

Rethinking Euro-Mediterranean relations in Corona times,
25 years after the Barcelona process

New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean

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This year, as it celebrates the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration and the launching of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Union is dealing with a flurry of new actors that have recently emerged in the Mediterranean region. China, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have taken major steps, directly and through proxies, to advance their interests in the eastern Mediterranean Basin and on its shores.

Indeed, the European Union and its members most concerned – Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy and Malta – remain strongly engaged, as are the United States and NATO from a security standpoint. But, clearly, new power struggles are playing out in the region. They are, simultaneously, economic, military and ideological.

Foreign Policy Vacuums and the Crimea Precedent

Irrespective of their own objectives, these new actors have benefitted from three different “policy vacuums.” The longest lasting one is the “EU vacuum,” created – paradoxically enough – by the ambitious Lisbon Treaty, which resulted in the creation nearly a decade ago of the position of EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (and Vice-President of the European Commission) and its bureaucracy, the European External Action Service. The difficult inception period and the modest achievements of the first two “HRVPs” – namely Catherine Ashton and Federica Mogherini – resulted in a clear political reality: EU foreign policy making has largely escaped Brussels-based institutions and is now done at the European Council table, where essentially

the Heads of State and Government from the largest countries – previously three, now two after Brexit – set the agenda. Typically, during the past decade, the European Council was unable to reach a clear consensus on the EU’s policy in Syria, Libya or Turkey. In practical terms, this inability cleared the way for Russia and Turkey to act decisively in Syria from 2015 onward, and in Libya more recently.

The United States’ disengagement from the region, which started under the Obama Presidency and accelerated under Trump’s current term of office, created a new, more fundamental vacuum: the US was no longer to be the security guarantor in the Middle East, as demonstrated by its uncertain path in Syria during the past few years. In addition, Donald Trump’s apparent affinity with strong, undemocratic leaders such as Vladimir Putin or Recep Tayyip Erdogan created uncertainties for his European allies and opportunities for the new players.

Another type of “vacuum” appeared in early 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic captured the energies of most Western governments and, in a way, partly froze their actions in the Mediterranean region. This period of uncertainty was not lost on Ankara and Moscow, as both acted resolutely on the foreign policy front, while Western capitals gave priority to limiting the pandemic’s effects on their population.

Looking at Russia’s military operations in Syria since September 2015, at the four distinct operations of the Turkish military in northern Syria (Jarabulus, Afrin, Ras al Ain-Tell Abiad, Idlib), or at the simultaneous and competing Russian and Turkish operations in Libya in 2019-2020, one can see a “Crimea methodology” at work. In February-March 2014, Russia swiftly occupied and annexed Crimea, expelling Ukrainian forces, creating new institutions, and even building a bridge over the Straits of Kerch in order to create a physical continuity between the Federation of Russia and its new “member.”

The “Crimea methodology” has distinct features: it starts with a unilateral move, hitherto considered improbable by third parties; it then creates facts on the ground, primarily with a rapid and substantial military deployment, swiftly solidified with the creation of permanent infrastructures and administrative institutions; it then waits for sanctions, be them EU or UN, and prepares to weather the political storm; it bets on the absence of military retaliation. Overall, putting in place a swift fait accompli and managing moderate retaliatory measures has proven to be a successful methodology for Moscow in Crimea. It was to become a useful precedent in the Mediterranean area.

A Host of Evolutive Tactics

Ongoing Russian and Turkish operations in Syria and Libya offer interesting lessons.

Looking back at Russia’s operations in Syria since September 2015 at the “invitation” of Damascus, one can see three major benefits for Russia: a) it rescued the Assad regime from the brink of disaster and kept a military client alive; b) it created the first ever Russian air force base in the Middle East (Hmeimim, which is an extension of the Latakia civilian airport), while reinforcing its pre-existing naval resupply station in Tartus, c) it performed a lasting operational demonstration of Russian military gear (cruise missiles, aircraft of various types) and tactical methods to both adversaries and potential future clients.

The same goes for the Libya operation in support of Marshall Khalifa Haftar, who to this date still controls the largest proportion of territory. Russia’s military operations unfolded in parallel with steady developments in its involvement in the region’s energy sector, as described in an earlier article.¹ Private military corporations such as the Wagner Group are on the ground, as well as Russian air force assets deployed from Hmeimim in Syria.

