



Europe's Western Mediterranean security: Between strategic neglect and untapped opportunity

European View
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journals.sagepub.com/home/euv**Alessia Chiriatti¹****Abstract**

In recent years Europe's security environment has increasingly been shaped by overlapping crises which academics, experts and policymakers have tried to interpret. While the EU's post-2022 security agenda has understandably focused on deterrence and the high-intensity conflict in the Eastern and Baltic neighbourhood, this shift has contributed to the marginalisation of the southern flank. This article examines the Western Mediterranean as a shared security space whose relevance has been underestimated despite the growing structural vulnerabilities and the variable threats that traverse it. Drawing on selected case studies from North Africa, it analyses how governance fragility, regional conflict spillovers, and the evolving engagement of regional and global actors are generating cumulative challenges for European security. The article also explores the implications of these dynamics for the EU–NATO relationship, highlighting persistent gaps between converging interests and fragmented policy responses. Taking all of these elements into account, it suggests that the Western Mediterranean remains a strategic priority for Europe and represents a test case for the EU's ability to move beyond reactive engagement towards a more coherent and forward-looking security approach.

Keywords

Western Mediterranean, European security, EU neighbourhood, Hybrid threats, North Africa, Maritime security, Energy security, Strategic autonomy

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Introduction: the Western Mediterranean in Europe's age of strategic overstretch

Over the past two decades, Europe's security environment has been shaped by mutually interdependent crises originating mostly from its eastern and southern flanks. These have progressively stimulated political and institutional debates, generating patterns of strategic overstretch widely discussed in the EU security and foreign policy literature (Desmaele 2025; Baldaro and Costantini 2021). Clear examples can be seen not only in the increasing number of asymmetric conflicts that have flared up in the Middle East and in the North and Sahelian Africa area, but also more generally in the crisis of the liberal rules-based order that has shaped the framework for diplomatic relations and institutions at the international level since the beginning of the Cold War (Lehne 2024).

The EU's ability to define clear defence and security priorities has consequently been affected. After 2022 this dynamic became more pronounced. Despite the existing normative base of the CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy), which is articulated in the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, the EU found itself unprepared to reply quickly and purposefully to the Russian aggression in Ukraine with a coordinated defence. The Strategic Compass was approved in March 2022, only weeks after the return of high-intensity war to the European continent. Marking an inescapable turning point, this initiative represents a first tentative step towards the EU taking on a new role on the global scene. It consolidates a security agenda centred on deterrence and defence, together with a diplomatic effort channelled towards addressing immediate threats linked to interstate conflict and military escalation.

Differences are apparent among EU countries' approaches to these challenges. All the same, Europe's southern flank has generally received more limited and fragmented strategic attention, despite its acknowledged historical relevance for European stability. The opening words of the Strategic Compass, for example, clearly state that the EU's main concern is responding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Mediterranean Sea, on the other hand, is mentioned primarily in relation to the protracted insurgency of terrorist movements, human trafficking and organised crime (Council of the European Union 2022).

Still, on the southern shore of the Mediterranean several symptoms of both economic instability and the prolonged erosion of governance persist. These are reflected in the ongoing fragmentation of Libya and the indirect effects of Sahelian instability transmitted through southern Algeria. Such dynamics interact directly with Europe through maritime connectivity, energy interdependence and mobility routes, transforming local vulnerabilities into strategic concerns. This convergence of challenges also reflects the growing alignment between EU and NATO security interests along the southern flank.

However, coordination between the EU and NATO in the Western Mediterranean remains limited, largely due to the different priorities the two organisations attach to the region. This situation has been further shaped by the partial US disentanglement (even if not in terms of the magnitude of its military presence) in the area that has been taking

place since the Obama administration (Miller 2015). The EU and NATO have not translated their concerns into a comprehensive strategic vision for the Western Mediterranean as a security space. Southern partners have been integrated as functional gatekeepers of European order, particularly in the fields of migration management and security cooperation (Del Sarto 2023). Meanwhile the entire Middle East and North Africa region continues to be characterised by structural asymmetries and blurred boundaries between internal and external governance.

As a result, the Western Mediterranean has remained marginal to broader debates on European security, having long been framed as a manageable neighbourhood. This perception of relative stability has contributed to a persistent tendency to underinvest politically and strategically in the region. It has led to the privileging of short-term management tools over structural engagement and long-term risk prevention, and has reinforced the perception of the EU as a ‘normative power’ in the region (Del Sarto 2023).

