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Guillermo Abio Villegas\*

The Mediterranean Sea: maritime power, conflicts and strategies

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## The Mediterranean Sea: maritime power, conflicts and strategies

### Abstract:

*The Mediterranean waters are among the most military-loaded in the World. Its position connecting the oil-rich Persian Gulf with big energy consumers, the fact that it is home to the three monotheistic religions, and the recent discovery of hydrocarbon reserves in the Oriental basin, make it so. Besides, it represents the natural direction for Russia to achieve its long dream of access to warm waters, and it is the main route for massive flows of irregular migrants from Northern African shores, to Southern Europe. All these questions make it a very contested theatre, where the World's strongest powers battle to exert their influence.*

### Keywords:

*Alliances, Eastmed, energy, immigration, Libya, Mediterranean, power, security, Syria*

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## Introduction

The Mediterranean is the oldest sea. It hosted the emergence of the first warship, the Phoenicians' trireme, and it was home for the first permanent fleet (the Athenian). All this, before becoming a vital axe for Roman expansion.

Geographically, it is divided into two main halves: An Eastern one and a Western. This geographic division has highly impacted historical developments on this sea: most notably, the traditional confrontation between Islam and Christianity lasting more than a millennium, has been drawn on East/West terms. But the North-South division is equally essential to understand Mediterranean synergies. Sailors have historically been inclined to prioritize Northern routes, since Southern journeys were more dangerous and typically, through worst port infrastructures<sup>1</sup>, although some exceptions can be made. Even today, this 'horizontal' split-up still act as a frontier between a Christian-more developed north, and a Muslim-less developed south. It is a relatively quiet sea, with somewhat small tides, and therefore, accessible and ripe to navigation. But probably, the most critical geophysical features are its horizontality and its location. Its location, approximately 30-45° North and 0-30° East, has resulted in warm climates and fertile soils, which has benefited the inhabitants of the shore. Its horizontality has permitted these favourable conditions to be reproduced almost throughout the whole basin and other surrounding lands.

The Mediterranean is reachable only by three narrow entries: the Gibraltar and Dardanelles straits, and the Suez Canal. It has two adjacent seas which are very relevant in geopolitical terms. The Black Sea, which constitutes the main Russian exit to sea (even if Kaliningrad, Saint Petersburg and Murmansk ports are also critical for Russia, they pose some problems as will be mentioned later on), and the Red Sea, which is a crucial choke point for oil routes and commerce departing from Middle East. They all converge in the Mediterranean, making it a sea where a perilous mix of interests coming from North and East, meet those of the indigenous nations. This convergence given by geography is exacerbated by the politically driven presence of the main global superpower, the United States, and the increasing economic based presence of an emerging global power: China.

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<sup>1</sup> RAHN, C., (2010). Chapter 1: Navies in the Mediterranean in the Early Modern Period. *In: Naval Policy and Strategy in the Mediterranean*. London, United Kingdom. Frank Cass Publishers, pp. 3-30.

### ***Historical lessons***

The Mediterranean is a sea full of islands and strategic points, whose influence upon historical processes cannot be undermined in an analysis. Fight for Sicily was the premise of the First Punic War, Allied Naval Forces in the Mediterranean were based at Malta during the Second World War, and Cyprus's status still arises tense disputes between Greece and Turkey, even today. Every island on the Western or Eastern basin (Balearic, Sicily, Sardinia, Crete, Malta and a long etc.) has known a history of war, commerce and continuous swinging of powers exercising control over them. Its control has been pivotal to ensure trade and navigation. Even in 2019, the United Kingdom has used the strategic position of Gibraltar to stop an Iranian oil ship, in pursue of their global geopolitical interests, and Turkey pursues maritime rights over Cyprus' adjacent waters.

As illustrated by its name, the Mediterranean (*Med-terra*) is a sea among lands, and this is not a mere semantic curiosity. By virtue of its nature, developments on land have influenced naval power more directly than in open seas. The defeat of Carthage (a sea power) by Rome (a land power) in the First Punic War, or the lack of sustained maritime control by Italian cities in the Middle Ages despite being major maritime traders<sup>2</sup>, provide us with good examples of how the lack of resources and manpower at homeland, might stop you from achieving sea dominance despite having a strong naval craft. Subsequently, some Behemoths<sup>3</sup>, such as the already mentioned Rome, but also the Ottomans, have been able to exert a leading role in the Mediterranean. This is a condition to be reminded by more traditional naval powers dominating this sea; land powers have been able to extent their power to these waters.

This importance coastal land, emphasized by the previously introduced burdensome access to the sea, has driven outside powers yearning to establish naval presence on the Mediterranean, to feel the need of controlling seaside land portions before projecting their power. Britain's efforts on controlling Tangiers in late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and in controlling Gibraltar, Minorca and Malta in early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, illustrate the knowledge the British had about the crucially of attaining soil in Mediterranean politics. The current United States model of naval pre-eminence in the Mediterranean, even if different in

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<sup>2</sup> CALLEYA, S., (2000) Chapter 11: Bridging history and future Security policy. *In: Naval Policy and Strategy in the Mediterranean*. London, United Kingdom. Frank Cass Publishers, pp. 261-301.

<sup>3</sup> By Behemoths, we are referring to land powers; as opposed to Leviathans: sea powers.

nature, still follows this geo-historical imperative. NATO and US bases are found in multiple Mediterranean countries (Spain, Italy, Egypt, etc.), and these alliances constitute the main springboard for US power projection in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the Mediterranean is not new to coalitions. In fact, alliances have played a role whose decisiveness cannot be stressed in one paper. From the formation of the Pan-Hellenic coalition to multiple Christian or Muslim alliances, amities have greatly altered the balance of power.

But perhaps, the mastery of this naval diplomacy came with the British. It is impressive to see how in the first 55 years of the 19th Century, the British achieved first, a coalition with Russia and the Ottoman Empire against Napoleon's France; then, a coalition with France and Russia against the Ottoman Empire in the Greek War of Independence; and later, a coalition with France and the Ottomans against Russia in the Crimean War. Such a display of diplomatic flexibility constitutes the main weapon the British employed to retain dominance at the Mediterranean. Certainly, the nature of those alliances is different to the ones standing now (they were more based on interests shared in a moment rather than long-term alignments), but the relevance of these blocks still plays a leading role for alien and indigenous actors.

