Regional Conflict, Hydrocarbon Dreams, and Great Power Competition: Considerations for U.S. Naval Strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean

Eric V. Thompson & Sarah Vogler

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a geopolitical era during which the United States and its maritime forces maintained unrivaled superiority at sea. In the nearly three decades since, the U.S. Navy (USN) has carried out a range of activities at and from the sea in support of American security, diplomatic, and economic interests around the globe. These include, advancing and maintaining freedom of navigation, combatting terrorists, projecting power ashore and responding to a range of crises and conflicts. During this period, no adversary or competitor could match or effectively counter the capabilities which the USN could bring to bear at or from the sea.

The global security environment is now in the midst of another shift wherein two significant nuclear-armed countries are expanding their maritime power at a time when their respective relationships with Washington have become competitive, or even adversarial. This shift in the international security environment has introduced what the U.S. National Defense Strategy calls an era of “Inter-state strategic competition,” more commonly referred to as “Great Power Competition” (GPC).1 Both the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China are developing the means to compete with and counter the United States diplomatically, informationally, militarily, and economically both proximate to their territory and in regions farther afield. Russia has rebuilt, redesigned, and reorganized its armed forces and China continues to grow its military strength, with a particular focus on expanding and extending its maritime power. Where the U.S. Navy was once able to sail, operate, and influence relatively unconcerned of, and uncontested by the actions of others, it now must contend with competitors who have means to undermine American interests and impact USN activities and objectives.

Against this evolving GPC backdrop, the Eastern Mediterranean continues to be a region of strategic importance to the United States. American security commitments in the region, both to its NATO allies and other regional states such as Israel and Egypt, have driven a near constant naval presence in those waters during the three decades of U.S. naval primacy. A primary reason for this is that in addition to being the home of many American friends and allies, the region is site of several potential flashpoints\(^2\) that may erupt in, or spill into, the maritime domain. Crises could develop at sea or be triggered by the outbreak of a conflict ashore that has a direct manifestation in the maritime domain. In addition to longstanding disputes among regional countries, competition between the United States, Russia, and China in this part of the Mediterranean could lead to new tensions and/or exacerbate any emergent crisis.

This chapter examines the drivers and manifestations of increasing Russian and Chinese activity in the Eastern Mediterranean and their resulting increase in naval activity in the region. It considers what the growing Russian and Chinese naval activity in the region might mean for U.S. interests, the USN, and security more broadly in the region. The chapter then looks closely at two of the most important sources of conflict and regional competition in the Eastern Mediterranean—the Syrian civil war, and the race to develop offshore gas fields and related infrastructure—and considers how the expansion of Russian and Chinese interests and the resultant increasing naval presence may affect those dynamics.

**Key External Interests in the Eastern Mediterranean at the Dawn of Great Power Competition**

**United States**

In the most basic sense, the U.S. is a *status quo* power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Political stability, a peaceful security environment, free and open markets, and the primacy of American influence have been the predominant trends (with a few notable exceptions) in the region for the last thirty years. U.S. interests are well-served by a stable, peaceful, democratic and cooperative Europe, a robust NATO alliance, peace and security

\(^2\) For the purposes of the chapter, “flashpoints” are defined as sources of tension between regional actors that could lead to a conflict.
for Israel and Egypt, and stability in Lebanon while playing the role of favored, if not indispensable, partner to nearly every state in the region.

Forward deployed naval presence has been a staple of U.S. maritime strategy in the Mediterranean. According to the Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority 2.0 (January 2019), the mission of the Navy is to “be ready to conduct prompt and sustained combat incident to operations at sea.” Furthermore, it “will protect America from attack, promote American prosperity, and preserve America’s strategic influence.”

However, with the simultaneous emergence of both Russia and China as strategic competitors to the U.S., the national rebalance of military presence and posture to the Pacific, the continuing demands for forces in around the Arabian Gulf, the military—in particular the Navy—does not have the option of sizable increases in sustained military presence in the Mediterranean without major consequences for other theaters.

The United States has sought to mitigate the challenges posed by the emerging global strategic order—and the pressures it puts on overall force availability—by seeking to implement a more flexible and dynamic manner of deploying and employing its forces. The concept of “Dynamic Force Employment” (DFE), introduced in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, seeks to maximize the nation’s military ability to impact adversary decision-making by being less operationally predictable, while retaining strategic predictability.

As then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford explained in testimony to Congress,

> The National Defense Strategy directs the Joint Force to ‘introduce unpredictability to adversary decision-makers through Dynamic Force Employment.’ Dynamic Force Employment allows us to develop a wide range of proactive, scalable options and quickly deploy forces for emerging requirements while maintaining readiness to respond to contingencies.

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In other words, the United States intends to influence adversary decision-making by varying operational patterns and timelines, but do so in a way that conveys consistent strategic intent – namely, deterring adversaries and assuring partners and allies.  

