



The Eastern Mediterranean: Calm before the Storm in a Core European Strategic Zone

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Four developments are converging to make the Eastern Mediterranean (EM) once again a core European strategic zone, very likely before it erupts, to the same degree perhaps as on March 12, 1947, when President Truman told a joint session of the US Congress that the “world faced a choice in the years to come”. He did not mean the Baltics, Poland, or the Ukraine. He proclaimed that “The Foreign policy and national security of this country” were involved in the situations confronting Greece and Turkey. This speech is widely considered to be the start of the Cold War. Lest we forget: it was the Soviet Union’s perceived demands for freedom of navigation through the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus that greatly contributed to Greece’s and Turkey’s membership of NATO in 1952. Throughout history, the geopolitics of the Straits have been a core European geopolitical interest.

Now that one partner in the alliance that shouldered the main geopolitical burden in the EM, the US, has “pivoted” to Asia, Europe needs to fill the vacuum in the Mare Nostrum. Geography hasn’t altered, nor the basic drivers of geopolitics, and both abhor vacuums. Russia has had the same objective since Catherine the Great when the Imperial Russian Navy occupied Beirut twice, in 1772 and 1773, as part of its Levant campaign during the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1774: to reach the warm waters and to navigate freely through the two Straits. The last Tsarist foreign minister Sergei Sazonov’s writings may be very instructive in tracing the origins of current Russian strategic thinking, which considers the EM as a core part of its strategic posture. It is not enough for Europe, therefore, to look “east” to the Baltics and the Ukraine in defining its own core interests. The geostrategic touch line with Russia extends to the EM – and so does that with Turkey.

FIRST DEVELOPMENT: REGIONAL ALLIANCES OF INTEREST

The first development is the mélange of three regional “alliances of interest” based on the existing regional fault lines: gas (Egypt, Israel, France, Greece & Cyprus vs Turkey), Libya (Egypt, UAE, France, Russia, vs Turkey), and Syria/Lebanon pitting most of these alliances of interest against Turkey. This not only includes Russia, but NATO, US, and the EU as well, pitting them against one

of NATO's members. A key risk in this complex matrix is the transactional nature of many of these intersecting alliances and enmities. One of the main outcomes, however, given the vacuum created by the US's emphasis on China and its "pivot" to the Asia Pacific, is that Syria has become a de facto client state of Russia's. Turkey competes with Russia across the region into Libya, but also including through supplying its successful UAVs (tested in the Nagorno-Karabakh War of 2020) to the Ukraine. Note the linkage between the EM, Ukraine, and the Caucasus. Europe ignores these linkages at its peril. In fact, while Turkey competes with Russia, and the EU competes with Russia, it also the case that the EU and Turkey find themselves in competition across many fronts. Turkey's control of the flow of refugees into Europe, as well as its competition with Russia extending to the Ukraine through the Caucasus, have emboldened Turkey to secure offshore concessions in Libya. This alone is a core European geostrategic and geoeconomic interest

On the ground, therefore, it is Russia and Turkey that are driving events on Europe's doorsteps in the absence of the US and the EU. Europe needs to urgently wake up to the fact that the geopolitical distance between Beirut and Brussels is not 3000 km, but 200 km between Beirut and Cyprus, and 550 km between Egypt's Nile Delta (the highest population concentration on the coastline of the Mare Nostrum, with 85 million people) and Cyprus, the "eastern" most parameter of Europe. Cyprus must become an absolute priority in Europe's strategic and military thinking and planning.

SECOND DEVELOPMENT: WHEN THE GLOBAL AND THE REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS INTERSECT

The second development is the dynamics of global alliances as played regionally. The first are the US-backed Abrahamic Accords that concluded peace between Israel on the one hand, and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan on the other (in different phases). In a real geopolitical and military sense these accords bridged the Gulf states into playing an active role in the Mediterranean, as the relationship with Israel starts to take shape and expands. Moreover, the vacuum created

by the Obama administration in the region enabled Russia and China (and Iran) to take full advantage and play a very active role. In addition, it led to intensified regional power competition resulting in new alignments and a new regional order. The US seemed to realise that it needed to revert to engaging in the region, albeit through regional actors, to achieve containment, having abandoned its role of sole dominant power under Obama. It now seems keen to use this global-regional framework as a belated means of containing China, Russia, Iran, and possibly, Turkey – a supposed ally.