In light of these considerations, it remains important to assess whether the Western Mediterranean and its bordering countries still feature among the geopolitical priorities of European states. Initiatives such as Italy’s Mattei Plan suggest that the region retains strategic relevance. Yet it is worth asking whether this perspective accurately reflects broader global strategic balances. There is a risk that an excessively regionalised reading of European security may underestimate the centrality of the Western Mediterranean, as resources, strategic competition and the core interests of major powers are increasingly oriented towards other theatres.

The Western Mediterranean as a shared security space

Assessing the strategic relevance of the Western Mediterranean requires first clarifying how the region itself should be understood. Since the Arab uprisings, the region has remained an area of sustained engagement for the EU. For Europe, proximity has translated into continued involvement, especially in terms of managing and regulating the fluxes of migration and exploiting energy resources. However, this involvement has lacked a stable or shared strategic framework capable of accommodating the region’s internal diversity.

Since 2011 the countries along the Southern Mediterranean have followed very different paths. Libya has remained characterised by prolonged fragmentation and recurrent intra-elite conflict. An authoritarian model centred on repression and regime stability has been consolidated in Egypt. And while Tunisia was initially framed as a political laboratory, it has experienced a reversal marked by institutional erosion and executive centralisation. These differences caution against treating the Western Mediterranean as a politically homogeneous space to which a single model of instability can be applied (Erdogan 2017).

At the same time, an exclusively country-based reading risks obscuring the dynamics that operate across borders. Despite divergent domestic paths, countries across the Western Mediterranean are exposed to a set of shared structural pressures: weakened governance capacity, persistent socio-economic fragilities, exposure to regional conflict

spillovers and increasing external penetration. The absence of sustained international leadership and of a shared strategic vision has contributed to the emergence of power vacuums. These, in turn, have opened the way for the selective engagement of external actors, including China, Russia, Türkiye and the Gulf states (Wilén 2025). The involvement of these countries has been further reshaping the regional environment.

Taken together, these elements suggest that the Western Mediterranean cannot be understood either as a unified political bloc or as a mere aggregation of national cases. It is more accurately approached as a shared security space in which differentiated national experiences intersect with transnational processes that directly affect European security. This duality—divergence at the domestic level and convergence at the structural level—provides the necessary lens through which to analyse the sources of instability and strategic vulnerabilities.

Sources of instability and strategic vulnerabilities

Despite the international community's focus on other security and development challenges, the Western Mediterranean is currently experiencing a pivotal moment in its political and security trajectory. This development has been shaped by the conjunction of long-standing regional rivalries and more recent structural pressures that have intensified existing fault lines. While the Mediterranean has often been portrayed as a space of shared civilisation, political realities increasingly reveal a fragmented arena marked by persistent tensions and competing strategic agendas.

Since the Arab uprising and then emphasised by the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, tensions have increased across the region as unresolved disputes, economic vulnerabilities and governance challenges have interacted with broader global shocks. At the same time, the very notion of the Mediterranean has gradually faded from political vocabularies, reflecting the declining analytical and strategic attention devoted to the region. This accumulation of pressures has transformed the Western Mediterranean into a critical node of instability. In this way it has become clear that the Western Mediterranean functions less as a buffer zone and more as a bridge between African and European security dynamics, exposing the region to cumulative and interconnected risks that can no longer be contained within national or subregional boundaries (Bicchi 2018).

Specifically, the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco continues to be a central source of tension. Rooted in deep mutual distrust and in these countries' competition for regional influence in North-West Africa and the Sahel, this rivalry has long constrained cooperation and reinforced a zero-sum logic in diplomatic and security decision-making (Amirah-Fernández 2023). The Western Sahara dispute remains the most visible manifestation of this antagonism. But energy cooperation, border management and regional connectivity have all been affected by this competitive dynamic, in which the perceived weakness of the neighbour is consistently interpreted as a strategic gain. This zero-sum logic has contributed to regional disintegration and reduced the capacity of Maghrebi states to respond collectively to shared challenges.

These geopolitical tensions intersect with deep-seated socio-economic vulnerabilities. Despite improvements in infrastructure, education and access to basic services over the past two decades, the Maghreb continues to face persistent inequalities and weak job creation. Youth unemployment remains particularly acute, especially among educated young people and women, while neglected border and rural areas experience extreme poverty and limited state presence. Food and energy shocks have exposed structural vulnerabilities across several economies in the Middle East and North Africa. And long-standing dependence on hydrocarbon rents—often associated with ‘resource curse’ dynamics—has shaped governance structures, limited economic diversification and constrained the capacity to attract productive investments.

