A GEOPOLITICAL SEA: THE NEW SCRAMBLE FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

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Over the last decade, the deep transformations that swept through the wider Mediterranean region have risen new challenges that overlap with old crises. State fragility, conflicts, security threats and socio-economic inequalities have turned the area into one of the world’s most volatile regions, whose geo-strategic importance goes far beyond its geographical borders. Here, more than elsewhere, diverging interests of several regional and international actors are fueling rivalries and conflicts for power and control of energy resources, intensifying fragmentation and instability. Today, the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting oil prices add new strains to this fluid geopolitical context where a new balance of power is hardly emerging. What are the prospects for regional stability and order? How do the interests and ambitions of the main regional players interact with those of external powers? What room for cooperation initiatives in the region?

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The East Mediterranean: Decoding the (In)security Complex

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Why did the January-2020 Berlin Declaration on Libya fail to limit this country’s flare-up, and the more recent Cairo Declaration in June could face the same fate? It is because this Libyan case is but a reflection of the predicament of the East Mediterranean and the whole MENA insecurity complex: the interconnectedness of different elements of instability, geopolitical as well as domestic, entangling several international/regional powers and local actors/militias. So-called “new wars” are multiplying and the State – this classical bedrock of international order – is declining. This insecurity complex tends to be dominated by what Thomas Friedman of the New York Times called in a different context Black Elephants. As a metaphor, Black Elephants is itself a combination of two well-known English metaphors: the “elephant in the room”, which denotes a basic or risky topic that we choose to ignore or neglect; and “black swans”, which denotes unexpected occurrences. I use this double metaphor to indicate that both past policies and new events trap the East Mediterranean into multi-layered conflicts, and a
thick insecurity complex. While here the emphasis is mainly on domestic dynamics will be also taken into account. Country examples such as Libya, Syria or Lebanon are cited to demonstrate the argument.

CONFLICT PREDOMINANCE: OLD AND NEW

In 2014 the MENA region accounted for **15.7% of global conflicts**, three times higher than its percentage of the world’s population of 5.2%. Since then, the region has continued to move, but without changing direction. While geopolitical inter-state conflicts continue (e.g. Arab-Israeli), they are now superseded by intra-state conflicts, so-called new wars. Amidst extreme fluidity and uncertainty, most issues tend to be securitized, i.e. to be conceived as threats and added to a constantly enlarging conflict map.

Many of these intra-state conflicts – especially the structurally basic ones or elephants in the room – have already existed for a few years. For instance, population growth is on average around 2.4%. However, without an equivalent growth of resources the existing resource gap is aggravated. Similarly, the present urbanization pattern led – under the pressure of migration from the countryside – to the ruralization of the cities with its rise of informal economy and tin-districts or slums. These structural problems reflected both misdevelopment and misgovernance, as symbolized by rising youth unemployment that largely motivated the 2011-Arab Spring. These uprisings were a consequence – and not a cause – of these aspects of misdevelopment and misgovernance aspects. The post-Arab Spring context, however, brought in “new wars”.

"NEW WARS THEORY” DEMONSTRATED

As is known, when we think of the common and widespread phenomenon of war, we usually think of inter-state wars and classic contributions such as those of the German General Clausewitz. But data over the last 20 years or so show a different pattern: decline in the number of these inter-state wars and the rise instead of INTRA-state ones (Kaldor 1991&2012). They are also different from conventional civil wars because of the multiplicity of their warring components: religious sects, tribal groups, identity factions, different militias. Though protagonist among themselves, they are united against the state. Indeed, the state ends by losing its most important characteristic: its monopolistic use of force. The present situation in Libya – which boasts the largest oil reserves in Africa – concretizes this phenomenon of new wars.

Libya's fighting groups and "new wars" cost

- Government of National Accord (GNA): centered in Tripoli and led by Fayez Sarraj and backed up by UN.
- Libyan National Army (LNA): centered in Eastern Libya, led by General Khalifa Haftar, and supported by a number of militias and Special Forces unit.
- General National Congress (GNC): with the Libya Dawn (equivalent of an “armed forces” led by their ex-chief of staff General Jadallah al-Obaidi and Libya Shield grouping).
- Jihadist Groups: ISIS: still maintaining itself in the central coastal city of Sirte, eying nearby oil
of revenue. Ansar al-Shari'a: pro-al-Qaeda group, active in eastern Libya and has battled the LNA in Benghazi. Also present in cities of Derna and Sabratha. Responsible for the attack on US consulate in September 2012 and assassination of Ambassador Chris Stevens.

There are also less well-known groups such as the Benghazi Revolutionaries: for example, Derna Mujahidin Shura Council, Ajdabiya Revolutionaries Shura Council.

Because of this multiplicity of protagonists and decision-making centers, new wars are wars within wars and could continue endlessly at a high level of human and financial cost. Though precise data are hard to come by, estimates are still indicative. To date Libya's death toll is around 32,000 people since 2011. Financially the oil sector alone has lost $68 billion in revenues since 2013 with ongoing oilfield shutdowns and port disruptions. The destruction goes further as nearly half of the infrastructure and production facilities have been destroyed, with GDP falling from $81.87 billion in 2012 to only $48.32 in 2018.

As in Syria earlier, foreign powers, especially regional ones such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia or the UAE, are seizing the opportunity to increase their influence. As a result, the multiplicity of actors and factors gets more chaotic, and state authority declines further or even disappears.

STATE FRAGILITY/FAILURE AND ITS INTERNATIONAL SPILL-OVER

It is no wonder that the phenomenon of fragile/failed state is increasing, both in number and in degree, quantitatively and qualitatively (for definition and measurement, Korany 2019). Lebanon’s default on its economic obligations internationally and domestically, amidst mass protests to “change the system”, is the most recent addition on the fragile/failed state list. Lebanon’s unprecedented doom and gloom is confirmed by a recent assessment of the International Crisis Group (June 9, 2020). Highly import-dependent, Lebanon has run out of foreign currency to pay for what it consumes, while the state is printing money to pay salaries and is unable to service the public debt. Banks have imposed tight capital controls, which have staved off financial collapse until now, but only by bringing much of the economy to a standstill, manifesting soaring unemployment. Many businesses have failed, and the state of ‘medical emergency’ imposed since 15 March to combat COVID-19’s spread will likely be the last nail in the coffin for many more. While a curfew stifled demonstrations and police cleared away the protest camp in downtown Beirut, street actions in late April suggest that virus-related hardships could trigger more unrest. Crunch time may come when the state, strapped for cash as tax revenue collapses, cannot meet the public-sector payroll or when hyperinflation wipes out the real value of people’s incomes. State institutions, including the police, may start to disintegrate, and what have been mainly peaceful protests could turn violent.

As the “State” has traditionally been since the 1648-Westphalia Treaties the basis of international order, its fragility/failure is affecting this order. Another international spill-over of state fragility/failure is the flood of refugees/migrants.
demonstrating at more than one level the domestic-external interconnectedness. In its most recent report, the UN High Commission for Refugees specifies that out of the 20.6 million refugees for 2019, Syria tops the list accounting for more than 30%, exactly 6.6 million. Already in 2015, Leonard Doyle, spokesman for the International Organization of Migration, said “[…] nothing has been like this since World War II. Millions cross the Mediterranean at great risk. For instance, of the 45 thousand that crossed in 2013, 700 died in the process. The following year this number rose more than four times to reach 3224.”

Indeed, the Mediterranean has shown itself across these recent years to be also a mass grave. The photo of Syrian child Alan Kurdi, found lifeless by a rescue ship on the Mediterranean beach, spoke more than a thousand words.

