

# EU and US Narratives of Order and Disorder in Their Southern Neighbourhoods After the Migration Crises

Ieva GIEDRAITYTE\*

*Employing strategic narrative theory, (A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin & L. Roselle, Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order (Routledge 2013)) the article compares the EU’s and the US’s strategic narratives of their Southern neighbourhoods, forged after the simultaneous migration crises at their Southern borders in 2013-2015. By this comparison, the article tests the claims that the EU and the US have different preferences for (regional) orders and explores the region’s role in their strategic narratives. Exploring three levels in the circulation of the narratives – system, identity and issue – this article concludes that both powers share the idea of desired regional order. At the same time, the place of the ‘region’ in the strategic narratives is different, demonstrating the EU’s deeper engagement in the region and its identity as a regional power.*

**Keywords:** strategic narrative, the EU, the US, ENP, Central America, region-building

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Despite being seen as ‘the West’ or the ‘Global North’, especially by those not belonging to this ‘club’, for some, the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) represent very different approaches to the global order. The clashes between the EU and the US that took place after the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 revived the debate, with some authors claiming that the two sides of the Atlantic are parting in the understanding of how the world should be arranged.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion about differences in the ways that Americans and Europeans approach different global issues is not new, and it was already loud at the beginning<sup>2</sup> of the twenty-first century in the context of the ‘War on Terror’. Various authors<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University, Lithuania.  
Email: [ieva.giedraityte@tspm.vu.lt](mailto:ieva.giedraityte@tspm.vu.lt).

<sup>1</sup> K. Johnson, D. De Luce & E. Tamkin, *Can the US-Europe Alliance Survive Trump?*, Foreign Policy (18 May 2018), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/18/can-the-u-s-europe-alliance-survive-trump> (accessed 11 May 2019).

<sup>2</sup> See M. Cox, *Commentary: Martians and Venutians in the New World Order*, 79(3) Intl. Affairs 523–532 (2003); M. Cox, *Empire by Denial? Debating US Power*, 35(2) Sec. Dialogue 228–236 (2004); J. Grugel, *New Regionalism and Modes of Governance — Comparing US and EU Strategies in Latin America*, 10(4) Eur. J. Intl. Rel. 603–626 (2004); B. Hettne & F. Ponjaert, *Interregionalism and World Order: The Diverging*

have observed differences between how the EU and the US view power, cooperation, and decision-making in the global area. Hettne and Ponjaert<sup>3</sup> conclude that the EU and the US have very different preferences for world order and regionalism, calling these two models ‘Pax Americana’ and ‘Pax Europea’. These two concepts were born out of the comparison of how the EU and the US approach regionalism, defined as the ideology and project of building regions.<sup>4</sup> However, the comparison of the EU’s and the US’s regional projects often focuses on the regions where they have neither the same interests nor capabilities (e.g., Latin America). Peculiarly, their projects for the regions where these elements are comparable – their respective neighbourhoods – have not been compared.

This omission, at least partially, can be related to differences in the EU’s and the US’s approaches to regional processes: while the EU is creating all-encompassing neighbourhood strategies, the US prefers bilateral treaties except for free trade agreements. The second decade of the twenty-first century marked a change. Reacting to security challenges from the South, the US adopted its Strategy for Engagement in Central America (CEN Strategy) in 2014. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, the EU was forced to rethink its neighbourhood policies, formulating a Reviewed European Neighbourhood Policy (Reviewed ENP) in 2015 and its Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016.

Hence, the turbulences in their respective neighbourhoods in 2013–2015 have forced both actors to forge new strategic narratives – tools ‘for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate’.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on three levels (system, identity, and issue) of the EU and US strategic neighbourhood narratives, this article tests the claims that the two Western powers have very different preferences for regional orders.

A comparison of these strategic ‘neighbourhood narratives’ is particularly interesting as these regional visions tell a story of how two different Global North actors imagine order and their role in the context where they can be challenged. The past, featuring domination and resistance, makes these neighbourhood narratives rather contested, forcing both actors to address similar historical sensibilities and offer coherent and attractive development visions. Moreover, both powers’ Southern neighbourhoods mark a border between the Global North and

---

*EU and US Models*, in *European Union and New Regionalism: Competing Regionalism and Global Governance in a Post-Hegemonic Era* (M. Telo ed., Routledge 2014); R. Kagan, *Power and Weakness*, 113 *Pol’y Rev.* 1–18 (2002); R. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (Alfred A. Knopf 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Hettne & Ponjaert, *supra* n. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, at 116.

<sup>5</sup> A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin & L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order 3* (Routledge 2013).

the Global South. This is a critical division in times when the multipolar global system has produced several Global South powers that attempt to shake up traditional North–South relations.<sup>6</sup>

This article starts with the presentation of the debate regarding the differences in the EU’s and US’s preferred global and regional orders and regionalism and proceeds by demonstrating how these differences can be analysed using the framework of strategic narratives. After briefly discussing the methodology, this article then demonstrates that migration crises forced both the EU and the US to forge strategic narratives of order in their neighbourhoods. Moreover, these narratives were similar, as they both securitized Southern societies’ broad spheres and proposed similar recipes to ‘order’ them. What distinguishes them is the place of the ‘region’ in the overall narrative. While for the US, ‘the region’ is part of the system and issue narratives, for the regional power EU, it glues all three levels (system, issue, and identity) together. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the difficulties and opportunities of applying the strategic narrative framework for studying regions and proposes avenues for further research.