The second alliance is the recently concluded Franco-Greek defence agreement, which is primarily aimed at Turkey. It commits both countries to come to the defence of the other in case of an attack by a third party. This regional alliance should raise serious questions about the global implications for NATO: how will Article 5 operate in such a scenario? France, moreover, is supplying Greece with three Mistral frigates and over 20 Rafale jet fighters, potentially tipping the balance in favour of Greece. This is the first example of a mini-alliance within NATO against another member state. The alliance will embolden Greece's view that it can play a significant regional Mediterranean role, to strengthen its position as a key EU player when it comes to Turkey, and as a NATO and US ally. Whereas Greece is concluding alliances within the same camp, Turkey seems to operate across camps, for example by combining its membership of NATO with the contradictory policy of purchasing advanced arms from Russia. France, on the other hand, has reverted to playing its key historic independent role in the Mediterranean. In practical terms, for the EU the French seem to provide the only credible European thinking, face, and muscle, and is seen as such by the region and, possibly, by the US.

THIRD DEVELOPMENT: RUSSIAN STRATEGY FROM CRIMEA TO SYRIA

The third development is how Russian strategy seems to treat the Crimea and Tartus (Syria), passing through

the two Straits, as one strategic zone. This has significant implications for Europe as it directly links Ukraine with the EM. In particular, the reported success of the medium-range Zirkon hypersonic missile (should it be as successful as it is reported to be) enhances Russia's A2/AD capabilities from its EM base to compensate for its significantly weaker naval forces. The "sea Bridge" between the Crimea and Syria is also potentially a major threat as to who controls "connectivity": cables, sea lanes, pipelines, trade flows, human traffic, and the like. For trade and shipping this also impacts traffic out of the Suez Canal. The race to control connectivity may not be as obvious as other military and geostrategic issues. It may, however, be one of the key drivers for global and regional competition. Europe is at one end of the line of this connectivity, but it doesn't seem that it has thrown its hat in the ring yet for such a vital strategic interest. Time is of the essence!

FOURTH DEVELOPMENT: THE EM AND THE CAUCASUS ARE CLOSER THAN EUROPE LIKES TO THINK

The Fourth development is the newly emerging tension between Turkey and Azerbaijan (backed by Israel) on one side, and Iran on the other, on Iran's northern border. The typical European response is that the Caucasus' fault lines are far away. Wrong answer: they are not. First, Iran fears the loss of its Azeri-majority inhabited border territory, a development which, if it were to take place, would not only alter Iran's borders but will lead to fundamental shifts in the regional balance of power, reaching through Iran and Turkey to the EM and Europe. Iran will retaliate including using proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The geopolitics of gas will alter significantly as the pipeline running from Turkmenistan to Turkey will no longer have to pass through Iran, which has long opposed it. It will link Turkmenistan, the sixth largest gas producing country globally, directly to Turkey. This will help Turkey wean itself off from its two largest gas suppliers: Russia and Iran. Turkey is the second largest importer of Russian gas after Germany, and it depends

for 20% of its gas imports on Iran. It will also enhance Turkey's long term strategic goal of being an energy transit state to Europe.

Israel's success (through Azerbaijan), in what Prime Minister Naftali Bennet termed the strategy towards Iran of "death by a thousand cuts", will bring the geopolitical dynamics of the southern Caucasus directly to the Mediterranean. This risk is enhanced by the renewed Israeli threat to launch military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities should the current round of the JCPOA negotiations fail. Moreover, as Azerbaijan pushes to turn the cease fire agreement of 2020 with Armenia into a peace accord, under Russian guarantees, its main aim seems to be to entrench its territorial gains, including the strategically located land corridor, in a treaty. This, however, amounts to the regionalisation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which will exclude Europe. It is not in Europe's interest to be excluded.

CONCLUSION: THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OFFERS EUROPE AN OPPORTUNITY

The conclusions for Europe are stark: Russia and Turkey are setting the tone in the EM whilst Europe is largely reactive. The only European power that is exercising any role, perhaps in fulfillment of President Macron's concept of Strategic Autonomy, is France. Only when Europe will extend its touch line from the Baltics, Ukraine, and Poland to the EM will it be able to start to deal with Russia and Turkey in a credible manner. Coalescing around the French role will be a good place to start to develop a broader European geostrategic position to protect Europe's Eastern Mediterranean flank.

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