

## THE WIDER MEDITERRANEAN AS A GEOPOLITICAL REGION: THE CASE OF THE EASTERN BASIN<sup>1</sup>

Matteo MARCONI, Stefano VALENTE

*Sapienza University, Rome, Department of Political Science, Italy*

---

**Abstract:** The geopolitical rediscovery of a Mediterranean reaching as far as the Persian Gulf and the Ukrainian coasts during the 1980s and at the hands of the Italian Navy is certainly not accidental. The slow deterioration and finally the sudden collapse of the bipolar order imposed a reshaping of the doctrines and strategic concepts developed during the Cold War, which were unsuited to the new international context.

Although the end of bipolarity coincided with the end of the clash between antithetical cultural, social, moral, and economic conceptions, the global hegemony of the Western development model did not automatically translate into the political dominance that most proponents of the “End of History” (Fukuyama, 1992) expected.

Rather, the front that emerged victorious from the Cold War showed numerous cracks, maintaining unity of purpose more out of a lack of real alternatives than conviction. The new Global Order turned out to be a hybrid system, dominated by a widely shared rhetoric but formed by a complex web of regional and transnational balances.

Although the United States and NATO have formally retained their role as the ultimate guarantors of stability and international law, giving rise to

---

<sup>1</sup> The first part of the text is a reworking of the author’s previous publications: Matteo Marconi, *Una regione geopolitica in formazione: il carattere anfibio del Mediterraneo Allargato infrange l’egemonia delle talassocrazie oceaniche*, in *Il Mediterraneo allargato, una regione in transizione: conflitti, sfide, prospettive*, edited by Campelli E., Gomel G., Quaderni CeSPI, 6, Donzelli, Rome, 2022, pp. 45-48; Matteo Marconi, *Dallo spazio fisico allo spazio relazionale: una nuova visione geopolitica per il Mediterraneo Allargato?* in *Geopolitica e spazi marittimi*, edited by Marconi M., Sellari P., Nuova Cultura, Rome, 2021, pp. 75-86; Matteo Marconi, Enrico Mariutti, *Ricostituire la coesione e la centralità mediterranea: il tentativo italiano per un Mediterraneo Allargato*, in *Espaços económicos e espaços de segurança*, edited by Motia L., Valença Pinto L., Observare, Lisbon, 2017, pp. 221-240. The latter limited to paragraph 3.

what has been (erroneously) termed a unipolar order, international governance is ensured by a complex and interconnected jigsaw puzzle of areas of influence, overlapping and intersecting centralised and hierarchical religious beliefs, international alliances of varying intensity and structure, financial markets, industrial clusters, and trade leagues, resulting in a multi-dimensional multipolar order (Redaelli, 2021).

In this process, the oceanic order is still highly resilient, as shown by political practice, which completes our picture after the analysis of the geopolitical landscape. The framework of political relations in the area does not yet seem adequate for the fundamental change taking place and, thus, for creating an autonomous region. Evidence of this is the long series of failures in stabilisation attempts.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean, geopolitics, oceanic order, regionalisation, Turkey

## **Introduction: Regionalisation Processes in Geopolitics**

The technological revolution in communications that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reduced material distances, allowing for faster interaction between places traditionally considered distant. This has also allowed mutual relations to increase enormously, so that even events that occur at a great (material) distance from us can have a direct effect on our ability to act and the context in which we move. For example, friction in the South China Sea between Beijing and Washington directly affects Italy because it impacts imports and exports with China.

In general, the interconnectedness of the globe facilitates encounters, clashes, and hybridisations that were previously much slower and rarer. Looking at the hypertrophy of relational space in the Mediterranean, we easily realise the enormous relative complexity generated by this new geography of places.

Complexity, however, is not just a skein that thickens proportionally and homogeneously. Relationships are unstable and irregular, dictated by criteria that can make interactions between very distant countries difficult. For example, trade links between Italy and China are very complex, just as connections between relatively close regions, such as the north and south shores of the Mediterranean, are rarefied by the same criterion.

When complexity is endowed with internal coherence, i.e., the relationships between certain places are solid and significant across multiple criteria, then geopolitical regions emerge. The criteria that produce coherence are mainly of two types, in constant reciprocal rebalancing: 1) a

structural force, called the geopolitical landscape, which is composed of the environmental configurations as well as all the sedimentations that affect the territory, from social to economic and symbolic relations; 2) a voluntary force, political action proper, which changes the geopolitical landscape in which it is exercised while having to face the resistance that such a landscape offers and, above all, being affected by its influences.

