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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37458/ssj.3.1.2>

Original Research Paper

Received: February 8, 2022

Accepted: March 3, 2022

## **Amidst considerable challenges, maritime cooperation is a pillar of stability and security in the Mediterranean**

**Abstract:** *The Mediterranean has never been, conceptually or politically, a homogenous and organic space. From antiquity till the modern era, the surrounded littoral nations looked at their neighborhood through the lenses of a cooperative Euro-Mediterranean region, seeking to extend their norms, rules, and values through the deployment of soft power, from trade and aid to security cooperation and political dialogue. Today, instead, there is a great power competition that divided the region between North Africa and the Middle East especially in the eastern Mediterranean, heavily prioritizing the latter over the former in diplomatic and military outreach and viewing it through the prism of the strategic relationship, of EU nations and NATO allies. In addition, the Arab state system of the region is in standoff now, with many (if not most) states featuring existential fragilities or have collapsed altogether. State fragility has created areas of limited statehood, in which alternative forms of governance—from militias to municipalities, international donors to civil society—have stepped in and in which foreign powers have meddled. Through such interference, global and regional rivalries have exacerbated and have found fertile ground. All major global and regional cleavages are now tragically on display in the region: from the Russia-West and Israel-Iran confrontation in Syria to the Turkish-Greece tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, from the Turkey-UAE/Egypt struggle over political Islam in Libya, to the Iran-Saudi conflict in Yemen, or the Gulf and Israeli skepticism of the Iran nuclear deal. Also, energy has become a proxy for confrontation—as evident in the configuration of the East Med Gas Forum from which Turkey is excluded—and migration has become both a dramatic consequence of fragility and conflict, as well as a tool through which origin and transit countries have arm-twisted Europe. The only cleavage that appears to have temporarily abated is the Arab-Israeli one, with the Abraham accords crystallizing normalization between Israel and some Arab states. Consequently, the region has become far more porous than it once was. It has become impossible to read conflicts in the Mediterranean in isolation, as regional powers like Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, France, and Turkey weigh in across the region. Likewise, illegal migration, energy, security, terrorism, and climate dynamics have generated indissoluble ties to the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East.*

**Keywords:** *Security, Mediterranean, Conflict, Terrorism, Illegal migration*

**Some characteristics concerning the Maritime zones, throughout the planet, to understand how valuable is maritime security.**

Over the past two decades, the volume of global trade traveling by ship has more than doubled, while overall vessel traffic has more than quadrupled, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development<sup>1</sup>. The size of individual container ships continues to grow, allowing more economically significant shipments between trading partners across the world. The number of participants in this system has increased drastically in recent years, with developing countries now accounting for nearly half of global trade. The effects of globalization are more willingly seen on the Maritime zones than they are in perhaps any other place. Despite such progress, however, the maritime domain continues to present discouraging challenges. The dark news still regularly features reports of hundreds of migrant deaths at sea<sup>2</sup>. Global fish stocks remain vulnerable. Competing territorial and resource claims make the future of the Mediterranean Sea uncertain<sup>3</sup>. Just as the world's Maritime zones are being transformed by the positive effects of globalization, they are also full of the insecurity and friction that come with increased access and interaction.

As these trends continue, the Earth's Maritime zones will increasingly resemble smaller and more crowded bodies of water, where activities, interests, and threats converge. Today's the Mediterranean Sea provides a picture of what we should expect the Maritime zones of tomorrow to look like. It is an opening to the rest of the world that provides coastal nations with economic opportunity and access to resources and trade. But it is also bounded by chokepoints in every direction (Suez, Gibraltar, and the Bosphorus) and surrounded by diverse nations with competing interests. The Mediterranean, also, is a buffer zone between great powers and a natural spillover zone for many conflicts. In the most extreme view, it is a scene of conflict, a source of threats, and a dividing line between the rich and poor people of the world. While that picture is certainly

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<sup>1</sup> World Investment Report 2021-Investing in sustainable recovery (UNCTAD/WIR/2021) 21 Jun 2021

<sup>2</sup> The Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries Report prepared for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (December 2015)

<sup>3</sup> REPORT by Galip Dalay Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a way out of the current deadlock, Brookings, January 28, 2021

one of the great challenges, it also provides insight into the likely global maritime security challenges of the future and helps in developing appropriate national strategies to confront them.