### ***Current outline***

At present and for some decades now the United States is projecting the biggest share of power in the Mediterranean, and despite their decreasing influence in Middle East, it is likely they will continue to do so in the short term. Russia, with the 2013 establishment of the Mediterranean Squadron, the annexation of Crimea a year later, and its increasing weight in Middle Eastern affairs, is being progressively able to increase its voice on developments in the Oriental-Mediterranean shore. On the other hand, China's presence in this sea is different in nature. While it is not to be expected a strong Chinese military deployment in the Mediterranean Sea in the short term, two things are true: China is very rapidly increasing its overall naval capabilities, and it has also established itself in the Mediterranean through an aggressive investment policy.

The current picture of conflict signals three current hot spots. One of them is irregular immigration, a phenomenon extended all along the basin and predominantly from South to North. Irregular migrants are arriving in big numbers to Turkey, Spain, Italy, and

Greece, in an episode that is unveiling the lack of capacity by the EU to handle this issue through cooperation. On the other hand, the fight for energetic resources in the Oriental waters is resulting in the emergence of two blocks with opposed interests: one formed by the *EastMed* states Israel, Cyprus and Greece, along with Egypt, Italy, France and the United States; and the other led by Turkey, along with the non-recognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), and the Tripoli-based and UN-recognized Libyan Government of National Accord. Armed conflicts constitute another problem in the region, and they have varied during the last two decades. In the early years of the century, one could identify a “triangle of conflict” between Bosnia, Algeria and the Middle East<sup>4</sup>. In recent years, conflicts in the Balkans have decreased, turning this triangle into an axe from Middle East to Northern Africa. This axe of conflict currently manifests itself with the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, but, in the last decade and a half, conflict has been widespread throughout the whole MENA region.

This work aims at exposing recent strategies and policies undertaken by the main actors in the Mediterranean arena in the context of recent events. Though it would be impossible to isolate naval policies from wider strategies, an emphasis will be put on maritime strategies and developments at sea. The paper will first analyze the different conflicts involving Mediterranean states: it will discuss strategies and maritime actions by the main indigenous players, as well as the challenges these countries are facing and will face soon. For this purpose, the strategies of the biggest four Mediterranean players in GDP terms will be tackled more in depth, and references to the approach of other important indigenous stakeholders will be made as well. The paper will then evaluate to what extent and how are global powers present in this scenario. Similarly, it will try to highlight the tools employed to exert this external presence, and the main obstacles these countries will come up against in the region.

## **Main indigenous actors**

### ***Turkey***

Turkey might have a case to be considered a dominant actor in Mediterranean geopolitics in the upcoming years: its military power, demographic capacity,

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<sup>4</sup> ROMERO, J., (2010). Operaciones en el Mediterráneo: la dimensión militar internacional. *In: Cuadernos de Estrategia*, 144, pp. 63-98.

geographical position, and their geography of imagination about themselves, make up the foundations for possible regional dominance. However, its revisionist approach to foreign policy and the creation of certain mistrust among its neighbours are hindering its lift-off. The existence of internal disputes, namely the Syrian conflict in its borders and the Kurdish question, are also preventing Turkey from fully developing its international military capabilities abroad and hindering the country from having a larger impact in broader international issues. This obstacle posed by the existence of internal conflicts is not shared by many of its European counterparts, which could eventually orient their armies towards external conflicts and power projection elsewhere more loosely.

In recent years, Erdogan's administration has increased Turkish aggressiveness in its neighbourhood, and sea policies do not escape from this approach: Ankara's military investment is heavily reflected in air and sea capabilities. However, the Mediterranean is probably not in itself the final goal of Turkish naval strategy: they are looking further ahead, to the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean, as shown with the Joint Command Force established with Qatar overlooking the Strait of Ormuz, or with the Turkish Task Force present in Somalia. Turkish *Milgem* program has resulted in the national construction of four anti-submarine corvettes, some of which have already been sold to strong armies such as the Pakistani<sup>5</sup>; they have also improved its defensive capabilities with the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, a move that has caused an earthquake in bilateral relations with the United States, the EU, and its position in NATO. In fact, Turkey is making a relatively quick turn away from these institutions. Besides the purchasing of the S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, and despite diverging interests in many scenarios, such as Ankara's close ties with Kiev, Turkey and Russia have shared the leading role in recent months concerning the resolution of the Syrian conflict, an scenario where they also chase opposing objectives, and have held multiple conversations regarding the situation in Libya, even presenting a joint ceasefire agreement to General Haftar, which was eventually turned down. Turkey has also opened its arms to Chinese port investment, by the selling of large shares of the Ambarli port to Chinese company Cosco<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, and despite these recent

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<sup>5</sup> SARIIBRAHIMOGLU, L., (2019, October 1st). Turkish navy receives fourth and last Milgem corvette. *In: Jane's*. Retrieved on 12/12/2019 from: <https://www.janes.com/article/91620/turkish-navy-receives-fourth-and-last-milgem-corvette>

<sup>6</sup> ALBANESE, A., (2019). Tutti i porti cinesi nel Mar Mediterraneo e altre storie. *In: START Magazine*. Retrieved on 06/01/2020 from: <https://www.startmag.it/mondo/tutti-i-porti-cinesi-nel-mar-mediterraneo-e-altre-storie/>

moves, Turkey remains strongly embedded in Western institutions: it is still the second largest NATO army, it is home to NATO Land Command of Europe in Izmir, and its economy remains highly dependent on its special status with the European Union. However, if this turn in foreign policy continues for some years, the West might be losing a very valuable partner in Middle East.

The strength in military equipment emphasized in recent years, has also allowed Turkey to recently enter the Libyan scenario. They have done it through an agreement with the Government of National Accord, through which the UN-recognized Sarraj's government will receive sea and air military equipment, along with Turkish troops (requested by Al-Sarraj), in exchange for certain economic rights in Libyan waters, some of which are effectively controlled by General Haftar<sup>7</sup>. Turkish entrance into the Libyan theatre has been perceived as a threat and another example of Turkish aggressiveness by some of its neighbors like Israel or Egypt.



