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NAVAL BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND POLITICAL- MILITARY TRENDS

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Executive Summary

The Mediterranean has become one of the most critical flashpoints for international security. The geopolitical landscape of the region is rapidly evolving into a set of hard power-dominated conflicts and disputes.

In recent years, **Russia has begun restoring its military presence in the Levant**. More importantly, in doing so, Moscow has used strategic assets such as its burgeoning anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) architecture, intensive submarine activity, carrier operations, and long-range precision strikes. In other words, Moscow is not solely present in the region in order to help its Baathist ally in Syria. But rather, Russia has deployed enough assets to pursue broader strategic interests, and in doing so, has secured a permanent base in the Levant. Under these circumstances, NATO's traditional dichotomy of separate flanks might soon be rendered obsolete. Moreover, Russia has been using its porting strategy in the wider Mediterranean to test the solidarity of two important Western institutions: NATO and the EU.

Russia's growing assertiveness in the region is occurring at a time of **increased uncertainty regarding the American defense commitment to the region**. While this defense commitment will be determined by the policy decisions of the Trump administration, the range of policy options in front of the new administration are limited by defense economics. Meaning that the US's defense commitment to the region will not just be the result of policy adjustment, but will be determined by geopolitical risk prioritization and defense economics. Indeed, the Pentagon enjoys high-end military capabilities in the region, as reflected by the recent surgical and punitive Tomahawk cruise missile strike that targeted the Syrian Baathist regime's Shayrat Airbase following the chemical attacks in Idlib. Yet, put simply, Washington cannot alter its two present naval hubs, the Western Pacific and the Gulf, for a more robust permanent posture in the Mediterranean due to tense security environments in these regions. Furthermore, due to budgetary constraints, the US is unlikely to drastically increase its surface and submarine arsenals. Under these circumstances, the strategic significance of littoral states in the NATO alliance is increasing.

Consequently, **military might and military means have become more important for littoral states** and outsiders regarding several critical issues ranging from energy competition to political signaling. Thus, the Mediterranean is witnessing more ambitious defense modernization programs and a significant increase in game-changing naval developments. Israel, Turkey, and Egypt have come into prominence due to their successful naval modernization programs. In this respect, Turkey's and Egypt's growing blue-water capabilities are important. Israel has enhanced its high-end submarine fleet for potential strategic second-strike missions. Additionally, the Israeli Navy's recent emphasis on conducting conventional long-range precision strike missions from submarine platforms is an especially noteworthy advancement.

Finally, although state-level naval trends draw the lion share of attention, **anti-trafficking missions as well as the growing military capabilities of non-state actors remain critical issues in the Mediterranean**.

In sum, while the international community's attention tends to focus on more 'popular' areas, such as Asia-Pacific, Baltics, or the Gulf, for some time the Levant, and the Mediterranean in a broader sense, remind onlookers of the region's historical role at the epicenter of international affairs.

Mediterranean Geopolitics and Military Balance in the 21st Century: An Introduction

The geopolitics of the Mediterranean region is on the brink of a major transformation in the 21st century. In brief, the balance of power is rapidly shifting as a result of outsiders' presence, defense modernization trends amongst littoral states, and new capabilities of the region's non-state actors.

Without a doubt, the biggest game-changer is Russia. In order to assess the correlation between the Russian strategic interest in the Levant and the country's intervention in Syria, one should start with the fact that Russia's intervention in Syria was a direct outgrowth of its strategic interest in the Levant. A careful literature review of military publications shows that Russian experts had consistently voiced Moscow's strategic intention of returning to the Mediterranean well before the country's intervention in Syria [1].

At present, possessing an ambitious naval agenda, Russia has returned to the region along with important assets such as its sole aircraft carrier, submarines, conventional precision strike systems launched from sea-based platforms, and robust permanent forward basing in the Levant. Furthermore, Moscow has benefited from its military experience in Kaliningrad and Caucasia, and recently, Crimea, to establish a formidable anti-access /area denial (A2/AD) architecture in Syria.

As noted earlier, Russian presence in the region is meant to stay. Notably, some Israeli experts have recognized this fact and highlighted in their reports how the Russian return could offer opportunities for Israel in re-manifesting its value to the West. These reports have also mentioned how Moscow's ties with Tehran may undermine Israel's national security [2].

Despite having suffered heavily from the civil war, the Baathist regime of Syria managed to upgrade its layered air defense network and has acquired advanced coastal defense systems. These systems are thought to be integrated with the Russian A2/AD bubble. Furthermore, Iran has fostered its political-military influence in the Levant. Tehran's elite Quds Forces, other elements of the Revolutionary Guards, and Shiite militias have formed a broad axis of power and are now exerting decisive control over the Assad regime's operations in Syria. What is worse, at the time of writing, US Defense Secretary expressed that the Baathist regime has still been possessing chemical weapons in violation of the UN Security Council resolutions [3]. Without a doubt, the aspect of weapons of mass destruction is severely complicating the security environment in the Levant. Clearly, recent shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean military balance of power are posing important challenges to the West, and in particular, to NATO.