### **The Wider Mediterranean as a Geopolitical Region**

Since the early 1980s, a new geopolitical structure has been emerging as an alternative to the prevailing division of the world into two opposing ideological blocs. US-USSR bipolarisation gave way to complex and overlapping geopolitical representations. Among these, reflection on the Wider Mediterranean has been growing in Italy. This is a strategic concept whose elaboration starts with the Italian Navy and aims at the Mediterranean region in order to restore its coherence and autonomy (Credendino, 2023). The research and synthesis work carried out since the eighties of the twentieth century at the Maritime Warfare Institute in Livorno took the name of the Wider Mediterranean Doctrine thanks to the intellectual work of officers such as Rear Admiral Pier Paolo Ramoino (Ramoino, 1999, 2001) and academics such as Giorgio Giorgerini (Giorgerini, Nassigh, 2002).

The Wider Mediterranean is perhaps the most interesting strategic proposal produced in Italy in the last forty years. This concept<sup>2</sup> carries an innovative political and theoretical value, capable of discerning the elements of the epochal change taking place in the 1980s, rethinking Italy's role in international relations beyond its membership in the Atlantic Alliance, and overcoming the cognitive limits of physical space.

From a theoretical standpoint, the concept of Wider Mediterranean ideally refers to the fortunate and famous intuition of French historian Fernand Braudel, elaborated at the end of the 1940s to signify that the Mediterranean Sea is not composed of a single physical basin but rather of a succession of seas and lands joined together by commercial, political, and cultural exchanges that have come to produce, at their apogee, a sea far wider than the one visible on maps (Braudel, 1949)<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> The expression 'concept' is used here in a military sense, i.e. as a synonym for idea-guide.

<sup>3</sup> Braudel uses the linguistically assimilated expression '*plus grand Méditerranée*'.

For Braudel, what mattered in the economy of the Sea were the multiple relationships between men, which, beyond identity politics, made up a surprisingly united framework of common interests and complicity. A true geographical theory observed the relationships between things to arrive at a synthesis that was not only morphological but relational as well. For this reason, Braudel spoke of the Mediterranean as a “luminous centre” whose civilisational force exceeded the limits of the physical basin and gradually faded out, so that light could not be clearly distinguished from shadow, i.e., the physical boundaries could not be precisely determined. On the other hand, Braudel’s teacher was Lucien Febvre, who had reached the pinnacle of his teaching in a work entitled, significantly, *Man and the Earth* (Febvre, 1922).

These prestigious assonances allowed the concept of the Wider Mediterranean, which is by no means taken for granted, to be in line with certain aspects developed by the contemporary human and social sciences. Indeed, in the 1980s, the critical wave of the spatial turn reminded us that quantitativeness is not the only possible perspective to approach space. If the neo-positivist approach referred exclusively to the quantitative and geometric aspects, the spatial turn rediscovered the economic, social, and, more generally, cultural dimensions of space. Space was no longer an abstract container with its characteristics but the result of the constant interaction between entities.

Similarly, for Italian Navy circles, the criterion for delimiting the space of the Wider Mediterranean is established on an anthropic rather than morphological basis (Ramoino, 2012, p. 76). Only, in addition to socio-political-economic relations in the broadest sense, or “structure”, what matters now is the defence of choke points and lines of communication and supply, i.e., the strategic military and economic nodes essential to the life of the state. From the Suez Canal to the Strait of Gibraltar, opening the Mediterranean to the oceans, to Bab-el Mandab and Hormuz, the choke points are key hubs for the traffic that takes place in the region. Added to these are the maritime lines of communication, equally essential for the unfolding of economic life, such as the world’s most important trade route, which runs from the South China Sea ports along the perimeter of Eurasia to Europe and beyond. Traffic that in part feeds local Mediterranean economies above all finds on these waterways the most efficient system of communication on a global scale. The Wider Mediterranean is a theatre of operations, united by reasons that are not only strategic but for which it is necessary to have a strategic approach because it is the theatre of action of its own interests.

The result is a picture in which the Wider Mediterranean is as much the basin proper as the seas and gulfs close to it and strongly influenced by it. First and foremost, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, up to the most recent elaborations, in which the Gulf of Guinea and the Gulf of Aden are also included. Seas, however, develop the lives of the peoples who live on their shores, and thus both the European countries on the southern shore and North Africa and the Near East are involved.

The Wider Mediterranean is a geopolitical landscape consistent at least on these criteria, namely a succession of aquatic spaces and dry lands arranged in a grid of supply and communication lines.

This implicitly suggests the geopolitical vision of the Wider Mediterranean, to be summarised in one word: preserve. That is, the concept involves the preservation of the essential supply of the community, i.e., ensuring subsistence, understood in food, economic, and military terms, but also the preservation of security and stability. The survival of the Wider Mediterranean community passes through the preservation of supply and communication lines, the main object of attention.

