
**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 1

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
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Mediterranean Policy*****Chunghung Cho******Abstract**

This paper revolves around how Southern Mediterranean Countries (SMCs)—Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt—are managing their foreign policies in light of the Ukraine conflict. It also encompasses EU's approach and strategic considerations in the Southern Mediterranean region. As a special focus on the European southern neighborhood, EU maintains specific foreign policy goals with various countries within the region. Building on the points discussed above, this article sets out to accomplish the following objectives: the initial section aims to define and clarify the concept of hedging and bandwagoning strategy; the second part explores into the practical application of hedging as a framework for analyzing the policy positions taken by SMCs in the context of the Ukraine conflict, despite the relatively limited attention it receives; the third part explores how the EU engages in the Mediterranean

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region and also examines the multifaceted policies that the EU employs in its interactions with SMCs; lastly, the conclusion assesses the effectiveness of the hedging strategy adopted by SMCs and evaluates the resources and strengths available at the EU levels to bolster this strategy.

Keywords: Hedging, Bandwagoning, Southern Mediterranean Countries, EU's Mediterranean Policy, Russia-Ukraine War

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 3

I. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict represents a turning point in the global political order, with its outcomes and impact on international politics still uncertain. However, the effects on neighboring regions are already significant. The Southern Mediterranean countries (SMCs)—Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt—are in a unique position, having long navigated between the Western powers of the U.S. and Europe and Russia, maintaining close cooperation with both. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has increased pressure from these major powers, demanding that Mediterranean countries more clearly define their stance in the regional and international system.

Understanding the foreign policy orientations of SMCs, particularly within regions experiencing great power competition, is crucial. Although often overshadowed by the actions of major powers, these SMCs collectively wield significant influence, and their strategic choices can substantially impact regional stability, economic flows, and the broader geopolitical landscape.

Taking North Africa and the Middle East as an example: this region is rich in vital natural resources. North Africa and the Middle East are key suppliers of global oil and natural gas, granting significant strategic importance to SMCs that control or

serve as transit hubs for these resources. Their foreign policies, especially concerning resource management and trade relations, directly influence global economic stability and the interests of larger nations.

Furthermore, North Africa and the Middle East are situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, serving as critical strategic corridors exemplified by the Suez Canal and vital straits. The region's interests are closely intertwined with powerful external actors, including the United States, Russia, major European nations, and the rising influence of China. SMCs are often located at the nexus of these great power influences, and their foreign policy decisions regarding alliances, security partnerships, and regional conflicts can significantly shape regional security dynamics and the potential for conflict or cooperation.

Beyond resources and geopolitics, North Africa and the Middle East are important centers for trade and investment, connecting Eastern and Western economies. Regional constructs, such as the Arab League, reinforce regional economic integration. Therefore, studying the foreign policies of strategically important SMCs – given their control over key resources, pivotal geopolitical locations, and growing geoeconomic influence – allows for a more comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics and the challenges and opportunities presented by a multipolar world.

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 5

During the Russia-Ukraine war, the responses of SMCs can be understood through the concepts of “hedging” and “bandwagoning.” Hedging refers to actions taken by these countries to minimize the potential risks posed by the war. This might include maintaining neutrality, intensifying diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the conflict, or strengthening domestic security. Bandwagoning, on the other hand, suggests that these countries may choose to support or oppose one side based on the international situation in order to protect their own interests.¹

As neighbors on the southern border of the European Union, the EU has established a special relationship with some SMCs. These bilateral relations are not just about maintaining good neighborly relations but are also characterized by mutual interdependence. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought profound changes to this region, making the situation increasingly complex and fragile. Additionally, new actors and challenges are emerging, such as migration, security threats, and the evolution of stable democracies, all of which deeply affect the Mediterranean region and the EU. Regardless, the situation in Ukraine serves as a reminder to the EU of the urgent need to pay attention to potential conflicts on Europe's borders and to seek diplomatic solutions while there is still time. From this perspective, Europe

¹ Máté Szalai. “Between Hedging and Bandwagoning - Interpreting the Reactions of Middle Eastern and North African States to the Russian-Ukrainian,” *IEMed Policy Brief*, no. 123 (2023): 1-2.

can no longer afford to ignore the threat of conflict among its southern neighbors.

The topic revolves around how SMCs are managing their foreign policies in light of the Ukraine conflict. It also encompasses EU's approach and strategic considerations in the Southern Mediterranean region. As a special focus on the European southern neighborhood, EU maintains specific foreign policy goals with various countries within the region. Building on the points discussed above, this article sets out to accomplish the following objectives: the initial section aims to define and clarify the concept of hedging and bandwagoning strategy; the second part explores into the practical application of hedging as a framework for analyzing the policy positions taken by SMCs in the context of the Ukraine conflict, despite the relatively limited attention it receives; the third part explores how the EU engages in the Mediterranean region and also examines the multifaceted policies that the EU employs in its interactions with SMCs; lastly, the conclusion assesses the effectiveness of the hedging strategy adopted by SMCs and evaluates the resources and strengths available at the EU levels to bolster this strategy.

