

Presence of Non-Euro-Mediterranean Actors in the Mediterranean

Russia in the Mediterranean and in Europe

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That the rigors of geography and climate push Russia towards the Mediterranean is an elementary geopolitical truth found in the first lessons of any treatise on the matter. With the White Sea frozen more than six months a year, Russia has historically pressed southwards, in search of warm open seas that would allow it to become a naval power. It has done this in three directions: towards the Persian Gulf, through Persia; towards the Black Sea and the Mediterranean; and, centuries later, towards the Yellow Sea, through the country's far Asian reaches. As the gateway to the Mediterranean for Russia, Constantinople (which the Russians called 'Tsarograd,' or 'the Imperial City') was the epicentre of these ambitions for more than a thousand years. Between 860 and 988 the proto-Russian state, Kievan Rus', tried to conquer it six times. The decline of that primitive Russian state and the subsequent Mongol conquest (in the year 1240) marked the start of an eight-century parenthesis in Russia's ambitions in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Through his conquests, Peter the Great achieved a window for Russia onto the Gulf of Finland, where he built the city that bears his name. However, whoever controls the Danish straits – the Belts and Sound – can block the outlet to the Atlantic. After defeating the Swedes at Poltava (1709), Peter also reached the shores of the Black Sea, an extension of the Mediterranean that does not freeze over in winter. It was his successor, Catherine II, though, who ultimately consolidated a broad stretch of coastline there for Russia, founding the port cities of Nikolaev (1774) and Odessa (1783). But those Black Sea ports are subject to the same problem as

St. Petersburg: when the Turkish straits are in enemy hands, Russia's access to the Mediterranean is barred. Like the straits of Gibraltar, Hormuz or Malacca, these straits are a global geopolitical nerve centre; hence, Russia's renewed ambitions regarding Constantinople. To contain those ambitions, in the 19th century, England and France propped up the decrepit Turkish Empire, allying with it in the Crimean War (1853-56). Additionally, in the second half of the 19th century (1863), the port and city of Vladivostok were founded on the Yellow Sea. As this port, too, is covered in ice for four to five months a year, Russia sought more convenient ones for its fleet. It found them in Port Arthur (today, Dalian), in China, and the Kuril Islands, which Russia seized from Japan in World War II.

In the 20th century, as part of the Triple Entente to contain Germany forged in the secret Constantinople Agreement (1915), England and France promised to give Constantinople and the Dardanelles to Russia in case of victory. In return, the English would increase their sphere of influence in Iran and the French would be given control of Syria and Palestine. Russia's defeat at the hands of Germany, the triumph of the Russian Revolution, and Russia's subsequent withdrawal from the war prevented the transfer of Constantinople to Russia. Passage through the Turkish straits is governed by the Montreux Convention (1936), which gives control over them to Turkey. In peacetime, merchant vessels are guaranteed unrestricted innocent passage, whilst the passage of warships is subject to certain limitations, depending on their tonnage and whether or not they belong to a Black Sea state, as well as to a cap on the number of vessels that may be transiting the straits at any given time. Turkey may close the straits to warships belonging to countries that are at war with it or pose a threat to its security.

Beginning in the 1950s and throughout the Cold War, Russia maintained a permanent presence in the Mediterranean, always watchful of the movements of the US 6th Fleet. First, it had a submarine base at Vlorë (Albania) and after the Six-Day War (1967), it had naval and air bases in Syria and Egypt. The 5th Soviet Squadron had about 70 ships in this sea. Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia's naval presence in the Mediterranean dwindled to almost nothing.

It is along these geographical and historical coordinates that the avatars of recent decades have been projected. In June 1989, Solidarity ousted the Communist Party of Poland from power at the polls. Unlike Nikita Khrushchev in Hungary, in 1956, or Leonid Brezhnev in Czechoslovakia, in 1968, Mikhail Gorbachev did not send in tanks. In choosing not to, he rescinded the Brezhnev doctrine (whereby the USSR would prevent any socialist country from leaving the system) and began the dismantlement of the post-WWII order established in Europe. Gorbachev later accepted the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany, which Margaret Thatcher and François Mitterrand initially opposed. He also accepted the end of the Warsaw Pact and, ultimately, the dissolution of the USSR itself, in December 1991. He could have prevented each one of these events through the use of force, but he refused to do so.

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Fearing a bloodbath, Western leaders, including Felipe González, George Bush Sr, Mitterrand and Thatcher, amongst others, had opposed the USSR's dissolution. Bush gave what came to be known as his 'Chicken Kiev' speech before the Ukrainian Parliament, cautioning against "suicidal nationalism." Thatcher was even more explicit, stating that she could no more imagine opening an embassy in Kiev than in San Francisco.

