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**THE CHANGING MEDITERRANEAN:
GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS AND
CHALLENGES**

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Introduction

The Mediterranean Sea holds unparalleled strategic importance for several states in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Serving as the natural connection between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans through Gibraltar, Suez, and Bāb el-Mandeb, this maritime space is of inescapable centrality for the global trade system, with 90% of trade still concentrated at sea. Consequently, states highly dependent on the import of natural resources and the export of high-value goods, mainly European countries, consider the overall stability of this sea essential for their economic well-being and national security. Additionally, the Mediterranean's relevance has increased due to recent discoveries of large offshore oil and gas fields in its Eastern quadrant, between the territorial waters of Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt. As noted by ISPI (2021), the Mediterranean is also crucial when it comes to fishing activities, migration flow, the presence of pipelines and fibre optic cables, and security competition among various state actors in the region. Today, this region is largely regarded as a fundamental geopolitical area for the international balance of power, with multiple states vying to expand their influence and project power, with the aim of achieving greater strategic depth. The growing interest shown by countries like Russia, Turkey, Algeria, Egypt, and others in the Mediterranean, which translates into a more substantial naval presence, follows the geopolitical vacuum left by the US after its "Pivot to Asia". In this context, these geopolitical players are becoming more assertive, creating a concrete risk of destabilisation. This article assesses the changing balance of power and the rise of new geopolitical actors within the Mediterranean while also focusing on the areas where tensions may erupt or have already broken out.

An Increasingly Crowded Sea

Russia, Turkey, Algeria, and Egypt are the geopolitical players more assertively increasing their commitments in the Mediterranean region. As far as Russia is concerned, its Mediterranean policy is deeply rooted in history. Rumer and Sokolsky (2021) noted that Russia's absence from the Mediterranean, observed from the end of the Cold War to the annexation of Crimea in 2014, marked a departure from centuries-old involvement in the region. One of the lingering goals of Russian foreign policy is to get access to the Mediterranean and gain a military and commercial foothold in the region. The Syrian civil war of 2011, in particular, was motivated mainly by Russia's pursuit of these strategic goals, resulting in the establishment of its first naval bases in Tartus. Gaining more open access to the Mediterranean, Russia has focused on developing an effective green water navy, thus recovering from the naval decay experienced in the 1990s (Parnemo, 2019). As Dmitry Gorenburg (2019) points out, the Russian footprint in the Mediterranean region has grown larger and larger, with the Black Sea Fleet expected to continue expanding in the following years, enabling Russia to deploy more ships in the Mediterranean. This makes Russia a geopolitical actor that needs to be considered within the Mediterranean strategic calculus.

A reality that becomes even more evident when looking at the expanding influence of Russia in Northern Africa and the Sahel region. Access to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus provides Moscow with the most efficient and direct way to circumvent NATO land containment and expand activities in the MENA region, solidifying Russia's presence in the Mediterranean for the foreseeable future.

Turning to Turkey, the country, led by Erdogan, has emerged as a central player in the Mediterranean and Northern Africa. While Turkey had disengaged from the region for almost a century after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a renewed started to emerge in 2009 with Ahmet Davutoğlu's appointment as Turkish Foreign Minister (Rudincová, 2014). Since then, new Turkish embassies have opened across the whole region, bilateral and diplomatic relations have been established, and economic and cultural ties have been formed, with a boost in military cooperation between Turkey and states of the Mediterranean Basin (Rudincová, 2014). This new approach, evident in the Blue Homeland Doctrine, deliberately aims to increase Turkey's strategic depth and control over the surrounding seas, while consolidating its regional and international influence and gaining access to new energy resources. This shift contrasts sharply with the "zero problems with neighbours" foreign policy of the early 2000s and is increasingly perceived as a security threat by neighbouring countries like Greece, Cyprus (Deriziotis, 2021), and other nations with interests in the area such as France (Adar, 2020). This doctrine is contributing to giving Ankara a more consequential role within the Mediterranean basin, thus positioning Turkey as a major power in Northern Africa and the wider geopolitical area. This new status was achieved following the aftermath of Turkey's military intervention in Libya's civil war, a military operation that proved essential in allowing Al Serraj's government to prevail over Haftar's endeavours, making Libya the Turkish linchpin of its Mediterranean policy (Tanchum, 2020).

