

PEACE AND SECURITY

TROUBLED WATERS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

A Greek perspective on Security Policy in the
Southern Neighbourhood

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While regional stability is a Greek priority, Athens realises that the Coronavirus pandemic may cause social unrest and even political upheaval in some MENA countries.



Greece is seeking deeper engagement on the part of its European partners in effectively tackling irregular migration, Jihadist terrorism, bad governance and economic stagnation.



Athens' emphasis is also on reversing Ankara's revisionist policies.

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Executive Summary

Greece straddles a region where three continents intersect. Its relations with Turkey continue to occupy a position of primacy, mainly due to Ankara's revisionist endeavours, but also because any substantial integration of Turkey into the European family, which would contribute to a more predictable and orderly relationship, has proven elusive. Developments at various levels in recent years, however, coupled with Athens' effort to assume the role of a bridge in communication and understanding between Brussels (mainly the EU) and countries in the region – Egypt and Israel, for example – have dominated the Greek agenda. It is equally the case that Greece would like to capitalise on its geographical position, becoming a distribution hub for hydrocarbons, supplying the European market while mitigating its dependence on Russian natural gas. At the same time, after almost a decade of memoranda, Athens is looking for ways to restructure its economy and rise to become a major commercial gateway to the EU and Southeast Europe.

Security problems in the wider region are certainly a source of concern for the Greeks, with the list here being headed by: irregular migration, with the route from Turkey's shores to the Greek islands being one of the main conduits, and Jihadist terrorism, which has for some time now been spreading into North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

With strong channels of communication and cooperation (especially with Egypt, Israel and Jordan over the past decade), participation in regional platforms such as the Union for the Mediterranean, while undertaking convergence initiatives of its own, such as the dialogue on religious and cultural pluralism (2015), and dense network of relations with some of its southern neighbours, Greece articulates its views and objectives regarding developments in the region with a certain regularity. It espouses the need to promote interaction with countries in the region based on the pillars of the

Union for the Mediterranean – with the emphasis lying on sustainable regional development – a task which has taken on even more urgency due to the impact of the coronavirus on the region's economies.

For Greece, Libya is a key variable in the regional equation. In November 2019, Turkey and the government in Tripoli signed an agreement delimitating exclusive economic zones (EEZs) – an agreement that Athens has called illegal. While annulment of this agreement is not a priority for the international community, Greece will muster all its resources to make sure that this accord has no legal or practical effect. It will need its European partners' support in this effort. After all, stabilisation of the Mediterranean depends on the acceptance of common rules of good neighbourliness, respect for international law (and, when it comes to maritime borders, the International Law of the Sea), dialogue and cooperation between neighbouring states, exploitation of mineral wealth – prospects for which are waning due to the coronavirus crisis – and synergies in projects fostering economic development and prosperity of the region.

The current stance of the EU and NATO on how to handle security challenges originating in the wider Mediterranean region is inadequate. In fact, a number of national leaderships and a significant portion of the public see the West as an instigator of the crises in Libya and Syria, not to mention Iraq in the wake of the intervention by the »coalition of the willing«, in which the West was perceived by many as a »crusader« power. For the time being, the Southern Neighbourhood lies outside the scope of the EU's strategic interests, as there are more pressing priorities that need to be addressed. Nevertheless, if the EU wants to play a leading role in the world, it needs to look beyond its own immediate borders and also regard the Southern Neighbourhood as a contiguous space affecting its vital interests.

1 INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES. WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR GREECE

1.1 MANAGING AND MITIGATING REFUGEE AND MIGRANT FLOWS

By virtue of geographical proximity, Greece is the EU Member State most exposed to negative developments in the geographical region of the Southern Neighbourhood. Greek territory is merely a 30-minute flight away from Benghazi, Libya, and Libya's adjacent neighbour, Egypt, is but a short distance further. In 2015 and early 2016, 1.2 million refugees and migrants entered Greece, and in spite of the EU-Turkey joint statement of March 2016, a danger of increased flows from Turkey continues to loom. On 28 February 2020, in an attempt to blackmail the EU and Greece, Turkey orchestrated a mass attempt by migrants and refugees to cross the land border into Greece at Evros. At the same time, tensions on Greek islands such as Lesbos, Chios and Samos – which have borne the brunt of refugee and migrant flows – continue to run high, mainly because local communities fear that the government in Athens will use the camps as a long-term/permanent solution. And their alarm has only been further fuelled by the risk of increased flows and delays in the asylum procedure, in combination with the European Council decision on 'geographical restrictions', according to which any refugees/migrants transported to the Greek mainland can no longer return to Turkey.

