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**The EU as a Global Actor: Peace,
Security and Conflict**

Assessing the tropes of 'soft imperialism'
towards the European Southern
Neighbourhood

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Introduction

When asked what kind of a structure the European Union (EU) is during an interview, former European Commission chief José Manuel Barroso affirmed how “What we have is the first non-imperial empire” (Barroso 2007). Unlike old empires, and means of military conquest, the EU is built on the choice of twenty-seven countries who “fully decided to work together and to pool their sovereignty” (idem). One could argue metaphors are harmless, however, power operates through language and produces powerful representations of the “self” and the “other” (Foucault 1972; Said 1978). This remark reminds us of other more recent powerful discourses about the EU’s identity such as the “jungle” comment from High Representative of the European Union for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell. Indeed, during the opening speech at the inauguration of the European Diplomatic Academy in Brussels on October 13, 2022, Josep Borrell called Europe a “garden”, a garden which is threatened by the rest of the world, the “jungle”. Borrell further asserted “The gardeners have to go to the jungle. Europeans have to be much more engaged with the rest of the world. Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means” (Borrell 2022). Borrell later commented that his “reference to ‘jungle’ has no racist, cultural or geographical connotation” (idem). As Borrell holds the position of High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy, it seems critical to comprehend how such metaphors unveil the way the Union envisions the world and conducts policy. Studying such remarks under Orientalist and neo-orientalist accounts encourages us to unveil the EU’s wider and grim ambitions. Moreover, taking from Barroso’s vision of the EU as an empire, it seems necessary to analyse the EU under the scope of a “soft imperialism”. Soft imperialism in the context of this paper is understood as a “soft power in the hard way, that is an asymmetric form of dialogue or even the imposition or strategic use of norms and conditionalities in the self-interest rather than for the creation of a genuine dialogue” (Hettne & Soderbaum 2005). To challenge our assumption, this paper will examine the discourses and policies aimed towards the Southern Neighbourhood since European powers have a colonial history within the region and since it has been subjected to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) as a way of creating “an area of peace, stability, economic prosperity, upholding democratic values and human rights” following the 2004 enlargement of the Union (European Commission n.d.). This essay will thus explore in what ways the European Neighbourhood Policy towards the Southern Neighbourhood can be said to exhibit tropes of “soft imperialism”. For this purpose, the essay will first mention the theoretical and methodological considerations that underpin our argument. Furthermore, this essay will present the results of the Critical Discourse Analysis. It will be confirmed how the EU envisions its

neighbourhood as an ambiguous “other” and is trying to establish a “ring of friends” to create a buffer zone. Moreover, it will be demonstrated that the ENP’s agency is asymmetrical with an imposition of norms from the EU to its neighbours. The essay will further expand on how the EU also represents itself as having a duty to stabilise its periphery.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations

According to Foucault (1972: 49), it is essential to consider discourse “as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”. Foucault asserts that discourses produce their own reality which does not always reflect the reality. As a result, our understanding of the world is not an authentic reflection of reality, but rather a product of discourse. This concept of knowledge-making through discourse is reflected in Edward Said’s work on Orientalism. Indeed, Said (1978) uses Foucault’s interpretation of discourse as an entity that generates knowledge and legitimises a particular vision the West gave to the “non-West” after colonisation. However, Said (ibid: 5) goes further than Foucault by investigating who holds power and by asserting that the complex relation between Occident and Orient is a relation of power and domination. Indeed, Said argued European imperialism was powerful in that it also created new realities and ways of understanding the Other that were biased yet accepted as true. According to Said, discourses and powerful representations of the “other”, can serve as the basis for unequal relations of power and produce false identities that create common knowledge about the other. Thus, this knowledge-making was useful in creating a dual world system consisting of a centre and periphery polarity, produced, and reproduced through exploitation (Sa’di 2021). However, since the publication of Orientalism in 1978, the West’s representation of the “self” and the “other” has evolved. Although Orientalism in its original form has not disappeared, Sa’di explores a new form of knowledge-making about the “other”, which he terms neo-orientalism. Sa’di argues that “alongside the old-style orientalism, a more sophisticated, subtle, and up-to-date perspective has appeared. Although its emphases, concerns and methodologies might represent a certain departure from old orientalist dogmas, its objective seems to remain largely intact.” (ibid: 2505). Neo-orientalist discourse has shifted its tone, which would make it appear more benign and “respectable” (ibid: 2511). Therefore, whereas there is still a binary distinction and opposition, there is no mentioning of race and offensive terms. Indeed, more inoffensive and supposedly neutral terms are employed to mark the difference with the outer group, such as culture, ethnicity and religion (idem). Moreover,

