

SECURITY AND DEFENCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AND IN THE ARCTIC

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THE MEDITERRANEAN

Beyond the Mediterranean's cultural and historical significance, the region holds profound geopolitical importance in contemporary times, particularly concerning the concept of security¹, i.e., the complex interplay between geopolitical, social, and economic factors that have a paramount impact on the region's stability.

International cooperation and strategic foresight are crucial to today's geopolitical context of the Mediterranean region and will impact not only the regional actors, e.g. Member States of the European Union, but also the broader transatlantic alliance (i.e. NATO). The different nature of the challenges in the Mediterranean Sea namely strategic location, energy resources, migration challenges, naval power dynamics, and the presence of transnational threats (e.g. organized crime) leads to a link of geopolitical importance with far-reaching implications for the security of nations bordering on its shores.

The historical perspective on Mediterranean security

From the root of the word Mediterranean, it is easy to understand the strategic importance of this sea. "Mediterranean" is derived from the Latin word "Mediterraneus," meaning "in the middle of the lands". The Greek Empire was one of the first populations that benefited from the strategic position of the Mediterranean Sea, conquering the lands that faced it. Ensuring security in the Mediterranean Sea was a priority for the British Empire, which, before becoming a global empire, held a significant presence in the Mediterranean through the control of the Strait of Gibraltar, Sicily, the

¹ M. Molinari, *Mediterraneo conteso. Perché l'Occidente e i suoi rivali ne hanno bisogno*, Milano, Rizzoli Editore, 2023, p. introduction.

Suez Channel, and the islands of Malta and Cyprus². The access to the Mediterranean Sea was also, and still remains, strategic for the Russian Federation, as it had been for the Tsarist and the Soviet Russia. The historical objective of Russia is entry to the "warm seas". The First Crimean War of 1853, initiated by the Russian attack on the Ottoman Empire districts and strongly desired by Tsar Nicolas I, aimed to occupy Crimea to gain control of the Black Sea³. This strategic move would provide easy access, through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Strait, to the "warm sea": the Mediterranean Sea⁴. With the dissolution of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires at the end of the First World War the Mediterranean scenario changed radically. The emergence of new states redefined regional balances. It was primarily the efforts of the League of Nations that altered the situation in the Mediterranean. Through Type A mandates, all the territories formerly part of the Ottoman Empire were divided between the two predominant powers of the time and the victors of the war, namely Great Britain and France. Syria and Lebanon to France, while Palestine, Jordania, and Iraq to Great Britain. The Second World War did not significantly impact the balance in the Mediterranean, much like the First World War. It was the post-war events that once again reshaped the regional scenario. On one hand, the wave of decolonization brought important Mediterranean States to become independent such as Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. On the other hand, in 1956 the Crisis of the Suez Channel led to two different but contextualized phenomena within the Mediterranean region, the definitive reorganization of British power and a division between the northern and southern parts of the region marked a significant shift. The countries in the southern part sought to establish their autonomous roles within the region, emancipating themselves from the powers that had previously subjugated them. This sentiment is still evident in the region. The onset of the Palestinian-Israeli wars and the conflict in Lebanon had profound implications for the regional and international security of the Mediterranean Sea during the Cold War.

² R.Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800*, London, Penguin Books, 2012, p 147-185. J. Darwin, *THE EMPIRE PROJECT The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 1- 6 (Introduction)

³ S. Flanagan, A. Binnedijk, I.Chindea,K.Costello,G.Kirkwood,G.Massicot, C.Reach, *Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security*, Santa Monica, Rand Cooperation, 2020, p. 11-25.

⁴ P. Renouvin, *Il SECOLO XIX 1815-1871: l'Europa delle nazionalità e il risveglio di nuovi mondi*, Firenze, Vallecchi Editore, p.331-332.

These situations witnessed the United States becoming involved in the Mediterranean theater, a region in which it had not been particularly interested until then. The 1990-91 Kuwait crisis and the military invasion of Iraq in 2003 added value to the United States presence and influence in the Mediterranean and specifically in its Eastern area.

The 21st century saw significant evolutions in the Mediterranean basin, basically highlighting the different security perspectives that European Countries and the United States have been showing following the 9/11's "war on terrorism", the implications of the Arab Springs with their impact in producing the crises in Libya and Syria and the migration crises that have been affecting the basin. Parallel to that, the geopolitical and geo-economic developments characterizing the global dynamics have also influenced how this region is perceived by historical and new pivotal actors at international and regional level. From this point of view, the Mediterranean has been experiencing an increasing influence of China. As it became the concluding stage of the new Silk Road, enabling China's transition from a developing power to a global superpower⁵. China's Mediterranean entry has further introduced destabilization to the region, even raising the question that its significant involvement in crucial European ports might soon evolve into a more concrete form, a military one⁶.

On the contrary, and from Washington's perspective, the Mediterranean appeared to be lacking a strategic approach, bringing to a specific and focused set of actions:

«The United States' Mediterranean engagement is old and multi-faceted. But it has rarely if ever been accompanied by a strong sense of the Mediterranean as a coherent strategic space, and area of U.S. interest per se»⁷.

Key examples have been the United States' postures *vis-à-vis* the Libyan and Syrian crisis and particularly the "Leadership from behind" approach with the NATO intervention against the Qaddafi's

⁵ L. Basagni, "The Mediterranean Sea and Its Port System: Risk and Opportunities in a Globally Connected World", in S. Colombo, E. Soler (Eds.), *Infrastructures and Power In The Middle East And North Africa*, Barcelona, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2020, p. 12-33.