Preserving the essential needs of sustenance as the basis of associated living is one of the *topos* of modern politics, and this partly explains the concept's appeal to its admirers.

The complexity of cultural and economic relations means that the delimitation of the Wider Mediterranean is not a simple border but a mobile frontier, which varies in intensity and moves according to historical contexts. The result is a perspective that does not merely include or exclude geopolitical actors but rather attempts to render the complexity of the interests at stake. This is why the Wider Mediterranean has been associated, directly or indirectly, as the case may be, as a relevant element for alliances or international organisations such as NATO and the European Union, leaving behind the state-centric aspect (General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union, 24 June 2014).

The Wider Mediterranean is a diverse space given by the different importance of the points and lines that compose it based on deliberately subjective criteria, which develops an important, though not irreconcilable, contrast with the Cartesian space of the modern state, fixed and homogeneous, strictly delimited according to the coordinates of the western state tradition. It was certainly not a foregone conclusion that a military concept would redefine certain essential characteristics of the (modern) state, but if this were possible, it would be due to the maritime perspective. The sea cannot be contained by the rigid prescriptions of the rule of law but

rather tends to escape it in the name of navigation freedom. The principle of freedom of the seas does not easily submit to that of absolute sovereignty. Proof of this is the fact that the Wider Mediterranean does not claim sovereignty over a stretch of sea or a specific area but rather establishes the fundamental nodes to be defended in order to make associated life secure. Therefore, it introduces the idea that security no longer lies only in the defence of the rigid borders established by the nation-state but must necessarily project itself beyond, into the complexity of a world made up of contrasting and highly liquid interests, such as the sea on which disputes are often played out.

It is, however, something very different from the freedom of the seas claimed by the English thalassocratic power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In that system, the order of the sea did not directly involve the land but generated a dichotomy, which even in the early twentieth-century classical geopolitics interpreted as the opposition between thalassocratic and telluric powers (Marconi, 2015, pp. 64-65). The Wider Mediterranean, on the contrary, directly involves the coastal countries and wedges itself far beyond the physical limit of the coastline. Maritime and land order now find their connection as complementary moments of the same cultural, political, and economic process. Although the strategic concept is concerned with defending lines of communication and essential junctions, these are nothing more than the nerve centres of a political-economic system that also extends to the mainland. The very idea of a Wider Mediterranean suggests that the relevance of the space does not only depend on the focal points to be controlled but also on the cultural and economic qualities of the countries that are linked to it<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective, Fernand Braudel could see the Mediterranean as a combination of water and land.

### **Oceanic Order and Mediterranean Order**

The unitary vision of the Mediterranean clashes with a depiction of the same sea seen from the ocean. The characteristics of these two geopolitical representations were already clear in the work of Captain Francesco Bertonelli, an officer of the Italian Royal Navy:

“The Mediterranean can be studied from two different points of view:

---

<sup>4</sup> This aspect, although present in the strategic concept, is in fact the least developed and most problematic.

1. As one of the world's great lines of communication and as the transit channel between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. In this sense, the Red Sea becomes not only a geographical but also a political extension of the Mediterranean. [...]
2. As an inland sea that has problems of its own, independent of those that affect it as a major transit channel between the two oceans. More precisely, they have problems concerning the borders between the various states, possession of the various islands, communications between one shore and the other, problems of economic competition, and political supremacy" (Bertonelli, 1930, p. 16).

Those who dominate the ocean experience the Mediterranean as a subordinate area, a simple line of communication between the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. For those who sail the oceans, making their movements more efficient by avoiding the Cape of Good Hope to go from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean means saving many days of travel. A question concerning the economy of communication lines that, however, completely ignores the peculiarities of the inhabited lands on the Mediterranean shores. The oceanic interpretation of the Mediterranean was born in the modern world, led by Britain, from a vision of radical opposition between land and sea, whereby the maritime order is experienced as *mare liberum*, governed by the control of communication lines and junction points.

This vision is countered by Bertonelli, who in the early 1930s elaborated a radically innovative strategic conception of the Mediterranean, both in terms of method and conclusions, capable of grasping the fundamental importance of the control over European supplies and intercontinental trade routes of the Mediterranean choke points, i.e., the Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Suez, Gibraltar, Hormuz, and Bab-el Mandab; all this without forgetting the complex historical and cultural relationship that characterises the region. Bertonelli defined the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden as the "Mediterranean", grouping them into a single geostrategic region due to the interpenetration of their respective interests and the sharing of important geopolitical issues:

"It is necessary that communications with the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean, and with the Black Sea, are always ensured, in peace and war; that is, the gates of the Mediterranean mustn't be exclusively under the dominion of powers that may have interests hostile to those of Italy' (Bertonelli, 1930, p. 15).

