Their political meaning and their role have been to send a message (“signalling”) to the new local authorities and to encourage them to implement virtuous reforms.⁴⁴

Turning to Egypt, while sanctions initially had the same rationale as in the Tunisian case, the context was profoundly different, lacking the democratic transition dynamic seen in Tunisia. On 21 March 2011, the Council adopted a decision concerning restrictive measures directed against a number of Egyptian people linked to former President Hosni Mubarak’s family and regime deemed responsible for the misappropriation of Egyptian state funds. The measures consisted of the freezing of assets of listed individuals as well as preventive measures forbidding nationals and legal entities from EU members to make funds available to those listed, either directly or indirectly. The decision was renewed in the following years. In 2016 and 2017, these individuals repeatedly asked the General Court of the European Union to annul the acts renewing the freezing of their assets, claiming that, among other things, the Council’s decision had infringed on their rights of defence and effective judicial protection as well as the principle of proportionality. On 22 November 2018, the General Court upheld the Council’s decision.⁴⁵ In an important turnaround, however, on 3 December 2020 the Court of Justice of the European Union overturned the judgement of the General Court. Finally, the EU framework for sanctions was lifted on 12 March 2021.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ See Council of the European Union, *Council Decision 2011/72/CFSP of 31 January 2011 Concerning Restrictive Measures Directed Against Certain Persons and Entities in View of the Situation in Tunisia*, [http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2011/72\(1\)/oj](http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2011/72(1)/oj). For a comment on the effectiveness of this type of sanction in the case of Tunisia, see Andreas Boogaerts, “Short-Term Success, Long-Term Failure? Explaining the Signalling Effects of EU Misappropriation Sanctions following Revolutionary Events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Ukraine”, in *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 2020), p. 67-91.

⁴⁵ European Court of Justice (ECJ), *Judgement of General Court (Fifth Chamber) in Cases T-274/16 Saleh Thabet v Council and T-275/16 Mubarak and Others v Council*, 22 November 2018, <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?docid=207978&doclang=EN>; ECJ, “The General Court Upholds the Council’s Decision to Freeze the Assets of Members of the Mubarak Family...”, in *Press Releases*, No. 182/18 (22 November 2018), https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/jcms/p1_1459177/en.

⁴⁶ See “EU’s Top Court Ends Asset Freeze against Mubarak Family”, in *Ahram Online*, 5 December 2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/396228.aspx>; AFP, “EU Halts Sanctions against Family of Egypt’s Mubarak”, in *Arab News*, 12 March 2021, <https://arab.news/vnj9c>. This decision was based on the evidence that “the General Court made an error of assessment in finding that the Council was not required to ensure that the Egyptian authorities had acted in accordance with their fundamental rights” (para 28), namely the right of defence and the right to effective judicial protection. In conclusion, the ECJ stated that “the Council cannot conclude that a listing decision is taken on a sufficiently solid factual basis before having itself verified that the rights of the defence and the right to effective judicial protection were observed at the time of the adoption of the decision by the third State in question on which it intends to base the adoption of restrictive measures” (para 40). For the full text of the Court of Justice decision, see ECJ, *Judgement of Court (Seventh Chamber) in joined Cases C-72/19 P and C-145/19 P: Saleh Thabet and Others v Council*, 3 December 2020, <https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?docid=234941&doclang=EN>.

In other words, while the Council had ultimately based its decision to impose sanctions on political opportunities, namely the willingness to quickly turn a page in Egypt after the revolution, the Court of Justice focused on the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. As such, this is an example of consistent application of values and principles by the judiciary. Notwithstanding the legal dynamics however, the political point here is that in the context of Egypt’s current trajectory towards growing authoritarianism the EU’s overall position is not coherent with its values and principles considering that the government in power after the military coup of July 2013 is neither democratic nor does it respect human rights or the rule of law. The European Parliament repeatedly called for the suspension of assistance to Egypt; yet no sanctions have been imposed vis-à-vis the al-Sisi regime save for the suspension of some exports that could be used for internal repression and the revision of arms sales.⁴⁷ This decision is ultimately the result of heightened pragmatism and the need not to jeopardise the channels of communication between the EU and Egypt’s military rulers.⁴⁸

Of the two other countries enmeshed in fully fledged civil wars quickly turned into regional conflicts – Libya and Syria – the case of Syria is the more interesting one. In the absence of policy alternatives, sanctions have constituted the core of the EU’s response to the crisis. In this regard, the EU has deployed unprecedented measures and till today Syria is second only to North Korea as the country where the longest and most pervasive list of travel bans, asset freezes and trade restrictions against individuals (all government ministers, individuals involved in the exercise of repression, senior officers of the Syrian Armed Forces and the Syrian security and intelligence services, members of Syrian-regime-affiliated militias) and entities (companies in the energy sector, private banks) is in place.⁴⁹

After the United States imposed a first set of sanctions in April 2011, the EU followed suit in May 2011: it suspended bilateral cooperation programmes under the ENP, froze the draft EU-Syrian Association Agreement, suspended the participation of Syrian authorities in EU regional programmes as well as loan operations and technical assistance by the European Investment Bank to Syria, and imposed a full arms embargo on a few military officers. The list of sanctions was later expanded in the face of the Assad regime’s indiscriminate repression against the civilian population, the destruction of the country’s cultural heritage and the widespread and systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including the use of chemical weapons.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Adel Abdel Ghafar, *A Stable Egypt for a Stable Region: Socio-Economic Challenges and Prospects*, Brussels, European Parliament, January 2018, <https://op.europa.eu/s/q0Ua>.