⁶ S. Rhode, "China's Emergence as a Power in the Mediterranean: Port Diplomacy and Active Engagement" in Otte, T *Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft*, London, Routledge, 2022, p.22

⁷ I. O. Lesser, "The United States and the Future of Mediterranean Security: Reflections from GMF's Mediterranean Strategy Group", *Mediterranean Policy Program*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 2015, p. 5.

regime in 2011. Although with a wide spectrum of positions, decision-makers in the United States kept on considering the Mediterranean a sort of "route" rather than a "quadrant":

«...a strategic passageway for oil from the Gulf and North Africa and for American troops. No need for a strategy, therefore, for a corridor»⁸.

The lack of a specific strategy on the Mediterranean from the United States has been adding complexity to how its European partners in NATO could address the multiple challenges they had to cope with in the last three decades. Nevertheless, a lack of strategy does not mean a lack of interests: a key aim of U.S. authorities in the Mediterranean is to maintain influence in the region without having to bear the burden of security, specifically in the Eastern part of the region, that might necessitate military interventions, both costly from the political and financial point of view⁹. The recent evolutions, starting from the Gaza crisis in October 2023 and the Houthi attacks in the Gulf of Aden, together with Russian activism have brought Washington's foreign policy to, at least, reframe its positions.

The current complex governance upon the Mediterranean Sea

The role of Russia in the Mediterranean stability

Today two of the hot spots for Mediterranean security are the Bosphorus Strait and the Dardanelles Strait. The Eastern Mediterranean region emerges as a pivotal geopolitical arena, with the Bosphorus-Dardanelles strait assuming a central role. This strategic waterway holds considerable significance, notably due to the substantive presence and vested interests of Russia. With the first Russian escalation in Ukraine in 2014, with the unilateral annexation of Crimea and the subsequent invasion of the Donetsk Region in 2022, it has been two years that have underlined the importance of this part of the world.

More than a hundred and sixty years later from the First Crimean War (1853-1856), the passage to the Black Sea to land in the Mediterranean Sea remained the final target for the Russian

⁸ A. Benantar, "What Role Does the USA Play in the Mediterranean?", *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2009*, p.40. Accessed February 10, 2024 <https://www.iemed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/What-Role-Does-the-USA-Play-in-the-Mediterranean.pdf>

⁹ M. Yegin, "United States Policy in the Eastern Mediterranean", *Comp. Southeast Europ. Stud.*, 70:3, 2022; p. 439-461

Federation, in the past Russian Empire. To fulfill this wish would require the port of Odessa, a goal not achieved by Tsar Nicholas I and not even by Putin so far¹⁰. Russia's presence in the Mediterranean extends beyond the north-western portion; in recent years, Russian influence has also reached the southeastern coasts¹¹. Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, involvement in Libya with support for Haftar, connections with Egypt and Algeria, and its presence through the Wagner group in the Levant and Sahel Region suggest that, despite not being a Mediterranean coastal country, Putin's Russia should be considered a significant actor in the Mediterranean region. Today, Russia maintains two military bases in Syria: a naval base at the Port of Tartus and an airbase at Khmeimim. Additionally, Russian private military contractors (PMCs) exert significant control over various air bases across Libya.¹² Those two new military bases are planned in Sudan and Eritrea, both of which will be strategically important naval bases to add a Russian footprint in the Red Sea¹³. In recent years, Russia has deployed PMCs not only in Syria and Libya but also in other strategically significant African states such as Egypt and Sudan, which play crucial roles in regional stability. Furthermore, Russia is a major weapons' supplier to many states in the region, including Iran, particularly in the procurement of drones¹⁴. As such, Russia's main objectives in the region are twofold. Firstly, it aims to establish a deterrent against NATO by leveraging its presence in the region. Secondly, in the context of great power competition, Russia

¹⁰ U. Poletti, "Odessa: The Forbidden Dream Of Russia", PortCity Futures, 20 May 2022, <https://www.portcityfutures.nl/news/odessa-the-forbidden-dream-of-russia>

¹¹ C. Brandsma, "NATO and the Mediterranean", IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2019, December 2019, <https://www.iemed.org/publication/nato-and-the-mediterranean/>

¹² H. Notte, J. Alterman "Russia in the Middle East After Ukraine" Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 24 January 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-middle-east-after-ukraine>.

¹³ A. McGregor "Russia in the Red Sea: Port Options in Eritrea" The Jamestown Foundation, 6 November 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-in-the-red-sea-port-options-in-eritrea-part-two/>. C. Doxsee "How Does the Conflict in Sudan Affect Russia and the Wagner Group?" Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 20 April 2023 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-does-conflict-sudan-affect-russia-and-wagner-group>. The Maritime Executive "Sudan's Leader Agrees to Host Russian Naval Base on Red Sea", 12 February 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/sudan-s-leader-agrees-to-host-russian-naval-base-on-red-sea>.

¹⁴ ISPI, "Russian Relations With the Middle East After Putin's Invasion of Ukraine" ISPI Website, 11 September 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russian-relations-with-the-middle-east-after-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-143131>. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database" Updated 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

seeks to assert itself as a key player in every conflict scenario, signaling its status as a global power¹⁵. However, Russia is not the only actor with competing stakes in the Mediterranean.

Chinese influence in the Mediterranean basin

Also for the People’s Republic of China, the Mediterranean comprises the final stage of the Silk Road branch directed toward Western countries, namely European ones, by sea. Enormous investments in the ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki in Greece, Taranto, Trieste, and Venice in Italy, Marseille in France, and Malta signify a strategic move, ensuring a stable presence of China in the Mediterranean¹⁶.

