CARNEGIE EUROPE

JUNE 2021

Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe

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In the past decade, Russia has reinforced its posture in and around the Mediterranean—from the Levant to North Africa and, in multiple ways, vis-à-vis Turkey. Through its recent actions, Russia's priorities in the region have revolved around four main axes: boosting its presence in the energy sector; deploying a permanent military force in Syria and fighting Islamist extremism; partnering with Turkey for Russia's wider strategic goals; and making the Russian military presence in the region more efficient through a combination of small bases and military commuting.

In these domains, Russia's stance creates new challenges for NATO and the EU, especially considering the development of permanent bases in Syria, Libya, and Sudan and Russia's involvement in Turkey's missile defense. These implications go far beyond the Mediterranean Basin proper and also concern the Black Sea, Western Europe, and Africa.

When assessed against Russia's prevailing belief that NATO intends to encircle the country, Moscow's activities in the Mediterranean combine a defensive posture with a renewed ambition to assert its presence on the global stage. NATO and its members should seize the opportunity of a revived transatlantic relationship to respond more robustly in several areas.

The developments surveyed in this article are based on open-source information. This analysis is not an attempt to theorize Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean but an empirical effort to make sense of a significant accumulation of actions in different fields.

POLICY PRIORITIES EMERGING FROM RUSSIAN ACTIONS

The actions taken by Russia in and around the Mediterranean are the country's instruments of choice for competing with the EU and NATO on their southern flank. Moscow's policies benefit from a traditionally strong energy sector and recently revitalized armed forces, but they suffer from a limited financial capacity to intervene outside these two sectors.

Energy Politics

Energy politics has long been a central part of Russia's geopolitical influence in the world. The country's foreign ministry stated in 2013 that Russia's goal in the field of energy was to "[strengthen] its strategic partnership with major producers of energy resources while actively promoting dialogue with consumers and transit countries."

Analysts have long argued that energy is a major driver of Moscow's policies in the region. According to one expert, "Russia has multiple reasons to intervene in the Eastern Mediterranean. . . . Among its main regional interests . . . is increasing world energy prices. The Russian economy is largely the business of exporting oil and gas. This has been true for decades."

The Mediterranean has indeed been a major focus of this strategy, alongside other components such as reducing Moscow's reliance on Ukraine for gas supplies to Western Europe, thwarting the EU's energy diversification strategy, and creating a new gas corridor toward southeastern Europe via the Turk Stream gas pipeline.

Part of Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean is to get a foothold in countries where new energy developments are taking place. In Egypt, Russia bought from Italy's Eni a 30 percent stake in the Zohr offshore gas field, a major gas-producing field in the Eastern Mediterranean. In Lebanon, Russia's Novatek has acquired 20 percent of a gas-exploration joint venture of which Italy's Eni and France's Total own 40 percent each. While few developments have taken place in Syria due to the ongoing civil war there, Russia is involved in several oil and gas projects in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In Algeria, Gazprom is involved in hydrocarbon exploration. But it is in Libya that Russia has had the highest stakes since the era of former leader Muammar Qaddafi. Moscow's recent military support for the forces of General Khalifa Haftar in the east and south of the country and the red line from Sirte to Al Jufrah drawn by Russian forces and proxies in 2020 have an important energy aspect as much as a strategic dimension.

As for Turkey, where Moscow has long been the major gas supplier, the country's energy dependence on Russia has been boosted by the 2020 entry into service of the Turk Stream pipeline, which feeds Turkey and southeastern Europe, and by the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, due to enter into service in 2023 under Russian ownership and operational control. While Turkey has reduced its dependence on its agreements with Moscow, Russia is likely to remain an important player in the country's energy sector.

This being said, Russia's use of energy politics for foreign policy purposes has its challenges. The Russian economy relies heavily on energy income, and therefore state resources depend on fluctuations in energy prices. Trade in liquefied natural gas is substantially transforming energy markets worldwide, while the coronavirus-induced recession will result in a lasting drop in energy demand in Western European countries, as will the greening of their economies. And Russia is facing strong competition from Iran and the Gulf kingdoms as major oil and gas producers.