**Figure 1. Distribution of economic zones in Mediterranean waters.** Source. Anadolu Agency.

But most importantly, this agreement includes the distribution of economic zones in Mediterranean waters among both states: the division made (represented in Figure 1), has fuelled tensions in the region since it is aimed at hindering the construction of the *EastMed* pipeline and increasing Turkish rights over natural resources in the region; on

<sup>7</sup> GARCÍA, P., (2019, December 26th). Turquía dice que Libia le ha pedido ayuda y enviará tropas al país. In: *NIUS Diario*. Retrieved on 06/01/2019 from: [https://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/afrika/turquia-dice-que-libia-le-ha-pedido-ayuda-militar\\_18\\_2873070121.html](https://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/afrika/turquia-dice-que-libia-le-ha-pedido-ayuda-militar_18_2873070121.html)

top, it cuts across Greek waters, and has been labelled as incoherent with the international law of the sea by the European Union.

These disputes for energetic resources in Eastern Mediterranean, have highly deteriorated Turkey's relations with its neighbours. The long-standing Turkish claim for recognition of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) has picked up in intensity after the discovery of gas fields in the Oriental basin of the Mediterranean, some of which happen to be in Cypriot waters. Turkey has backed up these claims with the sending of war, drill and exploration ships to waters which Turkey considers belong to the TRNC; these actions have unsurprisingly led to an escalation of tension with Cyprus, but it has also involved other regional powers<sup>8</sup>, which, as a reaction to Turkish power, have followed a clear strategy of external balancing. Twice has Turkey blocked Italian ENI expeditions into Cypriot waters on the grounds that contracts signed with Nicosia are not valid because they do not take into consideration the TRNC. Turkish navy has recently forced Israeli research vessels out of Cypriot waters as well. As a result of this hostile policy and in an attempt to obtain higher energetic autonomy, Turkey has isolated itself from the regional energetic architecture and been left out of markets it actually must seek to enter if it wants to diversify its gas imports beyond Russian and Iranian gas. Even the European Union has sanctioned two Turkish oil company officials for illegal drilling<sup>9</sup> and is threatening Turkey with economic sanctions for the continued violation of Cyprus' sovereignty. Ankara is responding to these movements by the European Union threatening with allowing massive flows of refugees from Turkey to the European Union, in a menace that has become a strong negotiation weapon for the Anatolian country.

### **France**

By GDP, military capabilities, and colonial legacy among many other elements, France possesses all the ingredients to increase, even further, its relative weight in the

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<sup>8</sup> SPICER, J., (2019, June 18th). Turkey to launch second Cyprus drill ship. *In: Offshore Engineer*. Retrieved on 20/11/2019 from: <https://www.oedigital.com/news/467411-turkey-to-launch-second-cyprus-drill-ship>

<sup>9</sup> PATON, C., (2020, February 5th). EU to sanction two Turkish state oil officials over illegal Mediterranean drilling. *In: The National: World*. Retrieved on 14/02/2020 from: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/eu-to-sanction-two-turkish-state-oil-officials-over-illegal-mediterranean-drilling-1.974556>

Mediterranean. These elements are combined with a powerful diplomatic craft; one able to present itself as a leading power within the European Union, while capable of talking with Russia in good terms. One capable of presenting itself as a crucial piece of the Western security system, while openly criticizing NATO and calling for a larger European approach to the organization. Its colonial past in many countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, is not to be forgotten either; the presence of many citizens with a French past in these countries, creates certain degree of responsibility<sup>10</sup>, plus diplomatic relations are generally closer with France's former colonies. To establish its presence in Mediterranean waters, France has recently displayed its capabilities in joint naval exercises with NATO partners, like exercise PEAN 2019, and *EastMed* associates like Egypt. Paris seeks to play a leading role in the new European security architecture, one that must aim at achieving a higher degree of independence from the United States, the main trans-Atlantic partner (though European powers have shown little improvement in this direction, and it might be argued that they lack the capacities to develop this strategic autonomy). It is proving so in the Eastern Mediterranean disputes, where it has already sent two war ships in cooperation with Athens (by the way, unlike Germany and the United States, France has been the only Western associate stepping up and providing effective military aid to Greece against the Turkish threat), and leading the presence in the Sahel, where it is calling for higher involvement by other European actors amid the reduction in US effectives.

As a strong regional actor, it has indeed tried to influence the outcome of recent conflicts in Mediterranean shores, with little success to the date. In Syria, it has done so by keeping a quasi- permanent naval presence in Eastern Mediterranean throughout the entirety of the conflict, with warships patrolling Syrian coasts since 2011, including the powerful Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier<sup>11</sup>. Its naval presence on the conflict was specially felt after the joint operation with United Kingdom and the United States in 2018, bombing Al-Assad's chemical facilities with air missiles launched from vessels. To maintain this relatively important presence, France has used the ports of Limassol and Larnaca in Cyprus, country with which it keeps good relations, as exemplified by a

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<sup>10</sup> KAHRAMAN, S., (2019, July 17th). French naval presence in Eastern Mediterranean not just about energy. *In: Ahval News*. Retrieved on 12/12/2019 from: <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-france/french-naval-presence-eastern-mediterranean-not-just-about-energy>

<sup>11</sup> 10.

defence agreement which will extend the French use of these bases until 2027<sup>12</sup>. This agreement does not only serve to project French power into Syria and the Middle East, but it also allows it to protect French Total's extracting rights in Cypriot waters from Turkish interference.

Despite failing to achieve its basic goals in Syria, France has also exerted an impact on the Libyan conflict. From the beginning, it was one of the countries strongly pushing for the UNSC implementation of the Responsibility to Protect and playing an important role on the field on the overthrowing of Gaddafi. Currently, questions have been raised concerning France's compliance with the UN arms-embargo on Libya, after French missiles were found in Haftar's bases.