Likewise, in other regions e.g. the Arctic region, the proximity between China and Russia has been realized also in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia-China cooperation relies on a shared desire to erode U.S. and EU influence in the Region. Both countries aim to pursue this goal through different means. China prioritizes its economic interests and influence while Russia focuses on security presence to deny the NATO ability to control this area. To facilitate this situation is the lack of EU efficacy in the crisis i.e. Syria, and Libya, and a progressive U.S. retreat, which has created a vacuum that Russia and China have tried to fill¹⁷. In recent years, China has also intensified its military cooperation with key coastal actors, notably Egypt, and has forged relations with non-Mediterranean nations capable of exerting significant influence in the area such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey¹⁸.

The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom, being a historical maritime power, still maintains significant interests in the Mediterranean, revolving around

¹⁵ H. Notte, J. Alterman “Russia in the Middle East...”, op cit.

¹⁶ E. Bonini “La Cina controlla i porti dell’Ue, così Pechino influenza l’Europa” EU News, March 1, 2023, <https://www.eunews.it/2023/03/01/cina-controlla-porti-ue-influenza-europa/>

¹⁷ J. Townsend, A. Kendall-Taylor, D. Shullman and G. McKinley, “Russia-China Cooperation in the Mediterranean” Center for a New American Security, September 1, 2021, p. 11-13

¹⁸ K. Nguyen & P. Singer, “How China is winning the Middle East”, Defense One, 19 January 2024,

<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/01/how-china-winning-middle-east/393483/>

three strategic nodes that have shaped its history: Gibraltar, Cyprus, and Malta. Valletta, the capital of Malta, remains a port of call for Royal Navy patrols traveling to and from the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, and the Indo-Pacific. The resurgence of Russian influence in the Near East, its presence in the Mediterranean basin, and the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Gaza Strip, and the civil war in Libya underscore the logistic relevance of the UK's National Security Doctrine and its military bases in Cyprus and Gibraltar¹⁹.

Turkey: new crucial actor within the Mediterranean Sea

Turkey is a very curious observer towards the future development of the Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is a crucial factor in managing many of the security threats on NATO's southern flank. At the same time, it poses a challenge in itself. During the last years, the crisis over the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria led Turkey to move away from Western positions, particularly from the United States, approaching Russia²⁰. The ambiguous position maintained in the Ukrainian-Russian crisis also caused ruptures within the NATO coalition, accusing Turkey of exhibiting a certain level of autonomy in conducting its foreign policy in recent years. Another outstanding issue with the West is the status of Cyprus. On a strategic level, the importance of the island of Cyprus cannot be overlooked, especially considering Turkey's claim to a portion of its territory²¹. Cyprus, in addition to hosting vast oil fields in its territorial waters, is home to a large British military base on its territory. Recently, from this base, countermeasures have been initiated to address and alleviate the crisis in the Red Sea²².

¹⁹ M. Graves, "The British Presence in the Mediterranean Post-Brexit" IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020, 2020

<https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-british-presence-in-the-mediterranean-post-brexit/>
United Kingdom Cabinet Office "National Security Capability Review" March 2018

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5af1991040f0b642e2d8fa06/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf

²⁰ S. Neset, Aydin. M, Balta. E, Ataç. K, Bilgin. H, Strand. A, "Turkey as a regional security actor in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and Levant Region", CMI Michelsen Institute, CMI Report 2, 2021, p.18-28

²¹ K. Ulusoy, "The Cyprus Conflict: Turkey's Strategic Dilemma", Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, VOL. 18, NO. 4, p. 393-406

²² H. Smith, "Cyprus faces backlash over use of British bases to bomb Houthis", The Guardian Online, 20 January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/20/cyprus-faces-backlash-over-use-of-british-bases-to-bomb-houthis>

Other relevant actors

Beyond “known” superpowers and regional actors, nowadays geopolitical and geo-strategic Mediterranean scenarios are increasingly characterized by the role of some middle-eastern emerging powers, and mainly Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia is now a major economic force propelled by a well-established oil industry. Saudi Arabia, positioning itself as a power not aligned but capable of participating based on its interests, is actively seeking a distinctive status as a major player in international relations and within the Mediterranean dynamics too²³.

The “Elephant in the room” in the current Mediterranean security is Iran. Tehran has consistently exploited unstable situations to play a prominent role in international politics and has recently chosen to directly challenge the West by leveraging the historic Palestinian-Israeli conflict²⁴. The most impactful approach is to target strategic points where the West conducts its economic activities, with the Red Sea being one such crucial location. This intention is evident behind the substantial supply of armaments to the Houthis, who control the Yemeni coast. In other terms, the design of Iran is to generate instability at the mouth of the Mediterranean to create it even inside the Mediterranean basin²⁵.

Some Mediterranean strategic spots for regional security

The Pillars of Hercules, as the ancient Greeks called the Strait of Gibraltar, continue to be a strategic focal point concerning the defense of Mediterranean interests for the actors involved. The Strait of Gibraltar is where two of the most important military bases of the United States and Great Britain are located and where the defense strategies of the area are planned²⁶. The political and security situation in Libya today is characterized by complexity and instability. Libya is still divided into rival factions, with two main centers of power: the

²³ A. Ehteshami, A. Mohammadi, “Re-imagining Mediterranean Geopolitics: The Role of Eight Key Powers”, Medreset Methodology and Concept Papers, 2016, https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/medreset_cp_3.pdf.

²⁴ S. Khazaeli, “Iran’s strategy in the Middle East and Mediterranean region: the Hezbollah model” HybridCoE, Research Report 5, 2022, p.70-79

²⁵ A. Vatanka, “The Houthis, Iran, and tensions in the Red Sea”, Middle East Institute, 11 January 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/houthis-iran-and-tensions-red-sea>.