## 2 WHAT KIND OF REGIONAL ORDER?

### 2.1 PAX EUROPEA AND PAX AMERICANA

The EU, together with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other multilateral institutions that support trade, finance, and development, form a part of the so-called ‘liberal world order’ led by the US.<sup>7</sup> Despite recurring tensions, in general, Europeans and Americans tend to find common ground on the majority of global issues. Not in vain, they are often seen as a united group – the ‘West’.

The Western actors, especially the US, have for a long time been criticized for their attempts to dominate the non-Western countries, especially their neighbours in the Global South. The growing presence of other powers, such as China and Russia, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, has been seen by some not only as an emerging alternative to the Western hegemony but also a transition to a new and more just world order.<sup>8</sup>

Not surprisingly, terms such as ‘empire’, ‘hegemony’, ‘colossus’ or the ‘Eagle of the North’ are often employed by different authors to analyse and describe the

<sup>6</sup> S. L. Beringer, S. Maier, & M. Thiel, *EU Development Policies Between Norms and Geopolitics* 27 (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

<sup>7</sup> D. Fried, *Peering Through the Fog: The Liberal International Order in the Real World*, Atlantic Council (22 July 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/peering-through-the-fog-the-liberal-international-order-in-the-real-world> (accessed 15 Jan. 2021).

<sup>8</sup> A. Kovaleva, *BRICS as an Alternative to Western Hegemony*, 19(4) *Security Index: A Russian Journal on International Security* 87 (2013).

US policies towards Latin America.<sup>9</sup> The EU, composed of many former colonial powers which have been actively engaging with their former colonies, has also been criticized for the neo-colonial patterns of interactions with neighbours, with some authors calling out the ‘ideal power Europe metanarrative’<sup>10</sup> underlying such debates. Consequently, some authors also conceptualize the EU as an empire – normative,<sup>11</sup> soft<sup>12</sup> or leading ‘by example’<sup>13</sup> – but still an empire.

At the same time, the idea of the West or ‘Western narrative’ has already been challenged. Two global processes framed the debate regarding the EU’s and the US’s approach to power in international affairs: the ‘War on Terror’ on the one hand and growing EU external actorness on the other. The first process revitalized the discussion about America’s engagement with the world, its readiness to act alone, and the use of military force. This led to the popularization of the debate on the global ‘American empire’.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, a growing EU actorness prompted a discussion about how such an unorthodox actor operates. The concept of ‘Normative Power Europe’ (NPE), proposed by Ian Manners<sup>15</sup> in a reflection on the EU’s upcoming ‘Big Bang’ enlargement to the East, signalled an intensification in the discussion about the EU’s global role. Numerous adjectives are used in an attempt to conceptualize the EU as a peculiar power, the majority emphasizing its civilian and cooperative characteristics.<sup>16</sup>

At least to some extent, both actors did not shy away from these images. For example, at the height of the ‘War on Terror’, the senior adviser to George W. Bush, the then US president, asserted that ‘we’re an empire now, and when we

<sup>9</sup> See J. Colby, *The Business of Empire— United Fruit, Race, and US Expansion in Central America* (Cornell University Press 2011); G. Livingstone, *America’s Backyard: The United States and Latin America from the Monroe Doctrine to the War on Terror* (Zed Books 2009); T. Long, *Convincing the Colossus: Latin American Leaders Face the United States*, Doctoral Dissertation (American University 2013); P. Smith, *Talons of the Eagle: Latin America, the United States, and the World* (Oxford University Press 2012).

<sup>10</sup> M. Cebeci, *Deconstructing the ‘Ideal Power Europe’ Meta-Narrative in the European Neighbourhood Policy*, in *The Revised European Neighbourhood Policy: Continuity and Change in EU Foreign Policy* 58 (D. Bouris & T. Schumacher eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

<sup>11</sup> R.A. Del Sarto, *Normative Empire Europe: The European Union, Its Borderlands, and the ‘Arab Spring’*, 54(2) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 215–232 (2016).

<sup>12</sup> B. Hettne & F. Söderbaum, *Civilian Power or Soft Imperialism? EU as a Global Actor and the Role of Interregionalism*, 10(4) *Eur. For. Affairs Rev.* 535–552 (2015).

<sup>13</sup> J. Zielonka, *Europe as a Global Actor: Empire by Example?*, 84(3) *Int’l. Affairs* 471–484 (2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Cox, *supra* n. 2; N. Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (Penguin Press 2004); M. T. Gilderhus, *Forming an Informal Empire Without Colonies: US-Latin American Relations*, 40(3) *Latin Am. Res. Rev.* 312–325 (2005).

<sup>15</sup> I. Manners, *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 40(2) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 235–258 (2002).