II. Security approach

Classical theories posit that nations employ a range of strategies to pursue and safeguard their national interests and

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 7

achieve foreign policy objectives. These strategies can encompass conflicting approaches, cooperative efforts, and the use of both hard and soft balancing. Still, some countries opt for a neutral stance, while others align themselves with major powers, a phenomenon often referred to as bandwagoning. This alignment may include seeking alliances or dependencies.²

While the dichotomy of balancing and bandwagoning may oversimplify matters, in recent discussions about regional assertiveness, it has become hard to avoid employing the term “hedging” when evaluating contemporary security issues. the term “hedging” is widely employed to delineate the various patterns of interaction among regional states.³

Hedging encompasses a two-pronged approach involving both balancing and bandwagoning strategies. It has a dual purpose: engaging with a target country and simultaneously balancing against potential threats. The engagement aspect primarily focuses on economic interactions, with the aim of improving bilateral relations, gaining economic benefits, and even working to positively influence the political system and values of the target country through regular interactions. This approach ultimately

² Mohammad Salman, Moritz Pieper and Gustaaf Geeraerts. “Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition.” *Asian Politics & Policy* 7, Issue 4 (2015): 578; İsmail Numan Telci and Mehmet Rakipoğlu, Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States: The Case of Kuwait, *All Azimuth* 10, no. 2 (2021): 215.

³ Szalai, “Between Hedging and Bandwagoning.”

aims to reduce the perceived threat. On the other hand, the balancing aspect is predominantly related to security concerns. It involves a comprehensive strategy that encompasses both internal measures to strengthen national capabilities and external actions like forming alliances to ensure security guarantees.⁴

Kuik's shares a similar view as well. Hedging is a comprehensive policy approach that incorporates elements of both bandwagoning and balancing. Its primary objective is to foster increased political and economic collaboration among nations, with the aim of influencing the preferences and actions of leaders towards a more peaceful direction. Furthermore, hedging can be executed along with soft balancing, wherein a country simultaneously pursues two sets of policies that counterbalance each other, aiming at maximizing returns and contingently managing risks.⁵

This concept of hedging encompasses diplomatic, security, and economic elements. It refers to the actions taken by countries

⁴ Y.-S. Wu. "The choices of small and medium-sized countries between two superpowers: A theoretical perspective," in Y.-S. Wu & S.-Y. Yang, eds., *Benefiting from both sides or stuck in a dilemma? The choices of small and medium-sized countries between two powers*. Keygo Innovative International (2019): 6.

⁵ Cheng- Chwee Kuik. "Getting hedging right: a small- state perspective," *China International Strategy Review* 3, (November 2021): 300-315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>; Cheng-Chwee Kuik & Chen-Dong Tso. "Hedging in Non-Traditional Security: The Case of Vietnam's Disaster Response Cooperation." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 15, Issue 4 (Winter 2022): 422–442. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac017>.

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 9

to mitigate risks in uncertain situations by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to counterbalance each other. When a country perceives a rising power as an imminent security threat, it seeks to achieve strategic balance against this rising power. This means that despite potential political or security concerns between the two countries, the state still attempts to maximize benefits from the rising power by establishing direct trade and investment links.⁶

The concept of hedging strategy lies at the intersection of conflict and cooperation mechanisms, as well as between traditional balancing and bandwagoning tactics. This strategy allows a nation to adopt a defensive posture by forming alliances with potentially threatening countries or an offensive stance by aligning with nations that compete with those potential threats. Consequently, hedging strategy stands out as a pivotal preventive measure employed by countries to safeguard their interests and national security against looming potential threats.⁷ In this regard, the hedging strategy represents the third option among the

⁶ Lluç López i Vidal and Àngels Pelegrín Solé. "Hedging Against China: Japanese Strategy towards a Rising Power," *Asian Security* 14, no. 2 (2018): 197-198.

⁷ Ali Hussien Hameed and Hamza Raheem AL. Mufarge, "Contemporary Global Security Strategies and the Manifestations of Major Powers: Hedging Strategy as A Model," *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 9 (2022): 4341-4342.

spectrum of national security strategies embraced by both second-tier states and great powers.⁸

This kind of hedging strategy is not a novel concept in the realm of foreign policy. Throughout history, numerous instances have demonstrated that countries of varying sizes have employed this strategy to advance their own policies and safeguard their national security.

In situations where there is uncertainty regarding the future actions, intentions, or foreign policy stance of a powerful actor, second-tier states choose to adopt a strategic approach to mitigate potential risks stemming from the powerful actor's foreign policies. In practice, this involves pursuing policies that align with their own national interests, encompassing economic, regional, security, political, domestic, or other considerations, all while avoiding open confrontation with the regional power. This strategy of hedging enables states to refrain from provoking or directly challenging the dominant country while still allowing them to pursue policies that may not align with the dominant country's preferences or interests.⁹

⁸ Numan Telci and Rakipoğlu, "Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States," 216.

⁹ Salman, Pieper and Geeraerts, "Hedging in the Middle East and China-U.S. Competition," 577; Sofie Hamdi and Mohammad Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States." *Asian Politics & Policy* 12, no. 4 (May 2020): 130, <http://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12528>.

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 11

It is particularly appealing to nations confronting uncertainty resulting from structural shifts from unipolarity to a more de-concentration of power in the international system. In this context, hedging emerges as an attractive alternative to other strategies like balancing or bandwagoning, especially for nations with limited capabilities.¹⁰

III. The stance of SMCs in the Russia-Ukraine conflict

The ongoing crisis has given rise to a global divide reminiscent of the Cold War era, effectively ensnaring smaller and less affluent countries in a geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the United States/Europe. As the Ukraine crisis progresses into its third year, certain trends have become more discernible compared to two year ago, including the emergence of diplomatic alliances among SMCs.¹¹

In essence, the responses of SMCs during the Russia-Ukraine war are likely to vary. Within this context, various SMCs have adopted different approaches: Some SMCs have opted for a hedging strategy, driven by their desire to avoid potential regional conflicts. They choose to remain neutral in an

¹⁰ Hamdi and Salman, "The Hedging Strategy of Small Arab Gulf States."