Under America’s current forward deployed posture for forces in the Mediterranean, United States Naval Forces Europe (USNAVEUR) has four Arleigh-Burke-class destroyers permanently based in the European theater, augmented by other naval platforms on a rotational basis. This current posture provides a limited number of platforms to conduct operational and other activities in peacetime or in response to a crisis. Given ongoing mission requirements for these destroyers in the region, especially for ballistic missile defense, there is not much additional U.S. Navy capacity continually available to address increasing competition with other maritime powers.

As such, the US Navy’s ability to promote status quo outcomes in the Eastern Mediterranean can most likely only come through use of both the force homeported in the region and other elements of the Navy that come forward under DFE deployments, not via any major increase in steady-state homeported or permanently assigned forces. These likely force limitations provide the backdrop for a region in which competitors and adversaries seek to exploit the region’s economic potential, displace U.S. influence, and at times foment political instability. If the United States continues to value a visible American naval presence and a robust array of unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral activities and operations in the Mediterranean, it will have to find ways to do this without major sustained force increases.

While such an approach may require some creative thinking, planning and execution, it is not beyond the reach of naval planners and strategists. Then-Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson noted that “the Navy, by its nature, is predisposed to being dynamic and moving around.” He offered the 2018 deployment of the USS Harry S. Truman

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7 Ibid.
Carrier Strike Group, as an early example of operationalizing the concept of Dynamic Force Employment in support of U.S. interests in the region. During that deployment, the *USS Harry S. Truman* Strike Group conducted operations north of the Arctic Circle for the first time in 30 years, as well as flying missions against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), conducting high-end training with the Royal Navy and French Navy, and participating in the largest iteration of NATO’s Trident Juncture exercise to date.

Since this inaugural DFE deployment, the U.S. Navy has continued to execute periodic highly visible carrier operations to reinforce the capability and scalability of U.S. naval power in the European theater. In April 2019, the U.S. Navy had two carrier strike groups operating together with NATO allies in the Mediterranean. This was only the second time in twenty years that two U.S. aircraft carriers operated together there at the same time. “In the era of great power competition, particularly in the maritime domain, one carrier strike group provides tremendous operational flexibility and agility,” commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe Admiral James Foggo noted at the time. “Two carrier strike groups operating simultaneously … provides an unprecedented deterrent against unilateral aggression, as well as combined lethality,” Foggo said. “It also should leave no doubt to our nations’ shared commitment to security and stability in the region.” U.S. Ambassador to Russia John Huntsman noted, “When you have 200,000 tons of diplomacy that is cruising in the Mediterranean — this is what I call diplomacy. This is forward-operating diplomacy, nothing else needs to be said.” Vice Admiral Lisa Franchetti added “Dual-carrier operations here in the Mediterranean showcase the inherent flexibility and scalability maritime forces provide to the joint force, while demonstrating our ironclad commitment to the stability and security of the region.”

Despite these occasional surges, in this era of limited force availability in European waters, the U.S. Navy seems likely to continue to grapple with how it can best plan and execute naval operations in the Eastern Mediterranean to advance national strategic objectives. Unless things change significantly in the U.S. approach to global naval force allocation and employment, presence operations, port calls, demonstrations of combat capability, and joint and cooperative deployments and exercises with regional navies—the traditional tools that the U.S. Navy can use to reinforce its role
in regional affairs—will need to be executed creatively given limited permanent forces and a somewhat unpredictable DFE toolkit.

Russia

Russia’s increasing interest and naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is not by chance. According to Michael Kofman, one of the United States’ leading subject matter experts, Moscow fully embraces a burgeoning role in Great Power Competition. He notes that,

The Russian strategy for great power competition begins with a decision to establish credible conventional and nuclear deterrence, positively shaping the military balance, which paradoxically grants Moscow confidence to engage in indirect competition against the United States. This is a strategy of cost imposition and erosion, an indirect approach which could be considered a form of raiding. As long as conventional and nuclear deterrence holds, it makes various forms of competition below the threshold of war not only viable, but highly attractive.\(^\text{10}\)

After years of relative absence, Russia has become increasingly present and assertive in the Mediterranean Sea. According to Dmitry Gorenburg, another leading expert on its military affairs, “For Russia, the Mediterranean symbolizes the larger competition between Moscow and Washington.”\(^\text{11}\)

The country’s strategy in the Mediterranean is focused on three key goals:\(^\text{12}\)

1. Taking advantage of the Mediterranean’s geographical position to improve Russia’s security,
2. Using Russia’s position in the Mediterranean to increase its status as an alternative world power to the United States, and
3. Providing support for the Syrian regime.