Concerning Turkey’s operations in Syria, it is fair to say that, although they took place without serious legal justifications, they have provided Ankara with what mattered most, i.e. pushing back Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG) from the border with Turkey, and creating an almost continuous “safe zone” controlled by its

forces. In addition, in three of the four areas, Turkey is putting in place the elements of a permanent presence, such as public service infrastructures (dispensaries, post offices, schools) while making the Turkish Lira the de facto currency in the local economy. Bigger plans are ready for a massive reconstruction effort in at least three of the areas. However, a permanent Turkish presence would be at odds with Russia’s declared objective to return the entire Syrian territory to the country’s political leadership.

Bigger Changes Looming

The more recent Turkish operation in Libya follows the same logic, although at this point in time Ankara’s military footprint is much lighter than in northern Syria for obvious physical reasons. In addition, Turkey’s recent major achievements in military technologies, especially the use of light armed drones in combat operations, have constituted a decisive factor in both the Idlib province of Syria and around Tripoli in Libya. In addition, light armed drones have already been deployed in Northern Cyprus, while Turkish gas exploration and drilling vessels are routinely escorted by the Turkish navy.

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The air superiority in these specific situations might be boosted further in 2021 by the entry into service of a) the Bayraktar Akıncı high-altitude long-endurance armed drone carrying much heavier weapons and usable far away from the homeland, and b) the light aircraft carrier Anadolu (for rotary wing aircraft only at this stage). Both assets are capable of being operational in the entire eastern Mediterranean region and will constitute new “force projection multipliers” compared to the current situation, sparing Ankara from sending boots on the ground or putting air force

1 Marc PIERINI, “Russia’s Energy Politics and its Relevance for the EU,” *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook2019*. IEMed, Barcelona; 2019.

pilots in harm's way, and therefore lessening the potential political cost of military operations.

In the medium term, Turkey will reinforce even further its military presence in the Mediterranean, with the operationalization of six new submarines in the next six years, new frigates and short-range missiles. Without entering into considerations such as sustainability or over-reach, the political meaning is abundantly clear: Turkey is now putting modern warfare at the service of its foreign policy objectives, without consideration for pre-existing legal frameworks or traditional alliances.

Yet, in both Syria and Libya, Ankara and Moscow have not seen eye-to-eye and have even witnessed serious trouble, such as the Saraqib incident where an entire Turkish battalion was defeated by a swift Syrian-Russian air operation, or the last minute cancellation in mid-June of bilateral consultations between their respective Foreign and Defence Ministers. In Idlib province, Russia is impatient to see jihadist forces eliminated by Turkey, while in Libya the Sirte-Al Jufra "line in the sand" has become the limit set by Russia (as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) to the progression of Turkish forces eastward.

Legal Challenges and Religious Considerations

In parallel, Turkey has been pressing ahead with two major initiatives in the eastern Mediterranean, using the same unilateral methodology: a) gas exploration and drilling around Cyprus, mostly in contested waters, b) a treaty with Libya redefining maritime boundaries at the expense of Greece and Cyprus and "allowing" future gas exploration around Rhodes and Crete, among other areas. This massive challenge to the pre-existing legal order in the eastern Mediterranean remains to be addressed by the parties concerned, and there is currently no clear path toward such a process. Meanwhile, unilateral action has created facts on the ground and Turkey has created its own legal and physical reality consistent with its interests. It is betting –like Russia in Crimea– on the absence of massive reactions from the EU or the UN.

Ideology and struggle for influence in the Muslim world are not absent from Turkey's actions. In Syria, Ankara has consistently fought the Alawite Assad

regime, of Shia obedience, while in Libya it supports the Government of National Accord, seen as an emanation of the Muslim brotherhood and therefore opposed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Turkey Has Chosen Disruption over Dialogue with Allies

Seen from Turkey, the four military operations in Syria and the one in Libya have appeared as national successes, while the challenge of the maritime boundaries is framed within the "Mavi Vatan" (Blue Homeland) doctrine. Some analysts go as far as saying that Turkey has now acquired a "veto power" in the eastern Mediterranean and that unilateral moves antagonizing both Western powers and Russia are "a new normal." A more general argument is that the underlying shifts in the global order (US retrenchment, EU ineffectiveness) have worked in Turkey's favour and may be there for the long run.

