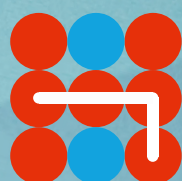


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Structural challenges and paradigm shifts: The new geopolitics of the Mediterranean Sea

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Hybrid CoE

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After years in which the brinkmanship policies of assertive regional players and ambitious external powers have destabilized the Mediterranean Sea, the new geopolitics of the region is gradually taking shape. Structural factors and recent geopolitical shifts are producing a flurry of realignments that tend to reopen old wounds or result in new frozen conflicts around which regional and global powers compete to reap the benefits of the end of the US hegemony.

Introduction

After years in which the brinkmanship policies of assertive regional players and ambitious external powers have destabilized the Mediterranean Sea, the new geopolitics of the region is gradually taking shape. The turmoil of the past few years was in part caused by the divisive approach taken by the Trump administration, which unleashed powerful forces that exacerbated different conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. Conversely, the change of administration in the US has paved the way for a gradual de-escalation, reopening diplomatic channels obstructed by the return of power politics.

In order to consolidate gains or control damage, **regional powers have now taken a strategic pause.** Many Arab capitals had embraced this posture even before the latest US presidential election, anticipating the expected change in Washington but also considering the US pivot away from the region as the most likely scenario. Despite the reset announced by the new US administration, the latest developments seem to confirm this trend, suggesting that continuity will likely prevail in the short to medium term.

As the US disengagement seems to represent the rule rather than the exception,¹ questions arise

as to whether the strategic pause is coming to an end. In the meantime, **structural factors and recent geopolitical shifts are producing a flurry of realignments that tend to reopen old wounds or result in new frozen conflicts around which regional and global powers compete to reap the benefits of the end of the US hegemony.** This Strategic Analysis looks into the changing geopolitics of the Mediterranean Sea, with a particular focus on the interrelation between the most recent events in North Africa and the expanding influence of external actors, whose strategies often include hybrid threat actions that cloud the region and beyond.

Structural challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean

At the epicentre of the fierce rivalry that resulted in the 2019–2020 fighting, **Libya seems once again to be stuck in transition.** Even though the October 2020 ceasefire agreement has produced some significant achievements, structural challenges, such as the inability of local groups gravitating around the two main centres of power (the interim Government of National Unity, which replaced the UN-recognized Government of National Accord in March 2021, and General

1 Also considering the most recent decisions, including the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of the combat mission in Iraq, which give the impression that the US is currently offering more of the same in order to extricate itself from the 'forever wars' in the region. See Umberto Profazio, 'As elections approach, the US walks a thin line in Iraq', Gulf Strategic Trends, NATO Defence College Foundation, July 2021, <https://www.natofoundation.org/gulf/iraqi-elections-and-the-us-thin-line/>. Unless otherwise indicated, all links were last accessed on 25 October 2021.

Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National Army) to reach an inclusive settlement, cast a long shadow over the successful outcome of the UN-sponsored roadmap. As the 24 December election approaches, centrifugal forces could once again push the country towards a new conflict or partition.

Along the main fault line that runs from Sirte to Jufra and further south in the Fezzan, **the Russian private military company Wagner Group is exacerbating the deepening divide** by constructing trenches and fortifications along the Sirte-Jufra axis, for instance. Its presence, alongside that of thousands of other mercenaries and foreign rebels,² highlights **one of the most significant shortcomings in the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, which had called for the removal of all foreign fighters**. Their activities represent not only the most visible threat to the political transition in Libya, but are also **spilling over its border into neighbouring countries**. An example of this is the killing of former Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021, which saw the involvement of the Libyan-based and Wagner-trained Chadian rebel group FACT (*Fronte pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad*).

The proliferation of these groups has been facilitated by Libya's fractured military and security apparatus, the consequence of a lack of comprehensive efforts to reform the security sector. As nation-building is explicitly ruled out as a foreign policy option by the Biden administration, the chances of avoiding a frozen conflict scenario will most likely rely upon the ability of regional powers with a stake in the conflict to find an accommodation.