Apart from the state-centric challenges, non-state actors have also boosted their military capabilities in recent years. Without a doubt, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL (Da'esh), is the most dangerous non-state actor in the region. The terrorist network has targeted several NATO nations, including Turkey, France, and Belgium. Thus, ISIL violence has already reached beyond the alliance's southern flank. The terrorist network continues to serve as a 'magnet' for foreign fighters flowing into Syria and Iraq and remains a destabilizing force for many other states, especially in the Maghreb.

At this point, it should be underlined that the foreign fighters challenge in the Mediterranean region is not limited to the Levant. A 2015 assessment on foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq suggests that 8,000 militants fighting in these countries originate from the Maghreb [4]. Furthermore, ISIL has declared so-called 'governorates' – or Wilayats – in some littoral states such as Egypt and Algeria [5]. In other words, the geopolitical scope of the threat manifests well beyond 'the Levant and Iraq', as the name of the organization implies.

The Lebanese Hezbollah is another alarming example of the burgeoning asymmetric capabilities in the region. Above all, the Lebanese Hezbollah's rocket and missile capabilities are now stronger than ever and the group has gained significant battlefield experience in Syria, using the country as a hub for arms and personnel transfer [6]. Notably, since its sensational strike on the Israeli corvette INS Hanit with a C-802 anti-ship missile in 2006, Hezbollah has taken advantage of the Syrian civil war, seizing more advanced weapons systems such as P-800 Yakhnot anti-ship missiles. Furthermore, it is well known that the radical Shiite group operates Iran-manufactured Mohajer-4 drones. Some sources even claim that the group has acquired SA-8 and SA-17 air defense systems [7].

Clearly, Hezbollah's growing military capabilities have already given rise to additional threats to stability in the Eastern Mediterranean. This menacing development could trigger a preemptive Israeli response in the coming years. In this respect, the proliferation of precision-guided missiles in the hands of non-state groups represents one of the most pressing security concerns facing Israel. Recent publications suggest that concern among the Israeli defense community stems from the fact that Israel was hit with thousands of rockets and missiles during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. A future conflict could feature a renewed emphasis from Hezbollah on launching missile attacks against Israel, but this time doing so with increasingly deadly high-precision missiles. In such a scenario, Israel's critical national infrastructure and its key military facilities could be significantly damaged or destroyed and its missile defense architecture could be overwhelmed and/or underperform [8]. In addition, Iranian proxy war efforts by means of the Lebanese Hezbollah add fuel to the fire. In this regard, some experts consider Lebanon as a "forward Iran missile base" and Tehran's "principal regional instrument of power projection" [9].

Securitization patterns are clearly observed in Mediterranean affairs in recent years. Competition in energy geopolitics has been gradually translated into political-military escalation in several cases and naval diplomacy has become a common tool of international affairs in the region. These trends inevitably resonate with defense modernization efforts. In this regard, we see the tendencies of littoral states to develop power projection capabilities and to acquire blue-water assets.

Finally, anti-trafficking operations have become more important given the constant humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean. In this regard, the European Union has been conducting Operation Sophia through the

European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR). At the time of writing, the Italian aircraft carrier Garibaldi was overseeing the flagship role [10] supported by several air assets and four surface combatants from Spain, Germany, the UK, and France [11]. Prior to launching this publication, Landing Platform Dock (LPD) San Giusto of the Italian Navy was assigned to replace Garibaldi, which spent more than 4530 hours at sea [12].

Libya, a non-EU but Mediterranean-coastal country, possesses an important geopolitical role regarding the European Union's anti-trafficking efforts. As Operation Sophia has progressed, efforts have focused on building the capacity of the Libyan Coastguard and Navy [13]. Furthermore, following the Warsaw Summit, NATO has decided to enhance its cooperation with the EU in a number of areas. In this regard, maritime security cooperation was envisaged, especially through increased interaction between Operation Sea Guardian and Operation Sophia [14]. Emerging essentially from wider instability in and around the region, it is anticipated that human trafficking will remain an important security concern in the Mediterranean in the coming years.

Littoral States' Naval Postures

In the Mediterranean strategic balance, the naval modernizations of three states are noteworthy. In brief, Israel is coming into the picture with burgeoning submarine capabilities, Turkey with its geopolitical perspective driving the naval modernization, and Egypt with its diversification of procurement policies in addition to its acquisition of high-end platforms.

Israel

The Israeli navy has been adopting a more ambitious posture by increasing its blue-water and possible strategic weapons second-strike delivery capabilities. In this regard, the new generation Dolphin-class ('Dolphin-2 class') submarine procurement from Germany – achieved through a considerable cost-sharing agreement – has been continuing since the 1990s. The fourth and fifth boats in the – upgraded – class, INS Tanin and INS Rahav, entered into service in 2014 and 2015 respectively. The sixth platform is expected to enter into service by 2020 [15].

According to several news stories, in recent years Israel has begun to use its submarine force more actively. However, this has yet to be confirmed by Israeli authorities. In 2011, the Israeli Air Force reportedly conducted airstrikes in Sudan targeting arms transfers to Hamas. Some sources also reported Israeli submarine activity off the Sudanese coasts at that time [16]. In 2013, the Jerusalem Post quoted news stories concerning an Israeli strike in Latakia that aimed to prevent a transfer of advanced anti-ship missiles to the Assad regime. According to the reports, the strike was conducted by Israeli submarines [17]. Interestingly, a 2012 development may have suggested the rising role and prestige of the submarine fleet for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). In 2012, an Israeli news outlet reported that the IDF banned dual-citizenship for the submarine service. The banning of dual-citizens from serving in certain highly sensitive roles highlights the growing security concerns of Israeli authorities, as dual-citizenship is quite common in Israeli society [18].

