TENSIONS AND COOPERATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

STRATEGIC WATCH - FINAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Since the exploration and conquest of the "New World" in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mediterranean is no longer the linchpin of international relations as it was during the Phoenician, Roman, Ottoman and other empires. It is neither at the heart of the "New Great Game" that now pits the United States and China against each other, nor is it the centre of gravity of the movement of economic globalization whose cursor is located in a trans-Pacific and Asian space. This strategic marginalization could signify the emergence of a pacified era in the region, as tensions related to the concentration of global issues progressively move eastward. On the contrary, over the last decade, the Mediterranean basin has become a major zone of geopolitical conflict and can still be defined as a restricted space for encounter, confrontation and/or cooperation.

The Mediterranean Sea is at a junction between three continents accessible from the whole globe (through the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal), comprising more than twenty countries. It is an area with an imbalance between developed and developing countries, composed of different cultures, influences, and religions. This structure is a source of tensions, even more so because it is characterized by the absence of institutionalized cooperation that would enable Mediterranean countries to solve their common problem. It is important to consider that the Mediterranean's geopolitics include also other players such as the United States and NATO, Russia, China but also Middle East countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Our strategic watch began in a context where the Mediterranean's geopolitics is witnessing an upheaval. The recent discoveries of natural gas and oil reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean (off the coasts of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria), have not only aggravated existing tensions but have also revived other frozen conflicts and led to the emergence of new forms of cooperation in a regional context that has already been severely disrupted since the emergence of the "Arab Springs". The Eastern Mediterranean is becoming an increasingly important space for the international security system because of its natural resources, as the interests of regional actors are interacting with major international actors. Thus, cooperation in the Mediterranean plays a key role in preserving stability and peace in the region.

Apart from the maritime, energy and influence rivalry issues, the Mediterranean also faces a strong North/South divide. Indeed, during our watch we observed that the Mediterranean is emerging as one of the "hot-spots" of climate change and that the problem of migration is still at the heart of trans-Mediterranean relations. Both problems would require strong cooperation between both shores in order to face and resolve them as they are likely to worsen in the future and be a source of tension in the region.

Therefore, we will see that the Mediterranean is a heterogeneous space where tensions are numerous and where cooperation is a key element in advancing the interests of the powers. The contestation of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) related to international laws, and the energy issues opposing Turkey, Greece and Cyprus have been at the heart of our watch (I). If a definitive reconciliation did not happen during our monitoring period between Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey, other regional and international actors are in the process of forming alliances and cooperation around energy but also military issues (II). However, other long-term issues, such as migration and climate change, have not seen any striking progress towards better cooperation to address them, despite the warning signals sent by the civil society and institutional actors (III). Finally, one of the main observations that can be deduced from our strategic watch is that the "Pax Mediterranea" coveted by Emmanuel Macron is not ready to be realized.
METHODOLOGY

Concerning our methodology to produce this strategic watch, we used different tools to collect the information. We have first created a Netvibes account, nonetheless, since our topic covers three different regions, it made it difficult to use RSS feeds to filter the information. Therefore, daily, we used Twitter to list the main articles related to our monitoring. We based our watch on international and more local media that were mainly published in English in order to have the broadest opinions possible. We principally utilized a Twitter account called Radio East Med, which was listing articles and news from different countries regarding our topic. We relied on media such as Le Monde, L’Orient le Jour, Al Jazeera, Daily Sabah, MiddleEastEye, Al Monitor, Greek City Times, Financial Mirror, TRT World, Arab News, RFI, etc. After having filtered all the information, we were adding all the relevant news for our subject on a Google Excel and adding the analytical content to a Google Docs. To avoid missing any important evolutions in the region, each one of us was following and filtering the news for half a week. For the analytical part, we used articles from newspapers, think tanks such as Le Grand Continent or the Institut Montaigne and we attended talks on the Mediterranean issues provided by the Institute of Research and Studies on the Mediterranean and the Middle East (IREMIMO) and the Mediterranean Foundation of Strategic Studies (FMES) in November 2020.

I. The return of the Mediterranean in geopolitics

A) The right to the sea in the Mediterranean, a significant maritime issue

The region has re-emerged in the forefront of geopolitics since the beginning of the 21st century with the discovery of hydrocarbons in the region which has driven to the revival of old tensions but also the emergence of new cooperation. The strategic stake that represents the access to sub-marine richness has revealed tensions regarding the implementation of the law in this field.

The international law of the Sea is essentially founded nowadays on the Montego Bay Convention, a United Nations Convention (UNCLOS), signed in Montego Bay in Jamaica on December 13, 1982, which entered into force on November 16, 1994, after ratification or accession by 60 States (there were 157 States signatories to the Convention in 2014). However, several states such as Israel, Syria or Turkey have not ratified or even signed the Convention and therefore they do not consider themselves obliged to respect it, hence the issue between Greece and Turkey which has been stoking tensions between the two countries since August 2020.

