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The new geopolitical scenarios of the enlarged Mediterranean: the competition between Russia and Turkey from a realist perspective

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Introduction

The objective of this research is to analyze the geopolitical competition in the enlarged Mediterranean between the two emerging hegemonic powers of this scenario in the post-Arab Spring period, namely Russia and Turkey. We analyze this topic from a realist perspective, that is, by examining the behaviors of the actors involved in our analysis on the basis of the principles of the realist theory, and in particular offensive structural realism, which will be briefly outlined at the beginning of the first chapter. We conduct our analysis with particular reference to three scenarios, particularly relevant in the geopolitical competition between the two powers: Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh. The ultimate goal of our research is to understand the reasons why the competition between these actors generated different outputs in these three scenarios and what variables determined them.

In the first chapter, after a brief discussion of the theoretical framework that represents the theoretical basis of our research, we present the premise of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and Turkey in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. In particular, we discuss the main aspects of the gradual disengagement of the United States, which has left in that area a power vacuum that our two reference actors want to fill, thus triggering the competition that is the object of our analysis. Next, we present an overview of the three reference scenarios, in which we briefly analyze the key aspects of the events covered by our analysis and the actors involved in each.

In the second chapter, we present the most relevant aspects of Russia's foreign policy and the fundamentals of its aggressive behavior in conducting it, with particular reference to our geographical area of interest. First, we analyze the reasons that drive Moscow to take a realist attitude in its approach to international affairs. Then we see how this approach has determined its behavior in Syria and Libya, presenting motivations, similarities and differences of such behavior in the two theaters. In particular, we discuss Russia's diplomatic strategy in dealing with the Syrian issue and its interaction with the various actors involved in it, in the attempt to carve out a role as a regional hegemon by mediating between the interests of the various regional actors involved, Iran, the Gulf Monarchies, Israel, and the challenges that such a project presents. We then dwell on the importance that Syria represents for Moscow from a purely strategic-military point of view for the pursuit of a foreign policy strategy dictated by the principles of offensive structural realism. In the following, we analyze the reasons and modalities of the Russian involvement in the Libyan conflict and the differences with the Syrian scenario from a geopolitical and geostrategic point of view. We next focus on Russian energy interests Libya, and how these determine Moscow's action in this scenario. Finally, we see how the growing Russian presence in the Mediterranean and Libya in particular has caused a new interest by Western states in the dynamics of the Libyan events, determined by the fear of a Russian military presence that could pose a threat to European security.

We also briefly mention the issue of jihadist terrorism, specifically how Turkey tried to exploit it to determine the fate of the Syrian conflict in its favor, causing the harsh Russian reaction.

Then we present the topic of Russian-Turkish geopolitical competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, with particular reference to the issue of the Black Sea and the straits, in order to understand what influence such dynamics exert on the geopolitical balances of the Mediterranean. We discuss in particular the recent developments that have resulted in a tipping of the balance of power in the Black Sea in Russia's favor and how the Istanbul Canal project could again change these balances. In addition, we briefly mention the complex issue of Ukraine and how this dynamic affect the same power relations in the Black Sea between Russia and Turkey.

Subsequently we devote ourselves to analyze the role of the third key actor of our analysis, Iran. In particular, we see how the Russian-Iranian and Turkish-Iranian relations influence the geopolitical dynamics of our reference scenarios, in particular Syria, where Iran plays a major role. A specific section of our research is then dedicated to the discussion of the tensions between Iran and Israel and how this hostility represents a fundamental factor in determining the evolution of the Syrian scenario.

Finally, we look specifically at the fundamentals and rationale for Russian the foreign policy in the South Caucasus, with particular reference to our third reference scenario, Nagorno-Karabakh, and a specific focus on Russia's conduct in dealing with the recent Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict.

In the third chapter, in parallel with the second, we present the fundamental aspects of Turkey's foreign policy. We first examine the historical-structural reasons and the recent geopolitical events that drive Turkey to adopt an aggressive approach in foreign policy and to interpret international relations from a realist perspective. Subsequently, we explain how nationalist and neo-Ottoman rhetoric is actually instrumental in the pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy that is functional to the real historical and structural objective of the Turkish state, namely survival. We then explain why remaining firmly in the Atlantic bloc and belonging to NATO is a key aspect of pursuing this goal. Next, we discuss the evolution of Turkish foreign policy in Syria and the changes in Ankara's action and objectives in this theater, analyzing the factors that have brought about these changes, particularly the Kurdish issue. Then, we present the main aspects, the logic and the objectives of Turkish action in Libya. We retrace the key stages of the Turkish military intervention in Libya by dwelling on the motivations and objectives of these moves. We discuss how the events in Libya have led to an increasing convergence of geostrategic interests in the Mediterranean between Turkey and Western countries, in particular the United States, with all the controversial aspects of this circumstance. We then analyze Turkey's strategic objectives in Libya with a focus on the new strategy of cross-border military operations, which with the military intervention in Tripolitania has definitely established itself as a characterizing aspect of Turkish aggressive foreign policy, mainly based on the use of military force beyond its borders.

Afterwards, we devote ourselves to analyze a fundamental and determining aspect of Turkey's foreign policy, namely its maritime dimension. We present in detail the new Turkish geopolitical strategy based on the new doctrine of the *Blue Homeland*, whose objective is the domination of the seas. We discuss how this strategy

influences foreign policy choices and the geopolitical balance of the Mediterranean. We see then how the strengthening of the Navy represents a key aspect for the pursuit of such a strategy and the consequences that an excessive militarization of the Eastern Mediterranean could determine, what actions Russia could take and the related consequences on the delicate regional balances. We then briefly analyze the challenge posed by Greece to Turkey in the pursuit of its maritime strategy and the constraints on Turkish expansionism in the Mediterranean. A specific section is then dedicated to an examination of the energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, the issue of the Turkish-Greek rivalry and how these dynamics directly and indirectly influence the equilibrium of the whole enlarged Mediterranean.

In the final section of the third chapter, we analyze Turkey's relations with the Gulf States, in particular its relationship with Qatar and its tensions with the United Arab Emirates, discussing how these relations influence the dynamics of the entire Middle East and North Africa.

In the fourth chapter we analyze the outcomes of the three reference scenarios of our study and we try to understand which variables influenced and in what way in shaping different outcomes resulting from the competition of the same actors but under different circumstances.

Chapter 1

*The enlarged Mediterranean in the post Arab
Spring period*

1.1 Theoretical framework

1.1.1 Realism

Realism is a way of understanding international affairs according to which every actor in the international arena is a competitive actor ready to do almost everything to prevail. The realist understanding of human nature is a Hobbesian view, perceiving every social dynamic as a state of nature in which every man is a wolf against the other. There is therefore an irreducible competition to prevail one over the other (*homo homini lupus*). The reason of that is the scarcity of resources that determines a competition to control them, which is something immutable in human nature. According to Hans Morgenthau (1948), one of the fathers of realism, *the fight for power is universal in time and space and it is an undeniable fact of experience*, meaning that this situation will never change. The only way to survive in this competitive arena is through power, which from a realist perspective means weapons arms.

Realists make four assumptions about international affairs. Firstly, realists have an understanding of international affairs in which the only relevant actors are states. They are the unit of analysis and all the other actors are secondary. Secondly, the states' primary characteristic is sovereignty; internal, the state can do whatever it wants within its borders, and external, no one can impose anything on a state. Thirdly, the state is always a unitary and rational actor: states never behave in a non-rational way, they pursue national interest and every decision is always rational and calculated. Fourthly, the focus of states' agenda is always security, other issues are less important, because security has to do with the survival of the state.

For realists the definition of power is very important: power is *the ability to make another actor doing what he would not have otherwise done or not doing what he would have otherwise done* (Dahl, 1957). Power is not absolute, it is usually relative, namely the ability to influence the other more than they are able to influence you. Power for realists is linked mainly to tangible resources related to military capabilities. However, there are other important sources of power, such as population, territories and geographical positions, connections, natural resources, industrial capacity. There are also intangible resources, which are important, like political culture and legitimacy of the government. Power always needs to be preserved and possibly increased.

From a realist perspective, a situation of stability in the international arena is possible in two circumstances. Firstly, when power is equally distributed and the distribution of power is in equilibrium, a situation called balance of power. The second is the case of the so-called hegemonic stability, based on the idea that there is a predominant power in international affairs and no one able to oppose it. Balance of power means resistance to threat: when a country feels that another country is getting armed it will get new weapons and it gives stability to the international system. Hegemonic stability is based on the opposite argument, the idea that stability is based on inequality, because the presence of a preponderant power that no one will try to challenge gives stability to the international system: it is precisely the concentration of power that reduces anarchy. A hegemon

always arise after a war, stabilizing the situation. However, all hegemonies at some point start to decline, basically because they over spend. In fact, to be a hegemon means to intervene militarily and economically to keep the hegemony in the system. There is always a number two in the system, who will try to take the leadership. After a moment of decline, usually there is a moment of crisis and often wars. A US scholar called Graham Allison analyzed the major rivalries of the last 500 years and found that in 75% of the cases a decline of a hegemon led to a war. There is therefore a strategic paradox: the more a state grows militarily, politically and economically, the more the others will resist to it, putting up balancing measures; by pursuing power a country will see its power actually declining because of the resistance of the others. According to the security curve theory, there is always a country that grows, taking advantage by the period of stability given by the hegemon, until it reaches the point of security threshold, in which the hegemon starts to be worried about it. The hegemon therefore takes some counterbalance measures, until the so called absolute security threshold point, which is often a war. Therefore, either the hegemon defeats the challenger and remains as such, or the old hegemon is defeated and there is the rise of the new hegemon.

Another very common mechanism in international affairs from a realist perspective is the so called security dilemma. It refers to a situation in which, under anarchy, actions by a state intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons or making alliances, can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no side really desires it. This is perfectly normal from a realist perspective because in international affairs there is no government, so the only way to avoid a conflict is to arm yourself.

Classical realism is based on the idea that the behavior of a state is based on a rational foundation that is the result of the choice of a leader, made on the basis of a rational calculation that takes into account the costs and benefits of each action. Therefore, classical realism focuses on the importance of the choices of leaders. To illustrate the functioning of the decision making process of a state in foreign policy, Hans Morgenthau, one of the most important scholars of classical realism, explains how *we put ourselves in the position of a statesman who must meet a certain problem of foreign policy under certain circumstances, and we ask ourselves what the rational alternatives are from which a statesman may choose who must meet this problem under these circumstances (presuming always that he acts in a rational manner), and which of these rational alternatives this particular statesman, acting under these circumstances, is likely to choose. It is the testing of this rational hypothesis against the actual facts and their consequences that gives theoretical meaning to the facts of international politics.*¹

Neorealism is a theory that differs slightly from classical realism. The fundamental difference between classical realism and neorealism consists in the fact that classical realism starts from the assumption that the behavior of states is always the result of a rational choice, the motivations of which are dictated by the national

¹ Morgenthau, H. (1978). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, pp. 4-15. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

interest. The foremost scholar of neorealist theory, Kenneth Waltz, states that the behavior of a state is not necessarily the result of a rational calculation, even if the goal of all states is to ensure its own survival. Waltz argues that explaining a country's foreign policy is too complex, as it is not the result of the interaction of a given number of variables and many factors may influence the actions of a state. A theory is therefore a simplification of reality. It is a generalization, which, by illustrating which are the important factors, allows identifying causal relationships between variables. A theory explains the regularity of behavior, namely how on the basis of some variables the states behave in a certain way and modify their behavior as the aforementioned variables vary. The states are all the same in some respects; however, they *are distinguished primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks [...] the structure of the system changes with the change in the distribution of capabilities across system's units* (Waltz, 1978).