### **Conflicts and terrorism acts in the Mediterranean Sea**

At the moment, tension is developing that we want and hope will be defused because there is no doubt that the main issue for the interests of NATO and the EU, is to have reliable speakers in the region, who are democratically legitimized, politically strong, and who feel able to take great historical and courageous initiatives to overcome the inflexibilities that have been historically formed<sup>4</sup>. The priorities of many Mediterranean nations are driven by ongoing and potential conflicts within and immediately outside their borders. Syria and Libya are sinking in civil war, while the remaining North African countries and those of Europe face internal and external terrorism threats of varying degrees.

Israel is troubled by threats ranging from the existential (Iran) to the merely deadly (Hamas). Both the Israel-Palestine question and the de facto partition of Cyprus (Turkey occupies and claims a portion of that otherwise independent island) stand out as the type of contrary, generations-old issues that have collected regional and global attention for decades and are continuing into the new century. In the Mediterranean, new conflicts are combined with old ones rather than simply replacing them.

All of these situations and threats have significant maritime elements. In terms of terrorism, the Islamic State (ISIL) has stoked fears of attacks on maritime traffic throughout the Mediterranean.

Regional powers have been using their naval forces to forward national objectives. Israel has maintained a controversial naval blockade of the Gaza Strip since 2007 as a protective measure against weapons-smuggling and sea-based rocket attacks<sup>5</sup>. While the country strongly defends these maritime tactics as a necessary protection against illicit Hamas activities, the blockade is also controversial and widely criticized.

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<sup>4</sup> Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the College of Europe in Bruges  
04 Mar. 2021 NATO: keeping Europe safe in an uncertain world

<sup>5</sup> <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/israel-blockade-gaza-and-flotilla-incident-0>

Turkey added to the tension in the region by sending naval forces to accompany the gas exploration vessels operating without permission inside the exclusive economic zones of Cyprus and Greece. The move, of course, drew the anger of Hellenism, many European countries, and the USA<sup>6</sup>.

Great power competition, too, looms huge over the area. Russian interests, ranging from hegemony in the bordering Black Sea to support of the Assad regime, have ensured its continued status as a major antagonist to Europe. Russia has kept a flotilla deployed as part of its reconstituted Mediterranean Squadron, a move that has been explained by Moscow as a response to European strategic missile defense and a guarantor of maritime access to both regional trading partners and the Suez, Gibraltar, and the maritime zones beyond. The country's aggression and inflexibility in its near abroad (in the Baltic, Georgia, and Ukraine, to include cyber-attack activity) figures prominently in the calculations of E.U. and NATO member states.

Turkey-Russia relations are a puzzle to many in the West. Central to the relationship is its bilateral nature. Relations between Ankara and Moscow are based on the mutual recognition of security interests. The resulting dynamics have shaped Turkish-Russian cooperation since the 1990s and can be observed in the current partnership in Syria. Mutual regard for the other's security concerns is facilitated by the prospect of collaborative projects that promise greater advantages than continued conflict. Trust is of secondary importance, as is the quality of personal relations between the Turkish and Russian presidents. More important is the interdependence between Russia and Turkey. The potential for confrontation or cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in regional conflicts depends on current priorities rather than past disputes. The form and extent of their collaboration are determined not by which side of the conflict they are on, but by their respective motives<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps nowhere are international tensions brought more into focus than at narrow maritime straits, and the Mediterranean remains uniquely bounded in by such chokepoints. The

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20200910IPR86828/eastern-mediterranean-turkey-must-immediately-end-illegal-drilling-activities>

<sup>7</sup> Comparative Southeast European Studies, Volume 69 Issue 4, Mehmet Bardakç, Is a Strategic Partnership Between Turkey and Russia Feasible at the Expense of Turkey's Relations with the EU and NATO? December 6 2021, Published by De Gruyter Oldenbourg

