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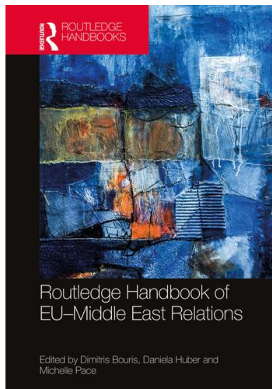

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From descriptive and evaluative accounts to causal explanations for EU–Middle East relations

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FROM DESCRIPTIVE AND EVALUATIVE ACCOUNTS TO CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS FOR EU–MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

Fred H. Lawson

Introduction

Relations between the European Union (EU) and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have most often been analysed in a descriptive or evaluative fashion. The comparatively few contributions that set out to explain interactions between the EU and the MENA tend to be idiographic in nature, that is, to propose causal factors and arguments that are peculiar to the specific case under scrutiny. Richard Youngs (2014: 7), for example, asserts that "an eclectic combination of dynamics drove and explained European Middle East policy between the end of 2010 and early 2014". The massive corpus of scholarly writing on EU–MENA relations has consequently had no discernible impact on the conceptual controversies that propel academic enquiry outside the confines of European Studies.

Nevertheless, studies of the fluctuating relationship between the EU and the MENA can advance at least five influential research programs regarding comparative and international politics. First, analyses of EU–MENA interactions have the potential to improve our understanding of the conditions that facilitate the rise of populism, along with the circumstances under which populist-led governments take steps to dismantle multilateral institutions. Second, research on EU–MENA relations might contribute to debates regarding the trend towards supranationalism in European defence policy. Third, work on EU–MENA relations can clarify the complex dynamics of regional securitisation. Fourth, investigations of EU–MENA relations can add to the growing literature on overlapping regionalism. And fifth, explorations of the underlying asymmetries that characterise relations between the EU and the MENA will enhance our comprehension of imperial structures of governance. It is only through a nuanced understanding of the trends that characterise EU–MENA relations and then framing the analysis of these trends in terms of ongoing conceptual controversies that we can not only advance our comprehension of the interplay between these two regions but also contribute to the broader enterprise of explaining the politics of the contemporary world.

Rise of populism

Scholarship on populist politics has proliferated abundantly over the past decade. The main contributions by far concern Western Europe and Latin America; a few deal with the Middle

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East and Australasia (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Existing work focuses primarily on the domestic political, economic and cultural factors that determine the success of parties and movements which display attributes of populism (Tismaneanu, 2000; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017; Voss, 2018; Dennison and Mendes, 2019). Only a handful of studies explores the connection between populist politics and the international arena (Liang, 2007; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Chryssogelos, 2017; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). How trends and developments beyond a country's territorial boundaries – aside from disparate components of "globalisation" (Betz, 1994) – might affect the rise of populist parties and movements remains largely untheorised.

One recent attempt to account for the emergence of contemporary populism in terms of external factors highlights three analytically distinct yet temporally intertwined causal variables: "attempts by foreign actors to influence the domestic politics of countries in which populism thrives"; "the intensification of the European integration process"; and periodic crises in the global economy (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017).[1] An alternative theory posits the importance of "transnational cycles of contention" in generating support for populism from one country to another (Aslandis, 2017). Explaining upsurges of populist politics in these terms suggests that like extreme right-wing parties, populist parties and movements gain strength whenever "a potent master frame" sweeps across the globe (Rydgren, 2005). Such frames take shape piecemeal and gradually, but pick up momentum as they encounter favourable political opportunity structures. Crucial to the process are the mechanisms or "channels" whereby master frames spread (Rydgren, 2005: 429–430). Varying combinations of master frames and diffusion channels constitute the raw materials that local political entrepreneurs forge into the platforms of particular populist parties and movements, which share a family resemblance that reflects the historical moment.

