

**COMPARING THE MILITARY PRESENCE AND STRENGTH OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

By

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**Final Essay for the Post-Graduate, “Masters of Arts
Mediterranean Studies”, Programme of the University of the
Peloponnese**

September 2019

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Keywords: Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, USA, Russia, historic strategic importance, big power strategic objectives, military strength, NATO, Syria, open-ended contest.

ABSTRACT

Historically, the Mediterranean Sea, and particularly its Eastern part was considered strategically important since the antiquity, an importance confirmed in recent times by both theoreticians of history and international relations as well as great power politics. Today the importance of the region remains, as it connects sea routes with from the Black Sea and the Atlantic to the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously regional and great powers have to face contemporary challenges like migration, Islamic radicalism and terrorism. Since the Cold War, USA and (formerly the Soviet Union and now) Russia are politically and militarily involved in the region each trying to achieve its political and military objectives which are often clashing. Through these years, the US alone or within a system of regional or wider alliances has managed to maintain the military and political advantage. But, Russia is making gains in recent years particularly through establishing a firm military presence in key regional points such as Syria. As other actors, like China, are gradually entering this stage, the contest and its future outcome remains an open-ended process.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the present essay, submitted hereby to the University of the Peloponnese, is the product of my own intellectual effort, does not violate third party rights, follows and fully observes internationally acknowledged, relevant academic standards.

The author alone is responsible for views expressed in the essay and the supervisor, examiners, the Department and the University of Peloponnese do not necessarily share these views nor do bear any responsibility for any errors or omissions.

The author

Sokratis Psaltis

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Methodology

The only method which will be used in this essay, will be gathering bibliography. It will include English or Greek bibliography which will either be essays, studies or academic books. Interviewing related persons or using empirical observation was not possible since the time given to complete the essay is only three months.

Summary

This essay will examine the strategic and, particularly, military presence and strength of two of the world's major superpowers the United States of America (US) and the Russian Federation (Russia) in the region of the Mediterranean, with particular emphasis, on the Eastern Mediterranean.

Main Issue of the Essay: A comparison of the strategic, political and military, objectives and military presence and strength of the US and Russia in the Mediterranean, and particularly the Eastern Mediterranean, aiming at assessing the degree of their present engagement, future prospects and whether one of the two powers is in a position of strength compared to the other.

Main Question of the Essay: Is one of the two countries in a position of strength, compared to the other in the Mediterranean region, particularly on the basis of indicators such as its military position, and does this successfully serve its strategic interests?

The essay will first make a relatively brief examination of the Mediterranean region, concerning its geographical position and strategic importance, in order to demonstrate why it is strategically and militarily important for any major power to engage or establish a presence there and what such a strategic and military presence entails.

An examination, in broad terms, of the overall strategic interests and political priorities of the US and Russia concerning this region will follow.

The essay will then examine relations between the US and countries of the region that play a significant role in US foreign and defence policy. Particular emphasis will be placed on Turkey, Syria, Greece and, to an extent, Italy. Particularly, issues such as the presence of military bases in those countries, joint military exercises, the US naval forces in the Mediterranean, etc. will be discussed. US interventions to prevent armed conflicts in the region will also be discussed. This method will then be repeated concerning Russia and its relations with Mediterranean states.

Finally, the data and arguments will be summed up and a conclusion reached on the main question of the essay, namely that although at the moment, the US and its allies have the dominant position in the sensitive and strategically important region of the Mediterranean, Russia made some impressive gains in recent years. And as

other actors, like China, are gradually entering this stage, the contest and its future outcome remains an open-ended process.

1. INTRODUCTION - THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

The strategic importance of the Mediterranean Region, emerges from several comprising aspects, including its geographical, political, economic and military importance.

Geographically, the Mediterranean Sea is a route towards the Atlantic Ocean, with the Mediterranean Basin surrounding it, and almost completely enclosed by land: on the north by Southern Europe and Anatolia, on the south by North Africa and on the east by the Levant. According to estimates, the approximate area covered by the Mediterranean Sea is 2.5 million km², representing 0.7% of the global ocean surface. It is connected to the Atlantic via the Strait of Gibraltar—the narrow strait that connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and separates Spain in Europe from Morocco in Africa—which is not more than 14 km wide.

The countries surrounding the Mediterranean are Spain, France, Monaco, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. There are also Malta and Cyprus, two island countries while other areas such as the Gaza Strip and the British Overseas Territories of Gibraltar and Akrotiri and Dhekeleia (on Cyprus) although not islands, have coastlines on the sea.¹

Understandably, the above countries have different political systems and economies and often competing or even clashing interests. However, the region of the Mediterranean as a whole, and in more recent times particularly its Eastern part, was always considered as strategically important. Theoretical models developed in the course of the 20th century define the Mediterranean as a region of major strategic or geopolitical importance. The world model developed by Harold Mackinder, for instance, as elaborated further by Nicholas Spykman, situates the region in the “Inner or Marginal Crescent” or “Rimland”, whose control determines the dominant power of Eurasia and, hence, of the whole world.² Mackinder makes specific references to the importance of control of the Mediterranean by great powers, even making a specific reference to the importance of such a Mediterranean

¹ Geographical information in the above paragraphs is based on references taken from sites of geographical content; see particularly, Wikipedia, Mediterranean Sea, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mediterranean_Sea

² Cohen Saul Bernard, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 2nd edition, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, pp.2- 23.

country as Greece for World War I belligerents, saying “the occupation of Greece by a big Heartland power would probably carry with it control of the Planet-Island [i.e. the world]”³

Other, subsequent theoreticians reiterated the importance of the region or of states in the region for the interests of great powers. Indicatively, as recently as 2017, Robert D. Kaplan notes that it would be interesting to consider how much stronger Kremlin’s position would be after World War II, if Greece belonged to the Eastern bloc, threatening Italy, at the other end of the Adriatic, not to mention Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.⁴

A US Army War College study of 1990 asserts that during the Cold War, Soviet Russia feared the creation of a large pan-Arab state in the region, which would encircle the Soviet Union with American support, while the US were afraid that such a state of unified Arab nations, would be a Soviet weapon against their interests. Conflicts between nations (Greece-Turkey, Morocco-Algeria, Israel-Arabs) or terrorist incidents often occur in this region.⁵

Economically, the Mediterranean Sea has been since ancient times a major, global commercial route. In modern times the importance of this route for the world economy is manifest. While the most industrialized and overdeveloped regions are the coastal regions of Spain, France and Italy, the Arab states of south Mediterranean have an abundance of raw materials and large amounts of petroleum, natural gas and nickel or cobalt. Eastern and southern countries of the region, have an abundance of agricultural lands and, hence, increased agricultural production and are suppliers of commodities to central and northern European countries. Currently, eight Mediterranean countries are EU members, thus rendering the Mediterranean by definition part of the EU, the world’s largest economy, single market and trading block as well as the most open market for developing countries.⁶ Furthermore, the EU engages in the wider region through the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, whose key aim is to create a deep Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Area, which has the purpose of enhancing trade and investment relations and activities between both the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries and between the Southern Mediterranean countries themselves. Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements are in force with the majority of the partners (with the exception of Syria and Libya). Together, the region

³ Mackinder Halford J. , *Democratic Ideas and Reality: A study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1919, cited in Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography* (Η Εκδίκηση της Γεωγραφίας), Translated and with an Introduction by Spyros Katsoulas, Melani, Athens, 2016, pp. 172-173.

⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, *ibid*, p. 285.

⁵ US Army War College Study, 26 March 1990 page 13.

