

The Big Powers, the Mediterranean and the Impact of the War in Ukraine (US, EU, Russia, China)

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The War in Ukraine and the End of Europe's Helsinki Security System

On 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops. It was a military move and the start of a war on a scale unknown and unthinkable in Europe since the end of the Second World War. It was also the end of the European security system as set out in the final declaration of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe signed in Helsinki. Clearly, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, compounded by its ferocious attack and destruction of Ukrainian cities and civilian facilities of all kinds, constituted a flagrant violation of the United Nations Charter and of all the principles of the fundamental agreement that had been the basis of European security since 1975.

President Putin thus sought a return to the Yalta system of sharing out the world between opposing blocs and recognition of the major powers' "zones of influence" and the principle of limited sovereignty of the vassal states, in accordance with the Brezhnev Doctrine. Putin was calling for Russia to regain the Great Power status as it was conceived by the Soviet Union before its implosion.

Are we facing the advent of a new World Order? How will it affect the Mediterranean? This would seem to be the case, to a large extent, and how it will affect us shall depend on the development and end of the war in Ukraine. Since 1991, we have lived in a unipolar global order with a single hegemonic power, the United States. But this order has been un-

dergoing a profound transformation due to enormous structural changes such as China's economic growth and the effect of the great waves of conflict, whose epicentre is largely in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

It is therefore clear that, since the zenith of American hegemony in the unipolar world at the turn of the century, the international order has been evolving towards a multipolar system, with China expected to overtake the United States by 2050. We are still far from a multipolar equilibrium, but the advance of the European unifying project, the progressive weight of China and Russia's growing military activity and presence in the Mediterranean and Africa are outlining the profile of the Big Powers in a fast approaching multipolar order, albeit with two clearly differentiated camps. In one camp are the Western liberal democracies under the leadership of the United States and Europe, and in the other, the authoritarian powers of China and Russia, with state-controlled economies and societies, which are presented as an alternative model, especially for developing countries.

Meanwhile, this unipolar period of supposed "Pax Americana" has not been as such. The invasion and war in Iraq, launched by President George W. Bush and his foolish and arrogant neocons in 2003, did not improve stability in the region, but rather seriously undermined it, creating a hornet's nest from which all kinds of attacks against the stability of Arab countries and the rest of the world radiated. Jihadist groups were strengthened, fundamentally al-Qaeda and its entire cohort of companions and continuers. Daesh prospered through the cruel Syrian civil war, and when it became less favourable to them, they began to move towards Libya and the Sahel countries, contributing decisively to the destabilization of the area. To this generalized confrontation in the Arab-Muslim world must be added the conflicts in

Lebanon, Yemen, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, which are hardly minor.

Regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt and Iran have been playing a growing role in recent years in the political and military alliances that have been gradually woven and unwoven in the context of growing conflict in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Against this regional backdrop, we will approach the issue from the angle of the major powers' presence and activity in the Arab and Mediterranean world in recent times, and especially in relation to the consequences of the war in Ukraine. First, we need to complete the picture by looking at how different countries or groups of countries have positioned themselves in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Europe and the West as a whole were surprised by the UN vote. Despite the blatant illegality of the invasion, the cruelty of the Russian attacks and bombings, and the harshness of the images, the realization was that Russia was not alone. Or at least, it was not repudiated by a wide array of countries. Many countries basically saw it as an internal European affair in which they did not want to get involved. Former partners to varying degrees since the days of the USSR in many cases, they did not want to adopt a position of condemnation towards Russia.

The initial proposal for condemnation by the Security Council was blocked by Russia's own veto power, although it received the pro-condemnation vote of 11 of the 15 member states. What was symptomatic were the countries that abstained: China, India and, surprisingly, the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the General Assembly, a resolution condemning the invasion, demanding the complete withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and the reversal of Russia's recognition of the separatist, self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk was adopted on 2 March by 141 countries against 5 negative votes, although the 35 abstentions and 12 voluntary absences added to the negative votes totalled 52. A not insignificant number of countries avoided condemning the invasion. The abstaining countries and those that were absent fit the profile of what years ago we would have called "Third World developing countries," which were then members of the Non-Aligned Movement, led as then by India, Algeria, Iran, China (obs.), Cuba, Iraq and... interestingly, Mali, which recently passed into the orbit of Wagner's Russian mercenaries. The Arab group

voted in a scattered manner, with Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya (Tripoli), Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Tunisia, the UAE and Yemen condemning the invasion. Algeria, Iraq and Sudan abstained, with Morocco conspicuously absent.

The General Assembly's vote on 7 April on Russia's exclusion from the Human Rights Council was approved by 93 votes to 24, although the total number of those who avoided condemning Russia had reached 100 countries by then. If we look at the Mediterranean, the entire North condemned Russia, along with Turkey and Israel. From the Arab world, only the Libyan government in Tripoli voted to exclude Russia from the Council and condemn it. The rest voted against Russia's exclusion, abstained or were absent. It is clear that in general they do not like to accuse or be accused on human rights issues, but it is nonetheless a highly significant result.

The conclusion is therefore, as stated, that Russia is not as isolated as Europeans and the West in general believe. The Russian military's failure to achieve a swift and resounding victory has serious implications for Russia's international prestige and ambitions. In the event of a protracted war in Ukraine, however, Russia has ample opportunity to replace trade relations with Europe and the West with other partners in the short to medium term. China and India are already supplanting Europe as a market for Russian gas and oil that the West has planned to progressively boycott. But in the longer term, if trade and financial sanctions against Russia persist, it is likely to face serious difficulties, especially in procuring technological and other components that it has hitherto acquired from the West, which it is not clear can all be replaced by Chinese or other products.