¹¹ Youssef Cherif. "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean – European Relations." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2023*, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/ukraine-and-the-changing-face-of-the-south-ern-mediterranean-european-relations/>

effort to safeguard their economic, political, and security interests. Certain countries may take on the role of mediators on the international stage, working to de-escalate tensions in the conflict; conversely, there are those SMCs that opt for bandwagoning, aligning themselves with either Russia, Ukraine, or other relevant states based on their preexisting relationships. This alignment could serve to enhance their international standing or advance their individual interests, which might encompass providing political support, economic aid, or engaging in military cooperation.¹²

Two specific votes have been chosen as illustrations, UN General Assembly resolutions ES-11/1 and ES-11/2, concerning to the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The voting patterns of SMCs on the Ukraine crisis during the UN General Assembly session highlighted a notable division. Resolution ES-11/1 passed in early March 2022, which called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and cancel its recognition of two separatist entities in Ukraine. Similarly, Resolution ES-11/2 adopted during the same month, reiterating the call for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and emphasizing the demand for Russia to take action. Algeria consistently advocated for peace rather than aligning against Russia and often abstained from or voted against related motions. Morocco showed reluctance and was generally hesitant to participate in the discussions and did not

¹² Szalai, "Between Hedging and Bandwagoning."

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 13

even attend the session. Egypt, with occasional support from Tunisia and Libya to a lesser extent, occasionally abstained from voting. However, in most cases, these countries did not lend unconditional support to Ukraine or the European Union's proposals.¹³ The nuanced positions of these SMCs in their voting reflected their complex geopolitical considerations and varying stances on the Ukraine crisis. Regarding the condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the findings reveal a range of strategies adopted by different SMCs (see table 1).¹⁴

A. Russia-leaning strategy/ bandwagoning

Egypt can be seen as pursuing Russia-leaning strategy. It refrained from supporting either side in the conflict and did not alter its relationship with Russia. Since 2013, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi staged a coup and assumed power, leading Egypt to re-engage with Russian. In response to mounting Western criticism of his human rights record, Sisi has reverted to an old tactic of turning towards the East. Consequently, there has been reciprocal visits and the signing of numerous contracts and agreements. In 2015, Egypt and Russia jointly revealed an ambitious project for the construction of a nuclear power plant,

¹³ Cherif, "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean."

¹⁴ Szalai. "Between Hedging and Bandwagoning."; Youssef Cherif. "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean."

which officially commenced in July 2022, marking a significant step in solidifying the Russo-Egyptian alliance.¹⁵ A leak from U.S. intelligence officials revealed Egypt's intentions to supply rockets to Russia, sparking strong warnings from both the USA and the EU and forcing Egypt to reconsider.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the fact that Egypt contemplated supplying arms to Russia during such a tense period underscores the depth of the relationship between the two nations.

Algeria has demonstrated varying levels of support for Moscow. It abstained from voting positively in any of the UN votes and did not provide assistance to Ukraine. Furthermore, Algeria put itself in a strategically imperative position to maintain strong ties with Russia amidst escalating tensions with Morocco. In June 2022, Algeria formalized this commitment by signing a joint declaration with Russia, designating the two nations as strategic partners rather than mere allies. On the other hands, Algeria's substantial contribution to Europe's oil and gas supplies has the potential to not only compensate for any losses resulting from its pro-Russia stance but also to benefit from the

¹⁵ Khalil Al-Anani. "The Fallout of Sisi's Gambit with Russia." Arab Center Washington DC, April 11, 2023.

<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-fallout-of-sisis-gambit-with-russia/>.

¹⁶ Evan Hill et. al. "Egypt secretly planned to supply rockets to Russia, leaked U.S. document says," *Washington Post*, April 10, (2023).

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/10/egypt-weapons-russia/>.

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 15

considerable advantages that may arise due to European sanctions against Russia.¹⁷

B. Hedging

Countries like Tunisia, and potentially Morocco, have embraced a hedging strategy, sending ambiguous signals to major powers without a clear stance. Although they have publicly criticized of the Russian attack and the annexation of Ukrainian territories, they also maintain open policies towards Russian tourists and continue to import Russian oil. By voting in favor of the UN resolution condemning the Russian use of force in Ukraine Tunisia began by joining the Western camp.¹⁸ It's worth noting that Morocco initially adhered to a stance of hedging but subsequently extended military aid to Ukraine, becoming the first African nation to do so.¹⁹

¹⁷ Samuel Herize et al., Relevant strategic facts about the northwestern Mediterranean countries, November, 2022.

<https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/observatorio-del-magreb-nov.-2022>

¹⁸ Akram Belkaid. "Maghreb-Ukraine (2). Tunisia with its Hands Tied, Public Opinion Favourable to Russia," *Orientxxi*, May 24, 2022.