<sup>16</sup> See C. Damro, *Market power Europe*, 19(5) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol’y* 682–699 (2012); S. Meunier & K. Nicolaidis, *The European Union as a Conflicted Trade Power*, 13(6) *J. Eur. Pub. Pol’y* 906–925 (2003); W. Wagner, *Liberal Power Europe*, 55(6) *J. Com. Mkt. Stud.* 1398–1414 (2017).

act, we create our own reality'.<sup>17</sup> At a similar moment, contemplating the EU's Eastern enlargement, a former President of the European Commission (EC), Romano Prodi, called the future EU neighbourhood a 'backyard'.<sup>18</sup> Several years later, the next President of the EC, José Manuel Barroso, even called the EU a 'non-imperial empire'.<sup>19</sup> While the EU quickly scaled down the imperial element, it boosted the emphasis on 'non-imperial'. A former High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, presented the Union as offering its partners 'something special: post-imperial partnerships for a post-imperial age'.<sup>20</sup>

The meta-narratives of the 'American Empire' and the 'NPE' are also reflected in the comparative studies dedicated to regional and world orders preferred by each actor. Hettne and Ponjaert observe that the two sides of the Atlantic represent different world orders: Pax Americana, or 'unilateralism oft decried as imperialism',<sup>21</sup> and Pax Europea, or 'multilateralism intertwined with interregionalism'.<sup>22</sup> Hettne, Söderbaum, and Stålgren also claim that the EU distinguishes itself from the US, among other things, by the fact that it deals with the external world differently than 'an ordinary great power, driven by geopolitical interests'.<sup>23</sup> While the EU does not hide its interests, it has:

a pattern of governance with its own distinctive characteristics and the potential of contributing to a world order ... that would be multipolar, plurilateral, regionalized and compatible with established international law; *in contrast* to the unipolar, unilateral and national interest-based model which remains at the core of US foreign policy.<sup>24</sup>

Hettne and Ponjaert maintain that these global-level differences are reflected in the regional engagement of both Western powers. Even more, according to them, 'the EU seeks to build and consolidate regional orders, whereas US regional activities aim to prevent strong regional formations from growing'.<sup>25</sup>

Summing up, as an emerging actor in the twenty-first century, the EU has been positioned as an alternative to the US, be it for its weakness (lack of military

<sup>17</sup> R. Suskind, *Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush*, The New York Times 17 Oct. 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html> (accessed 5 Nov. 2019).

<sup>18</sup> R. Prodi, *A Wider Europe – A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability*, *Speech at Sixth ECSA-World Conference* (5 Dec. 2002).

<sup>19</sup> J. Barroso, *Speech at State of the Union* (7 Sept. 2010).

<sup>20</sup> C. Ashton, *A World Built on Co-operation, Sovereignty, Democracy and Stability* (Corvinus University 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Hettne & Ponjaert, *supra* n. 2, at 125.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> B. Hettne, F. Söderbaum & P. Stålgren, *The EU as a Global Actor in the South* (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, at 135–136.

<sup>25</sup> Hettne & Ponjaert, *supra* n. 3, at 134.

might or coordinated foreign policy) or its strengths (being more ‘normative’, less hierarchic and ‘juster’). The differences in the ways that each power *acts* can reflect the differences between them: a unified state has a different set of tools and opportunities than an international *sui-generis* organization. However, studies also indicate that each actor *imagines* and *prefers* different global and regional orders and regionalism models. The following section proposes how to capture and compare these ‘imaginaries’ of regional orders by using a framework of strategic narratives:

## 2.2 ORDER AS A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

There is no standard definition of what a region or regional order is. Nevertheless, most authors refer to a region as a set of states and territories bonded to each other through geographic proximity and some level of interdependence, interaction, and commonality.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, from the constructivist point of view, regions are built not only by geography, institutions, and interactions but also by *talking about* or *imagining* them. As argued by Alexander B. Murphy, ‘as social constructions, regions are necessarily ideological, and no explanation of their individuality or character can be complete without explicit consideration of the types of ideas that are developed and sustained in connection with the regionalization process’.<sup>27</sup> In that sense, ‘regions are ... social entities, born out of imagination, discourse and socialisation’.<sup>28</sup> While for a region to be a region, a particular shared imagination of its people is necessary, the major powers play an important role in proposing and socializing their views. A tool kit offered by strategic narrative theory helps us to understand this effort.

Strategic narratives are tools ‘for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate’.<sup>29</sup> While the regionalists tend to see regional orders as constituted by three dimensions – structure, mode of governance and the form of legitimization<sup>30</sup> – they can be studied looking at the narratives of key regional actors. Narratives are stories that actors tell about themselves, others and their interrelations. In that sense, narratives provide a compelling explanation of how orders emerge and are maintained.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See A. Hurrell & L. Fawcett, *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and International Order* (Oxford University Press 1995); D. Lake & P. M. Morgan, *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997).

<sup>27</sup> A. B. Murphy, *Regions as Social Constructs: The Gap Between Theory and Practice*, 30(1) *Progress Human Geography* 22–35 (1991).

<sup>28</sup> A. Acharya, *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region* 24 (3d ed., Cornell University Press 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 5, at 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hettne & Ponjaert, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 5, at 87.