⁴⁸ For a criticism of the EU’s decision to support the Egyptian government through restrictive measures, considering that it does not respect the rule of law, see Sara Poli, *Le misure restrittive autonome dell’Unione europea*, Napoli, Editoriale Scientifica, 2019, p. 137.

⁴⁹ Mikael Eriksson and Francesco Giumelli, “Why the EU’s Sanctions against Assad’s Syria Will Backfire”, in *Foreign Affairs*, 1 December 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1070329>.

⁵⁰ See EU Sanctions Map website: *Syria*, <https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main/details/32>.

Intra-EU divisions have emerged with regard to the EU’s diplomatic stance on Syria. On the one hand, several member states (for example, Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) closed their embassies in Damascus but this was not an EU measure as it was not jointly agreed by the European Council, and the EU Delegation remained open.⁵¹ On the other, some members of the European Parliament (EPP and S&D) asked for a stronger and more united EU stance on Syria, while ALDE, ECR and Green groups criticised the EU approach towards Syria, asking to include President Assad on the list of Syrian officials sanctioned by Brussels.⁵²

With regard to the effects of EU sanctions in Syria, its primary goal of undermining the capabilities of the regime to stay in power, thus indirectly showing the EU’s support to the popular revolt, was achieved with different degrees of success. However, the supreme objective of stopping the bloodshed remains far from being attained, more than ten years after the beginning of the Syrian uprising and the regime’s repression.⁵³ This is due to the fact that sanctions against Syria were not matched by or framed within a more comprehensive diplomatic strategy along the ambitious lines of the EUGS and other foreign policy tools.⁵⁴ At the same time, the protracted duration of extensive sanctions, implemented in the name of stopping human rights abuses and other breaches of international law, indeed made the functioning of the Syrian government more difficult but also had serious unintended consequences for the civilian population, who remain the only real victims of the conflict.⁵⁵

More in detail, in the first phase between 2011 and May 2014, the scope of EU sanctions was gradually increased to target those individuals and entities that were directly responsible for violence and repression. At that time, the civil war was raging domestically and external interventions were still limited. In that context, sanctions had negative and growing effects on specific sectors of the Syrian economy that represented the lifeline of the Assad regime, namely the banking sector, the energy sector, the security apparatuses and the military. Following the Russian and Chinese vetoes of a UN Security Council resolution to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court in May 2014,⁵⁶ the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and, in particular, the Russian military

⁵¹ Clara Portela, “The EU’s Sanctions against Syria: Conflict Management by Other Means”, in *Security Policy Briefs*, No. 38 (September 2012), <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/?p=4806>.

⁵² European Parliament, *Greater EU Unity Needed on Arab Revolts and Tougher Sanctions on Syria*, 11 May 2011, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20110510IPR19132>.

⁵³ Paul Seeberg, “The Limits to the Sanctions Regime against Syria”, in Iana Dreyer and José Luengo-Cabrera (eds), “On Target? EU Sanctions as Security Policy Tools”, in *EUISS Reports*, No. 25 (2015), p. 67-75, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/1118>.

⁵⁴ Zaki Mehchy and Rim Turkmani, *Understanding the Impact of Sanctions on the Political Dynamics in Syria*, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, January 2021, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/108412>.

⁵⁵ UN News, *Decade of Conflict Triggering ‘Slow Tsunami’ across Syria, Security Council Hears*, 20 January 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082592>.

⁵⁶ See “French Draft Resolution on ICC/ Syria in Blue”, in *UN Drafts Blog*, <http://un-report.blogspot.com/2014/05/french-draft-resolution-on-icc-syria-in.html>.

intervention in the country in support of the Assad regime in September 2015, the conflict started to grow in intensity and scope, quickly becoming internationalised.