<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/maghreb-ukraine-2-tunisia-with-its-hands-tied-public-opinion-favourable-to,5635>

¹⁹ Basma El Atti. "Morocco remains silent amid alleged reports of weapons sent to Ukraine," *The New Arab*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/news/morocco-remains-silent-amid-reports-weapons-ukraine>

C. Western-leaning strategy

Libya's strategic alignment leans closer to Western positions. It has consistently voiced its condemnation of Russia in all UN General Assembly votes and has undertaken various actions in support of Ukraine or against Russia. For the Libyan leadership, aligning with the EU enables them to address the separatist eastern government and its Russian Wagner forces more effectively.²⁰

Table 1: Strategies adopted by different SMCs regarding the Russo-Ukraine war

²⁰ Giorgio Cafiero and Emily Milliken. "Russians unlikely to leave Libya, despite Ukraine war," Aljazeera, April 15, 2022.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/15/russians-unlikely-leave-libya-despite-ukraine-war>

Southern Mediterranean Countries’ Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU’s Mediterranean Policy17

| Strategy Type | Country | Key Actions & Alignments |
|--|---------|--|
| Russia-leaning strategy/ Bandwagoning | Egypt | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintains strong ties with Russia despite Western criticism.• Strengthened relations since 2013 coup by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.• Signed multiple agreements, including a nuclear power plant project (construction started in 2022).• Leaked U.S. intelligence suggested Egypt planned to supply rockets to Russia, though later reconsidered after Western pressure. |
| | Algeria | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abstained from all UN votes on Ukraine.• Maintains close ties with Russia, partly due to tensions with Morocco.• Signed a strategic partnership declaration with Russia in June 2022.• Continues supplying oil and gas to Europe, benefiting from sanctions on Russia. |
| Hedging | Tunisia | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Publicly criticized Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territories.• Voted for the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression.• Still maintains open policies for Russian tourists and continues importing Russian oil. |
| | Morocco | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initially hedged but later provided military aid to Ukraine, becoming the first African nation to do so.• Publicly condemned Russia but also allowed economic engagement with Russia. |
| Western-leaning strategy | Libya | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fully aligns with Western positions. |

Source: Made by the author

The reactions of SMCs can vary depending on their geopolitical interests, diplomatic relations, and domestic situations. These countries may seek to balance between hedging and bandwagoning to ensure their own best interests. These diverse strategies reflect the complex and nuanced positions that different nations adopt in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, influenced by regional interests, diplomatic relations, and geopolitical considerations. The uneven voting patterns in the United Nations General Assembly also highlight the importance of the multilateralism in play.

The lack of support for Ukraine and the support for Russia among both the general population and elites in the Southern Mediterranean region can be attributed to several key factors, as outlined by Cherif:²¹

First, many countries in the Southern Mediterranean region have a strong anti-imperialist sentiment. This sentiment can be traced back to historical struggles against colonialism and foreign intervention. As a result, there may be a predisposition to view Russia's actions in Ukraine through a lens of anti-imperialism. Algeria, a nation with a strong history of resistance against French colonialism, exemplifies this. This historical experience has cultivated a deep-seated suspicion of Western powers and their interventions abroad. When faced with the Russia-Ukraine conflict, some Algerians view Russia's actions, however controversial, as a countermeasure against perceived Western hegemony, even if they don't necessarily endorse the invasion itself. This sentiment is reflected in Algeria's abstentions on UN resolutions condemning Russia and its avoidance of unilaterally accusatory language. They emphasize the importance of respecting national sovereignty while also criticizing NATO expansion as a contributing factor to the conflict. This stance allows them to resonate with a segment of their population holding anti-imperialist views without fully alienating Russia, a significant arms supplier.

²¹ Cherif, "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean."

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 19

Secondly, Russia has effectively conducted disinformation and misinformation campaigns in this part of the world. These tactics can easily find receptive audiences among those who hold anti-imperialist views, contributing to a skewed perception of the conflict. The Egyptian government's cautious approach to criticizing Russia may be partly attributed to this. They tend to focus on the economic repercussions of the conflict rather than the political or moral dimensions. State-controlled media subtly echoes some Russian talking points or downplays the severity of Russia's actions. This approach is likely influenced by public opinion that has been exposed to pro-Russian disinformation, as well as the need to maintain vital economic ties with Russia.

Thirdly, some in the Southern Mediterranean region perceive a disparity in how the West approaches issues like Ukraine compared to their stance on human rights and democracy in the global south. This perceived double standard can lead to accusations of hypocrisy and affect attitudes toward the Ukraine crisis. A country like Tunisia, which underwent the Arab Spring and aspires to democratic governance, highlights this point. Many Tunisians may observe the intense Western focus on Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic aspirations while recalling the West's more muted response or even past support for authoritarian regimes in their own region.

Tunisia calls for a peaceful resolution in Ukraine while subtly pointing out the West's selective engagement with human rights issues, indicating an awareness of perceived double standards. This allows them to express concern about the conflict while also reflecting domestic views on Western foreign policy and maintaining a degree of neutrality.

Fourthly, governments in the global south may actively promote anti-Western or somewhat pro-Russian propaganda while maintaining strong economic and military ties with Russia. This dual approach can shape public opinion in favor of Russia, such as Egypt, subtly promote pro-Russian narratives in state media. This serves to outfit to certain domestic constituencies or signal a degree of strategic alignment without fully jeopardizing relations with the West, especially if significant economic links exist.

Fifthly, Ukrainians have done a lot to win over the Western public to their cause, but they have done little to engage with the Arab world. Ukraine's efforts to garner support in the Southern Mediterranean region may have been insufficient. This factor contributes to a lack of strong domestic resonance for supporting Ukraine, stemming partly from limited direct engagement and understanding of the Ukrainian perspective.