Strategic narratives are distinguished from other forms of communication by a temporal dimension and a sense of movement, implying a causal transformation.<sup>32</sup> A strategic narrative has ‘to entail an initial situation (or order), a problem that disrupts that order, and a resolution that re-establishes order’.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, strategic narratives are future-oriented stories, connecting past, present, and the future, and articulating a distinctive position on a specific issue or in general concerning the place of the country within the international system.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, they have an intention to reach other actors and structure their response to developing events<sup>35</sup>: the narratives target external or internal audiences, attempting to convince, explain, change the minds of other actors and set the terms of the debate.

The authors distinguish three types of strategic narratives: *system narratives*, which ‘are about the nature of the structure of international affairs’; *identity narratives*, which ‘are about the identities of actors in international affairs that are in the process of constant negotiation and contestation’; and *issue narratives* which are ‘strategic in the sense of seeking to shape the terrain on which policy discussions take place’.<sup>36</sup> In practice, these three narratives are intertwined.

The framework of (strategic) narratives has been applied to study the EU’s regional engagement.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it has also been applied to study the US; however, usually its global, not regional engagement (for example, ‘American empire’ or a ‘War on Terror’ can both also be seen as strategic narratives).<sup>38</sup> This article aims to complement these efforts by applying the framework to the study of strategic narratives of the *region*, in this manner enriching both regionalism theories and strategic narrative theory.

For regionalism, the strategic narrative framework offers a toolbox for a consistent analysis of regional narratives produced, projected, and received by different actors in different regions. On the other hand, a focus on the regional level poses interesting questions for strategic narrative theory. Where does the region come into play in the overall set of narratives? Maybe, a region is a filter transforming each narrative, creating discrepancies between the global and regional

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, at 9.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, at 7.

<sup>34</sup> A. Miskimmon, B. O’Loughlin & L. Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* 4 (Working paper 2017).

<sup>35</sup> L. Freedman, *Networks, Culture, and Narratives*, 45(379) *Adelphi Papers Series*, 22 (2006).

<sup>36</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 5, at 7.

<sup>37</sup> For example, A. K. Cianciara, *Stability, Security, DEMocracy: Explaining Shifts in the Narrative of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, 39(1) *J. Eur. Integ.* 49–62 (2017); M. Kaldor, M. Martin & S. Selchow, *Human Security: A New Strategic Narrative for Europe*, 83(2) *Int’l. Affairs* 273–288 (2007); A. Miskimmon, *Strategic Narratives of EU Foreign Policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy*, in *The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy* (T. Schumacher et al. eds, Routledge 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, *supra* n. 5, at 92–97.

levels. A comparative analysis of the EU's and the US's regional strategic narratives allows us to answer these questions.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The main sources of information are strategic documents and official communications. The documents selected (Table 1) represent the key ideas of the narrative and put the regional strategies into the perspective of broader foreign policy. Due to the interest in the immediate US and EU reaction to 'disorder' in the South, the documents included in the analysis represent the visions of the Barack Obama administration and the EU led by the Jean Claude Juncker Commission.

*Table 1 Documents Used for Empirical Analysis*

<i>US Strategic Documents</i>	<i>EU Strategic Documents</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- US Agency for International Development (USAID) (2015) Central America and Mexico (CAM) Regional Development Cooperation Strategy 2015–2019</li> <li>- White House (2014) US Engagement in Central America</li> <li>- Biden, J. (2015) Investing in a secure, stable Central America, the Hill.</li> <li>- Biden, J. (2015) A Plan for Central America, The New York Times.</li> <li>- White House (2014) National Security Strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- European Commission (2015) 'Towards a new ENP' Joint staff working document accompanying the Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Review of the ENP' SWD (2015) 500 final</li> <li>- European Commission (2015) Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Review of the ENP.</li> <li>- European Commission (2015) Review of the ENP: stronger partnerships for a stronger neighbourhood, Press Release</li> <li>- European Commission (2016) European Global Strategy</li> </ul>

The documents are coded using two sets of codes. The first one describes the type of narrative that the paragraph addresses, distinguishing three different narratives: *system*, *identity*, and *issue*. The second set of codes allows defining if the paragraph discusses 'order', 'disorder' and 'rupture'. Moreover, the empirical part



also looks at the place of the region in the strategic narrative. Table 2 summarizes questions for operationalization.