In 2015, plans for the Saar-6 class corvette program suggest that Israel has intentions to increase its naval posture in the Mediterranean where the country possesses significant interests related to energy assets. According to the 2016 open-source military data, the Israeli Navy will operate four boats of class with up to 40 vertical launch cells for deploying Barak 8 SAM systems, along with anti-ship missiles and torpedo launchers. Furthermore, it is reported that the vessels will be able to carry Israel's prospective SH-60F Seahawk helicopters and Extremely Short Takeoff and Landing (ESTOL) fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicles [19]. Modernization efforts for Saar-5 and Saar-4.5 type surface combatants are also ongoing, with a specific focus on electronics and weapons [20].

Turkey

Turkey's successful naval modernization efforts in the 2000s reflect the country's geostrategic transformation into a blue-waters navy with significant power-projection capabilities. In this regard, the Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD) project (started in 2013), which is based on the Juan Carlos-I-class amphibious assault ship, is expected to play a central role.

Some experts even described the project as an "aircraft carrier substitute" and a "major step altering the naval balance in the Eastern Mediterranean" [21]. From a military standpoint, the LHD project could provide two additional advantages to the Turkish Navy. First, at present, Ankara has a brigade-size elite marines force and highly capable naval commandos that took part in Turkey's al-Bab operations and gained key urban warfare experience [22]. Thus, by acquiring the amphibious assault ship, the Navy could increase its amphibious assault capabilities [23]. Secondly, some Turkish sources have claimed that a ski-jump will be built for the LHD [24]. In such a case, Turkey could operate an aircraft carrier-substitute by further procuring a short takeoff vertical landing (STOVL) air-wing for advanced naval aviation.

Turkey's top procurement body, the Undersecretariat for Defense Industries, is also pursuing efforts for acquiring TF-2000 air defense frigates [25]. Although the project dates back to the 1990s, military assessments now report tangible progress [26]. Furthermore, in the case that Turkey opts for anti-missile capabilities for equipping its future TF-2000 fleet, the navy will gain additional sea-based defensive strategic capabilities.

Finally, ongoing procurement of Type-214 submarines and the commissioning of remaining corvettes in the MILGEM batch – two in the class already commissioned and two more expected – would mark further naval capabilities for Ankara [27].

In sum, Ankara's key success stems from the geopolitical agenda of its naval modernization. This study predicts that in the 2020s, Turkey could operate a medium-size amphibious task force in the Mediterranean. Such an increase in Turkish naval capabilities would have important consequences for Ankara's strategic vision of becoming an energy hub and improve the country's naval diplomacy and power projection capabilities.

Egypt

Egypt is pursuing one of the most active and ambitious naval procurement efforts in the Mediterranean. In this respect, Paris, and in particular the French DCNS group specialized in naval defense, comes into the picture as Cairo's primary partner. The Egyptian Navy has significantly fostered its power projection capabilities through the procurement of two Mistral amphibious assault ships, Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD), from France. The ships were originally built for Russia, but could not be delivered due to the European Union sanctions on Russia following its annexation of Crimea [28]. Egyptian-Franco naval ties are not limited to LHD procurement. In June 2016, a FREMM-class frigate, then named Tahya Misr, was transferred to the Egyptian Navy from DCNS. An order for four Gowind corvettes is also in progress [29]. More importantly, the Egyptian-Franco naval cooperation is not limited to arms sales. In March 2016, Egypt and France conducted Ramses 2016 exercises in the Mediterranean with the participation of Cairo's newly procured French air and sea platforms as well as the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier [30].

Interestingly, while Russia was unable to receive its amphibious assault ships from France, it is selling Ka-52K attack helicopters to Egypt that are then being operated from the recently procured Mistral. During its combat deployment in the Mediterranean, the Russian air-wing based on the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier includes the abovementioned helicopters. In September 2016, Moscow and Cairo signed an agreement to train Egyptian pilots to fly Ka-52K attack helicopters [31].

Furthermore, Cairo has embarked on a submarine procurement program. In this regard, the Egyptian Navy received its first Type 209/1400 submarines from ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) in December 2016. This delivery is the first of four platforms included in a procurement package [32]. The submarines will be equipped with Boeing UGM-84L Encapsulated Harpoon Block II submarine-launched anti-ship missiles following the US approval of the sales in May 2016 [33]. Open-source defense updates suggest that the Egyptian Navy is now operating a new submarine shelter in the Alexandria naval base for its Type 209/1400 platforms [34].

Currently, the Egyptian Navy is smaller than other branches of its armed forces. It operates a mix of principal surface combatants, patrol vessels, submarines, mine warfare platforms, support ships, and some amphibious units [35]. In fact, Cairo has traditionally neglected its navy, and so, the branch's combat readiness is questionable [36]. However, in recent years, Egyptian naval modernization trends suggest a geopolitical desire to improve its power projection and blue-waters capabilities. Furthermore, Egypt pursues a balanced procurement policy, acquiring military equipment from Europe, the US, and Russia. In sum, if Cairo can overcome its defense economics and combat-readiness problems then we may see a stronger Egyptian naval posture in the Mediterranean in coming years.