These factors collectively contribute to the complex attitudes and perceptions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the Southern Mediterranean region, highlighting the importance of

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 21

diplomatic efforts, information campaigns, and engagement to shape opinions and build international support. The lack of support from SMCs for suspending Russia from its seat on the Human Rights Council suggests that linking the Ukraine issue to the human rights domain is not appealing to governments in that region. On the other hand, when Russia's actions are perceived as threats to values like territorial integrity and the prohibition of aggression, most SMCs take a clear stance against it. The results indicate that the majority of SMCs, in the current situation, lean more towards prioritizing security and influence, rather than viewing 'great power competition' as a significant threat to their survival.²²

Regarding the statement that 'the Russia-Ukraine conflict is not considered great power competition,' indeed, this perspective might originate from a specific viewpoint. However, the roots and development of the Russia-Ukraine war are deeply implanted in the strategic competition between great powers, particularly the contest over the European security order and spheres of influence. Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO impinged upon Russia's core security interests, which Russia perceived as an encroachment on its strategic space by NATO, led by the US.

Although not a direct, full-scale war between major powers, the military, economic, and intelligence support provided by the

²² Szalai. "Between Hedging and Bandwagoning."

US and Europe to Ukraine, alongside Russia's military actions, largely transform this conflict into a contest of interests between different great power blocs, effectively making it a 'proxy war.' For SMCs, the implications and nature of 'great power competition' can differ significantly from those of the major powers directly involved.

IV. The EU Mediterranean initiatives

Given that the Russia-Ukraine conflict represents a significant threat to European and global security, it becomes imperative for the EU to comprehend the motivations of SMCs to formulate an effective strategy. In the practice terms of Mediterranean policy, the EU and Spain employed a series of initiatives in the early 1990s,²³ such as 5+5 Dialogue,²⁴ Madrid Peace Conference,²⁵ Barcelona Convention²⁶ and Barcelona

²³ For the details and process of the EU's Mediterranean policy, please see Foteini Asderaki. "The EU in Eastern Mediterranean: Multilateral and Bilateral Relations," in Aristotle Tziampiris and Foteini Asderaki (eds.), *The New Eastern Mediterranean Transformed: Emerging Issues and New Actors*, Switzerland: Springer (2021): 38-43.

²⁴ "5+5 Dialogue" comprises Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and Malta, on the European side, and the five Maghreb countries, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Tunisia. It was established in 1990 for enhanced cooperation between the two banks of the Mediterranean and consists of a series of ministerial meetings.

²⁵ The Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 was a significant international diplomatic event aimed at resolving the Middle East conflict between Israel and its neighboring countries through negotiations and diplomatic efforts, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conference led to a series of negotiations, including talks between the Palestine Liberation Organization

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 23

Process²⁷ to foster dialogue, build consensus, and promote stability in the Mediterranean.

Within the EU's comprehensive and multifaceted policy framework for the Mediterranean region, a significant turning point was marked by the Barcelona Process, which led to the establishment of the European Mediterranean Partnership (EMP). This initiative represented a noteworthy shift in the EU's approach to its Mediterranean neighbors. Subsequently, in 2008, the EMP underwent a transformation and evolved into the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).²⁸

(PLO) and Israel, as well as negotiations between Israel and its neighboring countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. While the conference itself did not result in final peace agreements, it marked a significant milestone in the Middle East peace process.

²⁶ The Barcelona Convention, formally known as the "Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment and the Coastal Region of the Mediterranean," is an international environmental agreement established in 1976. The main objective of this convention is to protect the environment of the Mediterranean region, with a specific focus on combating pollution in the marine environment and addressing pollution sources originating from the coast.

²⁷ The Barcelona Process officially known as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, launched in 1995. with the goal of establishing a framework for political, economic, and social cooperation between the EU and the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea.

²⁸ The UfM is an intergovernmental organization that promotes regional cooperation in the Mediterranean region, and it was launched in 2008 during the French presidency of the EU. The UfM includes all 27 European Union member states and 15 non-EU Mediterranean countries, creating a comprehensive framework for cooperation that spans both shores of the Mediterranean. The process aimed to enhance mutual understanding, stability, and prosperity in the Mediterranean region through various forms of

The Ukraine crisis has had a profound impact on SMCs, spanning from Egypt to Morocco. Commencing in 2010, the Southern Mediterranean region went through a tumultuous period characterized by political instability, as seen during the Arab Spring, security threats such as civil wars, and economic collapse. Furthermore, the region faced challenges related to illegal migration, drought, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2022, just as the region was beginning to recover from these manifold crises, Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered an unprecedented set of challenges. These included a severe food crisis, disruptions in energy supply, and surging immigration flows, all of which had profound social and political consequences.²⁹ The instability in

collaboration, e.g. The UfM focuses on a wide range of issues beyond traditional diplomacy and trade, including environmental sustainability, energy, transportation, water management, education, and social development; the priority Areas are organized around specific priority areas, such as economic development, environmental sustainability, energy, and regional cooperation. Working groups, projects, and initiatives are developed to address challenges in these areas; One of the distinguishing features of the UfM is its emphasis on concrete projects that have a tangible impact on the region's development. These projects are designed to enhance economic growth, infrastructure, and social well-being; The UfM promotes collaboration across different sectors to address interconnected challenges. For example, projects might involve multiple countries working together on issues like renewable energy, water management, or transportation networks; The UfM facilitates political dialogue and cooperation among its member states to address regional conflicts, security concerns, and other geopolitical issues; The UfM seeks to promote cultural understanding and intercultural dialogue, fostering connections among the diverse societies of the Mediterranean region; The UfM addresses migration issues by promoting dialogue and cooperation among member states to manage migration flows, protect migrants' rights, and support development initiatives that can address the root causes of migration.

²⁹ Cherif, "Ukraine and the Changing Face of the Southern Mediterranean."

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 25

the EU's southern neighbors has become a concern for Mediterranean regional security. This has prompted the EU to take a more active role in the region to effectively address common challenges.