Furthermore, as the Mediterranean Sea is semi-enclosed, states are in close proximity to each other: thus, all the Exclusive Economic Zones - introduced by the Montego Bay, which extends up to 200 nautical miles and gives sovereignty over the exploration of submarine resources - are overlapping, provoking tensions between neighboring countries.

The discovery of gas in the region has accelerated the cutting up of the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a major concern for all the countries bordering the Sea as they can potentially become gas exporters, such as Israel and Egypt. Such a status and the revenue that it creates are vital for some countries in the region. For example, Lebanon is facing the worst economic, social, and political crisis in decades, it could benefit from hydrocarbons. Consequently, several alliances and agreements but also tensions have arisen during our six-month strategic watch, particularly between Greece and Turkey.
B) The high-profile conflict between Greece, and Turkey

Until recently, the Turkish-Greek oil and gas conflict was very much linked to the Cyprus issue: Turkey was conducting drilling operations off the coast of Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus, which is not recognised by the rest of the international community. If the Northern Cyprus dispute is still topical, the current deadlock has dramatically shifted the conflict to the high seas. Throughout our strategic watch, the Greek-Turkish conflict was recurrent and often at the centre of tensions and cooperation emerging in the Mediterranean.

The core of the dispute lies in the fact that Turkey claims exploitation rights in an area it considers as its continental shelf. It is a submarine extension of the terrestrial territory and extends up to 350 nautical miles, above all it gives sovereignty to the State concerned in terms of exploration and exploitation of resources. Greece argues that all of its inhabited islands are surrounded by a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in accordance with the UNCLOS, of which Turkey is not a member. Blind application of these rules locks Turkey’s exploitation rights in a small corner of the Gulf of Antalya (see Annex 1). In this context, on August 10 2020, Turkey sent the seismic exploration vessel Oruç Reis, escorted by warships, to probe the seabed in an area contested by it and Greece in search of hydrocarbons, provoking a surge in tensions between both countries. This event has been a major source of preoccupation for the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), as Greece and Turkey are both members of NATO. Since then, Ankara has not waived its rights in this area of the eastern Mediterranean.

At the beginning of our watch, Ankara and Athens announced on September 22, their intentions to resume dialogue and to resolve their maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean through "exploratory talks", as a result of diplomatic efforts from Germany and NATO. In reality, we observed a heightening of the tensions and provocations since October 9. Erdogan has denounced successive provocative acts by Athens including a decision to hold military drills in the Aegean Sea on Turkey's main national holiday on October 29 and he decided to redeploy the Turkish exploration ship Oruç Reis to search for oil and gas off the coast of Cyprus. Greece's government reacted by announcing it would not take part in planned exploratory talks with Turkey as long as the survey mission was in progress. In parallel with those tensions, Turkey is asserting its position in the region with the election of the pro-Turkish candidate, Ersin Tatar, as president of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. And a few days earlier, Turkish Cypriot authorities have partially reopened the beach town of Varosha, which was a no-man's land since the 1974 Turkish invasion that split the island. This decision has been strongly criticized by the UN, the US and the EU. Thereby, tensions and provocations continued until December 2020 with a brief parenthesis of solidarity between Greece and Turkey after the earthquake in the end of October 2020. During this period of time, Greece, Cyprus and France kept pushing the European Union to take decisive action to contain Turkish ambitions in the Mediterranean.

On December 1, after the European Parliament called for sanctions against Turkey over Erdogan's visit to Northern Cyprus, and Turkey's continuing illegal operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, Ankara decided to withdraw its Oruç Reis seismic survey vessel from its gas exploration activities. It has been considered as a last-minute goodwill gesture to open room for negotiation with Greece and Cyprus before the EU Council Summit, on the 10th and 11th of December 2020. During this summit, EU leaders approved sanctions on Turkish officials. Concretely, they decided to add new names of individuals and companies to the blacklist that currently exists for Turkey's “unauthorised” gas drillings off-Cyprus. The decisions are far from what Greece, Cyprus and France called for months. They were asking for "sectoral sanction" such as the banking and energy sector, but Angela Merkel and the Bulgarian Prime Minister Borissov were openly
opposed to sanctions against Ankara. As a result of the summit, Turkey’s tone has started to soften. For example, Erdogan called Charles Michel, soon after the EU Council, saying that Turkey hopes to turn a “new page” with the European Union and wants to build its future with the bloc.