\(^{12}\) Ibid.
Central to this strategy is the re-establishment of continual naval presence in the Mediterranean. In January 2013, Russia conducted its largest naval maneuvers there since the end of the Cold War. During his visit to the Black Sea Fleet in February of that year, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stressed that the “Mediterranean region was the core of all essential dangers to Russia’s national interests” and that continued fallout from the Arab Spring increased the importance of this region. Shortly thereafter, he showcased a new Russian naval policy by announcing the decision to establish a Navy Department task force in the Mediterranean “on a permanent basis.”

Following Shoigu’s remarks, the Russian Federation Navy stood up a permanent naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Syrian port of Tartus, with a rotating squadron of ships sourced largely from the Black Sea Fleet. The re-emergence of the Soviet-era 5th Squadron, now termed the Mediterranean Task Force (MTF) signaled a sort of return of the Russian Navy’s ability to project power and operate in areas farther afield from home. The MTF supports Russian ground forces in Syria and projects national power in NATO’s southern flank.

Initially cobbled together with the few older surface vessels capable of sustaining operations away from their homeports, the MTF now comprises the RFN’s newest surface combatants, which are equipped with Kalibr-class land-attack, antisurface, and antisubmarine missiles. An agreement with Syria has allowed the MTF to be reinforced with two of the RFN’s newest Project 636 “improved Kilo-class” attack submarines, which have been permanently stationed at Tartus since 2017. Submarines from the Northern Fleet have also been reported as deploying to the Mediterranean, sometimes as part of the MTF but occasionally for independent operations.

14 Ibid.
Two major developments have facilitated Russia’s ability to stand up a significantly more capable MTF. Since 2011, Russia has been conducting a modernization and reinvestment effort in its military forces and capabilities via the State Armaments Program (SAP). As part of SAP-2020, Russia poured the largest share of its military spending into reviving its naval forces, which allowed the state to conduct major upgrades to its older platforms and build new classes of surface and subsurface vessels. The Russian military industrial complex has also been focused on developing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and electronic warfare (EW) capabilities.\footnote{Roger McDermott, “Russia’s Advances in Electronic Warfare Capability,” Real Clear Defense, 4 October 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/10/04/ru...}

Although Russia faced challenges in fulfilling the initial plan for the numbers of ships to be built, the first phase of SAP has been modestly successful. The fleets of the RFN have been significantly reinforced with new and modernized platforms that have upgraded weapons systems and capabilities. The second phase of SAP (2018–2027) is focused on serial production of the new classes of ships developed in the first phase, making it likely that the RFN order of battle will continue to expand in the next 10 to 15 years.\footnote{Gorenburg (2019).}

The second development was Russia’s 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Russia’s Black Sea Fleet had been leasing its home port at Sevastopol from Ukraine, the terms of which had restricted the number and types of ships it could keep there and prohibited the deployment of air platforms and air defense batteries. The annexation effectively removed those restrictions, allowing the Russian Navy to build out the capabilities of its military forces in Crimea. Russia has since leveraged the territory as a base for power projection into the Mediterranean and beyond.\footnote{Igor Delanoe, “Russia’s Black Sea Fleet: Toward a Multiregional Force,” CNA Analysis & Solutions, IOP-2019-U-020190-Final (June 2019), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IOP-2019-U-020190-Final.pdf.}

While most of the naval units deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean are light vessels, they can patrol the Levant on a continuing basis, thanks to Russia’s growing support infrastructure in the region including the naval support facility in Tartus, a naval facility in Latakia, and bilateral agreements with Cyprus (Limassol) and Malta (Valetta) authorizing warships to visit these ports for logistical operations. Furthermore, the Mediterranean Task Force benefits from air cover provided by Russian air-

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craft and air defense assets in Syria. As a result, the Eastern Mediterranean has become a relatively safe environment for the Russian Navy despite being outside of contiguous maritime spaces.\textsuperscript{20}

Russia’s increased submarine operations in the Mediterranean, including its permanent presence off the coast of Syria, create a significant increased demand for U.S. and allied anti-submarine warfare (ASW) and reconnaissance resources. Russian media has claimed that the Russian Navy has tracked a U.S. \textit{Ohio}-class submarine.\textsuperscript{21} In 2018, British media reported that two Russian submarines (presumably \textit{Kilos}) chased one of its \textit{Astute}-class nuclear attack submarines off the coast of Syria. The Royal Navy boat was in the area to participate in allied missile strikes in response to the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons. The alleged shadowing by the \textit{Kilos} may have prevented the British submarine from firing its Tomahawks, though there is reason for skepticism about these open source accounts.\textsuperscript{22}

Gorenburg notes that,

> Although the Russian Navy’s missions in the Mediterranean are primarily related to [Syria]... conventional deterrence has come to play an increasingly important role since the development of a ship-based cruise missile capability. The Russian Navy has sought to establish credible maritime conventional deterrence versus NATO through the combination of air defenses and cruise missile–equipped ships, which work together to signal that any use of NATO naval forces against Russian ships and facilities would be highly costly for the adversary.\textsuperscript{23}