Thus, Turkey's key role in refugee/migrant flows¹ has become a top national-security issue for Greece, impacting Athens' relations with the EU and its outlook on the Eastern Mediterranean. As we saw in Evros, Athens is keenly aware of its obligation to do its utmost to guard Greek and hence European borders with practical assistance from its partners: at the operational level Frontex needs to evolve into a European border guard to confront the new realities that have emerged, while NATO needs to maintain a presence in the Aegean,² if only in a monitoring role. Furthermore, a programme to relocate refugees from first-reception countries, such as Greece, needs to be launched and the Dublin Convention amended. With regard to the latter, practical support is expected from Germany following proposals by the German Minister of the Interior Horst Seehofer on how to modify key European policies (e.g., on asylum and the fair sharing of burdens) during the German presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2020.

¹ There are understandable concerns that Jihadists may use these flows of refugees to infiltrate into the EU. Moreover – and with no assumption of malicious intent on the part of Turkish leadership – there are concerns that an increase in flows may result in health issues stemming from the Coronavirus outbreak in Turkey. Nevertheless, Greece recognises that Turkey hosts the biggest number of refugees worldwide and supports EU financial support for Turkey's efforts to shoulder this burden. But given these circumstances at present, any new deal with Ankara must be connected with curtailment of refugee flows from Turkish soil to Greece.

² On 15 April 2020, during an emergency meeting with his NATO counterparts, the Minister for National Defence called on allies to provide additional forces to combat illegal migration in the Aegean.

1.2 RELATIONS WITH TURKEY

Not wanting to see Turkey excluded from regional developments, Athens is supporting Turkey's return to a more constructive role, not just on Greek-Turkish issues and the Cyprus problem, but in the region as a whole. To this end, it is trying to reactivate channels of communication between the EU and Ankara, while maintaining direct communication and a dialogue with its neighbour's president-centred system, and at the same time promoting, wherever necessary, the adoption of measures/sanctions in response to Turkey's illegal activities in the Cypriot EEZ, in Greece's continental shelf, and if need be to the MOU signed by Ankara and Tripoli. The aim is not to punish Ankara, but to nudge it in the direction of a more responsible stance toward regional stability. It is no coincidence that, in the context of its trilateral cooperation mechanisms with Egypt and Turkey,³ Greece has rejected proposals from Tel Aviv and Cairo for a more energetic policy toward Turkey. Athens does not want to create an anti-Turkey axis or isolate Ankara, much less prevent it from exercising its legal rights. However, these rights must be based on international law and international treaties, while Turkey must display a modicum of tolerant good neighbourliness, and not plough along playing monolithic power politics. Moreover, Greece and Turkey are NATO allies, and any armed conflict between them would automatically weaken NATO's southern flank, with third powers lying in wait. Mainstream political parties in Greece agree in general terms with this approach. And it must be stressed that in the last decade (through five consecutive governments guided by different ideologies) there has been remarkable continuity. With the exception of the Prespa Agreement concluded by Athens and Skopje, aimed at resolving the dispute over the latter's country name that has been smouldering for over 25 years,⁴ there has been no discernible differences between the mainstream parties with regard to other foreign policy priorities (such as Greek-Turkish relations, relations with regional powers like Israel and Egypt, convergence of the Western Balkans with the EU, relations with the West, Russia and China). It is worth noting that no formal 'White Paper' has been published or adopted.

1.3 THE NEW ENERGY LANDSCAPE IN THE REGION

One of Greece's key priorities is to capitalise on the region's hydrocarbons to diversify suppliers and transit routes, thus giving European market's a more secure supply. Secure transport of natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean is no doubt a must if plans in this direction are to be successful. In this regard, the EU and NATO need to send out a crystal-clear message that they will not tolerate destabilising actions that delay or cancel projects. Moreover, time is not on the side of

³ The 3+1 platforms of dialogue have been developed between Greece, Cyprus and Israel as well as between Greece, Cyprus and Egypt.

⁴ The name dispute weighed down bilateral relations between Greece and North Macedonia (previously the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia). The latter state sought to revise the historical narrative by claiming that it was the true heir of Alexander the Great and ancient Greek Macedonia. The issue was finally resolved by the two sides agreeing that the term 'Macedonia' referred to a wider geographical space and was not an allusion to ancient history.

regional producers: oil prices are expected to remain low for the foreseeable future (with slumping demand augmenting this trend), so the Eastern Mediterranean's natural gas reserves, with the exception of Egypt's Zhor deposit, will be facing fierce price competition. Given Iran's exclusion from the energy market, however, the Eastern Mediterranean remains one of the few alternative sources, and Brussels views the involvement of at least two EU Member States (Greece and Cyprus),⁵ and perhaps a third (Italy) as a safety net. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, due to Covid-19, energy-supplying companies will be cutting back on investments due to the dismal prospects of earnings, which is likely to translate into projects being delayed, shelved or even cancelled.