SECURITIZATION IS REPLACING INTERDEPENDENCE

Though refugees and migrants could be a needed source of new and youthful blood for Europe’s ageing population, their flood is now securitized—i.e. viewed as a threat. So are other instances of interdependence such as the discovery of new natural gas. The optimism of an IAI’s 2016-study (Gitlin) about the possibility of trans-border pipelines with Turkey as a security link between the Mediterranean and Europe has not materialized. Instead, conflict escalated with Turkey’s 2019-maritime demarcation agreement with Tripoli’s contested government and its increasing military involvement. Opposition by other Euro-Mediterranean countries such as Greece and Cyprus shows that Turkey’s link with Europe and even NATO is. Interconnectedness of conflicts and their widening/deepening continue to grow.

The way-out of this multi-layered insecurity complex is a regional architecture based on CBSM, confidence and security-building measures. But this is a topic of a separate article.


Gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have been enthusiastically received by international observers, although the current price dynamics advises caution. This commentary both explores the opportunities of political and economic collaboration for the states of the region and beyond, and analyses the financial hazards of gas extraction and selling in a global scenario characterised by low prices and decreasing demand. The arguments put forward are that considerable public investment from regional and European states and a clear stance towards Turkey are necessary conditions to exploit gas opportunities and that the time has come for governments to take these steps. In greater detail, European states and regional governments should soon make a final decision on whether or not to build a pipeline from the gas fields of Egypt, Israel and Cyprus to Italy (EastMed) and on if Turkey should be included in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum.
Political Opportunities and Financial Hazards in the Eastern Mediterranean (EMGF): a regional platform to manage gas prices and the energy flow from producing to consuming states.

Opportunities for cooperation revolve around the shared economic interests for basin states to exploit the local energy resources and export them to Europe and elsewhere. The drivers of collaboration are a relatively high amount of gas in the regional basin, the proximity of the gas fields, and the existing infrastructural landscape. When looking at the Eastern Mediterranean gas fields, the total reserves for Israel is about 886 billion cubic metres of gas (bcm) (Leviathan: 450 bcm; Tamar 318 bcm; Dalit 55 bcm; Tanin 55 bcm; Karish 8 bcm); 850 bcm for Egypt (Zohr 850 bcm; Noor – yet to be established); and 299 – 359 bcm for Cyprus (Aphrodite 129 bcm; Calipso 170 - 230 bcm). Putting the data into perspective, the total of reserves is 2.035 – 2.095 bcm, which is roughly 4 years of the gas consumption for all European States $^1$ (554 bcm in 2019$^9$). When looking at the expected internal consumption, Egypt scores around 57 bcm for a year$^4$, Israel is around 10 bcm for a year, and Cyprus is around 1 bcm for a year in 2013$^6$. It is worth stating that the fields mentioned above comprise the entire gas reserves for Israel and Cyprus, while Egypt has more fields within its territory. It follows that Eastern Mediterranean gas will both cover the internal consumption and allow for exports. In such a scenario, coordinating the extraction process would lower prices, making the gas more competitive in the international market.

Eastern Mediterranean gas fields, in fact, are located within a ray of 100-150 km$^6$, and it is, therefore, highly cost-effective to connect them for export. To understand this point better, it is worth mentioning that the current project of transporting gas to Italy through a pipeline, as designed by Israel, Cyprus and Greece in a preliminary deal$^7$, would require to connect all the regional fields to maximise the project profits. The alternative is transporting gas by tankers, which would also benefit from existing regional infrastructures. Gas can be brought to the Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) complex of Damietta and Idku to reach both Europe and Asia by tank ships.

The financial hazards revolve around the cost of extracting gas from the regional fields vis-à-vis current global prices. Eastern Mediterranean gas is often located tens of kilometres from the coasts and in relatively deep waters. These two elements make its extraction expensive when compared to other sources in Russia and the US. To better understand this point, it is useful to look both at the estimation of extraction costs and the existing contracts. Charles Ellinas, CEO of Cyprus-based energy consultancy ECP Natural Hydrocarbons Company and among the leading experts of the Eastern Mediterranean energy market, estimates the average extraction cost for the gas in the region to be around 4.5 $ per mmBTU$^8$. An agreement between the Jordan National Electric Power Corporation (NEPCO) and the Israel Leviathan consortium fixes the
selling price for Leviathan gas to $4.79 for mmBTU. It follows that the breakeven point of Eastern Mediterranean gas is probably somewhere between 4.75 and 5 $ for mmBTU when selling it to the neighbouring countries. This price is similar to the average gas selling cost for Europe in 2019, which scored 4.80 $ for mmBTU, but it would make the Eastern Mediterranean gas uncompetitive when including transport costs. Carrying the gas by LNG ships would not help in solving the problem, as the average 2019 prices for Europe (5.05 $ for mmBTU) and Asia (5.53 $ for mmBTU) are too low to make the Eastern Mediterranean gas attractive for buyers. Furthermore, the current low prices might be here to stay when looking at the future outlook in a time of gas bonanza. The Energy Information Administration (EIA) expects that the price for selling natural gas in the period between 2020 and 2035 will be around 4 $ for mmBTU, while the price should reach 5 $ for mmBTU from 2035 to 2050. It follows that Eastern Mediterranean gas lacks competitiveness due to the current price environment. This issue would be partially solved with a pipeline which connects the producing areas of the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. The infrastructure would surely reduce the transport costs, but such a project requires a high financial investment to be completed. The estimated costs to carry 10 bcm of gas from the producing area to Italy by pipeline is expected to be around 7 billion euro. Ellinas estimates the unit cost of the pipeline to be around 3.50 $ for mmBTU, and the profitable price of gas at 8 $ for mmBTU when including the extraction cost. It follows that energy companies might find the pipeline investment not worth the price. Therefore, member states of the EU should step in and fund the project to make it more competitive.

The previous analysis suggests that the Eastern Mediterranean gas potential might remain untapped for the upcoming years unless European and regional states or European institutions give political and financial support to the pipeline. Such a decision would have a high political valence, as it reflects European and regional states stance to the current Turkish policy in the Mediterranean. Ankara has made it clear that it opposes the EastMed pipeline, which would hinder Turkey’s role as energy bridge between iddle Eastern production and European consumption area. Furthermore, Ankara might make a claim to participate in the resource management mechanism of the EMGF in the coming years. In a nutshell, the Turkish strategy points to obstacle the infrastructural project in the area as long as other states keep excluding Ankara from collective decisions. The signing of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreement with the internationally recognised Libyan government (Tripoli) and current gas exploration in the Turkish-recognised Northern Cyprus EEZ should be understood within this framework. The deal with Libya also serves to obstruct the construction of the pipeline by putting up legal
pretexts; the gas exploration in the Northern Cyprus EEZ aims at finding gas to make a case for participating in EMGF as a country involved in the gas extraction in the area. European and regional states currently lack a coherent strategy to respond to the Turkish plan, and such uncertainty is advantaging Ankara. A collective response can take two possible paths. The first is to recognise Turkey’s political interests as legitimate and thus engage Ankara as a partner in the Eastern Mediterranean. This option would have the advantage of calming some of the current tensions, but it also encourages Turkey to take an even more assertive stance in the region. The second is excluding Ankara from the infrastructural and decisional mechanism in the Eastern Mediterranean to contain the Turkish outlook. Such a strategy would not only harm Turkey’s regional ambitions but also exacerbate existing tensions with Ankara. Whatever decision is made, European and regional states should take a clear stance on Turkish activism in the following months. The upcoming period is decisive both because the Libyan conflict will shape the regional environment vis-à-vis competition between Cairo and Ankara as well as because Turkey might find new gas fields in the area, which would give this country a claim to join the EMGF. At the moment, Turkey is still the elephant in the room with regard to Eastern Mediterranean gas. A clear stance towards Turkey needs, therefore, to be addressed before any project can be seriously undertaken.