A. Energy crisis:

In response to the energy crisis resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the EU has adopted an emergency plan aimed at reducing gas consumption by 15% compared to the average annual consumption from 2017 to 2021. This measure is taken in an effort to conserve fuel in anticipation of a winter with uncertain Russian gas supplies. Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia served as the primary gas supplier to the 27-member EU, accounting for 40% of its gas supply.

To reduce its energy dependency on Russia, the EU is increasingly shifting its focus towards the Mediterranean region. Approximately 65 percent of Western Europe's oil and gas consumption passes through Mediterranean routes, and this proportion is poised to grow further due to the proliferation of pipeline projects across the Mediterranean in recent years.³⁰ The

³⁰ Manfred Weissenbacher. "Renewable Energy in the Mediterranean Context: State of the Play and Future Perspectives." *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2012*: 235; Athanasios Dagoumas. "The European Perspective on the Energy Development in Eastern Mediterranean and South East Europe." in Aristotle

EU is exploring three primary alternatives to address its energy needs.

Turkey plays a pivotal role in this strategy as it already transports oil from various sources, including Iraq, Russia, the Caucasus, and the Caspian region. The Nabucco pipeline has also commenced oil shipments from Iraq and Azerbaijan (potentially Turkmenistan as well), bypassing Russian territory. In addition, there are plans to interconnect the gas pipelines between Turkey and Syria, integrating them with the Arab gas pipeline. This would enable Egypt to export gas to Western Europe, where gas currently relies heavily on liquefied natural gas (LNG), which demands more expensive infrastructure.

Algeria's role holds significant importance for the European Union in terms of energy supply, surpassing that of Egypt. Algeria boasts substantial natural gas reserves ranking third globally, trailing only the United States and China (with Argentina holding reserves comparable to Algeria's). Algeria has historically delivered natural gas to Europe through two routes: a western pipeline traversing Morocco to Spain and an eastern pipeline passing through Tunisia to Sicily.³¹ Additionally, a new

Tziampiris and Foteini Asderaki (eds.), *The New Eastern Mediterranean Transformed: Emerging Issues and New Actors*, Switzerland: Springer (2021): 160-161.

³¹ Sergio Matalucci. "Can Algeria contribute to the EU's energy security?" May 4, 2022.

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 27

submarine pipeline directly linking Algeria to Spain through the Mediterranean has recently become operational.

Libya possesses relatively modest natural gas reserves, with significant untapped potential, particularly in its promising offshore regions. Furthermore, a gas pipeline from Libya to Sicily has been inaugurated, although it faced temporary disruptions due to the turmoil in Libya. Enhancing gas connections with both Algeria and Libya align with the EU's articulated objective of fortifying its relations with Africa.

The aforementioned Mediterranean energy alternative routes have become a major substitute for Russian natural gas, highlighting the geographical advantage of Spain. Spain currently possesses one-third of LNG import capacity, a significant portion of which remains underutilized. Spain maintains two primary gas pipelines connecting it to Algeria, including the Medgaz pipeline completed in 2004, which regrettably ceased operations since November 2021, primarily driven by France's advocacy for safeguarding its nuclear industry. It is evident that Spain could significantly enhance Europe's gas security if efforts were made to bolster the connections between the Iberian Peninsula and the rest of Europe.³² Starting from June 2022, Spain has re-exported

<https://www.dw.com/en/can-algeria-contribute-to-the-eus-energy-security/a-61680466>.

³² Francis Ghilès. "War in Ukraine and the Gas Crisis Force a Rethink of EU Foreign Policy." *CIDOB notes internacionales* 268 (March 2022): 4.

20% of its imported LNG to other EU nations. It has potential to evolve into a gas hub for Europe, thus assisting in regional endeavors to reduce reliance on Russian gas.³³ This Iberian pipeline stands to benefit not only Spain and France but also Algeria, offering added incentives for the exploration and development of new gas reserves, including shale gas, where the country boasts the world's third-largest reserves.³⁴

One additional avenue through which the EU can bolster its energy security is by increasing its utilization of renewable energy sources. This approach carries the added advantage of curbing the emissions of climate-altering greenhouse gases that result from fossil fuel usage. To this end, the EU has made a commitment to meet its “20-20-20” targets, which encompass several goals: Reducing EU greenhouse gas emissions to at least 20% below 1990 levels; Ensuring that 20% of EU energy consumption is derived from renewable resources; Achieving a 20% reduction in primary energy use compared to projected levels, primarily through improvements in energy efficiency. These targets signify the EU's dedication to transitioning towards cleaner and more sustainable energy sources while simultaneously enhancing its

³³ Christina Thykjaer and Inti Landauro, “Spain has capacity to become gas hub in Europe, PM Sanchez says,” *Reuters*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/spain-has-capacity-become-gas-hub-europe-pm-sanchez-says-2022-07-27/>.

³⁴ Ghilès, “War in Ukraine and the Gas Crisis Force a Rethink of EU Foreign Policy.”

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 29

energy security.³⁵ The Mediterranean Solar Plan (MSP) stands as one of the six pivotal initiatives under the UfM. Directive 2009/28/EC outlines regulations for achieving renewable energy targets by 2020, permitting EU Member States to fulfill their national objectives by investing in renewable electricity infrastructure in “third countries,” provided that the generated electricity is utilized within an EU member state.³⁶ The concept of generating electricity from renewable sources in SMCs for consumption in European nations is indeed a viable and promising option. Consequently, the EU has expanded its renewable energy initiatives to encompass the southern Mediterranean region.

