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## SECURITY WITHOUT TRUST? THE NEW PACT FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE CRISIS OF EURO-MEDITERRANEAN GOVERNANCE

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### 1. Introduction

The Mediterranean has become one of the most complex strategic environment in the modern world because it has developed into a connection point between Europe, North Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East via a complex array of connected infrastructure regarding energy, sea transportation, food, communication systems and movement routes<sup>1</sup>.

Although the complexities of the region and its issues are generally represented as a single issue in terms of "migration pressure" to policymakers, the issues are reduced to migration, and therefore the deeper structural vulnerabilities of the area are misrepresented<sup>2</sup>. These include

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<sup>1</sup> L. NARBONE, A. SKOURI, *A Sea of Opportunities: The EU, China and the Mediterranean Connectivity*, Luiss Mediterranean Platform, Policy Paper, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> L. GABRIELLI, *Deconstructing Migration and Refugee ‘Crises’ in the Mediterranean. The Need for a Broader Temporal and Geographical View for a Policy Reorientation in Europe*, in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2017, available at <https://www.iemed.org/publication/perceptions-of-the-migration-and-refugee-situation-in-the-mediterranean/>.

climate stresses, unbalanced development, bad governance, maritime conflicts, fragmented regional institutions and the existence of international organized crime networks. When policymakers focus on solving the symptoms of the problem, they may solve those symptoms immediately<sup>3</sup>; however, they do nothing to mitigate or reduce the root cause of the problem.

The New Agenda for the Mediterranean (2021)<sup>4</sup> identified a number of the broader risks facing the region and outlined key areas for priority action in relation to governance, resilience, climate cooperation, mobility and economic transformation. However, the majority of the actions taken under this New Agenda have been focused on short-term goals and border-based solutions, resulting in a disconnection between what was said at the level of strategy and what is done at the level of operation.

This disconnect between the strategic language of the New Agenda, and the operational hierarchy of policy action is the central concern of this paper. This paper seeks to answer the question: Can the New Pact for the Mediterranean be a legitimate strategic compact for collective regional security, or will it continue to exist as a strategically fragile but politically acceptable framework for containment?

The author argues that a durable pact will require a co-security architecture: a model in which hard-security cooperation is situated within a structure of resilience, rights, institutional trust and cooperative regional governance.

The article examines recent developments in migration governance in the Euro-Mediterranean space, with particular emphasis on the New Pact for the Mediterranean as a framework reshaping relations between the European Union and African countries. Adopting an international relations/political science perspective, it analyses the notions of “co-security” and “trust” as fundamental pillars of the new architecture of cooperation and shows how they reconfigure the balance between controlling migration flows and sharing responsibilities. The article argues that these notions operate both as legitimising discourses and as governance tools, influencing policy design and the practical cooperation between the EU and Africa.

Conceptually, methodologically, the paper draws upon research conducted during the author's doctoral and post-doctoral work, covering research on the governance of the Euro-Mediterranean space, the UfM, security planning in the eastern Mediterranean and Africa-EU interregional cooperation. Given the conceptual nature of the paper, the research methodology used is based on the integration of the analysis of documents and institutional comparison. This approach enables a closer examination of the gap between declared objectives and actual implementation. Although not a quantitative impact assessment, the study identifies recurring implementation patterns across policy instruments: the concentration of coercive tools,

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<sup>3</sup> IPCC, *Cross-Chapter Paper 4: Mediterranean Region*, in H.-O. PÖRTNER et al. (eds.), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge, 2022, available at <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>.

<sup>4</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, *A New Agenda for the Mediterranean: The Council Approves Conclusions on a Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood*, Press Release, 19 April 2021, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/a-new-agenda-for-the-mediterranean-the-council-approves-conclusions-on-a-renewed-partnership-with-the-southern-neighbourhood/>.

fragmented resilience programming, weakly enforceable accountability mechanisms and persistent asymmetries in agenda ownership<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. *Evolution of Euro-Mediterranean Governance: From the Barcelona Process to the Pact for the Mediterranean*

Euro Mediterranean governance has developed over generations of partnerships leading up to the Pact for the Mediterranean. The Euro Mediterranean partnership was first identified by the 1995 Barcelona Process which set out a broad partnership based upon political dialogue, economic cooperation and cultural exchanges. However, the EU's ability to enforce these partnerships and the increasing fragmentation over time, limited their effectiveness. In an attempt to rejuvenate the UfM in 2008 and provide a more institutionalized and project-based approach to governance, the UfM did nothing to resolve previous overlapping governance structures.

