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GREAT POWERS INVOLVEMENT IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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Deep structural changes in the global and regional politics in the twenty-first century moved the Eastern Mediterranean from the margin of the international relations to the centre of big powers game. The Mediterranean has acquired a renewed significance not only as a zone of conflict, jihadist threat, political upheavals and overlapping interests of great powers¹, but also because the Mediterranean security architecture is in flux. Russia and the West have entered a new path of open confrontation and rivalry in various regions of the globe that hold a certain geostrategic importance. However, the simplistic binary model of the Cold War time is no longer relevant.

The same actors can be allies or rivals depending on the levels of the international relations and particular issues. Whatever the differences between Russia and the West, the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is a top priority not only for the US and Europe but also for Russia because the terrorist movement is able to conduct or inspire terrorism on their soil. The United States can oppose Iran in one theater and support it in another. That is the nature of refusing large-scale intervention but being committed to a balance of power.² In Iraq, the United States is providing support to Shiites — and by extension, their allies — by bombing Islamic State installations. In Syria the US is strongly opposes the Iranian support to Damascus. Russia and EU regardless their differences on Ukraine are trying together to save the Iranian nuclear deal.

Security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean

The security architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean has been changing rapidly partly during the last decade as a result of radical transformational changes at the global and regional levels. The US/NATO, the EU, Russia and China, are involved in a big powers' game in the region, which is why they are reconsidering

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¹ Ian Lesser, Thunder over the Eastern Mediterranean. Available at: <http://www.ekathimerini.com/227805/opinion/ekathimerini/comment/thunder-over-the-eastern-mediterranean>

² George Friedman, The Middle East Balance of Power Matures. Starfor March 31, 2015. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/middle-eastern-balance-power-matures> .

and rebalancing their strategies. Turkey and Iran have emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean as strong regional superpowers with geopolitical ambitions.

The US

After the end of bipolarity and during the first decade of the 21 century the regional architecture was built on the US indisputable dominance and allied relations with Israel and Turkey. Nowadays the US is no longer the dominant or key actor in this region and it now has to balance its policies and interests against the perceptible influence of a range of other external and regional powers.³ There is a growing understanding in Washington that U.S. military capabilities are spread too thin through all over the world, which means that the United States will not be able to sustain intense military operations in all of potential theaters simultaneously. A military conflict in any one theater would seriously diminish U.S. capacity in another theater.

Under President Obama Washington started to move away from the strategy it has followed since the early 2000s — of being the prime military force in regional conflicts — and is shifting the primary burden of fighting to regional powers while playing a secondary role.⁴ The United States has undertaken a strategy focused on maintaining the balance of power, which is a difficult endeavour, since the goal is not to support any particular power, but to maintain a balance between multiple powers with conflicting interests.

With President Trump the situation is getting even more complicated. President Trump's main goal is to destroy everything that was built by his predecessor. However his neo-isolationist stance does not fully contradict Obama's strategy aimed at curtailing the US overseas' commitments. President Trump is focused on the practical results of Obama's policy. Donald Trump is consistent in the anti-Iranian rhetoric and policy. He is consistent in re-establishing the US-Israel axis badly damaged by his predecessor, but his wider policy inconsistencies highlight the uncertainty hanging over the US role in the Eastern Mediterranean. Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran does not mean in the least that he will be willing to provide greater military support against Tehran. In Syria the US maintains only a small military presence. Trump's doctrine "involves reducing military risks, using economics as a lever, and ignoring the opinions of foreign governments and the global public. The president can only react to the situation he's presented with, and from there his doctrine is established".⁵

³ The Mediterranean Reset: Geopolitics in a New Age. IAI, 24/9/2017. Available at: <http://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/mediterranean-reset-geopolitics-new-age>

⁴ George Friedman, The Middle East Balance of Power Matures. Starfor March 31, 2015. Available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/middle-eastern-balance-power-matures> .