Although the oceanic order and the Wider Mediterranean are united by the hubs and lines of communication that characterise their respective

geopolitical landscapes, the fundamental difference is that in the Wider Mediterranean, the lines of communication are functional for the subsistence of the lands and peoples that comprise it, whereas the global thalassocracy values only the line that crosses the inland sea. Within the Wider Mediterranean, this allows, at least potentially, for vital food and economic supplies as well as security and stability.

This is a decisive confrontation; the era we live in still suffers from the Anglo-Saxon oceanic hegemony in the Mediterranean, which materialised in the 18th century after our inland sea had long since lost its centrality as a terminal outlet for trade from Asia.

### **Hybridisation of Land and Sea: The Renaissance of the Inland Sea**

In today's world, we are poised for a model leap, occasioned by the irreparable crisis of the modern Anglo-Saxon maritime order, which has been progressively hybridising with the continental order for about a century. The decay of the modern opposition between land and sea has manifested itself with technological progress, which has fostered the confusion of land warfare and maritime warfare with the invasion of each other's spatial realm. Add to this the inevitable disappearance of the high seas, which manifested itself in the expansion of territorial waters in which the state holds absolute sovereignty and then in the proclamation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (an institution envisaged in the Convention on the Law of the Sea signed in Montego Bay in 1982, better known as UNCLOS). The EEZ certifies the projection of the jurisdiction of a coastal state up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline and allows it to claim exclusive exploitation of the water column and the seabed with its resources.

Overall, while the territorial sovereignty of the state has been weakened by globalisation, the possibility of exercising jurisdiction over the sea has increased. The coincidence of state, territory, and power, typical of political modernity, has collapsed, as has the mirror image and opposite idea of a free and inappropriable sea. A mechanism of expansion and retraction of state power that no longer depends solely on the sanction of legal systems but also on the concrete possibilities offered by the geopolitical landscape of each actor.

The sea territorialisation process then led states to proclaim specific sovereign functions over what was once the open sea, to the point of subordinating a thalassocratic-oceanic vision of the Mediterranean. Without a free sea, oceanic power loses freedom of action, both in terms of freedom



of trade and war. Economic freedoms become the prerogative of coastal states, while military activities are pushed away from the coast with the extension of territorial waters. It now becomes normal to discuss and bargain among coastal states over what was previously not subjugated, starting with the need to make agreements to delimit their respective jurisdictions at sea, just as has been the case on land for millennia.

One of the most obvious consequences of this change in the geopolitical order is the increase in conflict at sea and over the sea. Suffice it to think of the events linked to the discovery of offshore gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean. This has led to frictions and rearrangements of alliances between the countries in the area, which are fighting to be granted a portion of the sea where they can carry out explorations and soundings. It is a sea, then, that can also be looked at based on its internal dynamics, independent of the fact that it represents a passageway between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans.

### **Political Practices in the Inland Sea**

The geopolitical rediscovery of a Mediterranean reaching as far as the Persian Gulf and the Ukrainian coasts during the 1980s and at the hands of the Italian Navy is certainly not accidental. The slow deterioration and finally the sudden collapse of the bipolar order imposed a reshaping of the doctrines and strategic concepts developed during the Cold War, which were unsuited to the new international context.

Although the end of bipolarity coincided with the end of the clash between antithetical cultural, social, moral, and economic conceptions, the global hegemony of the Western development model did not automatically translate into the political dominance that most proponents of the “End of History” (Fukuyama, 1992) expected.

Rather, the front that emerged victorious from the Cold War showed numerous cracks, maintaining unity of purpose more out of a lack of real alternatives than conviction. The new Global Order turned out to be a hybrid system, dominated by a widely shared rhetoric but formed by a complex web of regional and transnational balances.

Although the United States and NATO have formally retained their role as the ultimate guarantors of stability and international law, giving rise to what has been (erroneously) termed a unipolar order, international governance is ensured by a complex and interconnected jigsaw puzzle of areas of influence, overlapping and intersecting centralised and hierarchical

religious beliefs, international alliances of varying intensity and structure, financial markets, industrial clusters, and trade leagues, resulting in a multi-dimensional multipolar order (Redaelli, 2021).

In this process, the oceanic order is still highly resilient, as shown by political practice, which completes our picture after the analysis of the geopolitical landscape. The framework of political relations in the area does not yet seem adequate for the fundamental change taking place and, thus, for creating an autonomous region. Evidence of this is the long series of failures in stabilisation attempts.

