

Security Issues in the Mediterranean

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The Mediterranean Sea has become an area of key strategic interest for an ever-growing number of actors, some of which belong to the area, and some are from external regions. Its pre-eminent geographical position makes it a nodal point for commercial routes with choke points such as Suez, Bab el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz.

In addition, the region is relevant in terms of energy exploitation, especially for underwater oil and gas resources. Today, the Mediterranean Sea is a geopolitical domain within which endogenous complexity is paired with a high level of immediate and future uncertainty.

The unstable geopolitical environment created within several Mediterranean countries (from Libya to Yemen and Syria) shapes current security issues concerning this area. With the exception of Tunisia (which is

erupting in Africa. Civil conflicts in Yemen and Syria, and the consequent international military interventions, represent additional drivers of instability across the whole area, as a number of regional and international actors have been dragged into military action by events – and by their political stakes. Mass migration from African countries and illicit traffic (people, drugs, fuel and arms) seem to be the most widely known consequences of instability, although they represent just superficial examples of the

raising the tones and the risks of political-military confrontation.

Rising Tensions among Relevant Actors

Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, tension between Brussels and Moscow had risen considerably, leading to the imposition of economic sanctions. The current situation in Syria worsens relations between these actors, with the EU evaluating the approval of stronger sanctions – to date not agreed – to condemn the siege of Aleppo, and Russia pledging more support to the Bashar al Assad regime. EU states are not cohesive in their resolve to implement sanctions – Italy and France amongst others.

But Russia is not the only state whose relationship with the EU is deteriorating. After the rapprochement aimed at reducing the flux of migrants reaching Greek coasts, cooperation between the EU and Turkey has become more problematic, especially after the attempted coup in July 2016.

Such dynamics do have an impact “on the ground”, namely the Mediterranean. For instance, circumstances pushed Russia and Turkey to resume their political ties. Russian-Turkish political relations have been complicated for decades, and the 2015 Sukhoi incident represented their lowest point. Despite the mutual convenience that has led to consistent economic ties – especially after post-Ukraine EU sanctions – Turkey did not hesitate to shoot down the Russian interloper, and Moscow launched economic retaliation promptly. The international response to the attempt to overthrow Erdogan (condemned by all Western states, but not as firmly as Russia), together with the ongoing and growing “Islamisation” of the country, has represented a turning point – a positive one – for relations between Ankara and Moscow.

The immediate consequence of such renewed cooperation has been Turkey’s intervention in the Syrian conflict to support the international counter-ISIS operations next to the Syrian-Turkish border. Never-



USS PORTER (DDG 78) transiting the Suez Canal en route to the Red Sea in May 2016 during a routine patrol in the US 6th Fleet area of operations in support of US national security interests in Europe

facing political problems anyway), the so-called Arab Springs, expected to stimulate a democratic transition from within, have merely created instability in most of the concerned states, Egypt amongst others. Furthermore, Qaddafi’s death left a political vacuum in another key country, Libya – one of the most relevant oil producers – creating the preconditions for Islamic State’s

issues concerning the region. Tensions are spreading both at the political and the military level. At the political level, local and international instability has been spreading to the point that even the most solid alliances have experienced some impact. Some new alliances are rising, while some of the existing ones are changing or failing, thus feeding further unpredictability and turmoil. Hence, on the one hand, ongoing military action comes from the stakeholders’ widespread need to better protect their multiple economic interests, while on the other, such struggles lead to further militarisation in the region, therefore

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theless, the political-military implications of these revived ties could be particularly problematic if Turkey decided to pursue an autonomous agenda, detaching from Western countries to get closer to Moscow. This notwithstanding, Ankara would keep the power to veto Western military undertakings at the NATO level, therefore favouring Russia's proactive approach to the Middle East. Should this worrying scenario turn into reality it would open to a new wave of potentially disrupting geopolitical reshapes, as Russian presence in the area builds up.

Controlling the (Rising) Military Traffic

Instability brought by the trends highlighted above is leading to the increase of military traffic in the Mediterranean.