The neoclassical realism is based on the idea that the behavior of states depends mainly on domestic factors that influence foreign policy choices. In other words, internal pressures determine each country's foreign policy behavior. An important scholar of neoclassical realism is Randall Schweller. He argues that the behavior of a state is primarily determined by the distribution of power in the international system. However, how some states react to threats to their survival depends on how they react to the influence of domestic factors. When internal pressures meet a state with a united and strong ruling class, decision makers recognize what are the real threats to national security and what are the actions to be implemented to protect their interests. When states are fragmented, leaders find it hard to resist domestic pressures, which can therefore exert a greater influence on the behavior of the state in foreign policy.

1.1.2 Defensive and offensive structural realism

Within realism, there are two different schools of thought: defensive realism and offensive realism. Hans Morgenthau is one of the most prominent proponents of the defensive realist thesis, which holds that states are not aggressive entities by nature but they seek only their own survival, which means maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, the supporters of the thesis of offensive realism, such as John Mearsheimer, hold the opposite argument, which is that the goal of states is not to preserve the status quo but it is to maximize their relative power in order to enhance their security.

According to defensive structural realism, aggressive behavior rarely brings benefits and balancing is the most appropriate way of dealing with security threats. According to Stephen Walt (2013), *in anarchy, states form alliances to protect themselves. Their conduct is determined by the threat they perceive and the power of the other is merely one element in their calculations.*

States evaluate the threats posed by other states in terms of relative power and offense-defense balance. Prevailing technologies and geographical circumstances often favor defense: an accumulation of an excessive quantity of territory to be controlled is difficult to manage at a distance and often produces the phenomenon

of imperial overstretch. Therefore, revisionist and aggressive behavior is self-defeating and states should maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security. According to the defensive structural realism approach, what states must avoid is the triggering of the spiral of the security dilemma, as the increase in offensive capabilities is easily balanced. For this reason, trying to increase your security by increasing your power is a strategy that leads in the end to determine a threat to your own security. States must aim to reduce the uncertainty and the tension that leads to the triggering of the security dilemma. Therefore, states should signal their non-belligerent intentions, for example by investing in weapons that pursue defense and deterrence purposes but which have a low offensive potential.

Offensive structural realism is based on the idea that acquiring greater relative power vis-a-vis other states increases security. Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory states that great powers fear each other because they always possess some offensive capabilities that can harm others and they can never be sure of others' intentions. Therefore, the best way to ensure one's survival is to try to increase one's relative power to the detriment of others. Unlike Walt, Mearsheimer argues that increasing one's offensive capabilities can increase the security of one country without triggering a balancing response from another state that poses a real threat. According to Mearsheimer, ultimate safety derives from being the most powerful state in the entire international system. However, achieving global hegemony is very difficult. The second best is to achieve regional hegemony, namely to have full control of the geographic area in which a state is located, which must be the goal of every state.

With reference to Russia and Turkey, it is clear that the model of offensive realism is the one that explains the power ambitions of these two states. The aggressive foreign policy of Russia and Turkey in our three scenarios of reference represents a case study through which it is possible to understand the approach of offensive realism through which they intend to increase their power in order to increase their security. In the next chapters, we will analyze the strategies and actions of these two powers in our three reference scenarios in the light of the theory of offensive realism.

1.2 The roots of the Russian-Turkish rivalry and their foundations

1.2.1 The two new imperatives of American foreign policy

The geopolitical competition between Russia and Turkey in our geographical area of interest was favored by the geopolitical retreat of the United States. The disengagement of the United States from the entire Middle East and the enlarged Mediterranean has in fact allowed the establishment of the geopolitical rivalry object of our analysis.

Below we briefly analyze the reasons that led the United States to disengage from the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean theater, in order to better understand the dynamics that have arisen following their withdrawal. We propose an explanation of the US retrenchment by considering two fundamental factors: the growing geopolitical rivalry with China and the domestic dimension.

In January 2008, in full campaign for the Democratic Party's primary elections, Barack Obama released the following statement: "I don't want to just end the war, but I want to end the mindset that got us into war in the first place"². These words, spoken at a time when Obama was not only not yet the President of the United States, but he was not yet the Democratic candidate for the White House, exemplify very well what his future administration's approach would be. This brief statement, in fact, hinted at the desire to rethink totally the role that the United States had given itself after the end of the Cold War. Not an upheaval, but an afterthought, a change in the operational approach with which the United States should have pursued its national interests in foreign policy. Rethinking the US approach to foreign policy briefly meant two things. First, to shift attention from the Middle East arena, no longer central to US interests, to reinforce the American presence in Asia and the Pacific, the new area of greatest relevance to American geopolitical and economic interests. Second, to redefine the operational role of the United States in all the scenarios in which it was at that time involved from a political, economic and military point of view. The need for this rethinking was due to a strongly urgent necessity in order to preserve the very role of the United States as a world power: to avoid the so-called imperial overstretch. Seventeen years after the end of the Cold War, in fact, US military and fiscal overextension was evident and no longer sustainable.

²CNN. (2008). *Transcript of Thursday's Democratic presidential debate*.
<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/31/dem.debate.transcript/> (January 31, 2008)

1.2.2 The new Pivot to Asia

After the attacks of 9/11, the foreign policy of the Bush administration pursued an approach based on the war on terror, making the Middle East the area of greatest interest for American geopolitical interests. This approach completely changed with the Obama presidency. The new administration quickly realized that it was necessary to establish economic relations with the countries of Asia-Pacific as these same countries were basing their economic development on the trade with the United States. The rapid economic growth of many Asian countries had led them to become valuable partners of the United States in extremely profitable import and export activities. This intensification of economic relations with Asia had a direct impact on the security relations that the United States should have established with the aforementioned countries. Securing trade routes to and from Asia quickly became a top priority of American foreign policy activity. This required a significant increase in the American military presence. For this reason, the US began to establish bilateral agreements with trading partner countries that allowed the establishment of US military bases at defined strategic points in order to control trade routes, causing a massive increase in the deployment of US naval military forces throughout Southeast Asia. However, protecting one's trade routes meant not only strengthening the military presence for the mere purpose of protecting commercial ships, but also strengthening regional security from other threats such as drug trafficking and terrorist activity in order to ensure regional stability to protect national interests. In this sense, the United States implemented a series of military and security cooperation programs with its Southeast Asian partners, such as Singapore and Australia, as well as various military training programs. In other words, the concept of security cooperation implied an increase in the US military presence on the one hand and in providing its strategic partners with the military tools to protect regional security on the other. This approach in the management of American activity in the Asia-Pacific was certainly not an innovation of the Obama presidency. However, the military presence and security cooperation initiatives in this area saw an exponential increase with the new administration.

The increase in the US military presence in the Pacific during the Obama presidency, however, has an even deeper reason, which lies at the basis of the practical reasons previously mentioned: the commercial and geopolitical competition with China. The relationship that the new administration wanted to establish with the PRC was extremely complex and controversial, characterized by the contradiction between a rhetoric of rapprochement and a harsh approach in practical terms. In October 2008, in an article published by the US Chamber of Commerce in China, Barack Obama clearly spelled out what his approach to the PRC would be. He declared his intention to improve Sino-US relations. At the same time, he argued that China should have taken some specific initiatives to foster rapprochement with the United States, claiming for a greater willingness to cooperate on the part of Beijing on sensitive issues such as climate change and Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues. Obama also wished for greater democratic participation of the Chinese people as a guarantee of stability and security for the entire Asian region. Finally, the future President specified that

Sino-US trade relations should have had to undergo a change and that the competition between the two countries should have been managed fairly through the dispute resolution mechanisms provided by the WTO. These statements were in line with what he had declared about a year earlier, when during the electoral campaign for the Democratic Party primary elections he had stated that the US should have considered China neither as an ally nor as an enemy, but as a competitor. The dialogue strategy proposed by Obama, at least in rhetorical terms, soon proved to be inapplicable due to Beijing's unwillingness to adapt to international trade standards. In particular, China refused to implement adequate mechanisms for the protection of intellectual property requested by Washington, but above all, it refused to reform its economic policy, based, according to what the US claimed, on an unfair competitive devaluation mechanism of its currency, which determined an excessive trade deficit between the two countries. Furthermore, China began to perceive the growing economic influence of the United States and the growing trade cooperation with other Asian countries more and more as a threat to its own regional economic expansion project. For this reason, the PRC began to increase its aggressiveness regarding its territorial claims in the South China and East China Sea. These seas have a great strategic importance due to the presence of small, uninhabited archipelagos, the Spratly and Paracelsus archipelago in the South China Sea, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu archipelago in the East China Sea. Spratlys and Paracelsus are at the center of a dispute among PRC, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines and Vietnam, while PRC and Japan compete for the sovereignty over Senkaku/Diaoyu. The strategic importance of these islands is enormous since sovereignty over them guarantees control over the trade routes through which about a third of global trade passes. For the PRC, control of the Chinese Seas is essential in order to preserve its influence in the Pacific. Other countries have therefore begun to seek US protection. The US in turn saw China's growing assertiveness as a threat to US interests in the area, based on the ability to exploit the aforementioned trade routes. Furthermore, the even more controversial issue of Taiwan is worthy of mention. In 1979 in fact, the US officially recognized the Beijing government and the "One China" principle, renouncing to recognize the legitimacy of the Taiwanese government. Since then, given the impossibility of having official diplomatic relations, the Taiwan Relations Act regulates the US-Taiwan relations. Taiwan is one of the main innovator and manufacturer of information technology (IT) products and a major US trading partner in this and other industries. Taiwan's security is therefore an absolute priority for the United States in order to preserve its economic interests from the threat that the productive and commercial autonomy of the island could be limited by China or come under even partial control of it. For these reasons, Obama decided to send a strong signal in this sense. In 2010, the United States sold weapons worth \$ 6.4 billion to Taiwan. The deal included the sale of Black Hawk helicopters, missiles and mine-hunting ships. China threatened to impose sanctions on US companies involved in arms sales to Taiwan and stopped all military exchanges with the US, but a year later the US and Taiwan concluded another arms sale deal worth \$ 5.85 billion dollars.

Finally, the opposition of the PRC to the pressure that the Obama administration decided to exercise in order to enforce human rights and the rights of ethnic minorities in China further worsened the chances of a rapprochement between the United States and China. The PRC defined such requests as an interference in its

internal affairs and therefore a threat to the territorial integrity of the country. After the first two years of the Obama presidency, characterized by a contradiction between reconciling tones and harsh actions, the new administration decided to change course and take an openly more competitive approach. The new strategy involved making explicit the shift of US foreign policy focus from the Middle East to Asia and a competitive approach towards China. This radical change, called "Pivot to Asia" or "Rebalancing to Asia" was announced in an atypical but very effective way in an article published by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2011.