### 2.1. *“Common Mediterranean Space”*

The 2021 New Agenda for the Mediterranean then reframed relations with the Southern Neighborhood<sup>6</sup> by defining a renewed partnership structured around priority areas and NDICI-Global Europe funding, but again largely through re-programming and clustering existing tools. Building on this trajectory, the 2025 Pact for the Mediterranean is presented as a qualitative step: a political, three-pillar framework (people; sustainable and integrated economies; security, preparedness and migration management) that explicitly aims to create a “Common Mediterranean Space” and to mobilise and align existing instruments under a single, co-owned strategic narrative<sup>7</sup>. Each pillar is accompanied by a toolbox of new and scaled-up initiatives ranging from education, skills and mobility schemes to green-energy investment platforms, digital-connectivity projects, disaster-preparedness actions and ‘whole-of-route’ migration-management measures

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<sup>5</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*, Joint Communication JOIN(2021) 2 final, 9 February 2021.

<sup>6</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Southern Neighborhood*, 2021, available at [https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/southern-neighbourhood\\_en](https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/southern-neighbourhood_en).

<sup>7</sup> K. SIDLO, *New Pact for the Mediterranean: The Future of Euro-Mediterranean Relations on the 30th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process*, in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2025, available at <https://www.iemed.org/publication/new-pact-for-the-mediterranean-the-futureof-euro-mediterranean-relations-on-the-30th-anniversary-of-the-barcelona-process/>.

## 2.2. "One Sea, One Pact, One Future"

In this sense, the European Union's Council endorsement of the Pact for the Mediterranean with the slogan "One Sea, One Pact, One Future"<sup>8</sup> was a significant moment of consensus building around a specific story line. By framing the initiative as a joint regional project, the final conclusions welcomed the Pact as the chief means of creating a deeper "common Mediterranean space" and called upon member states to quickly implement it in a coordinated way using a dedicated governance structure and monitoring mechanism. The three pillars of the Pact (people, economic sustainability and integration; and security, preparedness and migration) should be pursued in an integrated manner, the conclusions stated, by increasing political dialogue among member states and their neighbors, improving cooperation in peace, security and defense, and strengthening efforts related to climate, energy and the blue economy. However, the conclusions also emphasized the unity of purpose, and the need to mobilize existing mechanisms, which highlights the central contradiction within the Pact. While the Pact is intended to establish a more equitable, co-owned partnership, the fact that most of the tools it intends to utilize already exist, and are largely driven by the EU, leaves unresolved the question of whether it will result in the transition of Euro-Mediterranean relations from containment logic to co-security.

## 2.3. *Rethinking Security: From Containment to Co-Security under the New Pact*

The Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean and "Pact for the Mediterranean" are all examples of Euro-Mediterranean frameworks which have attempted to incorporate the hard security aspects that create cleavage into a larger framework of governance (connectivity, environment, energy, migration). For a co-security approach, the key will be how far the regimes move away from crisis driven securitization of issues (such as migration or energy), towards the development of common rules, common agenda, and a commonly recognized legitimate institution(s). This can be seen by looking at the migration and eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbon crises and how functional interdependence (trade, flows, pipelines) has amplified rather than stabilized the perception of zero-sum threats, where there is no inclusive regional governance.

Co-security is an idea that relates to both existing concepts of cooperative security and collective resilience<sup>9</sup>; however, co-security has an emphasis on how the governance mechanisms for co-producing security are distributed among different levels of government and sectors. Thus, while co-security does not exclude the use of hard security tools or measures, it requires a broader strategic framework that places a premium on prevention, trust building and capacity development. This implies a move from responding to crises (downstream) to reducing the potential for crises (upstream), consistent with approaches to governance that emphasize the

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<sup>8</sup> COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, *Council Conclusions on the Pact for the Mediterranean: One Sea, One Pact, One Future*, document 15699/25, 20 November 2025, available at [https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/EU/45731/imfname\\_11543664.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVIII/EU/45731/imfname_11543664.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> G. EVANS, *Cooperative Security and Intra-State Conflict*, in *Foreign Policy*, 1994, pp. 3-20.

distribution of authority, coordination through negotiation, and self-enforcement of compliance<sup>10</sup>.

In this paper, co-security refers to shared and durable security generated through five interdependent and mutually reinforcing dimensions: institutional legitimacy and accountable governance; socio-economic and ecological resilience; rights-based and law-governed cooperation; infrastructure robustness across interconnected systems; and joint political ownership of agendas and implementation<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. *Euro-Mediterranean Space as a Security Complex – Towards a Common Mediterranean Space?*

In the context of Euro-Mediterranean relations, examining the region as a regional security complex implies that security is co-created among the densely interconnected northern and southern shores, rather than "transferred" from Europe to its neighbors<sup>12</sup>.