In the following weeks, Ankara has adopted a much more cooperative attitude towards its Mediterranean policy. Erdogan talked to an audience of European Union ambassadors in Ankara, saying that Europeans and Turks “are ready to put their relations back on track” and that “they must make the Eastern Mediterranean a basin of cooperation, rather than a zone of competition”. He even declared that the “uncertainty created by Brexit could be overcome if Turkey takes the place it deserves within the EU family”, suggesting the possibility of relaunching the process of Turkey's accession to the EU. Most of all, at the end of our watch, on the 25th of January 2021, Turkey and Greece resumed the exploratory talks about their territorial claims in the Mediterranean Sea that they suspended in 2016. However, a short-term diplomatic breakthrough in the Mediterranean seems “unlikely” to happen. First, they both do not agree on a common agenda. Greece wants to limit the discussion to the demarcation of maritime zones, while Turkey wants to bring up also the status of eastern Aegean islands as well as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Also, according to analysts, levels of trust on both sides are low and they both see any diplomatic approach as an image-branding exercise to the international community, rather than a real attempt to de-escalate the crisis.

C) The affirmation of the Turkish Blue Homeland on the Mediterranean

Turkish territorial claims are part of a strategic policy: Mavi Vatan, the blue homeland (see Annex 2). Its aim is to make Turkey a leading naval power. For the father of this doctrine, Cem Gurdeniz, a former Turkish admiral, the Turkish Republic is a victim of Western imperialism: only naval power would be able to guarantee its survival. In his words, it is a manifesto against the strangulation of Turkey, against its confinement on land and a doctrine to prevent Turkey from being denied access to its undersea maritime wealth. This analysis can explain why Turkey has become offensive in the Mediterranean while gas prices are still dropping. With gas prices so low, one wonders whether it would be profitable to extract these resources now. An explanation could be that the implosion of Turkish lira is compensating the collapse of gas prices to support its own currency. However, the exploration and production of gas, especially in the seabed, requires considerable initial investments. During our watch, we observed that some countries, such as Israel, do not hesitate to supplement its gas-fired power plants with solar energy. Thus, Turkey's strategy in the Mediterranean could be understood as a way to reaffirm its military power in the region and to look away from its economic instability, particularly with the pandemic.

II. The Mediterranean, a battle of influence

In the past few years, the profound transformations that have taken place in the Mediterranean region have given rise to new challenges that are overlapping with old crises. Fragile states, conflicts, security threats and socio-economic inequalities have made the region one of the most unstable in the world, with a geostrategic importance that extends far beyond its geographical boundaries. Here, more than elsewhere, the divergent interests of several regional and international actors are fuelling rivalries and conflicts over power and control of energy resources, intensifying fragmentation and instability.
A) A regional cooperation to counterbalance Turkey's ambitions

Despite Turkey's energy ambitions, recent gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean have increased its chances of being side-lined from the region's emerging energy and security order. Many regional players have gathered to share the benefits of hydrocarbons at Turkey's expense. The most significant step was the agreement signed by Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Palestine, Jordan, and Italy to establish the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) as a regional organization in September 2020. France is expected to join this organization in 2021. The EMGF is a specialized discussion platform on gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. This initiative aims to define a common strategic vision and regulations to support the development of gas exploration and production, comprising private actors (ENI, Total, Exxon, etc.). The objective is to create conditions likely to build a regional gas market controlled by the regional powers that are members of the EMGF, to the detriment of Turkish interests. It is also to give more substance to the EastMed gas pipeline project, which could help diversify European gas supplies. In response, as we have seen, Turkey has deployed a hard power approach and coercive diplomacy to prevent the emergence of such a framework. The regional realignment that underpinned this project has been very clear throughout our watch, particularly for three regional actors, such as France, Egypt, and Israel.

1) Paris, “troublemaker” or “architect of peace” in the Mediterranean?

Turkey and France support rival sides and pursue clashing interests on several foreign policy issues such as in Libya and Syria. The current tensions have increased dramatically since Turkey's operation against the PKK into northeast Syria in 2019, and they have kept growing until then, aggravating the crisis in the eastern Mediterranean. Before the beginning of our watch, France has undeniably become the most vocal European power supporting the Greek-Cypriot position, underscoring its position by conducting military drills with Greece and sending the Charles de Gaulle nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean during the summer, after a serious incident with the Turkish Navy. France largely distinguished itself from other European powers such as Germany or Italy, by repeating that Turkey had to cease its repeated attacks against the sovereignty of Cyprus and Greece. This offensive rhetoric has particularly helped to generate new arms sales for France, in the context of increasing militarization of the Mediterranean Sea (see Annex 3). On September 12, Greece was announcing the purchase of 18 Rafales to defend its islands, as part of a $14.5 billion deal to modernize Greece's armed forces amid tension with Turkey.