The United States: Towards a Renewed Presence in the Mediterranean

In recent years there has been much talk of US "retrenchment" or "disengagement" from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The trend began during Obama's term in office, when he inherited a heavy burden of international responsibilities in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama, and his Vice-President Joe Biden, proposed a shift in priorities, proposing the "Pivot to Asia" and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiatives, both of which ultimately failed due to domestic

issues of political opposition in Congress and complications in the Middle East, including the likewise failed priority of concluding the Iran nuclear deal as a legacy of his presidency. The trend was accentuated during Trump's tenure, with his "America First" nationalist involution and populist obsession with confrontation with China. The Middle East, with the exception of Israel, became less important. Moreover, the United States was progressively becoming self-sufficient in oil and gas, to a large extent, especially with the new fracking techniques, thus weakening the original reason for the priority of the Middle East in US foreign policy: a guaranteed oil supply and having a stabilizer for the world crude oil market. The perception of American disengagement in the region became more acute after the US withdrawal from Iraq and especially Afghanistan. And also as a result of the United States ceding the initiative to Russia and Turkey in Syria, with the more than partial withdrawal of American troops on the ground decided by Trump in October 2019 and agreed with Erdoğan, leaving the Kurds to their fate against Bashar al-Assad and the Turks. The insistence on respect for human rights as a foreign policy criterion since the Obama era, and above all the dropping of Mubarak, was already a warning signal that was poorly perceived by the Arab regimes. Also contributing to the sense of abandonment was the US withdrawal from UNESCO and other UN institutions as well as from the negotiation of the Iran nuclear deal and Trump's anti-multilateralist and regressive attitude in disarmament negotiations in general.

The attitude is no longer the same as that of previous generations of Middle Eastern leaders, and the United States will have to accept a greater degree of autonomy from its allies in the Arab world

This trend towards US disengagement from the Middle East and the Pivot to Asia initiative still existed on President Biden's election platform and in the first months of his term. But with Russia's attack on Ukraine, it underwent a profound change. Confronta-

tion with Russia returned; the Mediterranean and the Middle East became particularly important again. After the attack on Crimea and its annexation by Russia in 2014, the situation became extremely tense. Now, with the invasion of Ukraine there is a strong, unified reaction from the EU and the US, imposing heavy sanctions on Russia. NATO is once again important; countries with such long neutralist traditions as Sweden and Finland are joining the Alliance.

In the new war situation, with Russia's expansionist tendency definitively demonstrated, some of the major objectives of the Atlanticist hawks are beginning to be achieved: to weaken Russia definitively; for the war in Ukraine to at least serve to bleed it dry. It also achieves another of its major aims, that of disengaging Germany from Russia, backtracking down the long road begun by Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and continued through to Angela Merkel, as we shall see later. It also achieves the other major goal of Atlanticism, which is to reinvigorate and unify NATO after Trump's attacks and after so many years without recovering a clear objective for the Alliance. Moreover, as was clearly established at the NATO summit in Madrid, NATO's southern flank has become a priority. It is thus clear that the United States is back in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, from which it never really left.

A New Security Policy for the Gulf and the Mediterranean

The Biden Administration began its term in office with relations with Arab countries in a state of serious disrepair. Given the urgency of the change of course demanded by the war in Ukraine, it was necessary to dust off and reconnect with the long tradition of US friendship with Arab countries, especially in the Gulf. The votes at the United Nations were already an indication of the lukewarmness of the old alliances. Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries refused to increase their production in order to mitigate the rise in oil prices, prioritizing compliance with the agreement reached by OPEC with Russia. US relations with Saudi Arabia, a key country in the Arab world, were particularly bad. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) did not even get on the phone with President Biden. The opposition Democratic Party had been particularly critical of Saudi Arabia in the wake of the scan-

dalous murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. A CIA report, released by the Biden Administration in 2021, concluded that Prince MBS himself approved the operation to “capture or kill” Khashoggi. Biden himself, when running for office, had said that the repressive Saudi kingdom should be turned into a global pariah. But the war in Ukraine changed everything and the needs of *Realpolitik* had to be addressed.

On 15 July 2022 President Biden arrived in Jeddah, where he met with Crown Prince MBS and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, plus the presidents of Egypt and Iraq, and the king of Jordan. This set the stage for the coalition that Biden sought to build to counter the influence of Russia and China in the Middle East. His core message was that the US remained committed to the countries of the Middle East and would not walk away. He did not get concrete commitments on increased oil production, but Biden was optimistic that the renewed relations with the conservative countries of the Arab world would bear fruit. Much work remained to be done, however; trade and investment flows with China, and also with Russia on a different scale, have been growing. China has signed Belt and Road Initiative agreements with virtually all Arab countries. The attitude is no longer the same as that of previous generations of Middle Eastern leaders, and the United States will have to accept a greater degree of autonomy from its allies in the Arab world.

The Perennial Alliance with Israel

President Biden was arriving in Jeddah from Israel, where he had decided to begin his trip to the Middle East, an important message in itself. There he met with Israeli and Palestinian National Authority (PNA) leaders, visiting Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories. The bottom line is that doubts about whether Biden would accept and continue with the Abraham Accords brokered by President Trump were dispelled. With them, Israel's relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have been “normalized”, breaking with the Arab League's tradition of not recognizing Israel diplomatically without guarantees of Palestinian statehood, in line with UN General Assembly resolutions. The question is whether agreements with other countries will follow, especially the key player Saudi Arabia, which is currently

highly unlikely given the symbolic role Saudi Arabia plays in the Arab and Islamic world.

