Geographical Overview | **The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and Other Actors**

The United States and the Mediterranean in an Age of Shocks

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The United States has been a Mediterranean power for well over 200 years, but without devoting much attention to the Mediterranean as a strategic space in its own right. The November 2020 presidential election and the course of the Covid-19 crisis and its economic ramifications are enormous variables. But neither is this enduring reality likely to change. At the same time, concerns about American disengagement, whether from the Middle East and North Africa or from Europe, have proven to be overblown. This, too, is unlikely to change. Looking ahead, American policy will be torn between attention compelled by crises and alliances and the immense distraction of global health, economic and security concerns.

A Persistent Approach

Traditionally, American interests in the Mediterranean have been a derivative of broader concerns, often at some distance from Mediterranean shores. This stands in sharp contrast to the European and even the Russian approach. For the US, the Mediterranean is not a neighbourhood or a "near-abroad." Washington's interest in and policy toward the region has been a derivative of America's interest in European affairs; the Mediterranean's position as a political and logistical gateway to the Persian Gulf; and as a collection of flashpoints around North Africa and the Levant. Taken together, these elements have been sufficient for successive administrations to pay considerable attention to the region.

The American policy debate and the structure of its foreign policy bureaucracy has always been sharply divided between Europe on the one hand, and the Middle East and North Africa on the other. The Mediterranean *per se* has rarely been an organizing concept for American regional policy. One important exception has been the US military, where the areas of responsibility for key commands (e.g., EUCOM and AFRICOM) have cut across regional lines. In terms of naval presence, the American Mediterranean footprint has eroded steadily since the end of the Cold War. But this also reflects the steady shift towards European involvement in Mediterranean missions, a trend dating back to the first Gulf War and reinforced after 2001. This is fully complimentary with American interests, and the US can bring in additional forces for crisis management and intervention operations when required, as in Libya in 2011. In some aspects, notably in ballistic missile defence and drone basing, America's Mediterranean presence has acquired even more significance in recent years.

The Trump Years … and after?

The Trump Administration has shaken up American foreign policy, with some direct implications for the Mediterranean region. The unpredictability, personalization of relations, and less-automatic support for alliances has affected key partnerships on both sides of the Mediterranean. Arguably, NATO has been least affected by these shifts. Despite early concerns, Washington's alliance policy has remained relatively steady and US presence in Europe has actually increased – a trend started under the Obama Administration. Much of this attention has been directed to the East. But Washington has been among those allies attuned to risks emanating from

the South and the concerns of NATO's southern European members.

An important exception to this essential stability has been the sharp deterioration in relations with Turkey, a sustained shift driven by developments on both sides. The relationship has not "broken" and it is unlikely to do so as long as the NATO tie holds. But the lack of trust is mutual and deep. Unlike the EU, the US has essentially a one-dimensional relationship with Ankara based on security cooperation. The sovereignty conscious outlook and sense of national "exceptionalism" prevailing in both countries contributes to an uneasy relationship. Turkey's purchase of the Russian S400 air defence system has triggered sanctions, including Turkish exclusion from the F35 programme in which Ankara had already invested heavily. Further congressionally mandated sanctions might already have been put in place if not for the distraction of the Covid crisis. The traditional American constituency for the strategic relationship with Turkey has virtually collapsed, driven by the S-400 dispute, President Erdogan's anti-Western rhetoric and by differences over policy in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean. From Turkey's perspective, only President Trump's affinity with President Erdogan has kept further sanctions in check. An exaggeration, perhaps, but it has a measure of truth behind it. Whatever the outcome of the November 2020 US election, the next administration will face tough challenges in managing relations with Turkey.

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Elsewhere, the picture is less clear-cut. American relations with Greece and Cyprus have never been stronger, driven in part – but only in part – by a desire to hedge against negative developments with Turkey. Not surprisingly, the Trump Administration has developed a close relationship with the Netanyahu government in Israel. Washington's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and of Jerusalem's status as Israel's capital has been highly controversial. And the administration's proposed peace plan has fallen flat. If the newly formed Israeli coalition presses ahead with the formal annexation of the West Bank, this could pose formidable challenges even in relations with a Trump Administration. A moderate Democratic administration would be strongly opposed.