All things considered, Russia's energy politics will likely remain a crucial component of the country's presence on the world stage, in particular in the Mediterranean. But these policies will have to keep evolving in response to a fast-changing environment in the gas sector and political developments such as the stabilization and reconstruction process in Libya.

A Permanent, Multipurpose Deployment in Syria

Syria has long been a military client of Russia and, previously, the Soviet Union, especially during the 1971–2000 presidency of Hafez al-Assad. The relationship took on a new dimension after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011 and the gradual disengagement of the United States from the Middle East.

The first of Russia's military objectives in Syria after its September 2015 intervention was to rescue the army of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from the brink. Moscow did just that, with an implied political message reminding Western leaders that Russia also has friends, that it cares about them, and that it will not allow them to be ousted at will by Western powers. This attitude mirrored Moscow's strong disapproval of Western actions against Qaddafi in Libya in 2011—because in its view the West exceeded the mandate authorized by the UN Security Council, because Russia lost an ally and a client, and out of fear that the West could in future organize a color revolution in Russia.

Russia's second objective was to establish a forward military base in the Middle East. Moscow swiftly transformed the Syrian civilian airport of Latakia into an efficient—if rustic by U.S. standards—air force base renamed Hmeimim and substantially increased the use of its naval facility in Tartus. This allowed Russia to launch intensive air campaigns, including against rebels threatening to cut off vital road links between Latakia and Aleppo as well as between Damascus and Aleppo. As the Russian defense minister announced in December 2017, these two bases were there to stay and grow, consistent with Moscow's long-term objectives in the region and vis-à-vis NATO.

Russia's military intervention in Syria served this wider geopolitical objective by demonstrating that Moscow possessed enough military might to respond swiftly to a crisis in accordance with its own interests and independently of other major powers. In addition, Russia deployed much more powerful military assets in Syria than needed to fight an insurgency, with an arsenal that comprised S-400 missiles, cruise missiles launched from the air and from ships in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas, and an air interdiction policy over parts of Syria. To carry out this military expedition, Russia set up a massive maritime resupply mission via the Turkish Straits, dubbed by some the Tartus Express.

Russia's intervention in Syria has demonstrated Moscow's substantially enhanced capacity to project power. Access to the Mediterranean by sea and air was no constraint for Russian forces when such access corresponded to a political and military priority. Well beyond rescuing the Assad regime, Russia's strategic priority was to beef up its buffer zone against NATO on the country's southern flank. Today, this priority is still a guiding principle of Russia's policy in the Mediterranean and is likely to remain valid for the foreseeable future.

Russia's demonstration of its operational capabilities also served to showcase its military industry in the Middle East and the Gulf, where arms sales are highly competitive. Being able to prove the combat performance of weapons systems such as fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, cruise missiles, and electronic warfare is a powerful commercial argument for Russia's military industry, as illustrated by Moscow's sale of Su-35 fighter jets to Egypt.

Part of the reason for the intervention in Syria was that Russian authorities have long been wary of Islamist terrorism at home, especially in or from Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Muslim enclaves in Russia's heartland. Paradoxically, the involvement of substantial numbers of Russian Muslims with the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq has reduced the risk of Islamist extremism at home. Moscow's lasting priority is most likely to prevent the return of these fighters to Russian territory.

In addition, Russia's diplomatic mediation to minimize the consequences of a major chemical attack by the Assad regime in 2013 is considered to have worked to the benefit of both Damascus and Moscow. As one analyst noted, "the role played by Russia, sparing the Syrian regime from a military operation by hesitant Western powers, was considered a great victory of [Russian] diplomacy which made the country an important actor in the Middle East."

Russia's Relationship With Turkey

In implementing its energy strategy in Europe and its politico-military strategy in Syria, Russia needed to establish close cooperation with Turkey. But the relationship between Moscow and Ankara took on other dimensions, too.

The Turk Stream pipeline—together with the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines linking Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea—served to bypass Ukraine and hence keep Moscow's dominance over gas supplies to Western Europe. This deprived the Ukrainian government of transit fees and reduced the attractiveness of pipelines that supply Central Asian gas to Europe via Turkey.