⁵ George Friedman, Opinion: 'Trump Doctrine' pressures U.S. trading partners, reduces military risks — and ignores world opinion. Available at: <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/george-friedman-trump-doctrine-dictates-that-economic-offense-is-the-best-defense-2018-07-12>

The EU

The European Union is not just an idle onlooker in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Eastern Mediterranean is a region where Brussels' post-enlargement strategy is being formulated and tested. Nowadays it is getting more and more clear that the EU ambition aimed at creating a ring of friends in the region has not been achieved. With the multifaceted challenges emanating from Europe's southern periphery, the European Union cannot stand aloof because of evident interdependencies. The EU Global Security Strategy (EUGSS) gives considerable attention to these challenges, first and foremost, migration to the European soil. Migration is at the top of the European agenda as a political, economic, and security concern. The migration crisis is being viewed in Europe as an existential challenge. The EU's ability to manage the refugee crisis across the whole Mediterranean area should be viewed as a test for the EU viability as a great integrationist project from the survival of the Schengen regime to Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the security sector. The close intertwining of external and internal security related to migration and terrorist threat has already resulted in the triumphal march of populist movements in the European societies capitalizing on the dissatisfaction of European citizens with Brussels and national political elite.

The crisis in Euro-Atlantic relations, which has been deepened by Trump's anti-European stance, means that security in the EU southern neighbourhood will be getting more and more European cause. The latter implies that EU should acquire military capabilities to cope with the ongoing and latent conflicts in the region. The only positive aspect of Trump's bias against European allied is that it has become a catalyst for PESCO.

Russia

Nowadays Russia is present in the Wider Mediterranean region on an extended scale using the whole set of political, economic and military instruments depending on each country. Since officially coming to power in May 2000, President Vladimir Putin has sought to restore Russian influence in regions the Kremlin lost in the 1990s. In economic terms, large scale involvement in the region presents an opportunity for Russia to not only sell arms, but to squeeze the West out from the arms markets, build partnerships across the region in the energy sector, and invest in infrastructure development. Kremlin's Mediterranean strategy is focused on several goals.

Firstly, it is status-rebuilding, since Russian leadership proceeds from the understanding –“if you want to be heard, you should be on the ground”, which is why Kremlin is interested in naval bases in Syria and Libya.

Secondly, it is a policy aimed at overcoming isolation imposed by the West after the Ukraine conflict. Expanded access to the Mediterranean serves this broader goal by establishing a foothold in a European sphere of influence and reducing

the U.S. ability to maneuver militarily.⁶ All ambitious actors need reliable allies or at least ad hoc partners. The common wisdom says: the friendlier immediate neighborhood of a state, the stronger its position. The emergence of the informal alliance between Russia, Iran and Turkey built in Syria around the Astana peace process has made many think that its importance goes far beyond the Syrian borders. What do the partners have in common? Definitely, it is the overlapping neighbourhoods of Russia, Iran and Turkey. But given their conflicting interests in these spaces this fact not so much brings them together but rather divides them. Not only in the Caucasus where their interests clash but even in Syria they are pursuing different policies.

Thirdly, it is a demonstration of Russia's ability to fix what the US breaks. As it is seen from Moscow, Iraq, the Arab Spring turmoil, Syria and Libya are a good reminder of the Western failures to stabilize the region through export of democracy to unprepared countries. Russia wants to emerge in the region not only as a spoiler as the West defines its presence but first and foremost as a peace broker. If European actors like Italy, France and the UK want to avoid escalation, Russian diplomatic ambitions provide some leverage. Russian decision makers expect to be involved in international discussions on Libya just as they are in the Syria negotiations and in other regional formats such as the Middle East Peace Process Quartet.

