



THE MEDITERRANEAN'S RESURGENT ROLE IN SHAPING GLOBAL AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean is cyclically a region considered of secondary importance on the world stage. Given its millennia-long history, it is erroneously thought that the dynamics of encounters and conflicts that populate the Mediterranean have already occurred, and that new political, social, and economic balances will always reiterate the same dynamics experienced between the Pax Romana of the Mare Nostrum and the Oslo Accords. Civilizations that border or have ties to the shores of this sea are all too often considered stuck in an unresolved clash of civilizations, as if it were an unwanted annoyance or an enduring problem that one must bear with the knowledge that it cannot be resolved. The Mediterranean is also seen as a stagnant sea where the wealthy northern shore either ignores or accommodates the always chaotic and unstable southern shore. The Mediterranean is ancient and appeared to



have lost its relevance in the realm of political, social, economic, and cultural dynamics that have traversed the waters of this sea for centuries.

KEY EVOLUTIONS ARE OCCURRING ELSEWHERE

The future of the world and the international order seems to be decided in other seas, considered much more dynamic than the Mediterranean: the Arctic, a new frontier for energy resources, or the Indian Ocean, the cradle of many new powers and emerging markets. Not to be forgotten is the South China Sea, which is considered the new battleground between the USA and the People's Republic of China, the new challenger to global hegemony. Beijing's activism in these seas is leading economic giants like Japan, albeit militarily dwarfed, to rearm in an anti-Chinese context, followed by countries like South Korea and the Philippines. The real apple of contention in this scenario of increasing military and strategic activism remains Taiwan. The island, home to the Republic of China, a country protected but not formally recognized by the USA, is the global center for semiconductor production, essential for challenges and advancements in areas not crossed by waters but equally (and increasingly) important, such as cyberspace and space. Lunar missions are no longer a US monopoly, given the recent successes and Indian and Chinese research programs focused on this satellite. The space technology industry is experiencing a moment of prosperity and popularity with ambitions that go far beyond scientific research but have clear political and hegemonic implications. As mentioned earlier, cyberspace represents the new, untapped non-kinetic frontier. A space of great advancements and opportunities that are shaping human civilization and, for the latter, a new field of confrontation, conflict, and security.

All these expectations and new developments in various regions of the world and towards new frontiers of humanity had pushed the



Mediterranean into the background as a region that no longer capable of influencing global dynamics and relations. A sea with seemingly crystallized relationships, shaken by unresolved conflicts which are so longstanding to be almost forgotten. A region of the world almost isolated in its slow pace of change, isolated or only partially affected by major projects such as the New Silk Road, BRICS, or energy projects between North America and Northern Europe in the Atlantic Ocean.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN IN TODAY'S WORLD DYNAMICS

The Mediterranean returns, not only on social media feeds and in local newspapers, but as an area truly relevant for the global stage. The Mediterranean is a sea continuously crossed by migrants in search of a better life, whose journey from sub-Saharan Africa can influence the elections of far-right governments in the Netherlands and Italy. The migration factor, present since the last 10 years but severing in the last period, weighs on the exponential growth of populist parties where perhaps more than anywhere else it was thought to be impossible, as in Germany, the economic and political leader of the European Union. The EU seems to have centered its Mediterranean foreign policy on trying to respond to the increasing migration phenomenon through externalization to neighboring countries such as Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia, and Egypt.

For Brussels, the Mediterranean has also returned to the forefront due to its energy security when Europe was surprised by its extreme energy dependence on Russian resources after February 24, 2022, the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The latter, with its staunch defense against Russian aggression, immediately demonstrated that this was not only a regional conflict but had a global dimension. Kiev found Western support, while Putin's Russia, to varying degrees, received support from China, Iran, and North Korea. Turkey, straddling the Mediterranean and the Black



Sea as well as between Russia and the West, leveraging the personal relationship between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin, attempted to negotiate a role by mediating the so-called "grain deal", concerning Russian and Ukrainian grain that passes through the Mediterranean to reach African countries and others, upon which they depend for their food security.

The war in Ukraine also raised questions regarding the Montreux Convention drafted in 1936 to regulate the passage of merchant and warships between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea through the straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus. Specifically, the passage of Russian warships from the ports of Latakia and Tarso in the eastern Mediterranean, in support of the Syrian government of Al Assad and directed to support Russian military efforts in the Black Sea, raised particular issues. Once again, the Mediterranean managed to play a fundamental role in questioning an international treaty that had seemed impregnable in terms of international law for 86 years.

In the eastern Mediterranean on October 7, 2023, the international spotlight was once again turned on one of the latent, serious, and forgotten conflicts of our time: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The military attack launched from Gaza and orchestrated by the terrorist organization Hamas caught the Israeli defense apparatus off guard. Tel Aviv's responded through indiscriminate bombings in the Gaza Strip and an ongoing invasion that does not seem to be stopping. However, what happened and is happening in Israeli and Palestinian territories is not just a local conflict.

International actors have been busy in taking the sides of Palestine or Israel, with Washington leading in its support for the latter. Civil societies, not just governments, are divided on their positions and in conflict over this great tragedy developing in an area which is considered holy land by believers of the world's three major monotheistic religions. The disproportionality of Israel's response has led the International Court of Justice in The Hague to consider plausible its jurisdiction to rule the charges of genocide filed by



South Africa. In the meanwhile, governments and citizens of many countries around the world have been claiming Israel's right to defend itself in response to Hamas attacks, which resulted in fewer casualties compared to Israel's strikes on Gaza but still caused harm to civilians, remains a vital concern. This new act in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may seem like the new phase of an endemic, regional conflict, with no major consequences on the international stage, as mentioned earlier. Yet, this war has reminded us of the relevance of the Mediterranean not only for the politics and civil societies of the world. In support of the Palestinian cause and the Iranian proxy war against Israel, the Houthi rebels in who control Yemen have conducted missile attacks against merchant ships that travel from the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal to Mediterranean ports or are in transit before heading to the Atlantic Ocean and ports around the world. Sea traffic, which accounts for most international goods' transport, has had to be revised and its routes extended, thus resulting in delays and price increases for essential commodities, affecting the economies of many countries worldwide.

THE MEDITERRANEAN BACK TO THE CENTRE, ONCE AGAIN

In conclusion, the Mediterranean, often seen as a region with seemingly static dynamics, has unexpectedly returned to the forefront of global affairs. It has played a crucial role in migration, energy security, international treaties, and conflicts that have reverberated far beyond its shores. This serves as a reminder that the Mediterranean remains a pivotal region with the power to influence politics, economies, and societies on a global scale. Despite the focus of most international actors remains on other regions and frontiers of our world the international relevance and influence that the Mediterranean and its dynamics is cyclically gaining should remind to global affairs to not neglect or underestimate this region of the world.