Following the intervention in the Syrian civil conflict and in the anti-ISIS campaign, the number of Russian units sailing across the Mediterranean is increasing considerably. Several (and a growing number of) vessels belonging to the Third fleet, originally deployed in the Black Sea, have been recently redeployed in the Mediterranean: for instance, the fast-attack guided missile craft MIRAGE and the two BUYAN-M series missile corvettes SERPUKHOV and ZELENY DOL, armed with KALIBR NK cruise missiles. The naval group deployed to the Mediterranean reportedly includes the NANUCHKA-III Class missile corvette MIRAZH, the ADMIRAL GRIGOROVICH Class frigate ADMIRAL GRIGOROVICH, the KRIVAK Class frigate PYTLIVY, the minesweeper IVAN GOLUBETS, the battle cruiser PYOTR VELIKIY, the anti-submarine ships SEVEROMORSK and VICE ADMIRAL KULAKOV and support vessels. In addition, the only Russian active aircraft carrier, ADMIRAL KUZNETSOV, has recently completed its redeployment in the Eastern Mediterranean.

According to Russian military spokespersons, the deployment of the whole battle group is aimed at protecting Russian interests from international terrorism and piracy, even if a number of vessels have reportedly been involved in operations in Syria.

The formal operating base for operations in Syria is the Humaymim Air Base in Latakia. At the same time, Tartus naval facility (Syria), already in use as a logistic base for vessels crossing the Mediterranean sea, is now serving as Forward Operating Base for operations – previously beefed up through the Sevastopol base (the closest Russian naval base to the Mediterranean before Tartus was restored). Some recent statements from Russian senior officers



Photo: MoD Russia

ADMIRAL KUZNETSOV, for the time being the only active Russian aircraft carrier, has recently completed her redeployment to the Eastern Mediterranean.

speculate on the idea that the Tartus base should be transformed into the first active fleet infrastructure in the Mediterranean. The relevance given to the Tartus base and the whole naval group is underlined by the recent redeployment of one S-300 air defence system in the area.

The massive presence of Russian vessels in the Mediterranean requires better situational awareness, from and for Western assets, including the need to track ongoing activities in this crucial area.

Missions like shadowing vessels or intelligence gathering could prove increasingly difficult to perform safely, given the unprecedented security architecture around the Syrian theatre amongst Turkey, NATO, and Russia. Despite the period of budget constraints and political tensions, the worrying reliance on Turkish assets (considering that Turkey is also the closest NATO member to the Syrian front) obliges NATO to take additional measures, so adding to the complexity.

In the meantime, Turkey's interest in enhancing its amphibious capabilities stresses once again Ankara's key role in any future military undertaking in the region. For instance, the MILGEM programme, started in 2000 and then blocked for some years, is currently revived, and new bids are under discussion. The programme is aimed at modernising the Turkish fleet through the purchase of corvettes and frigates locally produced, to give Turkey strategic independence from foreign products. So, in the future, Turkey can be viewed as a key player with more military autonomy.

Furthermore, surface vessels represent only a part of the traffic (even if the most significant), as submarines are increasingly

coming back to the Mediterranean. With stealth and long endurance as main features, submarines can accomplish both combat missions and intelligence gathering – namely SIGINT, ELINT and COMINT. Israel represents an interesting example in the Mediterranean submarine domain, as the country is supposed to base its nuclear deterrent on submarines as a second



Photo: Michael Nitz

The DOLPHIN Class submarine LEVIATHAN, built by HDW, Germany, has been in service with the Israeli Navy since 2000.

strike capability. The country owns five (one more to be delivered by 2017) German produced DOLPHIN 2 submarines; according to various sources, the most recent units should be refitted to carry submarine launched cruise missiles (SLCM) with nu-



Photo: Dassault Aviation

Paris reaffirmed its ties with Cairo through the sale of 24 RAFALes to the Egyptian armed forces.

clear warheads – probably the Israeli built POPEYE TURBO. Furthermore, a number of countries – the US, the UK, the Baltics and Sweden – are reporting a growing number of Russian submarines moving back and forth across the Mediterranean, therefore crossing the Channel and the Baltic Sea. Worse still, US analysts believe the Russian submarine fleet has reached a remarkable availability and enhanced technological level thanks to deep maintenance processes. Keeping in mind present and future scenarios, increasing submarine traffic in the Mediterranean is crucial for a number of reasons.