In this context, it is easy to understand why the vast majority of Russians did not accept what, for Mos-

cow, entailed the loss of all the gains made since Peter the Great, at the turn of the 18th century. The independence of Ukraine was regarded as the amputation of a limb. If Abraham Lincoln had prioritized preventing bloodshed, the Russians say, the United States would no longer exist. Vladimir Putin gave voice to what the majority of Russians felt when he said that the breakup of the USSR had been the greatest strategic disaster of the 20th century. The underlying message was: "This would not have happened with me." And, thus, reading between the lines: "It's not over yet."

This process was later compounded by the expansion of NATO. Although some dispute his account, Gorbachev claims that he was given assurances by the US and Germany that if he accepted the reunified Germany's continued membership in NATO, the organization would not expand eastwards. Russians do not understand how Gorbachev could have failed to demand a written guarantee for such a critical issue. Clearly, both the former members of the Warsaw Pact and several of the former Soviet republics wanted to join the Atlantic Alliance, which would shield them from Moscow's ambitions. However, it is equally clear that Russia viewed their admission as a grievance, notwithstanding any pledges not to enlarge. Russia could begrudgingly accept the admission of the former Warsaw Pact members to NATO. It could even resign itself to the admission of the three Baltic states (known in the defunct USSR as 'the Soviet abroad'). However, the idea of the admission of Ukraine or Georgia was unpalatable to much of Russian society. George Kennan, the chief strategist of 20th century US foreign policy, predicted, "Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold-War era. Such a decision may be expected [...] to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking." Time has proved him right. Furthermore, the following years saw NATO's intervention in the war in Yugoslavia, the defeat of Serbia, a traditional Russian ally, and Kosovo's conversion into an independent state.

The result of the wide-ranging process of withdrawal undertaken by Gorbachev and its exploitation by the West is a 'humiliated and offended' Russia. Moscow believes that whilst it behaved as a friend, granting everything for free, renouncing the use of force when it could have used it, it was treated like

an enemy. In Moscow's view, it abandoned the Cold War, but the West did not. People often point to the 1930s to draw comparisons between Putin and Hitler. In my view, there is a much more relevant precedent: the resentment engendered in Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, which led to World War II. Having learnt that lesson, the Western countries were magnanimous to Germany following its defeat in 1945 and, again, in 1990. However, they ignored the lesson when Russia lost the Cold War without spilling blood. The recomposition of the European order was only superficially addressed. Gorbachev's repeated appeals to build a "common European home" fell on deaf ears. Had a gesture been made (financial aid for Perestroika, some type of partnership agreement between the European Union and Russia, non-enlargement of NATO, etc.), it would have generated strategic trust and, with it, a solid basis for a non-conflictive long-term relationship with Russia.

Russia regarded the EU's attempt, in 2014, to woo Ukraine, to the detriment of Putin's Eurasian Union, as a first step towards the country's integration in NATO. Russia views the prospect of the US 6th Fleet in Ukrainian ports as a knife to its throat and, thus, preventing it, as a primordial geostrategic imperative. Putin's response, including the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Ukraine, met with massive support from the Russian people. The Russian military intervention in Georgia, in 2008, and Moscow's support for the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, received identical support. Russia also views a potential NATO presence in the Caucasus, which enclose the vast Russian plains to the south, as incompatible with its security. Russia can leverage its geographical proximity and the multiple recourses at its disposal to destabilize these two countries or any other former Soviet republic. Meanwhile, NATO is unwilling to engage in a military conflict with Russia to defend Ukraine or Georgia, although it is willing to pressure it with economic sanctions. The Russian people have borne the additional hardships entailed by these sanctions, at least to date, out of feelings of wounded pride, or nationalism, and the fact that Ukraine is viewed as inseparable from Russia. In this context, the position shared by Kissinger and Brzezinski, who advocate the 'Finlandization' of Ukraine, i.e., the adoption of a position of equidistance between Russia and

NATO, makes complete sense. When Russia refers to the former Soviet republics as 'the near abroad,' it is referring to 'Finlandization'; Russia aims to limit these countries' sovereignty by vetoing their membership in NATO.

Russia's angry reaction to what it considers attacks on its vital interests has included, in addition to the military actions against Georgia and Ukraine, support for anti-system forces and for parties opposed to European integration in EU countries and the return of its naval and air forces to the Mediterranean, where it has shored up its position in several coastal countries. Russia aims to monitor NATO and jihadism, as well as safeguard its trade interests, especially gas and oil exports, the backbone of its economy. It also seeks to project power beyond its borders and 'near abroad,' like the great power it wishes to remain.