The oceanic vision is still dominant among the main actors in the area, so much so that NATO, the United States, Great Britain, and, to some extent, the European Union approach crises in the Mediterranean as disconnected from their more general regional balances. NATO expresses the vision of a fragmented Mediterranean already from the reference to the North Atlantic in its name. Similarly, the European Union embraces a thesis in which the southern shore becomes a periphery, as evidenced by political investments mostly directed towards Eastern Europe.

European policies towards the southern shore are implemented under the banner of contradictory assertiveness, whereby the European Union wants to be the point of reference for any progress in social and economic relations between the two shores but does not invest sufficient resources to enable the partner countries to carry out a possible transition to a western socio-economic model. Ultimately, the European Union claims the legitimacy of its hegemonic role without, however, fully assuming its responsibilities, as if it were a disempowered sovereign. In the end, that leaves room for action for the individual European states, which run free with their specific national interests, mostly unable to imagine an overall framework for the area.

Similarly, the new forces entering the Mediterranean, from Russia to China, do not have a unified vision of the sea. However, they contribute to making the picture of the powers involved in the area more complex, preventing the hegemony of a single model or actor (Radojević, 2020).

Moreover, it is significant that both Asian powers are traditionally continental and bring a different approach from the thalassocracies. This novelty follows the general proliferation of amphibious powers capable of acting both on land and at sea, as is normal in the age of hybridisation of the relevant geopolitical orders.

Alongside these elements of fragmentation, others lead instead to a unified vision of the sea, a Wider Mediterranean vision:

- a) As an inland sea, the Mediterranean is particularly suited to amphibious powers; the short distances between its shores disfavour the development of the high seas, all the more so with the closure of the free sea. Here, the territorialised sea dominates, similarly to the sovereignty of the state over land. That is an innovation that is accompanying the reduction of the US role in the Mediterranean, which is now limited to controlling the functioning of its choke points and related communication routes. This need, however, is not at odds with the prospects of the amphibious powers present there. As US interest in the Greater Middle East, the Islamic area's equivalent of the Wider Mediterranean, wanes, the possibilities for cohesive political initiatives within its basins increase.
- b) Macro-regional interests are asserting themselves, requiring defence on the same scale. This is certainly not new, since throughout the Cold War, the logic of imperial power led to overcoming and sometimes ignoring the limits placed on superpower action by the non-interference right typical of the modern state. The waning of ideological imperialism has certainly not reduced the increasingly uneven and territorially indefinite character of national interests, if anything the opposite. The rigidly state-related dimension of political legitimacy is contrasted with a much broader and more varied macro-regional system of interests and a legal system that increasingly struggles to adjust or regulate the lawfulness of the interests pursued.

Ultimately, state sovereignty is still defensible only by overcoming the idea of the border as the extreme limit of the national community's interests. The Wider Mediterranean expresses this need and thus opens up a *de facto* reconsideration of the relationship between sovereignty and national interest. The defence of national interests now entails a questioning of the absolute nature of sovereignty. Hence the assumption of a broader perspective, including a multilateral one, which is why the concept of the Wider Mediterranean lends itself better than others to strategic elaboration in contexts such as NATO and the EU (Marconi, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The inherent limitation of the principle of non-interference was already clear to geopolitical thought in the period between the two world wars, and the ostracism of geopolitics also played out on this point. The world that arose after the Second World War, in fact, still had a cultural sensibility that had little inclination towards the return of empires, while the belief in the classical state model had created a sense of unbridgeable otherness from geopolitical doctrines.

It would be shortsighted to think that the growing conflict and instability in the Mediterranean scenario only concern the countries that are part of it, as well as to underestimate their connective and economic capacities.

Only in the light of an “interconnected geo-dilation” involving every political, strategic, and economic aspect of a complex and vast area that has its centre in the Mediterranean” (Giorgerini, Nassigh, p. 209) is it possible to interpenetrate this geopolitical complexity and, consequently, to develop effective solutions.

As Bertoni realised almost a century ago, the Mediterranean is a key nerve centre of the international maritime system, and with the enlargement of the Suez Canal, completed in 1915, its importance is growing even further. Although the opening of the Panama Canal in the early 20th century provided intercontinental trade with a second route on the East-West axis, the Mediterranean has remained an extremely busy and strategic route between the Atlantic Ocean and the Indo-Pacific region, where a large share of global industrial production has been concentrated in recent decades. Although Mediterranean port infrastructures do not yet have sufficient capacity to challenge the ports of Northern Europe, the strong growth of short-haul trade provides excellent prospects.