⁶ European Commission, 2019, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/eu-position-in-world-trade/>

represents 9.4% of total EU external trade in 2016, with EU exports to the region coming up to 186.4 billion Euros, while imports by the EU at 131.8 billion Euros.⁷

Militarily, the region, particularly Eastern Mediterranean, was historically always of great importance. As Robert Kaplan writes, “Europe is bordered by more or less four closed or quasi-closed seas which push, in a way, the sub-continent in a relatively narrow peninsula: these are the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Baltic and the North Sea” and it is in this theatre that from the earliest years, Europe gains its political force from “belligerent Athenians, Spartans, Romans, Iberians, Phoenicians...”.⁸ Kaplan and others also refer to power struggle in the region during the time of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. For nearly four centuries, the Ottoman Empire controlled the Eastern Mediterranean. By the late, nineteenth century, however, Ottoman power was waning and that of Britain, Russian and France (and later Italy) growing. The British, in particular, systematically established their supremacy in the region through the 19th and 20th centuries.⁹ World War II weakened the Europeans, including the British. With Britain’s inability to play its pre-war role after the end of World War II, the British were succeeded by the Americans. During the Cold War era, the US established military bases and deployed the 6th fleet in the region, in an effort, to control and protect the flow of petroleum, something very important after the 1973 petroleum crisis. For Russia, efforts to influence the region began already when “Imperial Russia began asserting its interests [there] in the nineteenth century. Its successor the Soviet Union worked for at least half a century to bolster its influence...and stymie that of the United States and its allies”¹⁰. Soviet Russia kept trying to increase its influence in the region so that it could affect the petroleum interests of the West by controlling relevant routes, also because the Mediterranean market would be very lucrative for Soviet products, and because it has the shortest way by sea from Soviet ports to the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹¹ Post-USSR Russia, followed a similar policy, in broad terms, notwithstanding the great change in ideology and the political system that occurred in the country after 1990.

More widely, the period which started with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc countries to the present, was a period of change in the region’s importance for both the US and its allies and for Russia. Up to the beginning of the

⁷ European Commission, EU – Mediterranean Partnership,

<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/euro-mediterranean-partnership/>

⁸ Robert D. Kaplan, as above, pp. 262-263.

⁹ For a detailed account of the establishment of the British influence in the region see Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean Since 1800*, Penguin, London, 2013.

¹⁰ Anna Borschchevskaya, *Russia’s Strategic Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Testimony submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, 15/6/17

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-strategic-objectives-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹¹ Us Army War College Study, 26 March 1990 page 14. Also, for a detailed account on developments in the region and internationally during the Cold War period, and particularly US-USSR antagonism, see indicatively, John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, Penguin Books, London, 2007.

1990s, the region was important but of serious peripheral concern for academics, strategists and policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. But after the events of the wars in Iraq, the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, the Arab Spring risings and subsequent wars in the region and migration flows, Eastern Mediterranean developments became central to strategic and geopolitical debates and studies, not only in European Union countries, where security concerns emanating from the south, affected and shaped policy agendas for some time, but also in Washington and in Moscow.¹²

Thus, the region of the Mediterranean, particularly its Eastern part, is a region where competition for control and influence between regional and outside actors is historically constant and uninterrupted.

2. BIG POWER STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

2.1. US STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Since 1947, when US President Truman announced US provision of financial, military and technical assistance to Greece and Turkey in the framework of “the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”¹³, i.e. when he announced what subsequently became known as “the Truman Doctrine”, the US developed their strategy in the region. It had three essential policy elements:

First, an overarching policy framework -the Truman doctrine- that sought to curtail the spread of Soviet influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Secondly, a mechanism -the Marshall Plan- that provided US assistance to empower governments to stabilize themselves and, finally, an emphasis on stabilizing Europe in order to avoid regional fragmentation and resist adversarial forces inserting themselves into the region. Anchoring Greece and Turkey within the Euro-Atlantic community, along with maintaining a robust and persistent US regional presence, was seen as the antidote to Soviet presence within and around Europe.¹⁴ Since 1947, this strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean relied first on NATO, which incorporated Turkey and Greece soon after its foundation, and was vital against the Soviet threat. Secondly, it relied on Israel and Egypt. After various phases in their relationship these two countries signed the 1979 peace treaty which was in accordance with US policy of promoting US-brokered stability in the Mediterranean and put an end to rivalries that

¹² For a detailed analysis on this period, from the 1990s to the beginning of the 21st century, see Ian O. Lesser, Security and Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean, ELIAMEP, December 2005, <http://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/lesserppno5.pdf>

¹³ U.S. State Department, The Office of the Historian, The Truman Doctrine, 1947, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>

¹⁴ John B. Alterman, Heather A. Conley, Haim Malka, Donatienne Ruy, Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor, Center for Strategic International Studies, May 2018, pp. 3-4, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/restoring-eastern-mediterranean-us-strategic-anchor>

contributed to four Arab-Israeli wars in 25 years and gave a role to the USSR in the area.¹⁵

For the US, the significance of the Eastern Mediterranean persisted even after the end of the Cold War era. “The region has grown even more intimately connected to its periphery, creating a web of interrelationships and dependencies. The Eastern Mediterranean is no longer a rampart that defends the free world from tyranny. It has become the hub of a whole system of ties and interests vital to US national security. Instability in the region cannot be contained. Rather, when instability breaks out, it ripples into key areas and relationships in Europe, the Middle East and beyond.”¹⁶

Before moving on with key, contemporary, US security objectives and challenges we will briefly refer to the US relationship with the three specific countries on which this paper will focus as indicators of the political and military dimension of the relationship, namely and in alphabetical order, Greece, Syria and Turkey. Italy will also be mentioned briefly not so much as an indicator country but as a major NATO country in the vicinity. This will be repeated further below, for Russia.

All three Greece, Italy and Turkey are US allies, through NATO. Italy is a founding member of NATO, having joined the alliance in 1949. Greece and Turkey, are also NATO members, both having joined in 1952. All three countries contribute to NATO functions and operations. NATO’s Allied Land Command (LANDCOM), responsible for all NATO land forces is based in Izmir, Turkey. The Allied Joint Force Command in the region is based in Naples, Italy (JFCN). There are forward operating bases for NATO AWAC aircraft in Turkey, Greece and Italy, and also ballistic missile defence forward bases in Turkey.¹⁷

Apart from being NATO members, all three countries have long partnership relations with the US and separate defence agreements, for instance concerning military bases or installations such as the Souda base in Greece, Sigonella in Italy, Incirlik in Turkey etc. Specific issues related to these installations and their effect on the overall strategic relationship will be discussed below.

As concerns Syria, for many years, relations between this country and the US are fraught, due to intense policy disagreements over Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean issues, particularly policy towards Israel, Iraq and Lebanon. Washington’s dominant view of Syria is that it is a country ruled by an unreliable leader, with ambitions of controlling its neighbouring country Lebanon by military force, harboring terrorists and being a loyal ally of Iran – a strategic adversary of

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁷ NATO official website, <https://www.nato.int>

both USA and Israel. So, US policy towards Syria is one of containment and isolation.¹⁸

Returning to the wider issue of US strategic interests, contemporary US “National Defense Strategy” defines US defence interests primarily in the framework of long-term strategic and intense competition with China and Russia, both of which “require both increased and sustained investment, because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to US security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.”¹⁹ In the framework of this principle, defence objectives for the US include “maintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere.”²⁰ And specialized by sectoral and geographical criteria, one sees Mediterranean- and Russian-linked defence and security objectives appear under two headings – explicitly or implicitly:

“Fortify the Trans-Atlantic NATO Alliance. A strong and free Europe, bound by shared principles of democracy, national sovereignty and commitment to Article 5 of North Atlantic Treaty is vital to our security. The alliance will deter Russian adventurism...and address the arc of instability building on NATO’s periphery...” and

“Form enduring coalitions in the Middle East. We will foster a stable and secure Middle East that denies safe havens for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to stable energy markets and secure trade routes...”²¹

These are the US’s top strategic defence priorities for the wider region of Europe and the Middle East of which the Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean in particular is part. The above objectives clearly reflect in part a US desire to address problems related to a change in the balance of power in the region of the Mediterranean since the late 90s. Following a series of large-scale US military interventions in areas of the Middle East in the early 1990s, and their dubious success, notably in Iraq, US zeal for an activist policy was exhausted and a number of failed European attempts to intervene in a stabilizing way as well as the failure of local powers to overcome the de establishing effects of the 2011 “Arab Spring” uprisings, the Eastern Mediterranean region became a region where threats mutated and traditional alliances weakened or realigned.²²

¹⁸ See, indicatively, Martin S. Indyk, Testimony, The Future of U.S.-Syrian Relations, Brookings, April 24, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-future-of-u-s-syrian-relations/> and Joshua Landis, The U.S. – Syria Relationship, A Few Questions, Middle East Policy Council, Volume VII, <https://www.mepc.org/us-syria-relationship-few-questions>

¹⁹ Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, US Department of Defense, 2018, p. 4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 9.