Concerning illegal immigration, France is not a top receiver of sea migrants, but this has not prevented it from actively trying to reduce the impact of human trafficking and smuggling in the Southern European coasts. It has promoted European action on Northern African coasts, and it had plans to deliver speedboats to the Libyan Coast Guard to stop migrants fleeing from Libya, but finally cancelled the shipment due to public opinion pressures<sup>13</sup> among other factors. The European Union has not been effective regarding the management of irregular entries by sea, and France, as a leader of the European integration process and a Mediterranean country, holds an important responsibility in this failure.

### **Italy**

Italy has traditionally been United States' most loyal NATO partner for Southern Europe. United States unilaterally lifted the post-World War II disarmament clauses on Italy, to allow it to build a stronger navy, which was greatly developed during the late 50's and early 60's, and played a leading role, second only to the United States in the Western Block, in the Mediterranean Sea during the Cold War. This close alignment is also one of the reasons why the 6th Fleet command is staged in Naples; United States trusts Italy as a very reliable partner, even above many other European associates. Italy is thus generally seen as a country willing to rely on NATO over the EU in security terms;

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<sup>12</sup> 10.

<sup>13</sup> JEANNEROD, B., (2019, December 4th). France Drops Plan to Give Boats to Libya. *In: Human Rights Watch*. Retrieved on 17/12/2019 from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/04/france-drops-plan-give-boats-libya>

however, its efforts to further engage NATO in the Mediterranean have not been very fruitful after, and during the last years of the Cold War.

In the early years after the Cold War, the Balkans constituted the main focus for Italian Mediterranean policy due to the high intensity of conflicts and obvious geographical reasons. These priorities changed with the entrance of the 21st century with the stabilization of the former Yugoslavian republics, along with the increase in immigration in early years. Currently, Italy's Mediterranean strategy is centred around two main issues: the prevention of illegal immigration, and the protection of its energetic routes and firms. While irregular entries into Europe have been decreasing in the last five years, Italy's policy has become tougher since the rise of Lega Norte. This hardening of the policies is reflected in the several negatives of the Italian government to allow the disembarkation of ships with rescued migrants. Italy's government has also hindered and even braked the initiative, backed by Spain among other countries, of keeping a permanent fleet in Libyan coasts to react more rapidly to emergency situations: Italy argued that it would cause a 'pulling' effect.



**Figure 2. Poseidon gas pipeline construction plan.** Source: Independent Balkan News Agency.

Energetic-wise, Italy's cards are strongly played in Libya and in the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean. In there, as mentioned before, ENI is facing hindrance from Turkish forces to properly perform the extracting rights it has agreed to. Indeed, the Italian Navy has sent in early December, frigate *Martinengo* to Cyprus' Larnaca port as a warning message for Ankara<sup>14</sup>. Italy is therefore openly in line with *EastMed* countries, and it could indeed be one of the beneficiaries if this pipeline finally goes through: as figure 2

<sup>14</sup> TNH STAFF, (2019, December 11th). Italy Sends Warship to Protect Italian Energy Ship off Cyprus. *In: The National Herald*. Retrieved on 20/12/2019 from: <https://www.thenationalherald.com/273460/italy-sends-warship-to-protect-italian-energy-ship-off-cyprus/>

shows, an extension of the *EastMed* pipeline, the *Poseidon* pipeline, would get to Italy, allowing the transalpine country to diversify its hydrocarbon imports away from the unstable Libya. It is precisely there, in Libya, that Italy is playing a mediating role between the two parties of the conflict with the visit by Luigi di Maio, Italy's Foreign Minister, to Tripoli to hold talks with both factions. Italy is strongly raising its voice against Turkish and Russian military involvement in the country: it is calling upon to respect the UN-embargo and look for diplomatic mediation to achieve a ceasefire, or even a solution to the conflict<sup>15</sup>. It is understandable that a powerful country like Italy does not wish to have a perpetual armed conflict in a neighbouring country; however, maybe the new Italian executive must be reminded that this kind of international mediation has already been tried in the Libyan War. And it has catastrophically failed, as shown with the lack of respect towards the conclusions reached in the Berlin Conference early on this year. This lack of success through diplomatic means has made Italy join the European Union military mission in Libyan shores to stop the arrival of military equipment to the country.

On another note, Italy is strongly opening to Chinese investments in port infrastructure: the ports of Trieste, Savona, Naples and Genoa, are already subject to Chinese presence and rights on some of their terminals. However, as opposite to other Chinese investments, these shall not be perceived as a change of geopolitical alignment by the receiving country. Instead, they must be conceived as purely economic agreements in a moment where Italy needed foreign capital: Italy remains NATO's leading member in Southern Europe and will continue to retain this position in the short and medium-term. Nonetheless, debate on how to combine Chinese economic engagement and the alliance with the United States, is a hot question of Italy's grand strategy.

### **Spain**

Spain's maritime policies in the Mediterranean Sea are strongly embedded into Western organizations. Providing NATO with ships for many of its exercises, such as the Combat Support Ship *Patiño*, the Spanish frigate *Méndez Núñez* has recently escorted two American aircraft carriers simultaneously meeting at the Mediterranean Sea. Spain has

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<sup>15</sup> ALHARATHY, S., (2019, December 29th). Italy warns of further escalation in Libya. *In: The Libya Observer*. Retrieved on 10/01/2020 from: <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/italy-warns-further-escalation-libya>

also been active in other theatres such as EU's training mission in Bosnia 'EUFOR Althea', and most notably, the African Atlantic Coast. Recent events have attracted the focus towards the Atlantic coasts for the Spanish Navy; in particular, the approval by a Moroccan parliamentary commission to request the increase of their EEZ claims onto Canary's space<sup>16</sup>. Despite the issue most likely being solved with diplomatic mediation, these hostile policies shall be treated as serious threats to the good bilateral relations. Beyond responding to these hostilities, irregular immigration constitutes the main medium-term problematic for Spain in Mediterranean waters. Spain is heavily spending money to tackle the problem, providing funds for Northern African countries (ironically including Morocco), to reduce the number of migrants<sup>17</sup>, and advocating for permanent European presence in the Northern African waters. Throughout a couple of years, the European Union displayed Operation SOPHIA, an important tool to react rapidly to humanitarian emergencies arising in the Mediterranean. But in the light of poor results, and an increasing Italian criticism towards this approach, the European Union put an end to this advance guard.