1.4 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ARAB WORLD

For the past 40 years, Greece has traditionally maintained good relations with the Arab world. But the deterioration in Egyptian-Turkish relations following Morsi's fall from power, as well as the close ties between Erdogan and the Muslim Brotherhood, has prompted Cairo and Athens to come closer. In recent years, Greece has tried to act as a bridge between the Al Sisi regime and the EU, not just through energy cooperation, but also diplomatically. Athens is well aware of the risks involved in a destabilisation of Egypt and has thus been toiling to minimise this risk, not just for the sake of regional stability, but also to further EU and NATO interests. At present, Cairo is holding back refugee/migrant flows from Sub-Saharan Africa, while it has checked the Jihadist threat on the Sinai Peninsula. With Libya and Syria being generally recognised as dysfunctional states, with Iraq intractably unstable, and Algeria and Tunisia finding it hard to obtain any traction toward stabilisation, Egypt has become the linchpin in the region.

1.5 LIBYA IN THE TRIANGLE WITH TURKEY AND GREECE

In Libya's case, Greek interests necessarily centred on the illegal Turkey-Libya agreement.⁶ Athens is aware of the difficulty of the situation gripping Libya, with the two opposing camps (Sarraj and Haftar) being propped up by foreign powers (turning this into yet another proxy war), the UN arms embargo is being flouted, and, due to the structure of Libyan society, the outcome of the war is in the hands of chieftains and factions. On the other hand, the country is of decisive importance not only in stemming migrant flows from central Africa, but also due to its natural resources, and the Western powers would not like to see Russia or Turkey ensconce themselves there. Nor, of course, do they want to see Jihadist terrorism establish roots in Libya. The international community, perennially divided as it is, has a common interest here in an enduring ceasefire that could pave the

way for adoption of a roadmap guiding the way to gradual stabilisation. Of course, the Berlin Conference (the latest international attempt to find a solution) amply illustrates that even an agreed truce is extremely fragile and tenuous if no monitoring mechanism is in place.

One very real possibility in which a military conflict could be sparked between Greece and Turkey would be an attempt by the latter to put into force the unlawful memorandum it signed with Libya, for instance by carrying out seismic surveys following by exploratory drilling in maritime areas lying within sovereign Greek territory. Such a development, which would further complicate efforts to restore order, must be avoided at all costs, and the EU needs to work behind the scenes with both Ankara and Athens to this end. Covid-19 has rendered this scenario less likely for the time being.

2 RISKS AND THREATS TO THE STABILITY OF THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Two categories of security threats/challenges can be identified: **Strategic**, which are sometimes underestimated, and **conjunctural**.

2.1 STRATEGIC THREATS

The strategic ones relate to the instability plaguing the wider region. Even Algeria, a country enjoying a steady revenue from its rich energy resources, has not been completely stabilised, even though its government is in a position to implement generous welfare policies to defuse and mitigate social unrest. Apart from Morocco, all the countries of North Africa have more or less (latent) fragile regimes. To the east of the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, the Coronavirus is having dire repercussions for Iraq, which may well disintegrate. Syria, a source of much suffering in the wider region as well, is set to have a wrench thrown into its reconstruction efforts, as the United Arab Emirates is expected to suspend its provision of aid. If this indeed happens and no coordinated action is taken, incentives to return will be much weaker for many Syrians, and we may well see new flows of refugees leaving the country. Consequently, the EU will either have to brace itself for a new wave of refugees from Iraq and Syria or for a surge in pressure from Turkey if the latter is unable to prevent refugees from entering its territory. This time around, Brussels would be well advised to act promptly and in a preventive manner. Another major challenge could arise from Lebanon, where almost 25% of the population is made up of refugees, and where the political situation has been fermenting for months now.

It should be abundantly clear that the biggest security threat facing the states of the Mediterranean, who are partners of the Southern Neighbourhood within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), is the socio-economic situation combined with accelerating demographic growth. More specifically, even if the latter is slowed, for the next 20 years around 60% of local populations will be under 30 years of age. This means that a young population having

⁵ They have found a *modus operandi* with Egypt and Israel, the two largest producers in the region. In fact, at the end of December 2019, Athens and Nicosia signed an MoU with Tel Aviv on the EastMed pipeline.

⁶ The Sarraj government, which is based in Tripoli, is internationally recognised, but it is obvious that the EEZ-delimitation accord was imposed on it by Turkey. In fact, the Libyan House of Representatives refused to ratify the agreement, citing the emergency situation.

completed secondary education will have aspirations that governments will find hard to satisfy. Economic growth alone is not enough; conditions ripe for political upheavals will inevitably come about (leading to a repeat of the Arab uprisings, perhaps with a more successful outcome). Hence, the EU needs to prepare for this contingency and devise policies to deal with it.