In this context, **signs of a détente between Egypt and Turkey**, which have been on the verge of a fully-fledged military confrontation over Libya, have led to a gradual de-escalation in other theatres of confrontation as well. Two rounds of talks in Cairo in 2021 have touched upon the disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, where the 2019

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Turkey and the authorities in Tripoli have shown Ankara's approach in the region. This has been on full display recently in Cyprus, where Turkey is pressing for a two-state solution; and with plans to go ahead with the Istanbul Canal project.

However, this same policy has backfired, leading to the **rise of an anti-Turkey axis** that is highly likely to represent a structural factor in the regional geopolitics. Stemming from the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, this regional front has provided Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE with the opportunity to reach out to new partners like Greece and Cyprus, with whom they share a common interest in containing Turkey's perceived expansionism;³ but also increased synergies with traditional allies like Egypt, which, despite a strategy of diversifying its alliances, adopted not only in Libya but also on a regional scale, has shown its intention of pursuing its strategic interests with all means necessary. The inauguration of the new naval base close to the border with Libya in July 2021 was particularly indicative of this posturing.

Geopolitical shifts in the Maghreb

A precondition for talks between Ankara and Cairo was reportedly to tone down criticism of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)-affiliated TV channels streaming from Turkey. The fact that the request had been accepted was an indication of the **steady decline of Political Islam** in the region.⁴ This was also recently confirmed by the election results in Morocco, where the Islamist *Parti de la justice et du développement* suffered a serious defeat; and the constitutional crisis in Tunisia, where President Kais Saïed's power grab led to the suspension of parliament, where the post-Islamist Ennahda had a majority.

In this changing regional landscape, new and more effective paradigms are emerging, helping

² These groups include, among others, the Turkish private military company SADAT, which has recruited thousands of fighters from the Syrian National Army (SNA); pro-regime Syrian fighters recruited and trained by the Wagner Group, and thousands of Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries recruited to support the main rival factions in Libya. See Conflict Parties, Libya, in 'Armed Conflict Survey', 2021, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

³ Yoel Guzanski, Gallia Lindenstrauss, 'The growing alignments between the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean', Middle East Institute, 25 May 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-alignment-between-gulf-and-eastern-mediterranean>.

⁴ Frédéric Bobin, 'Au Maroc et en Tunisie, l'islam politique subit de sévères déconvenues' [Political Islam suffers severe setbacks in Morocco and Tunisia], *Le Monde*, 13 September 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/09/13/au-maghreb-les-severes-deconvenues-de-l-islamisme-de-gouvernement_6094435_3212.html.

decipher the most recent political developments. The **Abraham Accords (the agreement between Bahrain, Israel, and the UAE to normalize relations), for instance, are producing significant shockwaves in the Maghreb.** Morocco's decision to join in and re-normalize diplomatic ties with Israel in exchange for US recognition of Rabat's sovereignty over the Western Sahara has left the indelible mark of Trump's transactionalism on a forgotten conflict. At the same time, the Biden administration's decision not to reverse this policy has also introduced an important element of continuity in US policies in the Western Sahara.

Inevitably, while Morocco was joining the normalization quartet including Bahrain, Sudan and the UAE, the **conflict in the Western Sahara began to unfreeze.** This trend was anticipated by the November 2020 decision by the Polisario Front (the movement for the independence of Western Sahara) to end the ceasefire.⁵ Despite renewed efforts to revive the diplomatic track, the recent uptick in fighting is laying the groundwork for a future conflict hotspot.

As tensions began to run high, the decision by Algeria, the main sponsor of Polisario, to cut diplomatic ties with Morocco was an ominous sign. The announcement was made a few days after the official visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid to Morocco, and highlighted the **increasing uneasiness in Algiers about Rabat joining the normalization front.** In this increasingly polarized landscape, the Israel-Morocco alignment is offering an incentive for Algeria to move in the opposite direction and get closer to countries such as Iran, Qatar and Turkey.⁶