The Mediterranean constitutes a distinctive (if internally segmented) security complex with problems that cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved independently of each other<sup>13</sup>.

Recent research has highlighted an Eastern Mediterranean sub-complex, defined by ongoing disputes between Greece and Turkey, the continuing military occupation of Northern Cyprus, the Arab - Israeli conflict and the securitization of offshore energy resources. It also identified a Central/Western Mediterranean sub-complex, which was characterized by Libya's instability and migratory pathways to Greece, Italy and Spain. Patterns of amity and enmity (alliances, rivalries and unresolved conflicts) define which actors are considered to represent a threat or a partner and therefore determine the range of possibilities for cooperative or co-security arrangements.

The New Pact for the Mediterranean, with its concept of a "Common Mediterranean Space," seeks to transform the current fragmented security landscape into a more integrated political, economic and security community. Through a strategic reinterpretation of the Euro-Mediterranean complex as a shared strategic space, the Pact conceives of the sea basin as a co-security zone, where interdependence will be jointly governed through institutions, projects and

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<sup>10</sup> R.A.W. RHODES, *Policy network analysis*, in R.A.W. RHODES, S.A. BINDER, B.A. ROCKMAN (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 425-447.

<sup>11</sup> For institutional legitimacy and accountable governance, see OECD, *Supporting State-building in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*, Paris, 2011; NATO, *Institutional Resilience and Building Integrity in the Defense and Security Sector*, in NATO, *Building Integrity*, Brussels, 2021; and for building social, economic and environmental resilience: EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *Best Practices in the Whole of Society Approach in Countering Hybrid Threats*, 2021; A. Atkinson, M. GRANDI, G. VAKLINOVA, *Resilience, Human Security, and the Protection of Civilians: A Critical Approach for Future Urban Conflict*, Stimson Center Policy Paper, 2022; for the resilience of critical infrastructure and the interconnectedness of complex systems: POLSCI INSTITUTE, *Strategies for Ensuring Human Security*, 21 July 2025; and for political joint ownership and multi-actor governance: M. BEVIR, *Governance*, in D. LEVI-FAUR (ed. by), *The Oxford Handbook of Governance*, Oxford, 2012, pp. 1-16; J.K. MERDIEMAH, F. DANSO, *Governance and Resilience: Enhancing Community Based Strategies to Combat Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana*, in *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 2025, pp. 86-113.

<sup>12</sup> G.S. DIMITRIU, *A Mediterranean Region? Regional Security Complex Theory and the Mediterranean Sea Basin*, in *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 2021, pp. 416-428.

<sup>13</sup> B. BUZAN, O. WÆVER, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, 2003, Cambridge, pp. 40-82.

rules-based practices, instead of being ad-hoc contained. Whether such ambitions are realized depends upon the extent to which governance mechanisms established under the three pillars — people; stronger, more sustainable and integrated economies; and security, preparedness and migration management — can moderate the current enmities and foster a habit of practical cooperation.

### 3.1. *Euro-African Space as a Regional Security Complex*

Empirically, the Euro-Mediterranean complex now overlaps with a wider Euro-African/Sahelian arc, as conflicts and governance failures in North Africa, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa have direct effects on European security, migration dynamics and energy routes. This has led some authors<sup>14</sup> and policy documents<sup>15</sup> to speak of an extended strategic system running from the Mediterranean through North Africa into the Sahel, connected by security, economic and human-mobility chains.

Within this extended complex, the design of regional governance and conflict-management arrangements—EU–AU cooperation, CSDP missions, African regional mechanisms and joint EU–AU initiatives—becomes a primary determinant of Euro-Mediterranean co-security outcomes, because it shapes whether cross-border threats are managed through coercive containment or through shared, rule-based institutions.

### 3.2. *Africa's Regionalisation: Multi-level Co-security?*

In the African context, regionalisation has developed through the African Union (AU) and the numerous Regional Economic Communities (RECS) and Regional Mechanisms (RMS) that together form the basis for the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA). These frameworks are attempting to create a multi-level structure for "nesting" conflict prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict reconstruction in a nested structure based on subsidiarity and complementarity among the AU, RECS/RM's, and the UN, with many regional organizations leading mediation and stabilization efforts<sup>16</sup>. From a co-security perspective, this regional complex logic will be critical to preventing conflict spillover in fragile regions such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, where domestic insecurities, transnational armed groups, and outside power penetration interact<sup>17</sup>.