Initially, however, we will have to devote attention to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the economies of these countries.⁷ One can expect a rapid fall in remittances from nationals working abroad, money flows which in many cases prop up national economies. Current and prospective Gulf-state investments (in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan) will also plummet. Tourism, now one of the most lucrative sources of income in the region, will also be hit hard. Energy prices will drop, so states like Algeria (the EU's third biggest supplier of natural gas/LNG) and Egypt, which are at the fulcrum of energy developments in the Mediterranean, will see their revenues shrink significantly. Given that the crisis will hit weak economies and vulnerable population groups the hardest, it may well act as a catalyst for political developments⁸ and social dynamics at a grass-roots level. Consequently, there is a direct linkage between security (and, by extension, regional stability) and poverty (which will be aggravated by the Covid-19 crisis) and potential social reactions, which may trigger uprisings.

Conjunctural threats include refugee/migration flows and Jihadist terrorism, which are interconnected with the strategic threats. Populations movements – commonplace as they have been throughout human history – now have the potential to take on catastrophic dimensions due to demographic shifts and climate change. The African continent's population of 1.2 billion may double by 2050,⁹ while climatic conditions are forcing more and more people to leave their countries, with access to even basic commodities (food, water) becoming increasingly problematic. Steven Smith¹⁰ argues that in one scenario »at the end of a sustained African migratory wave, Europe's population would include some 150 to 200 million African-Europeans, both immigrants and their children, compared with just nine million today.«¹¹ This

means – and this is why Greece puts so much emphasis on the economic development of these countries – that if economic incentives are not created to keep people in their countries of origin or – in the case of people who are forced to move – in intermediate transit countries,¹² countries of first reception will become the next and third »safety cushion.« Given that the three routes traffickers choose are: through Turkey, through Libya and via the Atlantic coast of West Africa (Mauritania), the burden of intercepting boats/refugees, which involves combatting organised crime and human trafficking, falls on the shoulders of the Southern Neighbourhood. So, in addition to providing development assistance to countries of origin and transit,¹³ the EU needs to seriously contemplate strengthening police patrolling in the aforementioned areas. It should be noted that the term »refugee flows,« which came into common use in 2015, must now be considered obsolete. Given that the majority of people heading to Europe seem to display more of a migrant profile,¹⁴ EU and national legislation more accurately refer to these as economic migrants.

Moreover, the EU needs to expand its presence in the sea-lanes between Libya and Italy (as it is attempting to do, although it is being hindered by a shortage of resources in Operation Irini¹⁵) if it wants to strengthen its role and say in developments in Libya by effectively imposing the UN arms embargo. Even if individual countries such as France and Italy maintain relations with both opposing camps in Libya, they are perceived to be doing so to promote their own interests. Hence, the EU needs to have a unified approach. Due to differences between European countries and the relative indifference of eastern and northern EU Member States (who are more concerned with the Russian threat, which they perceive as more immediate), the EU and NATO have to at least agree on a lowest common denominator: intensification of their naval presence in the region, who is to assume command (this is not always an easy question) and domains of responsibility. The decision to suspend Operation Sofia in 2019 was a mistake that, among other things, made it easier to violate the arms embargo to Libya.

⁷ According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the spread of the Coronavirus in the Middle East could spark extensive socio-economic upheavals. It points to, among other countries, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, calling on government authorities to prepare for a »possible catastrophic outcome« and for a »socio-economic earthquake.«

⁸ Usually in authoritarian regimes.

⁹ In many cases, the main characteristic of the population is its young age.

¹⁰ Professor of African Studies, Duke University.

¹¹ For more on this see: <http://www.german-times.com/the-scramble-for-europe/>. This text argues that migration is not a priority or option for the poorest strata. There is a growing middle class by African standards, however, which has access to satellite TV, the Internet and 4G mobile communication. This category is more eager to migrate to Europe. It is worth noting that 150 million Africans are earning from \$ 5 to \$ 20 per day, whereas 200 million have a daily income of between \$ 2 to \$ 5. So relative prosperity could boost migration from Africa, in the same way as has been witnessed in Mexico since the mid-1970s.

¹² In transit countries, which are often neighbouring countries, residence then becomes long-term – in some cases, permanent.

¹³ Including: DR Congo, Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

¹⁴ There is an ongoing debate as to who can be regarded as a »refugee« and who should be considered a »migrant«. Still, based on official data, since 2016 we have been gradually witnessing a change in the nationalities of persons reaching European soil. In 2020, 23.2% come from Afghanistan, 6.7% from Bangladesh and Sudan, 3.7% from Somalia and 3.5% from DR Congo and 16.1% from Syria. In 2019, 44% came from Afghanistan, 30% from Morocco, 23% from Tunisia, 18% from sub-Saharan Africa, 15.9% from Algeria and 25% from Syria. Data received from UNHCR. For more, read: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean?page=1&view=grid&Country%255B%255D=83>

¹⁵ At present, the mission is clearly suffering from deficient resources.

