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## ***Revitalizing EU's Southern Regional Strategy***

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The European Union (EU) is deeply engaged in supporting Ukraine against Russia's aggression, a commitment that has drawn significant resources and diplomatic efforts from the bloc. While the EU's focus is predominantly on the eastern front, Russia has been extending its influence in Africa, an area of strategic importance that the EU continues to overlook. This laxity is especially concerning given the geopolitical shifts and the potential realignment towards Russia, away from their traditional Western alliances, of North African nations which can be defined as "swing countries" (i.e. willing to seek alliances of opportunity according to their variable national interests). More gravely, the EU's lack of vision toward North Africa is opening strategic and political avenues for Russia's aggressive policy and security advances.

### ***Russia's renewed Mediterranean strategy***

In the past decade, Russia has renewed its strategy towards the Mediterranean, aligning it with its anti-Western foreign policy stance. The Middle East and Africa, while secondary, play supportive roles in Russia's pursuit of control over its post-Soviet space, particularly Ukraine. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine has underscored the importance for Moscow of expanding its influence in these regions.

Russia's military intervention in Syria, in support of Bashar al-Assad, has solidified its presence with permanent bases in Tartus (naval) and Khmeimim (air), while its Black Sea fleet continues to pose a significant threat to Ukraine in the Black Sea and an increased risk for NATO allies in the Mediterranean and adjoining seas. In Libya, Russia has backed field marshal Khalifa Haftar since 2015 (an actor not legitimized by UN), employing Wagner mercenaries to support his forces, diversifying their activities to include military, political, and disinformation efforts.

Concurrently, Russia has been actively expanding its diplomatic and economic ties with African nations, as evidenced by the Russia–Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in July 2023. This engagement is part of Moscow's strategy to portray herself as an alternative to Western influence, offering military support and economic investments. Additionally, the "forum of supporters of the fight against contemporary practices of neocolonialism" organized by Putin's United Russia party reflects Russia's intent to reassert its influence in Africa and challenge Western dominance.

The Sahel region's instability, exacerbated since long by political and economic crises and exploited by terrorist organizations, has become a focal point for influence struggles. Moscow's efforts to foster a more multipolar world order find resonance in Africa, a continent historically wary of Western

influence and interventions. This sentiment has accelerated with recent military coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, leading to a defence alliance supported by Moscow, the “Alliance des États du Sahel (AES)”, marking a significant shift in geopolitical alliances in the region.

### ***Why are swing countries important?***

The EU faces new and significant challenges in North Africa, a region historically aligned with the West but now increasingly targeted by Russia. Moscow’s offers of military support and economic partnerships to these “swing countries” threaten the EU’s influence, security and migration management. The potential shift towards Russia could create a security vacuum, enable the establishment of Russian military bases, and destabilize the Mediterranean region. Additionally, such a realignment could affect the EU’s energy security by disrupting North African energy supplies, while complicating migration control, heightening political sensitivities within the union. This situation underscores the importance of the EU paying closer attention to its southern flank to protect its interests and maintain regional stability.

While the EU’s commitment to Ukraine showcases its dedication to European principles and security, it is essential not to overlook the broader geopolitical landscape. Africa, especially North Africa and its strategic depth in the Sahel, is strategically vital and necessitates the EU’s and NATO’s attention and engagement. Although the Atlantic Alliance still faces historical bias among the population in many Arab countries, its role can be essential in backing a more robust EU Mediterranean policy.

Balancing commitments in the east with a proactive approach in the south is essential for building stronger ties with African nations to mitigate Russia’s expanding influence, a goal shared by NATO. This strategy demands a mix of diplomatic, economic, and security efforts, underscoring the continent’s significance to Europe’s future. Neglect could lead to major geopolitical and security repercussions for the EU, emphasizing the need for a well-rounded foreign policy that tackles both immediate and extended challenges.

In conclusion, the EU’s engagement with its southern neighbours, particularly “swing countries”, must transcend mere financial support to authoritarian regimes, often in exchange of unsuccessful migration arrangements. Brussels might discover with the cases of Tunisia or Egypt, for instance, that the Realpolitik of empowering authoritarian leaders might increasingly prove ineffective to grant security and prosperity to their populations.

These cases, together with others, highlights the urgent need for rewrite now and not in 2025 the Strategic Compass, signalling a shift in strategy. Such support, in addition to being contrary to basic European values, more often than not fails to ensure economic prosperity, social equity and democratic reforms, thus undermining the EU's broader objectives in the region, especially against Russian authoritarian infiltrations.

Moreover, it is imperative for EU member states, such as France and Italy, to adopt a unified approach towards North Africa, including Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia. The current practice of pursuing divergent national interests is highly counterproductive, undermining collective European efforts to counter Russian influence and stabilize the region. A cohesive EU strategy, combining economic support, political engagement and social security measures, is crucial in countering the expanding a Russian militaristic.

In this effort the EU is not alone because right now NATO, after more than a decade of relative neglect, is engaged in a reflection on its southern flank, that could be published soon. Evidently NATO wants to care more about its old and possibly also new partners in the Gulf, by enhancing first of all the political dimension of the dialogue and then practical, tailored collaboration menus with each country. An ad hoc collaboration with the EU, structured by the well-established Berlin+ mechanism, is possible if political interest will converge on a specific undertaking. The fact that memberships are largely overlapping should not allow a false sense of easiness in decision-making: ambassadors in the EU represent different interests than their colleagues in NATO.

By recalibrating their focus between the East and the southern flank, particularly considering “swing countries” pivotal in the geopolitical balance, the EU can bolster border security, advance democratic values and firmly counteract a key strategic adversary. Europe's security and prosperity are intrinsically linked to its ability to operate in a global and coherent manner, recognizing the interconnectedness of its challenges and leveraging opportunities for mutual reinforcement with its neighbours and partners.

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Ghazi Ben Ahmed is the Founder and President of the Mediterranean Development Initiative, a Tunisia based independent Think Tank born in 2013. He also set up the first Office of the US German Marshall Fund in Tunisia and led the US Initiative “MENA Partnership for Democracy and Development”. He is also the founder and was the Secretary General of the Club de Tunis, as well as the national coordinator for the US led Initiative LEND – Leaders Engaged in New Democracies. Previously he was the Lead Trade Expert in the African Development Bank (AfDB) in charge of the Bank response to the financial crisis in coordination with the G20, the WTO and the World Bank. Previously he was Senior Advisor at the UNCTAD, in the Africa and LDC Division. He has also worked for almost 10 years in the European Commission in Brussels, in several Directorates-Generals.

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