

US Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean Region and How it Affects Other Actors

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Washington will continue to have a significant impact on Mediterranean security, but not necessarily as a result of America's European policies. The most substantial influence could come as a result of US efforts to stabilize the Greater Middle East.

America and Europe

There is a tendency to obsess about American presidential rhetoric and the swirl of partisan commentary as a means for interpreting US foreign policy and strategy. Such a focus obfuscates an understanding of American statecraft and defence. In contrast, the US National Security Strategy published in December 2017 has proven a far more accurate template for understanding American actions. Washington's efforts have largely comported with the strategy.

The President's campaign rhetoric of "America first" was interpreted in various ways. Some suggested the US would become isolationist. Others argued the US President intended to make American policies wholly transactional, akin to big business deals. Still others viewed the pronouncement as disdain for traditional alliances. In practice, none of these interpretations have proven accurate.

Europe is a case in point. America's current European policies reflect strong elements of continuity with previous presidential administrations, including continued support for the transatlantic community and NATO.

That there are underlying features of consistency in American policy regarding Europe is not surprising. The US is a global power with global interests and responsibilities. The exercise of that power is dependent on America's interconnectedness to the world. The US needs to be present to safeguard its interests, as well as having the capacity to get to places where those interests are threatened. Three key strategic regions link the US to the world - Europe, the Middle East and Asia. For the trans-regional linkages to remain strong in and of themselves, the regions have to remain stable. It is in US interests that those regions continue to be peaceful and prosperous. Thus, the security and stability of Europe has long been and remains a vital interest of the United States. In turn, the US has long seen participation in NATO as the main American contribution to peace and stability in western Europe.

The list of reassuring measures the present administration has taken is long and illustrative. Actions include support for Georgia and Ukraine; the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI); increased bilateral defence planning and exercises; discussions over additional forward-basing of US forces in central Europe; and recent increased US naval activity in the Black Sea.

Black Sea Security and the Mediterranean

Of particular note in regards to the future security of the Mediterranean is the attention the US has given to the Black Sea. The US clearly regards Russian activities in the region with deep suspicion. The US government has concluded that Moscow's military build-up and expansive diplomatic, political and economic efforts are intended to establish the Black Sea as a power projection platform for the Russian armed forces.

Mediterranean, the US and Great Power Competition

It is not surprising that the US government has shown increasing concern over Russian Black Sea activities and a growing interest in countering them. US strategy identifies two principal external threats to the peace and stability of Europe. They are the destabilizing influence of the Russian government in Moscow and the spillover of conflict, terrorism, and competition in the Middle East. Of the two, Moscow tops the list of US worries.

The US strategy outlines a plan for dealing with Russia. That is not likely to change anytime soon. The prospects for significant shifts in Russian behaviour in the near term are dim. With the approaching 2020 national elections in the United States, many analysts are offering fresh thinking on what shifts the elections might bring. New ideas for dealing with Russia are becoming a cottage industry. Proposals range from ending NATO enlargement to new arms control initiatives, to ending sanctions and other trust and confidence building measures. The problem with all these initiatives is that they misdiagnose the problem. The problem is not US policy. The problem is an unyielding regime in the Kremlin. Moscow isn't changing. Policies seeking to induce Moscow to act differently will inevitably fail. Therefore, the best policy remains to increasingly work to marginalize Russian influence on the West from deterring military aggression to undermining the influence of disinformation and active measures to marginalizing Russian energy dominance, corruptive practices and economic influence.

In concert with the American focus on renewed "great power" competition and concerns posed by Russia, the US is also increasingly concerned about Chinese influence in Europe. An example is US warnings to the United Kingdom and Germany that allowing Huawei (which Washington believes is controlled by the Chinese government and used as an instrument to steal intellectual property and spy on other countries) to supply equipment for national wireless telecom infrastructure could jeopardize intelligence sharing. US concerns about recent news of Italy endorsing China's Belt and Road initiative and opening to Chinese investments in Trieste is another.

Dealing with China will increasingly be a topic of transatlantic discussions. US officials, however, appear to

demonstrate less concern over joint Moscow and Beijing efforts to influence Europe. Cooperation between Russia and China appears mostly of a tactical nature, supporting each other in votes at the National Security Council, for example. For now, the US continues to deal with these as separate concerns and continues to see Chinese influence as an emerging concern, while viewing Russia's actions against Europe as a present and serious danger.

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The Middle East and the Mediterranean

Rather than China and Russia policy, Middle East policy is probably more relevant to understanding the US impact on future Mediterranean security in the near term. As in Europe, this administration's primary goal in the Middle East is to create a stable region. In the Middle East, the US sees two major threats - the destabilizing influence of Iran and the disruption and violence caused by transnational Islamist terrorism. How the US handles these challenges will have a significant impact on Mediterranean security. The most common vector for problems in the Greater Middle East is for the consequences to overflow across the sea into southern Europe.

In the Middle East, the US has actively engaged to contain Iranian influence and defeat the physical territory controlled by ISIS. Both efforts have yielded significant results. The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or Iran Deal, was part of the American effort to isolate and weaken the regime. The US also supported efforts to abate or limit Iranian surrogates including the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hamas, Hezbollah and Shia militias in Iraq. Meanwhile, the US supported an aggressive campaign to destroy ISIS-territorial control in Iraq/Syria, as well as broadly supporting counter-terrorism operations in the region.