2.2 CONJUNCTURAL THREATS

Although it has been effectively shelved and virtually no one sees any hope for a settlement, the Palestinian problem continues to be a root cause of instability in the region and is being exploited by forces which would like to co-opt the Palestinian struggle for independence.

3 INSTITUTIONS AND REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS

3.1 THE EU

Through its neighbourhood policy, within which the Mediterranean is covered by the Southern Neighbourhood, the EU is attempting to develop ties with the 10 states of the region (including Palestine). Though they are not candidates for future enlargement, they are situated in Europe's immediate environs, so Brussels wants to have a degree of influence and thus a hand in determining developments there. The truth is, Brussels has not managed to achieve this, as exemplified by its inability to intervene effectively in Syria or, largely, in Libya – the two main sources of instability in the region. Even the ill-fated Operation Sophia¹⁶ and its future iteration, Irini,¹⁷ are also elements of European defence and security policy, despite being carried out in the territorial waters of countries involved with the EU through the Southern Neighbourhood. While this shows the operational limits of the Southern Neighbourhood, it must be stressed that the Southern Neighbourhood policy remains frozen following the failure of the »Union for the Mediterranean« initiative. This freeze is due, on the one hand, to the Middle East crisis and, on the other, to a shift in interest toward the northern and eastern borders of Europe, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the crisis it triggered in relations between the West and Russia. It is obvious that Europe's policy in the region needs to be resurrected and revamped in the direction of »more deliverables for more money.«

There are additional obstacles to be overcome (some structural, others more surmountable). More specifically:

- Member states with a historical interest and presence in the region are unwilling to »share« their privileged relations under a single European umbrella. They thus prefer to reduce the role of the supranational organisation to which they belong. For example, France does not seem to be willing to consult with the EU on what it does in Mali; it only includes European institutions in decision-making if the need arises. Similarly, when Britain was a member of the European family, it did not want its special relationship and position in Nigeria to open the door to cooperation with the EU. Today, Italy – which is

on speaking terms with both camps in Libya – is not on the same wavelength with France and Greece.

- Views on the need for a policy (Estonia and Italy have different opinions regarding the most important challenges in the Mediterranean) and implementation of policy often differ, creating obstacles in the operational sector. It is indicative that, during the procedure for committing units to Operation Irini, apart from the limited offers to provide resources (sea and air), Austria and Hungary had strong objections as to what should be done with any migrants found (with Greece offering a port in Crete where they could disembark), while Rome withheld consent to Athens assuming operational command, even though the headquarters are to be set up in Italy and the operation is to be headed by an Italian. And all this when Operation Irini's mission is supposedly to monitor the implementation of the arms embargo and the illegal export of oil and migrants, and to provide training for the Libyan coast guard.
- The human, military and financial resources the EU has earmarked for the Southern Neighbourhood fall well short of what would allow Brussels to play an important role in regional processes. Various powers are despatching mercenaries to Libya, the Gulf countries are acting to systematically bolster local economies, while other actors are gaining a military footprint and/or collaborating on military (defence) equipment. So unless the EU develops a plan for economic interaction and development with these countries, it will not succeed in keeping pace with developments.

3.2 UNION FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

The Union for the Mediterranean was forged on 13 July 2008 in response to a French initiative.¹⁸ Through joint projects in the energy and transport network sectors, joint exploitation of natural resources, etc., the aim was to strengthen the EU's ties with Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. The biggest stumbling stone, however, turned out to be the inability of both the EU and the private sector to raise capital that could be funnelled into these projects and national economies. The ultimate goal, which was to create a single economic space, proved to be elusive (and can in any case only be regarded as a very long-term endeavour). Following the miscarried intervention in Libya and the ensuing chaos, in the context of the Arab uprisings and the economic crisis that hit the European south especially hard, there was a distinct lack of appetite for such an ambitious plan. The European partners decided the timing was wrong. Later on, after the annexation of Crimea, interest shifted eastward and the EU's inclination to become actively involved in the wider region's problem cases waned.

This is precisely where one of the West's main weaknesses lies. On the one hand, the U.S. has already (as far back as under the Obama administration) shifted its attention to the Pacific and to containing Chinese influence, with Beijing being seen as the number one threat to American interests. On

¹⁶ Italy withdrew in 2019 because its partners would not agree to share the burden of migrants and refugees rescued at sea during operations.

¹⁷ Sophia operated close to Libyan shores, while Irini will operate in international waters.

¹⁸ Its creation was a Sarkozy campaign promise.

the other hand, the EU hesitated when it came to filling the void left by a shift in Washington's attention away from the Middle East and, in part, the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, local regimes are either more distrustful of the West – blaming it for fanning the flames in the Arab uprisings or for the interventions in Libya and Syria – or have come to the conclusion that the West cannot solve their problems. Hence, their priorities do not include restoring or tightening their ties with the West because they do not think there is much in it for them. Greece, for its part, was supportive of the idea, but it is also aware of the limited potential offered by the endeavour, although if there are good reasons to reestablish it, Athens will probably fall into line.