In Syria, the Russia-Turkey relationship is more challenging because, in principle, the two countries have opposite political objectives. Moscow aims at restoring the full control of the Assad regime over Syrian territory, while Ankara supports Assad's ouster.

Yet, various diplomatic contacts since 2016 as well as the Astana Process since 2017 and the 2019 Sochi Agreement have led to Moscow's consent to several Turkish military operations on Syrian territory: Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, Operation Peace Spring in 2019, and Operation Spring Shield in 2020. Relations developed amid some serious military incidents, such as the November 2015 downing of a Russian aircraft by the Turkish Air Force and the February 2020 disabling of an entire Turkish mechanized infantry battalion in Idlib province by Syrian and Russian aircraft.

Despite the ambiguities in the relationship, it can be argued that, up to a point, Russia relied on Turkey—a NATO member—for its operations in Syria, for example when setting up joint Turkish-Russian patrols following the partial withdrawal of U.S. special forces from northeastern Syria obtained by Ankara from former U.S. president Donald Trump's administration. The substantial deployment of Turkish ground troops also allowed Russia to focus its military deployment on the air force, the navy, force protection, and joint patrols of its military police with the Turkish Land Forces.

Another major development was the July 15, 2016 coup attempt in Turkey. This was a turning point for Russia, as it created an opportunity to enhance military and political relations. While Moscow, like all Western capitals, supported Turkey's president after the coup attempt, it uttered no criticism of potential breaches of the rule of law following the failed takeover. The Russian president hosted his Turkish counterpart in Saint Petersburg on August 8, 2016. Days earlier, this author had hypothesized that the coup attempt might encourage Russia to "go for a long-term game-changing move and lure Turkey away from the West as part of a broader geopolitical reconfiguration." It was indeed the beginning of an opportunistic convergence of minds, which culminated in 2019 in the delivery and deployment by Turkey of Russian-made S-400 missile systems. More generally, this first sale of Russian armaments to Turkey heralded an era of Ankara's repositioning partly outside the Atlantic alliance.