Spain's belonging to NATO, has not whatsoever, prevented it from hosting Russian ships to refuel in the Ceuta Port<sup>18</sup>. It has been doing it since 2011 with some punctual exceptions, in full respect of international maritime law and the principle of free navigation, despite receiving criticism from NATO partners. In the Syrian theatre, Spain has respected the European arms restriction on Turkey for its operations on Northern Syria, but this has not prevented Spain to fulfil its cooperative responsibilities under NATO with the Anatolian country. Unlike Italy, Spain has kept the deployment of its defensive missiles in Turkey, which do not collide with EU's restrictions, and has extended their deployment in a display of cooperation among NATO countries<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> PULIDO, G., (2019, December 27th). Marruecos, Canarias y las Zonas Económicas Exclusivas. *In: Revista Ejército*. Retrieved on 02/01/2020 from: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2019/12/27/marruecos-canarias-y-las-zonas-economicas-especiales/>

<sup>17</sup> MARTIN, M., (2019, July 19th). España inyecta a Marruecos otros 30 millones de euros para frenar la inmigración irregular. *In: El País*. Retrieved on 23/11/2019 from: [https://elpais.com/politica/2019/07/18/actualidad/1563452677\\_794983.html](https://elpais.com/politica/2019/07/18/actualidad/1563452677_794983.html)

<sup>18</sup> VILLAREJO, E., (2019, June 19th). Un buque militar de Rusia vuelve a hacer escala en Ceuta. *In: ABC Blogs*. Retrieved on 11/12/2019 from: <https://abcblogs.abc.es/tierra-mar-aire/espana/un-buque-militar-de-rusia-vuelve-a-hacer-escala-en-ceuta.html>

<sup>19</sup> ERKUS, S., (2019). Spain extends Patriot deployment since NATO ally's security is crucial. *In: Hurriyet Daily News*. Retrieved on 27/12/2019 from: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/spain-extends-patriot-deployment-since-nato-allys-security-is-crucial-ambassador-149868>

But in the medium and long term, other problems arise. Spanish leaders have tended to focus their foreign policy on Europe and the relations with United States and have paid little attention to increase and improve Spanish presence on the Mediterranean<sup>20</sup>. The Mediterranean has historically been a crucial space for Spain, where it holds a privileged geographical position and could eventually become a stronger regional power. This over-embedment in Western institutions has led, according to some scholars<sup>21</sup>, to a situation of dependence on the security provided by the United States, a partner which is increasingly hardening its speech and threatening with higher tariffs on Spanish products, at the same time that it is raising its demands for cooperation: it has recently requested, with practically no room for a Spanish refusal, to increase its military presence in the Rota base. This is a debate that must be brought into discussion as soon as possible, and alternatives to diversify our security must be proposed and studied. Also, on the other end of the Mediterranean, Morocco and Algeria are both increasing their military technological capabilities, mostly on the air, but Spanish policymakers do not seem concerned about it either.

***Other important actors: Algeria, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Libya, Morocco and Syria***

The Northern shore of Africa is strongly marked upon the Libyan conflict. Egypt is stepping up as a regional actor, trying to influence the outcome of the conflict in favour of General Haftar. Greece has also strongly positioned itself on the side of the NLA (General Haftar), with the ejection of the Libyan ambassador after his government signed the already-mentioned maritime agreement with Turkey, and as a strong *EastMed* partner, with Mitsokatis' recent visit to the White House to discuss Turkish energetic policies. The country is also regaining military spending after years of continuous decrease in the context of the poor economic situation it has gone through in recent years: it has joined France in sending war ships to the area, it has sold defensive missile systems to Saudi Arabia, and it has revamped a defence agreement with the United States. On the other side of the Libyan border, Turkey has been holding meetings with Tunisia to attract it into the Al-Sarraj axe, but, despite the signing of an agreement concerning the buyout of military equipment, it seems a too bold and daring

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<sup>20</sup> RIORDAN, S., (2017). Spain's Foreign Policy: A Lost Opportunity. *In: The Diplomat in Spain*. Retrieved on 11/12/2019 from: <https://thediplotatinspain.com/en/2017/04/spains-foreign-policy-lost-opportunity/>

<sup>21</sup> 20.

approach since Tunisia highly depends on its exports to Italy and France, neither of which would tolerate such an alignment. On the Western shore, Algeria is building the foundations to become a bigger regional power upon investment in Russian military equipment: after being the first receiver of the Su-57 fighter jets, it has proceeded to the buyout of Russian early warning and control airborne Beriev a-100, Kalibr missiles, and kilo-class 636 submarines<sup>22</sup>, all Russian-made. Morocco, Algeria's biggest regional rival, continues to be a loyal ally to the United States, being in 2019 the largest US customer in the whole MENA region, according to Forbes, with the purchase of F16 fighter jets, munition, and hosting Mike Pompeo on an official visit not long ago. They are both modernizing their military capabilities; too soon to call it an arms race, but not too soon to remind that an eye needs to be kept on these policies.

Egypt has also been very busy beyond the Libyan conflict. After the discovery of gas fields in its waters, the country is becoming a regional trading and export centre for gas and has strengthened its trading ties with Israel in recent years. Nonetheless, the already referred Turkish aggressive policies have required Egypt to increase its military capabilities as well. Defensive agreements with Cyprus, exercises in the Mediterranean waters with Italy and Great Britain, or in the Red Sea with a traditional ally (France), and further drills with Russia in Mediterranean waters, are improving Egypt's operative capabilities and sending a message against possible threats. It should also be highlighted the ability of Egypt to talk on friendly terms with a wide variety of important players: The United States and Russia, Israel and, to a lesser extent, the Arab World as well.