the “other” is not to be disciplined through coercive means but by the acceptance of neo-liberal institutions and standards through a variety of international bodies (ibid: 2513).

Therefore, Foucault and Said thoroughly describe how discourses have powerful shaping effects into how we construct the “self” and represent the “other”. Moreover, most recent accounts of neo-orientalism highlight how policymaking and visions of the “other” are still rooted in unequal relations yet in less obvious forms, therefore reminding of a possible “soft imperialism”. Performing a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the policy documents on the European Southern Neighbourhood policy seems necessary to assess those claims. According to Wodak & Mayer (2009: 7), critical discourse analysis “emphasises the need for interdisciplinary work in order to gain a proper understanding of how language functions in constituting and transmitting knowledge in organising social institutions”. CDA similarly is intimately related to postcolonial and poststructuralist approaches since it represents a useful methodology “for analysing power relations and their underlying structures” (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl 2014: 256). Moreover, using such techniques can reveal unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of the subject in question, which can allow alternative positions and opinions to arise (Morgan 2010).

The analysis consists of fifteen official documents published by the European Commission on its website from the 2003 “Wider Europe” Communication from the Commission to the 2021-2027 Multi-Annual Indicative Programmes for the Southern Neighbourhood, including: six Commission Communications, four Joint Communications, two Joint Staff Working Documents, two Multi-Annual Indicative Programmes for 2021-2027, one Fact Sheet and one Press Release. The corpus comprises policy documents ranging from the inception of the ENP to the latest ones since it is necessary to explore the variations of tone, motivations and explanations throughout time. As the examined documents were drafted and published on the website of the European Commission, it is assumed that the sentences, formulations and ambiguities were deemed the best suited to represent its neighbourhood and exercise power over its recipients (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl 2014).

Stemming from the definition of soft imperialism and by first reading the key documents, I was able to observe patterns and manually code segments of the analysed texts around four codes. Those codes are namely: the presentation of ENP countries by the EU (as inherently similar/different to the EU), the nature of the relationship between the EU and ENP countries (symmetrical/asymmetrical), the presentation of core values and norms (as either

consensual/shared/imposed), and the way the ENP itself is presented contra envisioned (mutually beneficial/self-interested).

3. The Neighbourhood as an ambiguous distant yet close “other”

The first Communication from the Commission about the project headed towards a partnership with the EU’s new neighbours was named “Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A new framework for relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours”. Although this terminology was still at play within the July 2003’s Communication from the Commission on “Paving the way for a New Neighbourhood Instrument”, this term was further abandoned as it became questionable. Indeed, it is interesting to notice that throughout the successive enlargements rounds, the EU continually expanded across Europe. Consequently, and as reflected by the terminology of “Wider Europe”, the EU envisions Europe as a political construct rather than a continent and wrongfully conceptualises itself as a synonym for Europe. The EU further suggests that ENP countries are neighbours whose proximity could allow them to be integrated into “Europe” and the EU through a single area policy. However, although the neighbourhood could be understood as “potential Europe” through this terminology, the “boundary is ultimately politically determined” and since the EU did not want to imply that ENP countries could integrate the Union, the usage of this terminology has thus been discontinued (Hettne & Soderbaum 2005: 8). All later policy documents did not mention “Wider Europe” anymore and switched to the notion of the European Neighbourhood. Countries part of the scheme were therefore solely identified as “partners” or “neighbours”.

