

THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN VORTEX

The Eastern Mediterranean region has moved to the very center of global security concerns. Open-ended conflict in Syria, a fragmented Libya, and threats to the stability of Egypt and other pivotal states underscore the fragility of the region. Refugee flows and the foreign fighter phenomenon are at the top of the European security agenda, alongside deepening friction with Russia – a competition that has acquired a significant Mediterranean dimension. In this article, the author highlights the pressing need to address Eastern Mediterranean challenges in NATO planning, as well as the EU's evolving global strategy. Looking further ahead, Chinese and American engagement in the region is also set to increase, with Turkey sure to be a critical, if often challenging partner in this new Eastern Mediterranean vortex.

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In important ways, the future of the international security order is being shaped in the Eastern Mediterranean. A marginal theater during the Cold War, the region has been a center of episodic crises against a backdrop of multiple unresolved disputes – Lebanon, Cyprus, Greek-Turkish friction, and of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Today, the Eastern Mediterranean has moved from the periphery to the very center of global concerns. The land and sea space spanning the Levant, the Aegean, Egypt, and onward to Libya, is set to be a zone of persistent chaos and conflict. Weak or collapsed states, direct and proxy wars, and a confluence of great power stakes are all part of the equation – threatening the security of societies and individuals. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the EU, and others, including Russia and China, are now compelled to address the challenges of strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the midst of this pervasive tension, there are a few positive opportunities, including the potential for a Cyprus settlement, Turkish-Israeli reconciliation, and cooperation regarding the region’s energy resources. Taking advantage of these opportunities will be critical for Turkey and the region.



The Challenge of Violent Extremists and Broken States

The Levant and North Africa are principal theaters in the struggle to contain and rollback violent Islamist groups bent on the control of territory and the export of terrorism. The conflict with the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL or Daesh) is a top priority for the US and Europe because the movement has been able to conduct or inspire terrorism on Western soil. But it is also a leading element in the prevailing insecurity across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Even if the movement is eventually defeated in Iraq, Syria, the Sinai, and Libya, the ability of networks affiliated with ISIL and Al Qaeda to destabilize states is likely to persist as a “permanently operating factor” in the region.

The jihadist threat could also acquire a more significant maritime dimension. The maritime environment is a challenging one for terrorists who are used to operating ashore, but the threat from this quarter should not be exaggerated. Over the last

decade, terrorist attacks on ships have been relatively limited, and mainly confined to the Suez Canal and its approaches. But the potential for attacks on maritime targets, from ports to tankers and cruise ships, or even naval assets, cannot be ignored. Offshore oil and gas installations are also at risk. Maritime security in the Mediterranean

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is among the most obvious areas for multilateral security cooperation led by NATO and the EU. Indeed, both are already engaged in this area, including NATO’s long-standing Operation Active Endeavour and the more recent deployment in support of refugee control in the Aegean.

All of this goes well beyond current crises. The pattern of chaos, civil strife, broken states, external interventions – and half interventions – may well prevail for the foreseeable future, leading to open-ended instability around the Eastern Mediterranean. It is worth recalling that the Lebanese civil war lasted for over 15 years, and the stability of the country has never been fully restored. The conflict in Syria could persist at least this long, with far higher stakes, fueled in part by the deepening sectarian competition across the Middle East. This would certainly be accompanied by continued migration, internal displacement, and a protracted human security crisis.

Europe Looks South

The Eastern Mediterranean is the place where Europe’s post-enlargement external policy is being formed and tested. Migration is at the top of the European agenda as a political, economic, and security concern. The EU’s ability to manage the refugee crisis, not just in the Aegean, but also across a much larger Mediterranean area with multiple and long-term migration pressures, could prove politically existential for national governments. Migration will be a key factor in shaping the future of the European project, from the survival of the Schengen regime to foreign and security policy. The close connection to internal security and identity concerns within European societies gives the Mediterranean migration question a sharp edge in this time of populist politics and widespread disillusionment with elite projects and institutions. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that developments in the Eastern Mediterranean will play a key role in shaping the future of Europe over the next decade and beyond.