Regional mechanisms and triangular AU-RECS-UN partnerships can serve as the platform for early risk-reduction efforts—early warning systems, preventive diplomacy, and building resilience rather than simply being deployment vehicles for crisis containment.

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<sup>14</sup> M. BÓAS, F. STRAZZARI, *Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making*, in *The International Spectator*, 2020, pp. 1-17, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03932729.2020.1835324>.

<sup>15</sup> NATO, *Strategic Foresight Analysis – Regional Perspectives: North Africa and the Sahel*, Norfolk, 2023); EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE, *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, Brussels, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> AFRICAN UNION, *Revised African Union Policy on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD)*, Addis Ababa, 2024.

<sup>17</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *The European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel*, Legislative Train, Theme "A Stronger Europe in the World", 10/2023.

From the perspective of the Euro-Mediterranean region, African regionalization provides an empirical research opportunity for examining how joint security structures can convert cross-border conflict configurations into more collaborative forms of regional ordering. The Pact's goal of developing a Common Mediterranean Space<sup>18</sup> may benefit from drawing upon these lessons by developing more formalized multi-level, rule-based, and co-owned mechanisms within the security, preparedness, and migration management pillar of the Pact, connecting Euro-Mediterranean and Euro-African arrangements into a broader co-security architecture<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. *When Migration-Centric Governance Fails: Rethinking the Pact's Strategy*

Migration centered governance, therefore, does not provide an adequate basis for the Pact for the Mediterranean. Despite the fact that the Pact's security, preparedness and migration management pillar presents a more holistic approach to the issue at hand, much of the initial political signaling and the majority of the operational proposals continue to focus on "managing flows", building up border capabilities, and negotiating operational agreements with the key transit and origin countries.

While the Pact's performance will likely be evaluated using indicators like intercepted migrants, returned migrants and decreased numbers of migrant arrivals, it may reproduce the same dynamic issues (i.e., border-induced displacement, legitimacy erosion, opportunity costs and policy dependency) associated with prior phases of the EU's external migration governance<sup>20</sup>.

A co-security perspective views the Pact's mismatch between the objectives stated and the predominant instruments used as a structural mismatch. The Pact will optimize short-term pressure management and invest less in climate adaptation, socio-economic resilience, labor market reform, and institutional capacity--the areas that its "people" and "sustainable and integrated economies" pillars are intended to prioritize--if it primarily focuses on treating migration as a security variable.

This governance myopia also provides the Pact with a shorter time horizon than necessary for institutional consolidation and regional co-development; thus, it will anchor the Pact in electoral and media cycles instead of the longer time horizons required for co-development. In addition, if migration cooperation continues to be conducted through opaque agreements, exceptional procedures and diminished oversight, the Pact will further exacerbate the "normative dissonance" already evident in the EU's external migration policies and reduce its credibility as a rules-based actor in the region, limiting its ability to act strategically in the Mediterranean.

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<sup>18</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, *Pact for the Mediterranean – One Sea, One Pact, One Future*, Joint Communication and factsheet, 15 October 2025.

<sup>19</sup> AFRICAN UNION, *Revised African Union Policy on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRDR)*, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> E. FTAKLAKI, *L'influence du phénomène migratoire sur les relations de l'Union européenne avec les pays d'Afrique : l'externalisation de la politique migratoire dans le nouveau Pacte Européen sur la migration et l'asile*, in *Revue du droit de l'Union européenne*, 2025, pp. 95-124.

In order for the Pact for the Mediterranean to operate as a strategic co-security instrument rather than merely a new label for migration externalization, its migration security pillar must be reoriented towards upstream risk reduction, rights safeguards, and co-owned mobility frameworks, and migration governance should be embedded within, but not replace, the adaptation, governance and social inclusion agendas that form the basis of a common Mediterranean space.

##### 5. *From the New Agenda to the Pact: Between Ambition and Implementation Gaps*

The Pact for the Mediterranean intends to structure Euro-Mediterranean governance by grouping neighborhood, security, and migration/traffic tools into one overarching framework through a unified action plan that will be structured around three thematic pillars. However, the Pact has functioned primarily as an umbrella of previous frameworks (Barcelona Process, New Agenda for the Mediterranean, NDICI) rather than as a true integrative mechanism that will clarify the hierarchy of objectives or streamline the mandates of institutions. Specifically, the migration-security pillar includes border control, anti-smuggling, return of migrants, and selective mobility programs but does not address the structural imbalance between quickly deployable control measures and chronically fragmented and underfunded preventive governance mechanisms.