Hence, since the “Wider Europe – Neighbourhood” Communication, there has been an ambiguous relationship as to how to consider such partners. Neighbours were first conceived as similar, if not the same as European states as this statement highlights: ‘The accession of the new member states will strengthen the Union’s interest in enhancing relations with the new neighbours. Over the coming decade and beyond, the Union’s capacity to provide security, stability and sustainable development to its citizens will no longer be distinguishable from its interest in close cooperation with the neighbours’ (European Commission 2003a). Therefore, it would be possible to assume for neighbourhood states that the ENP would lead to close relations and a potential inclusion within the Union. However, within the same Communication, it was further made clear that the ENP would not lead to a possible accession to the EU:

The aim of the new Neighbourhood Policy is therefore to provide a framework for the development of a new relationship which would not, in the medium-term, include a perspective of membership or a role in the Union's institutions. A response to the practical issues posed by proximity and neighbourhood should be seen as separate from the question of EU accession (idem).

However, as a way of compensating for no opportunity of enlargement within the Union, the "Wider Europe – Neighbourhood" Communication proposed that the ENP should aim "to develop a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighbourhood – a 'ring of friends' – with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations" (idem). However, "in the same way that a ring presumes the existence of a centre, a ring of friends posits the idea of the hegemony of the EU over the neighborhood" (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl 2014: 263). Indeed, as will further be analysed, the EU conceptualises itself as the "core" actor of this partnership, using its normative power to influence the periphery. Before the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) in 1995, the Mediterranean countries did not have regional cooperation mechanisms nor did they constitute a single entity. All states have different colonial histories and trajectories, yet the EU found a way of constituting them into an entity to domesticate the EU's security concerns. This can be qualified as a "buffering logic" since the EU aims at blurring its external borders while keeping its neighbours close in its interest (Del Sarto & Schumacher 2005: 26). It does so by gathering regional Mediterranean states into a single entity to avoid any dissidence and regional conflict that could potentially affect the EU while making the neighbourhood develop cooperation mechanisms and infrastructures in the EU's interest. Following this line of thought, the Communication from the Commission entitled "On Strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy" from 2006 mentioned how the Union should work even "beyond its neighbourhood", with "the neighbours of our neighbours" in Central Asia on energy since these countries are world oil producers (Zielonka 2006).

Therefore, the EU constructs its neighbourhood as an ambiguous "other", which is simultaneously similar to and different from the EU. Moreover, attempts to reunite neighbouring countries around a "ring of friends" as a cover for security concerns reveals soft imperialistic concerns. The ambiguous relationship between the EU and its neighbours further hints that the agency of both actors is asymmetrical.

4. “The EU should win hearts and minds” (European Commission, 2015a): The ENP as an imposition of European shared values and of an asymmetric power relationship

In all studied documents, the partnership with neighbours is said to be fundamentally based on and enabled by “shared values” (European Commission 2003a). The shared values notably represent “democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, as set out within the EU in the Charter of Fundamental Rights” (idem). Although these values are said to be “common”, or “universal”, these are later qualified as “EU’s values and principles” (European Commission 2003b; European Commission 2011; European Commission 2015a). Therefore, it is possible to notice that these values are the tenets of the EU’s normative power. Ian Manners (2002) understood the EU’s power in that it is capable of shaping “what is normal” in international politics based on its “substantive normative principles” that partners have to adopt. These norms are encoded in the EU’s founding treaties and laws and therefore constitute the EU’s identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world. The diffusion of EU norms in the case of the Southern Neighbourhood has taken place through procedural diffusion (involving the institutionalisation of a relationship between the EU and a third party) and transference (involving when the EU exchanges goods, trade, aid, or assistance and exports its norms and standards) (idem). Therefore, the “shared”, “common” and “universal” values underlying the ENP principles are in fact the values monopolised by the EU. Although Manners does not consider such export of values and norms problematic, various authors, in line with the argument of this paper, associate this with regional hegemony and to a greater extent imperialist trends (Haukkala 2011; Zielonka 2006). By striving to export its norms and values, the EU is covertly coercing its neighbourhood into complying with them.