Moreover, even though the shale revolution has exploded US crude oil production, the south-eastern areas of the Mediterranean remain a central hub in the global energy landscape, with estimated reserves of conventional and unconventional hydrocarbons amounting to hundreds of billions of barrels and production that places them firmly at the top of the global ranking (Energy Information Agency database, 2023).

The natural evolution of the concept of the Wider Mediterranean should lead to espousing an explicit geopolitical direction that is systematically discussed and engages Italy in a broader framework of interests. The Wider Mediterranean implies a unionist political dimension, so if we intend to espouse its perspective of action, this leads to the goal of union (in the broad sense) of the “coastal” countries. However, such a union will have to be pursued within a broader political sphere than the nation-state.

These should be the minimum coordinates to start debating a geopolitical vision of the Wider Mediterranean. We will then have to ask ourselves how wide this political space should be, i.e., whether it should involve only NATO and the EU or non-Western actors in the area as well. Another central question is what political institutions the new union of the Sea should consist of.

The opportunity of a Wider Mediterranean as an autonomous region is obvious: to engage the different actors in the area in concerted solutions to address key issues such as the recurring migrant crises, the enduring Israeli-Palestinian issue, the outbreaks of terrorism, the collapse of Libyan institutions, and the general weakness of Arab states (Giordano, 2021). At the moment, there is a favourable structural condition and a geopolitical landscape suitable for thinking up a coherent amphibious regime for the Mediterranean, but there are still no actors capable of grasping the opportunities presented by the emerging geopolitical order.

### **Turkey's Foreign Policy in the Wider Mediterranean**

The concept of a mobile frontier, the characteristics of a diverse space, and the survival of the Wider Mediterranean community through the preservation of the supply lines in the seas and gulfs close to the Mediterranean basin also tend to be linked to the attempt to delimit its space and carry forward its territorialisation (Moita, Pinto, 2017).

When considering Turkey's policy, including the choices of an increasingly proactive foreign policy throughout the Wider Mediterranean, the first parameter to take into account is precisely the dynamism of this "mobile frontier" and the apparent dichotomy between the principle of freedom of the seas and that of sovereignty. Therefore, the notion of security itself, emancipated from mere physical survival (in its various forms and facets), becomes central (Baldwin, 2020).

Despite the gradual marginalisation in both the political and economic spheres that has emerged since the 17th century, the Mediterranean is still a central pivot in today's balance of power.

A Mediterranean that, as described earlier in this essay, lends itself to different geopolitical representations.

On the one hand, the concept of "Wider Middle East" is based on fragmentation/marginality, which tends to give prominence to ethnic, religious, and political divisions, as well as all those divisive factors that are the premises for endemic instability. On the other hand, there is the Wider Mediterranean, with its "inclusive" vision aimed at safeguarding and preserving the continuity of traffic that synergistically unites the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and all the choke points related to them (Gibraltar, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, Suez, Bab-el Mandab, Hormuz, etc.) through momentum and a partial connection between maritime and land orders.

Therefore, this supranational dimension of the Wider Mediterranean tends to place great emphasis on the needs of the coastal countries to preserve their supply and livelihood in both the commercial and economic spheres.

Turkey plays a central role in these dynamics. Indeed, since 2002, with the rise of Erdoğan, it has pursued a foreign policy capable of overcoming certain constraints present in the bipolar past (Walker, 2007). This change of perspective by Erdoğan has affected both the internal and international spheres, increasingly after the Gezi Park protests (2013) and the failed military coup (2016), a real turning point for the subsequent evolutions that have affected this country.

One of the tools Erdogan used to strengthen his domestic legitimacy and govern a strong socio-political polarisation was precisely a proactive foreign policy made possible by strengthening economic growth.

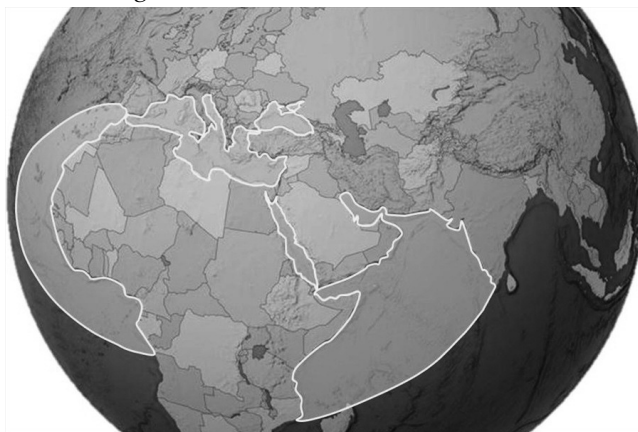
Thus, the trend of the Turkish economy has direct effects on the consolidation of the ruling class in power and the strengthening of the country's external projection throughout the Wider Mediterranean, with consequences for the territorialisation of this basin and Turkish activism at choke points increasingly relevant for trade stability.