On the Middle Eastern shores, Israel has been relatively quiet this past year. Beyond its already traditional interferences on Palestinian waters and violation of rights of Palestinian fishermen, Israel has lowered its political profile. Its main partners are still the United States and Russia in military terms, and it continues to export armament to smaller countries like Azerbaijan, Myanmar or South Sudan<sup>23</sup>. Nonetheless, Israel remains a resounding actor in its neighbourhood: its participation in Syria against Al-Assad's forces and its bombings on the Gaza Strip have continued during this year. The

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<sup>22</sup> GUERRAOUI, S. (2020, January 5th). Arms race between Morocco and Algeria intensifies. *In: The Arab Weekly*. Retrieved on 08/01/2020 from: <https://thearabweekly.com/arms-race-between-morocco-and-algeria-intensifies>

<sup>23</sup> VARDI, S., (2019, December 25th). The fight to expose Israel's arms sales to the world's most repressive regimes. *In: 972 Magazine*. Retrieved on 02/01/2020 from: <https://www.972mag.com/israel-weapons-exports-activists/>

main concern for Israel's foreign policymakers sees to gain supporters of their cause to name Jerusalem the capital city of the country: countries like Uganda, where the opening of an embassy was offered in return, or Morocco, to whom Israel offered recognition of the Western Sahara as part of the country in exchange for the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital, exemplify this.

Due to the lack of stability, Syria and Libya are currently important geostrategic points. In Syria, even though the conflict seemed settled and controlled by Al Assad's forces a few months ago, in recent weeks bombings have resumed in the Southern part of the Idlib province which divides the Syrian Army and rebel militias. In the light of these events, the Syrian Army has increased in recent weeks cooperation ties with the Russian Army, to the point of performing for the first time ever<sup>24</sup>, joint naval exercises in Tartus' coasts. These recent skirmishes have also had a negative impact on Ankara-Moscow relations. In Libya, while foreign powers continue to dismiss the UN arms embargo, and pursue its interests through military means, the UN-sponsored Berlin Conference has not proved very fruitful and hopes to achieve a diplomatic and peaceful solution is sinking. The European Union has recently sent a military mission to avoid the entry of weapons into the country, in a mission that is perceived as a big challenge for the EU by its own, and that, for better or worse, will serve as a precedent whenever the recurrent question of European strategic autonomy arises.

## Main foreign powers

### *United States*

The United States is the most decisive actor in many regions worldwide, and the Mediterranean is no exception. Through long-standing alliances with shoring countries, embodied primarily on NATO, the United States has been able to keep in the Mediterranean, unlike in other regions, a relatively friendly and stable environment after the Cold War. This has allowed the World's most powerful state, to turn its focus elsewhere for many years. However, the Eastern Mediterranean is re-emerging as a vital geopolitical pivot after a sustained period of relative calm<sup>25</sup>. Two main factors have

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<sup>24</sup> O'CONNOR, T., (2019, December, 19th). Russia and Syria hold first navy drills together as they launch new assault. *In: NewsWeek*. Retrieved on 02/01/2020 from: <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-syria-drills-new-offensive-1478351>

<sup>25</sup> JINSA Gemunder Center's Eastern Mediterranean Policy Project (2019). Sea Changes: U.S. Challenges and Opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean. *In: JINSA*. Retrieved on 10/12/2019 from:

further increased US interest on the region, which had already escalated after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea: Turkey's aggressiveness, and Russia's expanding influence in the region, have compelled the United States to become increasingly active in this sea, and to shift its objectives from engagement and assistance, to deterrence and defence. These long-term tendencies converge with the recent events on Iraqi soil and the increasing tensions with Iran, which will either lead to an increase or a reduction of US presence on Mediterranean countries like Syria. To exert this presence, the United States has the permanent deployment of the 6th Fleet based in Naples. The fleet's Area of Responsibility (AOR), includes not only the Mediterranean, but also the whole continental Europe including Russia (USEUCOM), and Africa as well (USAFRICOM)<sup>26</sup>. This wide AOR assigned is not a mere operational issue, it reflects the United States' vision on the Mediterranean, which is not that of a region itself, but rather of an element of a wider Europe/Africa scenario.

American contingents in Europe are increasing as a result of these new geopolitical needs. In recent years, the United States has deployed four destroyers in Rota, which already constitutes a very strong forward presence in Southern Europe and a cornerstone of American defensive guarantees, but they have demanded to even further increase this presence with two more destroyers and 600 hundred extra personnel on the Rota base<sup>27</sup>. United States is also caring for showing muscle to its homologues: in April 2019 American carriers John C. Stennis and Abraham Lincoln, met at Eastern Mediterranean to perform joint exercises. This is a very rare phenomenon that has only taken place three times this millennium in the Mediterranean, and two of those three, have been after 2016. The increased rate of action does not transpire only in military deployment, diplomacy is a very important tool of United States abroad: Mike Pompeo's visit to Cyprus in recent weeks, in a clear message to Turkey, is a proof of it. But perhaps, the most overwhelming action responding to Turkey's increased

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<https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Sea-Changes-U.S.-Challenges-and-Opportunities-in-the-Eastern-Mediterranean-2.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> LARTER, D., (2019, January 14th). US Navy's 6th Fleet boss describes her front-row seat to the great power competition. *In: DefenseNews*. Retrieved on 19/11/2019 from: <https://www.defensenews.com/interviews/2019/01/14/us-navys-6th-fleet-boss-describes-her-front-row-seat-to-the-great-power-competition/>

<sup>27</sup> HUERTAS, F., (2019, December 18th). EE. UU. quiere desplegar dos destructores y 600 marines más en la base de Rota. *In: De Verdad Digital*. Retrieved on 09/01/2020 from: <https://deverdaddigital.com/eeuu-quiere-desplegar-dos-destructores-y-600-marines-mas-en-la-base-de-rota/>

offensiveness, has been the lift off United States' economic embargo on Cyprus, which had been upheld from 1987.

However, there is another side of the coin. As highlighted previously, Middle East is a highly contested region in which United States has had a very strong presence during the last two decades. This 2019, has marked a year where the United States has significantly decreased its presence in Syria and Iraq. It could be said that this reduction has not come out of United States' willingness, but rather as a consequence of their inefficiency in solving Middle Eastern affairs and protecting its regional partners, as the lack of response against Iran's aggressions on Saudi Arabia's energy facilities show. This lack of US success in the region might have been an element pushing traditional allies away from its axe: Turkey, Egypt and Greece among others, are getting closer to other foreign powers like Russia or China.

