

# RUSSIA, CHINA AND TURKEY: NEW PLAYERS IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN COUNTRIES?

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**The apparent shift in US foreign strategic priorities prompted pro-western states in the region to seek alternative partners.**

Discussion of the outside engagement in the Southern Mediterranean Region (SMR) has revealed conflicting views and concerns. However, the US remains the only outside power capable of decisively intervening in this region (which includes Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco), particularly in concert with its allies in the EU. Others, such as Russia, China and Turkey are able to exert influence, but none can impact the region as the US is capable of doing.

In this context, there were differences of view as to whether the US is really withdrawing from the region and what this would mean. Most experts in Egypt as well as in many Arab countries were of the view that it would be a negative development if it happened. However, this did not mean that everyone liked the way the US presently interacts with the region. In Syria, for example, the US's failure to provide any significant support for the Syrian rebels or hold the Bashar al-Assad regime to account for the use of chemical weapons has frustrated its Arab allies, particularly in the Gulf region. Furthermore, the hold placed by the Obama administration on military aid to Egypt has also negatively affected the US's image in the region because this was seen as evidence by many Egyptians and Arabs that the US was favoring the Muslim Brotherhood group, which was considered recently as a terrorist group in many Arab countries. In addition, the announcement by the US administration of its infamous "pivot to Asia" and of cuts in the defense budget indicated that an American disengagement from the region was imminent. Views were expressed that the SMR's main problem with the US may soon not be with a US that intervenes too much in the region, but with a US that largely goes home and leaves the region to its own devices.

**Russia's advocacy for the principles of stability, state sovereignty and non-interference makes it an attractive partner to many Southern Mediterranean states.**

In the psyche of many Arab policy-makers, the apparent structural shift in US foreign strategic priorities overshadowed any reassurances to the contrary reiterated by US officials. The notion of a weak, undependable US has, therefore, prompted pro-western states in the region, Egypt and Saudi Arabia above all, to weigh alternative arrangements and press ahead with their regional agenda, often irrespective of US preferences. In this context, Russia, in particular, has emerged as a lucrative alternative partner, especially in light of its unshakeable commitment to its regional allies: Syria, under the al-Assad regime, and Iran. In the meantime, the reactions of Russia showed its willingness to become a more active player in the SMR to defend its growing interests. Since the start of the Arab Spring or the "democratic storms" in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya, the Russian leadership has advocated stability, return to normalcy and holding high the banner of state sovereignty and non-interference. These principles were attractive to many policy-makers in the SMR. Therefore, it was not strange that Egypt's elected president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi paid his first foreign visit to Russia in February 2014, following the ousting of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. After this visit, many Egyptians looked at Russia as a new possible partner and ally because of its "huge" capabilities in military and energy areas. Egypt, which faces ongoing Islamist insurgency, particularly focused in the Sinai Peninsula, has sought a \$2 billion arms deal with Russia. The deal would probably include financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although this deal has not been finalized yet, it was very important for the new Egyptian leadership in the light of

the US's hold on its military aid to Egypt at this critical time in dealing with the terrorist groups in Sinai. In addition, Russia also has huge energy supplies which could help Egypt facing a serious energy shortage crisis. Last May, it was announced that Egypt will obtain a favorable rate with long grace periods for its imports of Russian natural gas during 2014 and 2015.

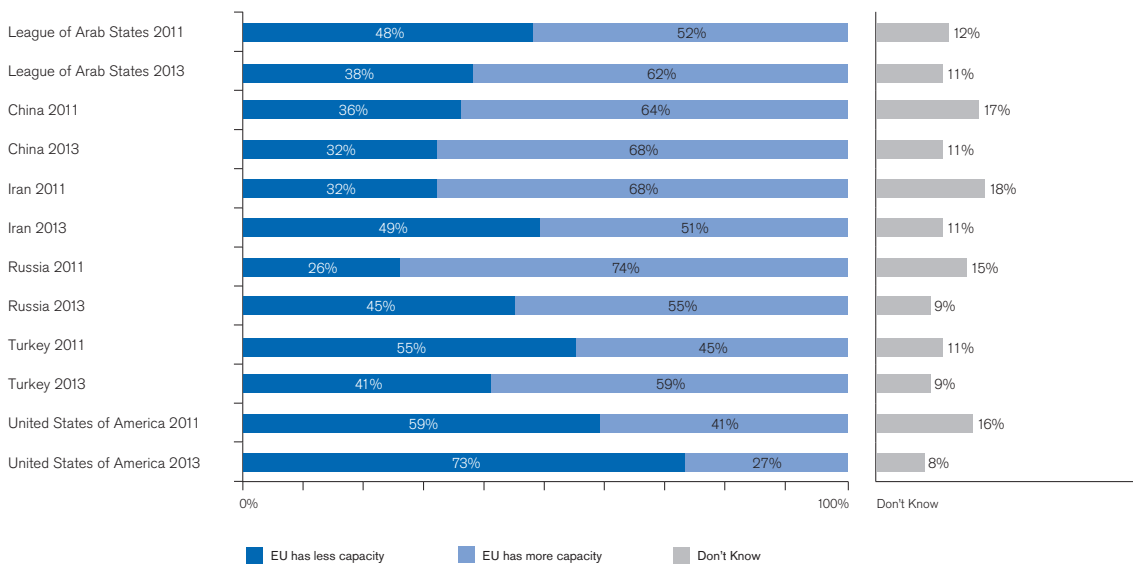
In addition, Russia, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, may also find that its arms and energy supply diplomacy in the SMR will probably be helpful in its strategic competition with the US, especially after the Ukrainian crisis.