Russia's New Maritime Doctrine and Its Naval Presence in the Mediterranean: Rejuvenation of the 5th Eskadra?

In July 2015, Russia announced a new maritime doctrine which suggested a new naval outlook for the Russian Navy and hinted at Moscow's strategic calculations. As officially reported by the Kremlin, President Putin held a meeting onboard a Russian Navy frigate to discuss the doctrine on July 26, 2015. Notably, one of the issues on the table was restoring the Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean [37].

Some immediate evaluations of the updated maritime doctrine consider Moscow's perspective as "*another example of Putin's effort to mobilize the state and, in this case, the military and the defense industry for a situation of protracted but mainly political conflict against the West*" [38].

Contemporary Russian naval posture in the Mediterranean shows similarities with that of the Soviet Union. The Soviet naval deployment in the Mediterranean dates back to 1958 following the American intervention in Lebanon. In the following years, Moscow's strategic calculus in the region led to the establishment of the 5th Eskadra, the Mediterranean Squadron, to counterbalance the US 6th Fleet. According to the Cold War security studies literature on the Soviet Navy, the relationship between the 5th Eskadra and the Soviet political-military objectives in and around the Mediterranean remained a "symbiotic one" in which the Navy promoted Moscow's local interests while the cultivation of relationships with countries in the region enabled the Soviet Navy to maintain a standing presence away from its home ports [39].

At this point, Cold War experts drew attention to the very fact that the size of the Soviet Mediterranean naval formations and the success of Soviet naval diplomacy in the region were unrelated. In other words, the Mediterranean deployments were more aimed at political signaling and promoting strategic influence abroad than they were about naval warfighting [40]. Furthermore, the Soviet Mediterranean naval forces had to operate through a number of significant limitations such as the Montreux Treaty, logistical hardships, and the mercurial characteristics of its regional allies. All the abovementioned factors brought about elasticity to Moscow's Mediterranean naval deployments, a force structure that allowed the Soviet Navy to be rapidly reinforced at times of crises, such as during the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) [41].

As Moscow's global political-military ambitions rise, so does its naval strategic posture. The Mediterranean remains an important part of this overall picture. By September 2013, there were about 80 Russian ships deployed worldwide and among those assets, 10 surface vessels were commissioned in the Mediterranean

[42]. The 2011–2020 armament program allocated 22% of the budget – some 120 billion Euros – to naval modernization efforts. Within this framework, the Black Sea Fleet is set to receive 9 new surface vessels and 6 conventional submarines by 2020 [43].

Anti – Access / Area Denial (A2 / AD) Architectures in the Mediterranean

Anti-access / Area Denial (A2/AD) architectures have emerged as one of the decisive military technologies in the Mediterranean. While anti-access activities refer to efforts aimed at preventing an adversary military forces' entry into a theater of operations, area-denial activities aim to deny freedom of action in the more narrow confines of the area that fall under the adversary's direct control [44].

The Russian A2/AD architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean is centered on a network of layered onshore and offshore disruptive weapon systems. In this regard, Russian News Agency TASS officially reported that Moscow has deployed a three-layer air and missile defense system in Syria by deploying S-400, S-300V, BukM2E (SA-17), Pantsir S-1 (SA-22) batteries to cover long, medium, and short ranges respectively. Furthermore, this formidable air-defense architecture is networked with the Syrian Air Defense Force's assets, sea-based S-300FM systems embarked on missile cruisers, as well as Krasukha-4 electronic warfare (EW) system deployed in the Hmeymim Airbase [45].

As underlined by a 2015 Harvard Belfer Center study:

"While Russia's military action in Syria is predominately aimed at fighting anti-regime forces to prop up its beleaguered client state, one must question the additional buildup of anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) forces such as surface-to-air missiles and advanced fighter aircraft that serve no purpose against the various groups opposing the Assad regime. This strategic buildup is inconsistent with a counter insurgency (COIN) strategy. Such a buildup mirrors the strategic buildup and A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad and Crimea. The former constricts and threatens the Baltic nations and Poland, while the latter has the potential to hold at risk NATO countries and forces in and around the Black Sea. Beyond Syrian regime survival and shifting the focus away from Ukraine, Russian objectives from a military perspective are three-fold: secure access to the Mediterranean Sea by keeping a foothold in Syria, mute Western influence in the region by offering parallel or replacement security strategies to Daesh-battered countries, and contest freedom of movement for the United States and its allies by creating a formidable A2/AD bubble" [46].

Furthermore, this Russian A2/AD architecture and the underlying political-military perspective that motivated its construction are now more risk-relevant for NATO than in previous times as Russia has reached a deal with the Assad regime that provides for permanent basing in Syria [47].

Apart from the military-technical details mentioned hitherto, readers of this paper may need a contextual explanation about the meaning of A2/AD systems from a Russian standpoint. Recent studies about Russia's strategic culture suggest that Russian military perceives A2/AD as a component of strategic operations, as opposed to a separate, independent effort. In this context, A2/AD, along with cyber/information warfare, and traditional warfighting components, are postured so that they can be used simultaneously and so that they may ready further conventional and nuclear forces when/if necessary. More importantly, these strategic operations are designed for providing maximum options to the Russian political elite while minimizing those of the adversary. Steve Covington depicts such Russian operations with an A2/AD component as *Strategic Area Control – Opponent Options Denial* [48].