1. European states includes Turkey but excludes Russia in the British Petroleum Report
3. Egypt: Natural gas consumption, Ceic Data
4. Egypt: Natural gas consumption, Ceic Data
5. There are not recent available data, but it is very likely that the current data are not quite dissimilar to those of 2013 due to the limited population of the country (1.17 million), 23 December 2013: https://cyprus-mail.com/2013/12/24/emergency-meeting-called-on-interim-gas/
7. Paul Tugwell, Leaders from Israel, Cyprus, Greece sign EastMed pipe deal, Bloomberg, 2 January 2020
8. Charles Ellinas, Changing priorities threatens viability of EastMed gas pipeline, Cyprus Mail, 6 January 2020
9. Amiram Barkat, Leviathan gas: The good, bad, and downright confusing, Globes, 9 January 2020
10. World Bank Commodities Price Data (The Pink Sheet), World Bank, 2 June 2020
11. Regional LNG Prices (Monthly Average), BlueGold Research: https://bluegoldresearch.com/regional-lng-prices
12. Ibidem
14. Charles Ellinas, Changing priorities threatens viability of EastMed gas pipeline, Cyprus Mail, 6 January 2020
15. Ankara slams EastMed pipeline, opposes any gas project excluding Turkey, Daily Sabah
After many years of being the Middle East’s backyard, the Mediterranean has over the past decade become its flashpoint, hosting a toxic mishmash of militarized conflicts, border disputes and energy competitions. If these divisions are not contained using constructive diplomacy and viable multiparty agreements, regional instability will continue to pose a threat to all Mediterranean littoral states.

Most countries in the region have not yet signed bilateral agreements that delineate their maritime borders. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) postulates that a state can exercise maritime sovereignty in an area of up to 12 nautical miles from its coast and to establish an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), where it could claim rights over fishing, mining and drilling activities, in an additional area of 200 miles. However, in semi-closed seas with multiple states and overlapping spheres of influence, like the Mediterranean, where the
distance between many neighboring countries is less than 424 miles, a bilateral agreement is required to draw the dividing line between each country’s economic zone.

The discovery in the last decade of massive hydrocarbon riches in the region and the intensification of the civil conflict in Libya have altered the regional status quo, reviving interests in drawing final maritime borders between the Mediterranean states. Indeed, last November, the Turkish government signed a maritime border agreement with Libya’s Government of National Accord that delineates their EEZs in the Mediterranean. The deal, which was considered to be illegal by Egypt, Greece and Cyprus, had created a maritime corridor between the two countries. Italy and Greece inked a similar agreement in June, ending an issue that had been pending for four decades. Moreover, Greece and Egypt agreed to resume talks on demarcating the maritime boundaries between the two countries.

The main bone of contention in the legal dispute between Turkey on one hand, and Greece and Cyprus on the other, is concerned with the legal status of islands in maritime law. Athens and Nicosia affirm their adherence to the principles of UNCLOS in this regard. Yet, due to the close proximity of a number of Greek islands (especially Kastelorizo) to the Turkish coast, Ankara, who is not a signatory to the UNCLOS convention, claims that islands should not be entitled to the same rights to maritime zones as land territory.

To be sure, this legal dispute is the façade of an imbroglio involving multiple parties who are impelled by potent economic and realpolitik motivations. If fully utilized, the huge deposits of natural gas in the Mediterranean could transfer billions of dollars to the coffers of the region’s countries. To that end, Mediterranean actors have pursued different paths: Egypt aspires to become a natural gas hub in the Eastern Mediterranean; Greece, Cyprus and Israel are planning to construct a 1,900 kilometer subsea pipeline that would transfer Israeli and Cypriot gas to Europe through Greece (the project has been put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic and falling oil prices); and Turkey has deployed its hard power capabilities in Libya’s proxy civil war. Meanwhile, oil conglomerates crave a piece of the cake. European states wish to see their current dependence on Russia’s natural gas lessened and the US is keeping a close eye on regional developments.

To complicate things further, the politics of maritime boundaries and pipeline competitions takes place against the backdrop of simmering geopolitical conflicts, most notably the longstanding Cypriot question and the decades-long Arab-Israeli conflict. The flow of refugees in recent years from the region’s hot spots, such as Syria and Libya, towards European shores has added a destabilizing element to the already fragile equilibrium. Unsurprisingly, the delay in finding viable political solutions to these protracted disputes has led to the militarization of the region. This
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has taken shape through huge arms purchases (including a great deal of naval hardware), the rise in the number of military drills (especially among the anti-Turkey axis states), deeper military involvement in Syria and Libya (chiefly on the part of Turkey), the frequent harassment of civilian and commercial vessels by warships, and the seasonal escalation of fiery rhetoric among Mediterranean states’ officials. Perilously, such high levels of militarization, which take place within the framework of contested sovereignties, undemarcated maritime borders and overlapping licenses granted to oil companies to operate in similar zones, create a situation that runs the risk of maritime accidents.

In recent months, all eyes have been gazing towards developments in the Libyan civil conflict, notably the vital Turkish military contribution to the series of battlefield victories by the forces of the internationally-recognized Government of National Accord against the forces of the eastern commander Khalifa Haftar. The change in the front lines among the Libyan warring factions has proved that Turkey has not only retained a foothold on Libyan soil, but also put on display that its intervention could be decisive. In response, Egypt seems adamant to prevent Turkey from further extending its grip into Libya’s oil crescent, by force if necessary. Referring to a potential larger military role for his country in Libya, the Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi warned on June 20th that any direct Egyptian intervention “would have international legitimacy at this point,” adding that the key central towns of Sirte and al-Jufrah are red lines for Egypt’s national security.

Within the larger framework of geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts playing out in the region, Libya is only a piece in a larger puzzle of interwoven interests, ambitions and concerns, but it is an important one. As unjust as it may sound, in international politics, the law usually follows in the footsteps of power politics, not vice versa. And so, redrawing the Mediterranean’s maritime borders will likely reflect the balance of power on the ground rather than institute a new balance. Seen through this prism, the outcome of the Libyan conflict stands to have an impact on the leverage of the contending parties in the Mediterranean.
The overlapping of civil and proxy wars in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have gradually turned the wider Mediterranean into a land of conflicts, asymmetric threats and geopolitical challenges. In particular, the implosion of some coastal states of the southern shore has undermined the stability and legitimacy of the old regional system built in the post-Cold war. This shift has unequivocally stressed a new perception of the Mediterranean arena: an expanded and wider space turned in one of the world’s most volatile regions.

The eruption of conflicts in some Mediterranean countries has helped to develop this area into a new space of competition, even among global players. The several wars and tensions that have broken out in the Mediterranean since the post-Arab Spring are partially influenced by competition between various regional and external players (especially Russia, Turkey and Gulf monarchies), contributing to reshape
challenges to the security and stability of this geopolitical arena. In fact, several adverse interests and problems, as well as a lack of support from regional and great powers, have thwarted any diplomatic negotiations impeding progress towards a shared and peaceful solution.

From this perspective, the crises in Libya and Syria emerged as paradigm of the contemporary chaos in the wider region, in which conflicts, power policies, expanding geopolitical pressures, as well as the lack of clear fault lines and coherent political-military strategies, have shaped this fragmented scenario in a new context of global competition. In the wake of recent battlefield developments in Libya and Syria, international powers are manoeuvring for influence and supremacy, with far-reaching implications for each national sovereignty, and cohesion.

In fact, the latest developments in Libya (General Khalifa Haftar’s strategic retreat from the Western part of the country) and in Syria (the agreement between Russia and Turkey that stopped fighting in Idlib) seem to be leading towards a period of reassessments, which does not, however, seem to presage an end to the crises. In the same way, external powers attempt to freeze these conflicts to establish a settlement aimed at de-escalating tensions in the hope that a stalemate could lead to a de facto win-win situation for everyone. But managing these conflicts would fragment coalitions, preventing or slowing a clear victory of one side. This outcome cannot be averted due to the involvement of proxy powers.