3.3 NATO

Through the Mediterranean Dialogue, NATO offers training and know-how, but even in the area of security (terrorism, migration), cooperation with NATO is not seen as contributing anything of essential value to the security forces of states in the region. Moreover, these states do not believe that NATO or the EU are willing or able to support them if their domestic stability should totter. There is certainly the matter of the outlook/priorities of Member States in other geographical regions of Europe, which form a majority in both organisations. For these Member States, Russia poses a much greater strategic challenge and its revisionist quests need to be contained. Thus, Moscow's entrance into the Mediterranean via Syria or its strengthened position in Egypt and Algeria are not seen as being on a scale that necessitates a change in orientation from the north and east to the southern perimeter. Nor, of course, do the Member States intend to loosen their purse-strings unless absolutely necessary, and in many cases, unfortunately, their approaches are shortsighted and largely shaped by geographical proximity. Thus, NATO forces are focused on eastern Europe based on the assumption that Russia is an aggressive state. Of course, in return for the protection (or sense of protection) they receive, the Visegrad and Baltic countries are more open to influence by their protectors. And naturally, sales of weapons systems also bolster defence cooperation.

NATO has a stable presence in the Mediterranean in the guise of its Standing Naval Force Mediterranean (STANAVFORMED) with destroyers and frigates provided by Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Joint air and naval exercises are carried out regularly, and some of these, despite being under a NATO umbrella, involve other states in the region (e.g., INIOHOS was expanded to include participation by Israel, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates). Thus, joint training cooperation and military exchanges are fostered, but these often take place at a national level and not necessarily within the NATO context. However, there is no question that the eastern flank has been assigned priority over the southern flank, particularly from 2014 on. Nato's eastern flank is considered by many members to be the most vulnerable sector, as it is exposed to »penetration, subversion, and

military probing by a revisionist Russia.«¹⁹ Greece does not consider these concerns to be as dramatic as other Member States, although it is worried by the hybrid instruments that Russia is deploying against the West and some of its neighbours. In Athens' eyes, Russian and Turkish methods display a certain similarity. The eastern flank is more valuable for an additional reason: it has become a field where great powers skirmish and test their reach, whereas for the time being, on the southern flank, Moscow's foothold remains limited. It is characteristic that, at the NATO level, developments in Syria were downgraded, while in contrast (because it was easier), forces along the border with Russia were reinforced every time movement was detected among the latter's forces (e.g. deployment of units).

As mentioned in the foregoing, the swing in Washington's attention to the Pacific has impacted NATO's position in the Mediterranean. What is more, Russia (with increasing momentum from 2014 on) has now established a noticeable presence in the region, with a number of ships ranging from 10 to 12 or even more (depending on the situation)²⁰ – a development that has caused concern. It should be noted that China has a special interest in the region, has started to penetrate it economically,²¹ and Beijing sees the Suez-Piraeus route as the commercial gateway to the European market. Another element in the security equation is the current U.S. administration's confusion over its priorities in the region, its flip-flopping in foreign policy, its unilateral actions, its hostility towards the EU and its »betrayal« of partners in whom it invested in previous years – the paramount example being the Syrian Kurds, with Washington being forced to choose between the Kurds and Turkey. But the sense of the unstable and shifting nature of the U.S. administration's choices has shaken countries' trust and confidence in Washington, driving even traditional partners to seek alternatives, if only as additional security fall-backs. This observation is borne out by the fact that Russia is currently the sole common go-between²² for the key belligerents in the Middle East. It has clearly been strengthened by its role in Syria and has gained greater influence in parts of Africa. Still, it is worth mentioning that, although Athens usually avoids the temptation to wager political capital on the gaming table of big power politics -in contrast to other regional players- its positions will be better served through sustainable and effective Western presence and involvement – provided that Turkey's revisionist ambitions and provocations are effectively contained through a mutually beneficial, but unambiguous, agreement.

¹⁹ »Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank. A Strategy for Baltic-Black Sea Coherence«, Centre for European Policy Analysis, November 2019.

²⁰ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140130-the-largest-russian-fleet-in-mediterranean-waters-since-soviet-dissolution/>

²¹ China is funding infrastructure projects (i.e. through Platform 17+1), investing in conjunction with its participation in transportation plans (here its focus is on controlling supply chains) and is even cooperating to promote innovation with Israel.

²² Moscow has a functioning relationship with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Israel. No Western country is in a similar position at present.

4 PROBLEMS, POTENTIALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing discussion suggests two levels at which to manage the Southern Neighbourhood's security issues: the **urgent** and the **long-term**.

