

Framing Russia's Mediterranean Return: Stages, Roots, and Logics

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Russia's return as a major geostrategic actor in the Mediterranean is one of the most significant trends characterizing this area over the past few years. Part of a broader geopolitical pluralization of this space, Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria marked a new phase in Moscow's Mediterranean engagement. Based on a stringent logic of intervening where other powers leave strategic vacuums, Russia has succeeded to carve out an increasingly central role in Mediterranean equilibria, despite its limited resources.

Russian diplomatic and economic support for the Syrian regime in Damascus had steadily increased since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Yet, it was Moscow's direct military intervention in September 2015 that signaled a decisive upgrade in engagement. Moscow's military involvement shifted the tide of the conflict, proving decisive in avoiding the collapse of the Syrian regime, which is also backed by Iran and the Lebanese group Hezbollah.

After Syria, Russia started deepening its role in another Mediterranean civil war: Libya. Many commentators noticed the role of Russia in Libya only once the presence of Wagner mercenaries, the face of Moscow's hybrid warfare, on the side of Khalifa Haftar's forces became visible in late 2019. Yet, the reality is that Russia had been strengthening its role in Libya since 2016. In doing so, Russia used another tool of intervention: printing money for the eastern authorities, which proved essential to bankroll their political survival.

Russia has since become an increasingly important player in shaping Libyan dynamics. While working primarily with Haftar, together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, Moscow labored to cultivate good relations with all actors involved in the conflict, including forces aligned to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

The above might suggest that Russia can exert influence only in countries engulfed in civil wars. The reality is more nuanced. In recent years, Russia has also deepened relations with other regional countries, notably in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. Yet, Moscow's moves in North Africa are also telling, having received less attention as of late.

In the wake of the October 2019 Sochi conference on Russian-African relations, Russia struck a deal with Morocco for the development of a two billion euro refinery. While the economic investment and project itself

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is not particularly significant, the development is remarkable because it points to a consistent strategy that Russia has pursued in other locations.

This development demonstrates that Russia applies a specific logic—exploiting strategic vacuums—not only in conflict areas or with traditional Russian allies. Russia and Morocco signed a strategic partnership back in 2016. Yet, Rabat’s ties with the United States and the EU are substantially deeper and, in recent years, Morocco has also become more and more of interest to China.

All these actors have economic resources that far outstrip those of Russia. Yet, where and when they do not intervene, Russia does. Morocco’s only refinery shut down in July 2019. Despite domestic pressure to find a new buyer, no international company was interested.

This created room for Russia to penetrate the sector even with limited economic exposure, precisely what Russia did through this agreement. The move has no apparent political rationale, yet to consider it neutral would be misleading. Moscow established a connection in a sector that Rabat considers essential. This might open the door for further investments and deeper political ties. Should no further returns materialize, interest groups linked to the Kremlin will benefit economically from even this limited investment. In both cases, a win-win outcome for Russia and its leadership is secured at a limited cost and risk.

Looking at Russia’s present-day Mediterranean involvement, Moscow’s capacity to shape dynamics is surprising, particularly if compared to the early 2000s and is a direct result of Russia’s greater foreign policy assertiveness. From this point of view, the intervention in Georgia in 2008 represented a major turning point in Moscow’s foreign policy and Russia’s role in Syria, Libya and the broader Mediterranean region is a direct function of this event.

As noted by Michael Kofman, the conflict in Georgia “heralded an important transition in international politics” since it “presaged the return of great-power politics and the end of the post-Cold War period.” NATO and the EU’s weak reaction to this event helped embolden Russia further. As a consequence, Moscow became more assertive, aiming to reacquire the status and influence lost in the 1990s, at least partially. The annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing war in the Donbas region, also respond to the same logic.

The Russia’s Mediterranean engagement is partially driven by the same logic of intervening when and where the United States and the EU show little to no interest—or capacity—to intervene, thus filling a vacuum. This logic is driven by the limits of Russia’s geo-economic influence and these difficulties are balanced by its willingness to engage militarily, directly (Syria) or indirectly (Libya), and by a surgical and strategic use of its limited options and resources. Thus, Russia has systematically identified areas where the cost/benefit calculus can ensure important returns with limited risks, thanks to the absence of potential competitors.

This logic serves three strategic goals.

First: having access to the Mediterranean is fundamental for Russia. Indeed, historically, a crucial element informing the Russian approach toward the region was its obsession with having access to so-called “warm waters” and related ports, a long-term geopolitical driver of Russian foreign policy. A natural corollary of this

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objective is the centrality that the Ottoman Empire first and Republican Turkey later acquired in Russian strategic thinking.