At the same time, the United States' special relationship with Israel in political, economic, and especially technological and defence matters was reaffirmed. Their close relations in terms of security and intelligence in the region likewise continues, especially with regard to Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Complicated Relations with Turkey

Kemalist Turkey had always been a fundamental NATO outpost. With President Erdoğan's Islamist-inspired administrations, however, relations have been complicated. Under Erdoğan, Turkey has pursued a highly autonomous international policy, often referred to as Islamist-inspired neo-Ottomanism, seeking to regain its influence in what were once the vast domains of the Ottoman Empire. This has led it to support Islamist-inspired movements along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood in all countries without particularly running counter to US interests. Relations in the Syrian conflict have been more complicated. Turkey and the US have supported the forces opposed to Bashar al-Assad's regime, although they have clashed over US support for the Kurds in northern Syria, whom Erdoğan considers allies of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, included on the list of terrorist movements. Turkey sought to keep them away by establishing a Turkish protectorate zone along its border, inside Syrian territory.

The most serious complications have arisen, however, as a result of the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2015, of which the Turkish President accused the religious leader Fethullah Gülen, who is in exile in the US and whom Washington refused to extradite. Erdoğan carried out extensive purges in the administration and the military and appeared to have concluded that the Americans had possibly had a hand in inspiring the coup. Erdoğan has since maintained an ambivalent policy within NATO, which has led to controversial understandings with Russia, notably in acquiring the Russian S-400 air defence system. That understanding led the US to exclude Turkey from the F-35 Patriot missile procurement and industrial participation programme.

The war in Ukraine has, in this case, greatly strengthened Turkey's already important role. In the first place, because of its geographical position and its

control of the straits connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Secondly, Erdoğan has very skilfully played his hand as a mediator. First and foremost, by reaching agreements together with the United Nations to unblock the flow of cereals out of Russia and Ukraine, so necessary to avoid famine, especially in Arab and African countries. Moreover, Erdoğan continues to insist on his role as mediator between Russia and Ukraine, which allows him to maintain a position of neutrality that does not pit him against Russia and appears positive for all parties. His personal contact has been fluid and continuous with both Putin and Zelensky, as well as with the UN Secretary General and the main world leaders concerned. This has strengthened his position vis-à-vis Washington, and it is therefore to be expected that he will continue to pursue a policy with a broad degree of autonomy.

Europe's Soft Power Confronted with Geopolitical Reality

Europe and the Mediterranean: The Construction Years

In the world under American hegemony, Europe has generally felt comfortable. From the geopolitical point of view, specialization has taken place. The United States has been in charge of hard power, as the world's great gendarme, first against the Soviet bloc and then uncontested, while Europe has specialized in soft power and focused on the economy as the basis for its international relations. This state of affairs has clearly been applicable to the Mediterranean and the Middle East since 1956, when France and Great Britain ceased to be world powers after the Suez crisis.

In 1995, with the launch of the Barcelona Process, European soft power was perfected. Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has disrupted everything, including in the Mediterranean. But, as always, the biggest change consists of a sudden acceleration of the trends and developments that had already been taking place in recent years.

The Arab Springs were received with enthusiasm by the international community in 2011. They seemed to be the final crisis of the traditional authoritarian Arab state before moving on to a new democratic,

modernizing model such as the one that was being promoted by the Barcelona Process. The results varied depending on the developments in each case: countries where the democratic revolution triumphed, as initially in Tunisia and Egypt; countries where it later ended in an authoritarian reaction that re-established the traditional state, such as Egypt; countries where governments managed to impose a reformist path, such as Morocco and Jordan; countries that largely managed to avoid reforms by financing social peace with gas or oil revenues; and finally, countries where the revolution failed and a civil conflict of enormous proportions broke out, as in Syria, Yemen and Libya. These conflicts are intertwined with external interference from both major powers and regional powers, which support one or the other of the warring sides.

The current situation of crisis and heightened tensions as a consequence of the war in Ukraine will require a clearer sense of realpolitik by the EU in the exercise of its Principled Pragmatism and its new geopolitical capabilities

The EU was trying to adapt its Euro-Mediterranean policy to the reality of the new democratic processes and modernization driven internally by the most enlightened elements and youth in Arab countries. But the gravity of the situation was becoming increasingly apparent as the counter-revolutionary reaction in Egypt and Bahrain and the civil wars in Syria and Libya deepen. In 2015, the European Commission (EC) launched a review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to address the consequences of the Arab Spring. The ENP's main priority in its Southern dimension continued to be promoting economic growth and institutional modernization in partner countries, but collective security and the prevention of irregular migration also emerged as major issues. The progressive construction of a European Security and Defence Policy found in the complicated Mediterranean scenario an area demanding increasing attention. It also included the emergence of new

and enormous challenges, such as climate change, the environmental emergency and the necessary energy transition, or the digital transition imposed by technological change. The imperative has been to adapt to the accelerating process of globalization. All of this led to the publication in February 2021 of the Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, “Renewed partnership with the southern Neighbourhood: A New Agenda for the Mediterranean.” To demonstrate its intended effectiveness, the Communication was accompanied by an Economic and Investment Plan.

The European Union: A Geopolitical Player?