The RFN has demonstrated its ability to rapidly deploy additional ships to augment the MTF and guard strategic equities. In August 2018, the MTF was augmented with ten surface combatants from the Baltic Fleet, Northern Fleet, and Caspian Flotilla and a tanker, ostensibly in order to dissuade

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.  
U.S. naval forces from potentially conducting strikes against Syrian government sites.\textsuperscript{24} This was the largest composition of the MTF since Russia’s military operations in Syria began in 2015. The ships were reinforced with airpower, Tu-160 bombers and Su-33 and Su-30SM fighter jets, in addition to other aircraft deployed to Khmeimim Air Base near Damascus.\textsuperscript{25} The enlarged task force remained off the coast of Syria for several weeks, and held antiair and antisubmarine warfare maneuvers and mine countermeasure operations in early September. Of note, these drills coincided with Russia’s annual large-scale strategic operational exercise, \textit{Vostok}-2018, and so while there was an operational demand for the build-up, it also demonstrated Russia’s ability to support two major military activities concurrently.\textsuperscript{26}

Perhaps just as significantly for Russia, its MTF has allowed it to engage with Mediterranean allies and demonstrate its shipbuilding and weapons development. The MTF has conducted port visits and exercises with Cyprus, Egypt, and Turkey, as well as joint exercises with China. In the press, Russian officials have underscored that they are a maritime force to be reckoned with, which will defend itself and its allies from Western aggression. When the US Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, referenced a potential maritime blockade to constrain Russian energy activities in the Middle East, a former RFN chief and past Black Sea Fleet commander, Admiral Viktor Komoyedev, countered by saying that the country could (and would) introduce a convoy to accompany every vessel going to and from Syria.\textsuperscript{27} This language is reminiscent of the 5\textsuperscript{th} Squadron’s appointed role of protecting the Soviet Union’s Arab allies from the United States and Israel, especially as Komoyedev explicitly referred to Israel’s cooperation and support of the United States.\textsuperscript{28}

Over the longer term, given future shipbuilding plans, Russia will continue to be able to maintain a Mediterranean Task Force of 10 to 15 ships.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{24} “Russian Navy deploys biggest task force in recent time to Mediterranean – military expert,” \textit{Interfax} in English, 28 August 2018.
\textsuperscript{26} Of note, during Russia’s 2017 major strategic operational exercise, Zapad, Russian forces in Syria were attacked by jihadists in Idlib, who “threatened to encircle and overrun Russian positions.” Michael Kofman, cited in Iddon (2018).
\textsuperscript{27} “Russia will not let U.S. organize naval blockade – Russian admirals,” \textit{Interfax} in English, 1 October 2018.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
29 Similarly, it will likely be able to maintain a larger contingent of submarines in the Mediterranean than it did before 2014. Some caveats are necessary, in that this assumes that Russia’s ship building industry is able to continue to repair, modernize, and build new platforms with at least the present level of success. The Mediterranean will likely continue to play a key role in Russian naval strategy because of its strategic significance as an access point to southern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. As Gorenburg notes, “By building up its naval forces, Russia is hoping to circumscribe NATO access to the region, protect Russia’s southern flank, and assist its current and potential future client states in the region.”

China

While Russia may pose a more immediate military challenge to American activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, China is also proving that it too considers the region to be promising venue for advancing its interests and decreasing U.S. influence. By almost every economic metric, Chinese investment and involvement in the countries that comprise the wider Mediterranean has surged since the early 2000s. As Magnus Nordenman notes,

For China, the broader Mediterranean region is of real interest in terms of both energy security and trade. The broader Mediterranean region, North Africa and extending down to the Gulf in particular, is also an important source for China’s supply of energy. It is far from unusual that commercial and energy interests are usually followed by a military presence, at least on a rotating basis. . . . The Mediterranean

29 Gorenburg (2019).
30 Ibid.
31 Alice Ekman, Director of China Research and IFRI’s division of Asian Studies notes that Chinese officials, ministries, and academic researchers rarely use the term “Mediterranean.” Instead, they are more likely to refer to sub-regions, i.e. “southern Europe” or “northern Africa” and consider them depending on the geographical division of their institution. Ekman notes that this context and bureaucratic compartmentalization suggests Chinese diplomacy does not address the Mediterranean region in its entirety. As such, it is difficult to speak of a “Mediterranean strategy” in Chinese diplomatic discourse (Alice Ekman, “China in the Mediterranean: An Emerging Presence,” Notes de l’IFRI, 23 February 2018, 7, https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/china-mediterranean-emerging-presence).
constitutes the western end of the “New Silk Road,” the Chinese project to link China with markets and producers across Central Asia and into Europe and the Middle East.\textsuperscript{32}

China’s investment in the region appears to seek to position it to be able to lay the foundation for the expansion of the maritime Silk Road and access farther into Europe.\textsuperscript{33}