The ratio of this pattern of negotiation is based on two main features: on the one hand, the new international framework created after the Cold war, in which aspiring powers tried to leverage their involvement in different ways but did not get directly involved in the conflicts; on the other, the fact that these civil wars did not have clear winners and losers. A trend that repeats itself constantly from the Balkan wars in the 1990s to the present day, adapting to the different international needs of uni/multilateralism. This pattern evolved over the years, but its pillars have remained roughly the same: 1) managing compromises among the local actors, 2) protecting conflicting interests for the external powers.

The emergence of this framework in the Arab-Mediterranean conflicts has provoked a constant failure in all recent regional crises. Libya and Syria wars, indeed, fall within the above picture, without altering the nature or the balance of power but with never ending conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes. In light of this, international powers tried to update this multilateral approach, proposing a new model based on a crystallization of conflicts and the protection of the interests of international players involved in that confrontations. This new approach has started to widespread in every crisis on the Wider Mediterranean, particularly in Syria, where Russia, Turkey and Iran – the main players involved – have tried to
manage the conflict by freezing the war. This new model of negotiation is known as Astana Process. An attempt was made to replicate it also in Libya, with the same outcome of failure. the Astana approach is not aimed to solve a crisis but rather to freeze a conflict, waiting for a good compromise between external actors. Although this process could be an agile diplomatic tool to guarantee a tactical success in the power proxy strategy, it also highlights the external actor’s inability (or unwillingness) to resolve the interminable crises.

Clearly, the Astana approach cannot be a model solution in Syria and Libya, where even a potential Turkish-Russian deal would, at best, lead to a de-facto partition of these countries into spheres of interests. This means that conflicts would diffuse locally, with militia groups contesting power and resources at the local level, and that any truce could be potentially broken. In addition, other proxy powers in Libya (such as France, Egypt, UAE) and in Syria (as Iran or Hezbollah) could dispute any agreement that doesn’t satisfy them and their goals.

In short, this approach doesn’t solve any crisis, but it legitimizes foreign meddling in local conflicts, elevating the external players’ interests over those of local actors, of which they become their undeclared representatives in negotiations. Basically, the Astana model is only useful for achieving political compromises in the short term without the definition of a comprehensive solution to conflicts in this new phase of the multipolar era. It is therefore a diplomatic tool to guarantee sharing power and to prevent military escalations. The same framework that has been used – without any results – in Syria since January 2017 and in January 2020 during the Berlin Conference for Libya aimed at stopping the violence and defining steps towards a truce for those on the ground. Despite international support, the deal reached in Berlin has been considered a failure, due to the developments in the civil war.

In conclusion, the most dangerous risk for Libya and Syria is that they could quickly find itself facing protracted and expanded struggles, opening the doors to a new conflict dimension, in which these crises could resemble similar landscape, although persist different peculiarities. A further internationalization of these conflicts could finally lead to an overcoming of the local dimension causing a total deadlock to the complete disadvantage of the local populations and the emergence of several war of attrition in increasingly smaller contexts.

Over the last years, Turkey has increased its activism in the Mediterranean, becoming a key and assertive player in regional politics and crises. From the Eastern Mediterranean gas dispute to the Libyan war, Ankara has not hesitated to flex its muscles to safeguard its interests and achieve its goals. Turkey’s activism is part of a wider foreign policy, which has become more and more militarized since 2015, aiming at extending its geopolitical influence in the Middle East and its surrounding regions. This includes a significant maritime component, the so-called Mavi Vatan or the “Blue Homeland” doctrine, for the control of waters in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea and the Black Sea through military power projection. It is not by chance that Blue Homeland is the name of the largest naval exercise (involving 103 military ships and 20,000 soldiers) in Turkey’s history which was launched at the end of February 2019 to test its ability to carry on war...
simultaneously in the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. A more active role for the Turkish Navy in national defence as well as in energy geopolitics competition is one of the pillars of this maritime doctrine, which also relies on the development of an indigenous defence industry.

Positioning itself as maritime power Turkey has intended to send a loud and clear message to other players, both regional and external, that have their stake in the area: Ankara wants its say in regional affairs and particularly in the great game of gas in the Eastern Mediterranean. This was addressed not only to Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel that along with Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian National Authority, in January 2019 established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to coordinate their energy policies and create a regional gas market, but implicitly also to the European Union and the United States that support cooperation projects and have important energy and geopolitical interests. Aspiring to become an energy hub between hydrocarbon-rich areas and the European markets as well as to diversify its energy supplies Ankara, which imports more than 90% of its energy requirements/demand, showed to be ready to challenge any initiative that does not include it and may endanger its geostrategic interests.

Against this backdrop, the first move was taken in May 2019 when Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced the start of drilling activities in the waters west of Cyprus. Claiming the rights of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus to benefit from natural resources around the island, over the years Turkey has opposed unilateral initiatives by the Republic of Cyprus (the Greek part recognized internationally) as well as the activities of international energy companies in disputed waters around the island. Indeed, Turkey considers Cyprus’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as infringing on its continental shelf (Turkey claims a 200-mile EEZ). Furthermore, it has not signed the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea nor agreed maritime demarcation deals with the other littoral countries, except for Northern Cyprus and more recently Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA) of Fayez al-Serraj. Conversely, since 2004 Cyprus has signed demarcation agreements with the other littoral states. It is not surprising that in this context the presence of Turkish drilling vessels – Fatih in the west and Yavuz in the northeast of Cyprus – have escalated tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, provoking harsh reactions in Brussels and Washington as well.

Tensions escalated even further at the end of the year when Turkey took a further step signing an agreement with the internationally recognized GNA, one of its few allies in the wider Mediterranean, defining maritime borders and EEZs with Libya. Although the legitimacy of the agreement was questioned by the other littoral states, Turkey staked a claim on an area through which the EastMed pipeline is supposed to pass, making its realization...
more difficult. However, the construction of this ambitious 1,800 km pipeline – which is supposed to transport between 10 and 16 billion cubic meters per year from the Levant gas fields to Greece and Italy through Cyprus and Crete bypassing Turkey – faced a number of challenges in terms of feasibility, costs, and funding, even before the global economic slowdown and the drop in energy demand amid the Covid-19 pandemic put on hold drilling activities carried out by international companies and made the investment for the project more unlikely.