In mid-February 2022, when an extraordinary, mass concentration of Russian military forces was already taking place on Ukraine’s borders just before the invasion, there was still serious disunity among EU Member States as to the nature of the threat and the scope of possible sanctions to deter Russia. The EU lived up to its reputation as a legalistic body with cumbersome procedures, especially in matters of foreign or security policy, traditionally the zealously-guarded preserve of state sovereignty. On 24 February, however, everything changed. Faced with the ferocious Russian attack and invasion of Ukraine, Europe’s response was united, swift and forceful. Moreover, doubts about the need for Euro-Atlantic solidarity suddenly disappeared. NATO has been strengthened. Even countries with a long tradition of neutrality, such as Sweden and Finland, quickly applied to join the Alliance. The European Union and its Member States have adopted historic sanctions against Russia by absolute consensus, adding to those already in place since 2014 as sanctions for the invasion and annexation of Crimea. Among other measures, funds and assets of 80 Russian entities in Europe have been frozen, as well as the entry possibilities of 1,091 Russian leaders. The financial assets and reserves of the Central Bank of Russia and the seven main Russian banks have been blocked and excluded from the SWIFT interbank connection system. A series of severe trade restrictions and bans have been passed and airspace, ports and land routes are now closed to Russian planes, ships and vehicles. And what is most ground-breaking for the EU is the approval of up to 1 billion euros in mili-

tary aid to Ukraine based on the European Peace Facility created a year earlier. It amounts to 900 million for the financing and supply of lethal weapons, for the first time in the history of the European Union, plus 100 million for humanitarian and emergency aid. 1.55 billion euros have been approved, based on the Temporary Protection Directive of 2001, for aid to the six million Ukrainian refugees in EU countries, of which 60 percent has been directed to Poland. Finally, Russian disinformation media, such as *Russia Today* (RT) and *Sputnik*, have been shut down and blocked.

These sanctions are identical or similar to those adopted by the United States. In addition, Russian gas imports are to be halved by the end of 2022, and oil imports are to be progressively reduced. Germany’s initial hesitation due to its heavy dependence on Russian gas has been forcefully resolved by the new chancellor, Olaf Scholz, who cancelled the commissioning of Nord Stream II and increased the defence budget by 100 billion euros, with the plan to henceforth devote an annual 2% of GDP, which will be by far the largest defence budget among EU countries, a major change in Germany and in Europe in geopolitical terms. In response to a request by Ukrainian President Zelensky, the European Parliament has adopted a motion calling for the immediate opening of negotiations with Ukraine to make it a candidate country for EU membership. In a highly symbolic decision, the Council instructed the Commission to examine how this could be done.

In this manner, the European Union has just taken a very first step, but one of enormous importance, in the progressive configuration of a European defence system, in line with the goal of Strategic Autonomy. This was confirmed in the Strategic Compass approved on 21 March, a programmatic security and defence document for the 2022-2030 period.

Europe, which voted unanimously at the United Nations to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the strongest terms, is perplexed by the reluctance of the countries of the Arab world to join in. The EU and the US are launching their diplomatic offensive in the face of the elusive behaviour of Arab countries that they considered especially friendly and allied. President Biden’s key visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia was backed up by trips by Borrell and other senior EU officials. Energy is the first area of negotiation, but the diplomatic wrangling and approaches go beyond

this. Alliances are taking shape that, if consolidated, may come to characterize the new International Order after the war in Ukraine. Traditional European policy towards the Mediterranean, through the ENP and the Union for the Mediterranean, is being maintained and strengthened, but the war in Ukraine has accelerated the changes that were already taking place. Realpolitik is gaining ground through the EU's Principled Pragmatism, which is acquiring a more geopolitical and realistic profile in the defence of its positions and interests, based on the acceptance of the Arab-Mediterranean world as it is rather than as Europeans would like it to be.

The southern countries will be more autonomous in their foreign policy; But they are well aware that, in order to defend their stability, prosperity and interests, US hard power and EU soft power cannot be replaced by an alternative alliance or understanding with Russia or China. In the competition for influence in the MENA region, the first fact is that European official development aid still far exceeds that of China. At the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EU approved 225 million euros in aid from the Food Resilience Facility for the MENA countries in the face of potential problems of rising cereal prices, shortages and famine. More importantly, the EU has approved the major Global Gateway programme, which plans to mobilize 300 billion euros for infrastructure projects around the world in the fields of digital infrastructure, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research. In this context, the external dimension of both the European Green Deal and the large-scale Next Generation programme designed to revive the economy after the Covid-19 pandemic crisis stand out. The Global Gateway programme, in particular, appears to be specifically designed to compete with the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative programme, offering alternative funding and support.

The current situation of crisis and heightened tensions as a consequence of the war in Ukraine will require a clearer sense of realpolitik by the EU in the exercise of its Principled Pragmatism and its new geopolitical capabilities. In general, the EU will support reformist regimes such as Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia (which will hopefully continue to be so); it will seek the best possible understanding with conservative authoritarian countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates; and, together with the

US, it should call to order Turkey, which should not forget that its great economic progress since 2001 is based on its Customs Union agreement with the EU. Finally, the EU will have to act in concert with the US to contain the disruptive activities of Iran and its dependent proxies in Syria and Lebanon. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations that President Biden wants to resume offer a good opportunity to attempt to do so.

Russia, the Mediterranean and the War in Ukraine

Russia's presence and policy in the Mediterranean in recent years is part of its desire to project itself as a major power on the international stage. It was Putin's immense good fortune that when he came to power as Russia's prime minister in 1999, the country's economic situation radically changed. After more than 10 years of economic disasters, the Russian economy experienced a period of vigorous economic growth in the 2000s, driven by the boom in the global oil market. This allowed him to acquire enormous stature as a ruler capable of lifting Russia up again. His drastic intervention in the Second Chechen War in 1999 caused stupor in Russia, but also admiration. The comparison was obvious; the years of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were years of economic collapse. Vladimir Putin came to power as the strongman capable of rebuilding the country and putting it on a firm footing. The result was the construction of an authoritarian, autocratic system with a particular preponderance of former KGB men, and the consolidation of the plutocratic system based on the plundering of the sources of wealth clearly subject to presidential political power. His ambition to restore Russia's status as a great power was made explicit by Putin himself at the Munich security conference in 2007. Before Angela Merkel and a good many Western leaders, including former NATO Secretary General and EU High Representative Javier Solana, Putin clearly expressed his rejection of the unipolar global order, denouncing NATO enlargement as an operation concocted against Russia in breach of previous alleged commitments. He claimed Russia as a great country with 1,000 years of history that should participate in building and leading a new international order.