*As the war in Iraq winds down and America begins to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan, the United States stands at a pivot point. Over the last 10 years, we have allocated immense resources to those two theaters. In the next 10 years, we need to be smart and systematic about where we invest time and energy, so that we put ourselves in the best position to sustain our leadership, secure our interests, and advance our values. One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise in the Asia-Pacific region. [...] At a time when the region is building a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, U.S. commitment there is essential. It will help build that architecture and pay dividends for continued American leadership well into this century. [...] Harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests and a key priority for President Obama. Open markets in Asia provide the United States with unprecedented opportunities for investment, trade, and access to cutting-edge technology. Our economic recovery at home will depend on exports and the ability of American firms to tap into the vast and growing consumer base of Asia. Strategically, maintaining peace and security across the Asia-Pacific is increasingly crucial to global progress, whether through defending freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, countering the proliferation efforts of North Korea, or ensuring transparency in the military activities of the region's key players." [...] President Obama has led a multifaceted and persistent effort to embrace fully our irreplaceable role in the Pacific, spanning the entire U.S. government. It has often been a quiet effort. A lot of our work has not been on the front pages, both because of its nature long-term investment is less exciting than immediate crises and because of competing headlines in other parts of the world.*³

³ Clinton, H. (2011). America's Pacific Century, *Foreign Policy*.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/> (October 11, 2011).

1.2.3 The domestic dimension

The biggest problem that Barack Obama faced once elected President of the United States was that of having to face the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. The phase of global uncertainty that followed the 9/11 attacks led central banks to implement an extremely dangerous financial strategy in order to stimulate the economy. They began to reduce significantly the interest rates to facilitate access to credit. The lowering of interest rates, however, had another effect, namely that of reducing the yields of the banks, which reacted by making investments that were increasingly risky because they were more profitable. Specifically, banks began to grant loans and mortgages to people who presented low or almost non-existent solvency guarantees. This bank strategy was based on the assumption that the US economy would continue to grow in and the real estate market would continue its steady growth trend. The idea was that the banks would take possession of the homes of those who would not be able to repay their debt reselling them on a market that had always guaranteed a profit for the seller. This assumption turned out to be incorrect. In 2006, the real estate market began its decline, so banks found themselves full of bad loans that could no longer be covered by sales of foreclosed homes. This flaw of the banking system led to a series of bankruptcies, the most notable of which was that of Lehman Brothers. The banks stopped lending to the companies, which started to lay off in order not to go bankrupt themselves.

When Obama took office in the White House, the unemployment rate was very high and growing, with about three million jobs lost only in 2008. Therefore, the top priority of the new administration was to raise funds to revive the economy. On February 17, 2009, Obama signed the "Recovery Act" which provided for an allocation of approximately \$ 787 billion. The recovery plan included unemployment benefits, active labor policies, tax cuts for the middle class to boost consumption, tax cuts for the companies to boost productivity, incentives for hiring and infrastructure investments to create jobs. Passing the "Recovery Act" was by no means easy. The Democratic Party was divided between the left wing, which required an allocation of about \$ 2000 billion to revive the economy, a position to which President Obama himself was also close, and the more moderate wing, which believed that a crisis caused by an excessive indebtedness of the banks could not be resolved with excessive indebtedness of the state. The theme of the management and rationalization of public expenditure items and public debt thus became central after the approval of a plan, which provided for an enormous allocation of public funds for the previously listed items of expenditure.

The deficit and public debt had grown continuously from 2001 to 2009 and a consistent part growth was due to the Bush administration's choice to finance the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq mainly not through taxes but by borrowing. The national debt increased from \$ 5,807.46 billion in 2001 to \$ 11,909.83 billion in 2009.⁴ Military expenditure had grown from \$ 331.81 billion in 2001 to \$ 705.92 billion in 2009, increasing from

⁴ Statista 2020 [Data file]. Public debt of the United States 1990-2020.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/187867/public-debt-of-the-united-states-since-1990/> (October 21, 2020)

3.12% to 4.89% of GDP.⁵ The new administration proposed a 10% annual cut in military expenditure. However, this need to cut military expenditure for urgent purposes of domestic economic policy did not reconcile with the growing need to increase the military presence in Asia and the Pacific, in line with what would soon become the "Rebalancing to Asia" strategy. The growing competition with China and the need to protect new trade routes in Southeast Asia required, on the contrary, an increase in investment to ensure security and stability in the region, both in terms of military spending and in terms of security cooperation with the allies. On the other hand, the war on terror had reached its highest annual cost, reaching \$ 186.9 billion in 2008 and a total cost of \$ 1.5 trillion since the start of the conflict. These enormous costs combined with the domestic economic crisis, which required, as said, a reformulation and reallocation of public spending, had a very strong effect on the support to these wars both in terms of political and public opinion support.

⁵ *Macrotrends 2021* [Data file]. U.S. Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960-2021
<https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/military-spending-defense-budget>

1.3 Overview of the three scenarios

1.3.1 Syria

It has now been more than ten years since that March 15, 2011, the date on which the Syrian conflict began. On March 5, 2020, thanks to the mediation of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the pro-government forces of President Bashar Al-Assad, supported by Russia, Iran and the Lebanese paramilitary organization Hezbollah, reached a ceasefire agreement with opposition groups, supported by Turkey and, to a lesser extent, by Saudi Arabia and the United States. The aim of the aforementioned agreement was to put an end to the conflict, still particularly violent in the governorate of Idilib, in northeastern Syria, the last stronghold left under the control of the rebels. The agreement between Moscow and Ankara had the effect of avoiding an exacerbation of the conflict and a new large-scale escalation. Nonetheless, the truce has been violated several times. Ten years after it has begun, this war cannot be said to be over yet, and it seems quite far from it. In fact, despite the signed ceasefire agreement, the conflict continues, and has now become the photograph of the geopolitical contrast between global powers, the United States and Russia, and between regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran; with the additional role of a regional power that wants to become a global power, Turkey. Indeed, by limiting the analysis to the Syrian conflict, Ankara represents the closest ally of the opposition forces. However, by expanding the analysis to a broader perspective, it plays an increasingly role in the international arena, not yet a global power but something more than a regional power. In this context, however, the approach of the two superpowers in recent years has gone in opposite directions. Russia is increasingly aggressive and assertive, while the United States are less and less involved in the dynamics of the conflict. After a slow and gradual withdrawal of US troops with the Obama and Trump administrations, at the beginning of Biden's presidency the US presence in Syria is extremely limited and with the sole motivation of defeating what remains of the ISIS presence and protecting civilians. With the United States less present, Russian influence in Syria, which began with the intervention in September 2015 to save the regime, has greatly strengthened. In fact, thanks to the agreement with the Assad regime, Russian state-owned companies have obtained the opportunity to exploit Syria's rich hydrocarbon reserves.

During these years, two factors have prevented a peaceful and negotiated solution to the conflict. First, as mentioned, the intensification of the geopolitical tension between the actors involved. To better understand this growing tension, it is necessary to interpret the dynamics of the war in Syria on two levels of analysis. The first level is the tension between great powers (or rather, between great and aspiring great power). In fact, despite the diminishing role played by the United States in this scenario, Syria has increasingly become one of the most important theaters of confrontation between those who opposed the USA, Russia, and those who

took its place, precisely Turkey. The second level of analysis is the regional geopolitical tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This second level of analysis brings us to the second determining factor that prevents the peaceful solution of the conflict: the polarization of ideologies. In fact, if at a first level of analysis, that, to be clear, broader, of the opposition between great powers, it is necessary to reason with a perspective focused only on the geopolitical tension, to a second level of analysis it is necessary to add a second element. In fact, in addition to being a geopolitical confrontation at a regional level, the clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia is an ideological and religious clash between the leading country of Shiite Islam and the country representing the Sunni Wahhabi conservatism. In this regard, it is necessary to make a clarification. In the ideological religious conflict that divides the Islamic world, the Shiite front is united, while the Sunni one is extremely divided. Despite being a minority in numerical terms, the Shiite front is compact around its own political, religious and military leader, Iran. It is also composed by the Syrian Alawite regime of Assad, the Lebanese paramilitary-political party organization Hezbollah, and several pro-Iranian militias fighting to overthrow Sunni or pro-Western regimes in various parts of the Middle East, notably Yemen and Iraq. The issue of the Sunni front is far more complex. It is an extremely heterogeneous system whose elements are in conflict with each other for political and ideological reasons. Almost every Islamic countries except for those mentioned above is part of it. Saudi Arabia, as mentioned, represents the most conservative part of the front, and together with the other Gulf countries represents an important block of the front (subject to some tensions with Qatar, for reasons that we will mention). Another important element is Turkey, the most prominent representative of political Islam since the defeat of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt; a country with which Turkey is in great tension, due to its support for opposition movements. To complete the picture we have some less influential actors of North Africa and the Middle East, but above all a series of extremist and terrorist non-state actors, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The latter in particular, returning to the conflict in Syria, have contributed to the intra-Sunni and Shiite-Sunni ideological polarization that made a peaceful solution to the conflict impossible. Once clarified the picture at the two levels of analysis and the factors that determine them, it is now possible to deepen in detail the opposition of the actors with specific reference to the conflict in Syria and the interactions between them. Before dwelling on this aspect, it is necessary to specify that we intend to analyze the Syrian conflict here with reference to the first level of analysis, the geopolitical opposition between the Russia and Turkey. The second level will be used to understand, broaden, deepen, explain, when necessary, the dynamics of the first.

As mentioned at the beginning, the Bashar Al-Assad regime is supported by Russia and Iran, Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian Iraqi militias. We do not dwell here on the political-ideological reasons that push Shiite actors to support the regime and we will deepen in detail the reasons that push Russia to support Assad later. In fact, it is first necessary to specify the relations that Russia has with the other players on its side and specifically with Iran. In the same way, it is essential to understand how Russia itself stands towards the actors of the opposite side, specifically Saudi Arabia; the relations Saudi Arabia itself has with Turkey and with the Syrian rebels. In short, the balance of the two deployments.

In the opinion of J. Blank Russian aggressive foreign policy in Middle East is motivated by its *robust economic interests in Iran and by major Russian lobbies from the industrial and nuclear defense technology (Rosatom, for example) sector who benefit enormously from deals with Iran.* [...] *Russia also has tremendous energy interests in Iran and that beyond those energy interests its fundamental strategic interests lay in promoting Irano-U.S. hostility and not cooperation. Indeed, official statements from Russia call for strengthening Iran's role as a legitimate actor in a Middle East security system at a time when Iranian leaders threaten to destroy Israel and are unabashed supporters of state-sponsored terrorism.*⁶

On the other hand, Russia is successfully trying to establish relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Monarchies. This axis is in turn undergoing strong consolidation. In particular, Riyadh and Moscow plan to strengthen cooperation in the energy sector and specifically bilateral cooperation in the oil market, with the ultimate aim of keeping the price of oil high. For this reason, the OPEC countries and Russia had agreed in May 2020 to reduce drastically oil production in order to cope with the drop in prices due to the oversupply on the market. When at the end of 2020 they decided to increase production again, about a quarter of the daily production increase was entrusted to Russia, to underline the importance of the strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the OPEC countries in this sector.