As such, Moscow always needs to maintain some leverage over Turkey. This aim is evident in Russian actions in Syria: preserving and strengthening Moscow's presence in military naval base of Tartus on the Mediterranean was indeed an important goal. Yet, increasing leverage over Turkey, thanks to its presence in Syria, was even more significant.

Moscow has several means to pressure Turkey in this context: instrumental support for Kurdish groups, refugee and migrant pressures, the direct military presence in Syria and deepening defense ties, mainly since Turkey purchased Russia's S-400 systems in defiance of NATO. This logic also drove Putin's approach toward Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup in Turkey.

Indeed, Turkish-Russian relations improved significantly since the failed coup. While talking of a well-defined division of labor, for instance in Libya, might be far-fetched at the moment, it is undeniable that the two countries have coordinated many decisions and have managed to carefully balance their respective interests, even when these are not entirely aligned.

Second, there is a Mediterranean-“Near Abroad” strategic trade-off. Looking at the timeline of Russian moves abroad, it is worth noticing that its engagement in Syria came one year after the Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014. As such, this deepening engagement in the Mediterranean has also served Russian objectives in its “near abroad.”

Indeed, Russia historically regarded the Middle East as an arena within which to compete with European powers and the United States away from the European theatre and an instrumental arena to fulfil its more substantial concerns about survival and engagement with Europe. As such, Russia's growing presence in the Mediterranean has forced both NATO and the EU to take Russian actions and policy into greater consideration when addressing the regional strategic equation across Europe's southern neighborhood, something that was not the case not that long ago.

Overall therefore Russia aims to use its influence in the Mediterranean as a means to balance and potentially weaken NATO and EU engagements in Russia's “near abroad,” as was the case with Moscow's efforts to block eastern enlargement. This logic also applies to Russian anti-terror efforts: by being more engaged in the Mediterranean, in areas where jihadist groups have a significant presence, Moscow seeks to contain these forces and limit their potential influence among Muslim communities in Russia.

A final dimension of the Russian approach revolves around the need to seize and consolidate economic opportunities. This engagement also serves Russia economically. It opens up new market opportunities for the regime and its cronies. The case of Syria is telling. Active military engagement helped promote Russian battle-tested defense supplies, including the provision of mercenaries forces, and thereby also strengthen Moscow's

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reliability as an ally for struggling regimes. Meanwhile, Russia can hope to secure important contracts and benefits from its military engagement on the side of Damascus.

Several countries in the basin are interested in deepening relations with Moscow in this domain, also because Russian trade comes with little political conditionality. Besides, as the case of Morocco showed, Russia carefully chooses its specific opportunities and invests even in countries in which its political outreach is more limited compared to other regional countries.

Given the strategic importance of the Mediterranean for Italy, what does this increased activism by Russia imply for Rome's interests and alliance frameworks? Italy's historical relations with Russia are cordial, despite Rome being part of the Transatlantic order since its inception. Since the Cold War, Italy has tried to act as a mediator between Russia and the West. As Russia becomes more prominent in the Mediterranean context, this intensifies Moscow's ability to potentially influence Italy's behavior.

While this is unlikely to produce a structural foreign policy shift, it can significantly constrain Italian maneuverability on several issues, from energy choices to relations with specific countries. The number of challenges, from this point of view, is rising. Two are particularly significant.

An emerging division of spheres of influence in Libya between Turkey and Russia, eventually even leading to the establishment of military bases in the country, may severely undermine Italy's ability to influence dynamics in Libya, not least given that Rome has little appetite to use military power to support its foreign policy.

Moreover, one of the strategic drivers pushing Turkey to strengthen relations with Russia was its mounting perception of isolation in the Eastern Mediterranean. Both Moscow and Ankara share an interest in undermining the emerging energy alliance between Greece, Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, given their shared interest in cooperating on energy provisions to Europe through alternative routes via Turkey and the Black Sea. Moreover, mounting tensions between Greece and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean have demonstrated the serious risk of military escalations or misadventures given the growing congestion in the area. This is causing significant problems for NATO and the EU, a dimension that in and of itself helps explain Russian policy in this domain. The possibility of military clashes in the Eastern Mediterranean or over Libya, particularly between two NATO members, could be devastating for Italy, the EU and NATO more broadly.

Russia's greater effectiveness and activism in the Mediterranean is today a reality. This has allowed Moscow to garner important influence and leverage over various dossiers of significant importance to Italy, Europe and the transatlantic relationship, forcing these actors to take Russia and Russian policy into consideration in their Mediterranean calculus. This trend is unlikely to dissipate in the near future and is reflective of the emergence of a new multipolar (dis)order gripping the Mediterranean and, more broadly, the international system at large.

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