The sequence is clear. After the Chechen experience in 2009, inside the Russian Federation, and the Georgia War of 2008, the invasion and annexation of Crimea was launched in 2014, along with the incitement to secession of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Donbas. There were sanctions by the West, but Crimea remained annexed to Russia.

This is not the clean, swift war that was envisaged, but rather is turning into a war of attrition that is destroying Ukraine, but also progressively weakening Russia, due to its military failure and the consequences of the economic and financial sanctions that will continue to be increasingly felt. All of this will have consequences for Russia's projection in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

The Mediterranean has always been part of the Russian social imaginary. It is the outlet to warm waters for a country whose immense continental landmass is enclosed, with the only exits to the seas being the icy waters of the Arctic, impassable for much of the year; the narrow Russian window on the Baltic; and the Siberian Far East via Vladivostok. Even if it is through the Black Sea and then the narrow passages of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the Mediterranean Sea is thus Russia's clearest outlet to the world, and furthermore to the world in which it can develop its ambition for imperial influence, i.e. the countries of the South.

The exceptional economic boom allowed for a major rebuilding of the Russian army and navy, an essential attribute of a great power, as well as the reconstruction and modernization of Russia's powerful military industry. In recent years, with the military and economic instruments in place, the success of Russia's projection in the Mediterranean has been truly significant. First, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, with a large base in Sevastopol for the Russian navy's

southward projection. In 2015, the decisive intervention in the Syrian civil war, which managed to change the course of the conflict. Subsequently, the firm foothold in Libya and the building of important relations with all the countries of the South. Putin's imperial design was thus achieving its goals without encountering much resistance. In 2022, he finally made his historic miscalculation. The invasion of Ukraine was intended as a blitzkrieg, creating *faits accomplis* on the ground as in Crimea in 2014, without major opposition from the West beyond the announced sanctions. However, the invasion of Ukraine has provoked a unanimous, strong response from European countries and the United States and massive support for the Ukrainian military.

The failure of the Russian army's offensive and its enormous difficulties against the Ukrainians are causing it to lose its prestige and respectability. This is not the clean, swift war that was envisaged, but rather is turning into a war of attrition that is destroying Ukraine, but also progressively weakening Russia, due to its military failure and the consequences of the economic and financial sanctions that will continue to be increasingly felt. All of this will have consequences for Russia's projection in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

The basic objectives of Russia's projection and presence in the Mediterranean in recent years have been to:

- Establish itself as a major power in an area of special interest to it.
- Fight against Islamist terrorism, which could once again spread among the Muslim populations of the Caucasus and Central Asia.
- Support strong regimes that provide stability and close the door to democratic transitions, which could lead to new colour revolutions in the area of the former Soviet countries, including Russia.
- Penetrate and influence the world oil and gas market as an exporting country and also as an investor.
- Acquire permanent bases for the Russian navy and air force in the region.

Considering Russia's economic capacity, which, with a GDP lower than Italy's, can hardly match that of a major world power, Russia's actions will be opportunistic. It will take advantage of the opportunities that arise and try to make its military operations prof-

itable, charging for its services, arms sales or the exploitation of raw materials, in addition to political influence. Furthermore, it will try to minimize costs by using mercenaries such as Wagner's, who are less politically compromising and much more effective and cheaper for the type of missions to be carried out in African countries.

The first major operation of Russia's new power projection in the Mediterranean was its intervention in the civil war of Syria, a country that was a former client of the USSR. There is an overriding Russian interest in having permanent military bases in the Mediterranean: the large naval base in Tartus, revitalizing and expanding the one that the Soviet navy already had there, and the new Khmeimim air base, essential for air support to the Assad regime, which would turn the tide of the war. In this war, Assad's and Putin's objectives coincide: to fight the Islamist terrorism of ISIS and related groups, on the one hand, and the Syrian democratic opposition forces, which were already failing in their attempt to overthrow Assad and initiate a democratic transition in the country, on the other. Moscow sees the democratic projects of the Arab Spring as yet another example of the colour revolutions that could "infect" the countries in its orbit, and Russia itself. With Russia's aggressive military intervention, especially its aviation, the same war tactics are being repeated as in Grozny in the Georgia war, the massive destruction of cities such as Aleppo, which we will later see repeated in the war in Ukraine.

The democratic revolution of the Arab Spring in 2011 was initiated by groups of modernizers and youth and women's movements. However, it was soon hijacked by Islamist movements, whether jihadist revolutionaries or moderates, supported by the Gulf countries. With the outbreak of repression and war, the Syrian regime, with the support of Iran, faced a large coalition composed of opposition movements, both democratic and Islamist, and the Kurds, who would be joined by an international coalition including the United States and Turkey, initially formed to fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, and later transferred to Syria. It was the direct military intervention by Russian aircraft that changed the course of the war, but the progressive inhibition of the international coalition also played a role, especially the US withdrawal proposed by Trump, which was largely carried out. Some analysts believe that the

US withdrawal was partly because the Trump Administration was happy to accept that Bashar al-Assad's regime had survived and that Russia would impose order and stability in the country.

Russia's support was primarily political and diplomatic, as its veto prevented the UN Security Council from condemning the Syrian army for its proven use of chemical weapons. In addition to arms sales, Russia has been intervening directly since 2015 with direct aviation, artillery and training support, in exchange for the guaranteed provision of its military bases for the future. Incidentally, misgivings among its allies led Damascus, under pressure from Iran, to shorten the years of cession of the bases originally envisaged when negotiating their respective agreements. Iran and Russia are circumstantial allies here, but with ultimately conflicting objectives: Russia's interest is in regime stability that will guarantee the use of its military bases for the future, while Iran remains committed to spreading the Shiite revolution, its pre-eminence in the region and the destruction of Israel.