If the link between great power and regional power of one side is strong and based on common interests, the same cannot be said between (aspiring) great power and regional power on the other side. Relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia started to crack in 2013, when Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backed the military coup that removed the Muslim Brotherhood government from Egypt, with which Turkey was politically linked. The situation deteriorated because, for reasons that we will see in detail below, the two countries supported different factions in the other war scenario that will be the subject of our analysis, the conflict in Libya. On this occasion Saudi Arabia, under the guise of the Arab League, accused Turkey of supporting the GNA by sending Syrian mercenaries to Libya from extremist jihadist groups (perhaps also to deflect the accusations of being the responsible for the rise of jihadist groups in Syria, as we will see very briefly). Tensions escalated in 2017, when Saudi Arabia cut off relations with Qatar, Turkey's strategic ally. The reasons were the accusations made against Qatar by Saudi Arabia of having links with Iran and of having financed Shiite terrorist groups as well as the Muslim Brotherhood itself, presumably by virtue of its ties with Turkey.

To this structural imbalance in internal relations within the blocs, it is necessary to add the different involvement of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the conflict from a military point of view. The direct involvement of Saudi Arabia has been quite controversial and ambiguous. At the start of the conflict, Riyadh began to support militarily the rebellion, as the Sunni Islamist forces would certainly have broken the alliance with Iran once Assad was overthrown. However, Saudi support for rebel forces has been the subject of controversy due to the suspicions related to Saudi support for Islamist rebel forces of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda-affiliated rebel militants.

⁶ Blank, S. (2009). *Resetting the Reset Button: Realism About Russia*. Strategic Studies Institute.

ISIS's ascent in Syria in 2014 forced Saudi Arabia to restrict its military support within the US-led Syrian coalition due to the accusations of being responsible for the rise of the caliphate, by virtue of the alleged funding for extremists groups. Since that time, being directly linked to the United States, Saudi direct military involvement in Syria has been very limited and gradually decreasing. On the other hand, the direct involvement of Iran from a military point of view is extremely significant. For Iran, keeping Bashar in power is an issue of vital strategic importance, as maintaining Syrian territorial integrity under an allied regime means safeguarding the routes to supply its armed arm in Lebanon, namely Hezbollah. The French political scientist Fatiha Dazi-Héni explains that *Syria is a major front in Tehran's geostrategic competition with the United States, its cold war with Saudi Arabia and its war against Salafis and al-Qaeda affiliated groups, whose hatred of Shiism is well known. Tehran perceives the collapse of the Assad regime as an inauspicious move that could checkmate Hezbollah and the Islamic republic.*⁷

Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, Iran has militarily supported the regime in a decisive way. When it appeared that the Saudi-backed rebels were on the verge of overthrowing Bashar, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Quds Forces, the elite unit of the Iranian Armed Forces, came into play. They turned the tide of the war in 2016 by recapturing Aleppo, with the decisive support of the Russian air forces and Hezbollah forces, financed by Iran itself.

The picture would not be complete without an overview of the opposition forces but above all a mention of the Kurdish question. The composition of the rebel forces is extremely heterogeneous. More than ten years after the start of the conflict, more than 1000 different rebel groups fought the Assad regime, including terrorist jihadist groups, each with their own goal and strategy. The tension between the main backers of the opposition, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates on one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other, has spilled over into rebel groups, weakening an increasingly fragmented opposition. Furthermore, the Syrian Kurds, which contributed to form the Syrian Democratic Forces, the main rebel opposition group, played a leading role in the fight against ISIS in Syria, contributing significantly to the defeat of the caliphate, also thanks to funding from the United States. In 2016, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) unilaterally proclaimed a Kurdish federal system in northern Syria. Turkey considers the PKK a terrorist organization as they reclaim part of the Turkish territory, as well as the Syrian and Iraqi ones, to establish their own autonomous state. Turkey fears that if the Kurds gain autonomy in northern Syria, the Kurdish population residing in Turkish territory could be more motivated to fight to unite the territory of Turkish Kurdistan with that of Syrian Kurdistan, which poses a great threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey.

The picture that emerges from this analysis is extremely unbalanced. On the one hand, a regime, that of Assad, supported by a great power and a regional power linked by common interests, with a strong relation with both by virtue of a political-ideological unity with Iran and common economic and geopolitical interests with Russia. Russia itself, in our analysis the great power, has strong and growing ties with the rival regional power,

⁷ Dazi-Héni, F. (2013). Saudi Arabia versus Iran: Regional Balance of Power. *Awraq*, n° 8, p. 24.

namely Saudi Arabia, which in turn cultivates various tensions with the other power of reference of its own camp, Turkey. In terms of forces on the field, the result of this brief overview is equally unbalanced. On the one hand, the deployment of forces is huge both by the great power and by the regional power. On the other hand, the regional power is less and less involved due to the lack of involvement in the conflict of what was originally the real great power that supported the rebellion, namely the United States. The disengagement of this great power allowed for a growing involvement of what in our analysis is the aspiring great power. Turkey finds now itself supporting almost alone a rebellion less and less backed by the regional power of reference; with the responsibility of coordinating a fragmented opposition in constant internal competition and with an additional component within it that Turkey itself considers as an enemy like the regime that it proposes to overthrow. In fact, Turkey launched in 2019 the “Operation Peace Spring”, a military campaign against the SDF, in Northern Syria. Through this operation (which was later interrupted thanks to an agreement with the United States) Turkey gained control of a "safe zone" in northern Syria about 120 kilometers long. The creation of this "safe zone" has the specific objective of dividing the Syrian territories controlled by the Kurdish forces from the Turkish territories with a Kurdish majority (Turkish Kurdistan).

The conflict in Syria currently reflects the imbalance of forces described so far. After the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the rebellion against the regime supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the US, Assad seemed destined to capitulate. Russia's intervention in 2015 and the subsequent gradual US disengagement turned the tide of war. Thanks to the bombing of the Russian air force and the Iranian military support, the regime has regained much of the territory. Currently, the rebels control a very small portion of territory in the north of the country. As anticipated at the beginning, in March 2020 the opposition groups and the regime reached a ceasefire agreement concerning these territories. However, the truce is not respected by both sides and the conflict continues.

Finally, it is necessary to make a final point, namely to clarify the role of Israel, another relevant actor in Syria, whose weight cannot be overlooked. We did not include Israel in our two-level analysis of the conflict because Israel is not part of the rebel camp. However, Israel autonomously fights a war against the Assad regime, which is actually a war against Iran, and Israeli military actions against the government army and the Iranian and pro-Iranian militias have a direct effect on the balance of the conflict. Israel considers the Iranian military presence in Syria a threat to national security, as the Islamic Republic could use its bases on Syrian soil as an outpost to attack Israel. According to Israeli intelligence sources, the pro-Iranian militias are building several underground bases in the territories southwards Damascus, near the border with Israel. These would be underground bases with particularly fortified bunkers designed to withstand aerial bombardments, which would pose a huge threat to Israeli national security. In order to neutralize these threats, the Israeli air force repeatedly carries out air raids against Assad's military forces and Iranian militias. These certainly contribute to weakening the regime's forces and reducing the Iranian presence in Syria. However, these attacks are concentrated mainly in the southern part of the country, as they are intended to protect the territorial integrity

of Israel, and do not have a decisive effect on the balance of the conflict between the regime and the rebels, which is instead fought in the northern part of the country.

A final mention deserves the residual role that the United States continues to play in the conflict. Consistent with the retrenchment strategy from the Middle East, the United States has started a gradual disengagement from the Syrian theater of war since the last years of the Obama administration. US gradual withdrawal left, as mentioned, space for Turkey as the new leading sponsor of the opposition to the regime and to Russian influence in the country and in Middle East in general.

However, the withdrawal of US forces was not complete. An American contingent remains present in Syria to lead the international anti-ISIS coalition that operates in Iraqi Syrian soil, with the aim of defeating what remains of the caliphate. However, the US forces present in these territories are sometimes the object of attacks by pro-Iranian militias. In the past two years, the US bases in Iraq and Syria have been hit by several attacks. For a long time the US has threatened retaliation against the pro-Iranian militias, in particular against the so-called Hezbollah Brigades, responsible for several of these attacks on American targets. This retaliation came following a missile attack that hit the Erbil airport, in Iraqi territory, where a US-led anti-ISIS coalition air base is located. The attack, the first foreign military operation ordered by the new Biden administration, hit the positions of pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria. It had a more symbolic than concrete value, as it is aimed at demonstrating that the new administration is not willing to accept attacks against its military forces and personnel without counterattacking. Anyhow, any intensification of American raids against Shiite militias can be a determining variable for the balance of the conflict.

Tab. 1.1 the conflict in Syria

| <i>Regime</i> | <i>Rebellion</i> |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government forces (<i>keep Assad in power</i>) • Russia (<i>establish itself as a new hegemonic power in Middle East</i>) • Iran (<i>keep a Shiite regime in power, maintain a military presence in the country</i>) • Hezbollah (<i>keep a Shiite regime in power</i>) • Iraqi Shiite militias (<i>keep a Shiite regime in power</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opposition forces (SDF, other Sunni militias) (<i>overthrow the regime and establish a democratic government</i>) • Turkey (<i>establish itself as a new hegemonic power in Middle East</i>) • Saudi Arabia and UAE (<i>maintain the status quo in the region</i>) • Kurdish forces (<i>obtain an autonomous state</i>) • United States (<i>defeat terrorism</i>) • (Jihadist forces) (<i>establish the caliphate</i>) • (Israel) (<i>eliminate Iranian presence in the country</i>) |

1.3.2 Libya

After the 2011 uprising and the end of Gaddafi's dictatorship, the fate of Libya was different and more chaotic than that of the other Northern African countries that had experienced the Arab Spring. The fall of the regime, in fact, left a tremendous power and institutional vacuum. This vacuum could not be filled by any entity authoritative enough to give order to the country and lead the reconstruction. The attempt of a democratic transition failed within a few years. From 2014, the country found itself divided between two governments, both claiming electoral legitimacy: the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, recognized by the United Nations, and the House of Representatives in Tobruk. This political division soon turned into a bloody civil war between the Tripoli government, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Haftar, the strongman of Tobruk. Turkey sided with the GNA along with its ally Qatar. Russia has instead taken sides with the LNA, along with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and France. As for the Syrian conflict, we will try to explain briefly the nature of the two sides and the reasons that led to their formation. The case of Libya is less complex than the Syrian one and therefore it does not require the two-level analysis methodology proposed previously. In summary, it is a clash between our two powers of a purely geopolitical nature, a power clash for the control of a strategic area between Russia and Turkey. The role of the other actors involved in the conflict is marginal.