Urgent issues include:

1. Libya. The current quagmire is deepening the rift between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (traditionally at odds with each other) and facilitating the spread – within and beyond the country – of Jihadist elements with their strongholds mainly being in the south. At the same time, we are at present witnessing solidification of the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood in strong geographical enclaves (e.g., Misrata). At this juncture, the EU needs to take decisive action to resolve the Libyan crisis. Reaching a minimum of understanding with Russia and Egypt and securing more constructive involvement on the part of Turkey (NB: The Greek stance on the Turkish-Libyan accord must be taken seriously, as the agreement would legitimise Turkey's flagrant disregard for international law and vindicate Ankara's power politics.)²³ are *condiciones sine quibus non* for resolving the crisis. The Berlin Conference took a timid step forward, but its momentum was quashed in the ensuing period. The EU needs to employ a carrot-and-stick policy to achieve its goals, and Operation Irini must be strengthened right from the outset; Member-State offers of aircraft and ships have been distressingly limited so far, as the mission is to screen a region stretching from west of Sicily to the middle of Crete. It can offer and/or withdraw energy-related economic incentives²⁴ and confer legitimacy on the belligerent parties depending on whether or not they respect agreements. A new conference (Berlin II) obviously needs to take place²⁵ to evaluate the results of the first conference and to exert greater pressure for compliance with the ceasefire, which is not being honoured even in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic. The EU has to step to the forefront in the face of the mixed signals coming from the U.S., which appears to be playing a waiting game in the hope that future developments will provide it an opening to reassert itself in the Libyan process.
2. Syria. Although the West as a whole no longer has the influence to broker a solution, Syria is obviously in dire need of a peace process that offers prospects for restoring a form of functional unity and putting an end to the outflow of refugees. For the time being, the strategic dominance of Russia and Iran seems irreversible – as do

the latter's Mediterranean aspirations. The EU and NATO lack essential tools or footholds with which to secure a role in developments, so they have to involve themselves via third countries in an astute manner. But to do this they first have to build trust and confidence. One such third country which is involved on the ground is Turkey. Consultations would be difficult here, however, because of Ankara's maximalist agenda in areas involving immediate European interest (the Aegean, Mediterranean, energy issues) and its intention to demographically alter regions of Syria by creating a safe zone for repatriation of Syrian refugees. The United Arab Emirates, which is supporting the reconstruction of Syria, is another potential mediator for the EU. Russia and Iran will necessarily remain in the picture, but the EU's moves will involve mainly transactional diplomacy. If the EU wants to reassert itself in its southern and south-eastern environs, however, it will have to adapt to this way of exercising diplomacy.

In any case, both the EU and NATO need to maintain a perceptible presence throughout Mediterranean maritime space, even if only for symbolic reasons. They will thus send out a message that they are intent on deterring human trafficking and organised crime with an emphasis on illegal smugglers and defending their strategic interests through alliance configurations (and permutations of these with states in the region), particularly in the face of rising Russian, Chinese and Iranian influence.²⁶

Long-term issues:

At tactical and strategic levels, EU and NATO actions have to focus on preventing the exacerbation and spread of security problems in the geographical space of the Southern Neighbourhood, as any escalation of these problems reinforces and increases existing instability. It has been found that these problems cannot be dealt with by local governments using their own resources or through assistance from international players.

First of all, the substance and financial means of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood configuration are obviously not enough to cover the needs of its partners.²⁷ Of course, it is neither objectively feasible nor institutionally appropriate for the EU to provide decisive funding for development programmes or economic cooperation mechanisms in the wider region alone. At the same time, other powers, including the

²³ Soft, rather than hard, power is obviously a comparative advantage of the EU. Consequently, it cannot show lenience in the face of Turkey's bullying tactics. The EU is well-advised to increase the costs for Turkey without ignoring Turkey's importance; it should leverage Turkey's precarious economic position, offering assistance, but only under certain conditions.

²⁴ Influencing where a country's natural resources are channelled during times marked by a drastic fall in prices.

²⁵ Greece must be invited to the table this time. In addition to being a state in the region, it is directly impacted by developments and has its own view on the best way to proceed.

²⁶ The heavy death and financial toll of the Coronavirus crisis in Iran presents an opportunity for the EU to attempt to bridge Tehran's differences with Washington or at least set the stage for a return to the negotiating table regarding Iran's nuclear programme. First, however, aggressive moves that might have a deleterious influence on public opinion have to be avoided.

²⁷ An indicative allocation between €7.5 and €9.2 billion is being earmarked for the Southern Neighbourhood region for 2014–2020 under the ENI. During 2007–2013, the EU has made available a total of over €9 billion for the Southern Neighbourhood region (ENPI funds). For more on this, see https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/southern-neighbourhood_en Another challenge is how to check the distribution of European money by regimes which largely lack transparency in their operations.