On several occasions, France has attempted to raise the issue of Turkey within the broader and conventional framework of Atlantic and European alliances. In September, Emmanuel Macron insisted on organizing the EuroMed 7 summit, bringing together the seven EU countries bordering the Mediterranean, in Ajaccio trying to convince them to define a common position to ensure respect for international law and to find allies in the European Council. But this attempt was not very effective since, on October 16, Spain, Italy and Malta, members of the EuroMed 7, opposed an embargo against Turkey, notably due to a network of economic reasons and fear of illegal immigration which has been instrumentalized by Turkey. Even though Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Emmanuel Macron discussed their differences in a phone call in September, agreeing to improve ties, the two presidents later traded accusations over domestic issues as tensions flared again. Franco-Turkish relations became particularly tense after Paris recalled its ambassador to Ankara for consultations while the Turkish president questioned the “mental health” of his French counterpart and called for a boycott of French products in the end of October.

In December, French efforts finally paid off with EU sanctions against Ankara. A month later, Ankara softened its tone towards France, wanting to “write a new page” in its relations with the EU, as already
mentioned. In this context, Turkey and France started to work on a road map to normalize ties and talks were issued. Turkey has taken a first step in this direction by appointing a new ambassador to France who was classmate with Macron at the ENA. Emmanuel Macron will meet with Erdogan by videoconference on March 2, 2021, to discuss bilateral relations, regional issues, and relations with the European Union. This will be the first time the two leaders will speak again since September and months of high tension. However, the warming of this relationship has not prevented France to show willingness in keeping strong ties with Greece as Macron announced that France and Greece would commit to a strategic security partnership agreement to be signed next June, while receiving Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at the Elysée, in January 2020.

2) Egypt as a stabilizing power of the region

In the conflict between France and Turkey, Egypt clearly positioned itself in support of France. We can observe that the Libyan conflict pitted Turkey against both countries, with repercussions throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. In response to the 2019 agreement between Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) establishing the respective EEZ of each country, Egypt ratified, in October 2020, a maritime demarcation agreement fixing its Mediterranean border with Greece for oil and gas drilling rights. This initiative has been a major blow to Turkey’s ambitions in the region.

With the discovery of gas deposits on its coast, Egypt has achieved a strategic goal of becoming a regional energy hub and a major gas capital in the Eastern Mediterranean, benefiting from its large gas infrastructure. Egypt’s strong position has enabled the country to play a central role in the region, and Cairo has used bilateral relationships to develop and maximize its gains in the context of a regional redistribution of power. Throughout our watch, Egypt has tried to deepen its cooperation with other actors to promote its interests in energy, migration, and terrorism issues while strengthening its military capabilities. At a trilateral summit in Nicosia on October 21, Cyprus, Greece and Egypt sent a strong message against "Turkish aggression", demonstrating the willingness to form a regional alliance that would seek for stability in the region. Aware of its progressive isolation, Turkey made several gestures towards Egypt, especially in October, to explore whether it can find a modus vivendi with Cairo in Libya, hoping that such an arrangement would have an influence on the Mediterranean crisis. However, Egypt has continued to move closer to the Europeans since the three countries hold regular summits as part of their cooperation in the field of energy in the Mediterranean. In November, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi made an official visit to Athens, confirming the excellent bilateral relations between both countries and their will to move forward in new fields of cooperation. He stressed the common interests between Egypt and Greece on matters of security, stating that “there is a consensus” between Egypt and Greece to stand against regional threats and to cooperate on various levels. Al-Sisi sees in this cooperation a way to deepen the relations between Egypt and the European Union, Greece describing the country as "an ally of Europe". The joint military exercises that Egypt held with the Europeans also mean that it is training with the U.S. NATO partners, moving closer to the strategic partnership that Cairo seeks to establish with Washington, which is crucial since Egypt is the 2nd largest recipient of US military aid.

Al-Sisi’s visit to Paris at the beginning of December was a key moment for the Franco-Egyptian cooperation during our watch. France and Egypt stressed their “strategic and essential” partnership in the Mediterranean. They showed a united front against Turkey, both on the Libyan issue, since they both support Haftar’s troops, and on the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, Macron refused to make cooperation with Egypt conditional on human rights and awarded the Legion of Honour to Al-Sisi. This gesture has revealed the tensions between Italy and Egypt regarding the murder of an Italian researcher Giulio Regeni in Cairo.
back in 2016. However, this issue did not affect their relations at the political level since a major military deal is still under negotiation. In February 2021, the discussions revolved around a €10 billion deal comprising the sale of Italian frigates, Eurofighter Typhoon jets, and military satellites.

Therefore, Egypt is clearly planning to become a major actor in the region and keeps gaining influence due to its strong military ties, including military agreements, with France, Greece, Cyprus but also the UAE, the US and Russia. The exploitation of hydrocarbons is essential for Egypt if it wants to confirm its regional ambitions. Its discreet cooperation with Israel, particularly based on an agreement on gas delivery in 2018, is at the center of its development, even if the normalization of relations between Israel and Bahrain and the UAE was not in the country's interests. Nevertheless, the recent agreement, on February 21, 2021, to build a gas pipeline from the offshore Eastern Mediterranean Leviathan field to Egypt, aimed at boosting exports to Europe, demonstrates the intention of both countries to become major exporters through cooperation and to move forward together towards economic, political and security gains.