*Table 2 Codes and Their Operationalization. Source: Author, Based on Miskimmon, et al. (2013) and Roselle, et al. (2014)*

<i>Code</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Questions for operationalization</i>
<b>Narratives</b>		
System Narratives	How is the world structured, who are the players, and how does it work?	Broader International relations (IR) dynamics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Polarity</li> <li>- Role of external actors in the neighbourhood</li> </ul> Role of the neighbourhood in the global agenda of the EU/US <i>(Region as a geographical unit?</i> <i>The region as an element of global order?</i> <i>The region as a system itself (with its principles, players, structure?)</i>
National/Identity Narratives	What is the story of the state/nation/actor, what values and goals does it have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How does the actor present itself?</li> <li>- What values does it emphasize?</li> <li>- What place does it see for itself (in the region)?</li> </ul> <i>(Belonging to a region as a part of the identity?</i> <i>Engagement with the region as a part of the identity?)</i>
Issue Narratives	Why policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How will a particular course of action resolve the underlying issue (issue areas for engagement)?</li> <li>- How are the goals to be achieved (principles of engagement)?</li> </ul>

<i>Code</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Questions for operationalization</i>
		<i>(Region building as an area for engagement Regional integration as an area for engagement)</i>
<b>(Dis)Order</b>		
Order	How does the actor perceive the desired state (or what was the state before rupture)?	- What needs to be achieved? Or - What has been lost?
Rupture	What caused the reaction and adoption of a strategy?	- Why is the policy needed?
Disorder	What does the actor see as a threat?	- What needs to be addressed? - What are the ‘roots of insecurity’?
<b>Place of the region?</b>		
<i>Overarching question: at what level does ‘a region’ appear? Is it a separate narrative?</i>		

This analysis has its limitations. First, it does not follow the reception phase of the narrative, leaving out the perceptions of the US and the EU among the neighbours. Second, by focusing on the official documents (or documents produced by officials), this article does not follow through the whole media ecology, as advised by Miskimmon et al.<sup>39</sup> Finally, the research covers only a short period of time and does not take into account the changes that took place with the Donald Trump administration or the new EU Commission. However, the approach outlined here is sufficient to capture the main elements of the strategic narratives created by the two Western powers in the face of regional and global crises.

#### 4 NARRATING ORDER IN TIMES OF TURBULENCE

This section analyses the strategic narratives of the EU and the US related to their Southern neighbourhoods. The section starts by discussing the context and the main audiences that each actor had to address. Further, it proceeds with the analysis

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, at 14.

of narrative elements, separately discussing a rupture motivating the actors to engage and their definitions of (dis)order in the neighbourhood.

#### 4.1 CONTEXT

For a long time, the EU and the US seemed to have different approaches to engagement with their neighbours. The EU was building the Mediterranean space since the 1970s, with the most important initiative being the Barcelona process that started in 1995. With enlargement and discontent with its results, the Barcelona process was incorporated into the overarching framework of the ENP. The financial crisis and the ‘Arab spring’ forced the EU to review its policy. The first revision of the ENP took place in 2011, followed by another in 2015.

While the EU was expanding eastwards and launching its neighbourhood-wide policies, the US was busy with the implementation of its political vision: the spread of free trade, together with its influence, in Latin America. The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), intended to expand North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to Argentina, was a signature project of George W. Bush. Nevertheless, it was disrupted, and the only non-bilateral agreement that came out of that endeavour was the Dominican Republic–Central America–US Free Trade Agreement (DR–CAFTA), signed in 2004.

In 2010, seeking to respond to the worsening security situation, the US launched the Central America Regional Security Initiative focused on drug trafficking. The limits of the strategy became visible during the so-called ‘unaccompanied minor migrant’ crisis in 2013–2014. Increased flows of migrants and asylum seekers from Central American countries raised heated political debates and led to the formulation of a first coherent strategy for the whole region of Central America.

Concluding, in 2014–2015, both Western powers had to attend to the troubles in their respective Southern neighbours, which were quickly becoming internal problems for the EU and the US.

Besides these regional challenges, the two Western powers had to target both their neighbours and internal audiences. First, while the visible lack of success in the Southern neighbourhood has not affected the standing of the US in the world, for the EU, it has been a constant source of doubts about its abilities, role, and even usefulness. Thus, a new strategy had to demonstrate its effectiveness, the novelty of its approach, and its ability to ‘do geopolitics’. At the same time, the ‘Normative Power Europe’ could not lose its face in the regional engagement that began with the noble goal of building a shared sphere of prosperity. Moreover, the EU was worried about a buy-in of its strategy among the neighbours, which was more and more relevant in the process of migration management. Finally, the EU strategy

had to speak directly to its Member States, which held different views regarding the priorities in the neighbourhoods. Summing up, the EU had to project confidence and the ability to be both a geopolitical and normative actor, as well as to defend its regional approach and the 'added value' of the ENP framework to the external and internal stakeholders.

The US administration had a different set of challenges and addressees to convince. While the role of China was growing in Latin America, Central America seemed more immune to its influence, and the narrative was not built to be attractive for potentially unwilling recipients. Thus, the US could be more open about the interests underlying its approach. At the same time, the Barack Obama administration attempted to balance the image of the US as a 'colossus' of the North and tried to distance itself from the more aggressive policies of its predecessors in Latin America by building a narrative of a shared commitment for shared problems.

The main target that the Barack Obama administration had to convince was the US general public and politicians in Washington as they were not willing to dispense a requested additional US\$1 billion to countries widely seen as corrupt and unwilling to cooperate. Not accidentally, the US vice president Joe Biden wrote public articles, explaining the 'plan for Central America'. Summing up, the US had to project confidence in its ability to transform the neighbourhood, avoid being seen as too dominant and at the same time convince internal actors that the engagement was necessary and would be effective.