In the Libyan conflict, what happened in Syria in 2015 with reversed parties happened in 2019. If the Russian air force intervention had prevented the capitulation of the Assad regime at a time when the rebel forces supported by Turkey seemed on the verge of winning the war, the decisive Turkish military support for the GNA counter-offensive prevented the Haftar's troops to take over Tripoli in April 2019. As well as support for the Syrian rebellion, Turkey's intervention in Libya was motivated by geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic reasons. Libya, even more than Syria, represents for Turkey a geographical area of fundamental interest for its strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. We will explore this aspect in detail later. Other reasons of lesser importance, but still to be considered, are linked to political-ideological reasons and to the link between the GNA and the Muslim Brotherhood. This latter aspect leads us to explain the support of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to General Haftar. In fact, as mentioned, in 2013 in Egypt there was a military coup led by General Al-Sisi, which overthrew the government of President Morsi, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian support for General Haftar is therefore explained by its aversion to Islamist political formations and its will to eliminate them from Libya, as they are considered terrorist organizations; therefore by ideological and security reasons. Similar but slightly more complex reasons explain Saudi Arabia and the UAE's support for the LNA. In addition to the same political-ideological motivations linked to hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood, in this case we have some reasons of a purer geopolitical nature, namely the safeguarding of the status quo in North Africa. As in the case of the support for Al-Sisi's coup in Egypt, the military intervention and financial support of the two Gulf monarchies to LNA is determined by the fear of

the establishment of any government of democratic inspiration that could alter the status quo of the Arab world, namely countries led by strong and authoritarian regimes, dictatorships or monarchies.

As for Russia, the fall of Gaddafi represented for the Kremlin the loss of a valuable ally in the region and a potential significant loss of influence in favor of Turkey, supporter of the GNA. In addition, in this case Russia's interests in the region are linked to the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves. The 2011 uprising and the instability following Gaddafi's deposition had seriously jeopardized Russia's interests in Libya in this sector, and the prospect of a Turkish-sponsored government posed an even greater threat to Moscow's interests. This fear resulted in a symmetrical strategy with respect to that adopted in Syria to support the Assad regime, based on military support in exchange for agreements to obtain privileges on the exploitation of energy resources. The direct involvement of Russian forces in the Libyan conflict began in 2016 and it involved, in addition to the use of the aviation, the deployment of mercenaries from the Wagner company, in direct support of Haftar's army. The involvement of mercenaries on the battlefield, on the one hand, represents the difference from a strategic-military point of view compared to the intervention in Syria, where the deployment of Russian forces was, and still is, predominantly a deployment of air forces in support of the ground troops of the government army and Iranian militias. On the other hand, it is a particularly ingenious instrument for waging war. In fact, since they are mercenary companies, these military forces have a particularly wide margin of maneuver, as they do not respond officially to Moscow. This is not new. Turkey also supported the GNA by sending mercenaries, predominantly from Syria. However, the case of Wagner is particularly effective. Later we will go deeper into the details of this particular intervention strategy of Russia.

Just as in Syria, Russia signed with Haftar several agreements to guarantee itself an advantage in the exploitation of hydrocarbons. In particular, in 2017 the Russian company Rosneft made an agreement with the Libyan National Oil Corporation. The Russian intervention in Libya, has an ulterior geostrategic motivation of enormous importance, namely that of having an influence on the Mediterranean, and specifically the possibility of having a military base on the southern flank of NATO, the so-called "soft underbelly". In fact, although Russia already has some naval bases in Syria, Libya offers a very large coastal area just southwards Italy, the most important American outpost in terms of military bases in the Mediterranean, as well as the possibility of realizing what the Soviet Union had failed to obtain throughout the entire Cold War, a naval base in North Africa.

The military and financial support of Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led Haftar to conduct a very effective military offensive, up to the siege Tripoli in early 2019. However, in April the Turkish intervention forced the LNA forces back east to Sirte, where Russian bases that provided air support for Wagner mercenaries and Haftar's army were located. On 23 October 2020, again thanks to the mediation of Erdogan and Putin, as on 5 March 2020 for the Syrian case, the GNA and the LNA reached an agreement at a meeting of the 5 + 5 Joint Military Committee, an organ composed by members of both sides warring. The agreement provides for a truce on all Libyan fighting fronts and the removal of military forces and foreign

mercenaries from the country within 90 days from the day of the agreement. The deadline, however, has not been respected and several fighters are currently present on Libyan soil.

Although the ceasefire agreement did not completely put an end to hostilities, it did put an end to the armed conflict, at least theoretically. The interruption of the war operations on an official level made it possible to start a political negotiation to give a new government to the country. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, a series of intra-Libyan meetings that began in late 2020 with the aim of leading the country towards elections and towards the democratic legitimacy of Libyan institutions, elected an *ad interim* government at a meeting in Geneva in February 2021. This government represents all political forces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan, and it aims to lead the country to the general elections on December 24, 2021. However, the new provisional government is not exclusively representative of local political forces. It is affected by the influence of external actors, who want to have a say in defining the country's future. The military influence of foreign powers turned into political influence in the definition of the *ad interim* government; and those who exercise it want it to materialize in direct influence on the future political choices of the country. The new executive, which should represent in theory Libyan unity, is nothing more than the political expression of the balance of power that emerged on the battlefield, where the military victory of the GNA and Turkey was clear. The superiority on the ground is reflected in the choice of some key elements of the provisional government, such as the Prime Minister, Abdulhamid Dbeibah, a businessperson with important business relations related to Turkey, or the assignment of the Presidency of the Presidential Council to Mohamed al-Menfi, representative of Cyrenaica, ideologically close to political Islam.

Tab. 1.2 the conflict in Libya

| | |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Libyan National Army</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LNA forces (<i>gain control of the country</i>) • Russia (<i>establish itself as a new hegemonic power in North Africa, protect its own interest in the energy sector</i>) • Saudi Arabia and UAE (<i>maintain the status quo in the region</i>) • Egypt (<i>prevent the establishment of a government linked to the Muslim Brotherhood</i>) | <p><i>Government of National Accord</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GNA forces (<i>gain control of the country</i>) • Turkey (<i>establish itself as a new hegemonic power in North Africa, establish a democratic government linked to the Muslim Brotherhood</i>) |
|--|--|

1.3.3 Nagorno-Karabakh

The Nagorno-Karabakh region has been disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 1988, when the region, with an Armenian majority, unilaterally declared its secession from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan to join the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia. This unilateral declaration was not accepted by Azerbaijan neither by the Soviet Union. In fact, according to the Soviet Constitution, to join a Socialist Republic other than the one they belonged to, the regions, defined as "oblasts", had to obtain the consent of the Republic to which they belonged itself. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of the Soviet military forces from the region, a series of armed clashes began. The tensions last until 1994, also following the fact that, after a referendum called by the authorities of the region, Nagorno-Karabakh declared its own independence from Azerbaijan in 1992. This declaration was welcomed by Armenia, which provided decisive military support in the clashes with Azerbaijani forces. At the end of the clashes, Azerbaijan had lost the control of the region, which had proclaimed itself independent along with some other neighboring regions, with the name of Republic of Artsakh. This political entity had not received the recognition of the international community and Armenia controlled de facto the Nagorno-Karabakh region until the recent conflict of 2020. After some clashes that took place in 2016, the situation degenerated in September 2020, turning into a real war. The conflict ended with an Azerbaijani military victory on the ground after 44 days of armed clashes. Thanks to this military success, Azerbaijan regained control over the region and, thanks to the mediation of Russia, a ceasefire agreement was reached on November, 10. As a result, Armenian troops withdrew from the region.

Armenia and Russia cultivate positive relations from a political and economic point of view. However, there has not been a significant Russian intervention in support of its ally, as happened in Libya or Syria, and the role of the Kremlin in this case was mainly that of mediator. The Russian strategy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could therefore appear less assertive than in the two cases seen previously. However, this is not the case. The lack of Russian military intervention is guided by a precise logic, perfectly in line with the Russian aggressive strategy and the pursuit of its national interests. Russia's strategic objectives in the Caucasus are different from those in the Middle East and they are dictated by a clear imperative, namely to avoid the eastwards expansion of NATO's influence and the establishment of any kind of pro-western government in the region. To better understand the reasons for Russia's lack of military intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict it is therefore necessary to focus on the Armenian domestic situation. We will address this aspect in detail later.

Furthermore, the evolution of Russian-Azerbaijani relations in light of Russian non-intervention in the conflict are very advantageous for the Russian strategy of expanding its influence. Indeed, the fact that Russia has accepted that the control of Nagorno-Karabakh falls back to Azerbaijani may facilitate Azerbaijan's rapprochement to Russia to the detriment of Turkey.

On the other hand, Turkey has very close ties with Azerbaijan from a political and economic point of view, also by virtue of the common tensions with Armenia for historical and ethnic reasons. The Caucasus also has great geostrategic importance for Turkey for the protection of its national security and the limitation of the expansion of Russian and Iranian influence in the region. Turkey did not intervene directly in the conflict but provided crucial support for Azerbaijan's victory in terms of military equipment supply.

The Turkish strategy in the Caucasus therefore presupposes the objective of limiting the Russian economic influence in the area. Turkey therefore seeks to maximize its economic ties with all countries of the South Caucasus (with the exception of Armenia, its historical rival) with the aim of reducing the economic dependence of these countries from Moscow and increasing that from Ankara. Also in this case, the reference sector is mainly the energy sector, and specifically that of pipeline and the transfer of energy resources. In this sense, Turkey has taken several regional cooperation initiatives to wrest control of the South Caucasus area from Russia and increase its economic influence in the region. An example of these initiatives is the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Gas Pipeline, which has been built to transport the gas produced in the Shah Deniz field, located in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea, to Georgia and Turkey. Unlike what happened in the cases of Libya and Syria, Turkey did not take part directly in the negotiations of the ceasefire agreement, which were conducted entirely under the supervision of Russia. Turkey appears to be the winner from a certain point of view, as the military support offered to its ally made it possible to bring the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh under the control of its Azeri ally. However, if Turkey is the winner from a military and territorial point of view, Russia is perhaps more victorious from a geopolitical and geostrategic point of view. The patronage of the ceasefire agreement guarantees Russia the possibility of maintaining its military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, while there is no reference to Turkey's military presence in the region in the agreement. The outcome of this proxy war and the subsequent peace agreement is controversial. Turkey wins militarily, Russia wins politically. We will address this issue in detail later.

Chapter 2

Russian foreign policy in the enlarged Mediterranean

2.1 The reasons for Russian realism

2.1.1 Russia-NATO tensions

Many scholars of offensive realism argue that the US policy towards Russia even after the end of the Cold War had the result to keep relations between these two countries in a zero sum logic. Despite initial agreements not to expand NATO to the East, this eastward expansion process continued uninterrupted until 2010, representing, from a Russian perspective, a strong threat to the territorial integrity of the Federation. Many of them, including Mearsheimer, have warned of "the beginning of a new cold war" by describing NATO's eastward expansion and US foreign policy towards Russia as provocations, arguing that that Russia would begin to react adversely. These predictions turned out to be correct. Russia has in fact started to act adversely, in a logic according to which the more power it has, the less power others have to oppose it and its interests. Since the Western allied countries have expanded considerably to the east, a global-scale balancing process was necessary in order not to diminish Russia's power and ability to pursue its own interests. Russia's aggression has grown significantly leading to the Russian annexation of Crimea and its aggression in eastern Ukraine, which sparked further tensions with the United States. These events reflect the deterioration of relations between the United States and Russia and an ongoing zero-sum approach to international affairs.