The Trump Administration has been less focused on questions of democracy and freedom of expression in relations with Egypt and other long-standing regional partners. Alignment on security policy, above all counter-terrorism, has been a leading metric in relations. This has not necessarily meant smooth relations. Cairo's defence-industrial relationship with Moscow has certainly not been well received. A Democratic administration would likely refocus American policy on questions of democracy and rule of law around the southern Mediterranean, alongside other more "transactional" measures of cooperation.

Emerging Concerns and Open Questions

Looking ahead, American policy toward the Mediterranean, north and south, will likely be shaped by larger evolving concerns and geopolitical shifts. The deepening strategic competition and risks in relations with China will be at the top of the American agenda regardless of who sits in the White House. There will be specific concerns about Chinese investment in ports and infrastructure, including IT infrastructure around the region. This could well emerge as a more contentious issue with southern Europe, in the Western Balkans and possibly across North Africa. In structural terms, engagement in the Mediterranean could be significantly influenced by the longer-term shift of American diplomatic and military attention to requirements in the Indo-Pacific. Recent administrations, and the foreign policy establishment in general, have tended to favour a second-tier role for the US in areas on the European periphery, where allies are able to reach and act, including the Balkans and the Maghreb. This has also been part of the impetus for recent moves to withdraw American forces from counter-terrorism missions in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. It is possible that a Democratic administration would look more favourably on continuing this engagement as a matter of alliance solidarity with France. But barring new, disruptive events, the trend is clearly toward a progressive shift of attention and resources to Asia.

The US has traditionally paid close attention to questions of stability in the Aegean Sea and eastern

Mediterranean. At key points in the past, Washington has played a crucial role in crisis management between Turkey and Greece (e.g., in the Imia/Kardak crisis of 1996) and over Cyprus. These issues have not been high on the American agenda in recent years, but growing tensions in the region are drawing more attention from Washington, especially in Congress. The mood here has been very critical of Turkish policy and broadly supportive of cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and (perhaps with less enthusiasm) Egypt. Congress has recently voted to allow arms transfers to Cyprus. Overall, the US has a clear stake in avoiding brinkmanship in the eastern Mediterranean and in the preservation of the still prevailing détente between Athens and Ankara.

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Iran is another flashpoint with implications for the strategic environment in the Mediterranean. A serious armed conflict between Iran and the US would put new demands on America's partnerships around the Mediterranean, and could prove a new source of tension in its already strained relations with Turkey. Even short of conflict, the use of sanctions under a policy of "maximum pressure" will remain at variance with the approach of most of Washington's allies. By contrast, if a new administration looks to revive American participation in the nuclear agreement with Tehran, this would be widely welcomed around the region.

Finally, Russia will be high on America's foreign policy agenda. A Democratic administration would likely be even tougher on this front. This could bring the US to look more closely at Russia's role in Libya and elsewhere in North Africa and, of course, in Syria. There is little prospect of any US administration choosing to engage more directly in Syria, although a successor administration might look more favourably on participation in possible EU-led operations there or in Libya.

The Covid Crisis… and after

The ongoing Covid-19 crisis and its economic consequences will have important implications for American foreign policy, including engagement around the Mediterranean. First, it will have an enormous distraction effect, raising the bar for American activism on any specific front around the region. The US will not necessarily disengage from countries and crises around the Mediterranean, but the threshold for costly interventions and diplomatic efforts will be higher. Governments everywhere will not have a lot of excess political capital to spend on international policy. Similarly, many conflicts and abuses around the Mediterranean may simply go unaddressed as Washington and others are focused elsewhere.

Second, the mounting economic crisis – global depression may not be too strong a term – will have consequences for American policy. Emerging economies like Turkey and Morocco, as well as southern Europe are especially exposed. What will be the extent of American support in the event of new requests to the IMF and new pressures on sovereign debt? The development of offshore gas resources in the eastern Mediterranean has been a focus of American policy, both as an element of cooperation and, more recently, as a stability concern. The collapse of global energy prices is likely to put expensive offshore energy projects of all kinds on hold for the foreseeable future.

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Finally, the Covid crises cast in sharper relief the existing tension between the need for coordinated, multilateral approaches – on health, economics and security – and the widespread instinct to revert to national solutions. American policy in recent years has helped spur a global retreat from multilateralism, the consequences of which have been felt acutely around the Mediterranean. On this front, among others, 2020 will be a key year of decision on both sides of the Atlantic and both sides of the Mediterranean.