Where institutions are layered without an established order of objectives, implementation follows political urgency over strategic coordination. In such an environment, the deployment of rapidly deployable control instruments expands rapidly, whereas preventive governance programs experience delays, are distributed across numerous channels, or lack sufficient resources. Consequently, a pattern of cyclical crisis response emerges, as opposed to the incremental building of long-term resilience.

In this context, the UfM represents important institutional assets: inclusive membership from both shores of the Mediterranean; sectoral platforms; and project-based cooperation in the areas of the environment, energy, water, transportation, and social development. As well, the UfM's discourse consistently positions stability, development, and regional integration as complementary objectives -- providing a discursive link between security, resilience, and connectivity.

The 2021 EU New Agenda for the Mediterranean and the accompanying Economic and Investment Plan also recognize the interconnected nature of governance deficits, security challenges, environmental degradation, demographic pressures, and the relatively low level of regional economic integration. Thus, this integrated diagnosis and the EU's commitment to "a green, resilient, and inclusive" recovery represent a substantial conceptual advancement<sup>21</sup>.

However, three operational limitations remain prominent. Firstly, implementation is segmented across a very large number of instruments, agencies, and financing mechanisms, thus

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<sup>21</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, HIGH REPRESENTATIVE OF THE UNION FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY POLICY, *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*. Joint Communication JOIN(2021) 2 final, 9 February 2021.

complicating the achievement of coherence and visibility. Secondly, the enforcement of governance- and rights-based conditionality remains weak, thus resulting in inconsistent application and the recurrent trade-offs in favor of short-term stability or migration control<sup>22</sup>. Thirdly, there is a persistent asymmetry between the rhetoric of equality of partnership and the de facto agenda-setting power of the EU, thus limiting the potential for genuine co-ownership on the Southern side<sup>23</sup>. As a result, the implementation gap recurs: a gap between comprehensive and progressive policy language and selective, security-focused implementation that fails to meet the co-security aspirations that the region would require<sup>24</sup>.

## 6. Co-security, Trust and the Pact for the Mediterranean

Debates on Euro-Mediterranean security have long pointed out the gap between the many institutions developed there and the limited nature of the security cooperation<sup>25</sup>. Earlier efforts — from the Barcelona Process to the Union for the Mediterranean — had greatly expanded the number of dialogue forums and sectoral platforms but these efforts did not develop a single, coherent security system able to address the various types of threats (hard, soft and environmental) in an integrated way.

Studies of the regional security complex identify this shortcoming as both material and relational in nature; this is due to the established patterns of friendship and hostility that exist, the uneven distribution of the agenda-setting process among states, and the continued reliance upon “first stability” logics. The enduring patterns of amity and enmity, as well as the differential capabilities in a region can limit the emergence of genuinely common security practices within a regional security complex, as argued by Buzan and Wæver<sup>26</sup>.

The Pact for the Mediterranean is introduced as "a paradigm shift at an ambitious level" toward a Common Mediterranean Area, where all partners work together to develop a collective awareness of shared ownership, co-creation and co-responsibility. Structured around three pillars - the people; the economy, sustainable and integrated; and security, preparedness and management of migratory flows, it allows in theory to operate a co-security logic in practice. From that point of view, the upstream prevention and the adaptation of risks, and the reinforcement of the social resilience, are considered as fundamental security functions instead of secondary social or developmentally related.

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<sup>22</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *Renewed Partnership with the Southern Neighborhood – A New Agenda for the Mediterranean*, European Parliament recommendation, P9\_TA(2022)0318, 14 September 2022.

<sup>23</sup> C. CAPSASKIS, A. FATSEA, *The European Union's Pact for the Mediterranean: Opportunity for a Reset in the Region?*, ELIAMEP, Policy Paper 188, October 2025, available at <https://www.eliamep.gr/en/the-european-unions-pact-for-the-mediterranean-opportunity-for-a-reset-in-the-region/>.

<sup>24</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *The Pact for the Mediterranean: Co-creating a space of peace, prosperity and stability through a Common Mediterranean Space*, EPRS Briefing 779223, 25 November 2025.

<sup>25</sup> S.C. CALLEYA, *Security Challenges in the Euro-Med Area in the 21st Century: Mare Nostrum*, London-New York, 2013; S. PANEBIANCO, I. FONTANA (eds.) *Human Security: A New Perspective for Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation*, Paris, 2024.

<sup>26</sup> B. BUZAN, O. WÆVER, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, 2003.

However, critics argue that unless there are enforceable rights protections for local actors, and more symmetric forms of governance — the Pact runs the risk of merely continuing previous patterns of containment-oriented cooperation under new terminology.