Syria, a former ally of the USSR during the Cold War, has provided Russia with naval facilities at the Tartus base. In 2012, after Assad's deployment of chemical weapons, Obama decided against a military intervention, going back on his word. Russia stepped in to mediate the destruction of the Syrian chemical arsenal – or part of it. At Damascus's behest, Russia launched its military intervention in 2015, changing the course of the civil war and establishing itself as a champion of the Assad regime. Russia has skilfully taken advantage of the lack of understanding between NATO and the EU and some of their partners in the eastern Mediterranean. In the Syrian civil war, Russia supports Assad, whilst Turkey supports his enemies. Against this backdrop, Russian-Turkish relations were seriously damaged when, in November 2015, Turkish fighter jets shot down a Russian warplane in disputed airspace near the Syrian-Turkish border, as well as by the killing, one month later, of the Russian ambassador in Ankara. However, since then, the relations have improved considerably. Putin and Erdogan's shared problems with NATO and the EU have served as a platform for entente. The US criticized Turkey for how it repressed the thwarted coup attempt, in 2016, and for its disregard for human rights, refusing to hand over the cleric Fethullah Gulen, the mastermind behind the attempted coup according to the Turkish government. US support for Kurdish forces in Syria, considered terrorists by Turkey, as well as US sanctions on Turkish companies for vio-

lating sanctions against Iran are also reasons for disagreement. That the EU has closed its doors to it is also viewed by Turkey as a humiliation. The shared perception of having been aggrieved by NATO and the EU has cemented the growing understanding between Russia and Turkey, which have managed to temporarily set aside their differences over Syria and are now striving, together with Iran, to find a solution to the conflict that is acceptable to all three. As a result of this rapprochement, Turkey, a NATO member, has purchased S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems from Russia. The two countries have also undertaken major energy cooperation projects: the construction of a gas pipeline for the sale of Russian gas to Turkey and the construction by Russia of a nuclear power plant. The understanding is largely satisfactory for both sides: Russia gets to drive a wedge into the heart of NATO, whilst Turkey strengthens its negotiating position vis-à-vis both NATO and the EU.

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As with Turkey, Greece's rapprochement with Russia is grounded in the deterioration of its relations with the EU and the US. Given that, albeit for different reasons, both countries are experiencing this decline, it is just as advantageous for Greece to play 'the Russian card' as it is for Russia to play 'the Greek card.' Greece initially opposed the EU's sanctions against Russia. Although it later accepted them, it applied them laxly. Meanwhile, Russia provides cheap energy, credits and investment to Greece, whilst also selling it military equipment. In Egypt, Obama pressured Mubarak to step down and called for democratic elections, as part of the effort to spread democracy in the Middle East in the wake of the 'Arab Spring.' In light of the Muslim Brotherhood's victory at the polls, things did not

turn out as hoped. Because of their fear of Islamic radicalism, the US and Europe turned a blind eye when the Egyptian army staged a coup, disregarding the outcome of the elections, considering it the lesser evil. Nevertheless, Obama's relations with al-Sisi were strained. As in the previous cases, that state of affairs afforded an opportunity to Russia, which secured an agreement for its military aircraft to use facilities in Egyptian territory, something it had not been able to do since Sadat expelled the Soviets in 1972, nearly half a century earlier. Russia is building a nuclear power plant in Egypt and has sold it fighter-bombers and combat helicopters. Cyprus rounds out the list of Russia's friends in the eastern Mediterranean. About half of its bank deposits and much of its inbound tourism come from Russia. It was a Russian loan that enabled the overhaul of the Cypriot banking system after the spread of the crisis that began in 2008. Thus, in recent years, Putin's Russia has managed to significantly strengthen its geostrategic position in the eastern Mediterranean, as part of its renewed ambition to continue playing the part of a great power.

Part of the price that the US and EU are paying for their mishandling of the process of recomposing the European order is the strengthening of the entente between Russia and China. This has been a major boon in terms of both Russia's geostrategic position with regard to the West, as it undermines the impact of the sanctions imposed due to the Ukraine conflict, and China's geostrategic position, to the detriment of the US's turn towards Asia. One result of this understanding was the joint military exercises conducted by Russia and China in the Mediterranean in 2015. Both Russia and China regard the US as a 'primary threat' and reject both the attempts at political regime change, pushing them towards liberal democracy, and the US's refusal to acknowledge their spheres of influence in their own backyards. Russia and China are working together in the Shanghai Security Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the BRICS association. Trump has helped strengthen the ties between them by mentioning them together as "strategic rivals" of the US in the country's most recent National Security Strategy, published last December. No matter how you look at it, a new cold war climate has settled over the relations between Russia and the West.