Involvement in the Syrian civil war is just one factor in the fundamentally complicated relations between Russia and Turkey. Modern Kemalist Turkey was a staunch NATO ally. Under Erdoğan and Putin everything is much more complicated. The war in Ukraine has changed the equation significantly, adding more unknowns for now. What is certain, however, is that Putin has achieved significant collusion with Erdoğan, especially since the failed coup of July 2016.

Russia was already a commercial partner, a key supplier of gas and oil, a regular customer of Turkey's important tourism sector and a major investor in the construction and real estate sectors. During Putin's official visit to Turkey in 2014, he announced the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline, which entered service in 2020. After 2016, relations went up a notch. In 2017 Erdoğan bought a batch of S-400 missile systems worth \$2.5 billion from Russia. Reacting to criticism from NATO, he bought a second batch in 2020. In 2018, the Russian company Rosatom broke ground for the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant. With the Ukrainian war raging, in July 2022, Russia approved \$20 billion in funding for the expansion of the plant under construction, which will be maintained and operated by Rosatom and whose first reactor is due to start operating in 2023.

The fluidity of Russian-Turkish relations has allowed Erdoğan to play the complicated role of mediator in order to reach an agreement on shipping cereals from Ukraine and Russia to the international market, avoiding, as we said, problems of famine and unrest, mainly in Arab and African countries. The Ukraine war undoubtedly strengthens Turkey and Erdoğan's position in their relations with Russia, as well as with the United States. But Russia is certainly losing face for its failures in Ukraine. Despite its mediations, Turkey may come under increasing pressure as a NATO member to become more defined in support of Ukraine, which it has thus far managed to avoid.

Russia's relations with Egypt have traditionally been good since the 1956 Suez crisis and Nasser's agreements with Khrushchev for the construction of the Aswan Dam after he failed to obtain US support for the project. The Obama Administration supported the democratically elected government of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood and strongly criticized al-Sisi's coup, while taking pains to avoid labelling it as such in order to maintain important trade, political and military aid relations. Al-Sisi moved closer to Russia, and Egypt is now a major customer of the Russian arms industry and the world's leading importer of wheat, most of it Russian. Trade and economic relations grew significantly after the Western sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014 for the invasion and annexation of Crimea. Al-Sisi has continued the Nasserist tradition of balancing between the US and Russia. In 2017, the two countries reached an agreement for Rosatom to build a nuclear power plant also in Egypt for \$24 billion with Russian and international funding, which is scheduled to begin operating in 2024. The oil companies Rosneft, Gazprom and Lukoil are all involved in oil exploration and exploitation in Egypt. This same Nasserist tradition and popular pressure, fundamentally anti-American, will foreseeably lead Egypt to maintain a balanced position on the war in Ukraine, as already demonstrated by the UN votes.

After Russia's great diplomatic and military success in meddling in the Syrian civil war since 2015, the experience would be repeated to some extent in Libya. Russia, which had maintained good political and especially commercial relations with the Gaddafi regime, felt cheated when a mere humanitarian no-fly operation approved by the UN Security Council, with the Kremlin's abstention, turned into a full-

fledged military intervention by NATO and some Western countries, especially France. Moreover, with the fall of Gaddafi, Russia lost an important market and even debts of more than \$4 billion that the new post-Gaddafi Libyan government refused to recognize. Gazprom and Tafnet were forced to abandon contracts they had in the country worth more than \$10 billion. The implosion of the Libyan State and the ensuing civil war plunged the country into chaos. The re-launching of the war by Marshal Haftar's alternative government, established in Benghazi, to advance towards Tripoli and control the entire country, offered the opportunity for the Russian intervention decided by Putin in 2019. Haftar had the support of Egypt and the UAE, and Russia is present with aviation forces and through the Wagner mercenaries, both Russian and Syrian pro-Bashar al-Assad militia. For the moment, Libya has become a platform for the projection of Russian military power in the heart of the Mediterranean and a base of operations for Wagner mercenaries in the Sahel. However, with Marshal Haftar's offensive having failed, the continuity and modality of Russia's military presence in Libya will be conditioned by the evolution of the peace process underway under the auspices of the United Nations. For the moment, the war in Ukraine seems to be resulting in a transfer of Russian forces and mercenaries from Libya to Ukraine, where they find themselves in a very different situation, which could put a damper on the arrogance they have tended to display in African countries.

The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia and the US, played a leading role at the beginning of the Ukrainian war. The UAE's abstention at the UN Security Council, avoiding condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine in exchange for Russian support to avoid UN criticism on human rights, was the first alarm bell. This was followed by the refusal of Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries to increase oil production in order to mitigate the price increases and market disruption caused by the war. As explained above, President Biden's visit claims to have redressed the situation.

Finally, it is worth noting Israel's always interesting role and relations with Russia in the Middle East. In recent years Israel has dramatically improved its relations with Russia in trade and technology, bordering on military-applicable technology, as well as having a particularly important human link because of

the many Jews of Russian origin who are citizens of Israel. Israel and Russia have had counter-terrorist intelligence collaboration in Syria, Iraq, Iran and elsewhere, and an understanding that Russia is not an impediment to Israel's operations in Syria against targets it deems a terrorist threat. The war in Ukraine will certainly complicate the situation by forcing a choice of sides. Israel has attempted some Erdoğan-style mediation, with little success so far.