### ***Russia***

The Mediterranean is Russia's long-time dreamt access to the sea: disputes over the Balkans with the Ottoman Empire, to control this access, were a constant for Russian tsars. But Northern Russia was also a battleground to achieve access to the sea: Peter the Great's conquest and capital placement on Saint-Petersburg show that. Russia possesses four main ports in national territory (or at least factually controlled territory): Kaliningrad, Murmansk, Saint-Petersburg and Sebastopol. The first is separated from the rest of the country, which makes it inefficient; the second is up north in the Arctic Sea, and most of the year is not in proper conditions for its navigation; and the third is in the Gulf of Finland, which has difficult access due to its limited depth. These constraints, and the existence of powerful threats to the South, have historically led Russia to envisage the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean by extension, as its main place of projection for its now increasing naval power. The opening of the Arctic routes, which have already forced Russia to increase its defensive capabilities at the North, and the endangerment, due to the country's Civil War, of Russia's forward presence in Syria, have been the main reasons causing the improvement of Russian naval capabilities. The renewed focus on the Mediterranean region is reflected with fundamental changes made to Russian navy and defensive systems: the creation of the Mediterranean Squadron, the advancement of air-missiles and anti-aerial defences to Crimea, and the

strengthening of its air defences at Tartus, its base in Syria, illustrate this trend<sup>28</sup>.

Nonetheless, these ambitions remain limited. Russia is aware of its inferior economic resources, capabilities and possibilities as compared to the United States and its NATO allies. The country will likely not be able to keep up its high naval spending for a long period of time, and its facing economic stagnation and Western sanctions. These socio-economic deficits are highlighted by Russia's difficult access to the Mediterranean, which must go through the Turkish Dardanelles Straits. Therefore, Russia finds more attractive and realistic to maintain naval presence in the Mediterranean which will act as deterrence for NATO associates, rather than pursuing a globally active blue-water navy<sup>29</sup>. It is to expect, that its overall focus will remain defensive in the medium term. While these handicaps do not allow Russia to compete with the United States in heavy naval craft such as aircraft carriers either, Moscow is showing a remarkable ability to do so with submarine and missile systems, in anti-access area denial operations (A2AD) , which will likely become the *modus operandi* for Russia in the upcoming years. This high naval spending is increasing the size of the Black Sea and Baltic fleets, which feed the Mediterranean Squadron, and improving Russia's naval technology in its surrounding waters.

Forced by geography, the crucial element permitting Russia's influence in the region, are and will remain alliances and friendly relations. The cornerstone of this system is undoubtedly Syria. In the context of the Civil War, where Russia had an active role providing food and military equipment, Moscow acquired a loan to use the Port of Tartus as its base until 2066<sup>30</sup>. This is Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean, making it an essential component, but good relations with Syria are also embodied in joint naval exercises in December 2019, and in the Latakia aerial base. Another country with whom Russia maintains cooperation policies is Egypt. Besides acting side by side in the Libyan conflict, Russia possesses numerous air bases in Egyptian territory which constitute an important policy element as well. It keeps good relations with Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and its relations with Turkey are improving recently, as exemplified

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<sup>28</sup> GORENBURG, D., (2019, September 18th). Russia's naval strategy in the Mediterranean. *In: Russia Military Reform*. Retrieved on 02/12/2019 from: <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2019/09/18/russias-naval-strategy-in-the-mediterranean/>

<sup>29</sup> 28

<sup>30</sup> REUTERS, (2019). Russia to invest \$500 million in Syrian port and build grain hub, Interfax reports. *In: The Japan Times*. Retrieved on 03/01/2020 from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-security-russia-grains/update-1-russia-to-invest-500-mln-in-syrian-port-build-grain-hub-interfax-idUSL8N28R32J>

with the Turkish purchase of Russian military equipment, despite maintaining conflict of interests in numerous disputes: regarding Cyprus' status, in the Libyan War, or the outcome of the Syrian conflict, among others. Despite having a relatively small economic presence, the Kremlin has had the capability of speaking with a wide range of actors in the MENA region, probably more than any other global power.

### **China**

As opposed to Russia and the United States, China's power projection in the Mediterranean Sea is mainly carried through economic investment rather than military capacity. China is extending its Maritime Silk Road to Southern European and Northern African Mediterranean ports, and the crown jewels of this extension in the Mediterranean, are the ports of Piraeus in Greece, and Cherchell in Algeria. Tight relations with Greece, probably China's strongest partner in the region, were reinforced during the 2008 financial crisis, when China emerged as the main bidder when Greece desperately needed capital inflows, and also during the Libyan Crisis, where Greece played an important role in the evacuation of Chinese citizens<sup>31</sup>. However, Greece and Algeria are not the only countries to have welcomed Chinese port investments. In fact, countries like Egypt, in Port-Said and Alexandria, Israel, with the ports of Ashdod and Haifa, or Italy with the already-mentioned Trieste, Savona, Naples and Genoa ports, have been big receivers of this investment. Also, Turkey (Ambarli), Morocco (Tangier), and Spain (Valence) have not escaped it. Almost the entirety of basin countries are subject to Chinese investments, which might become, in the medium term, a very big domination tool for China in the region: indeed, Chinese companies already have the ability to restrict access to some Mediterranean ports if they, or the Chinese government, so wish it<sup>32</sup>. On top, many African countries see China as a more reliable and less intrusive alternative to traditional sources of investment, which have been France and the European Union in general.

But port infrastructure and terminals are not the only field where China is emerging as a reliable investor: submarine telecommunication cables, connecting Tunisia and Italy, and Libya and Greece, and carrying almost the entirety of intercontinental electronic

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<sup>31</sup> EKMAN, A., (2018). *China in the Mediterranean: an emerging presence*. Paris, France. Ifri.

<sup>32</sup> 31.

communication, have been developed by Chinese Huawei and Alcatel<sup>33</sup>. China is also developing the so-called 'sectoral forums' with regional partners, serving as cooperation platforms for different sectors, mostly agriculture and maritime cooperation, to further increase its diplomatic weight on the region.