Seen from a non-Turkish perspective, some of these arguments could be entertained. First, the American retrenchment from the Mediterranean and Middle East region is a reality which will probably survive the Trump Administration, if only because the entire US political establishment is busy with devising a China policy. Second, the EU might take years to draw the lessons of dealing with the first ever US president openly hostile to the concept of European integration and to adjust to the post-Brexit reality. More generally, today's world is certainly less "Western-centric" than 10 or 20 years ago, and some geopolitical rebalancing is evidently at play.

Yet, Turkey is still far from being a coherent regional power. To start with, it didn't produce a consistent geopolitical framework, other than vague references to Ottoman times and to the "Mavi Vatan" doctrine. Secondly, it is apparent that many of its initiatives are induced by domestic politics: the need to keep the Islamist-Nationalist coalition (AKP-MHP) alive and therefore obligation to act against Kurdish actors and more generally in a nationalistic fashion; the need to hide the persistent economic policy failures during the past four years; the need to make the President appear as the indispensable strong man in times of emergency; the need to secure victory in the June 2023 presidential and legislative elections (even at

the price of twisting the rules and eliminating what's left of rule-of-law) at a time when the AKP and its president have lost their political monopoly for the first time in 17 years.

The NATO and Russia Angles

From a European Union standpoint, Turkey is a "disruptive player." This can be observed a) in the fight against ISIL in northeastern Syria (pushing back the US and Western special forces, although being a member of the anti-ISIL coalition), b) on land (launching a paramilitary operation against the Greek border, although both are NATO members) and c) at sea (the Turkish navy acting in a hostile way with the French navy and triggering a NATO enquiry, although being part of the embargo decision on arms delivery to any party in Libya). Disruption itself is the policy.

In parallel, Russia has entered into a defence deal with Turkey in the wake of the July 2016 coup and sold S400 anti-missile systems, currently stored on the Murted (Akinci) air force base near Ankara. If put in service, the S400 systems will undermine NATO's European missile defence architecture.² By contrast, Turkey's actions in Libya run directly against Russia's interests, let alone Western ones. Seen from EU capitals, there is a distinct loss of trust resulting from Turkey's adverse postures, which coexist with a continued participation in NATO activities (such as the Standing NATO Maritime Group), while acting in coordination or not with Russia. This makes Turkey a vastly more difficult partner for NATO, the EU and the US than it ever was. The European Union and the United States are therefore not only facing new players in the Mediterranean and Middle East region, but also players which have chosen, albeit in very different styles, to place disruption above dialogue in an already tense environment. While this is no surprise coming from Russia, Turkey's behaviour has been a shock to fellow NATO members. Such a "policy disorder" is probably going to remain a permanent feature in the Mediterranean region.

² Marc PIERINI, « How far can Turkey challenge NATO and the EU in 2020 », Carnegie Europe, January 2020. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2020/01/29/how-far-can-turkey-challenge-nato-and-eu-in-2020-pub-80912>

³ Among many publications:IAI, "The New Sea People: China in the Mediterranean," July 2018. www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/new-sea-people-china-mediterranean

Other New Actors in the Mediterranean

Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are part of the new actors in the Mediterranean, albeit in a secondary role, in the sense that they are not autonomous actors. Yet, all three have a considerable stake in the stabilization of Libya and therefore in the resuscitation of a ceasefire, followed by a peace process.

Egypt, for its part, has a higher stake due to its long border with Libya and its gas fields in the southeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Its leader, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, entertains tense relations with the Turkish President, especially as Ankara regularly denounces the June-July 2013 coup in which al-Sisi overthrew then-President Mohamed Morsi.

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Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has become a major economic player³ in the Mediterranean, especially through its interest in ports, such as Piraeus in Greece and others. On the political front, China generally sides with Russia at the UN Security Council.

Lessons for the EU

Undoubtedly, there are many lessons to be drawn by the European Union about the current state of affairs in the Mediterranean Basin. In giving consideration to the new situation, it appears necessary that the current situation be viewed as more than a passing phenomenon.