3) Israel's will to become a regional energy power

Israel also has the ambition to become a regional energy power. To this end, Netanyahu's government has moved closer to Greece and Cyprus in recent years. The signing, in January 2020, of a trilateral agreement between Israel, Cyprus and Greece, for the construction of a submarine pipeline, is one of the ambitious plans of this cooperation. At a cost of around €7 billion, this pipeline would allow the delivery of Cypriot and Israeli gas to Greece, via Crete, and beyond to Italy and Western Europe. This project would supply Europe with 9 to 11 billion cubic meters per year, corresponding to 15% of European energy consumption in natural gas. Although economically this project is costly (and probably infeasible), geopolitically it is of utmost importance for building Europe's energy independence. The US is strongly supporting this project to keep Europeans away from Russian gas. The tripartite cooperation, on which this project is based gained an institutional form with the creation of the EMGF. However, it reaches beyond the limits of a purely energy-oriented programme. On November 12, the defense ministers of Greece, Israel and Cyprus agreed to step up military cooperation in order to bolster security in the region, affirming that “our focus on energy is certainly a priority, but we aim at further improving both our economic and our wider political relations”. This cooperation became truly concrete with the $1.68 billion agreement that Israel and Greece announced in January 2021 for the purchase of Israeli jets and the opening of a military flying school managed by an Israeli company. Therefore, Israel used bilateral and trilateral talks to limit Turkish influence in the Eastern Mediterranean but also to ensure that it will benefit from undersea hydrocarbons.

Indeed, Israel has decided, in early October 2020, to start negotiations with Lebanon to clarify their sea borders. The main objective is the delimitation of an EEZ between northern Israel and southern Lebanon. The breakthrough came as Lebanon faces an economic crisis and needs to resolve this dispute, as foreign companies currently hesitate to realize investments for exploration and drilling in the disputed area (see Annex 4). The extraction of the natural resources in the maritime border area will help Lebanon contend with its crisis into which it has been plunged. Israel's potential profit could be to reinforce stability with Lebanon and to make it more difficult for Hezbollah to escalate the situation on the border. The negotiations led by the US and the UN, have been rapidly suspended in December, after four rounds of talks. Israel has accused Beirut of inconsistency, but this may reflect Netanyahu's desire to wait until the new U.S. Biden administration has taken office and to assess what Biden's policy towards the region will be. This episode demonstrates the influence that external actors still have in the Mediterranean area.
B) The end of the “American Lake” era?

Although the Mediterranean has long been nicknamed the “American Lake” because of the US’ military and naval presence, in recent years other powers from outside the Mediterranean basin have entered the region. These include Russia, China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that have shown during our six-month strategic watch their interests and influence in the area.

1) The Great Return of Russia in the Mediterranean, a growing concern for Western countries

Russia has been driven out of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, especially during the Cold War. Russian foreign policy has over the years managed to come back in the arena. Its military intervention in the Syrian conflict since September 2015 and the rapprochement with Turkey with the signing of an agreement on a buffer zone in northern Syria in 2019 or, more recently with the convergence in Nagorno-Karabakh, has improved Russian’s ambitions to have a better access to the warm seas. In 2019, Turkey purchased S-400 air defense systems to Russia for 2.5 billion dollars. In October 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan confirmed that Turkey has started testing the Russian-made system. This defense cooperation between Russia and Turkey is an important source of concern for the EU, the US and NATO. In December 2020, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo slammed Turkey during a virtual meeting of NATO foreign ministers, accusing Ankara of feeding tensions with its fellow allies in the Mediterranean and supporting the Kremlin by purchasing a Russian-made anti aircraft system. The US has gone further by imposing sanctions on several Turkish leaders after the acquisition of Russian S-400 missile defense system. Mike Pompeo accused Russia of “threatening the stability of the Mediterranean” and “sowing chaos” in the region.

More generally, Russia has also intervened in Libya by negotiating a ceasefire. Finally, the Kremlin has assured its presence in the region through its good relations with Egypt by signing an agreement on the construction of a Russian nuclear reactor in the country in 2017. Furthermore, Russia has supplanted the US in the arm market with Egypt, which is now representing 35% of Egyptian arm importations. This illustrates particularly well the growing influence of Russia in the region and the threat it represents for Western countries.