B. Migration and Border Control:

The Mediterranean region has played a crucial role as a major route for irregular migration into Europe. Currently, three main routes through which large-scale migration enters Europe via the Mediterranean. The eastern route passes through the Aegean Sea or Turkey's Dardanelles Strait to Greece, from where migrants make their way to Europe. The central route crosses the

³⁵ Weissenbacher. “Renewable Energy in the Mediterranean Context.”

³⁶ Directive 2009/28/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2009 on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources and amending and subsequently repealing Directives 2001/77/EC and 2003/30/EC (Text with EEA relevance) OJ L 140, 5.6.2009, p. 16–62

sea from Tunisia or Libya, heading north to Malta or Italy. The western route goes through Morocco and Algeria, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar to reach Spain or the Canary Islands, which are under Spanish jurisdiction. As the EU has removed internal border controls in the process of establishing the common market, external border control relies on cooperation from member states. In theory, as long as Greece, Italy, and Spain manage their borders properly, there should not be an uncontrolled influx of migrants within the EU.

The EU has consistently worked on developing a comprehensive approach to migration, addressing a wide range of issues from border management to asylum procedures and integration. It has implemented various measures to manage and control irregular migration, including strengthening coastal patrols and collaborating with EU agencies like Frontex.³⁷ The new “Pact on Migration and Asylum,” reached in December 2023, addresses the issue of large-scale migration.³⁸ However, there are

³⁷ Frontex is the EU’s border and coast guard agency responsible for coordinating border control activities among member states. It assists in patrolling and monitoring the EU’s external borders, including those in the Mediterranean. Frontex plays a role in managing irregular migration and enhancing search and rescue operations. The Joint sea operations by Frontex please see: Toteini Asderaki and Eleftheria Markozani. “The Securitization of Migration and 2015 Refugee Crisis: From Words to Actions.” In Aristotle Tziampiris and Foteini Asderaki (eds.), *The New Eastern Mediterranean Transformed: Emerging Issues and New Actors* (Switzerland: Springer, 2021), p. 191.

³⁸ “Commission welcomes the major progress achieved by Parliament and Council on the New Pact on Migration and Asylum,” European Commission,

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 31

significant differences among EU countries on how to handle the migration crisis. The main point of contention lies in the Dublin Regulation, which states “refugees can apply for asylum in the first country they enter.” Southern European countries, which are on the frontline of migration into Europe, feel overwhelmed by the heavy burden of migration. Northern European countries, on the other hand, criticize Southern European countries for not strengthening patrols along the Mediterranean borders, allowing migrants to enter northern countries, including Germany, Austria, and Sweden. Furthermore, there are disagreements among member states regarding the distribution of migration responsibilities. Frontline countries like Italy and Greece believe that all countries should establish migrant quotas and set up African asylum centers. However, Central and Eastern European countries, such as Austria and Hungary, are unwilling to take on this responsibility and have rejected the EU’s previous measures requiring member states to share the burden of migration. Under the revised “Pact on Migration and Asylum,” some migrants will be relocated to other EU countries to relieve the pressure on frontline Southern European nations. Countries that refuse to accept asylum seekers, such as Poland and Hungary, will need to pay fees to the countries that do accept migrants. At the same time, the EU will seek to expedite the processing of asylum applications, returning those deemed ineligible to their country of

origin or transit country, and extending the maximum detention period at border immigration centers from the current 12 weeks.

Although the EU has proposed establishing migrant identification centers to distinguish between economic migrants and asylum seekers—allowing those truly in need of asylum to be transferred to Europe and repatriating those seeking better economic opportunities—this plan depends on cooperation from the source countries. On the other hand, the EU is also developing a European Intervention Force to strengthen border control, which involves complexities related to member states' contributions to the EU's defense budget. Other proposed measures include establishing an EU Intelligence Academy to train intelligence personnel, appointing EU public prosecutors to handle terrorism and organized crime, and creating a "European Border Guard" to protect the EU's borders. Given the complexity of establishing an EU force, the current consensus within the EU is to first build a European Border Defense Force to assist Greece, Italy, and Spain in defending their borders, thereby creating a Mediterranean defense line to block the influx of migrants from the southern Mediterranean into Europe. This also involves the transfer of judicial authority from the three Southern European countries and the harmonization of judicial and border defense systems among member states.³⁹

³⁹ "Historic agreement reached today by the European Parliament and Council on the Pact on Migration and Asylum," European Commission, December 20,

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 33

C. Regional security and stability:

Security challenges in the Mediterranean region, including events like the institutional crisis in Tunisia, tensions between Algeria and Morocco, and the civil war in Libya have sparked concerns within the EU.

The “Arab Spring” marked a turning point, inspiring a movement for greater political openness and civic engagement in the Mediterranean region. This movement called for constitutional reforms in certain countries, including Morocco and Algeria. In the case of Tunisia, the revolutionary process paved the way for the establishment of a democratic and diverse political system. However, instability and armed conflicts continue to plague Libya.

A decade after the Arab Spring and the subsequent disappointment of an unsuccessful democratic transition, the Maghreb states are grappling with both internal and regional political issues.⁴⁰ These challenges have left the region, home to approximately 130 million inhabitants within the Arab Maghreb

2023,

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/historic-agreement-reached-today-european-parliament-and-council-pact-migration-and-asylum-2023-12-20_en.

⁴⁰ Pernille Rieker. “EU Performance as a Regional Security Actor: comparing ENP south to NATO’s MENA policy,” in Ingo Peters (ed.), *The European Union’s Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 134.