China, the Cautiously Ascending Power

On 4 February 2022 President Putin travelled to Beijing for the Winter Olympics, just 20 days before launching the attack on Ukraine. It is hard to believe that they did not refer in some way to the situation regarding Ukraine. Putin obviously went to Beijing seeking Chinese backing. The various options were ready, although it was perhaps not yet clear what the eventual course of events would be. The result was a warm reaffirmation of friendship between the two countries. The Chinese ally, meanwhile, is taking note. The war in Ukraine is a major test bed for China. First, to test the West's reaction and the degree of unity in its response; second, to analyse the effects of economic and financial sanctions; and third, to observe the reactions of third countries sympathetic to one side or the other. Ever cautious, China did not give direct support to Russia; it did not join the Russian veto of the UN Security Council resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine. It simply gave indirect support by abstaining. One of the principles of Chinese diplomacy is that of balance, not taking sides in any conflict other than its own, maintaining good relations with both camps and, should the occasion arise, presenting itself as a peace power and mediator. Ukraine is also a delicate case for another reason: it involves another major principle, that of territorial integrity, which Russia applies to Ukraine and China to Taiwan, which it considers a Chinese province awaiting reintegration into the common homeland. China's attitude towards Taiwan is similar to that of Russia towards Ukraine. China went so far as to say that what has happened in Ukraine is the result of US and NATO pressure and its besiegement of Russia in recent years; but the fact is that it abstained. China presents its model, which some have called the Beijing Consensus, demonstrating by example

that the good policy for long-term economic growth and development is not the liberal recipes of the Washington Consensus, but a politically authoritarian and economically state-directed system, even if economic stakeholders act with relative freedom in the market. This is the model it now largely shares with Russia, hence its solidarity of interests and international positioning. Its typical clientele is therefore those countries that aspire to economic development and that may find the Chinese model and aid the most effective way forward.

China, from a Mainland Country to a Trade and Maritime Power

China's economic growth and its extraordinary engagement in international trade have, to some extent, put the Mediterranean back at the centre of the world. Or at least at one of the strategic points for the functioning of China's economic model in recent decades. The route from China through the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean, and from there to Europe and optionally to the eastern seaboard of the United States is thus the route that connects China with the European market and also with the North American market on its Atlantic coast, which has similar freight costs from China as from the Pacific and Panama. It is also the route that connects China to energy sources in the Middle East, and to Africa, the continent of the future in terms of natural resources. But China's concept and approach are totally different from Russia's, at least in Putin's version of Russia. China's approach is always based on its first and foremost objective, which is to continue its extraordinary economic growth of recent decades in order to modernize the country and give China its rightful place among the world's great powers and, from its perspective, even a position of hegemony in the future. China is therefore well served by the stability on which it has built its economic growth. Stability at home through the iron grip of the Communist Party and stability in partner countries with which to continue prospering. This implies, for example, in the Arab and Islamic world, the deepest possible vigilance and cooperation in the fight against Islamist extremism, which could spread to the Islamic areas of China itself, especially the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang region.

China has traditionally had very little presence in the Mediterranean. However, everything has changed with globalization and China's extraordinary economic growth. The new China of recent decades has become the world's factory. It needs to attract foreign investment in technology – especially in its first decades of growth and industrialization – to expand its markets, mainly in Europe and the United States, and supply itself with raw materials and especially energy. In the case of the MENA region, the volume of trade with China was \$20 billion in 2000, but rose to \$314 billion in 2018, a 16-fold increase over 18 years. However, these figures represent only 7% of China's growing foreign trade. China's exports to the MENA countries are quite diversified, while 80% of exports from the MENA region to China are concentrated in oil and gas. China relies on the MENA region for 42% of its hydrocarbon imports, although one of the consequences of the war in Ukraine is that China is increasing its gas and oil purchases from Russia, and decreasing its imports from the Gulf and the MENA region in general.

President Xi Jinping has given China's foreign policy a much more assertive external projection. In 2013, he launched its major programme to structure China's projection throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe, i.e. the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This is an extraordinarily ambitious programme that essentially promotes and finances infrastructure projects based on agreements with countries that serve China's interests and conditional on the maximum possible participation of Chinese agents, be they financiers, companies, technicians or workers. After four decades of growth, China has also become a major investor abroad. For years, its trade surplus was invested mainly in US bonds, but for many years now Chinese companies, both public and private, have been investing massively abroad directly and in sectors with ever greater added value, setting up or buying companies of the highest technological level. It can be said, however, that China builds primarily in the South, through the BRI, but invests preferentially in companies in the rich countries of the North. BRI projects chiefly involve the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank, the new Development Bank for BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the New Silk Road Fund. In its financing projects, as in its commercial transactions, one of China's main aims is to promote the de-dollar-

ization of the economy and international finance, in which it has so far made little progress. Perhaps in this regard, the war in Ukraine and the financial sanctions imposed on Russia will be counterproductive, boosting this de-dollarization in China's and Russia's trade with one another and with third countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative comprises a complex map of land and sea routes linking China with Europe and Africa through six land corridors and two major maritime routes: the Arctic route, which may become important with climate change; and fundamentally, that of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, through the straits. Initially, its main objective was connectivity, investing in land and maritime connectivity infrastructures, in ports such as Piraeus, for example, now Chinese property. But most BRI projects consist of financing the award of large construction and engineering contracts to Chinese companies. The MENA region accounts for 30% of the construction contracts won by China and financed by the BRI. Algeria, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran are among the top 10 countries in construction volume by Chinese companies working abroad. Only Sub-Saharan Africa receives a higher volume of BRI funding than the MENA region, with a larger grant component. Some authors have accused China of practising debt trap diplomacy, i.e. lending to economically weak countries beyond their ability to pay in order to have greater leverage and influence over them.

China, a Growing Military Power in the Mediterranean

The greater assertiveness of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, the need to guarantee the security of its supply lines and, above all, the desire to have a greater presence as a world power, have led China to both increase its defence spending and weave a network of collaboration through military cooperation with certain countries according to its interests and through arms sales.

