

GEOPOLITICAL EVOLUTION

# Making Sense of the Geopolitical Pluralisation of the Mediterranean

The impact of global and regional powers on the  
Mediterranean region in a time of gradual  
withdrawal from the United States and the  
European Union in crisis

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Picture by Carole Hénaff

One of the most noteworthy geopolitical developments of the past few years is the visible emergence, or better the return, of multipolarity in the Mediterranean. The perception of a mounting lack of interest on the American side to shape Mediterranean dynamics, and the incapacity of the European Union (EU) to fill in the gap, is creating a vacuum that would be inevitably filled by other powers. Despite not having a specific Mediterranean strategy, Washington has been a substantial Mediterranean power for more than two hundred years.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US was the unchallenged dominant military power in the area. The *Unipolar Moment* in the Mediterranean translated into a sort of *dominance by default* because of the lack of competitors. Europe was the leading economic partner for southern Mediterranean countries but has never been a geopolitical competitor.

Against this backdrop, the Arab Spring revolutions represented a turning point for this return of multipolarity. Turkey adopted a very active posture in the wake of the Arab Spring. Erdogan tried to exploit this wave to strengthen the Turkish role in the Mediterranean. However, after several setbacks —Egypt, Syria, and partially Tunisia, all countries in which Turkey struggled to preserve some of the gains it made in the aftermath of the revolutions and which showed the limits of this approach— Ankara struck a significant victory by turning the course of the conflict in Libya, intervening openly in support of the UN-backed Government of the National Accord (GNA). However, a more assertive Turkish role in the Mediterranean is somehow regular, if looking at the Mediterranean from a historical point of view: the Turkish absence was not natural, not the other way around. As such, the Turkish gains in Libya signal the return of Turkey as a full Mediterranean player.

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Yet, the focus here is primarily on non-Mediterranean actors whose role in the area became more and more significant over the past years. This is clearly the case of Russia and China, two superpowers that —for different reasons, and in different ways— are becoming more and more central in shaping the dynamics of the basin. In addition, the analysis focuses on how the Mediterranean space became more significant for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For Gulf Countries, the Mediterranean turned from an area in which extending their economic influence into an area in which they have exported their internal rifts, which tend to be replicated in the domestic politics of several Mediterranean countries. This work will thus focus on analysing the features of the Mediterranean engagement of these three actors.

## China's Rise

China is the actual newcomer in the geopolitics of the Mediterranean. Indeed, its role in the area has become more relevant only over the past two decades, with an acceleration due to the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 by President Xi Jinping. Yet, to characterise the Chinese approach based on a specific strategy designed for the Mediterranean would be misleading. The definition of this area in Chinese foreign policy and international cooperation is ambiguous, to say the least. Chinese strategy thus focuses on pieces of the Mediterranean —Southern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East— with a distinctive set of drivers and priorities for each of them.

Until the late 1990s, the history of the Middle East, and by extension of the Mediterranean, could have been written without taking China into account [1]. During Mao's era, these spaces were far beyond Chinese immediate concerns and interests given the geographic

remoteness of the region from the PRC [2]. In the period of reforms and opening, starting from 1978, the meaning of the Middle East evolved and considerably expanded. Such a shift also gained new momentum after the end of the Cold War, once China became a net oil importer in the mid-1990s. By that time, Beijing started to engage strategically and commercially with the Middle East.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, China's attention to the Mediterranean space has increased exponentially. The Chinese leadership, and also the broader world, realised Middle East's considerable geostrategic importance to China [3]. This interest, while primarily geoeconomic, is also acquiring a more defined geopolitical dimension. First, the Arab Spring posed a significant challenge for the Chinese role in this space. The Chinese response took much longer to develop, compared to that of Western countries, as China cultivated long-standing ties with regional authoritarian regimes, such as those in Egypt, Libya, and Syria [4]. The main concerns for China were to preserve its economic interests and investments in these affected countries while guaranteeing the safety of its citizens living and working in the areas affected. The Arab Spring was also a direct, ideological challenge for the Chinese Communist Party, as it soon became worried that the democratisation sentiment sweeping the Arab world could incite and politically mobilise disaffected domestic groups.

Acquiring shares in Mediterranean seaports soon turned into a central concern in China's emergence as a major actor in the Mediterranean space. Consistently with the dominance of geoeconomic considerations over immediate geopolitical imperatives, China has invested significant economic resources to acquire shares and control of several seaports in the Mediterranean. The most obvious case is the Chinese focus on the Piraeus.