²² For an overview of the situation in the Middle East and the Mediterranean after the US or US-led interventions of the 1990s and before the Arab Spring, see indicatively, Sotiris Roussos, The

There is yet another, strategic, factor that needs to be taken into account in the above framework, although it does not refer specifically to the Mediterranean region but to wider US strategic objectives, but it certainly involves the Mediterranean. This is the US Prompt Global Strike (PGS) doctrine, a significant factor contributing to the souring of the relationship between the West and Russia, after the end of the Cold War.²³ PGS was a defence strategy launched in 2003 that notionally, once completed by 2020, would provide the US with capability of launching a devastating non-nuclear surprise attack on Russia, considering that they possess 6,000 cruise missiles which could be launched within one hour against targets within Russia. These missiles would be launched from US naval platforms in the North Sea, Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean, while at the same time there are available air forces which could launch the missiles. Russia in 2003 lacked any similar military capability.²⁴

2.2. RUSSIAN STRATEGIC INTERESTS

A number of regional and other powers have developed their own strategic involvement in the region of the Mediterranean as a result of or following the developments described immediately above, countries such as Iran, Turkey and China and, of course, Russia.

Russia has deep and enduring commercial, military, cultural and historic ties to the Eastern Mediterranean and its government views the Eastern Mediterranean as a cohesive region encompassing both Europe and the Middle East.²⁵ Since the return of Russian President Putin to the Kremlin, in 2012, Russia initiated a growing presence in the Mediterranean.

As above, under 2.1., we will briefly refer to Russia's relationship with the three indicator-countries, Greece, Syria and Turkey. As regards Greece, the relationship is both old and complex. The two countries are in opposite camps but Russia has old historical links with Greece. Russia was one of the three Great Powers that supported Greek independence in the 1820s. Generally speaking, relations are warm on the surface but without strategic depth. Greece avoids confrontations with Russia but avoids actions that could undermine a common European or Western approach when problems arise.²⁶

Quicksand of Hegemony – Regional Security Issues in the Middle East and Eurasia (Η κινούμενη άμμος της ηγεμονίας – Ζητήματα περιφερειακής ασφάλειας στη Μέση Ανατολή και την Ευρασία), Melani, Athens, 2008. From the vast bibliography on the Arab Spring, see indicatively, Ilias Kouskouvelis (editor), The Arab Spring (Η Αραβική Άνοιξη), University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, 2012.

²³ Rod Thornton, Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and its Strategic Deterrence Role, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28/1/19, p. 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2019.1552655>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John B. Alterman et al., *ibid*, p. 5.

²⁶ For a more detailed analysis and background information see, among others, Thanos Dokos, Μύθοι και Πραγματικότητες για τις Ελληνο-Ρωσικές Σχέσεις (Myth and reality on Greek-Russian relations), *Kathimerini*, 6/12/18,

The relationship with Turkey is also old and complex. Currently, as Turkey is reconsidering and reshaping its foreign and regional policy at a time when the entire Middle East is undergoing a major transformation with Russia is acting in a similar way, both look for more influence in the region. “Accordingly” it has been remarked “ their relationship is at times cooperative and at times competitive. For example, Moscow and Ankara were on the brink of military confrontation late in 2015 after Turkey shot down a Russian jet. Less than a year later, they had mended ties and decided to cooperate on Syria and a range of other issues, including defense and nuclear energy. As the relationship between Turkey and Russia shifts ... the two countries’ geopolitical aspirations are largely incompatible, and that cooperation today does not imply cooperation tomorrow.”²⁷ Specific aspects of the two countries’ relationship, concerning the Mediterranean, will be discussed in more detail below.

As regards Syria, from a foreign policy point of view, it is not a top priority for Russia, however it remains a crucial strategic partner in the Middle East, which still serves as an “anchor” for Moscow in the region already since the Cold War era. Syria’s importance has increased recently, first because of its ongoing destabilisation and second because of increased activity of the so-called Islamic State (IS). There will be a detailed discussion of this relationship below.

Returning to the broader issue of Russian strategic interests: Russia often fears that Western actions aim at its encirclement and thus cause regime change in various regions around it, with the ultimate aim of causing regime change in Russia itself. Russia reacts to this real or perceived containment by enhancing its military capabilities and when required proceeding to interventions beyond its borders. As was noted “the 2008 invasion of Georgia marked the beginning of major military reforms, and by 2014, the Russian troops that intervened in Ukraine appeared noticeably better qualified and efficient. Meanwhile, Western military operations in Libya which led to the loss of an old Mediterranean ally Muammar Qadhafi in 2011 reinforced the importance of this strategy.

The outbreak of the Syria war only magnified Russia’s perception of containment, as Western nations worked to halt Russian arms transfers and resupply to Assad.

Moscow intensified its regional presence during the Syria war by pre-positioning its naval forces in the area, developing military relationships with various governments, seizing the initiative on the chemical weapons issue, and building new operating

<https://www.kathimerini.gr/998805/article/epikairothta/politikh/amesh-analysh-my8oi-kai-pragmatikothtes-gia-tis-ellhno-rwsikes-sxeseis>, και Ελληνική Δημοκρατία – Η Ελλάδα στη Ρωσία (Hellenic Republic – Greece in Russia), Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs official website, <https://www.mfa.gr/russia/ellada/ellada-kai-rosia/politikes-sheseis.html>

²⁷ Galip Dalay, Turkey and Russia are Bitter Frenemies, Foreign Policy, 28/5/19, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/28/turkey-and-russia-are-bitter-frenemies/>

bases. A key step in this process was to reestablish its Mediterranean fleet. The first ships arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2013.”²⁸

More widely, Russia’s strategy in recent years is one of undermining US-led regional policies in Europe and the Middle East – which are perceived as a threat to Russian security or even sovereignty – and to maximize Russian economic and security interests. In the region of the Eastern Mediterranean in particular and apart from its military presence in Syria, as discussed above, Russia is seeking to achieve this by maintaining and strengthening ties with a number of regional actors, particularly Turkey: Turkey has a historic rivalry with Russia which, in recent years fluctuated between confrontation and co-operation. Relations were stable until 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian military aircraft that crossed into Turkish airspace from its base in Syria. Relations worsened for about a year, until in 2016, President Erdogan wrote an official apology to President Putin and soon after, Turkey and Russia agreed to take steps to improve relations without delay. In December 2017, Turkey announced an agreement to buy Russian S-400 missile defence systems. But Turkey’s military objectives in Syria, in particular the threat of confrontation between pro-Assad forces and Turkish forces there repeatedly threatened Turkish-Russian co-operation.²⁹

Regarding other countries in the region, Russia developed ties with Egypt under President Al-Sisi. From 2012 to 2015, Egypt signed arms transfer agreements with Russia worth 9.3 billion US dollars. By March 2017, a few Russian special forces troops were deployed there to support operations in Libya. In 2017, Egypt received the S300VM missile system it had reportedly purchased from Russia in 2015. And Russia is scheduled to deliver 50 MiG-29 fighter jets to Egypt by 2020.³⁰

Russia is also trying or tried to cultivate a range of relations, including on military co-operation with a number of other regional countries even with staunch US allies such as Israel and Jordan and, of course, on non-military matters but e.g. on financial services or energy with Cyprus and Greece.