²⁶ H. Admiral Train, *Maritime strategy in the Mediterranean*, Taylor, and Francis Online, 2008, p.49

internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar, based in the east of the country²⁷. These divisions contribute to ongoing political instability. On one hand, this political instability is seen as a disadvantage for the States of the European Union, in particular Italy, which no longer finds a real interlocutor representing the entire country, in particular for the issue of migrants²⁸. On the other political chaos favors the infiltration of external powers (e.g. Turkey, Russia through the Wagner group, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates) and the proliferation of the presence of transnational threats (e.g. organized crime)²⁹.

While not geographically placed on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the Sahel region has become a key area for the security and stability of the Mediterranean. The Sahel region, spanning across several African nations, is grappling with complex challenges such as radical and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), weakness of Institutions, migration and illicit trafficking and humanitarian crises³⁰. The interconnection of these challenges makes the Sahel region a global concern, with impacts on security not only at the local level but also regionally and internationally. The region has become a potential breeding ground for terrorism and organized crime. The threat of cross-border movements, including illicit activities and the potential spillover of conflicts, underscores the interconnectedness of security dynamics between the Sahel and the Mediterranean. Addressing the challenges in the Sahel is crucial for fostering stability in the broader Mediterranean region³¹.

The Syrian civil war outbreak in 2011 has left its traces on the current security of the Mediterranean. This conflict created a

²⁷ Center for Preventive Action “Civil Conflict in Libya” Council of Foreign Relations, 19 September 2023 <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>.

²⁸ E. Cusumano & M. Riddervold, “Failing through: European migration governance across the central Mediterranean”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49:12, 2023, p. 3024-3042.

²⁹ United Nations Security Council, “As Foreign Interference in Libya Reaches Unprecedented Levels, Secretary-General Warns Security Council ‘Time Is Not on Our Side’, Urges End to Stalemate”, 8 July 2020, <https://press.un.org/en/2020/sc14243.doc.htm>.

³⁰ UNHCR, “Sahel 2024 situation overview”, UNHCR Global Focus, 18 December 2023, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/sahel-situation>

³¹ United Nations, “Security situation in Sahel remains very worrying, Security Council warned”, UN Global Perspective Human stories, 16 May 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136712>.

humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions influencing the stability of neighboring countries, including Mediterranean nations like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. In addition, after this crisis, Syria is entangled in complex regional dynamics, including relations with Israel, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Iranian involvement, and the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran³². These dynamics make the Eastern Mediterranean one of the more complex and delicate places in the entire region.

There is also the climatic factor, which increasingly endangers the lives of many individuals through extreme natural phenomena. This situation is closely linked to the concept of human and economic security as it can exacerbate all the situations of instability described above: for this reason McDonald called it “climate security”³³. The climate change impact could be a cause of the conflict because it can amplify existing challenges in the Mediterranean. In particular, the increased frequency of extreme events such as rising sea levels, floods, desertification, and drought can exacerbate the humanitarian challenges associated with migration, making the already critical situation of irregular migration and refugee flows unsustainable³⁴.

NATO Southern flank: the maritime strategy in the Mediterranean Sea

The outbreak of the War in Ukraine, paradoxically, has convinced all NATO members of the usefulness of its southern flank, erasing the skepticism manifested during the last decade and united around the idea that NATO must be the main entity ensuring security in this region by bringing together all its members, especially the regional ones³⁵. In the Mediterranean basin, NATO faces a set of diverse, interlinked challenges. Some are familiar, others new; some are from within the region, others from beyond its borders, and still others are

³² J. B. Alterman, H. A. Conley, *Syria, Turkey, and the Eastern Mediterranean*. Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2018, p.1-4. T. Carpenter, “Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications” in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Duke, Duke University Press, 2013 Vol. 24 (1), p. 1–11.

³³ M. McDonald, “Discourses of climate security”, *Political Geography*, 33, 2013 p. 42-51. F. Fusco, “Climate Change and Security in the Mediterranean” Istituto Affari Internazionali, 4 March 2022, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai2204.pdf>.

³⁴ For a broader perspective of Climate change related issues in the Mediterranean see the “Climate Change and Energy Security in the Arctic and the Mediterranean” chapter of this volume.

³⁵ S. Schnauffer II. , “To the Bastion: NATO’s Return to Europe Leaves Its Troubled Southern Flank Open for Competition” in Farhadi et al *The Great Power Competition Volume 5*, New York, Springer Link Publisher, 2023, p. 309-324

looming on the horizon. Since its inception in 1994, the Mediterranean Dialogue has been a pivotal platform for NATO's active engagement in ensuring security in the Mediterranean region. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States in 2001 NATO launched Operation Active Endeavour. It was an Article 5 operation in the Mediterranean for helping to deter terrorist activity in the Mediterranean Sea and secure one of the busiest trade routes in the world.

The international context has undergone significant changes since 2001. In the globalized economy, the world's seas and oceans hold paramount importance, with 90 percent of all traded goods transported by sea. Furthermore, communication cables on the seabed carry 95 percent of the world's cyberspace traffic. The Mediterranean Sea is no exception. The Mediterranean is also an energy provider as it gives access to significant natural resources (large gas deposits). Nations seek to secure their energy needs (e.g. Israel, Cyprus, and Turkey) but this may also lead to tensions or conflict over economic gains. During the Warsaw Summit in 2016 to tackle these challenges NATO launched Operation Sea Guardian focusing on the Mediterranean. It has covered three main tasks: support maritime situational awareness, support maritime counterterrorism, and contribute to maritime security capacity building³⁶. The different nature of these challenges, i.e., strategic location, energy resources, migration challenges, naval power dynamics, and the presence of transnational threats (e.g. organized crime) leads to a link of geopolitical importance with far-reaching implications for the security of nations bordering on its shores. The escalating complexity of governance in the region prompted NATO to readjust its strategy in particular in the Mediterranean. Presently, NATO faces new challenges in the Mediterranean basin, compounding the existing complexities in the region³⁷.