Despite the criticalities of the Turkish economy (hyperinflation and macroeconomic vulnerability, currency devaluations, low productivity and GDP *per capita* indices, and very high unemployment), Turkey still seems capable of playing that new role.

Turkey's exposure to speculative turbulence has not, however, conditioned Ankara's new foreign policy approach, despite the risks of overexposure. For Erdogan, building a broad and reliable consensus base passes through a form of activism that, if one takes into account the Wider Mediterranean, has significant repercussions in two specific areas:

- 1) The reassertion of Turkish influence in strategically important choke points (besides the Bosphorus and Dardanelles): from Suez to the Gulf of Aden, etc. (Miscellaneous Authors, 29 November 2015; AA.VV., 2018).
- 2) The attempt to define the territorial waters of the central and eastern Mediterranean to Turkey's advantage.

Figure 1. The Wider Mediterranean



Source: <https://www.ammiragliogiuseppedegiorgi.it/mc/481/il-mediterraneo-allargato>

On the one hand, Turkish projection resumes some long-standing strategic lines following the pillars of imperial history (1299-1922) and its ability to extend its sphere of influence to the East and West. This strategic repositioning is, however, the “child” of the end of bipolarity, a historical phase in which Turkish expectations were bridled by rigid alliances. Ankara’s autonomy and greater margins for manoeuvring therefore tend to follow the two aforementioned priorities.

Turkey had to adapt to a new international context by leveraging, once again, its military capabilities to rebuild a more credible, pragmatic, and proactive role for itself by following well-defined geographical directions of expansion (Bozarslan, 2006, p. 42).

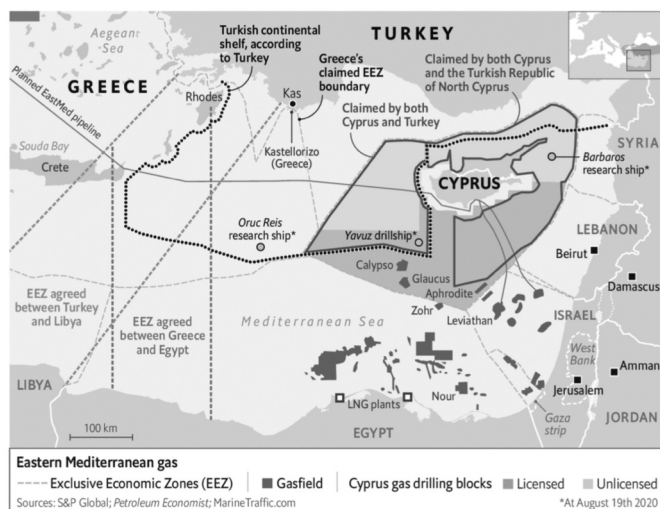
If Turkey’s economic and military presence in Djibouti or Mogadishu can be attributed **to point (1)**, even more significant is Ankara’s activism to delineate territorial waters in the Eastern Mediterranean **[point (2)]**, given the presence of potentially exploitable offshore oil and gas fields of strategic importance. Turkey’s projection throughout the Middle East influences its relations with Greece and Israel and the variable geometries of the Sunni front (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and of course Qatar)—all factors that are also strongly influenced by energy security and the role of conventional raw materials. Turkish activism has indeed heightened tension with countries that are geographically adjacent or historically in competition with Ankara in the regional sphere.

The “direct” intervention in Libya constitutes a milestone, as the new Turkish strategy shows, and ends up significantly conditioning its maritime dimension as well. Erdogan’s support for Tripoli in an anti-Haftar effort (and his regional and international allies) is part of a framework in which the Turkish President also intends to exploit the weakness of the European Union, which is divided internally between different national interests and incapable of actively projecting itself in an area that seems to be considered peripheral.

Turkey has entered this range of opportunities, including new manifestations of sovereignty over territorial waters (EEZs, etc.) and the consequent paradigm shift towards the “free sea”. That process affects the energy potential found in the eastern Mediterranean and the extremely rich deposits found there, which have profoundly changed the regional energy balance.

The territorialisation of the sea is therefore also of central importance in the central Mediterranean in light of the agreement signed precisely between Turkey and Libya regarding the definition of the maritime borders between these two states (MoU in 2019) and the related economic consequences in terms of energy (MoU of October 3, 2022). An initiative that ends up significantly disadvantaging regional competitors. An increase in conflict and the related complexities remain in the background, given the risk of unilateral approaches.