Finally, concerning the PGS threat, referred to under 2.1., above, this is a matter of great concern to Russia, as a successful employment of PGS would mean that virtually all Russian capacity, both conventional and nuclear, to resist US or NATO might be destroyed very soon after the start of a potential conflict. As has been observed, even if Moscow could retaliate, “the very fact that it could only do so using nuclear weapons as a response to a non-nuclear attack would result, in return, in a deadly nuclear counter-strike”³¹. Thus, PGS is today seen as “the most serious

²⁸ Anna Borschchevskaya and Jeremy Vaughan, How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 17 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-russian-military-reestablished-itself-in-the-middle-east>

²⁹ John B. Alterman et al, *ibid*, p. 9.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ Y. Kedmi, Moscow on the Euphrates, Israel Defence, no 40, Winter 2018, quoted in Rod Thornton, *ibid*, p. 16.

threat facing Russia”.³² Putin himself made speeches in order to emphasize the threat from PGS. The solutions preferred “point to the need to create more flexibility in Russia’s capacity to have efficient defense against any PGS attack, include fielding an increasing number of its own non-nuclear strategic missiles.”³³

3. THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY DIMENSION

3.1. US POLITICAL AND MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND OPTIONS TO ACHIEVE THEM

It follows from this analysis that for the US, the factors described above related to its strategic interests heighten the importance of viewing the Mediterranean and particularly the Eastern Mediterranean as a region where Europe and the Middle East intersect and where rival powers, such as Russia or ISIS or other jihadist forces, could play a negative role for US interests while promoting their own.

Along with pressing challenges in relations with Russia, Mediterranean security is set to pose key tests for US, NATO and EU strategy in the years ahead. Many arrangements that are being made to bolster deterrence in Europe’s north and east will be relevant and-perhaps more likely to be used-around the Mediterranean. US political and military engagement will be an important element of regional stability. But the relatively diffuse nature of Mediterranean security risks, a substantially reduced permanent military presence, and some marked differences in the European and US approach to the region will complicate the policy of “looking south”.³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lesser Ian O., The German Marshall Fund of the United States. Policy Brief, Mediterranean Policy Program, April 2015,p. 1., <http://www.gmfus.org/program/mediterranean>

US officials and strategists may not refer to the Mediterranean per se as often as their counterpart across the Atlantic. But crises and relationships around the Mediterranean still occupy an inordinate amount of attention for policy makers and demands for this quarter may be growing. Broadly the U.S. stakes in the region today have three key drivers. They are not new but their relative weight has evolved over time.³⁵

As mentioned under 1. above, the US are interested in the region as it is considered a part of European security. But this top Cold War and immediate post-Cold War priority has not been a leading driver of U.S. strategy in recent decades. As the region's ongoing transformation unfolds, external actors are competing to shape its future to their own needs. Threats from groups like ISIS, and the issue of failed and failing states around the southern Mediterranean comes to the fore of US as well as of Europe's security agenda.

3.1.1. US AND NATO

Discussion of the US – European security agenda provides the opportunity to briefly discuss the role of NATO and its links to US strategic and defence interests. Founded by the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949, NATO was essentially a Euro-American defence alliance, whose defensive stance was based on article 5 of its charter that stipulated that its members “agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all”.³⁶ After 1989, NATO changed scope and activity priorities often, with US always pressing for a more versatile organisation, open to new members and new tasks. Thus, then NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, spoke in February 2010 of “new global threats” requiring NATO responses. His list included everything from energy supply disruptions to maritime piracy. This statement reflected a policy favouring NATO opening its membership to any democratic state in the world willing and able to contribute to the fulfillment of these new responsibilities, on the grounds that only a truly global alliance could address the global challenges of the day.³⁷

Despite objections by member states, for instance France,³⁸ this policy continues to find support at collective, NATO level and by all US administrations, regardless of whether Democrat or Republican of persuasion. Thus, NATO, without being completely identified with US strategic and tactical objectives, largely shares them and reflects wider US strategic interests. But, this identification of interests

³⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁶ David Binder, Greece, Turkey and NATO, *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Volume 23, Number 2, Spring 2012, p. 99. Article 5 was invoked only once by the US, on 12 September 2001.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 101.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 102.

cannot always remain stable between all NATO allies and, indeed, divergences do occur which often pose serious strategic problems for both the alliance and the US. The most prominent such case in point concerns US-Turkish relations.

3.1.2. MANAGING POLICY DIVERGENCE WITH TURKEY

After the 2014 Wales summit NATO focusing on a strategy for the East, the Alliance began to design a parallel strategy concerning the south. The planners of NATO explored options for strengthening the capacity for crisis management in the Mediterranean. The dialogue between member-states established a decade ago faces challenges such as Turkish and Israeli bilateral issues. In hard security terms, the American engagement will be closely tied to European defence concerns.³⁹

The American-led initiative on ballistic missile defense now linked to NATO planning, is largely reliant on assets afloat in the Mediterranean. NATO allies most exposed to current ballistic risks and most concerned about efficient ballistic defense are those in Southern Europe and Turkey. The Mediterranean can also be a theatre for manned or unmanned platforms in the war against the Islamic Terrorism, which is a severe threat for the US and the West more widely. The US still have a stake in this sea as an important route to other regions. The Sixth Fleet moves materiel and personnel between Atlantic, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean through Gibraltar and Suez Canal. And the Incirlik airbase in Turkey is vital for American interests, with the question of its use for non-NATO plans is vexing for American planners. Since the Gulf War, the Americans have used the base several times, recently for attacks against ISIS in Syria. The region remains a theatre of crises and flashpoints. The constant conflicts in Syria and Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Greek-Turkish disputes as well as the Cyprus issue mean that the US need to maintain a strong presence there, in order to prevent conflicts and destabilization within NATO, among other things.⁴⁰ In this context, developments after the failed military coup against Turkish President Erdogan, in July 2016, affected relations negatively. Turkey accused the US of supporting the coup on the grounds that the US harboured Fethullah Gulen, the exiled religious leader blamed by Erdogan for instigating the coup. Irrespective of the truth of such allegations, mistrust increased and complicated relations between Turkey, US and other NATO members. In July 2016, Turkey temporarily closed the airspace over Incirlik base, cut electricity and accused US military officers for involvement in the coup.⁴¹ In the following years, Turkey not only continued distancing itself from the US and other NATO allies such as Germany but also announced its intention (which it finally carried out) to purchase Russia's

³⁹ Lesser. O. Ian, April 2015, page 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 7

⁴¹ F. Brinley Bruton, Abigail Williams, Courtney Kube, Incirlik Air Base: Post-Coup Power Cut Remains at US Site, NBC News, 21/7/16 <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/turkey-military-coup/incirlik-air-base-post-coup-power-cut-remains-u-s-n613086>

S-400 missile defence system, a system incompatible with any NATO system, put NATO's missile defence capabilities at severe risk and, given that Turkey is among the participants in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme, increases risks that sophisticated F-35 technology could leak to Russia.⁴²

These developments have eroded trust and took their toll on the US-Turkey relationship, but the relationship was much more seriously strained over the two countries' strategy in Syria. Analysing the Syrian question does not fall under the remit of the present paper, however the situation in Syria influences US and Russian (as will be discussed below) policy and strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Therefore, a brief reference to Syria is necessary:

Isolated instances pinpointing to problems between Turkey and its Western allies already manifested themselves back at the time of the Iraq War, when the Turkish Parliament refused to let US troops cross over the border into Iraq. Concerning Syria, Turkey and the US clashed over the latter's engagement in the country, specifically over Washington's policy towards and relationship with the Kurds.