Militarily, China is slowly increasing its power in nearby seas, most notably the South China Sea and the Indic Ocean, where much of its navy is concentrated. Perhaps, the economic investments in the Mediterranean region will translate into military presence of a growing navy in the mid-term. Indeed, this military expansion has also been noticed in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In the latter, China possesses its only military base outside its borders in Djibouti, which highlights the strategic importance of this sea as a union between the Arabic Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. In the Mediterranean, China undertook, for the first time ever, a joint military exercise with Russia in 2015, which served as a first contact for possible future appearances of its navy. Chinese engagement in regional military conflicts has been very limited, because as mentioned before, its involvement in the region is mainly economic and not military. However, Chinese presence must be carefully regulated by policymakers<sup>34</sup>, mostly on the European side, to maintain complete independence from the Asian giant in the decades to come.

### **Iran**

Iran's main trademark in the region is seen with its involvement in Lebanon and Syria. In each of the conflicts, the Islamic Republic has played an important role supporting its allies, Hezbollah and Al-Assad. These associates, along with the Shiite militias in Iraq, have provided the Regime with a privileged spot in the Mediterranean Sea, which, nonetheless, has not been exploited yet. These springboards are rather used, at least for the moment, to extend its influence on the Middle East and to have closer positions to Israel, an openly declared enemy. We will need to wait to see the outcome of recent events in Iraq, and the effect that these have on Iranian military deployment in the country. Iraq is a crucial piece of Iranian regional strategy, since its inclusion into the

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<sup>33</sup> 31.

<sup>34</sup> MÜLLER-MARKUS, C., (2016). China moors in the Mediterranean. A sea of opportunity for Europe? *In: Barcelona centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)*. Retrieved on 11/11/2019 from: [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/notes\\_internacionals/n1\\_156/china\\_moors\\_in\\_the\\_mediterranean\\_a\\_sea\\_of\\_opportunities\\_for\\_europe](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionals/n1_156/china_moors_in_the_mediterranean_a_sea_of_opportunities_for_europe)

axe translates into a corridor of Teheran-aligned countries, from Iran itself to the Mediterranean Sea<sup>35</sup>. However, the focus of the Iranian and the ICRG Navies is not in the Mediterranean, but rather in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and the Indic Ocean, where the country needs to protect its oil exports, and is going to perform in the upcoming months joint military exercises with Russia and China. The Mediterranean indeed constitutes a residual element of Iran's naval strategy.

The Islamic Republic is planning the opening of a new shipping line to Eastern Mediterranean ports<sup>36</sup>, which will increase its regional weight and economic influence, despite US sanctions on Iranian maritime trade. However, Iran lacks economic and military muscle to establish itself as a main power in the Mediterranean, and therefore its presence will depend on its ability to protect its interests in and through the Middle East region, and will be very limited to the Oriental basin. Two important actors, Turkey and Russia, are interested the most in limiting Iran's power in the Middle East. Despite the latter cooperating with the Islamic Republic in many fields, Moscow would not find attractive to have a very strong Southern neighbour, while Turkey rivals the Islamic Republic to expand its influence over the Middle East.

## Conclusions

The Mediterranean region is re-emerging as a focus of geopolitical interest. Many are the actors becoming increasingly involved and seeking to gain further influence. The Syrian and Libyan armed conflicts are de-stabilizing the region and becoming scenarios where regional and global powers try to produce their desired outcome. In the case of Syria, Russia is strongly defending its old ally Al-Assad, while the Anatolian country is seeking to de-stabilize a regime that has traditionally not been on good terms with Ankara. In the Libyan arena, international mediation has failed to achieve a peaceful solution and the most likely outcome seems to be a violent takeover of Tripoli by Haftar's forces. Turkey has aligned itself with the UN-recognized government of Al-Sarraj, while countries like Egypt, United Arab Emirates or Russia, have bet on the likely winning horse General Haftar.

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<sup>35</sup> ADESNIK, D. et al. (2019). Burning Bridge: the Iranian land corridor to the Mediterranean. *In: Foundation for Defence of Democracies*. FDD Press, Washington DC, United States.

<sup>36</sup> "Iran's new shipping line to eastern Mediterranean to be inaugurated: CEO", (2019, December 3rd). *In: Hellenic Shipping News*. Retrieved on 09/01/2020 from: <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/irans-new-shipping-line-to-eastern-mediterranean-to-be-inaugurated-ceo/>

The high degree of involvement in both conflicts (it was to be expected in Syria due to geographic proximity, but perhaps not as much in Libya) is not the only signal of Turkey's offensive approach to its neighbourhood. Its claims over energy resources found on Cyprus' waters have annoyed many of its European counterparts, most notably Italy and France who must protect the interests of their firms holding agreements with Nicosia for the exploitation of these resources. These resources and the necessity to build a block to counter Turkish policies, have led to the emergence of the so-called *EastMed* club, formed by Israel, Egypt, Greece and Cyprus itself.

All these events are taking place in the context of continuous immigration problems across the whole basin. Countries like Spain, Italy, Greece or Turkey itself find immigration at the top of their agendas, in a challenge that is unveiling the lack of effectiveness by these countries and the European Union to provide efficient solutions. Foreign powers have also been increasingly attracted by this scenario. The United States, the major dominant power in the region, with a well-consolidated network of alliances, is among these actors having increased its presence in this sea, while diminishing it in the Middle East. A probable cause for this pattern is to be found in Russia's increased power in the Mediterranean region. Moscow is emerging as a more skilled player in some conflictive scenarios, with ability to talk to many diverse actors, and is seeking to assert itself further into the Mediterranean. China does not escape this competition either, and despite not having enough naval experience and power to be militarily present in the Mediterranean, they do have investment muscle, and that is how they have established themselves in this distant sea. However, these investments might, at some point, translate into an abrupt strong military presence that must be foreseen and limited by European powers.

*Guillermo Abio Villegas\**

Master student of Geopolitics and Strategic Studies,  
University Carlos III Madrid