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine appears to have triggered a chain of reactions, transforming this regional conflict into a new confrontation between East and West—a conflict not only of weapons but also of values. Reiterating the complexity of the region, the

³⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Operation Sea Guardian", NATO Website, Last updated 26 May 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136233.htm.

³⁷ P. Morcos, L. Simon, "NATO and the South after Ukraine", Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), May 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-and-south-after-ukraine>.

Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, 2023, further highlighted the intricate dynamics in the Mediterranean. The last NATO Strategic Concept, drafted in 2022 after the Madrid Summit, underscores the imperative for the Atlantic Alliance to adapt to an evolving and increasingly insecure international order³⁸. As reported in the last Mediterranean Security Agenda drafted by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the Alliance must be able to securitize the three strategic points within the Mediterranean basin: access to the Atlantic Ocean, the Red Sea, which leads to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the Black Sea, which leads to Eastern Europe and Russia³⁹.

The NATO Southern flank is also threatened by underwater threats. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine NATO has focused on detecting Russian submarines in the Mediterranean Sea which reflects the ongoing technological competition and strategic concerns between NATO countries and Russia. Submarine activities in this region have been a point of interest for both military sides due to their potential impact on maritime security and regional control.

The Mediterranean area is also crucial for the underwater infrastructure that runs on the seabed. It hosts four crucial natural gas pipelines vital for the EU's energy supply and approximately 250 cable systems keys in connecting the EU to the global internet⁴⁰. NATO's Vilnius Summit Declaration underscores the organization's role in protecting these Critical Undersea Infrastructures (CUI) from the growing number of external threats⁴¹. NATO is recognized as the

³⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Strategic Concept 2022”, NATO Library, 29 June 2022,

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

³⁹ S. Krimi, “NATO and The Mediterranean Security Agenda”, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 24 November 2021, <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2021-nato-and-mediterranean-security-agenda-krimi-report-021-pcnp-21-e>.

⁴⁰ M. Moreno Minuto “La competizione strategica per il dominio delle infrastrutture critiche underwater: controllo e tutela delle dorsali dati” in *Le sfide multidimensionali ed emergenti del Mediterraneo allargato: quale ruolo dell'Italia*” Rivista Trimestrale della Società Italiana per l'Organizzazione Internazionale, Q. 26, 2023 p. 19-22

⁴¹ C. Wall, P. Morcos “Invisible and Vital: Undersea Cables and Transatlantic Security”, 11 June 2021

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/invisible-and-vital-undersea-cables-and-transatlantic-security>. See for example the recent Balticconnector pipeline incident and last year's Nord Stream pipeline explosions which highlighted the risk of deliberate damage to CUI across Europe. M. Cavcic “Following incident, Balticconnector pipeline capacity getting a boost to strengthen regional gas system”, Offshore Energy, 23 November 2023,

primary actor capable of deterring and preventing hybrid attacks on its allies' critical infrastructure⁴². This factor is of high relevance in the Arctic area too.

The Arctic

Geopolitical tensions and competing for influence in the Arctic have intensified over the past few years. Although there is limited chance of direct competition for resources in the Arctic, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to a halt in security cooperation with Russia and there has subsequently been an uptake in military exercises and bellicose rhetoric from Russia about the “threat” from the West. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks an additional watershed in relations between the West and Russia, including in the Arctic, as also cooperation in non-security domains was halted and further sanctions on Russia were put in place.

Moreover, the Russian invasion of Ukraine further underscores another trend in the Arctic, namely the increased engagement of China in Arctic issues, as well as Russian-Sino political, economic and even military collaboration in parts of the same area. Although China, as many other non-Arctic actors, holds legitimate research and economic interests in the region, there is also an element of “great power competition” driving an Arctic interest. This is not only the case for China, but applies more widely to actors like India, the EU, the UK and even – at times – the United States. These dynamics are, however, different from the immediate security consequences of Russian behaviour in the Arctic, or more accurately, parts of the Arctic.

Finally, despite the increased regional tension and the dividing line between Russia and the other seven Arctic states⁴³, both Arctic

<https://www.offshore-energy.biz/following-incident-balticconnector-pipeline-capacity-getting-a-boost-to-strengthen-regional-gas-system/>. Security Council Report “The Nord Stream Incident: Closed Consultations”, Security Council.org, 7 November 2023,

<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/11/the-nord-stream-incident-closed-consultations.php>.

⁴² S. Monaghan, O. Svendsen, M. Darrah, E. Arnold, “NATO’s Role in Protecting Critical Undersea Infrastructure”, 19 December 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/natos-role-protecting-critical-undersea-infrastructure>.

At the 2023 NATO Vilnius summit, allies agreed to establish the Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Underwater Infrastructure within NATO’s Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM). Within NATO other Centers have Research programs based on studying new systems for securitizing the CUI such as the NATO Centre For Maritime Research & Experimentation based in La Spezia (Italy).

⁴³ Canada, Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the United States.

scholars and Arctic states emphasise how the Arctic is a region characterised by the need for mutual cooperation. To sufficiently manage shared marine living resources, measure Arctic-specific effects of climate change, or ensure rights and livelihoods of Arctic indigenous peoples, some form of dialogue and engagement with Russian actors is needed. Moreover, some express a hope that due to Russia's vested interest in low-level of 'softer' forms of collaboration in various issues areas that pertain to the Arctic, this part of the world could be one arena where the 'West' and Russia re-engage politically and economically when, or if, Russia ceases hostilities in Ukraine. What these sets of political dynamics amount to is a complex pattern of 'great power competition' in the Arctic. Furthermore, different security dynamics in the Arctic (or parts of the Arctic) entail varying potential for conflict between Arctic, or non-Arctic, actors.

