

Strategic Sectors | **Economy & Territory**

# The Mediterranean Sea: Between Geopolitical Challenges and Climate Crisis

**Claire de Marignan**

Events and institutional relations officer  
Club DEMETER

From the Greco-Persian and Punic Wars of Antiquity to the Mediterranean Campaign (1940-1945), not to mention the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the Mediterranean Sea has, throughout history, been the scene of conflict and tension between coastal civilizations and empires. A commercial and cultural crossroads, it is the regional basin where, since time immemorial, varied cultures, agricultural crops, religions and political regimes have rubbed shoulders, envied one another and competed with each other... From a natural frontier, the sea nevertheless quickly became a maritime roadway and a link between nations. Exchanges of knowledge, goods and know-how were able to cross borders via the sea to spread throughout the region. The search for sea routes gave rise to maritime trade and developed the beginnings of international commerce. Although the Mediterranean was a zone of division and violence, it also enabled unique economic and cultural exchanges. The *Mare Nostrum* has thus separated countries as much as it has brought them closer together.

Historically the home of the grapevine and wheat, the Mediterranean has managed to retain its economic weight despite its progressive abandonment by the Europeans for more distant horizons and oceans. Indeed, its agricultural wealth and unique position at the heart of global trade routes have lent it a major strategic role and interest on the international geopolitical stage. Although it is no longer a prime destination, it remains an almost obligatory passage for world maritime trade. The Mediterranean is the place of transit for thousands of ships every year, carrying containers, foodstuffs, hydrocarbons and people. On

its shores, veritable trading hubs have gradually developed into major ports on the maritime trade route (Valencia, Marseille, Port Saïd, Algeciras, Tangiers, Marsaxlokk, etc.). As strategic entities, ports are key drivers of the global economy, a phenomenon that has intensified since the mid-20th century with the advent of containerization. This has led to competition between ports, particularly in the northern Mediterranean, to develop and modernize in order to attract as much traffic as possible from Asian ports and become a key regional hub. This dynamic also confirms the importance of the straits, which are veritable strategic locks for international maritime trade. The Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, controlled by Türkiye, are obligatory passages for Russia – a significant factor in the current context – while Gibraltar is an essential gateway to the Mediterranean – and the busiest in the world after the Straits of Pas-de-Calais and Malacca. The Suez Canal, completed in 1869, became the imperial route to British India. But the discovery of oil fields in the Persian Gulf a few years later gave it renewed importance and made it a major issue in the 20th century. With its unique geographical location, isthmus turned seaway positioned between Europe and Asia, between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, between the Nile Valley and the Sinai Mountains, the Suez Canal is today the leading route for transporting oil from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and containerized goods produced in Europe or Asia.

But these strategic economic assets specific to the Mediterranean have also made it an area of division and confrontation. The geopolitical stakes are such that they crystallize tensions. Whether long-standing and often complex tensions or recent asymmetrical confrontations, these disputes have a direct impact on trade in the Mediterranean and therefore on world maritime trade. The region's antagonisms, whether

linked to history (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), to the definition of borders (such as the Greek-Turkish rivalries in the Aegean Sea), to minority issues (Kurds, etc.) or to the development of Islamic terrorism (Algeria, Lebanon, Syria, etc.), are tenacious and long-lasting on the shores of the Mediterranean. The permanent presence of a number of major powers – in addition to the neighbouring countries – such as the United States and Russia illustrates the strategic and geopolitical importance of this area on a global scale. As an extension of the already complex land-based regional issues, the Mediterranean is emerging as an operational theatre where the world's powers test and evaluate one another. We are witnessing a veritable show of force whose aim goes well beyond regional ambitions. Its eastern basin, in particular, is becoming the site of a concentration of naval forces where navies from all over the world meet and test their mettle. While China may seem – on the face of it – to be keeping a low profile, its presence in the Mediterranean is more evident in its control of port terminals in Algeria, Spain and Greece, not to mention Italy, which, by joining the new Silk Road Initiative, could become China's gateway to Europe with its Genoa and Trieste ports. On the international maritime and naval chessboard that is being played out in the Mediterranean now and over the coming years, only the Europeans seem to be disappearing little by little...

We cannot envisage the Mediterranean without understanding the geopolitical role the area plays on a global scale. Now, in addition to the age-old geopolitical issues, there is a challenge that is only a few decades old, but which has taken on undeniable importance in the Mediterranean landscape: the climate crisis. Today, environmental issues are having a direct impact on the geopolitics of the Mediterranean. They are intensifying and exacerbating existing problems – access to natural resources (water and food), ecosystem balance, human health and safety, etc. Current changes and future scenarios reveal particularly significant risks that need to be taken into account over the coming decades. The sustainable development policies of Mediterranean countries must not only mitigate these risks, but also consider options for adapting to this new situation.