Surprisingly during our watch, Washington, traditionally the guarantor of peace between the Aegean rivals of NATO, was almost completely silent to Turkish and Russian initiatives. Some may get the impression that all actors wanted to take advantage of it, on land and at sea, before the American elections. It seems that it is this vacuum left by the US, rather than fossil fuels, that fosters regional rivalries. Despite these considerations, the US is still a relevant and active player on the Mediterranean stage, although more reserved than it used to be. The launching of talks between Lebanon and Israel under US mediation has been an important achievement for Washington. Joe Biden’s election as the President of the US has shown that regional actors are still waiting for the US’ stance to adjust their policy. For instance, we have observed a shift in Turkey’s attitude that aimed to demonstrate to the new US administration its willingness to negotiate. The US has proven that it is still a significant player in the Mediterranean and able to counterbalance Russia’s influence.

2) The role of China in the making

Another growing actor in the Mediterranean that we have witnessed during our watch is China. In November 2020, Greek officials have invited Chinese investment in post-COVID-19 Greece. This seemingly
anodyne statement is revealing the increasing, though slow, and peaceful, spread of China in the region. Through investments and purchases in strategic sectors by acquiring airports, railroads, and ports, especially the one in Athens in 2016, the Mediterranean has become an important corridor in its Belt and Road initiative. China is extending its political influence through various means (as well as with Confucius institutes) and could be able to influence the foreign policies of the most vulnerable countries away from a firmly Atlantic posture.

3) Middle East actors gain ground in the region

Turkey's rise in power has naturally stimulated potential opponents on the side of the Gulf monarchies. The Eastern Mediterranean has become a critical geopolitical space for the UAE's efforts to contain Turkey. Developments in the region have enabled Abu Dhabi to establish promising new partnerships and consolidate existing ones, with the region attracting a growing number of stakeholders. The increasing strategic interest of the UAE in this region is motivated by two main objectives. The first is to pursue economic and commercial interests with key potential partners, including Israel. The second is to contain Turkey's regional expansion. To contextualise, from 2011 onwards, the tensions between Abu Dhabi and Ankara have gradually turned into a bitter rivalry which is played out in the Middle East and in neighbouring countries, especially in Libya. For example, in November 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Greece interests have converged: the two states signed a foreign policy and defense agreement as their mutual tensions with Turkey in the Mediterranean Sea continue. Besides, Saudi Arabia also has affirmed its position in the Mediterranean game by sending F-15 aircraft to Crete in Greece in January 2021. At the end of 2020, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus conducted “Medusa 10” joint naval and aerial training on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt, with the participation of French and Emirati navy, aerial and special forces, as well as observers from Saudi Arabia, US, Bahrain, Sudan, Jordan, Italy, and Germany. These demonstrate the growing role of the monarchies in the Mediterranean as a way to tackle Turkey's policy.

III. The absence of an effective institutionalized cooperation on environmental and migration issues

A) A collective response to the growing climate emergency?

When we talk about cooperation, the issue of the environment has been one of the most important topics during our watch. In October, the Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) declared that the countries are “condemned to work together and find common solutions” as partners, especially in the face of the growing climate emergency in the region. In November, the UfM met for its fifth regional forum of foreign ministers, which was special as it celebrated 25 years of the Barcelona Process. The latter was created to strengthen relations between EU member states and their southern neighbours, with the aim of putting “the Euro-Mediterranean region on the path to stability and prosperity”. The UfM was launched in 2008 as a platform to promote political dialogue and operational cooperation in a wide range of areas, including environmental issues. For example, the UfM now joins the EU’s largest cross-border cooperation initiative, the "Mediterranean Basin Programme", to address common environmental challenges. The main priorities of the multilateral institution have been clearly stated and include cooperation on climate change, sustainable development, and the "blue" economy, with the aim of reducing the North-South gap in living standards, which is currently widening with the pandemic. This anniversary of
the Barcelona Process took on an even more symbolic significance as two reports came out describing the alarming environmental situation in the Mediterranean and calling for enhanced cooperation.

The first document is a report by the United Nations Environment Programme entitled “Report on the state of the environment and development in the Mediterranean”, produced by Plan Bleu and published on October 21, 2020. It warns that the Mediterranean Sea is subject to strong environmental pressure. According to the report, “the region is warming 20% faster than the global average” and “15% of deaths in the Mediterranean are attributable to environmental factors”. It recalls that despite the difficulties of regional cooperation in the Mediterranean, considering the geopolitical circumstances, several initiatives have been taken to improve collaboration between the various actors in the region. The creation of permanent cooperation frameworks between different institutions in the Mediterranean basin remains a priority, considering it as a key condition for progress on environmental issues. A concrete example from the report is the judicial cooperation for environmental protection in the Mediterranean.

The second report was published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) on October 26, 2020 and entitled “The Mediterranean: Mare Plasticum”. In this report, researchers estimate that more than two hundred and thirty thousand tons of plastic are accumulated each year in the Mediterranean, and this figure could double by 2040. The Mediterranean Sea has the highest levels of plastic pollution in the world. It calls on governments, the private sector, and consumers to work collaboratively to redesign processes and supply chains, invest in innovation and adopt sustainable consumption patterns and better waste management practices.