Indeed, China has steadily become one of the top trade partners for all the countries in South Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Although compared to Europe and other advanced economies most of the Middle Eastern and North Africa countries are not (yet) important markets for Chinese products, China aims at integrating them in its global chains of production within the framework of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) and make them example of a new, modern, and efficient, “made in China” brand. Consistently, the number of engineering contracts awarded to Chinese companies and of Chinese workers in the region have been surging.\textsuperscript{34}

China’s foreign direct investment (FDI) in Mediterranean countries has risen from less than five billion USD in 2009 to over 35 billion in 2017.\textsuperscript{35}

Cooperation between China and these countries forms the “European extension” of the maritime route and creates a “China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage.”\textsuperscript{36} As it has in other regions, China is investing heavily in Mediterranean ports: Piraeus in Greece, Cherchell in Algeria, Port Said and Alexandria in Egypt, the ports of Ashdod and Haifa in Israel, the ports of Savona, Triest, Genoa, and Naples in Italy, the Kumport terminal at Turkey’s Ambarli,\textsuperscript{37} and the Sines port in Portugal.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{33} Ekman (2018), 14.
\textsuperscript{36} Ekman (2018), 9-10.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 14.
China’s growing interests in the region are also reflected in its diplomatic efforts. Beginning in the early 2000s, China established sub-regional cooperation forums with Africa (2000), the Arab world (2004), and Southern Europe (2012). Included in the China-Southern Europe forum are Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta. These links cover areas of maritime and agricultural cooperation but provide the foundation for strengthened economic and political cooperation and, per Ekman, create the conditions necessary for expanding cooperation to additional sectors, such as transport and new technologies, and potentially, to other countries in the sub-regions.\textsuperscript{39}

Since the early 2000s, China’s economic modernization has fed the country’s military modernization. The 2013 Defense White Paper announced its intent “to accelerate the modernization of its forces for comprehensive offshore operations, develop advanced submarines, destroyers and frigates.” Like Russia, China is accelerating its naval shipbuilding program, including aircraft carrier capabilities.\textsuperscript{40} China has also increased its naval activities around the globe including conducting counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, opening a naval base in Djibouti, conducting non-combatant evacuation operations from Libya and Lebanon, participating in exercises with the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, sending a task force into the Baltic, and conducting port calls across Europe.\textsuperscript{41}

China has also sought to buttress its military-to-military relationships in the Mediterranean region. Chinese warships detailed to the counter-piracy effort off the Horn of Africa have, on numerous occasions ventured into the Mediterranean for port visits in both European and North African countries.\textsuperscript{42} Through these activities, China is demonstrating blue water capabilities in line with its stated maritime objectives, but also a sending a subtler message meant to accustom Europe to its presence and emerging maritime interests in the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Ekman (2018), 10-11.
\textsuperscript{42} Nordenman (2015).
\textsuperscript{43} Scott (2018).
In the summer of 2017, a task group the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted a live-fire drill in the Mediterranean Sea, which according to the Chinese Ministry of Defense (MoD) was for “honoring their combat skills” en route to a joint exercise with the Russian Navy in the Baltic Sea.\textsuperscript{44} There are clearly some early indications that China is intending to use its naval forces in the region to advance global political, diplomatic, and economic interests, expand influence, compete for access, and perhaps one day project naval power at and from the sea in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Potential Maritime Regional Flashpoints in the Era of Great Power Competition

The Syrian Civil War

Soon after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, regional countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey began picking sides to support in the quickly fragmenting country. What started as an internal uprising on the tail end of the Arab Spring quickly transitioned from an internal security problem for the Assad regime into something much bigger. The rapid seizure of territory by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013-2014 brought the U.S. and a growing coalition that would soon include Britain, France, Australia, and Jordan in to air patrols over Syria, and air strikes against ISIS positions on the ground.

In 2015, Russia augmented diplomatic and financial support to the Syrian government and began providing direct military support to the Assad regime. The Russian Air Force began strike missions in October and shortly thereafter Moscow confirmed that its special forces were assisting in ground combat operations near Palmyra, and that the Navy and Naval Infantry were expanding activities in and around the port of Tartus on Syria’s Mediterranean coast.\textsuperscript{45} Since then Russia signed a 49-year agreement with Damascus giving the Russian Navy rights to station up to 11 ships and submarines on an ongoing basis at Tartus, as well as establish a repair and maintenance facility to support these Syrian-based forces. By 2019, Capt. Sergei Tronev, the chief of the navy command in the area, noted that in


\textsuperscript{45} Gibbons-Neff (2016a).
addition to two submarines moored at the harbor, Tartus now also hosts two RFN missile corvettes, three patrol boats, and three supply vessels.\textsuperscript{46}

The buildup of Russian maritime power in and around Tartus is not solely relevant to Moscow’s deep support of the Assad regime during the civil war or to the pace of combat on the ground as Damascus seeks to reestablish control over the entire country. It also enables the Russian Navy to compete with the American regional and maritime interests in three ways.