While much less advanced than that of their Russian allies, the Syrian Baathist regime's A2/AD architecture also poses challenges in the Eastern Mediterranean. This is especially true thanks to the Syrian response to Israel's Operation Orchard launched in 2007, which targeted the al-Kibar nuclear facility. Since that operation, Damascus has opted to modernize its surface-to-air missile (SAM) and EW capabilities. In this regard, a procurement program for SA-22 and SA-17 systems was initiated and some S-125 batteries were upgraded to the Pechora-2M standards [49].

Without a doubt, given the ongoing civil war, obtaining accurate open-source information about the combat-readiness levels and inventory of the Syrian Air Defense Forces is not an easy task. The International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) Military Balance 2016 estimates that while the Syrian Arab Army operates a mix of SA-8, SA-9, SA-11, SA-13, SA-22, SA-17 short and medium range systems – probably organic to military formations – the Air Defense Command has four divisions equipped with SA-3 (S-125 *Pechora*), SA-6, and three regiments equipped with static but long range SA-5 (S-200 *Angara*) SAM systems [50]. With the new upgrades, the Syrian Air Defense Forces' S-200VE systems have a range of 240 km. In 2014, satellite imagery confirmed four S-200 bases with a total of 10 batteries [51].

Evidences suggest that the Assad regime would not refrain from using its A2/AD capabilities for escalatory purposes. In 2012 and 2013, Israeli press sources claimed that the Syrian Arab Armed Forces fired SAM missiles at Israeli aircrafts, with no casualties recorded. This story put a specific emphasis on the use of S-200s in 2012 [52]. In the same year, a Turkish F-4E Phantom II jet was shot down by Syrian air defenses. Some press sources claimed that the attack was carried out by Pantsir-S1 (SA-22) systems [53]. In March 2015, the Syrian military stated that it downed a US drone in the north of Latakia province. Although US officials did not confirm the attack, they revealed the loss of contact with an MQ-1 Predator drone over Syria [54]. In September 2016, Syrian official sources reported on the downing of an aircraft and an unmanned aerial vehicle operated by the Israeli Air Force. The Israelis have denied these claims [55]. And surprising to many experts, as recently as March 2017, an Israeli Arrow air and missile defense system intercepted a Syrian anti-aircraft missile launched from an S-200 air defense site to target the Israeli Air Force platforms during an incursion into Syria [56]. Even this incident itself reveals how complex the A2/AD environment is.

Apart from the SAM systems, the Baathist regime's coastal defense forces are noteworthy due to the presence of K300P Bastion (around 300 km range) and C-802 systems [57]. Notably, recent Russian military operations in Syria highlighted the land-attack capability of the K300P Bastion system with its P-800 Onyx anti-ship missiles [58].

In sum, the presence of layered and overlapping A2/AD architectures in the Levant is a pressing challenge. In countering it, NATO would not only need new capabilities but also a new strategic mindset.

NATO in Need for a New Maritime Strategy: Implications for the Mediterranean

Following the ambiguity of the post-Cold War period, NATO's first significant engagement took place in a landlocked country, Afghanistan. 'Out-of-area operations in East of Suez' led some experts to claim that NATO was in search for a new role for itself [59]. Yet, the Alliance's immediate response to the 9/11 attacks was initiating a naval mission in the Mediterranean, the Operation Active Endeavor (OAE), under Article V. The OAE gradually evolved from a platform-based effort into a network-based one and remained an invaluable asset for NATO in combating maritime terrorist activities [60]. Still, some experts mark the period from around 2009 as the 'maritime awakening' of the Alliance, as member nations saw the need for protecting their trade interests from Somali piracy as well as challenges posed by the power vacuum in the northern Indian Ocean [61].

NATO adopted its maritime strategy in 2011. According to the document, the Alliance's maritime strategy is based on the four pillars of (1) deterrence and collective defense, (2) crisis management, (3) cooperative security: outreach through partnerships, dialogue and cooperation; and (4) maritime security [62].

During the Warsaw Summit in July 2016, the Alliance voiced a firmer maritime rhetoric with a specific focus on Russian naval posture. The allied leaders preferred to openly stress Moscow's activities in the Levant as follows: "*Russia's military intervention, significant military presence and support for the regime in Syria, and its use of its military presence in the Black Sea to project power into the Eastern Mediterranean have posed further risks and challenges for the security of Allies and others*" [63]. Furthermore, the Alliance put an emphasis on the standing naval forces as "a core maritime capability of the Alliance and are the centerpiece of NATO's maritime posture" [64].

Nevertheless, NATO's current maritime strategy was prepared under the 2010 Lisbon Summit conditions and so does not address present risks and threats. Above all, NATO's maritime strategy document has no focus on the A2/AD challenges posed by Russia. Secondly, it does not address Moscow's frequent use of the maritime domain to test the Allied readiness and cohesion [65]. And thirdly, non-state actors are now capable to significantly threaten maritime security [66], something that contemporary NATO maritime strategy mostly overlooks.