International Level: Power Balance and Spill Over

During the Cold War, the Arctic played a prominent role in the political and military competition between two superpowers. The region was important not due to conflicts of interest within the Arctic itself but because of its strategic role in the systemic competition between the US/NATO and the USSR at the international level⁴⁴. Norway was one of only two NATO countries (the other being Turkey) that shared a border with the Soviet Union. And Alaska—albeit separated by the Bering Strait—was in close proximity to the northeast of the USSR. Greenland and Iceland were strategically located in the North Atlantic, and the Kola Peninsula was, and still remains, key in terms of Soviet and Russian military planning, as it provides Russian access to the Atlantic Ocean for strategic nuclear submarines⁴⁵.

When the Cold War ended, the Arctic went from a region of geopolitical rivalry to one where Russia could be included in various cooperative arrangements with its former opponents. Several regional organizations (such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Council, and the Northern Dimension) appeared in the 1990s to deal with issues such as environmental matters, regional and local development, and cross-border cooperation – and relates to *regional* relations (next

⁴⁴ K. Åtland, "Mikhail Gorbachev, the Murmansk Initiative, and the Desecuritization of Interstate Relations in the Arctic," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 43: 3, 2008, p. 289–311.

⁴⁵ R. Huebert, "Submarines, Oil Tankers and Icebreakers." *International Journal*, 66: 4, 2013, p. 809–24

section)⁴⁶. Although the interaction between Arctic states and Arctic peoples increased during this period, the region nevertheless disappeared from the geopolitical radar and lost its *systemic* or global significance.

Over the last two decades, the strategic importance of the Arctic region has again increased. As in the Cold War, the strategic importance of the region has grown primarily because Russia is committed to revamping its global militaristic and political position. The Arctic is one of the geographical areas where this can be done more or less unhindered. At the same time, the region is critical to Russia's nuclear deterrence strategy vis-à-vis NATO because of the Russian Northern Fleet, which houses the country's strategic nuclear submarines. Russia's increased military emphasis on the Arctic stems both from the melting of the sea ice that leads to increased shipping activity, and from the importance of the Arctic to Putin's overall strategic plans and ambitions⁴⁷.

In turn, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, this has led NATO countries to look north and counter the Russian presence there by increasing their military presence through exercises or maritime security operations in the Barents Sea⁴⁸. With Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the security environment in the Arctic has become further tense. Hopes of re-starting security dialogue in the North to reduce tension that emerged around 2019-2020 have been dashed, and sanctions on Russia, as well as halts in dialogue with the country, have been put in place. Finland's and Sweden's subsequent decisions to join NATO in 2022—making seven out of eight Arctic countries NATO members—further solidifies the divisions and spill-over of tensions to the North.

In contrast to what was the case during the Cold War, China has also emerged as a player in the North. When Beijing asserts its

⁴⁶ O. Young, "Whither the Arctic? Conflict or Cooperation in the Circumpolar North." *Polar Record*, 45: 1, 2009, p. 73–82. W. Lackenbauer, "Polar Race or Polar Saga? Canada and the Circumpolar World", in J. Kraska (ed) *Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 218–43.

⁴⁷ G. Hønneland, Geir. *Russia and the Arctic: Environment, Identity and Foreign Policy*, London, I. B. Tauris 2016. A. Sergunin e V. Konyshov, "Russian Military Strategies in the Arctic: Change or Continuity?" *European Security*, 26: 2, 2017, p. 171–89. A. Todorov, Andrey, "Russia in Maritime Areas off Spitsbergen (Svalbard): Is It Worth Opening the Pandora's Box?" *Marine Policy*, 122: December, 2020.

⁴⁸ D. Depledge, Duncan, "Train Where You Expect to Fight: Why Military Exercises Have Increased in the High North", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 3: 1, 2020, p. 288–301.

influence on the world stage, the Arctic is one of many regions where China’s presence and interactions are components in an expansion of power, be it through scientific research or investments in Russia’s fossil fuel industries⁴⁹. China describes itself as a ‘near-Arctic state’, which can be perceived as not only having the right to get involved, but also having a duty to do so⁵⁰.

But China’s entry into the Arctic policy realm elicits reactions, especially in the United States. This has led to the Arctic becoming relevant in the increasing global power competition between China and the United States. US Secretary of State Pompeo’s 2019 warning about Beijing’s Arctic interests highlights how the United States sees the Arctic as yet another arena where the new systemic competition between the two countries is sharpening⁵¹. This is to a lesser extent linked to Chinese actions *in* the Arctic; it is more about the United States wanting to blunt China’s global growth in as many areas as possible⁵². However, questions about Chinese–Russian cooperation in the Arctic and the effects this could have on regional tension are increasingly on the agenda after the sanctions placed on Russia in 2022.

Thus, tensions arising from issues in other parts of the world (i.e., Ukraine) or *global* power struggles have a spill-over effect for the Arctic: on the rhetorical level in the form of bellicose statements and on the operational level in the form of increased military presence and exercises by NATO and Russia. The Arctic will continue to be on the global political agenda both because of its importance for Russia’s strategic thinking and because of increasing Chinese interest in the region that in turn both engender rivalry with the US.

Regional Level: Shared Interests in Stability

⁴⁹ A. Edstrøm, I. Stensdal e G. Heggelund, “Den «nye Supermakten»: Hva Vil Kina i Arktis?” *Internasjonal Politikk*, 78: 4, 2020, p. 523–34. L. Guo e S. Wilson, “China, Russia, and Arctic Geopolitics.” *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-russia-and-arctic-geopolitics/>.

⁵⁰ The Guardian, “US Warns Beijing’s Arctic Activity Risks Creating ‘New South China Sea.’” 6 May 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/06/pompeo-arctic-activity-new-south-china-sea>.