The first delivery of Bayraktar TB2 combat drones from Turkey to Morocco has apparently proved this assumption wrong,⁷ but it is worth

noting that the arms sale in itself does not make Rabat a partner of choice for Turkey in the Maghreb. On the other hand, the key obstacles to any Algerian-Turkish alignment must be found in the main features of the Algerian regime. These include the central position of the military, its traditional wariness of alleged Islamist parties and its long-standing doctrine based on the principle of non-interventionism, which **prevents Algiers from considering embracing revisionism** for the time being.⁸

Conclusions

The approaching election in Libya will represent the first important test for the new balance of power that is taking shape in the Mediterranean Sea. Inadequate security conditions, the lack of a comprehensive constitutional framework, and the absence of a serious commitment by the different political stakeholders to respect the results are all factors suggesting that a return to the political polarization of 2019–2020 is highly likely. A resumption of the conflict would certainly have regional implications, ending the strategic pause taken so far by the different powers, but also bringing Libya close to a dangerous partition.

The eventuality of a frozen or low-intensity conflict in Libya would certainly play in Russia's favour, which has so far been successful in establishing a military foothold, mainly using hard power under a plausible deniability cover. The activities of the Wagner Group have not only offered Moscow considerable leverage over its local partners, but have also facilitated the creation of a Russian sphere of influence in the region that broadly corresponds to the triangulation between Port Sudan, Tartus in Syria and eventually Derna or Tobruk in Libya.⁹

5 The fighting included, in at least one episode, the use of one unarmed Harfang drone received by Morocco from France and jointly developed by Airbus and the Israeli Defence Industries (IAI). Umberto Profazio, 'Remote warfare spreads to Western Sahara', Maghreb Strategic Trends, March 2021, NATO Defence College Foundation, <https://www.natofoundation.org/maghreb/remote-warfare-spreads-to-western-sahara/>.

6 Interestingly, during his visit to Rabat, Lapid touched upon an unsubstantiated rapprochement between Algeria and Iran, reportedly sharing some concerns about Algeria being 'drawn closer to Iran'. Rina Bassit, 'Algeria partly blames Israel in decision to cut ties with Morocco', *al-Monitor*, 25 August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/algeria-partly-blames-israel-decision-cut-ties-morocco>.

7 According to the Moroccan army, Rabat has ordered 13 Bayraktar TB2 from Turkish manufacturer Baykar, with Moroccan soldiers undergoing a training programme in Turkey this summer. 'Morocco receives first order of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones', *The New Arab*, 25 September 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/morocco-receives-first-order-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-drones>.

8 However, recent changes in the constitution, allowing the Algerian army to be deployed outside of the national territory for peacekeeping missions, are indicative of a re-elaboration of the main foreign policy guidelines, which could push Algiers towards the revisionist countries.

9 This Russian sphere of influence could extend to the Sahel, as suggested by reports about recent talks between the Malian government and the Wagner Group. 'Mali-Russia: Bamako to sign contract with Wagner Group', *Jeune Afrique*, 17 September 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/127421/mali-russia-bamako-to-sign-contract-with-wagner-group/>.

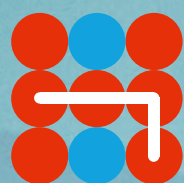
Frozen conflicts have become central to understanding the shifting sands in the region, which are providing external powers with the opportunity to make inroads, by increasing military cooperation with key partners, as shown by the recent geopolitical shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean; and using arms procurement as a vector of influence. In this context, recent suggestions about Algeria ordering 24 Wing Loong II drones from China are an indication of the **close ties between Algiers and Beijing, which has so far expanded its influence in the region mainly using a risk averse strategy.**

Facing the US retrenchment, **Europe needs to invest more in crisis resolution than in crisis management**, using its political capital to

transform the strategic pause into a long-term regional settlement. At the same time, **NATO must be the place where unity and purposefulness are retrieved, building trust between allies** to face new and old challenges together. Expanding NATO's partnerships through the revitalization of instruments such as the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative remains crucial, especially in the southern neighbourhood. This is the case not only when it comes to confronting the systemic challenges originating from China and Russia, but also in terms of avoiding an eventual decoupling between the two shores of the Mediterranean Sea, which would have an impact on the renewed great-power competition.

Author

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