This concern is hardly limited to the EU’s southern members. Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean now have a central place in the perceptions of northern and

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western Europe, including Germany. To the extent that Berlin continues to develop a more active and forward leaning external posture, the effects of this will be felt, first and foremost, on Europe’s southern periphery where crises abound. Germany’s central role in dealing with Europe’s refugee crisis, including negotiations with Turkey and the leadership of NATO’s maritime operation in the Aegean, is the clearest example.

The Rise of New Actors

The Eastern Mediterranean is an increasingly high profile focus of competition and cooperation among great powers from outside the Mediterranean region itself. Russia, an old Mediterranean actor, has returned to the region in dramatic fashion after the collapse of its Cold War-era presence. It is unclear if Moscow has the ability to sustain an active posture in the region beyond its current role in Syria. For the moment, Russia is a leading strategic concern for NATO in the south as well as the east. Turkey is particularly exposed to Russia’s new assertiveness around the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It is especially troubling that the multi-regional confrontation with Russia comes at a time of substantial uncertainty over Moscow’s aims, and the virtual absence of mechanisms for risk reduction and prevention of military incidents. Russia’s incursions into Turkish airspace and the downing of a Russian Su-24 in November 2016, underscored the dangers inherent in this situation. It is a central irony of the current environment that there was greater mutual understanding about strategic aims and operational stability during the Cold War than there is today. Together with the Baltic, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Black Sea are key flashpoints on this uncertain scene.

China, too, is acquiring greater stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean. China and other Asian actors have long had commercial interests in the region – from access to the Suez Canal to port operations and the security of personnel abroad. The joint Russian-Chinese naval exercise in the Eastern Mediterranean in May 2015 was closely watched by Western analysts, and was widely seen as a harbinger of more visible political and security engagement. The extensive role of Chinese companies in construction and other projects around the region has led to growing concern about the safety of Chinese workers where regimes are increasingly unable to assure the security of critical facilities (Libya and Algeria are examples). More profoundly, China’s vaunted

“one belt, one road” initiative promises to bring China into the Mediterranean world in a more direct fashion. Much of the land and maritime infrastructure envisioned in this ambitious project would terminate in the Eastern Mediterranean and its hinterlands. Although a relatively marginal actor today, China’s growing role in the region will be increasingly difficult to ignore in the years ahead.

Arguably, the center of gravity in the Middle East is shifting from the Gulf to the Mediterranean and above all, the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran plays a key role here, with its active involvement in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and elsewhere. The agreement limiting Iran’s nuclear ambitions remains controversial in some quarters, but has almost certainly reduced the risk of a direct clash with the US, Israel, or Saudi Arabia. As a thought experiment, it is worth imagining the current state of Saudi-Iranian confrontation and Tehran’s active posture in the Levant in the absence of a nuclear deal. That said, the nuclear agreement does not necessarily imply a path to Iranian-Western cooperation on regional security, although the Arab Gulf states and Turkey worry about this possibility. But if US-Saudi relations continue to cool, the prospects for some form of limited alignment with Iran in the fight against ISIL and Al Qaeda are likely to grow. All of this would unfold as the Sunni states of the Gulf continue to play a more active security role in Libya and elsewhere.

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The Transatlantic Calculus

Disenchantment with business as usual with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, reduced anxiety about Gulf energy (it will never disappear entirely), and the rise of security concerns in the Levant and North Africa, could encourage a broader westward shift in America’s Middle Eastern strategy. This would unfold against the backdrop of a renewed American investment in European security, and would imply a net shift from the Gulf to the Mediterranean in terms of strategy and presence. It has become fashionable to describe this in terms of American disengagement from the Middle East. More accurately, it is a growing tendency to see the Middle East and North Africa through the lens of European security.