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However, dismissing this evolution as solely geoeconomic would be misleading. These considerations are crucial, but the approach is progressively becoming more holistic. At the moment, China's geopolitical concerns are indeed primarily located in its immediate neighbourhood. As such, developing a military presence in the Mediterranean might not be automatic, and will likely be met with resistance both internally and by some of the countries in which China has invested resources over the past years. The fact that China, in 2015, participated in a joint maritime drill for ten days with Russia in the eastern Mediterranean shows that this concern already belongs to the Chinese strategic horizon. A higher capacity of shaping political dynamics, and intervening in active conflicts, would be needed as a crucial element for a successful implementation of the BRI in the Middle East, and China should thus contribute to the settlement of regional conflicts. This goal seems to be far beyond China's geopolitical capacity at the moment [5]. As of now, China indeed

remains more at ease with intervening through its massive economic power and struggles in having a role in highly militarised contexts, as shown by the cases of Libya and Syria.

## Russia's Return

Looking at the Russian involvement in the Mediterranean, the logic is contrasting with that of China: limited economic resources and geoeconomic influence are offset by a carefully calculated use of these limited options. Russia methodologically identifies areas in which the cost/opportunity of the political investment would be highly remunerative, primarily because of the absence of serious competitors, and act consequentially. Besides, differently from China, Russia is not a newcomer in the Mediterranean, and its strategic view of the area is more unified and coherent. Indeed, Tsarist, Soviet and Putinist Russia share several significant similarities, which are even more striking if comparing 19th Century Tsarist Russia and Putin's 21st century Russia [6].

Historically, a crucial element informing the Russian approach toward the region was its obsession with having access to the so-called *warm seas*, and the Mediterranean is the warm sea *par excellence*. Access to the Mediterranean, from this point of view, has always been seen as an imperative strategic objective. A natural result of this geostrategic necessity is that the relationship with the Ottoman Empire first and Republican Turkey later was critical, not only for the dynamics of the Russian presence —and defence— in the Black Sea. More generally, Moscow always needed to maintain some leverage over Turkey.

At the dawn of Putin's era, Russia had very little influence left in the Middle East. In those years, Putin's priorities were primarily domestic: the first Putin's Presidency —2000/2008— was centred mostly around restructuring the state, recentralising control and putting an end to the centrifugal forces that brought the country to the brink of disintegration in the 1990s.

In Putin's second term, the focus on foreign policy started becoming more pronounced. The engagement in the Mediterranean was, as described by Ilya Bourtman "anything but ideological" [7]. This pragmatism turned into two major trends: to recover debts from regional countries and, when not possible, transforming these debts into opportunities for economic penetration and strengthening relations with all the actors of the area, being able to deepen ties with rival countries, as shown by the Russian relations with Algeria and Morocco.

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In the early times of Putin's presidency, the approach was very prudent. Russia remained

mostly passive at the time of the so-called coloured revolutions spanning across Eurasia. This attitude started to change as visibly shown by Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008. The reactions from NATO and the EU to this emboldened Russia were weak, and Moscow became more and more assertive, aiming at reacquiring that status and influence it lost in the chaos of the 1990s. The impact of this conflict was largely underestimated, not only at that time but also in the following months. Instead, as correctly argued by Michael Kofman "this war heralded an important transition in international politics" since the August five-day conflict "presaged the return of great-power politics and the end of the post-Cold War period" [8]. Indeed, already at that time, there was the mounting perception that Russia and the West were set to collide in the Mediterranean.

This newfound assertiveness became more and more apparent as the years passed. It brought Russia to make several bold diplomatic moves, which would have a profound impact on the geopolitical architecture of the Mediterranean. From this point of view, the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015 and Libya in 2016 [9] are all part of the same, interlinked, approach. Russia also engages in the area as a tool to compete with Western powers, while dominated by broader considerations regarding survival and the relations with Europe.

In all these cases, Russia realised that the US and European countries would not have intervened; thus, the political and economic cost of intervention would have been more manageable, given Russia's limited resources. There is a stringent logic in this approach: Russia intervenes only where it finds vacuums to fill. Militarily, like in Syria and Libya, but also economically, especially if the investment is not very significant, as in the case of Russia investing in a refinery in Morocco.