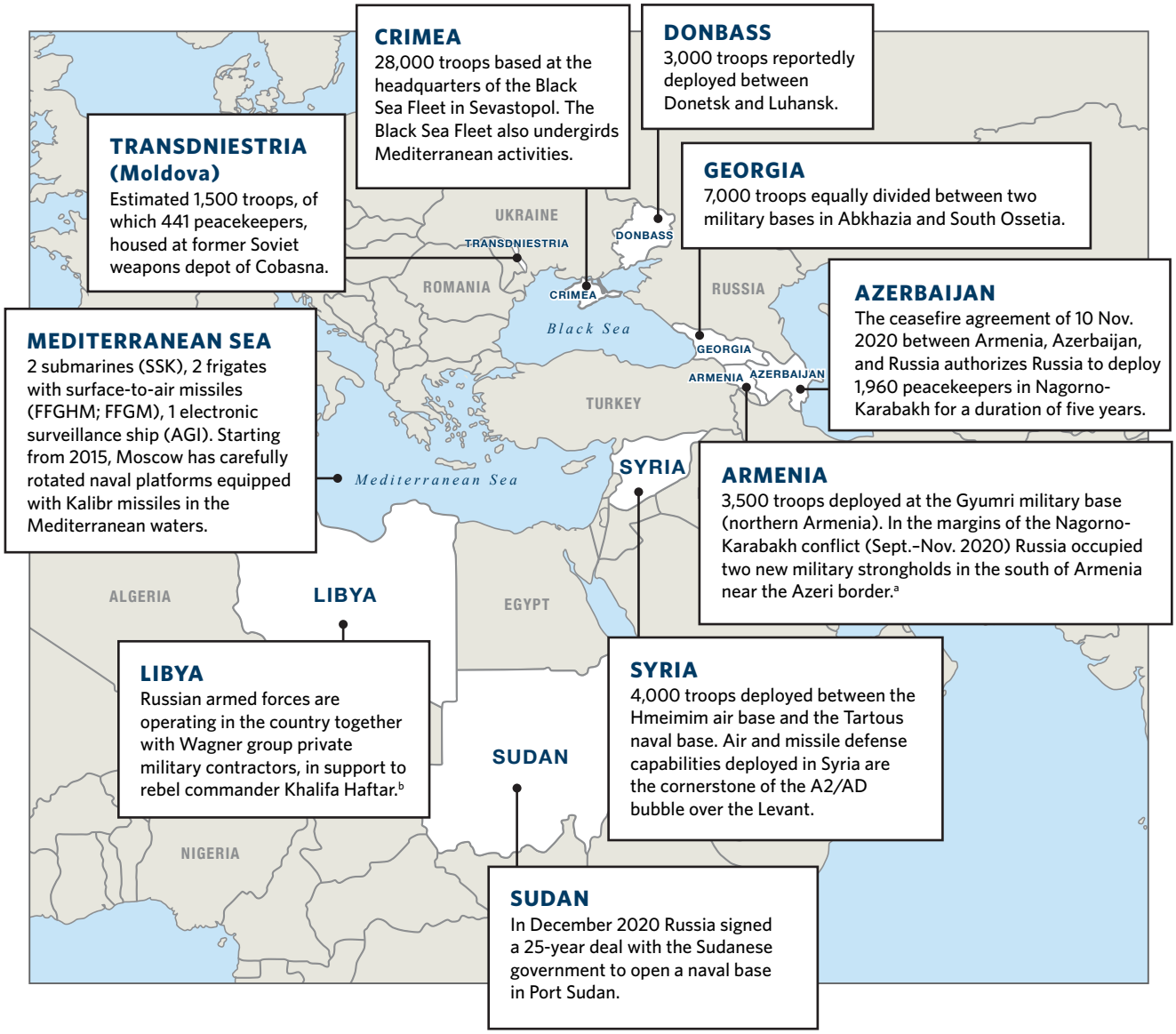
When Russia's and Turkey's respective positions on the Libyan conflict, the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and eastern Ukraine and Crimea are added to the picture, the relationship between the two countries in the Mediterranean and beyond can best be described as an unusual mix of cooperation and managed divergences, sometimes referred to as conflictual connivance. Barring a major conflict between Russia and NATO in another region, the pattern of cooperation between Moscow and Ankara in Syria is likely to continue in the near future.

Russia's Economic and Military Presence in the Mediterranean

Beyond the energy sector, Russia has a strong economic presence in the Mediterranean (see map 1), especially in Cyprus, where tourism, banking, and real estate are the main sectors of activity. The Russian Navy makes

MAP 1

Russia's Presence in and Around the Mediterranean Basin



a https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-military-armenia-reinforce-areas-near-azeri-border-agencies-2021-05-03/, last accessed May 27, 2021.
b https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32887/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-l, last accessed May 27, 2021.

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, all figures are taken from IISS Military Balance 2021.

calls to the Cypriot port of Limassol for replenishment purposes. Russia and Cyprus are both keen to keep a strong political relationship.

Russia has long maintained a military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, including bases in Egypt until 1972. Later, Moscow substantially downsized its presence, with only a small naval resupply facility in the Syrian city of Tartus. Russia is now returning to a more ambitious presence with what one observer has called "a commitment to playing the long game against NATO in the East Mediterranean." Meanwhile, Moscow's "steadfast belief in a Western encirclement strategy continues to shape its vision and activities, including the current build-up in the Mediterranean." This defensive strategy starts in the Black Sea, extends to Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean, and, ultimately, reaches into sub-Saharan Africa and the Red Sea.

The Mediterranean is an area of choice for Russia's naval strategy. Short of being able to pose a global challenge to the U.S. Navy, Moscow opts for a more circumscribed area of competition. In the words of one analyst, "for Russia, the Mediterranean symbolizes the larger competition between Moscow and Washington. By building up its naval forces, Russia is hoping to circumscribe NATO access to the region, protect Russia's southern flank, and assist its current and potential future client states in the region." The same analyst argues that, for economic reasons, "Moscow's focus on developing and augmenting the Mediterranean squadron is . . . a far more achievable limited objective that is well-aligned with Russia's foreign policy objectives in the region."