For those who study governance, this situation is the most understandable as a "trust problem." Security cooperation remains at the level of transactions when one of the partners doubts that other partner will commit to their obligations; that monitoring will occur; or that the costs and benefits of the cooperation will be distributed fairly<sup>27</sup>. Lessons from Africa-EU interregional relations support this finding, demonstrating that even if formally labeled "comprehensive," such frameworks can be undermined by imbalances in the agenda-setting capacity of the partners; the lack of strong conditionality on governance and rights; and fragmented implementation<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, for the Pact to be used as a true co-security instrument, its governance framework must explicitly focus on trust-building as a strategic objective rather than a result of technical cooperation — through co-defined priorities; transparent accountability mechanisms; and multi-level participation.

### *7. The Trust Deficit as a Strategic Variable: Lessons from Africa-EU Interregional Experience*

The concept of "trust" has been defined in this study as both the belief that others will fulfill their obligations to us and the expectation that they will do so reliably. In this context, the term "trust" does not refer to personal relationships or symbols, but rather to trust in the form of institutions and processes.

Trust is thus based on whether the commitments made by other parties to us are reliable, predictable and verifiable, and whether the distribution of burden and benefit is perceived to be equitable. For these reasons, trust should be seen as a strategic resource that can be measured and analyzed, rather than as a vague and intangible normative goal.

Policy design that ignores the role of trust in international cooperation may lead to production of technical results but not to stable political agreements and, consequently, to fragile, contingent and crisis-prone security.

The three types of trust deficits discussed above are:

*i.* Horizontal trust deficit (EU-Partner States): This occurs when there is an imposition of the agenda by the EU onto its partner states. The latter may implement the measures for tactical purposes only but refuse to develop further institutional ties with the EU. Therefore, cooperation may shift from being cooperative to being transactionally oriented and from joint problem solving to managing incentives and constraints.

*ii.* Vertical trust deficit (State-Society): This is generated when the population perceives that the policy instruments used by the government are coercive, opaque or unaccountable. As

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<sup>27</sup> S. LAVENEX, F. SCHIMMELFENNIG, *EU rules beyond EU borders: Theorizing external governance in European politics*, in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2009, pp. 791-812.

<sup>28</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *The African political integration process and its impact on EU-AU relations*, EPRS Study 702587, Brussels, 2023.

a result, the legitimacy of the state decreases and the costs of implementing policy measures increase. Social resistance, litigation and administrative non-compliance may then undermine the implementation of even technically well-designed policies.

*iii.* Intra-EU trust deficit (Between Institutions and Member States): The lack of trust within the EU among its institutions and member states is due to the divergence of strategic interests and the fragmentation of responsibilities among EU member states. Such differences cause incoherence in EU's external signaling, reduce the credibility of EU's commitments and create uncertainty for long-term planning.

The “comprehensive partnership” label has been used in Africa-EU relations for years now; however, these partnerships have co-existed with significant differences in terms of agenda-setting power, priorities regarding financing and control over implementation. The above-mentioned experiences provide the basis for three key lessons which should be taken into account in the development of a Mediterranean Pact based on co-security:

Firstly, the credibility of a partnership depends on whether all parties perceive it as equitable. Where the EU is seen as having an effective monopoly on the determination of priorities, the choice of tools and methods for assessing performance (i.e. performance metrics), the trust that exists between the parties will deteriorate and the level of cooperation will likely decrease, moving from long-term collaborative approaches to finding solutions to problems, to being primarily based on narrow transactional relationships. Based on this experience, the Pact for the Mediterranean should anchor its three pillars in common priorities agreed upon by both parties, common indicators for measuring progress and common governance mechanisms for implementing the pact, so that Southern partners can be seen as co-makers of rules and not simply as rule-takers.

Secondly, although securitized cooperation can produce short-term compliance from Southern partners, it does not generally create sustainable institutional capacity or resilience in governance systems. There are many examples of Africa-EU cooperation on migration and security issues that are heavily driven by external factors and thus reversible when there are changes in either the incentives provided to partners or the level of political attention. Instead, a Mediterranean co-security approach should therefore ensure that Southern partners have agency in designing border, migration and security policies and practices (for example, through joint programming, co-management of facilities and/or systematic inclusion of local authorities and civil society actors) and thus develop their own capacities and norms, rather than developing them under contract.

Thirdly, the degree of internal EU coordination (between different EU institutions, member-states and funding streams) is also a strategic variable. Misaligned priorities within the EU institutions and member-states, or between thematic funding instruments, send contradictory messages to partners and reduce the effectiveness of policy, despite large amounts of money being allocated to the issue area. Therefore, for the Mediterranean Pact, internal EU coordination (in terms of division of labor, unified messaging and streamlining of instruments) needs to be considered an integral element of the co-security equation to prevent the reproduction of institutional overload and policy incoherence.