US and rich countries, do not have the appetite to contribute decisively. The EU needs to provide financial resources in the dialogue involving the Southern Neighbourhood, because deeper security issues derive mainly from endemic economic woes. Of course, given racial and interfaith tensions and the presence of radical Islam in combination with climate change²⁸ and the demographic explosion, the West needs a comprehensive strategy to deal with the region. This requires that reliable partnerships be forged and encouraged, that trust and confidence be built even through the exchange of sensitive information between services²⁹ and that financial problems be managed through investments and employment building, with all of these being linked to governments' performance in priority areas specified by the EU, such as halting refugee/migration flows and neutralising the threat posed by Jihadist and other extremist groups.³⁰

Second, a delicate balance must be struck between political and financial support of the region's regimes³¹ (with the exception, for now, of Syria and Libya), and these regimes must be strongly encouraged to respect fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms. Care must be taken to offer this encouragement systematically and via all possible channels, but without alienating the EU's interlocutors. This indeed happened in the case of the Al Sisi regime, although it was subsequently remedied.

And third, the debate has to be stepped up within the EU so that Member States who do not grasp the urgency of the situation in the Southern Neighbourhood can be convinced that this neighbourhood's problems will directly impact their interests if the current instability becomes entrenched. Here, France, Italy, Greece and Spain must argue persuasively at EU level, securing practical solidarity not just through missions, but also at the level of courageous and proactive decision-making.

Fourth, while the EU and NATO need to convincingly underscore their interest in the wider geographical space of the Southern Neighbourhood, they should do so carefully in order to avoid arousing the suspicions of leaders and societies, given that the West has been blamed for the disastrous developments in Libya and Syria, the misguided and damaging U.S. intervention in Iraq, and an arrogant »crusader« approach betraying an ignorance of regional and local realities. Consequently, the EU and NATO strategy needs to take into account the unique political experiences and critical cultural peculiarities of the other side.

Over the past decade, Greece has implemented a policy seeking synergies with regional powers under the banner of »sharing the costs« in order to promote stabilisation and prosperity of the region. Compared to some of its allies, Athens has limited resources, but it has used its soft power to take initiatives that promote dialogue – e.g., the Conference on »Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East.«³² In the aftermath of the Prespa Agreement, Athens is trying to create a transregional bridge to help restore order by strengthening links between the Mediterranean and Southeast Europe.³³ It would be a positive step forward if Brussels capitalised on these partnerships and brought them under its aegis. Athens differs from other EU members in the region in its view of the EU's role: Greece is a team player, while other EU members in the region have proven to be more inclined toward unilateral action.

²⁸ Here, EU know-how and innovation can open roads in countries of the region.

²⁹ Intelligence gathering by countries that know – e.g., Jordan, Syria – and exchange of intelligence among European mechanisms as well. The intelligence network must be expanded through a database profiling Jihadists (e.g., they pose as heads of families).

³⁰ There is a clear link between poverty, lack of opportunities, absence of prospects and radicalisation. They all play an equal role in pushing populations toward migration.

³¹ The wider region goes beyond the Southern Neighbourhood and includes Sub-Sahel Africa and the Horn of Africa.

³² An initiative of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was launched in October 2015. The idea was to »move ahead in taking stock of unresolved issues and strengthening a framework for dialogue among the various religious communities in the region, thus promoting rapprochement, networking, mutual respect and, ultimately, peaceful coexistence.« The objective was furthermore to serve as an institution that monitors developments, reports on problems related to issues of religious and cultural pluralism and submits specific proposals to cope with these problems. The second International Conference took place in Athens in October 2017. For more on this, see also: <https://www.greeknewsagenda.gr/index.php/topics/culture-society/5826-religious-pluralism-in-the-middle-east-a-greek-research-dialogue-forum-/>

³³ For most European states, Southeastern Europe is disconnected from the Eastern Mediterranean. Greece, located as it is at the epicentre of these two regions, sees these regions as forming a common space facing similar challenges: migration flows, Jihadist terrorism, economic stagnation, bad local governance and corruption. The EU cannot but be deeply engaged in regional developments, as otherwise, either other external powers will become more actively involved or instability will become even more rampant, with a negative impact on vital European interests.

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TROUBLED WATERS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN?

A Greek perspective on Security Policy in the Southern Neighbourhood



While regional stability is a Greek priority, Athens realises that the Coronavirus pandemic may cause social unrest and even political upheaval in some MENA countries.



Greece is seeking deeper engagement on the part of its European partners in effectively tackling irregular migration, Jihadist terrorism, bad governance and economic stagnation.



Finally, [in Athens' view] it is crucial to find a sustainable solution to the Libyan issue while limiting external intervention as much as possible.



Athens' emphasis is also on reversing Ankara's revisionist policies.



Athens also sees Southeastern Europe and the Mediterranean as a single space with interconnected challenges and prospects (e.g., with regard to energy connectivity).

For further information on this topic:
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