In recent years, the Russian Federation has adopted an increasingly assertive and aggressive foreign policy strategy. The state is the main actor of this aggressive approach aimed at increasing its power, thanks to its ability to mobilize and organize resources to expand. The state makes use of several other actors, which, if superficially observed, may appear as autonomous actors pursuing their own autonomous interests with respect to the national interests of the Federation. A deeper analysis reveals instead how every non-state actor linked to Russia is part of the Kremlin's power project. Using non-state actors, Russia is pursuing its politics of power.

2.1.2 Russian realism in the enlarged Mediterranean

With the intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia revealed its power strategy to the world: breaking the US monopoly on the use of force in foreign policy as a great power for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Through this intervention, Moscow has enacted a resounding geopolitical return to a region that it had abandoned since the times of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation intervened in Syria to reassert itself as a great power and to create an outpost for its geopolitical expansion in Middle East. According to a scholar named Nikolay Kozhanov, an expert on Russian foreign policy and Middle East, the reasons that have prompted Russia to increase its activity in Middle East are motivations of three kinds. First, economic reasons, namely to compensate for the bad economic consequences of the growing tension with the West, and to protect the interests of Russian gas and oil companies through energy agreements. Secondly, political motivations,

namely to become the main mediator between the main players in Middle East and to promote the Russian vision of the future of the international relations system in the region. Finally, security reasons, namely to limit the potential threats to its own security from that region, terrorism, Islamic radicalism, proliferation of mass destruction weapons. In this sense, Russia's objective of getting closer to its Middle Eastern partners, in a context of growing threat from Islamic radicalism, is part of a strategy of approaching the most relevant regional actors, aimed at becoming the only great power to influence the geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics of the region thanks to its relations with local powers. Russia's relations with regional actors, in particular Syria and Iran, explain Russian interests in the area and the complexity of bilateral relations between Moscow and the middle-eastern countries. The Federation pursues a precise strategy of alliances to extend its influence and consolidate its power.

This aggressive and realist Russian approach to foreign policy began with Putin's return to power in 2012. This change of leadership resulted in a dramatic change in Moscow's foreign policy through a total reversal of the approach adopted by Medvedev's presidency, characterized by a thaw in international relations, in particular with the West. Although a debate between academics and experts about the profound reasons that motivated such a change is still underway, many agree that the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, a long-time ally of Russia, have played a decisive role in this sense. There is therefore a widely shared consensus among scholars regarding the fact that the dynamics of the Mediterranean-Middle Eastern theaters represented a determining factor, albeit not the only one, of a radical change in the Russian Federation's approach to international affairs. This gives an idea of the importance that this theaters have for Moscow's national interests suggesting that the dynamics of the Mediterranean and the Middle East represent a key point in Russia's power strategy. In this sense, Russia's new strategy in Middle East was shaped by the desire to preserve the status quo in the region. The Arab Springs appeared to the new Kremlin leadership as a dangerous repetition of the color revolutions that broke out in several post-soviet states in the first half of the 2000s. Putin's great fear was that the Arab Springs were a continuation of those Color Revolutions instigated by foreign powers against the Russian Federation. In this regard, the Russian President himself defined the removal of Gaddafi and the revolution in Libya as a violation of international law, and this episode represented a turning point in the definition of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. He was convinced that the establishment of democratic regimes in the Mediterranean area or in Middle East would trigger a wave of revolutions throughout Eurasia through a dangerous domino effect.

2.2 Russian realist foreign policy in Syria

2.2.1 Russian diplomatic strategy in Syria

As anticipated, one of the main objectives of the Russian intervention in Syria was the need to establish a military but also a political and diplomatic presence in the Middle East in order to revive relations with the Middle Eastern countries, in particular the Gulf countries. With them, the Russian Federation has a particular interest in developing relations, as they possess substantial economic resources to make the investments that the Russian economy needs. In the Russian strategy the military intervention in Syria represented a means to assert its military and diplomatic weight in the Middle Eastern theater in order to obtain advantages in terms of trade and investments in the relations with the Gulf countries and in particular with Saudi Arabia. The Russian strategy consists in this sense in taking the side of the enemy (the Syrian government and Iran) of the country with which it intends to establish economic ties (Saudi Arabia). The final aim is to obtain advantages in the establishment of economic agreements, in particular in the energy sector, exploiting its military and diplomatic weight in a theater of Saudi interest like the Syrian one. This economic-diplomatic strategy goes well with the Russian need to establish partnerships with Iran in the energy sector and in the exploitation of hydrocarbons. By moving closer to Iran, Russia is putting pressure on Saudi Arabia, which is interested in reducing Iranian economic influence in the region from a political and economic point of view. Russia is in this way exploiting the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry to its advantage. Relations with Iran, however, are solid but not without several thorny issues. If from an economic point of view, with particular reference to the energy sector, Russia's strategy of oscillating between Saudi Arabia and Iran with intermittent concessions and claims towards both, keeping them both firmly in the grip, actually works; from a political, diplomatic and military point of view this strategy is more complex and influenced by more variables. The Syrian opposition forces, backed by the two Sunni powers, are unwilling to accept any possible Iranian involvement in the country's future, considering it a threat to their national interests and national security. For its part, Russia does not consider convenient for its own interests a complete withdrawal of Iranian troops from the country, whose presence would be fundamental in the event, by no means to be excluded, of a rekindling of the conflict on a large scale, since it intends to provide air support in battles without sending ground troops. For their part, the Iranian troops do not have any intention to leave the country. As mentioned, the control of the Syrian territory represents a first level strategic priority for Iran and for the entire Shiite bloc, the only way to supply weapons to its armed arm in Lebanon Hezbollah, a fundamental pawn in the Shiite power strategy. Second, but not least, there is the question of Israel. As mentioned, Israeli military intelligence sources warn about the possibility of an Iranian strategy to establish a fighting outpost to strike Israel in southern Syria. This factor is a cause for concern for Russia, which is interested in stabilizing Syria under its own hegemony and cannot afford to take the risk of being accused of letting Iran strike Israel. At the moment, there is no certainty

about it, however, if Iranian aggressiveness towards Israel were to overstep the line, Russia could not allow a large-scale or even nuclear offensive against Israel to start from Syrian soil. In this regard, it is possible to imagine, but there is no evidence of this, that Russia is collaborating with the Israeli security services in order to avert this possibility. The tacit Russian tolerance of Israeli raids in the south of the country against Syrian pro-government positions could be a clue.

In this sense, the relationship between Russia and Iran, and not only with reference to Syria, is shaped by various factors that push in opposite directions. The Iranians declare that they have no alliance with Russia, but rather a strategic partnership based on common interests, a definition that pleases Russia itself, since it does not have to respond for Iranian actions as those of its own ally. On the other hand, however, this formula does not involve binding commitments for the parties and makes the strategic agreement between the two countries more volatile, despite of being solid due to a very valuable economic-energy cooperation for both. The relevant fact is that Russia tries to pursue its own interests by keeping itself as neutral as possible with respect to Iran's regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel, but Iranian aggression, particularly towards Israel, can be a severe test for Russian diplomacy. On the other hand, however, the Russian-Iranian axis is strongly strengthened by the tensions between Iran and the US since the killing of Soleimani on January 3, 2020. Russia has repeatedly sided in favor of Iran in the negotiations for the restoration of the Iranian nuclear agreement, better known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which are occurring in these months in Vienna. The Russian diplomatic action in favor of Iran in this sense has a fundamental importance for the negotiations themselves but also for the strengthening of Russian-Iranian relations. The diplomatic game is mainly about the theme of European sanctions against Iran. Teheran has repeatedly asserted that if these sanctions are not removed it will not be possible to restore the agreement, while for their part the United States and its allies demand that Iran fall within the parameters of the agreement as a precondition for the elimination of sanctions. The Kremlin in this regard has repeatedly stated through its spokespersons that the sanctions launched by Washington violate the JCPOA and must be canceled in order to restore the agreement. Soleimani's death at the hands of the US played in this respect a greater role than it might appear in pushing Moscow to support Tehran diplomatically. Before this event, Russia had never openly opposed sanctions on Iran, which had actually had a positive effect on the Kremlin through indirect means. In fact, after the signing of the JCPOA, Iran had preferred to sign agreements with the West in the energy sector by virtue of the greater availability of capital. The sanctions against Iran therefore favored Russian hydrocarbons making them even more necessary for Tehran. Soleimani's death, however, made it more advantageous for Russia to take diplomatic action in favor of Iran on such a vital issue, compared to the advantage derived from a privileged relationship in the energy sector due to western sanctions. We can say that in this case the political, geopolitical and security reasons prevailed over the economic-financial ones. Soleimani's death in fact, deprived Russia of an important mediation figure with Tehran. Soleimani was for Moscow a very trusted figure in the Syrian crisis theater (according to some, the Russian intervention in Syria is due to him), and fundamental figure for the Russian-Iranian collaboration in the fight against Islamic terrorism, a priority on the Russian agenda in

terms of national security. The US responsibility for the General's death was the drop that breaks the camel's back in pushing Russia to support diplomatically Iran for geopolitical-strategic reasons, namely the common interest in limiting US influence in Middle East, sacrificing the economic convenience deriving from sanctions. As mentioned, relations between Russia and Iran are solid by virtue of partnerships and agreements in the energy sector that determine the need for both to cooperate from an economic point of view to protect common interests. From a more strictly political and geopolitical point of view, however, the two countries are not allies, but they are united by a strategic partnership for common interests. Concerning Syria, in particular, these common interests refer to keeping Bashar al-Assad in power and reducing the American role and influence in the country as much as possible. This diplomatic action is evidently shaped by the second of the two common interests mentioned above, namely hostility towards the United States. With specific reference to Syria, as has been underlined several times, the partnership between the two countries is precarious and with the various factors of uncertainty already mentioned, however it is at the same time indispensable for both. Regarding the safeguarding of the Syrian regime Moscow is well aware that without Iran it could not manage Syria, because from a strictly strategic-military point of view, Russia cannot give up Iranian troops in Syria to keep Al-Assad in power. At the same time, Iran is aware that without Russian air and logistical support it would not be possible to prevent the overthrow of the Assad government by the rebels. As for limiting American presence and influence in the region, Iran's role in Syria is doubtless indispensable. Despite the Russian military superiority in the Syrian theater, extending the perspective to the whole Middle East region, the US superiority is overwhelming. Russia has four military bases, all on Syrian soil, while the US has more than thirty military bases and installations only in the Gulf. Against the clear American military superiority in the Middle East, Russia can adopt a single strategy, which is to create a collective security system including Middle Eastern countries and external powers with local interests. In this sense, Iran represents Russia's most important ally from a strategic-military point of view, and the Iranian presence in Syria represents the most important piece of this puzzle, to which it is impossible to renounce.