Relations between the EU and the MENA offer a trove of empirical cases that can be used to test externalist hypotheses concerning the emergence and consolidation of populist parties and movements. For example, if populism does congeal most firmly in countries that are part of a tightly integrated regional formation, then Europe's long-standing campaign to keep Turkey at arm's length should have militated against the triumph of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (Yabanci, 2016; Tuerk, 2018). Alternatively, if severe disruptions in EU–MENA trade and investment strengthen populist movements, then those Middle Eastern countries that have become most heavily reliant on European commerce and capital can be expected to be the most highly susceptible to populist challenges.

Until now, the term "populist" has been used by MENA specialists to denote regimes that advocate the overthrow of entrenched political and economic elites (most notably monarchs and elite landowners), in conjunction with a moderate redistribution of property and wealth. Explicitly acting in the name of the morally pure common people has not been a defining characteristic of populist leaderships in this part of the world. Future scholarship is likely to find closer affinity with studies of populist parties and movements in other regions, in light of the slogan that was commonly deployed during the momentous winter of 2010–2011: "The people want the fall of the system". The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have already started to be described as populist (Aslandis, 2017).

It is widely held that whenever populist leaderships gain control of the state apparatus, they can be expected to implement foreign policies that undermine multilateral institutions in the name of reasserting popular sovereignty. Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann (2019: 720) stipulate that populist antagonism towards multilateralism "only works in countries that are deeply embedded in international institutions: only if citizens are aware of such institutions and potentially directly affected by them, will it be rewarding for populists to discursively construct

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international institutions as a threat". On the other hand, populist governments that enjoy few institutional entanglements occasionally undertake multilateralist initiatives as a means to gain international status; Destradi and Plagemann (2019: 723) point to Turkey as a prime illustration of this phenomenon.

Why populist-led governments sometimes take steps to dismantle multilateral institutions and sometimes make use of such institutions to accrue prestige remains up in the air (Plagemann and Destradi, 2020). Divergences across countries may reflect the different "historical discourses" that populist leaderships cultivate (Cadier and Szulecki, 2020). Variations in foreign policy might also be caused by changes in the distribution of power among states, which shape how policymakers assess their respective countries' future prospects. Populist-led states whose position relative to others is improving are unlikely to engage in risky external actions, whereas ones whose position is deteriorating have a strong incentive to run substantial risks. Whether circumstances make it riskier to challenge multilateral institutions or manipulate them to gain status will determine which path leaders take. Relations between the EU and the MENA provide a wide range of cases that might be explored to devise innovative theories of populist postures towards the international arena.

Supranationalism in European defence policy

EU agencies have exercised unprecedented authority over matters related to European defence in recent years (Collester, 2000; Riddervold, 2016; Rosen and Raube, 2018). Michael Smith (2012: 256) observes that since 2003, "the EU has changed in terms of both its institutions (new Common Foreign and Security Policy/Common Security and Defense Policy [CSDP] competencies) and its policy outputs (new CSDP operations)". This trend culminated in the June 2017 establishment of the European Defense Fund (EDF), whose stated purpose was to allocate EU monies "to finance cooperative defence research and to co-finance with Member States the cooperative development of new military capabilities" (Haroche, 2019: 853). The EDF accompanied the adoption of the Preparatory Action on Defense Research, and was complemented a year later by the ambitious and well-funded EU Defense Industrial Development Program. Taken together, these three initiatives marked what EU officials called a "paradigm shift" regarding supranational authority in the security realm (Haroche, 2019: 853).

Pierre Haroche (2019) explains this burst of defence-related supranationalism in terms of an amalgam of intergovernmental and neo-functional processes. In the first place, the European Commission "used its initiative power to launch a supranational policy that surprised Member States"; secondly, "the Commission showed [astute] political leadership" in managing the projects (Haroche, 2019: 857). Third, the creation of the EDF was facilitated by several ongoing EU-sponsored military research programs, which together generated a cluster of "functional spillover effects in the defence area [that] can be called *offensive* because it allow[ed] supranational institutions to take advantage of the dysfunctionalities of the less or non-integrated sector to take it over" (Haroche, 2019: 857–858).