First, it enables the Navy to demonstrate that it can influence operations on the ground in Syria from the sea as part of the growing Russian joint power projection capability. In 2015, Russian Naval forces operating in the Mediterranean\textsuperscript{47} and in the Caspian Sea\textsuperscript{48} fired Kaliber land attack missiles into Syria, the former notably including the launch of missiles from submerged submarines. While power projection ashore from the sea is a significant high-end naval capability, perhaps more importantly in terms of Great Power Competition, the demonstration of precision land attack capability from forces stationed at sea hundreds of miles from the launch point used to be the sole dominion of the U.S. Navy and its top end NATO counterparts. Russia’s one working aircraft carrier, the \textit{Admiral Kuznetsov} also sailed, transferring airplanes to an airbase in Syria to integrate into Russian air operations. While arguably not on par with USN operations of a similar nature, these operations demonstrated the visible attributes of a modern, power projection Navy with able to influence events ashore far from Russia’s land borders and territorial waters.

Second, with the continual presence of submarines, intelligence gathering ships, and surface combatants in the Eastern Mediterranean, and with Russian aircraft flying over the Mediterranean—on occasion intercepting U.S. Navy aircraft\textsuperscript{49}—Russia is able to monitor American and NATO naval


activities in the region, and potentially disrupt operations or hold these forces at risk in times of tension or conflict. Beyond the ships and submarines forward stationed at Tartus, Russian units from other fleets regularly deploy in the Eastern Mediterranean. For example, by the autumn of 2019 the navy’s force there included the guided-missile cruiser Marshal Ustinov, which had sailed from its Arctic base of Severomorsk, and the guided-missile frigate Admiral Makarov detached from the Black Sea Fleet.\footnote{Karmanau (2019).}

In addition, the Russian military has provided Syria with long-range anti-ship coastal defense cruise missiles. According to senior US officials, the presence of Yakhont antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) in Syria alone has been enough to “create a surface naval A2/AD zone in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean.”\footnote{Jonathan Altman, “Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean A Growing Risk,” in \textit{Naval War College Review} vol. 69, no. 1 (Winter 2016), 72.} Combined with upgraded air defense systems, and the reported gradual replacement of the Russian combat air wing in Hmeimim with more interdiction asset, Keir Giles and Mathieu Boulegue have noted, “these out-of-area assets are not formidable, yet they are sufficiently capable of complicating the entry of US and allied forces into the region.”\footnote{Giles, Keir, and Mathieu Boulegue, “A2/AD Myths: Chinese & Russian – Russia’s A2/AD Capabilities: Real and Imagined,” \textit{THE US ARMY WAR COLLEGE QUARTERLY Parameters} vol. 49. No.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2019), 21-50, https://ssi.armywarcollge.edu/pubs/parameters/Issues/SpringSummer_2019/5_Giles.pdf, accessed 3 November 2019.}

Third, with continuous naval presence in the region, a growing diplomatic push to build new relationships and access across the Middle East and North Africa, burgeoning arms sales, increasing exercises and port visits in the Mediterranean, and the alignment of naval activities at sea with other instruments of Moscow’s power (diplomatic, economic, and informational), Russia is pursuing a direct counter to decades of overwhelming U.S. influence in the region. As Jonathan Altman has observed, “although the United States does have regional allies with credible maritime combat power, the Russians are working to drive wedges into these relationships” and “decouple” the U.S. from its long-standing allies such as Greece, Turkey, and Egypt.\footnote{Altman (2016), 73.} Not only does the presence of the Russian Naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean provide them opportunities for greater influence in the region, it also contributes to combat readiness and effec-
tiveness. Tom Fedyzin notes that the Russian Navy should “be able to increase its readiness and develop more sophisticated training by operating in the Mediterranean during the winter months.”

Competition for Hydrocarbon Resources

A 2010 assessment of undiscovered gas and oil reserves in the Levant Basin—essentially the geological underpinnings of most of the Eastern Mediterranean—by the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that there are approximately 1.7 billion barrels of recoverable oil and 122 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of recoverable gas in the basin. In the years since, new discoveries of offshore gas fields have been made by Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus, while Lebanon and Turkey continue to search their territorial waters for signs of similar resources.

These newly identified hydrocarbon resources lie under some of the world’s most contentious and contested maritime claims. At least five countries have contested or unrecognized maritime claims in the region. The prospects of energy independence and financial benefit that the riches of the Levant Basin gas field offer make the stakes high for all. Adding to the contentiousness of the claims to the Levant Basin energy resources, its waters abut—and in fact, overlap—several of the most contentious conflicts in the Middle East. The Turkish-Greek dispute, the Cyprus dispute, the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, the simmering Turkish-Israeli relationship, the ongoing Syrian civil war, and political turmoil in Lebanon, are all manifest along the littoral of the Mediterranean. Many of these conflicts have erupted into direct military action in the last 40 years, sometimes including naval engagements.