Suez Canal is precariously situated next to the Sinai Peninsula, where significant terrorist activity remains a problem. An Islamic State-affiliated group claims the Sinai as a “province” of its Iraq-and-Syria-based “state” and, along with others, conducts frequent attacks on a variety of targets in the area. While such threats are far less likely to affect either the eastern or western entrances to the Mediterranean, lingering political issues highlight the contentiousness of maritime straits. For instance, tensions built to the point of leading some to speculate whether Turkey could or would close the Straits (Dardanelles-Bosporus) to Russian ships. To the west, Spain and the United Kingdom continue to argue over territorial rights in the vicinity of Gibraltar.

The range and diversity of these tensions and the responses to them are instructive, as they include the full range of threats and actors likely to be confronted elsewhere in the future. Should terrorist groups raid into maritime attacks in the Mediterranean, it will provide insight into likely tactics and capabilities for attempts farther afield. The maneuvers and decisions of the antagonists in the Israel-Palestine, Cyprus-Turkey, and Greek-Turkey situations are vital. In the same way, Russian naval activity in and around the Mediterranean provides a preview of how other world powers may look to preserve their interests against and strike a balance of power in the coming years.

As ships grow in size and seaborne trade increases in order to cater to and export from newly-opened and newly-contributing economies, strategic chokepoints such as the Suez, Gibraltar, and the Bosporus will become even more critical. Responsible actors will need to strengthen multinational agreements and norms that recognize the absolute right to straits passage. Moreover, they will likely need to establish and exercise internationally accepted (and expected) responses to attempts to deny that right. From Panama to Malacca to Hormuz, the ability to prevent or respond to actions to shut down maritime chokepoints through presence, partnerships, and good governance will be paramount.

### **Illegal Migration and Refugees through the Mediterranean**

Over one million refugees crossed the Mediterranean toward Europe from 2014 till now, most fleeing violence and unrest throughout the Middle East and Africa. Indeed, the situation rose to the level of an outright humanitarian crisis, with nearly 5,000 individuals dying on the

perilous crossing<sup>8</sup>. As this mass migration has continued, European governments are facing mounting pressure to address the situation, both from those who are concerned about the economic and security implications of the immigrant wave and from those shocked by the regular reports of innocent lives lost at sea.

To date, the response of many European nations to this situation has been widely criticized. Indeed, the repeated, massive losses of life on the Mediterranean over the last several years have become a contentious and embarrassing issue for the countries of the continent. As 2015 drew to a close, the European Union took its most significant collective action to date by moving forward on the approval of a European Border and Coast Guard to replace the much-maligned FRONTEX border agency currently in place. The new agency will have expanded authorities and capabilities, specifically designed and incorporated to avoid its predecessor's shortcomings, but its tasks remain daunting.

The Mediterranean crisis provides a testament to the likelihood that desperate migrants will continue to risk their lives at sea, and that developed nations will continue to face great difficulties managing their responses. Indeed, migration may become an increasingly appealing prospect for that fleeing persecution, violence, or lack of opportunity in their home countries. Ever-greater access to media from abroad now provides would-be migrants with information about both the life that may await them and the tactics that can be used to avoid detection in transit.

Multilateral plans for mass migration contingencies and rapid humanitarian responses are already in place for many nations across the world. Continually updating and exercising such plans, with an emphasis on interoperability with international partners, will remain important. Common expectations, shared goals, and appropriate authorities and capabilities will help international coalitions worldwide avoid failures like FRONTEX.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