Since 2018, the Turkish-American agreement over the so-called Manbij Roadmap (an agreement for the future of the city of Manbij in Northern Syria) is in a stalemate. US President Donald Trump's announcement in December 2018 to withdraw American troops from Syria even further complicated the situation. Just after Ankara's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence missile system US Syria, envoy James Jeffrey arrived in Turkey for July 22- 23 meetings to make progress in the plans for the proposed safe zone and the Manbij Roadmap. However, the first round of talks ended unsuccessful according to Turkish officials with new talks scheduled for next week. Turkey is threatening with a unilateral military action east of the Euphrates River to drive out the terrorist-designated Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from Manbij and to establish a militarily protected safe zone if its security concerns are not met. The area shall be entirely cleansed from YPG forces and replaced and protected by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Turkish-allied so-called National Army. With this, Ankara aims at reshuffling the cards and diversifying its options for the political transition process ahead. If the US does not relent, Turkey will need to get on common grounds with Russia concerning a safe zone in northeast Syria. However, with Moscow too, Ankara is at odds, mainly on Idlib and the implementation of the Sochi agreement from September 2018. Nevertheless, Ankara's frustration with Washington pushed Turkey increasingly into the arms of Moscow. However, being dependent on the US on the safe zone, Turkey plays a risky gamble. Placing everything on the card of maximum pressure on

⁴² The Economist, 30/11/17, Turkey's \$2bn Arms Deal with Russia Faces Hurdles and Possible Sanctions, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/11/30/turkeys-2bn-arms-deal-with-russia-faces-hurdles-and-possible-sanctions>

Washington, Turkey might bet on the wrong horse since Russia, too, might leave Turkey empty handed concerning concessions on Syria.⁴³

3.1.3. OPTIONS AND SOLUTIONS

We referred in the above paragraphs under 3.1., 3.1.1 and 3.1.2. to some fundamental characteristics of US presence in the Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean in particular and some key current problems, such as a retreat from the positions compared to those held in the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War era, the difference of approach on certain issues between NATO partners, challenges posed by various types of new threats like jihadism and Islamic terrorism and the particularly complex problem of the divergence of interests with a traditional, important US ally such as Turkey. We will now consider available or suggested options and solutions followed by the US to address these issues.

The US, both alone and as a member of NATO, maintains a strong military, particularly naval, presence in the Mediterranean. The Sixth US Fleet has a permanent presence in the wider area of the Mediterranean with a stated mission of conducting “the full range of Maritime Operations and Theater Security Cooperation missions, in concert with coalition, joint, interagency, and other parties, in order to advance security and stability in Europe and Africa.”⁴⁴ However, as mentioned above, there was a feeling, in the last decade or so, that US presence in the Mediterranean was not as strong as before. But, in recent years there was a reversal to this trend. In 2018, the deployment of the aircraft carrier USS *Harry S Truman* accompanied by seven heavily armed escort ships to the Eastern Mediterranean to join locally-based air and sea units was seen as a message of intent to Syria and Russia.⁴⁵ More recently, this presence has been further upgraded, compared to the recent past. As a US military journal observes, on 4 June 2019 – incidentally summing up some of the more salient points of the present paper so far - “as tensions rise in the Black Sea to its north and Persian Gulf to the southeast, the Eastern Mediterranean is often an afterthought for American defense planning, despite its geostrategic importance as a crossroads between Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. For the first time since 2016, the US Navy recently deployed two Nimitz-class aircraft carriers to the region in April. This was an important signal to America’s partners and

⁴³ Nuray Atmaca, Safe Zones and Devil in Details: Turkey is Running Out of Options, NATO Defense College Foundation Paper, 26/7/19, <http://www.natofoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NDCF-Atmaca-Paper-260719-1.pdf>

⁴⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Sixth_Fleet

⁴⁵ Katrina Manson, David Bond, US Naval Presence off Syria Sends Clear Signal, Financial Times, 13/4/18, <https://www.ft.com/content/4b9d3c14-3f16-11e8-b7e0-52972418fec4>

adversaries, but more needs to be done to strengthen the US Navy's presence in these increasingly contested waters."⁴⁶

Another, major asset for the US is the Navy Support Activity (NSA) Souda Bay, a naval base conceded to the US by Greece in 1980. This base provides forward deployment opportunities for the Sixth Fleet and support joint US Navy/ Air Force reconnaissance missions as well as air refueling. The base can host a permanently based aircraft carrier, destroyers and amphibious ships.⁴⁷ It has been argued that, "Souda Bay is one of the few locations capable of hosting a permanently based aircraft in the Eastern Mediterranean along with destroyers and amphibious ships that would allow for quicker and cost effective responses in the Middle East, North Africa and Persian Gulf. In addition, NATO Maritime Interdiction Operations Training Center at Souda Bay serves as a "One Stop Shop" in the area by educating maritime law enforcement. The NATO Missile Firing Installation is located nearby, serving as the only place in Europe where missiles can be test fired, and is capable of hosting Marine battalions when forces are needed in the region."⁴⁸

Such assets give the US the potential ability to pursue policies that will reinforce its defence capabilities in the region and develop, if necessary alternative assets similar to those that Turkey provides if the divergence of US – Turkish interests continues. Some of these policies must have predominantly political characteristics and scope, for instance policies aiming at agreeing on a common policy on Syria, exploring potential of developing or supporting trilateral co-operation schemes in the region in the fields of energy. Energy and energy security issues do not fall immediately under the scope of this paper but US interest in supporting and participating in the trilateral Greek-Cypriot-Israeli co-operation scheme on energy is growing. This was manifested by the attendance of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the relevant meeting held in Jerusalem in March 2019 due to US interest to participate and discuss on energy and security issues in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁹

Other policies will be predominantly military in nature. Such options for the US could include:

- Identifying and building up complementary strategic assets as a guarantee against further deteriorations of relations with Turkey: One example of such an option would be exploring the expansion of basing rights in Souda as an

⁴⁶ DefenseOne, The Eastern Mediterranean Needs More US Warships, 4/6/19, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/06/eastern-mediterranean-needs-more-us-warships/157440/>

⁴⁷ John B. Alterman et al, *ibid*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Dr. Daniel Goure, Souda Bay: NATO's Military Gem in the Eastern Mediterranean, Lexington Institute, March 2016, <https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/souda-bay-natos-military-gem-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>

⁴⁹ Naftemporiki, 15//3/19 <https://www.naftemporiki.gr/story/1454352/ipa-epibebaionei-ti-summetoxi-stin-trimeri-elladas-kuprou-israil>

alternative to Turkish facilities. Souda's capabilities were discussed immediately above. And there are indications, at the time of writing, that the US are actually seriously considering this option. According to reports in the Greek media, in late August 2019, Athens and Washington are engaged in negotiations with the aim of upgrading their "Mutual Defense Co-operation Agreement" (MDCA), first signed in 1990, by the end of 2019. A key element of such an upgrading will reportedly be a new framework of operation of the Souda installations, described as the core of US military presence in Greece but also of other military installations in Thessaly (Larissa, for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, UAVs or "drones") and Thrace (the port of Alexandroupolis for the transport of US or NATO troops towards Central Europe, in the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative).⁵⁰ Additional options for the US, apart from Souda or other installations in Greece, could include the possibility of shifting resources to the Naval Air Station (military base) of Sigonella in Sicily.⁵¹

- Developing a more robust naval presence in the region by sharing assets with key European partners, while expanding multilateral naval exercises: Increasing US Navy ship visits to Eastern Mediterranean ports to demonstrate US presence and seek to synchronise naval deployments with those of other, major NATO naval powers such as the United Kingdom, France or Italy.⁵² Additionally expanding multilateral naval exercises in order to demonstrate US presence and build capacity among allies.
- Encouraging NATO to identify and develop a clearer mission and priorities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Currently, NATO is conducting naval operations in the region, such as Operation Sea Guardian, launched in 2016 as a flexible operation, aiming at enhancing maritime security building and maritime situational awareness. It was also designed to provide support to maritime, counter-terrorism. Part of its mandate is supporting the EU-designed Operation Sophia in the Central Mediterranean, an operation connected to information-sharing and logistics support around the issue of migration. Also, since February 2016, NATO ships have started patrolling the Aegean Sea in order to help international and EU authorities deal with the refugee crisis and the illegal immigration, through surveillance monitoring and reconnaissance.⁵³ However, missions of such scope are not enough to deal with the rising security challenges of the region, as described above. As early as 2005, NATO officials recognized that "in the years to come, the evolution of the Middle East will affect Euro-Atlantic security more than the development of any other region."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ See extensive report on Souda and a potential new Greek-US MDCA, Angelos Athanasopoulos, *To Vima tis Kyriakis*, 18/8/19, pp. A3-A5 and also, Aristotelia Peloni, *Kathimerini*, p. 4, 22/8/19.