The circumstances which actually enabled the European Commission to win acceptance for these initiatives, and what conditions made it possible for existing military research programs to come together in such an unexpected manner, remain to be elaborated. The popular uprisings that swept across the MENA beginning in the winter of 2010–2011, along with the civil wars that subsequently erupted in Libya, Syria and Yemen, no doubt contributed to the sea change in EU security practice that took place only a half-decade later. Situating the upwards trajectory of EU collaboration in the context of changes in EU–MENA relations is certain to enhance our

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understanding of the emergence and consolidation of supranationalism with regard to defence policy, in Europe and elsewhere.

Regional securitisation

Why some matters come to be considered threats to national security, whereas others stay in the domain of routine politics, has sparked a large and diverse corpus of academic writing (Stritzel, 2007; Balzacq et al., 2016; Lucarelli, 2019; Butler, 2020). These studies for the most part explicate the ways in which a country's leadership frames a given external problem as an extraordinary danger, along with the circumstances in which that framing starts to resonate among significant portions of the country's citizenry. Only rarely has attention been devoted to processes of securitisation that occur on a level higher than the individual state.

Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2009: 253) call such supra-state processes "macrosecuritisations", and assert that they accompany the appearance of "one over-arching conflict" in world affairs. "Macrosecuritisations", Buzan and Waever (2009: 257) argue,

> have a more complicated structure than ordinary [state-level] ones. Because they contain both higher and lower level securitisations, they embody permanent tensions across the levels, and are vulnerable to breakdowns not just by desecuritisation of the macro-level threat (or referent object) . . ., but also by the [state-]level securitisations becoming disaffected with, or pulling away from, subordination to the higher level one.

Consequently, macrosecuritisation happens whenever state-level actors manage to "rearticulate and adapt various local security concerns in terms of the macrosecuritisation", and Buzan and Waever (2009: 266) note that "there is still a need for a systematic analysis of the extent to which this mechanism is pervasive and dynamic enough and whether the other necessary factors are in place to make [any particular instance] a durable macrosecuritisation".

In the aftermath of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s and the September 2001 attacks against the United States of America (USA), EU governments transformed the long-standing problem of how to manage cross-Mediterranean migration into a national security matter.

> Migrants, in addition to their economic and humanitarian identities, began to be seen as potential threats to European order at both the national and Community levels on the assumption that they could also be the transmission trains of violent ideologies of conflict from North Africa and, to a lesser extent, from the Middle East into Europe.
>
> *(Joffé, 2008: 159)*

Nevertheless, European officials at first hesitated to turn the problem over to the armed forces, and relied instead on the police and intelligence agencies to deal with the "danger" that they were claiming had become inherent in the situation.

Only following the 2010–2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria did momentum build across Europe towards securitising the influx of immigrants from the MENA. The adversarial posture adopted by the Turkish government in negotiations over the 2015 refugee crisis, together with the armed attacks against the citizenry of Paris which occurred in January and November 2015 and the lingering effects of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, created the critical juncture in which authoritative anti-immigration pronouncements convinced the European public that immigration did pose an imminent threat to EU security (Fakhoury, 2016).

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Incorporating the regional context in which securitising "speech acts" take place, the impact of violent shocks, and the consequences of severe economic disruptions is likely to improve the chances that a compelling theory of macrosecuritisation will be formulated.

More important, analysing EU–MENA relations through the lenses of macrosecuritisation can help to shift the focus of scholarly enquiry away from developments in Europe and towards what has been transpiring in the Middle East and North Africa.[2] For example, leaderships throughout the MENA took steps to portray informal, cross-border trade and migration as threats to national security in the aftermath of the 2010–2011 uprisings. Government troops were dispatched to patrol previously unregulated frontiers, and extensive physical barriers were constructed to solidify boundaries that had earlier been porous. To some extent, such actions reflected the outbreak of civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, which often involved incursions into adjacent territories by anti-regime fighters. Yet the shift towards the securitisation of cross-border currents engulfed states far from these three battlefields, and became a common theme in regional affairs (Del Sarto, 2017). Explaining recent instances of macrosecuritisation in the MENA will make it harder for analysts to lapse into Eurocentric approaches to the topic.