Furthermore, at first sight the ENP supposes an equality-centred partnership. In this light, the ENP is said to be based on “Joint Ownership” (European Commission 2006). This Joint Ownership implies that “the operational tool of the policy – the ENP Action Plan – is fully negotiated and mutually agreed at political level. It is not an imposition by either side, but an agreed agenda for common work”. The programmes and agreements would therefore be jointly discussed and prepared by relevant stakeholders from both the EU and European Neighbourhood countries (European Commission 2003a). However, while the contents of the policy-documents on the ENP seem equality-centred and based on consensus, the underlying structure of these statements is that of asymmetry and dominance. Firstly, most policy documents are drafted and conceived by the European Commission with the Southern

neighbours only modestly consulted (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl 2014). Hence, throughout most policy documents studied, the documents reflect the EU's position and there are frequent allusions to the EU as the active promoter of reforms whereas the European Neighbourhood countries are portrayed as the ones having to adapt to the European norms. For instance, although the Communication from the Commission entitled "A strong European Neighbourhood Policy" from 2007 mentions that "Efforts are required on both sides", the EU's necessary efforts are linked to its "responsibilities", whereas the Southern neighbours' efforts relate to their acquisition and respect of the "shared values" and *acquis communautaire* (European Commission 2007). Therefore, the EU does not need to change, it presents itself as having the fundamental knowledge of what ENP countries need and it is only up to the ENP partners to accomplish their transition and integrate the EU's values and norms should they want to become effective partners of the European Union. For instance, the Commission Communication "Taking Stock of the ENP" from 2010 openly affirms that the aim of the policy is the acceptance of the EU's regulatory model by the partner countries since it is an advantage they should take advantage of:

The ENP does not seek to export the EU *acquis* wholesale. However, with only a few regulatory models in a globalized world, the EU model tends to be attractive to partners, reducing the "invention costs" of political and economic costs of reform (European Commission 2010).

For the ENP countries to be equal with the EU and gain leverage, the policy documents highlight how states need to adhere to these shared values and some of the *acquis communautaires*. Their agency is therefore "conditional" (Horký-Hlucháň & Kratochvíl 2014). The EU uses the technique of "carrot and stickism" to transfer and diffuse its norms in exchange of rewards and to a lesser extent sanctions (Manners 2002: 245). Indeed, in the Communication from the Commission on "Taking Stock of the European Neighbourhood Policy" from 2010, the Communication mentions how the EU is taking a "more for more" approach, where "the more deeply a partner engages with the Union, the more fully the Union can respond" (European Commission 2010). Furthermore, neighbours adopting the EU's values and norms are solely offered "the prospect of a stake in the EU's Internal Market" (European Commission 2003a). It comes without surprise to note that during the 2015 public consultation process, and as reflected in the Joint Staff Working Document "Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy" from 2015, some of the partner countries felt that the "more for more" principle had

not fuelled an atmosphere of equal partnership between the EU and ENP countries, and that greater ownership should be given to partner countries (European Commission 2015a).

In sum, whereas policy-documents highlight a commitment to “shared values” from both sides and uses egalitarian adjectives, a deeper analysis reveals how the EU’s modus operandi dominates the policy-making and how this asymmetry of agency within the ENP is reinforced through the imposition of such “shared values” and norms to gain leverage.