These problems have been exacerbated by Russia’s war in Ukraine. The war has had a direct effect on ‘hunger hotspots’, which are concentrated primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, extend into North Africa. Climate-induced droughts, rising food prices and widening rural–urban disparities have further exposed structural weaknesses. This has fuelled protests and eroded trust in state institutions, as illustrated most clearly in Tunisia and, episodically, in Morocco.

At the same time, demographic dynamics add both opportunity and risk. Declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy have created a temporary demographic window in which the working-age population significantly outnumbers dependents. Yet this potential demographic dividend remains largely under-used. Regional growth has remained modest, NEET (not in education, employment or training) rates among youth hover around 20%–30% across the Maghreb and the exclusion of young women is particularly severe. As this demographic window begins to close over the coming decades, failure to translate demographic change into inclusive and job-rich growth will risk deepening social frustration and political volatility (UN Development Programme 2025).

Security vulnerabilities further compound these pressures. The gradual loss of territorial control by jihadist organisations in the Middle East has contributed to a geographical reconfiguration of violent extremism, shifting the centre of gravity of global jihad towards Africa. This process has involved not only the Islamic State and its affiliates, but also organisations linked to al-Qaeda, which have progressively entrenched themselves across Sahelian and Maghrebi spaces. One finds great diversity among the countries in the region, with some of them recording improvements. All the same, the Maghreb and the Sahel have become increasingly interconnected theatres, characterised by porous borders, weak state control and dense criminal networks facilitating the circulation of fighters, arms and illicit goods (Institute for Economics & Peace 2025).

The Euro-Atlantic dimension: why it still matters

Before the Arab uprisings, Euro-Atlantic actors responded to recurring back-and-forth shifts in Mediterranean stability through incremental initiatives, with NATO and the EU pursuing largely parallel but distinct frameworks of engagement. Importantly, NATO’s understanding of the ‘southern flank’ did not fully overlap with the EU’s Mediterranean

policy. While the Alliance approached the region primarily through a security lens centred on the stability of its southern periphery, the EU framed the Mediterranean as a broader space of neighbourhood cooperation, combining political dialogue, economic integration and development initiatives.

On the security side, NATO launched the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1994 and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in the early 2000s, initiatives aimed at building confidence through political consultations, military-to-military contacts, training activities and limited operational cooperation with partner countries. In parallel, the EU developed a broader regional framework through the 1995 Barcelona Process and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, within which Euro-Mediterranean foreign ministers supported a range of partnership-building measures. These included diplomatic seminars and cooperation in civil protection and disaster management, and also explored gradual engagement with Libya as an observer of the process.

Taken together, these initiatives reflected a post-Cold War strategic environment in which the southern flank was approached primarily through dialogue, transparency and technical cooperation with incumbent regimes. Furthermore, these plans were conceived in a context characterised by relatively low levels of geopolitical competition and by a clear separation between security, development and energy agendas.

The limits of this approach became increasingly evident after the Arab uprisings, when the divergence of political trajectories across North Africa and the growing spillover of instability from neighbouring regions challenged assumptions that the area would gradually become more stable. Yet institutional responses remained incremental. EU and NATO strategic documents gradually acknowledged the changing environment, expanding the geographic scope of Mediterranean security to include the Sahel as an integral component of the southern flank rather than as a distant or secondary theatre. The growing European military and political engagement in the Sahel—despite its mixed results—confirmed that Mediterranean security could not be addressed in isolation from wider African security dynamics.

In November 2025, over 15 years after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, the EU launched the New Pact for the Mediterranean. This is a new strategy that seeks to address the persistent instability by articulating a broader political framework linking migration management, energy cooperation and development. However, the Pact has largely been placed on top of existing mechanisms. As a result, European engagement continues to be shaped by layered policy frameworks, each reflecting different strategic moments and priorities. Migration, energy and security remain addressed only on parallel tracks, limiting the EU's capacity to develop a genuinely integrated approach (Errichiello 2026).

This fragmentation has become increasingly problematic in a context characterised by the presence of multiple international actors that are pursuing agendas which diverge from, or openly challenge, Western priorities. China, Russia, Türkiye and several Gulf states have expanded their footprint across the Maghreb and the Sahel, adding a

competitive dimension that affects both regional balances and the sustainability of European and transatlantic missions. In this environment, the Mediterranean has evolved into a contested space in which influence, access and norms are actively negotiated rather than assumed.