Initially, China's military operations were within the framework of UN-flagged peacekeeping operations. Since 2008, the Chinese navy has been actively participating in anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa, off the coast of Somalia. This finally led it, in 2017, to establish a naval base abroad for the first time, choosing the strategic location of Djibouti, at the mouth of the Red Sea, a strategic point on the BRI

sea route. China has thus become a “maritime power,” – as Xi Jinping announced at the beginning of his term in office. Since 2015, China has been conducting naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean, the China Sea and the Pacific. It also conducts naval exercises in the waters of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean separately with both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

China is now the world’s fifth largest arms exporter and has major customers in the MENA region, such as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia, an important US ally, buys only 1% of its arms imports from China, but has reached an agreement with Beijing for the installation of a CH-4 drone factory in the country. Riyadh had tried to buy Predator missiles from the US, but President Obama vetoed it in the face of dissenting views in Congress over civilian deaths in bombings in Yemen. As a result, Saudi Arabia replaced it with a first-time purchase of CH-4 drones from China, which led to the agreement to set up the stated TH-4 drone factory.

China has clearly hierarchized its relations with other countries, in principle into three categories: comprehensive strategic partnerships, strategic partnerships and potential partnerships, as well as special partnerships in some cases. Applying this to the MENA region shows us a map of priorities. China has concluded comprehensive strategic partnerships with Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while maintaining strategic partnerships with some others, such as Morocco. A clear prioritization of energy supply interests in its relations with the MENA countries follows from the map. There is also China’s fundamental interest in preserving its good relations with all countries along its maritime route to Europe and the Atlantic. For the Arab countries, China is an increasingly interesting partner because of its immense economic capacity and the relevance of BRI aid, investment and development projects, and especially because of the non-political or ideological conditionality of Chinese aid and investment.

China viewed the revolutionary movements of the Arab Spring with suspicion and little confidence. In general, it supports stable, authoritarian regimes that shun alignment with the US to some extent, wishing to maintain a degree of autonomy from the West in their foreign policy. In North Africa, China has traditionally maintained particularly close relations with Algeria. Beijing has prioritized its traditional harmony

with the Algerian regime to favour its BRI projects, where more than 40,000 Chinese workers and technicians are employed. Algeria, which has the largest defence budget on the African continent, is a good buyer for China’s arms industry.

The Chinese ally, meanwhile, is taking note. The war in Ukraine is a major test bed for China. First, to test the West’s reaction and the degree of unity in its response; second, to analyse the effects of economic and financial sanctions; and third, to observe the reactions of third countries sympathetic to one side or the other

Egypt is of particular interest to China as a major geographic, demographic and cultural centre of gravity in the Arab world, although in recent decades it has been displaced by the wealth and power of the Gulf countries. But there is an additional feature that makes it strategically important, which is the Suez Canal, under Egyptian sovereignty and control. China maintained an important and fruitful relationship with Gaddafi’s Libya. Today it maintains good relations, mainly economic, with both the Tripoli government, since it is the one recognized by the United Nations, and General Haftar’s government in the Benghazi area, awaiting to enter into juicy contracts for the reconstruction of the country when the conflict comes to an end, whoever wins.

China has concluded two important special agreements with Turkey and Israel. Turkey is an old and new regional power, in a process of industrialization that is both competitive with and complementary to that of China. It is also of particular relevance to China because of its geographical position as the guardian of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits. In recent years, Israel’s relations with China have become increasingly important because of China’s exceptional interest in Israeli technological capabilities. China’s relations with the Gulf states have, predictably, been based primarily on energy. In recent years,

however, other dimensions have clearly developed that have an impact on stability and conflict in the region. Along with the other “big five” Security Council members, plus the European Union and Germany, China was one of the promoters of the nuclear deal with Iran and has consistently pushed for a return to that negotiation after it was broken off by President Trump. China cultivates and closely controls Iran so that it does not spread its revolutionary Islamist influence inside China. With the Biden presidency, negotiations should resume and China, which maintains excellent trade, political and security relations with Iran, will play a special role.

Looking to the Future

So, is the war in Ukraine a turning point towards a new World Order? And what impact will it have on the Mediterranean? It all depends, as stated, on the outcome of the war. In any case, it has been pointed out that crises and wars, rather than radically changing things, accelerate the trends that were already developing. And what appears on the horizon is indeed a multipolar system, but which in reality is configured into two opposing camps vying for hegemony and also for their ideology and political and social model, with quite or very different value systems: the camp of liberal democracies, led by the United States and the EU; and the camp of authoritarian systems, with societies, cultures, media and economies that are more or less capitalist but controlled by the state and all of its apparatuses.

In the case of the South Mediterranean world, there are three models, three possible paths: 1) A model of modernization and progressive democratization, such as the one agreed since 1995 with the European Union through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); 2) an anti-Western Islamist identity model, today in regression at the governmental level but not so much at the social level, with two different versions: the conservative one, driven by countries such as Turkey and Qatar, and the revolutionary one, driven by Iran and its epigones in Syria and Lebanon among the Shiites, and by the descendants of al-Qaeda among the Sunnis; and 3) the conservative model of the traditional Arab authoritarian state – which has been reinforced in recent years by the failure of the Arab

Spring – promoted by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and accepted by the US and the Western camp as a fait accompli when necessary for stability, as in al-Sisi’s Egypt. The possibilities for progress and development in the countries of the region depend on internal factors, on the policies pursued by regional powers and also, to a very significant extent, on the policies and attitudes of the major global powers. The problem is that the latter will act in accordance with their interests, which do not always coincide with those of the countries and populations of the region.

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