Regarding the air force segment of Moscow's strategy, short of developing major infrastructure comparable with the joint Turkish-U.S. air base at İncirlik, Russia has opted for swift and opportunistic initiatives. These include transforming the Latakia civilian airport into a military base, taking over facilities left behind by U.S. special forces in northeastern Syria, and repairing the damaged Al Jufrah air base in Libya.

Overall, Russia has implemented a very consistent strategy in terms of its defensive posture against NATO. Moscow has now deployed S-400 missile systems in Crimea, Abkhazia, and Syria while presumably keeping a degree of control over the S-400 systems sold to Turkey. This creates a vastly improved buffer zone on Russia's southern flank, including the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.

IMPLICATIONS BEYOND THE MEDITERRANEAN

Russia's air and sea bases bring additional benefits for its military deployments overseas. Beyond the Mediterranean itself, Moscow's assertive posture in the region has significant consequences farther afield. These concern not only countries in the wider region, such as Libya and Sudan, but also the NATO alliance as well as Russia's place on the international stage.

Syria as a Stepping Stone

Under the reasonable assumption that Russia's presence in Syria is for the long term, cooperation with Turkey will remain crucial. If Russian military planes were to routinely fly over Anatolia—on routes similar to those taken by VIP and humanitarian flights on December 22, 2019 and March 29, 2020—flights from the Moscow area (specifically the Chkalovskiy Air Base) to Syria (Hmeimim) would be considerably shortened from some 3,600 kilometers (2,236 miles) over the Caspian Sea, Iran, and Iraq, to around 2,350 kilometers (1,460 miles) over Anatolia.

Under this hypothesis, by using Hmeimim as a stepping stone for operations in Libya, Russia could also shorten the flight route from some 5,500 kilometers (3,400 miles) to around 4,300 kilometers (2,700 miles), saving nearly one-fourth of the distance.

MAP 2
Moscow—Latakia Air Corridors

SOURCE: Author's elaboration.

Russia will likely continue to use its fixed bases in Syria—the Hmeimim air base and the Tartus naval station—in combination with an increased mobility of air and naval assets drawn from home bases and regularly rotated. This formula of military commuting offers Russia a favorable cost-benefit ratio.

In this strategic context, the resolution of the Syrian civil war through multilateral dialogue is probably a lesser concern for Moscow. On the contrary, maintaining a close relationship with Assad will allow Moscow to not only develop its military infrastructure in the country but also help contain both Iran and Turkey in Syria.

Libya and Sudan as the Next Steps?

The possibility of Russia developing a permanent base at Al Jufrah in Libya and deploying high-end assets there has considerable implications for NATO and the EU. In the words of a general from U.S. Africa Command, "if Russia secures a permanent position in Libya and, worse, deploys long-range missile systems, it will be a game changer for Europe, NATO, and many Western nations." In addition, the use of a forward base in Al Jufrah would enhance Russia's existing capability to deploy private military contractors (PMCs) in sub-Saharan Africa, such as in the Central African Republic. However, Russia's eventual permanent presence in Libya will very much depend on the UN-led peace process in the country, which clearly calls for the withdrawal of all foreign forces—regular troops and PMCs—from Libyan territory.

From a European perspective, a lack of lasting stability in Libya would pose multiple challenges, from the security of energy supplies to irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to a permanent Russian military presence. This makes Libya a European emergency.

Similar reasoning applies to forthcoming developments concerning a Russian naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast, using the Tartus naval base as a springboard. If fully implemented, this move would clearly enhance the Russian Navy's capabilities to project forces in the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean. To an extent, such a facility would partly match U.S. and French infrastructure in Djibouti and the Persian Gulf.