Overlapping regionalism

Overlapping regionalism denotes a situation in which two or more regional organisations share with one another some, but not all, of their "member-states and mandates" (Hofmann, 2019: 885; Panke and Stapel, 2018). It assumes that each organisation has a keen interest in protecting its own autonomy, and will therefore do its best to block others from encroaching on its established purview. Reciprocal reluctance to work together not only prompts overlapping regional organisations to create redundant agencies and programs (Hofmann, 2009: 47), but also reduces each organisation's overall effectiveness (Hofmann, 2011: 113–114). In addition, it gives Member States the incentive and the opportunity to "forum shop" in order to find the organisation that accords them the greatest advantage (Busch, 2007; Davis, 2009). Moreover, "permanent uncoordinated organisational overlap may render some policy areas [completely] ungovernable by depriving [regional organisations] of general standards applicable to everyone" (Brosig, 2011: 149).

Organisational overlap has been hypothesised to prove particularly detrimental to the activities of regional security organisations. Stephanie Hofmann (2009: 45) argues that whenever security organisations overlap, "the resulting lack of inter-institutional cooperation and coordination has created inefficiencies in the crisis management interventions of each institution, including delays in troop deployment and a lack of strategic guidance in [tactical] operations". In addition, "overlap has clearly impeded the development of an efficient division of labor" among the organisations involved (Hofmann, 2009: 46). Responding effectively to crisis situations becomes almost impossible whenever there are states that belong to only one of the overlapping organisations, and those states take steps to block joint initiatives whenever their own individual interests are not satisfied – a policy that Hofmann (2019: 890) labels "hostage-taking".

At least three aspects of overlapping regionalism merit sustained investigation. First, existing work leaves open the question of whether or not collaborative initiatives undertaken by overlapping regional organisations increase the level of interdependence among the organisations involved. Some observers assert that joint ventures necessarily lead to heightened mutual reliance, and so overlapping regional organisations will hesitate to engage in combined operations (Brosig, 2011: 148–149). One could imagine, however, that collaborative ventures instead spark reciprocal matching with regard to agencies and programs, leading to periodic bursts of organisational redundancy. Since each regional organisation has a pressing interest in taking command

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of the joint project, each one can be expected to move quickly to set up the infrastructure required to supervise things. The crucial question then becomes why greater interdependence among overlapping regional organisations takes shape during the course of some crises but not others.

Second, the thrust of existing scholarship implies that overlapping regional security organisations have considerable difficulty carrying out joint initiatives. The problems that have beset collaborative ventures by the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) offer clear evidence that hostage-taking makes collaboration among overlapping organisations almost impossible to achieve (Hofmann, 2019: 893–894). On the other hand, Malte Brosig (2011) shows that overlapping regional security organisations manage to work together on some occasions, even as each one does its best to preserve its autonomy. Explaining why it is possible for some overlapping regional organisations to carry out combined operations, whereas it is not possible for others to do so, constitutes a crucial analytical puzzle regarding overlapping regionalism.

Third, it is generally agreed that hostage-taking on the part of what Hofmann (2019: 887–888) calls "single member-states with distributional preferences" plays a pivotal role in determining whether or not overlapping regional security organisations are able to implement combined operations. In fact, Hofmann (2019: 890) claims that "the limited and potentially deficient execution of [international organisations'] mandates is most likely when a government chooses hostage-taking. No other strategy can fully compensate for its impact". It therefore seems vital to explain why it is possible for hostage-taking to occur during the run-up to some joint ventures, but not on other comparable occasions.

Overlapping security regionalism became apparent in connection with EU–MENA relations with the promulgation of the Common Security and Defence Policy which authorised EU armed forces to engage in "some crisis management operations" outside the NATO command structure (Biscop, 2003). The Libyan uprising's transformation into civil war prompted officials in Brussels to organise such an operation, despite opposition to military intervention on the part of the German government (Fabbrini, 2014: 185). Before planning for the EU mission could be completed, France and the United Kingdom launched coordinated air strikes against pro-regime forces inside Libya. Less than two weeks after these attacks, NATO took charge of the bombing campaign. The abrupt transfer of command has been attributed to the inability of European armed forces to undertake crisis management operations on their own, along with "the fear by the United Kingdom of a French attempt to sideline the United States" in Mediterranean affairs (Fabbrini, 2014: 186). A more compelling explanation for the eclipse of the EU by NATO can no doubt be formulated in terms of the dynamics of overlapping regionalism.