Union (AMU), in a state of stagnation. The ousting of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia did not lead to an enhancement in the quality of life for the populace. This economic stagnation largely elucidates President Keith Saied's successful efforts to reestablish a robust centralized state capable of meeting the people's aspirations. In essence, the lack of economic progress in North Africa has undermined democratic initiatives. Similar to many authoritarian regimes, nationalist factions and military elites have come to believe in their aptitude for addressing the emerging challenges.⁴¹

While the economic and political repercussions of the Arab revolutions continue to reverberate, another pressing concern is the surging food prices and the potential for social unrest due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Notably, the agricultural sector in North Africa is grappling with the impacts of climate change, including water scarcity and drought, amid a global food crisis fueled by the protracted Ukrainian conflict. The persistent drought in the region imperils agricultural production and heightens reliance on imports, all within a context marked by a broad uptick in international food prices. Algeria ranks as the world's third-largest importer of cereals, while Tunisia imports a significant 64% of its cereal needs, with common wheat constituting 85% of these imports. Clearly, over a decade

⁴¹ Luis Martinez. "Fragmentations in the Regional Mediterranean Integration: What Do the Tensions in the Maghreb Mean for Europe?" *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook* (2022): 111.

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 35

following the Arab Spring, food security issues have taken precedence over the question of democratic transition.⁴²

The Western Sahara conflict appears to stand as the primary political obstacle hindering regional integration. It illustrates the persistent inability of Algeria and Morocco to overcome deep-seated distrust and even enmity that dates back to the 1963 Sand War. The prospect of a conflict between the two North African nations has raised alarms in both Europe and Africa following Algeria's announcement in August 2021 that it was severing diplomatic ties with Morocco. Both countries had been engaged in a military buildup, seeking to persuade their respective populations of the superiority of their military capabilities. As of 2022, six decades following Algeria's independence, Morocco has transformed from merely a rival into a potential adversary in the eyes of Algeria's military leadership. While the conjecture of a direct conflict between these two nations has been raised, potentially serious havoc on European interests and security, minimal efforts have been exerted to bridge the gap of mistrust separating these North African neighbors. Regarding the Western Sahara issue, the EU has consistently supported the United

⁴² Hanna Arhirova and Andrew Wilks. "Russia suspends deal allowing Ukraine to export grain, destabilizing global food markets." *PBS Newshour*, July 17, 2023.

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-suspends-deal-allowing-ukraine-to-export-grain-destabilizing-global-food-markets>; Luis Martinez, "Fragmentations in the Regional Mediterranean Integration."

Nations in playing a pivotal role in seeking a resolution and maintaining its humanitarian commitments to the people of Western Sahara. The EU is also a major donor, providing significant aid to refugee camps in the region.⁴³

However, the Ukraine war temporarily put a halt to the military tensions between these two North African countries. During Spain's presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2023, it sought to promote a new balance in the relations between its two North African neighbors. Spain openly supported Morocco's Sahara autonomy plan while maintaining good relations with Algeria.⁴⁴

The EU ensure that its policy on Western Sahara is balanced and aligns with its commitments to SMCs, both in rhetoric and in practice. Moreover, the precedent set by the Morocco-Algeria conflict will shape the future of European Mediterranean policy. The EU must ensure that this policy framework becomes a meaningful tool for political practice, rather than merely symbolic diplomatic rhetoric.⁴⁵ By transforming the conflict into an

⁴³ Martinez, "Fragmentations in the Regional Mediterranean Integration."

⁴⁴ Elcano Royal Institute. "Ten principles for Spain's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2023." July 24, 2023. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/ten-principles-for-spains-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-european-union-2023/>.

⁴⁵ Kristina Kausch. "Spain's Diminished Policy in the Mediterranean," *Friede Policy Brief*, 26 (2010): 1-5.

Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy 37

opportunity for integration with the Southern Mediterranean region, a win-win model could be established.

V. Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict and the EU's approach to the Southern Mediterranean illuminate shifting global power dynamics, particularly in the behavior of SMCs. These states, prioritizing their security and influence without viewing regional rivalries as existential, have largely adopted hedging strategies. This involves balancing against potential threats while engaging major powers to secure maximum benefits, a logic applicable across various regions.

Facing considerable economic, security, and climate challenges, SMCs theoretically need EU support. However, the growing influence of anti-Western elites, who blame the West for regional problems and advocate for diversified partnerships, presents a significant counterforce. These voices view the Ukraine conflict as a chance to decrease reliance on Western powers. The years following the Russo-Ukraine war demonstrate SMCs navigating their positions within local pressures and global geopolitical realignments.

The Ukraine crisis has exacerbated the divide between the West and Russia, simultaneously empowering Southern

Mediterranean SMCs in their dealings with Russia. While initial EU concerns arose from limited regional support, pragmatic imperatives concerning energy, migration, and regional stability led to a more accommodating approach. This has allowed SMCs to assert greater autonomy, potentially expanding their influence while diminishing Western sway. The crisis has underscored a perceived weakening of European leadership, encouraging the Southern Mediterranean to exercise newfound independence in its decision-making.

Recognizing the fluidity of its Mediterranean policies, influenced by evolving geopolitical, economic, and regional landscapes, the EU is likely to diversify its partnerships beyond its traditional allies. This anticipated increase in cooperation with various stakeholders suggests a potential redefinition of the EU's Mediterranean policy and an effort to rebuild relations with SMCs, with the aim of ultimately restoring and potentially enhancing European influence.

**Southern Mediterranean Countries' Approach to the
Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Testing the EU's Mediterranean Policy** 39

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