Shaping Turkey's Missile Defense as a Wedge in NATO's Policies

Implanting Russian missile defense systems at the heart of a major NATO air force through its 2019 sale of the S-400 system to Turkey was a major political achievement for the Kremlin. It disrupted NATO's European defense architecture and caused a sharp degradation of the U.S.-Turkey relationship. Although Moscow did not offer technology transfers associated with the sale, despite Turkish claims to the contrary and ongoing negotiations on future technology transfers, Russia did manage to shape Turkey's missile defense architecture to its advantage.

Having evaluated the psychological damage left by the July 2016 failed coup, in which Turkey's own air force attacked major state buildings for the first time ever, and taking advantage of Turkey's protracted and unsuccessful negotiations with the United States on missile defense, Moscow offered Ankara an oversized system relative to the actual threats linked to the coup. There is no immediate medium- or long-range missile threat to Turkey since the country is currently allied in Syria with both Iran and Russia. The hypothesis of a Greek or Israeli missile attack on Turkey makes no sense, even as part of a conspiracy theory.

The end result of Moscow's achievement is of staggering significance. First, Russia has set foot in the heart of a major NATO air force with sophisticated systems that require the calibration of the entire inventory of the Turkish Air Force, which is mostly U.S. made, and periodic maintenance—that is, access—by Russian personnel.

Second, Russia has prevented the deployment of U.S.-made Patriot missiles—or their French-Italian alternative—on its southern flank, whereas it would be normal practice for a NATO member to procure missile defense systems from within the alliance for the sake of operational compatibility.

Third, by betting on U.S. sanctions imposed in relation to the S-400 procurement, which led the United States to cancel Turkey's purchase of U.S.-made F-35 stealth fighters, Moscow has prevented the sale of one hundred F-35s to Turkey's air force and, potentially, twenty additional F-35b aircraft to operate from the *Anadolu* helicopter carrier. In so doing, Russia has reduced NATO's potential deployment of stealth fighters over the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Simultaneously, Moscow has made political gains and opened military sales prospects with Turkey while degrading the country's standing as a NATO military power.

Fourth, given Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 industrial program, Russia has indirectly weakened Ankara's aerospace industry. That industry is now losing an estimated $1.4 billion of subcontracting orders and, more importantly, is deprived of a beneficial high-technology cooperation scheme.

In the context of its perception of a Western threat, Russia has drawn a double strategic benefit from its S-400 sale to Turkey: Russia's southern flank is now free of both Patriot missiles and F-35 stealth fighters. If the view of one analyst that a resolution of the U.S.-Turkey disagreement over S-400 missiles is "a long way off" proves correct, this strategic benefit for Moscow will be all the more substantial. At the time of writing, NATO has not drawn any consequences from the new situation in Turkey. A NATO advanced radar station is operational in Kürecik in Malatya Province, Eastern Anatolia.

The Mediterranean as a Way to Return to the World Stage

At issue in the Mediterranean is not only Russia's control of Syria and, potentially, part of Libya. Moscow's wider objective is clearly to counter Western—that is, NATO—influence on Russia's southeastern and southern flanks. Consistent with past and current actions in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia—and farther afield in the Arctic and the Baltic—the Kremlin is intent on countering what it perceives as the anti-Russian stance of Western powers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin explained his country's overall strategy in his September 28, 2015, speech to the UN General Assembly. In short, he asserted that from then on, the world order would be shaped with Russia at the table, not by the United States and its European allies alone. Already at that time, the global diplomatic dimension of the Russian takeover in Syria was clear. Even before the military buildup had been fully documented, Moscow's creation of a kind of protectorate in western Syria gave a tangible dimension to the Russian concept of a new world order. From Moscow's perspective, that meant putting an end to the West's propensity to unilaterally impose its own global order.

In the words of Carnegie's Dmitri Trenin, a preliminary result of Moscow's military campaign in Syria was that "Russia did away with the U.S. monopoly on political and military action in the Middle East." Trenin further argued that this was perhaps not the outcome of a grand strategy but instead showed that Russia's opportunistic return to the region was of strategic importance in that it brought the country back to the top level of global politics.