## The Gulf Cooperation Council: divided we stand

China and Russia, particularly the former, are two superpowers with more or less global ambitions. However, another major external actor to the Mediterranean, which has become more and more crucial for the balances of the basin, is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In this case, this actor can hardly be considered as a unitary actor, particularly after 2017. The more visible role of Arab Gulf countries in the Mediterranean was a direct result of the Arab Spring. Yet, these events also triggered a process of gradual erosion of the internal cohesion of the organisation, with the broadening gap in approaches, perceptions and ideological narratives which would culminate in the 2017 blockade against Qatar.

The GCC was established in 1980. However, the relations between them and Mediterranean countries were becoming more significant already during the 1970s, as a result of the two oil booms, in 1973 and 1979, primarily driven by public aid and remittances. That era was characterised by the strong ascendance of Gulf rentier states which were redistributing this richness to neighbouring countries as a tool of influence in foreign policy [10]. Economic force, more than political and diplomatic influence, represented the main characterising element of the GCC presence in the basin.

The Arab Spring brought some changes within the GCC and to its external projection. Neither did it broaden its formal geographic outreach nor did it reinforce its role as a unitary, corporate actor. Actually, the Arab Spring triggered a process of internal fragmentation and increasing competition between the blocs inside the Council, culminating in the blockade against Qatar and the divisions that openly surfaced in 2017 [11].

The oil crisis, together with the coronavirus-induced global recession, will likely have a tremendous impact on the Gulf's capacity of using economic tools to increase political leverage in the Mediterranean

Qatar became very active in supporting the Muslim Brothers across the region, together with Turkey. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain became the front of counter-revolutionary actors whose aim was to undermine the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. Against this backdrop, the role of the Emiratis became more and more significant, even overshadowing the power projection of Saudi Arabia. This dynamic was undeniable in Libya, a country in which the UAE became the essential backer supporting the rise of the eastern Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. However, Libya was only the tip of the iceberg, a situation in which the role of the UAE became so dominant that Khalifa Haftar, the eastern Libyan warlord, was accountable only to Abu Dhabi. At the Berlin Conference on Libya hosted by Germany in January 2020, the UAE was the sole Gulf country invited.

However, despite the geopolitical ambitions of Gulf countries in the Mediterranean, the economic influence exerted through aid and investments remains crucial for this projection on both sides of the *Gulf barricade*. From this point of view, the COVID-19 crisis, jointly with the oil crisis—which was worsened by the coronavirus-induced global recession—will likely have a tremendous impact on the Gulf's capacity of using economic tools to increase political leverage in the Mediterranean.

## Conclusions

The return of multipolarity in the Mediterranean is one of the most remarkable ongoing trends in global politics. The dwindling American interest in direct engagement in the region and the EU's incapability to step in, has left a vacuum that other powers have been filling. Turkey is one of them, but Ankara can hardly be considered an external Mediterranean power. Instead, several non-Mediterranean actors are becoming more and more relevant in shaping the dynamics of the area.

China, for instance, thanks to its massive economic power and the importance that this area has for its energy needs and its BRI ambitions. However, its incapacity of exerting

influence, particularly in conflict areas, can represent an obstacle to its Mediterranean penetration. Over the past few years, Russia also returned to be a relevant power after the decline of the 1990s. Through a foreign policy driven by an abysmal pragmatism, Moscow tried to strengthen relations with all the relevant players, even with countries at odds with each other, and filled the vacuums left by the inaction of the US and Europe, as clearly shown by the successful and highly effective cost/opportunity Russian engagement in Syria and Libya.

Behind these two global superpowers, Gulf Countries also deepened their presence, primarily through economic influence. However, for them, this area has also turned, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, in an area in which they exported their internal political and ideological rifts, and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to further undermine their capacity to exert influence on Mediterranean countries.

These presences are altering the Mediterranean security equation structurally, triggered a number of notable, yet worrisome, trends, particularly if looking at them from Brussels: an ongoing militarisation of the basin, a greater competition for the EU economic influence over neighbouring countries, and the rise of authoritarian powers promoting alternative governance models. All these factors will contribute to broaden even further the structural cleavages charactering the Mediterranean, a sea that too often is united only in the myth and rhetoric, but polarised and fragmented in its tragic, daily reality.

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