Even more important, the military dimension of the agreement between Turkey and GNA allowed Ankara to throw its weight behind Serraj’s government by providing GNA with military equipment, training, armed drones, and forces. Turkey’s military support, along with Qatar’s financial backing, has reversed the balance of power on the ground in the GNA’s favour in a crisis that has gradually transformed into a proxy war between regional and external players. The involvement of a plethora of actors in Libya clearly shows that the great game of energy is just one side of a greater game for geopolitical influence in the wider Mediterranean region. Up to now, it seems that Turkey is succeeding in projecting its power in Libya and that the Ankara-Doha axis, of which the support of political Islam is one of its main pillars, appears solid and resilient to external shocks. However, how long it is sustainable amid the recession of global economy, the drop in energy demand that tremendously affects hydrocarbons producers like Qatar, as well as the spectre of another financial crisis in Turkey, remains an open question. While it remains to be seen whether or not the latest developments both in Libya and in the Eastern Mediterranean will turn into an opportunity to de-escalate tensions and open new and unexpected channels of dialogue and cooperation, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s decision to transform Hagia Sophia into a mosque was an unequivocal message to the world, and especially to the Sunni world: Turkey is here not only to stay but also to play a leading role.
Although the Mediterranean was traditionally an afterthought in Israeli geopolitical thinking, the 2000s recorded a shift: **Israel is turning to the sea.** The Mediterranean is capturing a **growing role in Israeli geostrategic thinking.** This is in large part the result of the discovery and development of gas in the Mediterranean Sea beginning in the late 1990s. Developed rather quickly, these gas reserves made Israel energy self-sufficient, a significant geo-strategic transformation. Prior to these discoveries, energy was a **serious concern.** The state had **no energy resources,** and for decades found it challenging to secure supply in the face of Arab hostility. With the gas discoveries, Israel gained not only energy independence, but also an economic and political tool. Israeli agreements to export gas to Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority gave Israel **important leverage.** The gas discoveries in the Mediterranean further offered the possibility for export to Europe if indeed Israeli-Greek-
Cypriote designs to build an undersea pipe will materialize. The new maritime energy source contributed to the expansion of the Israeli navy. Once a junior player in the Israeli armed forces, in 2013 the navy was entrusted by the government to protect the gas depots, despite the fact that they are held in private hands (including by non-Israeli corporations) and are outside of Israel’s territorial waters. The new task, alongside the expansion of the submarine flotilla (probably as part of a future nuclear deterrent against Iran), awarded the fleet a more important role in Israel’s national security establishment and resource allocation. It also allowed Israel to use the force for international cooperation and military diplomacy in the region. This turn to the sea also contributed to an emerging quasi-alliance with Cyprus and Greece, which includes, among many other areas, the possible joint gas export project, military exercises, and bi-annual trilateral summits between these countries’ leaders. Like its regional allies, Israel is affected by growing Chinese interest in the Mediterranean. Chinese corporations contracted the expansion of Israel’s two largest ports, Ashdod and Haifa. The latter was substantial enough to irk the US, whose navy used the Haifa port in the past for re-supply. Israeli and Chinese actors are in early phases of developing a Chinese funded, or owned, high speed train from Israel’s Red Sea port in Eilat to the Mediterranean port of Ashdod, that will serve as an alternate route for the Suez Canal portion of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Finally, Israel’s geostrategic turn to the sea is fueled by its newish reliance on desalinated water from the Mediterranean. For decades the country suffered from water shortages. Following a 2008 government plan, it moved to heavy dependence on desalinated water that is sourced in the Mediterranean, and processed in five coastline plants. Today, desalinated water accounts for more than 50 percent of Israel’s overall water consumption, and 80 percent of its residential and commercial water needs. Israel’s turn to the sea has the potential to further affect its relations with the regions’ actors around it. On the one hand, it holds the promise for greater Israeli integration into the Middle East. Jordan who has limited natural resources is already benefiting from a close, affordable energy source and water supply from Israel. The Palestinian Authority could follow. Egypt, is importing gas from Israel, to fill the gap between its current national gas resources, and the large needs of the Egyptian economy. On the other hand, Israel’s self-reliance, and maritime-based alliance with the non-Arab, non-Muslim Greece and Cyprus, could also be seen as a way of distancing itself from the Middle-East. The alliance with the Hellenic nations could also drag Israel into the seemingly escalating tension between the Hellenic states and Turkey. Ankara began projecting more assertively into the Eastern Mediterranean in the last few months, including the use of force in Libya, the signing of an EEZ demarcation agreement with it, and the prevention of commercial exploration.
activities in Cypriote waters, alongside Turkish gas explorations in Cypriot economic waters. Turkey is the strongest maritime actor in the region and invests considerable resources in maintaining this status. Its domestic industries develop capacities to build large naval platforms, including submarines and an aircraft carrier, and to export warships to other states. Turkey is also a key player in controlling the flow of refugees from the region to Europe and is involved in most of the conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. Cyprus and Greece might expect Israel, their militarily superior new ally, to help in curbing Turkish ambitions. The disparity between Turkish strength and aspirations, and its seeming marginalization by the emerging power axis of Egypt, Israel, Greece and Cyprus might amplify regional tensions and make a direct confrontation between Turkey and Israel, especially over energy issues. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) demarcation or Gaza, more likely. Finally, Israel’s geostrategic turn to the sea might buttress existing regional institutions, such as the Union of the Mediterranean, or at least increase Israel’s desire to support them or maybe even create new ones. After all, the Israeli reliance on energy and water from the Mediterranean necessitates a greater involvement in protecting and regulating this space. The joint aspects of maritime-based gas exploration and export have already led to the creation in early 2020 of a nascent Cairo-based, East-Mediterranean institution, the East Med Gas Forum.
After an uncertain political transition following the 2011 revolts, Egypt seems ready to reshape its geopolitical role in the Mediterranean area and fulfil its geostrategic goals, always maintaining their national security principle to be an essential objective of its domestic and foreign policy. The two main closely and interconnected scenarios, where the country’s strategic ambitions are projected, move from Libya to the contested waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. In particular the latter represents an area that, in recent years, has become a hotspot for the global energy market due to huge gas-field discoveries. It is enough to imagine how the fight for the control of these resources are shaping the region, elevating it to a potential geostrategic game-changer for the coastal countries such as Egypt.

Following the success obtained in the beginning of 2019, when the government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi officially
declared the achievement of its natural gas self-sufficiency thanks to the discovery of the Zohr and Noor fields, Egypt is trying to reassert itself as a regional hub for energy trade and distribution of liquefied natural gas (LNG). This strategy, that would allow the country to meet its internal needs and profit from gas exports, led it to support the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), a sort of “gas cartel”, through which Cairo, together with Tel Aviv, Nicosia and Athens, could coordinate the energy policies of its members, by managing the supply and demand flows. According to Cairo’s view this means also taking advantage of future subsea pipeline projects (such as EastMed, despite some analysts being sceptical on the real gains for Egypt), which promises to supply Europe with Egyptian natural gas reserves of the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, creating a direct link with Idku and Damietta liquefaction plants and shipping gas to global markets.

In light of a serious domestic and international economic recession, following the diffusion of Covid-19 pandemic, however, this production seems to have been hit hard enough to force the Egyptian government to suspend liquefying and exporting natural gas and, in March 2020, to stop the production at the Idku plant. The consequences of this decision could have dangerous repercussions on the economic and social stability of the country so much that Cairo government declared the need to increase its liquefied natural gas exports and expand its production from the Levantine basin. A stance that firstly will aim to intensify the production of the Zohr field (based along the Egyptian-Cypriot maritime borders contested by Turkey), and then to enhance its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, further exacerbating the dispute with Ankara.

Turkey, which is working to extend its control over energy resources in the Mediterranean – although at the center of the oil and gas exports bound for Europe from Russia and the Caspian Sea countries, it needs to import about 75% of its energy needs – views Cairo’s moves with increasing apprehension. Ankara reacted by taking the field in the Libyan crisis, which represents a strategic geopolitical node for Egypt and where the country now seems to get bogged down. Also in this scenario, al-Sisi has to face Turkey as Egypt’s most dangerous competitor.

In addition, the latest Libyan developments in favour of the UN recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, and backed by Ankara, created a new step in the Turkish-Egyptian competition in the Mediterranean. In fact, the inability of General Khalifa Haftar, supported by al-Sisi’s regime and Gulf monarchies, to resolve the crisis by military means and assure control of the neighbouring Cyrenaica, led Egypt to rethink its strategy in the country.

The tensions between Ankara and Cairo have spilled over into the Libyan crisis, after the Ankara’s signature of a memorandum
of understanding with Tripoli along the maritime demarcation border that would allow Turkey to drill energy resources in Cypriot and Greek offshore. This agreement on an exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which violates international rules on the delimitation of national waters, can also be read as a Turkish strategy to reshape its position in the Mediterranean energy dispute. Supporting the UN-backed government of Serraj and the Muslim Brotherhood-linked factions who belong to the GNA, Ankara was able to turn the tables ensuring that Tripoli would not fall. The Turkish presence in this fundamental area is for al-Sisi an alarming threat. The long-standing conflict within the Sunni world that sees Turkey and Qatar, fierce supporters of political Islam, against the equally stainless United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, was transferred into the Libyan front.