However, countries do not always have the necessary tools, particularly in the most vulnerable regions, mainly on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

## On the international maritime and naval chessboard that is being played out in the Mediterranean now and over the coming years, only the Europeans seem to be disappearing little by little

In 2019, 80 independent scientists, grouped together within the MedECC (Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change) network, issued a preliminary report summarizing several hundred studies and indicating that the Mediterranean region is warming much faster than the rest of the world (+20% on average).<sup>1</sup> Launched in 2015, this work was done in response to a request from the political leaders of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – an organization of 43 states set up in 2008 to contribute to peace and security in the region. According to the report, decreasing rainfall, rising temperatures and global population growth are leading to a significant reduction in water availability in the Mediterranean Basin, particularly in countries where water supply is already proving problematic. In the medium term, the Mediterranean is likely to experience a significant reduction in the availability of fresh water (between 2 and 15% for a 2°C rise in temperature), one of the biggest falls in the world. In addition, the duration and intensity of dry spells are likely to increase significantly. While the Mediterranean accounts for 7% of the world's population, it is also home to 60% of the so-called 'water poor' (those with less than 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> per capita per year). The populations of the semi-arid regions of the southern and eastern Mediterranean are particularly exposed to water shortages and the high variability of water resources. By 2030, Greece and Turkey could see their water availability fall below 1,000 m<sup>3</sup> for the first time in their history, while Spain could face a water shortage (less than

<sup>1</sup> "Risks Associated with Climate and Environmental Changes in the Mediterranean Region." MedECC Report, 2019.

500 m<sup>3</sup> per capita per year) within the next few years. While the volume of groundwater in certain regions is falling, its quality is also deteriorating (overexploitation, pollution, urbanization, seawater infiltration, etc.), particularly on the southern and eastern shores of the basin, due to heavy industrialization, mass tourism, migratory flows and general demographic growth. Water deficits are both accentuated and multiplied by demographic and migratory phenomena, as well as the obsolescence of water distribution infrastructures.

According to the World Bank, by 2050, climate change is likely to force 216 million people around the world to leave their homes, many of them in the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> People have always migrated, whether for economic, social or political reasons, but climate change has now become a major new factor, particularly in the Mediterranean. Exposure to climatic upheaval means that some of the region's populations can no longer live decently (extreme temperatures, droughts, floods, storms, fires, etc.). As a result, some inhabitants are forced to migrate to areas with a milder climate. In North Africa, the availability of water remains the main driver of internal climate migration. This affects people living in coastal and inland regions where water is becoming increasingly scarce. In Egypt, the eastern and western parts of the Nile Delta could soon become centres of emigration because of the increasing unavailability of water, but also because of the risks associated with rising sea levels – by 2030, a third of the delta could be regularly flooded. At the same time, a number of other regions where water is more readily available are likely to become hotbeds of climate immigration, including major urban centres such as Cairo, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, the Casablanca-Rabat corridor and several European metropolises. However, this presupposes that the host countries or regions have stable political, financial and technological institutions allowing them to accommodate these climate refugees in the best way possible. Although the prospect of a “water war” is unlikely, as the region has few cross-border rivers whose flow can be disputed by neighbouring countries – except between Spain and Portugal or in the Middle East,

where certain borders follow the course of middle-sized rivers – the aridity that could take hold in the Maghreb and the Middle East could nevertheless increase tensions with the countries north of the Mediterranean. Water resources are much scarcer in these southern and eastern regions (with the exception of Türkiye), where demographic growth, and therefore demand, is still high.

Since the 1st assessment report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1990, forecasts have changed considerably, particularly for the Mediterranean region. Today, there is a consensus that heatwaves will increasingly affect Mediterranean countries, particularly those in the Maghreb and the Middle East. With 70% of the Mediterranean population living on or near the seaboard, coastal areas, particularly in Morocco, Tunisia and Israel, will be directly affected by rising sea levels. Such adverse climatic conditions have a direct impact on the economy: strategic sectors such as tourism and agriculture will be weakened. An increase in poverty and hunger is a real possibility for the years to come. The climate is no longer simply an environmental issue: it is now a key factor in international relations and has become a major diplomatic challenge. Environmental issues are now an integral part of geopolitics, and all the more so in the Mediterranean region. The increasing scarcity of water, the growing shortage of land suitable for cultivation, the growing number of natural disasters and rising sea levels are all crisis dynamics in an area already affected by numerous political and social instabilities. The Mediterranean Sea is a fragmented area made up of a number of non-homogeneous countries that nevertheless share a common history and geopolitical ambitions. The region faces geopolitical, socio-economic, climatic and environmental challenges, many of which require a higher level of cooperation and joint action. In the complex context of the last three years (Covid-19 crisis, war in Ukraine), the Mediterranean, more than ever, must remain united and face, through dialogue and cooperation, the challenges of tomorrow, where geopolitical challenges are intertwined with climate issues. Stability in the Mediterranean will determine the future of many...

<sup>2</sup> *Groundswell Part 2: Acting on Internal Climate Migration*, World Bank, 2021.