A concrete example of the consequences of climate change in the Mediterranean Sea concerns fisheries. According to a report of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), a statutory body of the FAO, published on December 14, 2020, the combination of devastating environmental changes and geopolitical conflicts has made life increasingly precarious for the region’s fishing communities. The report points out that the number of fish in the Mediterranean has declined by more than a third over the last 50 years. Given that the vast majority of commercial stocks are shared between countries, the GFCM considers that a set of rules to regulate fishing activities and a common capacity to ensure effective control of these regulations is essential to address the problems facing the fishery. But the report considers that decisive action remains elusive, as relations between some coastal states are either hostile or non-existent.

Consequently, an awareness seems to be gradually taking hold. In this context, NGOs and European institutions have called for ambitious measures to be taken as soon as possible, stressing that cooperation between EU countries and their southern neighbors is key. On December 12, European Union leaders concluded their two-day summit at the European Council by stressing that a more prosperous southern neighborhood is a strategic priority for the EU. In a joint declaration, the Council stated that “we will develop a new agenda for the Mediterranean based on shared priorities and a focus on specific Mediterranean responses and close cooperation in areas such as the environment, connectivity, education and culture, and natural resources”. One particular initiative was highlighted, the Interreg Med, which is mainly financed by the European Union’s Cohesion Fund. It consists of a network of 900 national, regional, and private partners whose objective is to find a balance between mass tourism and the protection of natural resources and population, in one of the most visited tourist destinations in the world. Its main objective is to exchange best practices and learn from successes and failures.

One of the particularities that we wished to highlight in this watch is that, alongside the rhetoric of Mediterranean institutions for the strengthening of institutionalised cooperation on the environmental
situation in the region, the concrete action taken by local initiatives, whether private or public, has been quite effective. Indeed, cooperation between local and regional authorities in Tunisia and Italy, Morocco and Spain, for example, has yielded real results on the ground, according to the UfM. It shows that local actors in two or three different countries are able to work together on projects to rid coastal areas of plastic waste or to encourage sustainable tourism, for example. Therefore, both public and private actors are essential to create a cooperative framework to tackle environmental issues and to define a macro-regional strategy to make the Mediterranean a space for sustainable development cooperation. This issue is all the more important as it will increase tensions between regional actors if it is not effectively addressed, notably through a rise in climate migration.

B) The ineffective Euro-Mediterranean migration system

In recent years, the Mediterranean has been at the centre of the news regarding the migration crisis: according to the International Organization for Migrations, more than 20,000 migrants have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea since 2014. Handling migration is a particularly sensitive subject between countries on the shores of the Mediterranean. Agreements have been passed between EU and Libya in 2014 as well as with Turkey in 2016 to cooperate on migration and to end irregular flows.

During the last months of monitoring, some events have borne witness to the difficulties encountered by EU and Mediterranean countries to control immigration. According to the UN, more than 500 migrants have died in the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of 2020, highlighting that despite the several agreements, the management of the irregular migration is yet ineffective. In November 2020, the NGO Seawatch released a video of a shipwreck largely taken over in social media to put pressure on the EU to take actions. Besides, in the same month, the EU pressed Frontex to explain the reports that highlighted migrants' pushbacks in Greece towards Turkey, showing the breakdown of the EU-Turkey-Libya cooperation on migration. Finally, regarding the Greek-Turkish conflict, the troubles of the EU in agreeing on a common position regarding Ankara can be explained by Turkey's role in halting the flow of migrants. It has led some member states to opt for a position of moderation towards Erdogan. Thus, cooperation exists in this field but sometimes at the cost of being a redoubtable lever of pressure.

To answer the problems that have arisen regarding this topic, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, announced in September 2020 by the European Commission, is on the 2021 agenda of the EU Council. In January 2021, Portugal has started assuring the presidency of the EU Council, it could be a turning point in the redefinition of the EU migration policy and its relations with other Mediterranean countries. Indeed, in 2018, Portugal was at odds with its European neighbours by stressing that it wished to welcome more migrants. That is why, the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the Union could have an impact on the orientation of the new pact, which has for now bowed to anti-migration countries, according to some NGOs like Oxfam.