Concluding, the EU had a more difficult task to address and appease more varied audiences with its communications than the US. Nonetheless, to achieve desired internal and external political goals, both actors had to fit in their narratives quite contradictory elements: flexibility and principles (conditions), as well as interests and values.

#### 4.2. STRATEGIC NARRATIVES OF NEIGHBOURHOOD

The strategic narratives of both the EU and the US justify the necessity of action describing global and regional systems as changing, insecure and challenging, requiring bold moves to turn them to opportunities. They both tell the story of a rupture, present Southern societies as sources of instability, and propose a plan to change the situation.

### 5 RUPTURE: CHANGING REGION IN THE CHANGING WORLD

Both strategic narratives start by pointing out the rupture in the regional order. As explained by Joe Biden, 'as we were reminded last summer when thousands of unaccompanied children showed up on our southwestern border, the security and

prosperity of Central America are inextricably linked with our own'.<sup>40</sup> If something was not done, 'the Western hemisphere [would] feel the consequences'.<sup>41</sup>

The EU's narrative follows a similar pattern, stating that 'the current review comes at a time when the neighbourhood is facing numerous challenges'.<sup>42</sup> The Reviewed ENP also admits that in 2015 the EU found 'itself confronted with a neighbourhood characterized by many challenges ... with only a few countries committed to courageous political and economic reform'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the EUGS starts with the observation that its 'wider region has become more unstable and more insecure'.<sup>44</sup>

This rupture can be observed not only at the regional but also at the system level, where both powers emphasize the change, danger and opportunity. The US National Security strategy (NSS) of 2015 clearly lists the changes that are taking place in the international system as new powers are rising, and old enemies are still in action. Similarly, the EU points to a difficult, more contested and complex world in which it needs to operate.

The key differences between the EU and US narratives are the place of the neighbouring regions in their system narrative. For the US, Central America (or any other region) seems to be a geographical space of action. The challenges of the whole Western hemisphere take only a small part of the NSS at the end of the document, with significantly more attention given to the global changes (the rise of emerging powers, the shift of power from the state to other actors). For the EU, 'the region' is a significant element of the EUGS: among the strategy's main goals is the resilience of its neighbours and the construction of 'cooperative regional orders'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, 'the region' forms an important part of the EU's identity. First, the 'neighbourhood' is a particular space, different from any other region, as the special relationship with the neighbouring countries is enshrined in the Treaty on the European Union. Even more, building regions reflects the belief in 'voluntary forms of regional governance ... [and] is a fundamental rationale for the EU's own peace and development in the twenty-first century'.<sup>46</sup> The fact that the added value of this regional strategy has been criticized<sup>47</sup> adds to the overall crisis in the EU's identity as an external actor. The EUGS paints a bleak picture of

<sup>40</sup> J. Biden, *Op-Ed by the Vice President on the Administration's Efforts to Assist Countries in Central America*, the White House (10 Mar. 2015), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/10/op-ed-vice-president-administration-s-efforts-assist-countries-central-a> (accessed 15 Nov. 2019).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> European Commission, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, 14 (18 Nov. 2015).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> European Commission, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, 3 (9 Dec. 2017).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, at 10.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, at 13.

<sup>47</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 42, at 2.

the world: ‘in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned’.<sup>48</sup> This doubt (and maybe self-doubt) about the EU being a power leads to taking a more ‘humble’ approach in the neighbourhood as well. The Reviewed ENP admits that ‘the EU cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region, and there are limits to its leverage’ and limits the role of the ENP to ‘helping to create the conditions for positive development’.<sup>49</sup> Its approach to global affairs has been defined as ‘principled pragmatism’, stemming from ‘a realistic assessment of the current strategic environment as from an idealistic aspiration to advance a better world’.<sup>50</sup> This is a significant departure from the concept of a ‘non-imperial empire’.

Global and regional ruptures have had a weaker effect on US identity as a regional and global actor. While the NSS also points out the dangers of an insecure world, it also strikes a more optimistic tone. The NSS states that ‘today, the United States is stronger and better positioned to seize the opportunities of a still new century and safeguard our interests’<sup>51</sup> against these risks. Similarly, it does not see the instability in the South as sufficient to raise doubt about the US role in the region. One can describe the US approach towards regional problems as ‘cautious optimism’. Peculiarly, the overall emphasis on the US role as a natural leader in the world (the NSS calls global American leadership a ‘force for good’)<sup>52</sup> is somewhat scaled-down in the regional narrative. Here the US makes an emphasis on Central American ownership and inclusion of a broad coalition of actors and presents itself rather as a facilitator of change.

## 6 ORDER AND DISORDER IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Despite their differences, the two Western powers share the image of global and regional (dis)order. On the one hand, they both picture their neighbourhoods as sources of insecurity. On the other, they define (a very similar) desired change and present a roadmap to achieve it.

The Reviewed ENP Communication states that the crisis had placed ‘the EU’s own interdependence with its neighbours ... in sharp focus’.<sup>53</sup> The very beginning of the Reviewed ENP mentions the numbers of refugees arriving at the EU’s shores, the energy crisis, and terror attacks both inside and outside of

<sup>48</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 44, at 10.