Last but not least, Russia claims it is present in the region to fight terrorism. Even if IS has limited capabilities to unite Islamic nations in a single caliphate, Russian political leaders are fearful that the thousands of young Muslims from all over the world who are present in war-torn areas in Syria and move between Syria and Iraq and are acquiring battle experience and skills in terrorist and guerilla warfare, will come back to their countries of origin. However, the paradox of the current situation is that counter-terrorism could become the basis for constructive cooperation between Russia in the West, but only in the context of positive relations on a wider range of issues. The emerging bipolarity (with all superficiality of this term) on the macro level of the Russia-West relations has already been projected to the Eastern Mediterranean.

China

China, too, is acquiring greater stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean. China has long had commercial interests in the region – from access to the Suez Canal to port operations and the security of personnel abroad. Chinese presence in the region is still limited but it is gathering momentum and it will be increasingly difficult to ignore its role in the years ahead. Its interest stems from the fact that it is cheaper to buy assets in this part of the world than within the present European Union. Chinese investors are showing a willingness to take bigger risks than European rivals on a potentially lucrative market with links to the EU. Moreover, cheap Chinese money is an alternative to commercially expensive

⁶ Sarah Feuer and Anna Borshchevskaya, Russia Makes Inroads in North Africa. Policy Analysis, November 2, 2017, The Washington Institute. Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-makes-inroads-in-north-africa>

Western money or politically expensive money from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

The extensive role of Chinese companies in construction and other projects around the region has led to growing concern about the safety of Chinese workers, which will be used as a pretext for more profound involvement in the region. It is all the more so, since China's "one belt, one road" project could bring China into the Mediterranean world in a more direct way. Much of the land and maritime infrastructure envisioned in this ambitious project would terminate in the Eastern Mediterranean and its hinterlands.⁷

In this context Russia's position will be crucial for the evolving balance of power. Given Trump's anti-Chinese stance the Russia-China military cooperation (let alone a merger of Russia's natural resources with China's aggressive economic expansionism) will be a nightmare for the present US administration. The joint Russian-Chinese naval exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean that takes place on a regular basis are closely watched by Western analysts. On 30 May 2018, Admiral Harry Harris, the retiring chief of the newly renamed U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (IndoPacom), noted that "China remains our biggest long-term challenge" and "a resurgent and revanchist Russia, remains an existential threat to the U.S" – and that consequently "Great Power competition is back".⁸

Concluding remarks

Despite the complexity and multidimensionality of the security landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean, the main challenge to the security and stability is the deep divide between Russia and the West. Only together they can stabilize this region.

No doubt, with all uncertainties about the future of European integration, the EU is still one of the most important key-player in the region. What could the EU do for the region? The best it could do is to recover, to come out of its several crises stronger and present a viable grand design for the region based on regional alliances and horizontal integration of the regional countries. Aside from this, the EU should give an honest and adequate response to the migration challenge and develop its military and non-military capabilities to counter traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Russia's expansion in the region is widely perceived in the West as a threat to the global and regional stability. However it is not Russia's expansion but rather her isolation that presents a threat to the regional and global security. Its accommodation and inclusion in multilateral international cooperation remains high in the international security agenda.

⁷Ian Lesser, The Eastern Mediterranean Vortex - Turkish Policy Quarterly, June 28, 2016. Available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/802/the-eastern-mediterranean-vortex>

⁸ David Scott, RUSSIA-CHINA NAVAL COOPERATION IN AN ERA OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION. AVAILABLE AT: <HTTP://CIMSEC.ORG/RUSSIA-CHINA-NAVAL-COOPERATION-IN-AN-ERA-OF-GREAT-POWER-COMPETITION/36773>

EU, Russia and China should develop multi-level mechanisms for trilateral consultation and coordination to minimize the turmoil provoked by competition and conflicting interests in the region.

The United States remain the biggest unknown in the region but it is clear that its unrivalled role in the region no longer exists. Under the best scenario (which is not feasible in the nearest future) Eastern Mediterranean should become a new testing range for multilateral cooperation that can be based only on soft power, economic strength and on the ability of the leaders of the modern world to build collective positions and create the political interaction that is required to solve problems that affect more than one state or region.