If this assessment were to hold water, it would illustrate how much Russia's campaign in Syria, its limited deployment in Libya, and its complex interactions with Turkey represent a game changer in European and transatlantic geopolitics. Whether Russia acted

according to a grand design or not, questions arise about the weak reactions of NATO allies to Moscow's politico-military initiatives in the Mediterranean.

ISSUES FOR NATO MEMBERS

NATO and its members keep Russia's military deployment in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea under close watch (see map 3). The alliance's efforts are made easier by the return to a peaceful relationship between the U.S. administration and its European partners, the EU, and NATO. Going forward, these efforts should focus on three main areas.

Actively Supporting Multilateral Conflict Prevention

In recent years, the reactions of Western countries facing Russian activities on the European continent have mostly consisted of successive economic sanctions, the effectiveness of which is questionable.

Ironically, Western countries have not collectively invested a substantial level of coordinated diplomatic resources into the multilateral resolution of the Syrian war or the Libyan stalemate. In many ways, Russia has used this vacuum to fill the voids, autonomously advance its own interests, and create facts on the ground that prove difficult to reverse.

MAP 3

NATO's Presence in and Around the Mediterranean Basin

SOURCE: https://www.nato.int/nato-on-the-map/#lat=37.50498572336105&lon=23.897068827266963&zoom=1&layer-5; https://www.americansecurityproject.org/national-security-strategy/u-s-bases-in-the-middle-east/; both last accessed on May 4, 2021.

The depth of the Syrian crisis and its unfathomable human consequences as well as the fragility of the stabilization process in Libya require Western countries to put their weight behind the multilateral processes available to bring peace and stability to the two countries. This task cannot take place without a modicum of consensus between Western nations and Russia, and it will constitute a litmus test for the political and military stability of the region as a whole.

A recently proposed multilateral conference on the Eastern Mediterranean gathering all parties concerned will face difficulties in materializing. Such an initiative would imply, among other things, the presence at the table of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, an entity recognized only by Turkey. A more modest track 2 format consisting of nongovernmental and informal contacts might be a useful venue for unofficial dialogue on energy and maritime boundaries in the region.

Reassessing NATO's Military Presence in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea

NATO and its members can enhance their military presence in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea in multiple ways. First, they can increase the rotations of their naval forces in the area, given that their major bases—Taranto in southern Italy, Toulon in southern France, and Rota in Spain—are some distance away. Meanwhile, the United States is upgrading the Souda Bay naval station in Crete, Greece. Naval aviation and air surveillance assets, already very active over the Black Sea, will play an enhanced role over the Eastern Mediterranean.

Second, NATO allies should increase the readiness and interoperability of their air and naval forces as a way to improve collective efficiency and cost-sharing among them. Third, allies should boost the efficiency of NATO's joint naval operations that contribute to maritime security in the area, such as Operation Sea Guardian.

Reevaluating Turkey-Russia Relations

Despite occasional claims to the contrary, it is a fact that Russia's sale of missile defense systems to Turkey has created a major issue for NATO's defense architecture, to the point that no progress can be realistically expected from an approach based on technical committees. At the same time, deactivating S-400 missiles located in Turkey and storing them under international supervision would probably create a crisis between Ankara and Moscow—and possibly beyond.

NATO and its members will have to evaluate the situation carefully while avoiding a scenario in which the status quo develops into a fresh crisis between Russia and the United States. Yet, the bottom line for the United States and NATO in this respect is simple: Turkey's deployment of S-400 missiles is mutually exclusive with its acquisition of F-35 fighter jets and creates a distinct incompatibility with NATO's policies and procedures, since interoperability remains a key principle for the Alliance.

Overall, Russia's more assertive posture in the Mediterranean calls for a concerted and efficient response from NATO allies, given the multiple effects it could have on transatlantic and European interests in the region at large—as well as in terms of reducing the role of the United Nations system in resolving regional conflicts. Europe's interests are particularly high in the fields of energy, trade and investment, irregular migration, and security.

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ACKNOWLDEGMENTS

The author is grateful to Martha Higgins and Alice Vervaeke for their research support.

NOTES

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North Atlantic Treaty Organization
U.S. MISSION

This publication is funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author[s] and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

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