Imperial governance

After being relegated to the radical fringes of political analysis throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of empire has moved into the mainstream of academic debate regarding twenty-first-century international politics. Various notions of imperial governance started to be proposed during the late 1990s, primarily as analytical concepts to comprehend the unrivalled position and distinctive policies of the USA (Bacevich, 2002; Panitch and Gindin, 2004; Nexon and Wright, 2007). Around the same time, the EU also began to be depicted as an empire of one sort or another (Boeroecz, 2001; Engelbrekt, 2002; Zielonka, 2006; Behr, 2007; Beck and Grande, 2007; Colomer, 2007; Gravier, 2009). The push towards EU enlargement, the EU's insistence that non-EU trading partners adopt EU standards and norms, and the EU's burgeoning activism in global affairs – particularly its turn towards military interventionism – all came

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to be interpreted as indications of a shift towards imperial governance (Bicchi, 2006; Browning and Joenniemi, 2008; Sepos, 2013).

Laying out a set of generally agreed components of empire is an impossible task. The basic features of imperial structures of governance include a dominant core and one or more subordinate peripheries, each of which has direct political and economic connections to the centre but no significant links to other peripheral zones; a substantial degree of delegated authority, whereby supervision over day-to-day affairs in the peripheries is left largely in the hands of local elites; and a substantial amount of systemic exploitation, with the greatest proportion of wealth concentrated in the core. Otherwise, things are up for grabs. Empires may be created by conquest or arise "by invitation" (Lundestad, 1986); their cores may exercise a greater or lesser degree of control over the peripheries; they may demand adherence to a unified set of beliefs or practice doctrinal tolerance; they may cultivate domestic hegemony or be governed by brute force; they may be belligerent and expansionist, or innately peaceable; they may or may not be permeated with nationalism (Breuilly, 2017); *pace* Jan Zielonka (2012: 506), they may have well-defined territorial boundaries or fluctuating frontiers; and they may or may not possess "a *mission civilisatrice* of some sort towards their external environment" (Zielonka, 2012: 509). More contested is the matter of how politics operate inside the core: Conventional notions of empire assume that the core is ruled by a dictator or a handful of autocrats (note the usual distinction between the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire), yet recent scholarship asserts that the core can just as well be a liberal democracy (Ikenberry, 2004). With regard to the EU, the more pertinent question is whether an imperial core can consist of a collection of semi-sovereign states (Gravier, 2011).

Reconceiving EU–MENA relations as an instance of imperial governance can help explicate the dynamics of empire in the contemporary world. In the first place, looking at the evolution of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and its successor arrangements through the lens of empire sheds new light on the conditions that facilitate or inhibit imperial expansion, particularly since – with the exception of Morocco[3] – governments of the southern and eastern Mediterranean littoral harbored no desire to join the EU when they signed on to these initiatives. Exploring why empires sometimes cajole and sometimes coerce unwilling neighbours to become incorporated as de facto peripheries will further our understanding of the mechanisms of imperial power. In addition, contemporary empires tend to rely on hegemony as a fundamental element of both internal governance and external influence (Prys and Robel, 2011). The role of hegemony in consolidating the imperial order appears to be especially pronounced in the case of the EU (Haukkala, 2008; Roccu, 2018), but determining whether or not it is unique in this respect will require systematic comparisons with other cases (MacKay, 2015).