Seen from a European standpoint, it could be tempting to emphasize the absence of consistency or the lack of strong alliances in the current policy moves. The absence of a solid convergence of interests between

Russia and Turkey, be it in Syria or in Libya, is often mentioned. It is true that both countries have grown accustomed to manage a turbulent relationship, where the number of shared interests equals that of antagonistic positions. Yet, when Moscow decided last February to send a dire warning to Ankara about red lines in Idlib province, it did so in the most violent manner (36 Turkish soldiers killed in just one hour) while immediately convening a summit in Moscow to patch things up with a new ceasefire agreement on Russia's terms. This cycle of military divergences and political summits illustrates the ambiguity of their relationship but, in practical terms, it also creates a constant stream of political developments in the region. In turn, for the EU and the US, this situation creates more unpredictability.

A similar, albeit perhaps temporary, situation is the total unpredictability of the Trump Administration, as illustrated by the abrupt (although not yet complete) withdrawal of special forces from northeastern Syria, a vastly complicating factor for those European forces engaged in the anti-ISIL coalition. This being said, the trend toward a retrenchment of the United States from the Middle East is likely to survive a Trump Presidency.

Several Military Game-Changers

From a military standpoint, the European Union needs to factor in the mounting military presence of Russia and Turkey on land, in the air, at sea and under the sea. Russia's presence is now permanent through the Hmeimim air base and the Tartus naval station in Syria, while Turkey is trying to replicate the same strategy by acquiring similar rights in the Al Watiya air force base and Misrata port respectively. Russia is most probably also interested in permanent air and naval facilities in central or eastern Libya. In addition, the "export" by Russia and Turkey of militias from Syria to Libya in defence of their respective allies constitutes a dangerous novelty that establishes non-state military actors (to be clear: terrorist groups) in the immediate vicinity of EU territory and next to a fragile partner country, Tunisia. To add to the complexity of this new set up, Turkey's naval and air forces are instructed to serve bipolar

political choices in both Syria, Libya and at sea. The recent French-Turkish incident off Misrata is particularly telling: Turkey participates as a NATO country in the embargo on arms deliveries to all parties in Libya and its navy refuels the French navy (as per standard procedures), while simultaneously preventing it from controlling a merchant ship delivering military equipment from Turkey to Misrata. The end result is a disruption for NATO's and the EU's policies. This choice is similar to Ankara's decision to purchase Russian S400 missiles. NATO is confronted with new ambiguities in the region and the security architecture of the European continent is now permanently affected from within. It would be further affected if both Russia and Turkey were to establish permanent air and naval facilities on Libyan soil.

Such permanent disruptive behaviour illustrates, in the eyes of European government, the unpredictable and perilous nature of Turkey's policies in the Mediterranean

Such permanent disruptive behaviour can hardly be interpreted as the sign of a newly acquired "strategic autonomy," which is currently politically and financially unattainable for Turkey. But it illustrates, in the eyes of European government, including those in good terms with Ankara, the unpredictable and perilous nature of Turkey's policies in the Mediterranean.

Economic and Energy Interests

From an economic standpoint, the European Union also has to take into account its trade and investment interests in the region, its energy interests in Libya⁴ (where Austria, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain have operators, as well as Norway and the UK) and in the offshore gas fields of Egypt, Cyprus and Lebanon, as well as the persistent migration issues in the eastern and central parts of the Mediterranean Basin.

4 Oxford Energy, "Oil and Gas in a New Libya Era: Conflict and Continuity," February 2018. www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Oil-and-Gas-in-a-New-Libyan-Era-Conflict-and-Continuity-MEP-22.pdf

Acting Strategically

From a political and strategic standpoint, the European Union is currently facing a vastly different situation in the Mediterranean Basin than only five or ten years ago. Beyond the political uncertainties (presidential elections in the US next November and in Turkey in June 2023), the EU needs to carry out a strategic assessment of current trends and, more importantly, an evaluation of the political cost of no action.

Against such a volatile and perilous background, the European Union should act in five directions:

- Plan and act at European level, rather than just national level; maintain a strong policy coordination with the United Kingdom post-Brexit; speak the language of power and act accordingly by combining EU and national instruments;
- Devise consistent European policies even in instances where national interests may compete against each other, and maintain EU solidarity;
- Work to clarify NATO policy options in the region;
- Fight disinformation regarding regional challenges and push back adverse allegations;
- Continue to stand by its values (rule-of-law, good neighbourly relations, peaceful resolution of disputes) and use them actively to facilitate the resolution of conflictual situations in the region, especially in Syria and Libya.