Yet, these efforts are at best a qualified success. Some of the most persistent problems have been exacerbated by US missteps. Others are stubbornly resistant to American influence. Geo-strategic headaches range from a debilitating war in Yemen to the unsettled relations of the Gulf Coast Countries, contentious relationships with Turkey, the frustrating lack of progress in the regions on human rights and economic freedom, and the uncertainty over Syria, refugees and illegal migration, as well as the persistent threat of transnational terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism. How the US address these could have a significant impact on the future security environment of the Mediterranean region.

US-Turkish Relations and Regional Security

One of the most consequential issues the US will have to address is its contentious relations with Turkey. As a member of NATO astride the access point from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean, it is difficult to overstate the importance of Turkey's geostrategic position. Likewise, Turkey has a significant influence and impact on peace and security in the Greater Middle East.

Tensions between Turkey, the United States and Europe pre-date the current regime in Ankara. For instance, in the run-up to the Iraq War (2003), Turkey denied US forces an avenue of approach for the invasion. Long contentious negotiations over Turkey's accession to the European Union have been another source of friction in the past. That said, without question, relations have been significantly further strained under the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Several factors have exacerbated the difficulties of relations with Turkey. During his tenure, Erdogan has sought to balance relations with Western nations and Iran and Russia. Predictably, this has resulted in a heightening of mistrust among NATO allies. Erdogan has embraced fundamentalism and political Islam extending support to the Muslim Brotherhood. This often puts him at odds with other regional leaders, most notably President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt. Furthermore, Erdogan's record on human rights, particularly on press freedoms has increasingly been seen as a cause of concern in the West. The Turkish President also clashed with European leaders over the 2015 refugee crisis when a million refugees flooded into Europe, many coming through Turkey.

Without question, however, the most significant factor affecting relations is the attempted 2016 coup d'état against Erdogan. While repression after the coup raised concerns in the West, Erdogan remains convinced that outside powers, in particular the US either tacitly supported or acquiesced at the effort to overthrow the Turkish President. The mistrust and animosity over the coup run deep. His suspicions were only deepened by the contentious relations with the West, and the US in particular, over the response to the Syrian civil war. In particular, the Turkish President saw American support for the YPG as a betrayal and a direct threat to Turkish security.

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The US response to Erdogan has been measured. President Trump routinely exchanges phone calls with the Turkish President. The US President has also expressed an interest in expanding free trade with Turkey. On the other hand, the US has also threatened Turkey with tariffs and recently ended key trade preferences for the country.

Perhaps the signature issue at present involves Turkey's commitment to purchase the S-400 air defence system from Russia. The US has warned the Turkish government that employing this system involves grave security risks and jeopardizes Turkey's participation in the F-35 fighter programme. Not only would the US not allow Turkey to procure planes, but the US would also end Turkey's role in the aircraft's production. In addition, Turkey would be open to US sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CATSA).

What is most notable about US policy, despite the redline on the S-400, is the US commitment to sustain US-Turkish relations despite the many differences.

es and a growing bipartisan anti-Turkish stance in the US Congress, in addition to the increasing animosity towards Turkey among US-based human rights advocacy groups and think tanks.

Nevertheless, continued US engagement with Turkey is the right course for the US to take and this administration will, in all likelihood, seek to maintain constructive relations with Ankara. This is certainly the most efficacious course of action for promoting stability in the region. Whether this course is sustainable over time largely rests on how the Turkish President responds.

US Engagement in Libya

Another bellwether issue that will affect Mediterranean security, is US engagement in North Africa as part of its strategy for the Greater Middle East - in particular, the future of Libya. Libya is of concern as a gateway for illegal migration to Europe and as a target for Islamist extremism. While deals have been cut to mitigate some of these concerns in the near term, these solutions are not sustainable over time. There is scant European consensus on the way forward in Libya. The likelihood of strong external support for peace and reconciliation is grim without more active US engagement.

There are several reasons why it makes sense for the US to ramp up its engagement in Libya. One is oil. With the US pressuring countries to divest away from Iranian oil, getting more oil on the market ought to be a US priority. Libya has the capacity, with a more settled domestic situation, to significantly ramp up its production.

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A stable Libya would also be part of a more resilient firebreak, protecting the Middle East and Europe from

the troubles in North Africa flowing north. It is in both the interests of the US and Europe for Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt to be as stable as possible and to have friendly and constructive relations among themselves.

While the US has yet to step up its diplomatic game and ramp up efforts to promote economic development and trade in the region, that is likely coming, in part as the US expands efforts to compete with Chinese and Russian influence in the region.

The Way Forward

In summary, a case could be made that the US is practicing an “indirect approach” to enhancing the security of the Mediterranean. By focusing on the destabilizing influence of Russia and China, addressing concerns about security competition in the Black Sea and most importantly dealing realistically in a sustained manner with the challenges of the Greater Middle East, the US has the potential to make a strong positive contribution to a better future for the region.

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