⁵¹ John B. Alterman et al, *ibid*, p. 56.

⁵² John B. Alterman, Kathleen Hicks, *Federated Defense in the Middle East*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, September 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150909_Alterman_FederatedDefMiddleEast_Web.pdf

⁵³ NATO's Maritime Activities, NATO official website, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_70759.htm

⁵⁴ John B. Alterman et al, *ibid*, p. 59.

NATO must now adapt its role and deployment in the region to meet emerging risks.

3.2. RUSSIAN POLITICAL AND MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND OPTIONS TO ACHIEVE THEM

Shifting our focus to Russia, as discussed under 1. and 2. above, successive Russian governments have sought to demonstrate their presence the region. As discussed above, concerning our “indicator countries”, with Greece and Italy both NATO allies and EU members, Turkey remains a country which, despite being a NATO member, has potentially common interests with Russia and, together with Iran, is among the Middle East’s important actors. It makes sense for Russia to maintain strong relations and, in some areas, enter into partnerships with them. However, Russia’s and Turkey’s strategic interests are likely to remain very different, therefore in all probability Russia could, at best, hope for only situational alliances with countries such as Turkey or Iran. More generally, as has been the case in the past, maintaining a close relationship with Turkey will continue to be of strategic importance to Russia given the fact that Turkey has both a presence and influence in the Caucasus and controls the Black Sea straits.⁵⁵ Aspects of the Russo-Turco-Syrian relationship will be discussed below, under 3.2.1.

Concerning the military side of Russian presence globally, it has been argued that it is based on a strategy demonstrating Russia’s playing a prominent role on the international stage more widely. The Russian term for this attitude is *derzhavnost* and can be translated literally as “stateness” or more freely as “great-powerness”⁵⁶. This concept of *derzhavnost* led Russia to pursue a tradition of presence, particularly naval presence, in the Eastern Mediterranean. Already in 1964, the Soviet Navy formed the 5th Eskadra (squadron) in the Mediterranean. Its aim was to maintain maritime forward presence in an area occupying one of the maritime approaches to Russia. A Russian naval presence in this particular region was seen as a necessity for the protection of one of the country’s most vital economic and strategic arteries - the Turkish straits leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, in the event that someone tried to block them. As observed “it was axiomatic thus to Tsarist (and later to Soviet) strategic planners that a number of their warships needed to be out of the Black

⁵⁵ For a wider discussion on Russia’s global foreign policy strategy, see Dmitri Trenin, *It’s Time to Rethink Russia’s Foreign Policy Strategy*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 25/4/19, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/78990>

⁵⁶ Rod Thornton, *ibid*, p. 3.

Sea and operating forward in the Eastern Mediterranean”.⁵⁷ During the 1990s, the under-funded, post-Cold War Russian Navy was in no position to continue to maintain its Eastern Mediterranean presence. This situation changed after 2008, when the Russian military’s post-2008 military upgrade programme, started to improve the situation of its navy. “The fleet began to receive new warships and submarines; and training-time, the morale of personnel, and operational deployability have all increased. Putin then began ... to express an interest in using elements of this improved fleet once more in the Mediterranean. In February 2012 ... Putin felt he could boldly aver that the Russian Navy had by now ‘resumed its presence ... in the Mediterranean’”⁵⁸.

According to the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, published in July 2015, Russia would ensure a sufficient naval presence in the region on a permanent basis. Irrespective of whether “permanent “ should be interpreted to mean “forever” or “long term”, the doctrine makes it clear that Russia is committed to stay in the region.⁵⁹

Currently, Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean consists of the occasional presence there of the two largest ships in the Russian Navy and a flotilla numbering about 15 vessels. It has been argued that this presence should not just be seen in absolute terms but also in relation to the - until recently - diminishing activity there of the US Navy. During the Cold War, such arguments go, the size of the Sixth US Fleet meant that the American influence and power in the region was considerable. Now, as Washington made its ‘turn to Asia’ this fleet’s strength has been radically diminished as most of its assets have been redeployed to the Pacific.⁶⁰

The two big ships, sent in 2016 to the waters around Syria, were the Russian Navy’s only aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov* and the world’s largest, non-carrier, warship, the 25,000-tonne nuclear-powered battle cruiser, *Petr Velikii*. These two ships are powerful but they were not sent in the region because they could make any operational differences in theatres such as Syria but because they could confer prestige and project the image of Russia as an important naval power in the region.⁶¹

Strategically and militarily, the presence of the 15-ship flotilla is more important. Given the perceived threat from PGS (discussed under 2.1. and 2.2. above), it would be natural for Russia to mirror the threat, i.e. establish platforms on warships armed with non-nuclear strategic weapons that could target Western/NATO targets. This is the logic explaining the presence of the Russian

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶¹ For a detailed discussion on the operational capabilities and problems in the action of these two Russian ships, see Rod Thornton, *ibid*, pp. 11-13.

Eastern Mediterranean flotilla, whose ships can carry the appropriate missiles not only in regard to any possible use of PGS but also to any operational activities contemplated against Russian forces in any future conflict.⁶² This decision is also linked to the presence of Russia in Syria and the interests it wants to protect there, interests linked to both the region of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

3.2.1. SYRIA

As already mentioned above, under 2.2., Syria is not a top foreign policy priority for Russia, however it remains a crucial partner in the Middle East, being an “anchor” for Moscow in the region already since the Cold War era. Syria’s importance has increased in recent years due to its ongoing destabilisation and increased activity of the so-called Islamic State (IS). In very broad lines, the most important objectives of Russia’s policy in Syria include: supporting its main ally in the Arab World, limiting US superpower status and asserting Russia’s role as world power, stabilising the situation in the Middle East to help maintaining stability in the North Caucasus and making Russians proud of their country – in the framework of the concept of *derzhavnost* discussed above.⁶³

Thus, there are a number of reasons for why Russia committed forces to Syria, some related to strengthening the *impression* of Russian military power and some related to actually increasing Russian military power. So far as the latter objective is concerned, one of the most significant results was the setting up of what is called an “anti-access and area denial area” or “A2/AD bubble”.⁶⁴ In recent years, the Russian military have created a number of such A2/AD bubbles at various points near its borders. They consist of a layered system of defences and designed as a protective measure in order to prevent in times of conflict the ingress into Russian territory of any adversaries’ aircraft, ships, submarines, drones and missiles via a series of radar-linked to anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile batteries. The bubble established furthest from Russia itself is the one based in Syria. It includes missile systems and other weapons based at Tartus and Hmeimim. Vessels offshore are also part of the bubble. A continuous Russian naval presence is maintained in the Eastern Mediterranean with the flotilla of smaller vessels and the addition of bigger vessels, according to the occasion, like *Slava* class guided missiles cruisers. These cruisers carry the naval version of the S-300 anti-aircraft missiles.⁶⁵ This bubble can, on the one hand, be seen as a forward means of protecting ingress from the Mediterranean area into Russia itself. On the other hand, it allows Russia to effectively control the

⁶² Ibid, p. 17.