In this way, it is evident that Egypt cannot tolerate a Turkish-friendly Islamist government in Libya that controls the Libyan-Egyptian border, because Cairo needs to safeguard its porous western frontier bordering Cyrenaica and prevent dangerous jihadist penetrations from Eastern Libya. Furthermore, the other relevant economic interests that historically linked the two North Africa countries, represent a priority for the Egyptian government’s strategy. After the failure to achieve a cease-fire and a possible agreement with the GNA under the UN auspices with the 6 June Cairo Declaration, which was vigorously refuted by Ankara and Tripoli, al-Sisi decided to beat the drums of war, warning that Egypt could intervene militarily in Libya if Turkish-backed government forces were to advance on Sirte-Jufra frontline. Turkish-backed forces should not advance to that line that is a “red line for Cairo” or confront will be likely inevitable. If a military conflict between Turkey and Egypt breaks out in Libya, it would certainly have heavy repercussions on the whole region and would cause Egypt to recalibrate its goals. The country is, in fact, facing a serious health and economic crisis, due to the serious pandemic repercussions on vital sectors such as tourism. The Egyptian government, has therefore been forced to request the support of the International Monetary Fund: in the beginning of June they reached a staff-level agreement on a $5.2 billion stand-by arrangement that aims to alleviate the economic impact of pandemic. Embarking on a new war, in this context, would be a hazardous move, to say the least.

Yet, it is precisely the economic sector and the national security problem, which has always represented the workhorse of al-Sisi presidency, that could push Egypt to move rashly in an attempt to roll back Turkish aggression. In this context, Egypt would risk being crushed in its geostrategic and geopolitical aspirations, losing its grip on the neighbouring country. The late Egyptian “Show of Forces”, which led al-Sisi to move several armoured vehicles and a number of fighter planes to the border with Libya, would thus be justified.
In any case, the recent suggestions that an agreement between Cairo and Ankara would be more convenient than the beginning of a conflict, remain high debatable: there might be mutual interests in the Mediterranean that could move Ankara and Cairo closer to each other. So, a possible “truce-deal” would prevent the establishment of the EastMed gas pipeline, whose benefits for Egypt – according to some analysts – are extremely unclear. Above all, by establishing a maritime border agreement with Turkey, Cairo could acquire more “waters” in terms of square kilometres of the Mediterranean, a result that the agreement proposed by Greece and currently being negotiated with Cairo would not be able to ensure. Regardless of these hypotheses, it is difficult to understand if the current ambitious geopolitical goals could be effectively implemented by Egypt. Especially if the country decides to engage in an unsustainable war with uncertain outcomes. A possibility that seems improbable but that in any case represents a new source of instability on the shores of the Mediterranean.
Once marginal in shaping the geopolitics of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, Gulf power projection and competition have become a central driver of the politics of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria since the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The political turmoil that engulfed these states created both threats and opportunities for Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the rich and ambitious states of the Arabian Peninsula. Their involvement, which combined economic aid, political support and at times military assistance, was structured around their notion of what is the desired or acceptable role of Islamist movements in Arab politics. On the one hand, Qatar supports Islamist movements and most notably the Muslim Brotherhood as instruments of influence and popular appeal, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia perceive them as a security and ideological threat to their regional influence and domestic stability.
This rivalry is playing out across Middle Eastern arenas, and the Mediterranean is a key theatre. Gulf countries increasingly consider the Mediterranean as an important strategic space. The sea is the prolongation of maritime corridors linking Europe to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and as such crucial for global trade and energy routes. The UAE's maritime interests in the Mediterranean over the past decade, with Dubai Ports World operating ports in Cyprus, France, Algeria and acquiring a Spanish port operator, reflect this thinking. Gaining influence and levers in a region so close to European economic and security interests is also a way for Gulf countries to secure useful political capital and relevance. UAE involvement in Libya for example has allowed Abu Dhabi to deepen its strategic relations with France.

The Arab Spring movements in the Southern Mediterranean inflamed the contest for influence between GCC countries. In Libya, the UAE and Qatar supported the anti-Qaddafi war in 2011, but through competing Libyan networks and movements. Following the fall of Qaddafi, the civil war opened space for competing external influence, with Qatar supporting the UN-recognised government of Tripoli and associated militias while the UAE backed General Khalifa Haftar, a strong opponent to political Islam.

The same rivalry played out in Egypt during and after the 2011 revolution. Qatar backed the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated presidency of Mohamed Morsi, who was deposed in a 2013 coup encouraged by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since then Qatar lost considerable influence in Egypt despite its media outreach and harbouring of Muslim Brotherhood exiles. Its trade with Egypt plummeted while Egypt’s trade with the UAE grew almost 5-fold between 2010 and 2018. At the same time, Egypt’s political and economic dependency towards the UAE and Saudi Arabia is not absolute: Egypt has backed the Saudi and Emirati boycott of Qatar, but the need to preserve important economic links with Qatar – Qatar had investments in Egypt amounting $1.105 billion in 2017 and 250,000 Egyptians work in Qatar – and the need to cooperate with Doha on Gaza nevertheless compel Egypt to maintain pragmatic relations with Doha.

In Tunisia, the victory in 2011 of the Ennahda-led coalition allowed Qatar to extend its influence in the country at the expense of the UAE. But after the more secular Nidaa Toune came to power in 2015, the UAE resumed political relations with the country, hoping to dilute Qatari influence and obtain Tunisian recognition of Libya’s pro-Haftar Eastern government. This however did not materialise, and Tunisia seeks a careful balance between the two Gulf powers.

The competition between Qatar and the UAE has broad and lasting repercussions. The GCC dispute (which began in earnest in 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed harsh sanctions on Qatar) enters its fourth year without any real sign of detente, ensuring that those rivalries will...
shape dynamics in the wider region for the foreseeable future.

The ostracization of Qatar by its neighbours heavily curtailed Doha’s ability to project influence in the region. In response, Doha deepened its partnership with Turkey, a key competitor of the UAE and Saudi Arabia which shares Doha’s Islamist inclinations. Following the GCC spat, Ankara increased its rhetorical and political support for Doha and deployed troops on the peninsula. In return, Qatar extended financial assistance to Ankara, most notably to shore up the Turkish currency. Today, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider Turkey, with its military and economic power and regional ambitions, as their main rival not only in the Mediterranean, but across the region, including in Syria and in the Red Sea.

Libya is currently the major hotspot of those rivalries. The UAE, with the support of Egypt, has provided General Khalifa Haftar with military backing and financial assistance. Conversely, Turkey, and to a lesser extent Qatar, have backed the United Nations-recognised Libyan government in Tripoli. To counter Haftar’s offensive in Tripoli in 2019, Turkey ramped up its involvement in Libya, deploying troops and advanced weapons systems starting January 2020. This helped the forces aligned with the GNA launch a counteroffensive that is currently repelling Haftar’s forces.

The contest over Libya is an extension of the rivalries in the Eastern Mediterranean. In November 2019, Turkey signed an agreement with the Libyan government demarcating new maritime borders that cut through Greek territorial waters. Those unilateral steps, which violate international law, aim in part to counter the EastMed gas pipeline project. Led by Greece, Israel and Cyprus, and strongly supported by the UAE and Egypt. This major energy infrastructure project could have threatened Turkish and Qatari energy interests by side-lining them over gas trade to Europe.

On its side, the UAE also stepped up its activism in the region, increasing mercenary deployments in support to Haftar but also tightening its links with Cyprus and Greece, which oppose Turkey’s ambitions in the Mediterranean. In June 2020, Egypt also threatened to launch a military intervention in Libya in the event Turkey-backed Libyan forces advancement on Sirte. This announcement was met with statements of support from Abu Dhabi and Riyadh.