5. “The EU needs to rise to the historical challenges in our neighbourhood” (European Commission, 2011): The EU’s imperial incentive to stabilise its periphery from afar

Following neo-orientalist accounts, “what happens to ‘others’ nowadays matters to us to an unprecedented extent” (Samiei 2010: 1148). These accounts can help us grasp why the EU revised the ENP on three occasions: in 2011 following the Arab Spring, in 2015 amid the Migration crisis, and in 2021 during the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, unlike the triumphalism of orientalism, “neo-orientalism is characterised by a fear of decline and the uncontrollable flux of dark-skinned immigrants who will change Western societies beyond recognition” (Sa’di 2021: 2513). This can be exemplified through various accounts within the 2015 Joint Communication on a reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy, such as “conflict, rising extremism and terrorism, human rights violations and other challenges to international law, and economic upheaval have resulted in major refugee flows” (European Commission 2015b). The neighbourhood gradually becomes envisioned as a dangerous “Other” whose similarity to the EU disappears:

In 2015 the EU finds itself confronted with a neighbourhood characterised by many challenges (conflicts, resurgent extremism, migration, poverty, corruption, fragile states, serious deterioration of democracy and human rights situation etc.) with only a few countries committed to courageous political and economic reforms (European Commission 2015a).

Particularly, within the 2015 Joint Communication, the priority shifted towards securitisation, including conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation policies. This move is justified due to the threat that terrorist attacks such as the November 13th terrorist attacks in Paris pose to the stability and safety of the EU. For this purpose, the Communication demands intensified cooperation with its neighbours in these areas (European Commission 2015b). This attempt to securitise the agenda is reinforced when observing how within the Multi-Annual

Indicative Programmes for the years 2021-2027, a specific Programme was allocated to Migration within the Southern Neighbourhood (European Commission 2021d).

Unlike old empires, the EU does not aim to use coercive means to control and discipline its periphery. Throughout the ENP, the EU aims to control its vicinity from afar, through neo-liberal institutions and treaties, in order to control the plausible dangers emanating from the neighbourhood (Sa'di 2021). Hence, in almost all analysed documents, the EU presented itself as having a “duty” and a “task” to ensure stability in its neighbourhood (European Commission 2003a; European Commission 2004). This is justified by its “history of peace and stability” and its “experiences as the main provider of humanitarian and development assistance” and interests in doing so (European Commission 2007; European Commission 2021a). Nonetheless, on several occasions, the EU further mentioned that its presence across the region via diplomatic missions in ENP countries could be beneficial for conflict resolution efforts (European Commission 2006). The 2015 Joint Communication on a reviewed ENP went as far as mentioning that “all means available will be used including – where necessary, CSDP missions and operations or the EU’ Special Representatives – to support the management of crises and the settlement of protracted conflicts in the neighbourhood” (European Commission 2015b). Therefore, by trying to stabilise its periphery for its own stability and by using all means available, the EU reproduces trends of soft imperialism.

Conclusion and discussion

In sum, this essay has shown that the EU’s attitude towards the European Southern Neighbourhood reflects to a great extent one of soft imperialism. Indeed, the ambiguous position towards its neighbourhoods unveils a strategy of a “ring of friends”, as a way of bringing the neighbours as close to the EU as possible without the prospect of becoming members of the Union to establish a buffer zone. Moreover, the EU uses its normative power to impose its own values as “shared”, “common” and “universal”. The extent to which neighbours comply with these values and norms determines their relationship with the EU. The ENP’s discourse consists of using cooperative and egalitarian language in a context of hidden domination and asymmetry based on conditionality. Indeed, the EU strategically exports its norms and values to which the neighbours must adapt to if they want “a stake” in the EU’s affairs. It is clear that facing its fear of decline and due to the crises emanating from its neighbourhood, the EU sees itself as having the duty of stabilising its periphery by “all means necessary” which reflects its ambitions to stabilise the periphery of its empire for safety

concerns. Nonetheless, it would be futile to assume that Southern partners would wholeheartedly adopt European norms and standards without any profitable returns. Moreover, due to their colonial past, North African governments seem to be aware of the asymmetrical dominance of the EU within the ENP (Horký-Hluchán & Kratochvíl 2014). Therefore, it seems necessary for the EU to account for its soft imperialistic deviances and allow for a consensual, differentiated, and symmetrical relationship to grow with its Southern neighbours. If the EU fails to do so, it is likely partners will only continue to partially or fraudulently comply with the EU's imposed conditions.

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