2.2.2 The strategic-military importance of Syria

After the intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia adopted a strategy to increase significantly its military presence in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean area, in line with an approach based on the principles of the theory of offensive structural realism. In 2017, Moscow signed an agreement with the Syrian government that allows Russian military forces to use the military bases of Tartus and Hmeimim for 49 years and then for 25 years more. These bases are of fundamental importance for the pursuit of Russian strategic interests in Middle East. The establishment of a permanent naval presence in Syria is aimed at acquiring supremacy over the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Thanks to these military bases, Russia can very effectively implement what in

technical terms is defined A2 / AD strategy (anti-access/area-denial). Indeed, the deployment of the S-400 air defense system on Syrian soil prevents enemy aircraft from flying over the airspace above, guaranteeing the Russian aviation an overwhelming superiority. In fact, this anti-aircraft defense system actually creates a de facto no-fly zone over a large part of Syria, but also over the Eastern Mediterranean and the northern part of Turkey. The S-300, the naval version of that defense system, and the coastal defense system in Tartus, on the other hand, guarantee a clear naval superiority over the Eastern Mediterranean. The Russian naval defense in the Eastern Mediterranean is equipped with Kalibr cruise missiles and P-800 missiles, which represent a deterrent against any aggressive move by any potential enemy fleet.

The Russian Federation has recently taken a further decisive step in the militarization process of the Syrian coast, namely the deployment of three Tu-22M3 Backfire-C supersonic strategic bombers at the base of Hmeymim. Indeed, the Russian Ministry of Defense has clarified that long-range bombers will return to Russia after finishing their training missions. In fact, the purpose of this transfer would be to start the training of the Russian air forces in the airspace of the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, in order to verify the timeliness and operability of action and landing of the Russian military forces in these new scenarios of action.

At the moment, therefore, this is a temporary deployment, however it could reveal the Russian intention to transform this base into a permanent Russian strategic hypersonic base on the southern flank of NATO. The conceptualization of this hypothesis would have enormous strategic-military implications. In fact, although a clash between NATO and Russia on European soil is a highly remote probability, this would represent a real threat to the Atlantic Alliance with all the consequences that would ensue in terms of deterrence and alteration of the balance of power in the Mediterranean. Russia would be able to use its hypersonic missiles to hit and destroy at any moment all NATO infrastructures throughout Central and Eastern Europe, causing incalculable damage to the Atlantic Alliance, completely paralyzing military operations in Europe, as well as having the possibility of striking in a relatively simple way all sensitive targets of Central and Eastern Europe. The hypersonic missiles have been in fact designed specifically to neutralize the NATO's technological advantage. They are a new war technology for which the development of offense systems is currently much more advanced than the defense ones. The projects for the realization of defense systems from hypersonic missiles presuppose a complex defense system based on a radar defense combined with an infrared defensive system with mbda interceptors. The European Union is moving in this direction by financing the Twister (Timely Warning and Interception with Space-based Theater) hypersonic missile defense project through the European Defense Fund, within the framework of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), with the aim to develop a European multi-role interceptor to deal with emerging threats by 2030. However, Russia currently has much greater offensive capability than NATO's defensive capability thanks to the Avangard hypersonic missiles. Therefore, the strategic importance of the Syrian bases is incalculable as it allows Moscow to have the possibility of having an attack base from which it is possible to launch a potential, albeit unlikely, offensive with hypersonic missiles against the West.

Furthermore, Russia has recently begun a plan to improve the strategic effectiveness of the Tartus military base. This plan includes the construction of a floating dock in order to improve ship repair capacity in the port. Thanks to this innovation, it will no longer be necessary to send warships to the Black Sea ports for maintenance. The forecast is that this modernization plan will be completed by the end of 2022, which would guarantee the Russian fleet an additional strategic advantage in logistical terms, which would determine a strong improvement from the point of view of speed and operational effectiveness.

This strategy pursued by the Kremlin represents one of the most striking examples of the realist approach to foreign policy in the Middle East but also in reference to the West. Specifically, a strategy inspired by the dictates of structural offensive realism, aimed at creating a condition of military superiority against other powers in order to obtain an advantage for deterrence purposes.

Tab 2.1 Russian interests in Syria

| <i>Geopolitical interests</i> | <i>Economic interests</i> | <i>Political and diplomatic interests</i> |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming the new regional hegemon • Maintaining a military presence in the country • Controlling the Eastern Mediterranean • Putting pressure NATO's southern flank • Limiting American presence in the country • Countering the threat of terrorism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining cooperation with Iran in the energy sector • Establishing cooperation with the Gulf countries in the energy sector | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keeping Assad in power • Maintaining good relations with Iran • Maintaining good relations with the Gulf countries • Maintaining good relations with Israel • Avoiding the establishment of any democratic government |

2.3 Russian realist foreign policy in Libya

2.3.1 The “Original sin”, the support for Haftar and the search for stability

When at the United Nations Security Council occurred the discussion about the imposition of the no-fly zone on Libya to safeguard the revolution against Gaddafi's regime and avoiding retaliation by the latter on the rioters, Russia decided to abstain, thus effectively renouncing its right of veto. Russian abstention allowed the adoption of resolution 1973. However, Russia's "original sin" does not consist so much in this abstention itself, but in not having foreseen a rather active interpretation of this resolution by Western actors, resulting in heavy NATO military support for the rioters, an unexpected and disastrous outcome for Russia. In a short time, in fact, the regime of Gaddafi was overthrown with terrible consequences for Russia, which lost a key ally in North Africa and saw Libya fall into a spiral of irreversible chaos. In short, Russia made its calculations wrong and suddenly saw its interests strongly threatened by the loss of a regime with which the Kremlin maintained excellent relations, especially from the point of view of partnerships in the energy sector, as we will see briefly. Regret for the decision to abstain from this resolution left a mark indelible in the Russian policy towards the Libyan crisis, which has clearly influenced many decisions from then on.

In the rise of General Haftar between 2014 and 2015, Moscow immediately saw a chance to restore stability in the country. Haftar in fact presented himself as the only credible champion of the fight against extremist Islamism in Libya and the only true guarantor of order and security in the country's areas he reconquered and governed. Russia was particularly interested in the stabilization of the eastern area of the country, in particular Cyrenaica, where many of the Federation's oil and energy companies carried out their activities of extraction and production, at least until the outbreak of the war. For all these reasons, Haftar was gradually perceived by Moscow as the right man to reconcile and lead Libya.

A second important motivation that surely determined Moscow's actions in Libya was the will to conquer a leading role in the wider North African context. The success of the Syrian campaign and the expansion of its sphere of influence to the Middle East has given new impetus to Russia to move into other crisis contexts and determined the will to aim for North Africa. In this sense, Libya represented a perfect opportunity to follow up on the Syrian military campaign, also and above all in an anti-Turkish function, the main supporter of the GNA from a military point of view. In fact, Turkey saw the unification of Libya under the control of a government close to the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood such as the GNA as a great opportunity to establish an allied government in North Africa and pursue its imperialist projects. The principle that unites all the interventions of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa region is precisely the one according to which "Moscow must have a role in all crises".

Finally, the stability of Libya is increasingly threatened, from the Russian point of view, by the migration from the Sahel. The vulnerability of the southern Libyan border to migratory flows coming from sub-Saharan and central Africa is one of the main problems of Russian foreign policy in North Africa. Hence, the Russian will to contribute to the stability of the sub-Saharan area by also expanding its sphere of influence there, in order to be able to have its say also there. In this sense, the recent opening of a new Russian naval base in Sudan is emblematic. It represents in effect the first Russian official base in Africa. This is a historical fact that confirms the importance of Russia in the region and its imperialist harassments on the African continent.

2.3.2 Moscow's strategy in Libya and the differences with Syria

Compared to the Syrian case, Moscow's military intervention in Libya was different and much less direct. Unlike Syria, in the Libyan conflict there has never been direct intervention by the regular troops of the Russian army. Conversely, Moscow conducts its campaign in Libya through a particularly malleable instrument: the private mercenary company Wagner. "If there are Russians in Libya they do not represent the state and they are not paid by Russia" Putin declared in January 2020 following a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The reason for this difference is very simple: the geopolitical context is extremely different. We have seen how while acknowledging the government of Fayiz Al-Sarraj, created by the UN, in January 2017 Russia has signed a military cooperation agreement with General Haftar. The objective pursued by Russia through this maneuver was first of all to consolidate the convergence of interests with Egypt, the Gulf Monarchies and to protect the agreements signed by Libyan public company National Oil Corporation (Noc) with Russian companies such as Rosneft and Tatneft. On the other hand, especially by virtue of the increase of the Turkish military presence in the central Mediterranean, a strategic objective of Moscow was to obtain a foothold in Libya, which allow it to maintain a constant presence in the central Mediterranean as well as in the Eastern one. In this sense, once again the Russian and Turkish imperialist ambitions collide, this time in the central Mediterranean. From this perspective, it is possible to interpret the Syrian and Libyan conflicts as two aspects of a single conflict between imperialist and hegemonic aspirations. The two contexts, however, are, as mentioned, extremely different. In Syria, from a Russian point of view, there is a vital stake from a geostrategic point of view, since the entire geostrategic projection of Moscow in the Mediterranean depends on the control of the Levant. In Libya, the Kremlin has everything to gain and nothing to lose. If Moscow plays a fundamental game in Syria from an internal security point of view with reference to the aforementioned issue of the prevention of jihadist terrorism, the objective in terms of internal security is less relevant in Libya. In fact, as anticipated, Moscow shares with the Gulf monarchies the concern of a wave of revolutions that alter the status quo of North Africa and the Middle East. Russia fears that the establishment of regimes of democratic aspiration in this area could cause a dangerous domino effect that would destabilize Eurasia and therefore jeopardize its sphere of influence and consequently its own national security. In this Russia has a great ally in

the authoritarian regimes of the Gulf and in Egypt. For them, the containment of the spread of political Islam in the Arab world is an absolute priority in order to preserve their very survival. The Gulf monarchies cannot allow the concept of democracy to spread throughout the Arab world (and in this sense the case of Tunisia represents a dangerous warning signal); while for Egypt, the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood sponsored by Turkey represents the greatest threat to its political stability and national security. Russia therefore did not need to intervene militarily in Libya and win the confrontation on the ground at all costs, as was the case in Syria.

Moscow's strategy in Libya was clear right from the start: to limit its direct military and political involvement by betting on two options, both favorable. A much more cautious approach than the decisive intervention in Syria. If the Libyan conflict were resolved with the victory of Haftar and the collapse of the government recognized by the international community, Russia would collect the benefits of military support provided to the LNA. If, on the other hand, thanks to the Turkish intervention, the government forces were able to drive Haftar's troops out of Tripolitania, as it actually happened, the conditions would have been set for a substantial partition of Libya with Turks and Russians in the front line in the negotiation process. The only strategic imperative was to prevent the GNA from extending eastward its successes on the battlefield, reconquering Cyrenaica. This would have allowed Serraj to unite the whole of Libya under a government near to the Muslim Brotherhood and heavily influenced by Turkey and Qatar. However, this option was highly unlikely from the start: Egypt would have prevented it without doubt by all means, not excluding direct intervention in the conflict.