It is unlikely however that Cairo would want to risk being tangled in a messy war. In fact, Haftar’s setbacks and weakening coalition could compel the UAE and Egypt to re-evaluate their support. However dependent on Saudi and Emirati economic linkages and political backing Cairo is, it remains keen to maintain strategic autonomy in its own neighbourhood.

The COVID-19 pandemic adds several layers of uncertainty. The economic consequences of the crisis could have far-reaching political ramifications, reducing the economic levers of all players and potentially altering the regional
balance of power. The future of the EastMed pipeline project, whose feasibility is increasingly questioned by specialists, will also affect regional perceptions. An abandonment of the project would reinforce Turkey’s position in the region, thus weakening the UAE’s efforts to build an anti-Turkey/Qatar front in the Mediterranean.
The dynamics of the Mediterranean region are increasingly affected by the interplay of the US, Russian, and Chinese efforts to strengthen their respective regional positions. Since the years of the second Obama administration, the US disengagement has led to a greater Russian and Chinese presence and to the growth of their influence at political, economic, and military levels. Today, Russia is heavily involved in the Libyan struggle for power, a role that the reception of General Khalifa Haftar onboard the flagship of the Russian Fleet, the Admiral Kuznetsov, already highlighted in January 2017. Since then, Moscow’s role has progressively increased, culminating in the deployment of Russian PMC’s personnel in support of Haftar’s troops, in September 2019, during the operations on the Tripoli front. Somewhat reminiscent of the role assumed in Syria since 2016, Moscow’s activism has been, in recent years, the main source of concern for both the US military
establishment and NATO. Moreover, the increase in military assertiveness has gone side by side with a greater economic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, favored by the planned enhancement of the shipyard facilities in Tartus. Moscow’s political weight has been re-affirmed in the region by the role that Russian President Vladimir Putin played as peace broker during the crisis triggered by the announcement of the US’ withdrawal from Northern Syria in October 2019. The so-called ‘Sochi agreement’ (October 22, 2019) has been, to a large extent, a product of the role that Russia has assumed as the bulwark of the Bashar al-Assad’s regime and main military force in the region.

In parallel, concerns about a possible Chinese encroachment in the Mediterranean have grown. In September 2013, at the height of the Syrian civil war, Beijing dispatched the amphibious transport dock Jinggangshan to the Eastern Mediterranean officially to “observe” the events. In May 2015, Russian and Chinese naval units carried out their first joint maneuvers in the Mediterranean as part of a long term-program involving several operational theaters, while live-fire drills were conducted in July 2017, when Chinese units were en route to the Baltic to participate in the Joint Sea 2017 exercise together with the Russian fleet. The PRC’s economic activism is another source of concern. On the one hand, the acquisition of port facilities in the Mediterranean and its neighborhood strengthens China’s grip over the global logistic system, offering to Beijing’s a further competitive advantage on its rivals, on the other, this strategy is increasingly seen as a way to establish a network of overseas stations that the PLA Navy can use in case of need; an aspect that the US Department of Defense already pointed out, recently remarking how “some OBOR [One Belt One Road] investments could create potential military advantages for China, should China require access to selected foreign ports to pre-position the necessary logistics support to sustain naval deployments in waters as distant as the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, and Atlantic Ocean to protect its growing interests”. In 2017, PLA Navy established its first overseas facility in Djibouti, at the tip of the Red Sea, officially as a support base; however, the control of trade facilities in the Mediterranean can equally promote China’s power projection.

Although Beijing stresses its unwillingness to challenge the US security interests in the Mediterranean, Chinese initiatives have been widely criticized by US and NATO top military figures. In March 2019, General Joseph Votel, then head of the US Central Command, warned that China’s OBOR and port investments in the Arabian Gulf, Djibouti, the Suez Canal, and the port of Haifa could “mask longer-term military and political objectives”, while last June Admiral James G. Foggo, commander of the US Naval Forces Europe - Naval Forces Africa and of the Allied Joint Force Command Naples affirmed that China is actively working in Europe and Africa “to subvert the international
A Geopolitical Sea: The New Scramble for the Mediterranean

rules-based infrastructure that has maintained peace since the end of World War II*. China’s activism in the Mediterranean was an important theme of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s comments at the NATO 70th anniversary summit in April 2019. Since then, Allies have embarked on a process of re-assessing NATO’s exposure to Chinese technology and investments in key European infrastructure and the de facto alliance between Moscow and Beijing. In 2019 London Summit, the NATO Heads of State and Government agreed that the Atlantic Alliance has to address the security consequences of the rise of China, and in launching the NATO 2030 initiative, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg reaffirmed this commitment, remaking how it “need to be able to respond” to the consequences of China’s new strategic relevance “working together with partners, not least in the Asia Pacific, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, which are very close and like-minded partners to NATO”.

In the US political circles, the completion of the Chinese infrastructural network in and around the Mediterranean is currently perceived as far more threatening than any possible Russian ‘Eurasiatist’ theorizations. In Nicholas Spykman’s words, the fear is that “who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world”?. Since mid-2010, Moscow’s strategy has focused on the Mediterranean (but the Kremlin’s activism can be traced back to the Kosovo crisis in 1999, which remains the first great East-West clash of the post-Cold War age), making the region the shatter belts between Russia and the US. The increasing Chinese presence has added dynamism to this scenario. However, Washington seems currently unable to exploit the possible cleavages existing between its two rivals. This is partly due to the weakness of the US and NATO Mediterranean strategies. In NATO’s eyes, Moscow’s facilities in Syria and possibly in Libya pose a more immediate and ‘understandable’ threat, as well as a threat that better fits in several member states’ priorities. However, the overwhelming attention placed on Russia risks to further reduce the perception of the Mediterranean’s importance transforming the theatre in sort of sideshow. Although in 2016, at the NATO Warsaw Summit, the alliance agreed to ‘rebalance’ its posture placing greater emphasis on the Southern front, such an effort has led only to few results. The French withdrawal from Operation Sea Guardian after mounting tensions with Turkey (July 1, 2020)* is only the last example of the different political visions that crisscross the Alliance and affect the elaboration and implementation of a common Mediterranean strategy.
1. Y. Karamanau, “Russia plans to invest $500 million in its only navy base outside the former Soviet Union — here’s what it’s like there”, Business Insider, 18 December 2019.


There is something deeply and comprehensively flawed in the EU’s relations with its Mediterranean neighbourhood. After more than 50 years of European cooperation, agreements, declarations and plans with the southern Mediterranean and the Arab countries, only one new democratic state (Tunisia) has emerged. A benevolent observer would say this democratisation process was not initiated as a result of the EU’s resolute support for a population demanding freedom from an authoritarian regime. A blunter observer, however, would argue that Tunisians managed to topple their former autocrat despite the support he received from certain European quarters until the very last minute. So much for decades of European pro-democracy rhetoric.

The Mediterranean is one of the areas in which the EU has made the most effort and in which it has devoted a great deal of creativity and imagination to rethink cooperation.

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frameworks. However, the EU has failed to meet each and every one of the objectives announced in the 1995 Barcelona Declaration. Twenty-five years later, the Mediterranean is today far from being “a common area of peace, stability and shared prosperity”. The “Euro-Mediterranean free trade area”, announced for 2010, has yet to be realized nor is expected to be anytime soon. The “strengthening of democracy and respect for human rights” belongs to the realm of fiction. The “Euro-Mediterranean partnership for greater understanding and closeness between peoples” leaves much to be desired. In short, the failure is undeniable, and the frustration generated is profound. Neither the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) nor the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) have changed those realities for the better.