In sum, the experience of Africa-EU cooperation indicates that governance design is just as important as funding levels for the success of the Mediterranean Pact. Designing the Pact

around co-ownership, local agency and transparent and negotiated decision-making structures should be central considerations in the development of a co-security framework and should not be viewed as secondary considerations or mere rhetorical flourishes<sup>29</sup>.

#### 8. *The Pact of the Mediterranean and the Strategic Autonomy Question*

The Mediterranean area represents a testing ground for whether the European Union (EU) has the potential to evolve from being a stabilizing force to becoming a strategic co-securing entity. The region is characterized by both maritime disputes, competition over the transition to new forms of energy, spillover effects of security issues, and a high degree of legal complexity. Additionally, the Mediterranean area serves as the focal point of interactions between the EU, NATO, regional powers, and other external actors<sup>30</sup>. As such, the Mediterranean space embodies many of the systemic characteristics that are typical in the context of regional security complexes—high levels of interdependence, a high density of institutionalization, and fragmented threat perceptions—and therefore it presents an ideal laboratory for studying the circumstances under which strategic autonomy may be compatible with cooperative regionalism.

As a result of this conceptualization, the Pact for the Mediterranean clearly identifies the Mediterranean area as a “common Mediterranean space”, and as one of the primary areas where the EU will deepen cooperation with the countries of the South. Seen from the perspective of strategic autonomy, the Pact can be viewed as a mechanism for the development of the EU's ability to act in a concerted manner—through clustering and giving greater political direction to existing tools, and through establishing a more unified framework for investment, energy, security and mobility. Thus, strategic autonomy in the Mediterranean should be defined as the ability to take sustained, lawful and coordinated actions with partners, based on predictable rules and shared institutions<sup>31</sup>, rather than as a means of isolating oneself unilaterally.

This implies that the EU must achieve a higher degree of internal coherence in order to promote strategic autonomy in the Mediterranean; present credible partnership opportunities to the coastal states; and create greater harmony between the defense/security instruments available to the EU and the socio-economic resilience agendas of partner countries—ultimately promoting a shift from “militarized stabilization” to multi-level comprehensive security governance, as was advocated by post-Cold War analyses of the Euro-Mediterranean System.

In practice, strategic autonomy in the Mediterranean should be understood as the ability to carry out sustained, lawful and coordinated actions with partners, rather than as the ability to isolate itself unilaterally. To achieve this, however, the EU must achieve a higher degree of internal coherence, provide credible partnership opportunities to coastal states, and develop greater synergy between the defense/security instruments available to the EU and the socio-

<sup>29</sup> S. LAVENEX, F. SCHIMMELFENNIG, *EU rules beyond EU borders*, op. cit., p. 795.

<sup>30</sup> M.J. TSINISIZELIS, D.K. XENAKIS, *Security complexity and systemic change in the Mediterranean*, in D.K. XENAKIS, D.N. CHRYSOCHOOU (eds), *The Emerging Euro-Mediterranean System*, Athens, 2006, pp. 73-101.

<sup>31</sup> J.-L. SAMAAAN, *Securing European Interests from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf: Rethinking EU Strategic Autonomy at Sea*, EuroMeSCo Paper No. 68, Barcelona, 2024.

economic resilience agendas of partner countries—i.e., promote a transition from “militarized stabilization” to comprehensive multi-level security governance, as advocated by post-Cold War analyses of the Euro-Mediterranean System.

Whether the Pact promotes or hinders the realization of this vision will depend on the nature of its governance architecture. If implementation continues to focus on short-term migration control, ad-hoc energy deals and loose coordination of bilateral initiatives, then the Pact will simply perpetuate earlier forms of dependency and containment and contribute little to the promotion of strategic autonomy. On the other hand, if the three pillars of the Pact are implemented through co-owned agenda-setting processes, enforceable rights and rule-of-law safeguards, and robust regional platforms such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the Pact could serve as a basis for a type of “relational” strategic autonomy<sup>32</sup>—an increased capacity for initiating and sustaining joint action, sharing risks, and producing security in the Mediterranean jointly on more balanced terms<sup>33</sup>.

In doctrinal terms, this would imply conceiving of EU strategic autonomy in the Mediterranean as the responsibility-capacity for joint action, rather than as the freedom to act independently of constraints imposed by allies and neighbors<sup>34</sup>. The Pact’s emphasis on co-ownership, co-creation and joint responsibility provides an opportunity to move in this direction, but will only support strategic autonomy if the governance structures of the Pact (i.e., decision-making processes regarding funding, monitoring mechanisms, and conflict resolution mechanisms) are structured to promote trust, legal predictability, and multi-level co-security in contested maritime and energy spaces.