IV. Conclusion and prospective

To conclude, the last six months have been characterized by an extreme level of tensions in the Mediterranean, as well the reconfiguration of alliances around the Greek-Turkish issue. Despite the heightening of the conflict between the Aegean countries, the EU sanctions as well as the arrival of Joe Biden
at the White House seems to have appeased the tensions between Ankara and Athens. We also witnessed the reconfiguration of a whole set of alliances and cooperation around maritime, gas and military agreements especially. Regional powers as well as outsiders from the Middle East and Western countries have joined their forces to counter Turkey’s ambition in the Mediterranean. Thus, cooperation in the region has progressed mainly in the energy and security sector, particularly with increasing militarization. This phenomenon is based on an inflation of bilateral and trilateral agreements, reflecting the lack of institutionalized cooperation in the region. What also appeared during our watch was the clear ambitions of some countries to impose themselves as regional powers, such as Turkey and its blue homeland, France and its firm position, and Egypt and its growing partnerships. The vacuum left by Trump’s administration has given other states a wider margin of manoeuvre. It is particularly the case with Russia, China, or Arab monarchies. However, on topics such as the environmental and migration challenges, cooperation between countries of the Mediterranean shores still struggle to sit side by side. Discordance within the EU can partly explain the difficulties to implement a strong cooperation on migration. The arrival of Portugal, a pro-migration country, at the head of the EU Council, could be the turning point for a redefinition of the EU’s position and relationships with Mediterranean countries.

More generally, the region will probably be more peaceful in the short term due to the new Biden administration and the political and economic necessity for Turkey to have good relations with the US. However, the absence of a real political will to resolve the territorial issues between Greece and Turkey and the ongoing military cooperation directed against Turkey indicate that tensions will continue to rise in the region. A fair and equitable repartition of the fossil energy in the Mediterranean looks like the only way out to satisfy all the actors. According to a former Turkish diplomat, Sinan Ülgen, if Greece and Turkey fail to reach an agreement in the context of the negotiations, there are two other conceivable ways out of the crisis: the first one could be to take their dispute before the Hague Court of Justice; a second possibility would be to decide together that they cannot agree on the delimitation of the continental shelf. Then, it could pave the way for joint exploitation, an existing option in international law. Old tensions between the two Aegean countries are still vivid in the political and cultural hegemonic discourse. In 2021, Greece will celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Greek Revolution against the former Ottoman Empire. We will be able to observe whether this event will be the occasion for a demonstration of nationalist passion but, considering current events, Greece seems more likely to politically instrumentalize it.

On a financial level, the evolution of the EMGF and energy cooperation are fundamental not only for economic gains but also for regional stability. On a military level, regional actors are going to look for upgrading their cooperation and ties. For example, Al-Sisi’s initiatives are probably going to stay focused on reinforcing Egypt’s powerful military, while Greece is modernizing its air force with the inclusion of Rafale and F-35 jets. However, concerns seem to be rising on the side of the Greek government about a possible rapprochement between Egypt and Turkey, especially on the issue of the EEZ between Turkey and Libya. If this were to be confirmed, Greece and Cyprus would lose a strong ally in the region, but it seems unlikely that Egypt will cooperate with Turkey except on very specific points, since Egypt has too much to lose by moving away from the Western position. Nevertheless, this possibility leads us to reflect on the distinction between alliances and cooperation.

In addition, multilateral meetings, such as the “Friendship Forum” held in Athens in February 2021 with the participation of Greece, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Cyprus, are likely to multiply as long as these actors find a common interest in cooperating. For Turkey, this framework is considered as “hostile” and could threaten peace and stability in the region, since it does not
solve the core of the problem between Ankara and Athens but, on the contrary, accentuates their differences. However, the Greek government stressed that it is essential for Greece "to seek this type of cooperation, the multidimensional challenges in our great neighbourhood make it necessary".

Finally, the Mediterranean Sea is no longer an area of secondary importance. The interlocking set of crises that have unfolded in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and its rivals are intractable. Given the actors’ entrenched positions and the sensitivity of the topics involved, the countries of the region will reap the fruits of cooperation and regional alliances but will continue to face tensions. The region is therefore likely to play a central role in international security for years to come.
ANNEXES :

Annex 1:

Regain de tension en Méditerranée orientale

Les conflits frontaliers maritimes...
- Zone économique exclusive (ZEE) théorique, basée sur la limite d'égale distance
- Frontière maritimes délimitée par un accord international
- ZEE revendiquée par la Turquie
- Zone contestée à Chypre par la Turquie et la RTCOM
- Ravivés par la présence du gaz
- Peloton d'hydrocarbures
- Zone de recherche d'hydrocarbures
- Alertes de la Russie
- Zones de recherche militaire derrière les navires de forage turcs en 2019

Source: Le Monde

Annex 2:

Areas of control according to Turkey’s ‘Blue Homeland’ naval doctrine

Source: TRTWORLD
Annex 3:

**La militarisation de la Méditerranée**

Part des dépenses militaires dans les dépenses publiques totales en 2019 (en %)

- Entre 0 et 4 %
- Entre 4 et 8 %
- Plus de 8 %

Carte: Olivier Lenoir / Le Grand Continent • Source: SIPRI

Source: Le Grand Continent/Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

Annex 4:

**Gas blocks and disputed maritime border between Israel and Lebanon**

Source: Middle East Eye