⁶³ Agata Włodkowska-Bagan, Syria in Russia’s Foreign Policy in the 21st Century, *Teka Kom. Politol. Stos. Miedzynar.* – OL PAN, 2017, 12/1, pp. 27 – 40, where the issue is presented at length. <https://journals.umcs.pl/teka/article/view/7844>

⁶⁴ Rod Thornton, The Russian Military Commitment in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, *The RUSI Journal*, 163:4, pp. 34-35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2018.1529892>

⁶⁵ Rod Thornton, *ibid*, p. 35.

movements of any aircraft or ships in the Eastern Mediterranean or the Levant. It has been argued by a Western source that if fully realised this bubble “would put Western access to the Suez Canal, the Black Sea and the resource-rich eastern Mediterranean at the mercy of an increasingly aggressive Russian regime”.⁶⁶ Thus, Russian involvement in Syria, from the military point of view and through the A2/AD bubble, gives it the opportunity to protect both Russia itself and Russian interests abroad.

This Russian presence in Syria is of concern to Turkey. As already discussed above, relations between Russia and Turkey are presently good and the two countries, and their powerful leaders, came closer as Turkey’s policy diverges from that of Washington and other NATO allies and Russia is seeking allies in the region. There is no guarantee, however, that this level of relationship can be maintained in the future. The presence of a Russian A2/AD bubble in Syria and the one established in Crimea since its annexation by Moscow in 2014 is a source of concern for Ankara: Russia could take advantage of this dual presence in the future to exercise both diplomatic and military pressure over Ankara in both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean region. For its part, Russia would want to be in a position to balance out the strategic influence that Turkey can bring to bear given its control over the Bosphorus Strait. Any closing of the Strait could produce a severe stifling effect on Moscow’s position in the Mediterranean and Syria. At the very least, the Russian military’s logistic chain running from the Black Sea to Syrian ports would be severely curtailed.⁶⁷

Putin announced the withdrawal of a significant part of Russian forces from Syria in December 2017 on the grounds that the ISIS forces in Syria were defeated. As a matter of fact the war in Syria was not over yet and Russian presence in the area continued. In any case, at the time of writing, Syrian government forces are pressing opposition fighters to withdraw from key towns in the Idlib province at a government offensive to retake the country’s last major rebel stronghold. The opposing armies are rebels against Russian-backed pro-Assad forces.⁶⁸ However, with ISIS forces defeated and rebels about to be finally defeated too, the war seems to draw to its close. Russia will probably reduce its army personnel and wider presence in Syria. But, as per the preceding analysis, there are serious political and military strategy-related reasons for Russia not to terminate its presence in Syria.

The strongest indication towards such a direction is that the Russian naval base at Tartus is to be considerably upgraded. The base is considered to be a small-

⁶⁶ Jonathan Altman, Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk, Naval War College Review, Vol. 69, No. 1, Winter 2016, p.1. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1119&context=nwc-review>

⁶⁷ Rod Thornton, *ibid*, p. 35.

⁶⁸ Syria’s War: Rebels Withdraw from Idlib’s Khan Sheikhoun, Al Jazeera, 21/8/19, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/syria-war-armed-rebels-withdraw-idlib-khan-shaikhoun-190820063255105.html>

size one and has berths only for medium-sized Russian warships. But, capacity will be increased after a new, 49-year old lease agreement between Russia and Syria. New piers will be built, to create space for 11 medium-sized ships to dock simultaneously, onshore facilities will be expanded and the agreement will also allow for nuclear-powered ships to use Tartus.⁶⁹

These are indications that Russia's military presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean more widely will continue for a long time, will indeed be "permanent". The benefits for Russia, for the Russian military and for Putin himself are obvious. Russia will reap benefits by showing its commitment to its allies. Additionally, even if the war in Syria comes to an end, low-level conflict in the region is likely to continue. Land units and naval assets operating in the Eastern Mediterranean will be gaining valuable experience in the process. Furthermore, the ability to create and maintain the A2/AD bubble in the Eastern Mediterranean seems essential to both diplomatic and military Russian interests.

The continued Russian presence will satisfy the traditional Russian desire for being a great world power, for exhibiting *derzhavnost*, influencing developments regionally in such an important geographical area as the Mediterranean. Such a presence and an exhibition of power serves not only Russian interests but the interests of President Putin himself. Russian military presence in the region means that he can stress not just to the international community but to his own people that Russia matters and that its leader matters too.⁷⁰

Before proceeding with the Conclusion, it might be of use, in the sake of brevity and clarity, to sum up the strategic interests of the two countries under discussion, the US and Russia and their options and means to achieve them in the region, in the form of a table.

3.2.2. SITUATION IN SYRIA, IN LATE 2019

In early October 2019, as the present paper was in final submission stage, Turkish President Erdogan called US President Trump to inform him that Turkey was preparing an invasion in Northern Syria, to expel SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces, a largely Kurdish militia) from the region. Turkey regards SDF as a terrorist organisation due to its links with PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party in Turkey. President Trump ordered all US troops located in northern Syria, to withdraw, on 5 October. On 9 October, Turkey launched operation "Peace Spring" ordering Turkish military forces, supported by a local militia, the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), to attack northern Syria in order to destroy and remove all Kurdish forces located there, in a 30km-deep "safe zone". The operation was widely condemned by the EU, Iran, Israel, the UK, the Arab League as well as by circles within the US who opposed Trump's decision, believing that the decision

⁶⁹ Tom Parfitt, Putin Expands Naval Presence in the Mediterranean, The Times, 13/12/17, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-expands-naval-presence-in-the-mediterranean-hq3rhhdh>

⁷⁰ Rod Thornton, *ibid*, p. 37.

to remove US forces from the area, was an approval to Erdogan to attack and destroy the Kurds and thus detrimental to US credibility in the region and against US interests in the fight against ISIL.

Developments in the region are still ongoing, at the time of writing, and have not finally crystallised. However, in the latest developments in the region, on 17 October US Vice President Pence announced that US and Turkey agreed on a ceasefire for five days in return for a complete withdrawal by the SDF from the “safe zone”. And, on 22 October, Russian President Putin and President Erdogan reached agreement to extend the ceasefire for 150 additional hours to allow SDF to move 30 km away from the border area.

As several journalistic observers noted, what can be seen in Syria today is that the US prefer to withdraw from the region not considering the conflicts there as relative to their national security. They also seem to lose credibility after their behaviour towards the Kurds. But, arguably, they have managed to win over Turkey as an important regional ally, in exchange for their support for Operation Peace Spring. In Syria, Assad is stabilized, The Kurds lose any immediate prospects for independence, Putin is able to assert Russia’s role in the region as regards both its military presence and its ability to mediate. Erdogan seems to ensure gains as well, even if more limited than he originally envisaged. Assad secured both the territorial integrity of Syria and the survival of its regime.⁷¹

4. TABLE, COMPARING STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

	STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN REGION	OPTIONS & MEANS
US	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintaining favourable balance of power for US. - Achieving stability by containing Russia and China. - Strengthening NATO presence. - Formulating coalitions. - Using the region for developing PGS strategy (chiefly against Russia). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintaining a strong, unified NATO alliance and identifying a clear mission in the region. - Dealing with specific problematic issues, e.g. Turkey. - Developing an energy security policy with regional allies/partners (Greece, Cyprus, Israel etc.) - Maintaining a strong

⁷¹ See indicatively, “In Syria, Russia is pleased to fill an American void”. Hubbard Ben, Troianovski Anton, Gall Carlotta, Kingsley Patrick, New York Times, Middle East section, October 17, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/world/middleeast/kurds-syria-turkey.html>

		naval presence. - Making better use of base facilities (Souda).
RUSSIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Countering Western efforts for encirclement/containment or threats for regime change in Russia itself. - Undermining regional US threats by forming alliances. - Countering PGS strategy by creating bases regionally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building local alliances, even if not strategic (Turkey). - Maintaining a strong, particularly naval, presence in the region, “<i>derzhavnost</i>”. - Forming and maintaining alliance with Syria. - Establishing permanent bases in the region (Tartus).