⁵¹ US Department of State, “Looking North: Sharpening America’s Arctic Focus.” Remarks, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>.

⁵² A. Østhagen, “The Arctic Security Region: Misconceptions and Contradictions”, *Polar Geography*, 44: 1, 2021, p. 55–74.

There is an important difference between these overall strategic considerations and those security issues concerning the Arctic region in particular. As highlighted, when the Cold War's systemic competition came to an end, regional interaction and cooperation flourished in the North in the 1990s. As the region again gained global attention, in response to the concerns about 'a lack of governance' in the Arctic the five Arctic coastal states gathered in Greenland in 2008 and declared the Arctic to be a region marked by cooperation⁵³. They affirmed their intention to work within established international parameters and agreements, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea – highlighting a specific *regional* approach and coherence amongst the Arctic states⁵⁴.

Following this meeting, the Arctic states have frequently repeated the mantra of cooperation, articulated in relatively streamlined Arctic policy and/or strategy papers⁵⁵. The deterioration in the relationship between Russia and the other Arctic states in 2014 did not change this⁵⁶. They reconvened in Greenland in 2018 and repeated promises of cooperation and protection of the Law of the Sea, which, after all, gives the Arctic states sovereign rights over large parts of the Arctic Ocean.

The Arctic states have shown a preference for a stable political environment in which they maintain their dominance in the region. This is not only encouraged by regional cooperation but also by economic interests, which are well served by a stable political climate. As a consequence of the melting ice and high raw material prices at the beginning of this century, the Arctic states have looked north both in terms of investment and of opportunities related to shipping, fishing, and oil and gas extraction. Russia's ambitions with the

⁵³ Arctic Ocean Conference, "The Ilulissat Declaration." Arctic Ocean Conference. Ilulissat, 2008, https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/080525_arctic_ocean_conference_outcome.pdf.

⁵⁴ K. Stephen e S. Knecht (eds), *Governing Arctic Change: Global Perspectives*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁵⁵ L. Heininen, K. Everett, B. Padrtová e A. Reissell, "Arctic Policies and Strategies — Analysis, Synthesis, and Trends." Laxenburg, Austria, 2020, http://pure.iiasa.ac.at/id/eprint/16175/1/ArcticReport_WEB_new.pdf.

⁵⁶ M. Byers, "Crises and International Cooperation: An Arctic Case Study", *International Relations*, 31: 4, 2017, p. 375–402. A. Østhagen, "High North, Low Politics Maritime Cooperation with Russia in the Arctic," *Arctic Review on Law and Politics*, 7: 1, 2016, p. 83–100.

northeast passage and industrial activity on the Yamal Peninsula in particular require a presence in the North, but also stability⁵⁷.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to the suspension of cooperation with Russia in various forums such as the Arctic Council and Barents Cooperation. Despite these negative developments, the Arctic countries have still stated a desire to shield the region from conflicts in other parts of the world and cooperate in so-called ‘soft’ policy areas. However, political cooperation or dialogue with Russia is not possible as of the time of writing and will apparently be very limited in the country in the future.

The question is to what extent the events in 2022 will alter the long-term fundamentals of shared interest amongst the Arctic states. The Arctic is unlikely to figure less prominently in Russian economic development agendas, but this might be counterweighted by its increased strategic importance vis-à-vis NATO. Whether the Arctic Council will ever return to ‘normal’ remains to be seen, and much depends on the actions of the Putin regime in Moscow.

The National Level: Russian proximity

Finally, to understand the dynamics of security policy in the Arctic, we must include a national perspective on the challenges and opportunities in this domain. Central to this is the role of the region in national defence and security considerations, as there is great variation in what each country chooses to prioritise in its northern regions in terms of national security and defence.

For Russia, as mentioned above, the Arctic is integrated into national defence considerations. Although these are to some extent related to developments elsewhere, investments in military infrastructure in the Arctic also have an Arctic impact, although primarily on the countries in close proximity to Russia (mainly Finland, Norway, and Sweden, and to some extent those in the wider North-Atlantic area and the US across the Bering Sea/Strait). Consequently, the Arctic is also integrated in the national defence policy of the

⁵⁷ D. Claes e A. Moe, “Arctic Offshore Petroleum: Resources and Political Fundamentals,” in S. Rottem, I. Soltvedt e G. Hønneland (eds), *Arctic Governance: Energy, Living Marine Resources and Shipping*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2018, p. 9-26. A. Jørgensen e A. Østhagen, “Norges Vern Av Suverene Rettigheter Rundt Svalbard: Russiske Persepsjoner Og Reaksjoner (Norway’s Defence of Sovereign Rights around Svalbard: Russian Perceptions and Reactions),” *Internasjonal Politikk*, 78: 2, 2020, p. 167–92.

Nordic countries, precisely because it is here that Russia—as a major power—invests some of its military capacity⁵⁸.

In North America, the Arctic plays a slightly different role in national security concerns⁵⁹. Although an important buffer vis-à-vis the USSR and later Russia, some have argued that the most immediate concerns facing the Canadian Arctic today are social and health conditions in northern communities. This does not discount the need for Canada to be active in its Arctic domain and to have Arctic capabilities, but this perspective differs from the crucial role that the Russian land border plays in Finnish and Norwegian security concerns. However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the debate has (again) emerged if Canada has actually invested sufficiently in Arctic security capabilities to be able to deter Russia in the north⁶⁰.