## 9. Conclusion

The New Pact for the Mediterranean sits at a critical juncture. It can pursue a narrow, containment agenda, which while politically recognizable is structurally weak; or it can be reframed as a co-security framework that addresses systemic sources of instability within the Mediterranean Basin. If the former path is taken, the Pact risks further entrenching the “security field” that has normalized migration as an ongoing source of uncertainty and a subject of exceptional management. Conversely, if the latter path is chosen, the Pact can become an institutional mechanism to connect the long-term nature of security practice with the goals of longer-term governance, resilience, and rights-based agendas.

The analysis presented in this paper supports three conclusions regarding the new Pact for the Mediterranean. First, migration should not be used as the organizing principle of Mediterranean security; instead, it is best viewed as one variable among many other variables in

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<sup>32</sup> EUROMED RIGHTS, *Mediterranean 2030: How the EU Can Deliver Its New Pact for the Mediterranean*. Brussels, 2025, available at <https://euromedrights.org/publication/how-the-eu-can-deliver-its-new-pact-for-the-mediterranean/>.

<sup>33</sup> K. KALLAS, *Remarks at the Launch of the Pact for the Mediterranean*, Barcelona, 30 November 2025, available at [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/pact-mediterranean-press-statement-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-launch-event\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/pact-mediterranean-press-statement-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-launch-event_en).

<sup>34</sup> A.E. JUNCOS, S. VANHOONACKER, *The Ideational Power of Strategic Autonomy in EU Security and External Economic Policies*, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2024, pp. 955–972.

the larger interdependent ecosystem of risk factors including: governance failures, climate stress, economic insecurity, and conflict dynamics. As long as a security architecture prioritizes a single variable (i.e., irregular migration), it will continue to misattribute the causes of instability and create displacement rather than producing durable solutions. Second, institutional trust is a strategic necessity, not a normative add-on; without legitimacy, accountability, and collective ownership, cooperation agreements are brittle and susceptible to being challenged and reversed at multiple levels (between states and within state-society relations). This finding is consistent with those from the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Africa-EU frameworks, which have demonstrated how the gap between aspirational language and observed practices has undermined the credibility of language associated with partnerships. Third, effective strategy in this regard requires the development of a comprehensive security architecture that integrates hard security tools with adaptive policy responses, enhanced governance capabilities, legal mobility options, and resilient infrastructure, rather than treating these as separate and competitive agendas. Siloed policy approaches may generate apparent results, but these will not converge into a sustainable security order.

Thus, from this analytical perspective, the core Euro-Mediterranean problem lies not in the lack of vocabulary or declaratory ambitions related to the New Pact, but in the failure of implementation hierarchies and incentives to align with stated objectives. While the region has developed a complex web of initiatives, dialogue processes, and action plans, day-to-day practice remains largely determined by short-term control criteria and institutional competition in the security domain. Therefore, in order to develop a truly strategic Pact, the EU must redirect resource allocation, reform institutional interfaces, and redefine success metrics to move beyond narrow border indicators toward co-produced resilience and stability, as articulated in debates surrounding "normative power Europe": ultimately, what matters most is not simply what the EU says, but also what it does and how it designs its instruments<sup>35</sup>.

Without these changes, the Euro-Mediterranean system is likely to continue to operate in a cycle of crisis management, where each successive "emergency" response eventually becomes part of the ordinary grammar of governance. Under such conditions, migration will remain a focal point of a broader continuum of threats, and the Union's normative claims will be increasingly incompatible with its practices.

By implementing the paradigmatic shifts discussed in this paper—namely, toward co-security, measurable trust, integrated resilience, and multi-level ownership—the creation of a more robust and legitimate Euro-Mediterranean order is a plausible, though highly challenging, goal. This type of order would not eliminate conflict or risk entirely; however, it would fundamentally transform the modalities through which these phenomena are managed, moving from a focus on security with respect to others to a focus on security with others, and from perpetual crisis management to contested but sustainable co-management of a common regional space.

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<sup>35</sup> I. MANNERS, *Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?*, in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2002, pp. 235-258.

In this spirit, as President Ursula von der Leyen has stated, “Europe and the Mediterranean share one destiny”<sup>36</sup> – the key question is whether the governance mechanisms of the new Pact will be able to convert that shared destiny into shared, co-produced security.

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<sup>36</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Statement by President Ursula von der Leyen on the Pact for the Mediterranean*, Brussels, 15 October 2025.