This important qualitative shift in the conflict was not matched by a similar change in the EU’s political-diplomatic approach. Although the EU has been the main provider of humanitarian aid to Syria, has attempted to keep the Geneva Peace Talks on Syria in place and has isolated the Assad regime through sanctions, this mixture of initiatives has not led to significant changes.⁵⁷ The ability of internal networks of wealthy cronies and warlords to ultimately benefit from the sanctions, for example through the control of smuggling channels, and to cooperate with external partners in overcoming them has compounded corruption, reconstruction mismanagement and eventually the health-related and economic impact of covid-19 to make the life of ordinary Syrians increasingly difficult.⁵⁸

All in all, the EU’s diplomatic action vis-à-vis Syria has been seriously undermined by the lack of support on the part of Russia. Dragging on for too long and unable to adjust to changing conflict circumstances, restrictive measures have proven ill-suited to stop the bloodshed and have been detrimental both for Syria and for the perception of the EU in the country, particularly among what remains of the popular opposition.⁵⁹ The EU’s initially principled rationale has over time given way to a purely bureaucratic/de-politicised, overly-pragmatic and minimalist form of diplomacy that has not contributed to reaching the stated goals of protecting the civilian population against grave human rights abuses but has rather favoured apparent stability and reconstruction over democracy and reconciliation.

Conclusion: Values and principles reloaded

The adoption and implementation of sanctions by the EU in the MENA region has been incoherent, conflictual and ill-timed. This is clearly demonstrated by, in particular, the cases of Egypt and Syria. As to the former, the EU has put up with human rights violations by the current Egyptian authorities. With regard to the latter, the complex geopolitical environment surrounding the Syrian conflict and the EU’s more general inability to develop a fully-fledged approach to this crisis (and others) beyond humanitarian support have turned sanctions into a weak instrument since they did not increase European leverage on the targets but rather contributed to the suffering of the population. All this shows that the EU’s diplomatic engagement with the MENA region has not contributed to advancing its stated goals.

⁵⁷ See ECHO website: *Syria*, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/syria_en.

⁵⁸ See International Crisis Group, “U.S. Sanctions on Syria: What Comes Next?”, in *Middle East & North Africa Commentaries*, 13 July 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/14496>.

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, “Ways Out of Europe’s Syria Reconstruction Conundrum”, in *Middle East & North Africa Reports*, No. 209 (25 November 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/12470>.

This contrasts with the ambitions of the EUGS, particularly its added value of finding some middle ground between interests and values. These ambitions have largely remained on paper and in spite of the continued references to values and principles to be defended and advanced, internally and externally, the EU’s role has been constrained by pragmatism more than sharpened by it. Pragmatism has ultimately been used as an excuse to justify the EU’s inability to muster enough internal cohesion to devise and implement bold common diplomatic actions beyond the minimum common denominator. Furthermore, pragmatism has been used as a form of protection of the EU vis-à-vis an increasingly intractable MENA region as well as growing tensions at the international level and the erosion of the global liberal order. This has led to a certain retrench from the MENA.

The pragmatist turn of the EU – which has arguably been made more acute due to the spread of covid-19 and of the measures that have been implemented in 2020–2021 to contain the pandemic across Europe and globally – is now facing a number of shortcomings. The most evident one is represented by the impact of the changes that have been taking place across the Atlantic with the new Biden Administration. Not only is the transatlantic partnership bound to change such that the EU can no longer just sit on the US train (except on some particular files such as the negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue or Israel/Palestine), but the globe is transitioning to an increasingly multipolar world where other regions are rising and the growing geopolitical competition in and on the MENA is also matched by new arenas of normative contestation.

To thrive in this extremely complex and volatile geopolitical context, the EU needs to come forward with a revision of its foreign and security strategy. This does not mean scrapping the EUGS and devising a brand-new strategy. It would rather entail clarifying “principled pragmatism”, arguably the most controversial concept introduced by the EUGS in 2016, by underpinning it with a fully-fledged rights-based approach anchored in international law and its underlying norms (for example striking a balance between individual and community interests). Developing a more legalistic approach to principled pragmatism would contribute to dispelling significant doubts about the EU’s own goals, points of reference and capabilities.

The introduction of the concept of “strategic autonomy” as the EU’s new strategic compass does not represent a departure from the pragmatist turn of the EUGS, as the EU is now more than ever aware of the need to be more pragmatic to adapt to an international conjuncture of complexity and uncertainty.⁶⁰ But here once again there is space to bring values and principles back to the forefront in line with international law. Values and principles have to be more forcefully defended and furthered both internally and externally to ensure coherence, particularly in the MENA region where the EU still has the ambition to play a major role. Making a

⁶⁰ Josep Borrell, “Embracing Europe’s Power”, in *Project Syndicate*, 8 February 2020, <https://prosyn.org/UZNbi12>.

rights-based approach the new foundations of the EU’s foreign and security policy would also need specific attention to the implementation phase that has suffered the most from the pragmatist turn.

This could be done starting with acknowledging the existence of closer interconnections between issue areas in current policy-making, the so-called “nexus” approach. In this respect, particular attention should be paid to the potential incoherence and tensions in terms of values and principles (or the lack thereof) in the context of a variety of EU external policies such as trade, agriculture, migration, energy, regulatory cooperation, digital cooperation and development, well beyond diplomacy and foreign and security policy. Being aware of such potential tensions, in theory as much as in practice, and addressing them would be a first step forward to make values and principles central again in foreign and security policy and thereby fostering the credibility and leverage of the EU as a foreign policy player.

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