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Peace is best served cold

Grand bargains are fading from Mediterranean diplomacy. For the EU, patience may be its most useful asset

Peace processes around the Mediterranean no longer look much like traditional peace processes. Comprehensive settlements have largely disappeared. In their place now sit fragmented negotiations, informal diplomacy and alliances that can shift within weeks. Ceasefires are increasingly localised — and just as often broken.

The European Union, for its part, is more exposed than ever to the fallout of regional instability, while also being pushed further away from the diplomatic tables where decisions are actually being made. Because the tools that matter most in today's Mediterranean are not the ones the EU has traditionally relied on. Its comparative advantage lies elsewhere: in prevention, soft power, operational diplomacy and its capacity to support implementation over time.

Leaning into these strengths may be its clearest path back to relevance, even as its influence over formal talks continues to decline.

A region in flux

Over the past decade, diplomacy across the Mediterranean has become markedly more transactional. Conflicts increasingly involve militias, proxy actors and regional powers whose interests rarely align, and that is reflected in the way peace itself is now pursued.

Comprehensive peace agreements have become rare. With more actors able to block or disrupt a settlement, and fewer willing or able to commit to one, mediation increasingly focuses on containing conflicts rather than resolving them. In practice, this means localised ceasefires, de-escalation deals and crisis management, often on several competing tracks rather than within one overarching framework.

That fragmentation has pushed the role of mediation further from governments and closer to the margins. Since discreet contacts are often

the only way to keep communication alive where trust is low, track II diplomacy – dialogue between experts, civil society figures and unofficial go-betweens – has expanded while official channels have narrowed.

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Beyond that, as strategic competition has intensified and the space for compromise has narrowed, traditional mediation has increasingly given way to more coercive forms of diplomacy. Sanctions, security guarantees and conditional aid are now commonly used to pressure parties into concessions. The Trump administration's transactional approach to mediation, often backed by the threat of economic or military pressure, illustrates this shift. Such methods can produce short-term gains, but they rarely create the political conditions needed for a lasting settlement.

Put together, these shifts mean mediation is no longer a single settlement to be reached. It is an ongoing practice — managing instability, keeping communication open and preparing the ground for political openings that may not arrive on schedule.

For the region, this creates specific needs. Amongst others, it needs partners who can work below the threshold of a full settlement. That means sustaining dialogue and providing technical support between one negotiating track and the next. As coercive diplomacy has gained ground, the region needs actors that can offer something different: a steady, patient presence rather than one-off dealmaking.

A new EU playbook

This is a role the EU is better placed to fill than it may appear. Its political weight in the region has declined, and divisions among Member States limit what it can achieve at the highest diplomatic level. But precisely because its leverage is limited, the EU has an incentive to make better use of the tools it does have. Rather than chasing diplomatic breakthroughs, it should focus on the areas where its long-term presence can make a difference: preventing tensions from escalating, building confidence between parties, supporting technical cooperation and helping create the conditions in which formal agreements can eventually hold.

This logic applies to Morocco and Algeria, where the bilateral relationship remains largely frozen. Diplomatic relations are still severed,

and the Western Sahara negotiations, despite renewed US engagement since early 2026, have not yet produced real political convergence. The EU should not try to mediate that dossier by itself, or force a rapprochement neither side is ready for. What it can do is invest now in the infrastructure of dialogue: keeping discreet channels of communication open, supporting track II and track 1.5 platforms, and encouraging practical cooperation on connectivity, border security, disaster management and people-to-people ties. The stakes here are not only external. Maghreb tensions increasingly play out inside EU member states themselves, as polarising narratives take hold online and within diaspora communities on the ground.

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That groundwork holds value either way. If political negotiations eventually move forward, it gives rapprochement something concrete to build on. If they stall, it limits further deterioration and keeps relationships alive that can be activated later. In both scenarios, Europe has a direct stake in the outcome. If relations improve, the EU stands to benefit from greater regional stability, connectivity, energy cooperation and economic integration. If tensions deepen, Europe is likely to absorb part of the cost. As the region's closest neighbour, the EU would indeed feel any further deterioration first, be it through security risks, migration pressure or disrupted trade. That gives it both an interest and a responsibility to stay engaged while tensions remain contained. Sustaining ties among experts and civil society keeps trust alive and lays the groundwork for the next opening.

None of this requires the EU to reinvent itself. But it does require treating patient, unglamorous engagement as a strategy in its own right, not just as what's left over once bigger ambitions fail. The Union already has enough of a foothold in the region to do this work: dedicated political attention on the region, a fresh strategy meant to anchor its ties there, and long-standing groupings that keep Member States and regional partners around the same table. What is missing is not more architecture. It is the willingness to put what exists to use: sustaining channels of communication, backing technical cooperation and standing ready to help implement agreements once the politics allow. The value of this groundwork is that it leaves the EU ready to act when a political opening appears, rather than forcing it to build relationships and mechanisms

from scratch once one does.

That discipline is also a form of realism. The EU cannot out-leverage the United States or regional powers, and competing on those terms will keep producing the same result: more exposure without real influence. Patience, technical credibility and the ability to sustain relationships across changes of government on all sides are not second-best. They are the actual terms on which the EU can still matter. That is a modest ask next to competing for a seat at the negotiating table, but it plays to strengths the EU already has.

The EU does not need to compete to be the world's chief mediator. Its value lies elsewhere, as a long-term implementation partner combining governance support, institutional capacity-building and sustained diplomatic engagement. Judged by that standard, success is not one transformative breakthrough. It is the ability to preserve dialogue, prevent escalation and keep the door open for the settlement that may, eventually, become possible.



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