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout its history, the Mediterranean was the theatre of great power activity and clash of interests. After the end of World War II (WWII), the dominant non-regional powers who were strongly involved in the region, trying to shape developments to suit their own interests were the US and Russia.

After the end of the Cold War and with Russia in decline, the US became the undisputed dominant power both in the world and in the region. Even today, a comparison between the two countries demonstrates that the US is by far more powerful militarily than Russia, with a defence budget of about \$ 693 billion, ranking first in the world, compared to Russia’s estimated \$ 61 billion and ranking sixth.⁷²

⁷² See, among others, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures or the US site National Priorities Project, <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/campaigns/us-military-spending-vs-world/>. Other sources maintain that actual US spending, including some not obvious components such as cyber security or energy rise up the figure to about \$ 989 billion. See, for instance, The Balance, US Military Budget, Its Components, Challenges and Growth, 22/4/19, <https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-military-budget-components-challenges-growth-3306320>

However, in recent years, as discussed at various points above, the US emerges from a period of comparative strategic atrophy, with its comparative military advantage eroding. For the US, the dominant world power, challenges abound. The post-WWII international order, encapsulated in organisations such as UN, NATO and to an extent the EU, is still in place, resilient but weakening. There are differences and antagonisms between NATO and EU partners and powers like Russia seek to take advantage of this situation and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to their favour.

From the US point of view, the country is facing increasing global disorder, in a complex and volatile international environment where inter-state strategic competition and not terrorism is now the primary concern.⁷³ In such an environment, Russia, along with China, Iran, North Korea and the terrorist challenges that remain after the defeat of ISIS, come up as the main challenges.

Militarily, the US had enjoyed uncontested or dominant superiority for decades, in every operating domain. In the Mediterranean, as elsewhere, the US could deploy their forces when they wanted, alone or in alliance with other powers, and operate how they wanted. Today every domain is contested. Faced with this situation, in the Mediterranean, the US is proceeding to a number of moves to reassert its military pre-eminence and ensure the balance of power, military and otherwise, remains in its favour.

As we saw above, these moves include increasing US naval presence in the Mediterranean, by deploying more vessels and increasing visits to Mediterranean ports, engaging NATO in developing a clearer mission and priorities. Concerning NATO in particular, the US seem to follow a policy of encouraging synergies between the EU and NATO, particularly in the South of Europe (i.e. at or near the Mediterranean) in order to address “the arc of instability building on ANTO’s periphery”⁷⁴. At the same time, of course, the US press their European NATO allies to fulfill their commitments to increase defence spending, so that the US can cut down on spending.

Irrespective of their NATO policy, US know that it is crucial to deepen their cooperation with the EU or regional countries on warning, presence and response on Europe’s southern periphery, participate in regional alliance schemes like the trilateral Greece-Israel-Cyprus one and finding ways to address consequences of the policy divergence with Turkey which, contrary to the past can turn both towards the US or towards Russia, or indeed China. More widely, the US appears to be realising that its withdrawal from the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East region in recent years contributed to the destabilisation of the region and gave room to powers hostile to the US with a number of ramifications negatively influencing American military and energy

⁷³ See, Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, *ibid*.

⁷⁴ Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, *ibid*.

security interests. Energy security was outside the scope of the present paper but recent energy discoveries off Israel, Egypt and Cyprus are already leading to regional rivalries, for instance between NATO partners Greece and Turkey and EU member Cyprus and could generate new ones. With the Syria war nearing its conclusion, Assad may look to the Eastern Mediterranean to boost trade revenues and energy resources as he works to rebuild his country and consolidate his authority there. Other, related developments may occur elsewhere in the region, with other actors who are not Mediterranean countries but could influence developments there against US interests. Iran is a case in point as recent incidents concerning the Iranian tanker *Adrian Darya 1* indicate.⁷⁵

Turning to Russia, one could argue that, like the US, it had the objective of finding a way to “return” to the region after years of disengagement. Unlike the US, however, Russia “returned” quickly, and its presence showed demonstrable benefits in a relatively short period.

Russia re-established its presence in the region, first in Syria, where it contributed greatly to the survival of the Assad regime and, subsequently its prevalence. Russia’s assistance was not only military, as Russia played an important role in averting condemnation of various Assad actions by the United Nations throughout the 2011-2018 period – as did China⁷⁶. Militarily, Russia’s involvement was of paramount importance to Assad who only controlled some 20% of the ground on Syria before the start of Russian involvement in 2015 and is now practically in

control of the whole country.⁷⁷ As noted in a European Parliament research paper “the ... probable survival of the Assad regime in Syria brings Russia, its main international backer, various benefits. In January 2018, Russia signed an energy cooperation agreement giving it exclusive rights to rebuild the Syrian oil and gas sector, with potential huge profits for the Russian companies involved. From a military perspective, Russia gets to keep its Tartus naval base and the more recently added Latakia airbase, its only military facilities outside the former Soviet Union. Tartus is of strategic importance, as it enables Russian ships to stay in the Mediterranean without having to return to Russia for servicing... However, the biggest gains for Russia are geopolitical. Moscow has managed to impose its vision of Syria's future, ignoring Western demands for Assad to step down... Russia's status as the dominant player in Syria is a huge boost for its influence

⁷⁵ See, for instance, The Wall Street Journal, *Freed Iranian Tanker’s Journey to Greece Hits Stumbling Blocs*, 24/8/19, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/freed-iranian-tankers-journey-to-greece-hits-stumbling-blocks-11566412542>

⁷⁶ See indicatively, BBC News, *Syria War: Russia and China veto sanctions*, 28/2/17, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39116854>

⁷⁷ Martin Russell, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), *Russia in the Middle East*, Briefing Paper, November 2018, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630293_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630293/EPRS_BRI(2018)630293_EN.pdf)

not only in Syria's neighbourhood, but also in the wider Middle East/North Africa region.”⁷⁸

Russia also managed, after initial setbacks to establish a good relationship with Turkey. The two Presidents, Putin and Erdogan, seem to have developed a relationship built on trust that occasional frictions in Syria did not threaten. Economic and trade relation and tourism are positive, and Russia recently facilitated visa regulations for certain types of Turkish travellers to and from Russia. Other regional powers, for instance Israel and Saudi Arabia, who have good relations with the US, simultaneously cultivate good relations with Russia.

Russia's presence in the region is not based on tactical considerations or short-term interests that Moscow wants to defend. It is part of a long-term strategy, serving permanent Russian interests in the region, as discussed at length above and the Russian ideological and political concept of *derzhavnost*. Russia took advantage of gaps left by the US and, apart from its military presence, created a network of points of influence of smaller or greater importance, with a number of regional actors.

At the moment, the US and its allies have the dominant position in the sensitive and strategically important region of the Mediterranean, but Russia made some impressive gains. As other actors, like China, are gradually entering this stage, the contest and its future outcome remains an open-ended process.

As regards the, still fluid and developing, results of the aftermath of the Turkish “Peace Spring” Operation in Northern Syria, they seem to confirm the above conclusion. The US appear interested in the region but chiefly in the sense of safeguarding their alliance with Turkey, while leaving significant space to Russia to enhance its role in both parts of Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Middle East region. By agreeing with Erdogan on “Peace Spring” and removing their troops the US indicated that they were willing to leave an open space or a vacuum there. Russia, as well as other regional actors like Syria, took advantage of this opportunity in the specific case. As developments are still ongoing questions such as whether the US have now addressed their problems with Turkey, whether they will ultimately withdraw completely from the region, whether Russia's role will further be enhanced etc. must essentially be answered in the future.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

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NOTE: All Greek texts were translated into English by the author.