So, what has prevented the EU from being more successful in transforming the Mediterranean? One of the main reasons behind the EU’s inconsistencies and the lack of coherence between its discourses and the outcome of its policies is to be found in a widespread and oversimplifying idea. For decades, the EU has been trapped in what it perceived as a “dilemma between values and interests”: if it wanted to be true to its values, it would have to press for genuine democratic reform, but if it tried to defend its immediate interests, it would have to maintain friendly relations with autocracies. The problem with the perceived “dilemma between values and interests” lies in the definition of interests. Values seem easier to identify and to be placed in a temporal framework. However, how interests are defined depends on factors such as: 1) who defines those interests, 2) the timeframe to evaluate whether they have been successfully achieved or not, and 3) who assesses the costs and benefits of putting those interests before values. For many years now, the problem with the definition of interests has generated a false dichotomy between security and democratisation in Europe’s Mediterranean neighbourhood. Needless to say, non-democratic regimes are comfortable with that dichotomy and actively promote it. Short-term interests are arguably easier to identify than longer-term ones. This “short-termism” has guided European policies and actions for years, while regional conditions kept deteriorating. For the past decade, the world has witnessed the emergence of alarming phenomena occurring in the Arab region. These include civil wars, regional warfare, proxy wars, arms races, migration crises, waves of refugees, the use of weapons of mass destruction, the rise of sectarianism and religious extremism, the emergence of totalitarian projects such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the strengthening of repressive authoritarianism and the deterioration of relations between states and societies in several countries. The number of failed or failing states in the southern and eastern
Mediterranean has been on the rise, and there is no reason to believe that this trend will be reversed in the near future.

When defining its interests, the EU has failed to measure the secondary effects of cosying up to regimes whose nature goes against good governance and the rule of law. By supporting short-term stability at any cost, the EU has de facto geared towards preserving the status quo through backing “illiberal autocracies”. Those regimes cultivate crony capitalism, rely on corruption and nepotism, have a very unequal distribution of power and wealth and, ultimately, generate frustration and resentment among their populations. It is time for the EU to assess if those secondary effects compromise the interests, wellbeing and security of European states and societies in the longer term.

Because of its addiction to false dilemmas and misleading dichotomies (“security vs democratisation”, “cooperation with governments vs engagement with societies”), the EU has missed many opportunities and made itself less relevant as a driver of positive transformation in its immediate neighbourhood to the south. It is clear that neither the EU nor its member states can democratised those countries by themselves; however, they have enough leverage to play a crucial role in advancing good governance and democracy, which they are not using.

Some of the consequences of the EU’s addiction to false dilemmas is that they take over its political will to uphold its values, they make it engage in practices that have adverse long-term effects and they prevent it from developing a clear vision on how to protect its future interests.

In the new international context marked by a global emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic can be an aggravating factor for problems and a multiplier in conflicts around the Mediterranean. Its southern and eastern shores were already under great pressure from weak social protection systems and high youth unemployment, even before they were hit by the coronavirus. It is quite likely that the economic and security implications of the pandemic can lead to further destabilisation in such a volatile region. This should be the moment of clarity for the EU to quitits addiction to false dilemmas and to start a long-awaited course correction in its relations with the Mediterranean. The risk of not doing so is that it may have to deal soon with a more fractured, conflictive and unstable neighbourhood.

Whether it is true or not that Albert Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”, it does not take a genius to realise that constantly acting based on false dilemmas and misleading dichotomies ends up producing undesired and self-defeating outcomes.
Beyond Tradition: What Role Should Italy Play in the Mediterranean?

Giampiero Massolo
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It is widely believed the COVID-19 pandemic that has recently hit and paralysed the international community has accelerated processes already underway. These include the redefinition, certainly not the disappearance, of what is often termed globalisation. A trend, the latter, that – despite trade wars, shrinking supply chains, reshoring of companies – is destined to permanently characterise international relations, marking the end of traditional space-time limits and expanding their scope as never before. In terms of conducting foreign policy, the world is still global without space and time limitations – at least, that is how things should be viewed when managing a country’s external relations.

This requires a global vision of national foreign policies, including Italy’s, so as to have a comprehensive picture of geopolitical and geo-economic conduct. On the basis of this assumption, it becomes clear the traditional Mediterranean dimension, although strategic
for Italy, **cannot be the totality of our country’s external dimension.** On the other hand, and beyond purely geographical data, it would be equally simplistic to define Italy as the “pivot” of the Mediterranean.

In such a perspective, the Mediterranean dimension is **the core of Italian foreign policy.** Assuming the latter can be represented by three concentric circles, the smallest circle would be the Mediterranean area, the second one would cover the European and Transatlantic dimensions, while the third one would encompass the system of international relations, including the multilateral dimension.

Thus, the Mediterranean can be seen to be at the heart of our interests, albeit not representing them as a whole. At the same time, taking this area in its broadest sense – the enlarged Mediterranean –, many of the tensions of the global international system find an outlet here.

In this sense, the Mediterranean resembles a microcosm in which differing relationships and global trends are developed and thrive: relationships between superpowers; inter-Islamic relationships; flows of people, goods (and weapons); and the threat of Islamic terrorism in its different forms. These factors are **too numerous and too diversified** to guarantee our country that uniqueness that is so often evoked, but remains confined within the framework of a crystallised narrative, often just lip-service.

What role can Italy then play in today’s Mediterranean that, like a coin, has two sides: threat and opportunity?

First, it is necessary to adopt an integrated approach so our country can combine geopolitical and global dimensions in defining its role in the area. In concrete terms, this means, first and foremost, abandoning the logic according to which Italy – a “medium power” – can act only act in the region **within the framework of international multilateral initiatives.** Such an approach would obviously be the preferred option, provided all our partners and competitors acted in the same way. Which is clearly not the case. Accordingly, developing strong bilateral relations with the countries in the region is a priority for our foreign policy. To this end, we need to leverage our economic, commercial, technological and cultural expertise, and our ability to facilitate relations between key Mediterranean countries and the EU. This does not mean we are set to act alone all times. Pursuing our national interests realistically and effectively on our own **does not exclude identifying other countries that can share a “road map” with us.** For this, potentially making instrumental recourse to multilateral bodies (the UN and its agencies) could also prove useful. And clearly, bilateral diplomacy should primarily include our European partners, without forgetting, on the one hand, Washington is still key to the overall balance in the region and, on the other hand, the need to carefully consider the threats and opportunities arising from the growing role of powers like Russia, Turkey and Egypt.
Defining a scale of priorities is equally a top priority, putting security and defence first and assessing any other potential opportunities for cooperation in such a framework.

Conceiving the Mediterranean region not as a mere basin but as a wider framework (Africa, the Greater Middle East) and starting to define our interests and our partnerships in this broader context would be a logical consequence of such an approach. From this standpoint, the significant political capital the Italian Government invests in the yearly MED Dialogue Conference, organised by ISPI, is a meaningful example of such an integrated and far-reaching course of action for our policy in the Mediterranean region.

Two additional paths should guide our steps and help shape our role in the region. First, being a European democracy is consistent with siding with the forces that support secularism in the region, standing against any form of extremism and fanaticism. Secondly, we should propose our economic model (not only in the energy field - ENI - but also in transport and infrastructure, sharing the positive experience of SME supply chains) and promote a more targeted and widespread use of cultural diplomacy.

For all these aspects, Libya offers a real case study, especially as it is a country where Italy is not easily replaceable from many viewpoints. The current stalemate and a possible de facto partition of the country are not an option. Nor is a military solution. This is the time for active diplomacy to develop a network of connections with countries that are instrumental to a negotiated solution, namely Turkey, Egypt, France, Germany, Russia and the US. All of them would need to become involved to try to achieve meaningful political dialogue between the Libyan parties.

We could then promote the creation of a less plethoric and more pragmatic multilateral ‘format’ that brings together meaningful players. Once again, specific priorities, diplomatic initiative and political/economical/cultural tools, without neglecting military cooperation, would prove key in moulding a positive role for Italy where our national interests are at stake.