For regional claimants, the scale of the hydrocarbon resources that may be available under the Eastern Mediterranean can potentially have strategic impact. The size of Israeli discoveries, for example, exceed what is required for domestic demands, making it essentially energy independent while po-

positioned as an exporter. Hydrocarbon development also has the potential to promote regional cooperation as states attempt to provide a favorable atmosphere for outside investment necessary to develop their finds.

However, the discovery of commercially viable gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean also brings the prospect for new competition and conflict. For example, the discovery of gas reserves off the coast of Cyprus poses immediate challenges for the Republic of Cyprus (ROC) and complicates longstanding tensions with Turkey and the Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (TRNC). Both Turkey and the TRNC claim the right to explore and develop hydrocarbon resources off the coast and both reject the right of the ROC to sign agreements to explore for, develop, and monetize the island’s resources. To counter the ROC’s efforts, the Turkish government has conducted a boisterous campaign to condemn gas development deals, calling the decision “adventurous,” “irresponsible,” and “provocative.”

Turkey also signed an agreement with the TRNC, delineating the continental shelf between the two asserting rights to the entire Cypriot continental shelf for the latter. Subsequent agreements have placed bans on companies doing business with the ROC from working on Turkish energy projects.

Since 2011, a number of minor confrontations between Turkey and Cyprus have occurred in response to the exploration and development of hydrocarbon resources off the island’s southern coast. Turkey has deployed warships to areas where international companies have conducted exploratory drilling and sent research vessels into the island’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in a series of moves regarded by the ROC as provocations. Turkey has also contested foreign companies exploration activities; in early 2014, its navy expelled a Norwegian vessel searching for hydrocarbons in Cyprus’s EEZ, claiming it had entered an area under Turkey’s jurisdiction. In late 2014, Turkey dispatched two warships in support of its

own seismic surveys in areas overlapping Cyprus’s EEZ. Indeed, Exxon Mobil’s 2018 announcement that its deep-sea drilling south of Limassol had yielded encouraging results coincided with Turkey embarking on its “biggest-ever” naval exercise in the region, a show of force accompanied with messaging to reinforce Ankara’s own right to energy exploration off the divided island.\(^59\) According to Ankara, Turkish naval and air forces are present in an around Cypriot waters in order to assert its claimed rights to operate there and to explore for offshore resources, as per their continental shelf claims and their agreements with the TRNC. However, Turkish military presence creates tensions in the region and increases the chances for a misunderstanding or a miscalculation at sea. Unlike on land, there is no UNFICYP force to monitor developments and/or interpose itself between Turkish maritime forces and the limited ROC coastal defense forces.

Given that the United States makes no maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and that any U.S. participation in resource exploration or extraction would be by private companies, it is unlikely to be a direct party to any hydrocarbon dispute.\(^60\) However, competition over hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean involves many U.S. allies and partners in the region, particularly Israel and Turkey. The risk, therefore, in this case is less in terms of maritime operations – though given its naval presence in the region, U.S. forces could certainly find themselves proximate to a clash at sea or be drawn in to responding or supporting an ally in the event of hostilities. Instead, the risk of damaging American relations with a key partner is arguably the most pressing concern.

Another major source of disgruntlement for policymakers in the United States is Turkey’s growing ties with Washington’s GPC rival, Russia. These ties are manifest in their cooperation in Syria, Russia’s military sales, particularly the delivery of S-400 system to Turkey, and cooperation on energy infrastructure. Russia’s TurkStream pipeline runs from the Black Sea through to Turkey, with additional legs of the pipeline planned to carry gas to Europe. TurkStream allows Russia to export gas to Europe, bypassing Ukraine. Turkey, as an importer of energy, is eager to secure access to Russian gas and establish itself as a hub for gas distribution networks. As U.S.-Turkish relations continue to chill over divergent interests, Turkey


\(^60\) It is worthwhile to note that Noble Energy and ExxonMobil, primary players in ROC and Israeli gas field exploration and development, are US companies and employ US citizens in both countries.
may be more incentivized to continue, or even deepen its relations with Russia.

Russia’s interests in Eastern Mediterranean gas go beyond forming a link with Turkey. From the beginning of the Mediterranean gas bonanza, Russia has been a participant. Gallia Lindenstrauss, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University notes, “Russia will not want to see the rise of serious competition to its energy exports to Europe.”61 In addition to Turkey, Russia has been growing its diplomatic and economic links with Cyprus and Israel, and several of its companies are players in Eastern Mediterranean gas exploration and development activities. Russia has secured drilling rights to finds in Syria and Lebanon, increasing the likelihood that if and when regional cooperation on gas development extends to these countries, it will have a foothold. Russia has restructured terms of loans with Cyprus to offer more favorable interest rates. In 2015, at a time when many European countries were re-evaluating cooperation with Moscow in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and activities in Ukraine, Cyprus signed a military cooperation agreement to give the Russian Navy access to its ports. As Cyprus seeks to build a favorable economic climate for resource development, its dependence on Russian investment and loans may be helpful in the short term, but set up the island nation up for a long-term complicated relationship, particularly if Russia were to apply pressure or seek a sort of quid pro quo for favorable terms.