Figure 2. The deposits in the eastern Mediterranean



Source: S&P Global; Petroleum Economist; MarineTraffic.com



## References

- AA.VV. (2018), *The Suez Canal after the expansion. Analysis of traffic, competitiveness indicators, the challenges of the BRI and the role of the Free Zone*, SRM and AlexBank, 2018, [https://www.srm-maritimeconomy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/srm\\_alexbank\\_suez\\_2018.pdf](https://www.srm-maritimeconomy.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/srm_alexbank_suez_2018.pdf).
- Baldwin, D.A. (2020). *Economic Statecraft*. Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press.
- Bertonelli, F. (1930). *Il nostro mare: studio della situazione politica militare dell'Italia nel Mediterraneo*. Florence, R. Bemporad & Figlio editori.
- Bozarslan, H. (2006). *La Turchia contemporanea*. Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Braudel, F. (1949). *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Paris, Armand Colin.
- Credendino, E. (2023). Marina Militare, interessi nazionali e Mediterraneo Allargato, *Gnosis*, 1, pp. 34-47.
- Energy Information Agency database (2023), United States of America.
- Febvre, L. (1922). *La terre et l'évolution humaine: introduction géographique a l'histoire*. Paris, La renaissance du livre.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, Free Press.
- General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (24 June 2014). *European Union Maritime Safety Strategy*. Retrieved from <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?I=IT&f=ST%2011205%202014%20INIT>.
- Giordano, A. (2021). Youth Bulge Dynamics in the Mediterranean Region: The Geopolitical Implications of Human Capital on Security and Stability, in: F.M. Corrao & R. Radaelli (Eds.), *State, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean. Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*. Cham, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham, pp. 107-127.
- Giorgerini G., Nassigh, R. (2002). La relatività delle forze nell'area del Mediterraneo Allargato, in: C.M. Santoro (Ed.), *Il XXI Secolo*. Milan: Centro Militare di Studi Strategici.
- Marconi, M. (2015). How Geopolitics landed on "earth": Rudolf Kjellén and Karl Haushofer, *Gnosis*, 3, pp. 59-67.
- Marconi, M. (2022). Una regione geopolitica in formazione: il carattere anfibia del Mediterraneo Allargato infrange l'egemonia delle talassocrazie oceaniche, in: E. Campelli & G. Gomel (Eds.), *Il Mediterraneo*

- allargato, una regione in transizione: conflitti, sfide, prospettive*, (pp. 45-48). Quaderni CeSPI, 6, Rome, Donzelli.
- Marconi, M. (2021), *Dallo spazio fisico allo spazio relazionale: una nuova visione geopolitica per il Mediterraneo Allargato?*, in: M. Marconi & P. Sellari (Eds.), *Geopolitica e spazi marittimi* (pp. 75-86). Rome: Nuova Cultura.
- Marconi, M., Mariutti E. (2017), *Ricostituire la coesione e la centralità mediterranea: il tentativo italiano per un Mediterraneo Allargato*, in: L. Motia & L. Pinto Valença (Eds.), *Espaços económicos e espaços de segurança* (pp. 221-240). Lisbon, Observe.
- Miscellaneous Authors (29 November 2015). *Gli effetti economici del raddoppio del Canale di Suez sui traffici del Mediterraneo*, SRM and CERTEeT, Retrieved from <https://www.srm-maritimeconomy.com/p/gli-effetti-economici-del-raddoppio-del-canale-di-suez-sui-traffici-del-mediterraneo/?lang=it>.
- Moita, L, Pinto L.V. (2017). *Espaços económicos e espaços de segurança*. Lisboa, Observe e Universidade autónoma de Lisboa.
- Redaelli, R. (2021). *A Geo-Historical Compass for the 'New Mediterranean'*, in: F.M. Corrao & R. Radaelli (Eds.), *State, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean. Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region* (pp. 45-67). London, Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ramoino, P.P. (1999). *Fondamenti di strategia navale*. Rome, Edizioni Forum Relazioni Internazionali.
- Ramoino, P.P. (2012). *La NATO e il "Mediterraneo allargato": primavera araba, intervento in Libia, partnerships*, in: *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche*, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 4, pp. 73-84.
- Radojević, S.M. (2020). *Political and strategic changes in the Mediterranean*, *The Review of International Affairs*, 71, pp. 54-76.
- Walker J.W. (2007). *Learning Strategic Depth: Implications of Turkey's New Foreign Policy Doctrine*, *Insight Turkey*, no. 9 (3), pp. 32-47.