First is the inadequacy of Western assets (especially those of Southern EU countries) to counter submarine threats. Following a period of decreasing submarine traffic in the Mediterranean, different countries, Italy among them, have been replacing their ASW capabilities with MP ones. Also, northern Mediterranean submarine fleets are shrinking while southern Mediterranean ones expand. This could have negative consequences in the short- and mid-term. Looking at the latest technological developments in the naval sector, submarine warfare is entering a new developing phase – not only in terms of submarines themselves, but also concerning underwater robotic technologies, very probably enhancing submarine threat capabilities in the area in the near future.

Second, the majority of Mediterranean states (namely Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel, Algeria and Egypt), already have a submarine “fleet”: regardless of the efficiency rate of these fleets, what is interesting is that an eventual deployment of submarines as a consequence of the aforementioned tensions is not excluded. A sample scenario serves well to describe a potential evolution of the ongoing situation. A small sub-area of the Mediterranean is currently “hosting” a relevant amount of traffic, in terms of surface vessels – the ones involved in the Syrian crisis, plus

the commercial traffic – and submarines. As a consequence of the need to gather intelligence and keep potential enemies under control, submarines enter and exit the area without coordination, because of the different tasks they have within a system of fluid alliances. In detail, we can figure out that at least seven submarines could currently operate in the Eastern Mediterranean at the same time: a Russian one, in support of the fleet’s activities in the area; a US one, to track Russian activities; an Israeli one, to gather intelligence and to prevent illicit arms traffic from Syria to its coasts; a Turkish one, to observe what is happening next to its maritime border and in Syria; an Egyptian one, to control eventual threats to its strategic interests; a French and an Italian one, with intelligence gathering as main tasks, and the opportunity to support their troops in Lebanon or as part of NATO activities. Lots of assets with multiple tasks and caveats actually raise the likelihood of escalation, and add to a geopolitical theatre which is difficult to handle for all.

Conclusion

A number of critical security issues have affected the entire Mediterranean Sea, and instability in the MENA region drives Mediterranean instability further.

Considering the strategic importance of the Mediterranean, several countries want to play a role in the area, both physically (see the military presence) and politically (with the creation or renewal of alliances, especially among MENA and non-MENA states). Sometimes even schizophrenic scenarios arise. For instance, France and Russia are seeking to strengthen their military cooperation with those African countries deemed relevant in countering terrorism. Paris is reaffirming its ties with Egypt through defence procurement: the sale of 24 RAFALes to Cairo (the first foreign buyer) has been followed by the hand-over of the helicopter carrier MISTRAL, with a

second to follow. Russia is also enhancing its relationship with Egypt, (as demonstrated by the joint counter-terrorism exercise “Defenders of Friendship-2016” and the sale of equipment operating from MISTRAL) namely technological platforms and, probably, helicopters. Furthermore, military and economic cooperation remain strong with Algeria, which sees in Russia its first arms provider – and it is also expanding its submarines fleet. Meanwhile, Algiers purchases from France and Italy as well.

Concerning geopolitical stakes among local actors, omitting Libya for its peculiarities, Egypt could represent a major threat in the near future. Willing to protect its major economic interests – namely offshore gas and oil deposits (Egypt is a candidate as a gas hub for the Eastern Mediterranean), and the security of the Suez canal, especially after its doubling – Cairo is enhancing its naval fleet, and taking advantage of its political ties with the US, EU countries (France, but also Italy) and Russia. Here the critical part lies in the political ambiguity of the al-Sisi government, both at the domestic and the international level.

So, while the Eastern Mediterranean represents the hottest spot in today’s world, the unclear and unstable political situation in relevant North African countries, together with ongoing “militarisation” fed by eastern turmoil, create the necessary conditions to spread crises westwards, thus inflaming the whole Mediterranean region.

The main vulnerability for international security is that, despite multiple stakeholders’ growing efforts, no-one has truly comprehensive situational awareness (the reasons to be found in the capability gaps and political/military variables described above) nor command of the bigger picture. Alliances’ fluidity has a negative effect on political-military reliability, as recent incidents like the Sukhoi affair demonstrate, and in these conditions increased traffic and mounting tension cause the smallest incident to lead to the most unpredictable consequences. ■