<sup>49</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 42, at 2.

<sup>50</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 44, at 8.

<sup>51</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy*, 1 (Feb 2015).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, at 2.

<sup>53</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 42, at 2.

Europe.<sup>54</sup> The urge to react is also evident in the US documents, given that ‘US security is intimately linked to the security and prosperity of Central America’.<sup>55</sup> This interdependence forces both actors to emphasize the (lack of) stability in the South. The Reviewed ENP states that the most pressing EU challenge is the stabilization of the neighbourhood. The US is also willing to bring stability to ‘this impoverished and violent region’.<sup>56</sup> However, it promises ‘nothing less than systemic change’.<sup>57</sup>

While there is a difference in tone (the EU seeks to stabilize, while the US seeks to transform), at closer look, the issue narratives of regional order and disorder seem quite similar. Migration and security are the main challenges faced by Northern neighbours. Similarly, both agree that ‘the causes of instability often lie outside the security domain alone’.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, both focus on the ‘root causes’ of the rupture. This broad category encompasses the lack of economic development (e.g., slow economic productivity, underemployment), social trends (e.g., growing population) and bad governance (e.g., deterioration in democracy, rights of minorities, and pervasive corruption). Hence, nearly all the spheres of Southern societies are seen as potentially ‘fixable’. The narratives of both the EU and the US outline the reforms needed to achieve change and express their desire to support their implementation.

Both narratives also identify a future or ideal state where the policies should lead. In the case of the EU, the desired state is described by the concept of *resilience*, which is understood broadly and encompassing governmental, economic, social, climate/energy and migratory dimensions.<sup>59</sup> The US also uses the same concept; however, it defines it more narrowly: as resilience to climate change.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, the objective of the US strategy is similar to the EU’s. It aims to create an economically integrated, democratic, safe, Central America, capable of providing economic opportunities to its people.<sup>61</sup> Both powers openly state that they aim to stabilize the migration flows and diminish the risk of radicalization/engagement in criminal activities.

For both powers, regional integration forms part of an issue narrative (an instrument to achieve prosperity). In that sense, their region-level narrative of

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> White House, *US Strategy for Engagement in Central America*, 2 (2014).

<sup>56</sup> Central America Department and Office of the Chief Economist Latin America and Caribbean Region, *DR-CAFTA: Challenges and Opportunities for Central America* (2006).

<sup>57</sup> J. Biden, *A Plan for Central America*, *The New York Times* (30 Jan. 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/opinion/joe-biden-a-plan-for-central-america.html> (accessed 16 Nov. 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 42, at 3.

<sup>59</sup> Commission, *supra* n. 44, at 12.

<sup>60</sup> White House, *supra* n. 55, at 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, at 2.

order seems to be coherent with the global one, as they both desire to preserve a rules-based order, with strong multilateral governance.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, the EU emphasizes the region as a shared space ('our common region', in the words of Frederica Mogherini,<sup>63</sup> creating a more varied network of regional cooperation frameworks ranging from culture and science to migration management and security. While the US has created institutions to cooperate in the sphere of, for example, climate change, they are not prominent in the narrative coined after 2014, which focuses more on fostering cooperation between the Central American countries than engaging together in regional affairs.

Summing up the arguments laid out in this section, both the EU and the US have a strategic narrative of their neighbourhoods. Both regional visions have addressees and reflect the strategic aims of both powers. Moreover, these narratives are more or less coherent stories, connecting past (in the form of failed engagement), a rupture (migration and violence), and a future (stable, democratic, and prosperous neighbourhood), to be achieved by following the prescribed policies. During the analysis period, these 'ideal' orders at regional and global levels seemed rather similar. By emphasizing 'root causes' of insecurity and interdependences between the North and the South, both actors promoted a broad set of political, economic and security reforms.

Peculiarly, however, the place of 'the region' in the two discourses has been different. In the case of the EU, 'the region' connects all three levels of the narrative: the EU sees itself as an important actor working in its 'shared' or 'wider' region. Moreover, the concept of 'neighbourhood' is particularly relevant for the EU as it distinguishes certain regions from other geopolitical spaces (*identity level*). Building regions and the creation of cooperative regional orders is also an important element of the EU's global vision of how the world should be (*system narrative*). Finally, economic and cultural regional integration are also seen as tools for prosperity (*issue narrative*). Hence, one can conclude that during the period of analysis, the EU 'thought' as a regional actor, was willing to be a regional power in its neighbourhood and promoted regional integration as a tool for global prosperity. At the same time, 'the region' features in the US system narrative (region as an area for action) and issue narrative (regionalism as an instrument to achieve prosperity in the neighbourhood). However, 'the neighbourhood' does not appear in the US vocabulary. The US is a global power and its Southern neighbourhood is a mere space for action.

<sup>62</sup> White House, *supra* n. 51, at 23 and Commission, *supra* n. 44, at 8.

<sup>63</sup> European Commission, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Press Release* (18 Nov. 2015), [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp-stronger-partnerships-stronger-neighbourhood-2015-11\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news/review-european-neighbourhood-policy-enp-stronger-partnerships-stronger-neighbourhood-2015-11_en) (accessed 10 May 2019).