While China is not a direct party to hydrocarbon developments nor has the PRC taken a clear position on the future of Mediterranean gas development or the related boundary disputes, its increased investment, cooperation forums, and presence in the region creates potential influence. For China, the broader Mediterranean region is of real interest in terms of both energy security and trade. China has invested in Greece’s port of Piraeus and other facilities throughout the region as part of the western outlet for its “New Silk Road.”62 As China and Russia become more connected and enmeshed with Eastern Mediterranean countries, they will be posi-

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tioned to exert pressure on local actors, which will likely complicate the calculations of regional countries.63

Conclusion

So where do all of these developments leave us? While predictions about the twists and turns of regional politics, diplomacy and security in the Eastern Mediterranean can be perilous, a few things are clear. First, while U.S. interests in the region remain largely consistent with the decades preceding the emergence of GPC, the landscape has changed dramatically. Expanding Russian and Chinese interests now overlap, and in many ways challenge U.S. aims. Similarly, the U.S. Navy is no longer uncontested in its influence in the region and it no longer has unquestioned naval primacy. With the wide expansion of RFN naval activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, a growing anti-access/area denial capability developing in Syria, and increasing Chinese presence in the region (including in key ports, commercial hubs, and at sea) U.S. naval operations in the region no longer go unobserved. Thanks to assertive diplomatic, financial and increasingly naval moves by China and Russia, U.S. naval influence in the Eastern Mediterranean now has viable competitors. Depending how things unfold, the U.S. Navy may one day soon find its ability to operate at will in the region contested.

Second, Russian naval forces are now in a position to maintain a continual military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and seem likely to turn it into a source of influence directed at U.S. friends and allies. Russia has demonstrated that it can conduct land attack operations from surface and subsurface units in the region; no nation there can ignore Russia’s ability to influence the shore from the sea. Russian aircraft also regularly patrol the skies over Syria and keep a keen eye on areas well beyond Syria’s borders. Russian naval forces regularly exercise in the region, make port visits, and support Russian diplomacy and arms sales. While not yet a peer of the U.S. Navy in overall naval capability, RFN influence is palpable in the Eastern Mediterranean and plays a direct role in Russia’s efforts to lessen Washington’s influence.

Third, China clearly has its eyes on the Eastern Mediterranean. While the PLAN does not regularly patrol the waters of the Levant, Chinese diplomatic, economic, and security interests have a distinctly maritime dimension. Chinese companies and parastatal actors are investing directly in Eastern Mediterranean ports, maritime infrastructure and seaborne commerce. And the presence of Chinese naval forces in the region is on an upward trend. The only major foreign military operations that the PLAN has undertaken in the last two decades—beyond counterpiracy operations off the Horn of Africa—have been the NEOs in Libya and Lebanon. PLAN task forces frequently transit the Suez Canal and make port calls in Europe and North Africa. Those ships regularly transit the Mediterranean en route to major naval exercises with the United States’ other GPC rival, Russia. More recently, the PLAN has even conducted its own live fire exercises in the region.

Fourth, potential flashpoints in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as the conflict in Syria, unresolved territorial claims, and the competition for hydrocarbon reserves are real, are unresolved, and could easily touch off a conflict that originates in—or spills into—the maritime domain.

As a result, U.S. naval strategists and planners must now face the challenge of adjusting to a period in which they may no longer have uncontested naval primacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The prospect of the U.S. Navy having the resources to dramatically increase its force presence in the region appears slim, so “growing” the steady state force to meet this challenge may not be an option. In spite of these changing circumstances and USN force limitations, American interests and objectives in the maritime domain remain largely as they have for the last three decades. As such, strategists and planners must find novel ways to strengthen partnerships and alliances, enhance interoperability, and promote increases in the capability and capacity of friendly navies alongside the limited U.S. forces in theater. They must find ways to assure friends and allies and deter adversaries while promoting regional security, stability, and prosperity at a time when U.S. influence is being actively contested by Great Power rivals. Doing so will also require a keen understanding of adversary intent, strengths and vulnerabilities, and risk calculus both during calmer times and most importantly in periods of heightened tensions.

This is a tall order, indeed. To rise to it, these strategists and planners will need to be creative, resilient, and adaptive as they seek to apply U.S. naval power in support of American interests in the Eastern Mediterranean while facing the dual challenges of looming maritime flashpoints and increasingly assertive, present and capable Great Power competitors.
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