Experts underline that a new NATO maritime strategy should focus on promoting interoperable naval forces with an all-domain access objective. In this regard, the Alliance needs to foster key capabilities of anti-submarine warfare, integrated air and missile defense, electronic warfare, intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance (ISR), electronic warfare, space-based systems, and cyber warfare [67].

Furthermore, it would be beneficial for the Alliance to establish a NATO Force Integration Unit (NFIU) [68] on the Alliance's southern flank with specific amphibious and/or airlift tasks in one of the littoral member countries. Additionally, enhancing the scope of the NATO Standing Maritime Group 2 through a numerical increase of available assets and by increasing stealth and long range precision-strike capabilities supported by a robust C4ISR [69] architecture will be indispensable for countering the menacing A2/AD threats in the Mediterranean [70].

The Mediterranean Region in Contemporary US Defense Posture: Feasibility of 'Asking for More'

NATO's naval cloud in the troublesome Eastern Mediterranean benefits from Turkey's military capabilities as well as from other allied naval powers' deployments such as France and the United Kingdom. Realistically, however, without an increased and permanent US commitment, the Alliance would be unable to establish an enduring deterrent in the face of emerging challenges.

Indeed, on April 6, 2017, the US Navy launched a total of 59 Tomahawk Block-IV cruise missiles from USS Porter (*DDG 78*) and USS Ross (*DDG 71*) Arleigh Burke-class destroyers in the Mediterranean, and targeted the Shayrat Airbase in Syria following the regime's chemical attacks in Idlib [71]. Although this may have hinted at a more robust US commitment in the region for some, in fact, Washington's naval strategic calculation is based in geopolitically prioritized hubs, and the Mediterranean is still not a priority.

The US Navy has traditionally sustained its combat credibility through a 'two hubs' geopolitical perspective. In this context, while the Mediterranean and the Western Pacific (WESTPAC) remained in the foreground during the Cold War, the Northern Arabian Sea/Gulf region has replaced the Mediterranean since Operation Desert Storm. This calculus was fostered by joint force structures and capacity of flexible deployments from the

continental United States [72]. Indeed, the US Navy deployed advanced systems in the Eastern Mediterranean due to present challenges, such as DDG-51 Arleigh Burke-class destroyers (from Rota-Span), and the Mount Whitney Blue Ridge-class command ship [73]. Yet, these deployments have not significantly altered the focus on the WESTPAC and Gulf hubs.

Recently, debates about the US Navy's 'force structure assessment' center on the fleet size. Simply put, this refers to the number and type of ships in service. Advocates of a bigger fleet, which is tantamount to a force structure that could be 'up to 350 ships', draw attention to the security challenges in the Mediterranean that stem from the Russian military buildup and the instability in the Middle East and North Africa [74].

However, beefing up the US Naval posture in the Mediterranean permanently is easier said than done. Such a decision would depend on either a shift in the naval-geostrategic calculus and/or size of the US Navy and related defense economics. Clearly, a complex shift to the Mediterranean, without increasing the size of the navy, would mean force reduction from either of the current hubs [75]. Yet, due to burgeoning Chinese naval modernization [76] and the volatile situation in the Gulf, emanating from rising Iranian military capabilities [77], the US Navy cannot replace either of its current two hubs in WESTPAC and the Gulf. Without a doubt, US allies in the Pacific and the Gulf would not want to see a decrease in American defense commitments that could significantly undermine the US influence in those regions.

The other, yet unpractical, option would be adopting a 'three hubs' geostrategic perspective. Doing so would mean drastically increasing the size of the Navy. However, such an option does not seem feasible due to present budgetary constraints. At this point, some studies recommend additional forward homeporting options in the Mediterranean region [78]. Yet, facilitating forward homeporting would take considerable time.

Naturally, Washington is expected to lead NATO posture in the Mediterranean. However, American efforts must be coupled with a tangible increase in the allied nations' naval capabilities. Without a doubt, such capability development would necessitate an increase in military spending, more NATO nations would need to meet the 2% military expenditure/GDP ratio. Considering the fact that the Trump administration is expected to ask for more contributions from its NATO allies, this paper suggests that the Allied naval posture in the Mediterranean might be more of a defense economics and foreign policy issue as opposed to a military strategic calculus concerned with force-to-force ratio.

Recent Aircraft Carrier Activities in the Mediterranean: Chess Pieces and Players

In naval warfare literature, aircraft carriers are known as the largest and the most complex of all ships. Operating an aircraft carrier is not only about the vessel, but also its embarked air wing, logistical support elements, and advanced training infrastructure. Some experts depict the doctrinal roles of these huge platforms as "geopolitical chess pieces" and "airfields at sea" [79]. Thus, this paper puts a special emphasis on assessing the aircraft carrier issues in the Mediterranean in hopes of developing a better understanding Mediterranean's chessboard and players.

Recent 'big news' in the Mediterranean included the deployment of the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier for operations in Syria. The Admiral Kuznetsov is the only aircraft carrier currently in service in the Russian Navy. The campaign in Syria was reported to be the vessel's first combat mission since it was built [80]. Interestingly, the Soviets designed the ship as a "heavy aviation cruiser" and so it is not exactly fit for its present role as an aircraft carrier [81]. At the time of writing, Russia's sole aircraft carrier returned from missions in Syria and was undergoing a comprehensive refit, leaving Moscow with no carrier capabilities for nearly 3 years [82].