Revisiting EU–MENA relations as an instance of imperial governance can improve existing theories of empire by explicating the ways that subordinate actors resist the imposition and perpetuation of imperial rule. All too often, the politics of empires are presumed to be driven solely by the interests of rulers located in the core, who impose their will on the peripheries. Unlike states, however, empires include powerful peripheral actors, whose capacity to derail or block projects mandated by the core plays a crucial role in determining political outcomes. Rulers based in the core consequently expend considerable effort and allocate substantial resources trying to prevent the peripheries from joining forces to oppose their edicts. Empires paradoxically entail higher governance costs than do states, making imperial structures of governance more susceptible to instability at moments of crisis.

Raffaella Del Sarto (2016) uses the notion of EU-as-empire to account for the EU's overall response to the 2010–2011 uprisings, as well as its varying interactions with different MENA states. During the years leading up to the revolts, the EU had distributed sizable assistance

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and investment funds among the MENA countries, and had encouraged local authorities to adopt economic policies in line with EU preferences. These policies heightened inequalities of wealth throughout the region, provided a fillip to official corruption, and boosted unemployment, especially among young people. When protests against these developments erupted in Tunisia, the EU at first took no action, but did later on "freeze the assets of the president and his entourage", albeit "*after* [President] Ben Ali had left the country in January 2011". By contrast, "Brussels was a little faster in expressing support for the demonstrators in Egypt, and it reacted swiftly to the unfolding events in Libya" (De Sarto, 2016: 224). Taken together, these disparate responses show that "the EU continued to prioritise stability in its borderlands, security in the broad sense (including the prevention of unwanted migration) and the economic advantages of the Union and its Member States" (Del Sarto, 2016: 225; see also Stivachtis, 2018).

It remains for future contributions to this nascent research program to show how the EU's actions reflect the distinctive features of imperial governance. It seems likely that states and empires alike can be expected to value the maintenance of stability in adjacent areas over the uncertainties associated with widespread popular upheaval, and to exercise whatever leverage they have to convince less advantaged trading and investment partners to do business on terms that accord them the most benefit. The pertinent question is whether empires react to serious disorders in nearby countries differently from the way states do.

Much depends on whether the MENA is posited to stand inside or outside the EU-as-empire. Del Sarto (2016: 221, 223–224) tends to claim that the MENA lies outside the empire, and constitutes the EU's "borderlands", although she also refers to it as the imperial periphery (Del Sarto, 2016: 221–222, 224, 227–228). If Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are considered to be peripheral zones of the empire, and to have differential standing vis-à-vis the core, then the EU's varying responses become easier to explain. Tunisia, whose political-economic connections to the core were deeper and more extensive (Del Sarto, 2016: 224), was accorded wider latitude, in the expectation that the country's well-integrated local elite would contain the uprising and keep the imperial order from being destroyed. Libya, on the other hand, prompted a forceful reaction that might reshuffle local authority structures in ways that would enhance imperial rule in the aftermath of the revolt. Egypt lay somewhere in-between. A full explanation for the divergent outcomes of these three uprisings will have to incorporate the interplay between rulers located in the core and influential actors based in the peripheries. And a completely different kind of account will be necessary if the MENA is posited to lie outside the imperial realm.

Conclusion

Academic studies of relations between the European Union and the Middle East and North Africa have had little impact on theoretical debates in the disciplines of comparative politics and international relations. Existing work describes interactions between these two regions, points out the shortcomings and inadequacies of EU policies, and proposes alternative courses of action that the EU might pursue in future. Only rarely have attempts been made to explain the changes, trends and patterns that characterise interregional affairs, and such explanations are seldom framed in terms of ongoing conceptual controversies concerning world politics. Nevertheless, empirical evidence drawn from recent EU–MENA relations can profitably be injected into at least five of these controversies, and doing so will improve our understanding not only of the interplay between Europe and the Middle East, but also of the workings of the contemporary world as a whole.

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Notes

1 The potential effects of a fourth independent variable – the end of the post-1945 rivalry between the capitalist West and the Leninist East – are quickly attributed to "globalisation and regional integration".
2 Thanks to Michelle Pace for pointing out that securitisation runs both ways across the Mediterranean Sea.
3 Thanks again to Michelle Pace for qualifying my initial generalisation.

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