## 7 CONCLUSIONS

This article has compared the strategic narratives of and for the EU and US Southern neighbourhoods aiming to test claims about differences in their preferred regional orders. The comparison allows us to formulate the following observations regarding the main question of inquiry and the application of the strategic narrative framework for the analysis of region-level narratives.

For the EU and the US, we can speak about them having strategic neighbour narratives in both cases. Both powers attempt to create stories connecting the past engagement with the present rupture and promising to reach the desired state through a 'new, different and better' approach. These narratives address different internal and external stakeholders, shaping their expectations, defining their roles, and presenting the EU's and the US's identities as the 'coordinators' of the regional-level efforts. Contradicting observations about *Pax Americana* and *Pax Europea*, both actors claim to be willing to create similar regional systems based on multilateralism, international norms and regional institutions. These regional images of the order are coherent with their system-level narratives where they emphasize multilateralism, joint efforts and rule-based governance. Nonetheless, there is one discrepancy between the global and regional identity of the US. While presenting itself as a global leader, it scales down its tone in the regional sphere.

Second, the comparison of the EU and the US regional strategic narratives shows that one can speak about 'the Western' image of order. Although security is the main point of contention for both the EU and the US, the concept of 'root causes' of insecurity expands the number of policies and sectors in the Southern neighbourhoods seen as dangerous. While both narratives emphasize shared responsibility and ownership, they also lay out the steps and recipes for positive change and foresee mechanisms for inducing it. In that sense, these narratives seem to be strongly affected by the 'traditional concept of modernization understood as the convergence of different human societies towards the model developed first in Europe in the Western World, and that has, according to this view, gradually become the universal model through globalisation'.<sup>64</sup> While more modestly laid out by the EU, which seems to agree that its ideal might not be acceptable to all, it is still a modernization project that 'is deemed to be universal'.<sup>65</sup> Hence, those who see *Pax Americana* and *Pax Europea* as similar, are not completely wrong.

Nonetheless, there are two visible differences between the EU and the US narratives. The first one is related to identity, as the US is more confident in its capacity to transform the neighbourhood, and the previous failures do not affect its

---

<sup>64</sup> S. Florensa, *The Euromed Dream in the New Hobbesian International Wilderness*, 11(26) *Mediterranean Y. B.* 89 (2015).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

identity as a power. The EU, meanwhile, seems to be more conflicted about its role in the region and in the world, and the challenges in the neighbourhood affect its image (and self-understanding) as a global power.

The second difference is related to the place of the region in the strategic narrative. The US does not see itself as *belonging* to Central America: 'the region' is a geographical space, and regional integration is a tool for future prosperity. Maybe not willing to seem too dominant, the US presents itself rather as a coordinator of joint efforts for change. For the EU, meanwhile, 'the region' penetrates different narratives. First, it is related to its identity: engagement with the Mediterranean countries is nearly as old as the EU itself and is enshrined in the EU Treaties. Even the EUGS starts contemplating the instability in the EU's wider region and questions about the effectiveness of the ENP seem to affect the EU's standing as a power directly. The neighbourhood story for the EU is also personal and global.

Finally, from the theoretical point of view, the analysis shows both opportunities and challenges for merging strategic narrative studies and regionalism studies. First, 'the region' can be analysed as both a system in itself (focusing on elements, actors and principles inside of this system), and a part of a broader system narrative (i.e., as an area of activity, regions as partners). However, it is difficult to separate these levels as the region *par excellence* is placed somewhere between national and global and it is difficult to imagine the story of a region without mentioning elements of a global system. Second, 'the region' can appear as a part of a specific narrative (e.g., 'regional power' as an identity narrative and 'regional integration' as an issue narrative). For example, in the case of the US, the region appears at the system and issue narrative levels, while the US does not seem to have an identity narrative of regional power. Third, 'the region' can also penetrate all three levels, as in the case of the EU. The emphasis, attention and sensibility to neighbourhood affairs show that 'the region' is all: an element of a *system narrative* (cooperative regional orders, inter-regional cooperation, the neighbourhood being a challenge to security); an element of an *identity narrative* ('our wider region', the EU as a region and a regional power, the EU as a region-builder in the Mediterranean); and, finally, an element of an *issue narrative* (integrating regions for stability and prosperity). The rupture at one level of narrative requires adjusting other levels to it.

One can theorize that region becomes a part of all three narratives in those cases, where region-building is taking place, as actors acquire regional identities and see regions as part of their global imaginary. As discussed, the EU's engagement is deeper than the one of the US, as it has been engaged in region-building efforts in the Mediterranean since the Barcelona process. Evolution of the ENP reflects global and regional challenges; however, the interest in the Mediterranean stays the same. The US, meanwhile, does not seem to give special attention to

Central America. Hence, 'the region' appears only in some of its narratives. Future studies of regional narrative transformations during a longer period of time – considering for example how the strategic narrative has changed under the administration of Donald Trump; how it has changed with the 'geopolitical' EC; how global and internal events affect regional strategic narratives – or broader comparisons of regional strategic narratives of different powers might help to test this claim.