Apart from its current military implications, the deployment itself served as an analytical guide to understand the future of Russian naval aviation capabilities and power projection intentions. In this respect, Vladimir Shamanov, chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee and former commander of Russia's formidable airborne forces (VDV) said that the experience gained from the Admiral Kuznetsov's latest deployment would be useful in building the next generation of aircraft carriers. According to Shamanov, building a new aircraft carrier has long been an urgent need for Moscow and Russia is "*destined to not only restore, but also to build up the fleet's combat potential.*" Furthermore, Shamanov underlined that the aircraft carrier's mission in Syria remains "*another step forward in developing (Russian) Navy, because the effectiveness of the most advanced weaponry it has should be put to test in situations approximating combat ones, if not real combat operations, and not stay idle [83].*"

Notably, General Vladimir Shamanov was one of the most prominent and highly-decorated generals in the Russian armed forces. Biographies of the general report that General Shamanov was awarded the Hero of the Russian Federation Medal twice thanks to his combat record in Georgia and Chechnya. General Shamanov commanded the airborne forces and masterminded the establishment of Russia's rapid reaction force. Apart from his military capabilities, the general's political influence is considered to be the primary factor that saved the VDV from budgetary cutbacks [84]. In other words, if a comment about defense modernization is voiced by Vladimir Shamanov, it would be very influential.

On the other hand, Moscow's recent move was not only about ambitious objectives and strategic success. In fact, deployment of the Admiral Kuznetsov also suggested Russia's gaps in carrier-based naval aviation operations. In this regard, satellite imagery in late November 2016 showed that many of the Russian aircrafts that were initially staged on the Admiral Kuznetsov, mainly Su-33 and Mig-29KR jets, were operating from the Hmeymim Base in Latakia [85]. Moreover, during the sorties over Syria, the Russian Navy also witnessed aircraft losses due to arrestor cable problems experienced by the aircraft carrier [86].

In fact, for a long time the Russians have used Ukraine's *Nazyemniy Ispitatelnyy Treynirovochniy Kompleks Aviatsii (NITKA)* at the Novofedorovka aerodrome in Saki, Crimea for carrier-borne pilot training. The facility possesses take-off ramps that are full-size replicas of the Admiral Kuznetsov's bow section and runways with arresting gears to simulate landings [87]. Following the invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia was banned from using the NITKA. Viktor Yanukovich lifted the ban in 2010 when he assumed the presidency. Because of the 2008–2010 ban, the Russians began constructing their own facility in the Krasnodarskiy Krai at a cost of 24 billion rubles [88]. The facility reportedly began training pilots in late 2014 but the facility's pilot-training features were to be fully initiated sometime between 2015 and 2016. In the meantime, Russian forces reclaimed control of the NITKA facility in March 2014 following their hybrid-invasion campaign into Crimea [89].

We do not exactly know the real impact of the 2008-2010 ban on the Russian naval aviation pilots' training and combat readiness. Yet, there is still no good reason to rule out the role of abovementioned factors of the Admiral Kuznetsov's problematic operations in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the ageing Admiral Kuznetsov lacks high-end catapult capabilities, causing aircraft embarking from the carrier to fly with lower payloads, limiting the battle group's combat efficacy [90].

France is another important naval power that has been conducting carrier operations in the Mediterranean. In fact, the French flagship vessel, the Charles de Gaulle, started its operations against ISIL from the Persian Gulf in late February 2015 [91]. The first mission lasted two months with 10 to 15 sorties per day [92]. The second mission took place in November 2015 following the Paris attacks perpetrated by the ISIL terrorist network. This time, the Charles de Gaulle and its *groupe aeronaval (GAN) – carrier strike group* – were deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean [93], with a larger air wing [94]. Subsequently, the French flagship vessel set sail to the US Fifth Fleet's area of responsibility to assume command of Task Force 50 for anti-ISIL operations [95]. This mission marked the culmination for Franco-American naval interoperability with the assignment of a French

admiral, Rear Adm. Rene-Jean Crignola, to the command of a US Navy task force [96]. In fall 2016, the French aircraft carrier conducted its third tour in support of anti-ISIL operations in Mosul [97].

The US carrier activity in the region was also noteworthy in 2016. As of June 2016, the presence of two American carrier strike groups in the Mediterranean, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and the USS Harry S. Truman, were perceived as a strong signal of the American commitment to the anti-ISIL coalition efforts, as well as to NATO's naval posture in face of the Russian activities [98]. By the end of 2016, the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower remained deployed in the Mediterranean in the 6th Fleet's area of responsibility [99]. At the time of writing (March 2017), USS George H.W. Bush carrier strike group has been active in the same area [100].

Recent Submarine Activities in the Mediterranean: Back to the Cold War Days?

In modern naval warfare, submarines are key platforms with a broad mission portfolio ranging from intelligence and surveillance, special operations, land-attack roles, and even hunting down aircraft carriers. Due to doctrinal and geographical reasons, submarine fleets are the centerpiece of the Russian Navy and receive top priority in modernization efforts [101]. Analysts even claim that stealth submarines are part of the Russian A2/AD architecture [102].