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The EU’s global strategy review, led by High Representative and Commission Vice President Federica Mogherini and her team, is set to release its findings at the end of June 2016. By all accounts, the strategy document devotes considerable attention to the challenges emanating from Europe’s southern periphery, including the Mediterranean and its hinterlands. It is likely to focus heavily on Europe’s soft power and related instruments. The hard security dimension of European security looking south is likely to receive more attention at NATO’s July 2016 Warsaw Summit, and afterwards. The Alliance will need to balance its strategy east and south, but there is no doubt challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean will receive considerable attention over the coming years. There is an obvious asymmetry between these regions in security terms. Looking east, there is a clear focal point – Russia. By contrast, the Mediterranean presents an over 5,000 kilometer land and maritime space, with highly diverse risks. NATO has considerable defense infrastructure in the south, but has hardly begun to consider the concepts and capabilities required to address these Mediterranean risks.

Turkish Exposure

Turkey is the place where the eastern and southern dimensions of transatlantic strategy meet. Turkey is hardly alone in facing the deteriorating strategic environment in the Eastern Mediterranean, but it is certainly the most exposed transatlantic partner. The country will also be strongly affected by the wider political and strategic developments noted above. For over a decade, Turkey enjoyed the ability to conduct an active, commercially driven policy toward the region. The collapse of the security order in Turkey’s neighborhood has understandably thrown Turkish policy into disarray. Russia has emerged as a geopolitical competitor and a tangible source of risk in a way that few would have predicted. Iran’s involvement in the Levant, directly and via proxies such as Hezbollah, raises the uncomfortable specter of growing Turkish-Iranian friction. Above all, the prospect of open-ended chaos in Syria and spillovers of terrorism and political violence on Turkey’s borders present the Turkish government with a deepening set of internal and external security problems.

These problems have been complicated by Turkey’s active involvement in support of various Syrian opposition factions, and sharp differences with Western partners on the question of strategy toward the Kurds. If ISIL continues to target Turkey through rocket attacks along the border and terrorism in Turkish cities, Ankara may

eventually look to develop a *modus vivendi* with Syria's Kurds, much as Turkey has done with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. At the moment, however, this seems a distant prospect. Taken together with the need for reassurance and deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, it is not surprising that Ankara now looks to rebuild strained ties with transatlantic security partners.

The policy imperatives for Turkey under these highly insecure conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean go beyond the reinforcement of core defense partnerships. With some three million refugees already in Turkey, Ankara has as much of a stake in successful EU-Turkey cooperation on this front as Brussels – perhaps more. There is now a reasonable chance for a settlement of the Cyprus dispute. Success here would be transforming for Turkish-EU relations, EU-NATO cooperation, regional

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energy cooperation, and in many other considerations. It would be a very positive development in a deeply troubled region. It might also be the catalyst for Ankara and Athens to move beyond their prevailing *détente*, and to resolve longstanding air and sea space disputes in the Aegean – disputes that continue to constrain maritime cooperation and resource development. In a similar vein, the normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations is long overdue. It is most unlikely that this relationship will return to anything like its former strategic character, but the costs of estrangement are greater in a more uncertain and conflict-prone region, and there are important shared interests to pursue, from energy trade to tourism and defense.

From the Periphery to the Core

The Eastern Mediterranean – indeed the Mediterranean as a whole – has acquired far greater strategic importance with the proliferation of regional crises, with no end in sight. This shift from the margins to the center of strategic concern has been reinforced by the growing involvement of new actors from outside the region, even as the nature of US and European engagement is in flux. This analysis suggests that far from disengaging, US and European involvement is likely to be refocused in ways that keep both involved in the Eastern Mediterranean, with Turkey as an essential, if sometimes difficult partner. Of course, 2016 is a presidential election year in the US, and the candidates have had much to say about the US's global role, but that is the subject of a different article.