## **Maritime Diplomacy**

It's clear, the present era, unequivocally be maritime or, better yet, the era of maritime diplomacy. I am led in this thinking, as the overwhelming majority of global commerce travels by sea, most of the world's population lives close to the coast, the world continues to feed on the sea, draws natural resources and the ocean ecosystem lies at the heart of global climate change. Consequently, states' ability to manage disputes at sea will define maritime zones and will determine international policy in our modern age. Also problematic behaviors of autocratic states, despite the increasing importance of geopolitical space, are perceived at sea in both the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Maritime diplomacy can be referred to as the management of international relations through the maritime domain. Despite the concept involving state mechanism and naval forces, it is not any standalone naval activity simply deploying naval vessels or coast guard boats in the sea realm. Rather, it is the deployment of a country's navy, coast guard, and other maritime constabulary sea power assets to garner possible diplomatic outcomes. From that perspective, these naval constabulary forces are indefeasible apparatus of diplomatic tools. Includes a spectrum of activities, from cooperative measures, such as port visits to fly ships flag, combined exercises with allied navies, humanitarian assistance, and evacuation operations for civilians, to gunboat diplomacy with the deployment of naval forces, naval blockade, and access denial by sea control. It is an activity no longer confined to just the Hellenic Navy, but in contemporary days is pursued by the participation of the Coast Guard, merchant vessels, and non-state groups.

Mediterranean states are increasingly using this more flexible form of soft and hard power. The use of such kind of diplomacy can be interesting not only for the transportation of people and goods but for any event that can reflect changes in the international order while acting as an excellent measure for the existence and seriousness of international tension. Moreover, maritime diplomacy can act as a 'safety valve', to mitigate any potential conflict, deterring adversaries, removing threats, or solving disagreements without resorting to conflict. Our exercise of maritime diplomacy signals to allies and foes the intent of foreign policies and capabilities of national security forces. The effects of maritime diplomacy are deemed as a failure if it would lead to the spiky paths of war. From that viewpoint, maritime diplomacy is one

of the best indicators of changes in the global or regional balance of power and an invaluable tool for international relations analysis.

It is a basic condition that no State can assert sovereignty over the sea and its judicial rights, laid down in the International Law of the Seas for its islands and rocky islets, without naval forces. These "law enforcement and judicial claims" play a role in preventing a challenge to the state's National Sovereignty. Today the upgrading of Greece's geopolitical position in the South-Eastern Mediterranean Sea is becoming increasingly urgent because the issue of maritime zones is so closely linked to the interests of the geopolitical security of our country.

The longer the turmoil issue of the States in the Mediterranean Sea remains currently relevant, the greater the value of marine forces. The presence and proximity of foreign warships, submarines, and aircraft within the same operational area are potential risks in the Mediterranean Sea that can cause accidents and crisis events. A program of new maritime armaments can create undesirable tension, making control of maritime armaments and confidence-building an important aspect of maritime diplomacy. The interesting topics that are troubling in this new environment are:

1. How will react to the great power competition inside and outside the region?
2. Will states defense upgrade be accompanied by growing fears of a power competition leading to war, or will NATO as its main regional ally be an important catalyst in the interaction between nations?
3. Will the intensity of the major powers be as dangerous as during the Cold War or could it be worse as Russia has now aeronautical bases in the warm seas that could use as a strategic tool?
4. How will NATO and the EU respond collectively or as the individual Member States to the great competition of forces between Turkey, Cyprus, Greece, Egypt, and Israel?
5. Will we have a maritime conflict between the states of the region that jeopardizes the balance of power in the Mediterranean Sea?

6. Will there be competition between the US and Russia in the Mediterranean Sea that will destabilize the maritime paths in the region where there was stability before the Arab Spring?

The answers to these concerns are given by conducting remote maritime diplomacy to maintain peace and security in the region. I have consistently argued that the conflict in the Mediterranean Sea should be resolved through multilateral negotiations or international court rulings, while Turkey supports its over-the-top "national sovereignty" as a matter of "national interest" in Ankara. Resolving the "demarcation of the continental shelf" is a crucial matter, as an expensive arms race is needed that could end in disaster. Thus, the awareness has increased, so the regional character and cooperation of many states and alliances such as Greece, Israel, France, and Egypt is a necessity that cannot be avoided. However, achieving this objective depends on trust and the establishment of rules through multilateral organizations.