Therefore, the Euro-Atlantic dimension still matters. This is not because the Mediterranean has emerged as the primary arena for global strategic competition. Rather, it is because the Mediterranean has become a testing ground for Europe's ability to adapt inherited security frameworks to an environment characterised by blurred boundaries, intersecting crises and selective external engagement. The Strategic Compass and NATO's Hague Summit Declaration from 2025 continue to acknowledge the Mediterranean through references to counter-terrorism, climate risks, disaster response and partner capacity-building. But these priorities remain largely operational and secondary, overshadowed by the perceived primacy of the Eastern threat and broader concerns about the erosion of the liberal international order.

At the same time, long-standing partnership frameworks with countries in North Africa and the Middle East, including the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, risk remaining stagnant. Such stagnation would reinforce the patterns of limited political engagement that have persisted since 2022 (Marrone 2025). The coexistence of these legacy instruments with more recent initiatives ultimately illustrates the layered—and still unresolved—nature of Euro-Atlantic engagement in the southern neighbourhood.

From strategic neglect to strategic engagements: policy implications

The possibility of enlarging the geographic sphere relevant to Mediterranean security—from coastal North Africa to the Sahelian hinterland—requires strategic rethinking on the part of the main organisations involved in European security and defence. This implies employing a more comprehensive and holistic interpretation of the threat environment, one capable of linking governance, development and security dynamics across regions.

First, reconceptualising the Mediterranean as a strategic priority entails significant policy reorientation. The current pattern consists of operational cooperation shaped by short-term objectives, together with initiatives taken bilaterally or by just one EU member state with specific North African and Sahelian countries. This approach has mitigated immediate pressures but failed to address enduring vulnerabilities. Strategic engagement requires integrating existing instruments within a coherent long-term framework. For the EU this means breaking sectoral silos. Instruments addressing energy interdependence, migration governance, economic resilience and maritime security must be aligned around shared strategic goals. Such integration would allow the EU to leverage its strengths in civilian and normative power to tackle structural drivers of instability.

Member states have a role in shaping this integration. This is especially true of those with direct Mediterranean exposure: Italy, France and Spain. Their strategic perspectives are informed by sustained engagement with regional partners and actors from local civil society. They could help anchor Mediterranean security within broader EU policy discourses. This would enhance the EU's capacity to translate national strategic readings into collective action.

Second, such a reorientation inevitably calls for stronger forms of inter-institutional cooperation. Effective responses depend on improved coordination between the EU and NATO, together with regional organisations such as the African Union. Strengthening regional security governance and developing new modalities for joint or complementary action are therefore necessary conditions for addressing the interconnected threats affecting the Euro-Mediterranean space.

Third, Euro-Atlantic cooperation requires clearer role delineation. NATO's focus on collective defence should complement, not overshadow, cooperative actions that the EU is better positioned to deliver. Shared strategic assessment and long-term planning could reduce redundancy and enhance resilience across the southern flank. Strategic engagement must avoid reinforcing transactional arrangements that prioritise short-term stability over long-term resilience. Cooperation with partners must be underpinned by mutual accountability and a commitment to structural reform, to transform the Mediterranean from a recurring source of reactive policy cycles into a space of sustained strategic engagement.

Conclusion

The Western Mediterranean occupies an ambiguous position in Europe's security landscape. It is widely recognised as relevant yet rarely treated as a strategic priority in its own right. This article has argued that this ambivalence is increasingly difficult to sustain. The cumulative nature of instability in the region, its proximity to areas of high conflict intensity and the dense interdependence linking Europe to North Africa challenge long-standing assumptions about manageability and containment. What emerges is not a theatre of acute crisis but a space where persistent vulnerabilities gradually translate into strategic exposure.

The Mediterranean is gradually shifting from a corridor of globalisation to a regionalised security space, where global dynamics are filtered, reshaped and contested primarily at the regional level. Rather than expanding outward, the Mediterranean is becoming denser, as interdependence, conflict spillovers and strategic competition increasingly converge within a geographically bounded maritime space.

This transformation remains largely under-conceptualised because acknowledging the Mediterranean as a regional sea would imply a redistribution of strategic priorities and responsibilities. Framing the Mediterranean as a regional security space would require moving beyond crisis management and functional cooperation, confronting Europe's own

role in shaping regional vulnerabilities, and accepting a more explicit leadership role in an area characterised by blurred boundaries between internal and external security.

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