The Mediterranean has recently witnessed intensive submarine activity. Notably, in February 2016, Vice Admiral Clive Johnstone, Commander of NATO's Maritime Command, stated that his subordinate commanders leading submarine cells were reporting "more activity from Russian submarines than (they have) seen since the days of the Cold War." [103]

In 2016, Russian submarine activities in the Mediterranean reached a peak and have been posing significant challenges to NATO. Importantly, in late 2016, open-source military publications noted that the US Navy and NATO forces have been tracking down two Russian guided missile submarines, at least one of which probably being a Project 949A Antey, in the Mediterranean [104]. Equipped with P-700 Granit supersonic sea-skimming anti-ship missiles, this formidable platform is known as a "carrier-killer sub" with a primary mission of hunting down enemy aircraft carrier battle groups. Even more importantly at the time, referring to the abovementioned open-source reports, the Russian 'carrier-killer' submarine was thought to be in close proximity of two Western aircraft carriers, Charles de Gaulle of France, and the USS Eisenhower of the American Navy [105], replicating naval maneuvers during Cold War times.

Russian submarine presence in the Mediterranean is of key importance, hinting at the shifts in military operations and concepts. In this regard, in early December 2015, the Russian Navy initiated its first submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM) strikes in Syria from its submarine platforms [106]. The SLCM launch marked a turning point for the Russian military operations. Traditionally Moscow's long-range missile concepts have depended on either nuclear warhead delivery, or anti-ship and anti-air missions [107]. According to Russian press sources, the Rostov-on-Don, a Kilo-class diesel-electric submarine, conducted the strike by launching 3M-54 Kalibr missiles at targets in Syria [108]. Thus, this paper assesses that the Kremlin sees the Mediterranean as a testbed for Russian long range conventional precision strike capabilities.

In fact, subsequent developments showed that early success of conventional precision strikes from submarine platforms in the Mediterranean has already influenced Russian naval modernization plans. It is reported that Project 971 Bars (Akula)-class nuclear-powered attack submarines will be equipped with the Kalibr missiles, reportedly anti-ship variants, as a part of the modernization efforts [109]. More important, according to Viktor Kochemazov, head of the Russian Navy Training Department, the December 2015 SLCM strike's success played an important role in the Project 971 Bars modernization plans by proving the effectiveness of the weapon [110].

Early success of the Kalibr missile launches from surface and submarine platforms seems to have already influenced the Russian naval strategy in the Mediterranean. In early 2016, Russian press sources reported that Moscow was planning a permanent rotation of naval platforms equipped with cruise missiles in the region [111]. Notably, the cited news story deliberately underlined three facts about the permanent rotation plans: firstly, Kalibr missiles' operational success in Syria; secondly, the fact that these missiles can be carried by both relatively smaller surface vessels in addition to submarines, thus boosting their operational value, and thirdly, they can stress missile defense systems in the region to a considerable extent [112].

Finally, given the Soviet submarine operations in Swedish territorial waters in the 1980s, especially considering the example of the systematic Soviet intrusions into Swedish coastal defense zones and major naval bases [113], one of the strategic aims of the current Russian submarine operations could be testing NATO's naval response capabilities in the Mediterranean.

Conclusion: Militarization of Political Agendas in an Increasingly Complex Threat Landscape

Without a doubt, the biggest change in the Mediterranean naval balance of power has emerged from the return of the '5th Eskadra legacy' – namely Moscow's Mediterranean naval task force – to the region. Notably, the Kremlin has managed to capitalize on its operational achievements in Syria and has successfully translated them into strategic gains. As mentioned earlier, Russia is now a permanent actor on NATO's Southern flank. Furthermore, Moscow has been able to use advanced weaponry for its intervention in Syria. This will most likely pay off through new arms sales and robust defense planning depending on more tangible indicators stemming directly from the battlespace. In this regard, Russian sources explained that some 160 new items of advanced arms were tested in the Syrian campaign [114]. This testing has already boosted demand for Russian defense exports [115]. Moreover, some experts argue that Moscow is using its ports in the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to the Levant, as a tool for testing the solidarity of NATO and EU at a time of crisis [116].

Notably, the abovementioned drastic shifts have coincided with the burgeoning military capabilities of China and Iran in the Pacific and the Gulf respectively. Thus, although the US might opt for a rotational presence in the Mediterranean, a massive naval posture that would simultaneously cover all three hubs would not be feasible for any administration in Washington. Clearly, the West needs more realistic approaches and effective deterrence in the Mediterranean to protect its interests in the long term. Especially given the Russian A2/AD bubble and growing submarine activity in the Levant, NATO is in need of revising its Mediterranean strategy.

Meanwhile, three regional actors – Turkey, Israel, and Egypt – are all pursuing successful naval modernization programs. Although each cannot alter the regional balance of power on their own, their policy orientations could indeed do so. In this respect, Turkey's and Egypt's growing blue-water capabilities are noteworthy. Israel's commissioning of submarines for potential strategic second strikes as well as its recent efforts to improve its ability to conduct conventional long-range precision strike missions from submarine platforms are game changing in this regard.

In sum, we are talking about a critical flashpoint in international affairs, as the naval developments in the Mediterranean are expected to play a decisive role in the global power struggle at a time of both ambiguity and fierce competition.

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