In addition to Russia, China is also becoming more and more influential in the SMR. Economically, China has been involved for decades in sizeable infrastructure projects in the region. China also has strong trade ties with many countries in the region. The number of Chinese tourists has also increased dramatically in recent years. However, Beijing seems to avoid any direct involvement in the complicated political environment in the SMR. One clear sign of this passive attitude is the limited number of high official visits from the Chinese side to the region. Nevertheless, many observers expected China to become a more active political player to defend its growing economic and political interests in the region. From their bad experience in Libya, where they lost several economic and commercial gains after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, the Chinese leaders recognized that their low political profile in the region would no longer be useful.

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In the near future, and as indicated in the results of the 5th Euromed Survey, it is likely that the impact of Russia and China will continue to increase (see graph 1) in the SMR for several reasons:

**Graph 1: Assessing the EU's future role in MPCs compared to other regional and international actors. Comparing 2011 and 2013 survey results.** (The graph below displays the EU's relative capacity to influence regional developments compared to other actors).



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of 3rd and the 5th Euromed Survey

**Russia and China's opposition to the international western intervention in the region may result in their growing influence in the MENA region.**

First, history shows that the opposition of Russia and China to the international (western) intervention in the SMR is highly appreciated by many Arab peoples who are still suffering from the negative consequences of such intervention in Palestine, Iraq and Sudan.

Secondly, Russia and China have a “white history” with all Arab countries. There is no colonialist heritage, no territorial disputes and no serious immigrant problems. In addition, many in the SMR have generally considered Russia and China as friends and supporters of Arab causes for the past 60 years. During the past three decades, many Arabs also admired China for its economic achievements. As such, Russia was also viewed as a military partner in some countries in the SMR.

Thirdly, Russia and China, with their growing financial and technical capabilities and in cooperation with the rich Arab Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait, could create a new “developmental fund” to support the sustainable development projects in the SMR, especially in the following areas: labor-intensive industries, new technologies in the agricultural sector, infrastructure projects, and renewable energy. This fund can play a significant role in achieving self-sufficiency in food and energy and creating new job opportunities as well as new investment opportunities for Russian and Chinese companies.

**As long as Erdogan continues his current policies, Turkey is likely to lose its impact in the region.**

In contrast to the expected growing impact of Russia and China in the SMR, Turkey would likely lose its high impact in the region in the near future. In the last few years, Ankara had enjoyed a growing influence in the region because of its economic success and moderate Islamism. Its “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy contributed to its high impact in the region. This foreign policy enabled Turkey to expand business and trade links with many Arab states, as well as Iran, and even helped mediate some of the region’s toughest disputes, brokering talks between Syria and Israel, Fatah and Hamas, and Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, this high impact of Turkey would probably be reversed in the region because the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems to fail in building bridges with the new ruling regime in Egypt. He also started a war of words with the Gulf countries and Israel for having a hand in the “coup” that removed former President Morsi from power. This failure led Turkey and Egypt to pull their ambassadors from each country amidst the dispute. It is not only in Egypt where Turkey is now having a problem. In Iraq, Ankara has also openly defied Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s government, accusing it of fomenting sectarian strife and going behind its back to negotiate oil deals with the Kurdish regional government, which administers the country’s north. In Syria, Turkey has also lent unqualified support to the anti-regime rebels, letting them operate freely on its soil, turning a blind eye to their atrocities, and reportedly criticizing the US for branding the al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra a terrorist group. In addition, Turkey’s image in the West took a beating this summer with the protests in Gezi Park. Erdogan’s decision to put down the demonstrations with riot police, tear gas and water cannons undermined his relationship with the EU. For all these reasons, Turkey will be less likely to exercise a real and positive influence over the SMR as long as Mr Erdogan keeps his current policies which have almost left no friends for Turkey.