Maritime Diplomacy must ensure the 21st century is not another moment of complacency and denial. The solution to disputes over maritime zones is not limited to the argument concerning the decision on the legal meaning of demarcation adopted under international law, but also includes a plan to maintain peace and stability in the maritime region by eliminating fundamental conflicting factors including territorial claims through peaceful means and cooperation between all concerned states.

### **Reflections on a New Allied Strategy**

It is easy to assume that the "special relationship" with our allies and partners will last forever, can deepen further, and that closer alignment is therefore only natural. But there is nothing inevitable about it. Yes, every Mediterranean Nation, needs each other more than it did before due to the revisionist policies in this region. But that does not mean there is no gamble in this new vision for any power, aligned more closely with that of NATO's at least since the end of the Cold War. And ally policymakers should remember that even a closer alliance is not the same thing as obedience. A comprehensive review of our strategy, as the opposing pole of states

that provide conflicts and terrorism, could be taken in the coming years even if they conflict with the allied or corporate interest.

As for how the allies choose to respond, it is not just we are watching. This brings us to the more general context. Other countries will watch how the ally treats a middle power like Greece is taking some risks to align itself even more closely with the alliance when other allies and partners in Europe are hesitant. This allows maritime cooperation as a chance to prove something that it often proclaims but does not always live by. An open, liberal, rules-based world order may have started as a dream, but it is embraced and supported by all democratic nations.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

With Turkey and terrorist organizations aiming toward the antithesis of an open world, maritime cooperation should support our efforts as a pole of power in the region. If we can help to prepare this new strategy successfully in this regard, it is also important as it is estimated to reap benefits for the whole world.

An alliance of Mediterranean nations (Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, France, Israel, Italy, Spain) must work together toward one ambition in 2022—to renew, revitalize and retool for the decade ahead of the most powerful democratic community in modern history in the Mediterranean basin.

With the East Med accord, will once again have a committed Mediterranean security plan as we try to do. After years of mistrust, recrimination, and division, the bridge across the Naval power should be “built back better” and we must do that together.

But it would be a dangerous mistake to think that the result of an accord alone will repair the violations that the threats try to build. Each Mediterranean nation cannot simply rebuild the ties of a peaceful region if we are to succeed in meeting today’s challenges.

The geopolitics has not stood still: a more confident and stable Libya after a brotherhood war, an aggressive Turkey, resurgent authoritarianism, and the existential threat of competitive power, present our nations with new and grave challenges. The trans-Mediterranean relationship

must be rebuilt and reimagined. Our institutions must be strengthened. As we embrace sea power, we must rethink its approach to some fundamental issues.

The task is urgent. Our nations need a more powerful Naval force alliance to drive a new agenda. A renewed trans-Mediterranean commitment to human freedom and democracy is needed to safeguard the future we seek for our children and grandchildren.

With vision and hard work, a “new aeronautical alliance” for the trans-Mediterranean community is possible, joining in common action a more committed force with a more self-reliant and capable aeronautical joint task force to meet the challenges to our security, prosperity, and way of life.

This new compact must begin with an immediate ceasefire across our lines, ending, on all sides, aggressive rhetoric, disciplinary economic sanctions, and exclusionary regulatory measures.

We must also harness our joint power to deter terrorism, illegal migration, and a cynical and disruptive Turkey. They have exploited trans-Mediterranean tensions for too long. Together, we must oppose their illiberal agendas. This is our challenge as much as of the rest Mediterranean nations.

We must come together under the support of a trans-Mediterranean task force to produce a strategic plan for a renewal of the security to which we all remain deeply committed. We believe will be “stronger together” in meeting common threats and advancing democratic values in the world than operating at cross purposes from each other.

## **Recommendations**

Finally, we must rededicate ourselves to three strategic goals for the year ahead:

- 1: Rebuild the bonds of trust at the heart of Navy power and revitalize security
- 2: Commit to a joint strategy to meet the challenges and defend liberalism
- 3: Transform our military, technological and economic capacity to be the most effective force for freedom at sea according to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).