The role that Algeria is starting to play in the Mediterranean is also noteworthy. The country's growing military capabilities, the expansion of its Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ), and its growing assertiveness are raising concerns in the region. The proposed 2023 budget allocates a staggering 130% increase in military spending, reaching an unprecedented peak of \$ 22.78 billion, equivalent to 13.8% of the estimated Algerian GDP. It is important to highlight that, on average, countries around the world spend approximately 2.2% of their national GDP on military expenses (Menas Associates, 2023).

Algeria was already the African country with the highest defence expenditure, but such an astounding increase would distance it even further from other African states, making it a central player in Northern Africa and Mediterranean affairs. Additionally, as shown by Troisi (2021), the growing level of instability characterising the Mediterranean in the last decade has pushed Algeria to rump up its naval capacities, purchasing three Chinese Corvettes class Adhafer – C28A, two Meko A-200 multipurpose-combination ships of German production, two Kilo 877EKM class and four Kilo 636 class submarines of Russian production (Troisi, 2021).

These acquisitions not only enormously enhance Algeria's naval capability making it one of the major naval powers of the Mediterranean, but also showcase a concerning level of military cooperation with Moscow and Beijing, which in turn fuels strategic and security concerns across European states.

Lastly, since al-Sisi's rise to power in 2014, Egypt has been renovating its navy and re-visioning its foreign policy for the MENA region. This post-Arab Spring phase of political transition has led Egypt to reshape and step up its geopolitical commitment within the Mediterranean area (Malcangi, 2020). The rising tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, coupled with the growing naval capabilities and assertiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated government in Ankara, are the recent key developments contributing to this shift. One of the central goals of al-Sisi's government has been the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood; therefore, Turkey's expanding influence in the Mediterranean and its growing military presence in Libya are seen as existential geopolitical threats. Consequently, Egypt has undergone a continuous trend of military rearmament with a focus on the navy. As noted by Troisi (2021), the country once possessed one of the largest fleets in the Arab world; however, over the last few decades, its naval assets have succumbed to obsolescence and structural gaps. Nevertheless, between 2014 and 2020, Egypt acquired two French-made Mistral-class amphibious assault helicopter carriers, four French-made Godwind-Class multi-mission corvettes, four MEKO A-200EN-class Frigates, and two Italian FREMMs. These acquisitions dramatically improved the power projections and the amphibious and landing capabilities of the Egyptian navy, making it one of the most formidable navies in the region and arguably, a direct competitor to Turkey.

Concluding Remarks: Rising Tensions and Instability

Russia's Mediterranean policy is a cause for concern among NATO member states, with the 2022 Strategic Concept defining Moscow's military build-up in this sea as a direct challenge to the alliance's security (NATO, 2022). Turkey's Blue Homeland Doctrine fuels security competition with Greece and Cyprus, increasing the likelihood of armed hostility. Relations between Greece and Turkey have progressively deteriorated, with the Turkish Foreign Minister going as far as stating in 2022 that Ankara would take military action if Athens proceeded with expanding its territorial waters in the Aegean (Stamouli, 2022). Despite the threat of war, Athens remains steadfast in its commitment to extend territorial waters west and south of Crete (Kokkinidis, 2022).

Algeria's assertiveness is evident in the unilateral expansion of its Exclusive Economic Zone to waters adjacent to the Italian island of Sardinia, as well as in its patrolling operations with Russian-made submarines. The Algerian military build-up may trigger competition with its neighbours, fostering growing military spending and rearmament across the whole region. For instance, Egypt, nominally on good terms with Algeria, has a long-standing rivalry in North Africa with the country led by President Tebboune (Ghafar, 2022).

However, Egypt's military rearmament and growing assertiveness have to be understood as responses to Turkish regional activism and Cairo's desire to secure its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Eastern Mediterranean, with multiple offshore gas discoveries, is rapidly becoming the most unstable area within the broader region, plagued by several ongoing maritime boundary disputes (Connely, 2023). In fact, it is deemed to be an area which "sits atop a dormant volcano", with tension that might break out between Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece over the exploitation of the large offshore gas reserves (Shama 2019, pp. 2-3). Rising Turkish-Greek tensions and the ongoing military conflict in Gaza are further escalating the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean.

While the outbreak of tension and military hostilities is by no means a foregone conclusion, stability and cooperation remain the primary interests of all Mediterranean states. However, recent international developments reveal that rationality is not always the main driver of foreign policy decision-making. Military build-ups, assertive foreign policies rooted in realpolitik considerations, and centuries-old enmities across the region may provide sufficient ingredients for the eruption of conflicts. Efforts by third parties, such as NATO and the EU, aimed at conflict prevention, diplomatic mediation, and building deterrence, are of utmost importance.

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