The United States, however, is in a different situation. For Alaska, security relations are indeed defined by its proximity to Russia. Alaska plays a somewhat important role in the US defence policy, with its border with the Russian region of Chukotka across the Bering Strait—albeit it is not comparable to the role of the Russian border in the security policy concerns of Norway (and NATO) due to the presence of Russia's strategic nuclear weapons (submarines and ballistic missiles)⁶¹. However, this has only to a limited extent attracted the attention of decision makers in Washington, DC. The United States has been reluctant to make a significant investment in capabilities and infrastructure in the North, although the rhetoric around the Arctic hardened under the Trump administration, and decisions were made to invest in new icebreakers for the US Coast Guard⁶².

⁵⁸ D. Depledge e A. Østhagen, "Scotland: A Touchstone for Security in the High North?" *RUSI Journal*, 166: 6–7, 2021, p. 46–63. H. Saxi, "The Rise, Fall and Resurgence of Nordic Defence Cooperation," *International Affairs*, 95: 3, 2019, p. 659–680.

⁵⁹ D. Depledge e W. Lackenbauer (eds), *On Thin Ice: Perspectives on Arctic Security*, Peterborough, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN), 2021, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Depledge-Lackenbauer-On-Thin-Ice-final-upload.pdf>.

⁶⁰ E. Blake, "To What Extent Does Russia Present a Real Threat to Canada's Arctic?" *CabinRadio*, 27 April 2022, <https://cabinradio.ca/90997/news/politics/to-what-extent-does-russia-present-a-real-threat-to-canadas-arctic/>.

⁶¹ B. Padrtova, "Frozen Narratives: How Media Present Security in the Arctic," *Polar Science*, 21: September, 2019, p. 37–46.

⁶² V. Herrmann e L. Hussong, "No UNCLOS, No Icebreakers, No Clue? U.S. Arctic Policy Through the Eyes of Congress," in J. Weber (ed), *Handbook on Geopolitics and*

The limited involvement of the US in its own ‘northern areas’ highlights the mentioned differences in the nuanced distinction between the international (system) level and national considerations. At a system level, the United States can and will involve itself in regions such as the Arctic when it coincides with American interests. The activity of the US Sixth Fleet in the Barents Sea in May and September 2020, the reactivation of the US Second Fleet out of Norfolk in 2018 with responsibility for the North Atlantic (i.e. High North), and increased US participation in NATO exercises in Norway since 2014—such as the biannual *Cold Response* exercises and *Trident Juncture 2018*—are examples of the United States’ ability and willingness to engage in security policy in parts of the Arctic as required – with a goal to both reassure its Nordic NATO allies and keep a close eye on Russian strategic capabilities on the Kola Peninsula⁶³.

At the same time, Alaska itself has primarily served as a base for US missile defence and some number of forces (primarily air force) and there is no immediate concern over Russian threatening actions across the Bering Strait – a stark contrast to what the northern border with Russia means to Norwegian defence and security policy. At the same time, we see that increased military activity by Russia and China in the North Pacific and Bering Sea is causing some concern also in Washington DC, and might lead to further priority given to Alaskan/Arctic security concerns by the USA writ large.

Arctic dynamics after 2022

Security and geopolitics in the Arctic region cannot simply be boiled down to a statement of conflict or no conflict. This tenet holds, even after February 2022. The Arctic states have limited reason, if any at all, for entering into direct regional conflict over resources or territory in the whole Arctic region—even if sub-regional or national security concerns persist, such as those between Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia. These are linked to the defence posture of various Arctic countries, as well as the overarching links between the Arctic region and other domains such as the Baltic Sea.

Still, the war in Ukraine has clear consequences for Arctic security dynamics in several ways. The impression of what is possible

Security in the Arctic: The High North Between Cooperation and Confrontation, Cham, Springer, 2021, p. 23–40.

⁶³ Andreas Østhagen, *The Arctic...*, op. cit.

Russian behaviour changed radically. It strengthens the security policy arguments mentioned above. Although the drivers of the growing tension between NATO / 'West' and Russia are not in the High North or in the Arctic in general, we are already seeing the contours of the consequences along several axes.

The European High North will become even more central to operational defence and security policy thinking in both Norway and NATO in general. This would have been the case even without the Finnish and Swedish accessions: the more tension between NATO and Russia, the more relevant the High North is in terms of deterrence, surveillance and ability to deny Russian access to the North Atlantic / Atlantic at large. These trends are further amplified by the Finnish and Swedish NATO membership.

Although the reason for conflict does not emerge from the Arctic, the Arctic is undoubtedly important for Russian military doctrines and thus also in a larger deterrence perspective as seen from NATO headquarters in Brussels and Mons. Linked, there is a question concerning Russian calculations in the North. Forums for cooperation in the Arctic have been suspended, and thoughts of a security policy dialogue with Russia in the North have been shelved. The goal of reduced tension and dialogue with Russia in the North has been replaced by a halt in cooperation in some areas and an increased need to deter Russia in the High North.

In this context small disputes over sovereign rights at sea, the legal status of passageways or maritime zones, or (un)intended mishaps during military exercises and operations might escalate beyond immediate control. Such escalation could drag the Arctic (or parts of the Arctic) into an outright conflict between Russia and NATO-members.

Additionally, the great power rivalry in the Arctic will increase, as the USA, Great Britain, France, the EU, Turkey, China and – increasingly – India look more to the North for strategic and symbolic reasons as the region is increasingly accessible as well as relevant in global power games. The Arctic will not become less important, simply because the United States and Russia are already in the region, and actors like China, India and the EU are increasingly demonstrating their (strategic) interests in the North. The worse the relationships among these players are globally, the more tension we will see in the Arctic, too, which is materialised by challenging statements, sanctions, and occasional military displays. This became

particularly apparent in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Such tension has little to do with regional issues in the Arctic (ice melting, economic opportunities, etc.), and everything to do with the strategic position that the Arctic holds as a geographic space where these actors engage.