In Libya, from a Russian point of view, the game is different in comparison with Syria. The entire Moscow's geopolitical strategy depends on Syria, while Russian interests in Libya are of a more strictly geo-economic nature. Not less important, it is worth to specify it, but different. In Syria it is not possible to give an inch on the battlefield because the foundations of the imperialist ambitions of Moscow depend on the successes on the field, as well as national security, and therefore from a realistic perspective the survival of the state itself. In Libya, the stakes are not the same; the security and survival of the state are not in danger, guaranteed by the convergence of interests with allies who have a much greater interest than Moscow's in pursuing the same objectives (maintaining the status quo in the region). From the point of view of Moscow's imperialist ambitions, Libya can represent for Russia at worst a loss of profit in terms of geopolitical dividends. If the Kremlin succeeded in establishing a military presence in Libya, it would be able to consolidate its naval dominance on the southern shore of the Mediterranean to the detriment of Turkey and to press on the southern flank of NATO. Otherwise, it would lose nothing. Once again taking a realistic perspective, the survival and security of the state are not in danger. The real game of Moscow in Libya is about economic issues, specifically in the energy sector, and to win it Russia is willing to field every means, including the use of force.

2.3.3 Russian interests in Libya in the energy sector

In 2008, Russia and Libya signed an important agreement for the elimination of the Libyan debt to the Russian Federation, amounting to approximately 4.5 billion dollars, in exchange for contracts in the infrastructure and energy sector. In the same year Gazprom, a Russian energy company partially controlled by the state, and the Libyan National Oil Corporation signed a strategic agreement for the establishment of a Joint Venture, in order to deal with the exploration, production and transport of oil and gas. A year earlier Gazprom itself had won a tender for the exploration and production of natural gas in the Gadames area, located in the western part of the country. In addition, the company obtained also a series of important oil concessions in partnership with Wintershall A.G, a German company specialized in the extraction and production of oil and natural gas. Tatneft, a Russian oil company, has pharaonic contracts for production with Libya, but due to the conflict that broke out in the country, the execution of the exploration and production programs was suspended in 2013. The military support provided to the LNA by Russia should therefore be interpreted mainly in order to protect the oil exploration and production sites, which are mostly located in the eastern part of the country, controlled by Haftar. It is reasonable to think that Russia was more interested in influencing the Libyan energy sector, rather than pushing for a resolution of the conflict. Russian pragmatism is evident in its attitude towards the two main parties involved: Moscow supported Haftar in a discreet and indirect way, but it has formally recognized the GNA, backed by the United Nations. Russia has thus earned a reputation as a reliable actor in the area, filling the void left by Western powers. Furthermore, Russia cannot afford to go too far against UN action. Moscow in fact, not being able to work openly against the United Nations, has established good relationships with part of the GNA as a balancing measure of its support for Haftar. Thanks to this, Russia, together with general Haftar, recently negotiated an agreement with some members of the GNA to end the embargo on oil that the General had imposed on January 2020 to the detriment of the government of Tripoli. It was also included in the agreement the elimination of restrictions on eastern Libyan banks, which could have accumulated new debt and create a mechanism to govern the spending deriving from oil revenues. The role that Moscow has assumed in favor economic agreements between the two factions, as well as the end of the oil embargo, has once again demonstrated its growing influence in the country beyond military presence.

Tab 2.2 Russian interests in Libya

| <i>Geopolitical interests</i> | <i>Economic interests</i> | <i>Political interests</i> |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming the new regional hegemon • Maintaining a military presence in the country to put pressure NATO's southern flank • Controlling the Central Mediterranean • Limiting Turkish presence in the country • Countering the threat of terrorism and immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protecting its interest in the energy sector • Promoting cooperation between Russian and Libyan companies in the extraction and production of oil and gas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabilizing the country • Avoiding the establishment of any democratic government • Avoiding the spread of Political Islam |

2.3.4 The western obstacle in the Kremlin's Libyan foreign policy

Russian policy towards Libya aimed at increasing the Kremlin's influence in the country has to deal with the opposition of the West. Despite a rhetoric inclined to dialogue regarding the Libyan question in fact, Moscow has done very few to enact such cooperation. In this context and in the light of the previous Syrian and Ukrainian cases, the Russian military presence represents a great cause for concern for the West. The European Union denounced officially the military presence of Russia (and Turkey) in Libya by reiterating that there is no military solution to the conflict. What Europe absolutely wants to avoid is a reiteration of the "Syrian solution" in Libya, that is, leaving too much space for Russia's imperialist ambitions. If Moscow does not seem to be very concerned about compromising relations with the European Union, to which it seems to attribute little importance, the Kremlin could be more alerted by the risk of damaging relationships with individual Member States. Furthermore, Russian policy in Libya risks significantly increasing the tensions with the United States. The new administration, unlike the previous one, which has essentially ignored the Libyan issue, seems inclined to contain the risks of a strong Russian military presence in the area. The New Biden presidency looks very concerned to Moscow's rise to the position of the new hegemon of the Middle East in recent years.

Having already left Russia ample space of maneuver in Syria and elsewhere, by virtue of their growing disengagement, the United States does not seem willing to allow Russia to increase its presence also in Libya. Washington's change of course is in this sense more likely as Moscow's moves will be perceived as threatening. In short, the West is starting to consider the concrete possibility that Libya will become a platform from which Moscow can directly undermine European security. It is not a secret that Moscow's projects include the construction of a large military air base in Sirte. US Command for Africa (AFRICOM) has already alerted about the potential impact of a Russian presence permanently established on the Mediterranean. If Russia installed an air defense system in Sirte, it could threaten directly the aircrafts taking off from the NATO air base in Sigonella, not to mention the impact of a naval military base in Sirte in the Russian projection in the Mediterranean.

2.4 The issue of jihadist terrorism between Moscow and Ankara

2.4.1 The role of the jihadist forces in Syria

Russia's aggressive foreign policy in Middle East, as mentioned, is primarily, in accordance with the principles of realism, an issue of security. And as regard national security in the strictest sense of the term, as anticipated, a great threat to Russia comes from the danger of jihadist terrorism, and in particular from Syria. In February 2017, the Kremlin declared that at least 4,000 Russians citizens and 5,000 citizens of the former Soviet republics had joined the Islamic State or other jihadist organizations in Syria. So that Russian is the most spoken language in Syrian jihadist organizations after Arabic, also because many ethnic Russians or Russian citizens have reached positions of command.⁸ Evidence suggests that a large proportion of the Central Asians fighting on behalf of ISIS or Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq (or seeking to live under the Islamic State) made the decision to join that jihad while in Russia.⁹ While reliable data is conspicuously absent, estimates collected from TNT and REP field research in Turkey suggest that between 2011 and 2014, up to 10,000 individuals emigrated from Russia, an estimated 4,000 of whom found haven in Turkey while perhaps 6,000 continued to Syria.¹⁰ Russian-speaking communities have been present in Turkey for hundreds of years, following large waves of migrations, in particular at the end of the twentieth e twenty-first century.

Huge waves of Muslims fleeing the former Soviet States for seeking refuge in Turkey further strengthened these communities. Today, the largest Russian-speaking Muslim communities in Turkey reside in Kayasehir, Basaksehir and Yalova. These migratory waves include some individuals with the intention of fighting in Syria and Iraq. In the early years of the Syrian war, Turkish intelligence services have facilitated the passage of Russian-speaking fighters in Syria to use them as pro-Sunni fighting force in order to overthrow Assad. It was therefore a threat to the Russian Federation's national security of enormous proportions, as part of such terrorist groups interpreted the Syrian jihad as a preparatory exercise to domestic jihad, training to later return to Russia to carry out attacks. The danger of jihadist terrorism has influenced Russia's decision to intervene in Syria at least as much as the geostrategic consideration and the political will to keep Al-Assad in power. In this regard, Russia's reaction towards Turkey for using terrorist fighters to its advantage in the conflict in Syria, also indirectly posing a great threat to Russia from an internal security point of view, was particularly harsh and violent. Emblematic in this sense is the violence with which Russian air force nearly destroyed Aleppo in August 2016, an unnecessary action from a military or strategic point of view, as a result of which Russian bombers pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees to Turkey. Subsequently, Putin stated that in the absence of a cooperative attitude on the jihadist front it would have favored the overflowing of the Syrian conflict in

⁸ Jedinia, M. (2016). IS "Cyrillic Jihadists" Create Their Own Community in Syria. *Voa*. (March 30, 2016).

⁹ Lemon, E. (2017). The Varied Roads from Central Asia to the Islamic State. *Impakter*. (February 28, 2017) <http://impakter.com/varied-roads-central-asia-islamic-state/>

¹⁰ TNT and REP. (2017). [Data File]. Interview with an academic in Ankara. (May 1, 2017)

Turkey. Through this showdown on the battlefield, Moscow has forced Ankara to cooperate in the dismantling of the jihadist fringes that it considers a threat to its national security. The links between the dynamics of the Syrian Russian-speaking extremist fringes and Russian and Turkish national security are, however, even more complex than so far explained. It is not simply an "unfair means" that Ankara has used to tip the tide of the conflict in its favor (an action that was actually counterproductive from a strategic point of view, given the harsh Russian reaction). On the one hand, there is the fear of Moscow that the Russian jihadists returning from Syria could bring the jihad back to Russian territory, but also destabilize Caucasus through acts of Islamist political terrorism. In this area, Islam is in fact on the rise, and Turkish ethnic groups are returning to be the majority in various areas of Central Asia. On the other hand, Turkey fears that Russia could use the pretext of the fight against jihadism to complete the encirclement of Turkey via Libya and Syria, after having tightened its grip on Anatolia from Crimea and Armenia. It is an extremely sensitive issue. A means through which both can strike the adversary and implement their own imperialist strategies, one at the expense of the other, in line with the logic of offensive structural realism. On the other hand, both are afraid that the use of such a means by their rival could turn into a serious threat to their national security. This explains the harsh Russian reaction on the battlefield. This explains also the Turkish turnaround in front of it, in order to protect firstly its own territorial integrity. What is certain is that, so far, the game concerning jihadist terrorism, within the great game of the Syrian conflict and the even greater game of the clash between Russian and Turkish imperialism, has at the moment been won by Moscow over Ankara, on the battlefield and politically.

2.5 Russian and Turkish imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean

2.5.1 The issue of straits and the militarization of the Black Sea

The military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is a fundamental element of Russia's offensive realist strategy in the Middle East and the enlarged Mediterranean. This presence is possible by virtue a convention, signed in 1936, which regulates the passage of civilian and military ships through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, the Montreux Convention. This convention establishes the rules, for both peacetime and wartime, which govern the transit of ships and submarines through these straits, in particular, the maximum tonnage that ships belonging to non-coastal states of the Black Sea can maintain within the Black Sea itself and the time limit of stay of foreign fleets. Furthermore, the Convention indicates when, and in what manner, Turkey has the right to prevent the transit of third-country naval units through these straits. Specifically, according to article 20 of the Montreux Convention, Turkey has the right to prevent the transit of ships flying the flag of states that are in a state of war against it. However, Article 21 specifies that *Should Turkey consider herself to be threatened with imminent danger of war she shall have the right to apply the provisions of Article 20 of the present Convention [...] Turkey may deny this right to vessels of war belonging to the State whose attitude has given rise to the application of the present Article*. This clause of the Convention is extremely debated as it leaves space for the interpretation of what an attitude that gives rise to the application of Article 20 actually is. However, it is certain that often in the declarations of Turkish politicians and officials Russia is described as a concrete and real threat to Turkish interests and sovereignty.

The Montreux Convention is in fact a key to Moscow's aggressive policies in the Mediterranean. In fact, the Convention applies to all non-coastal states of the Black Sea, thus determining the freedom for Russian ships to cross freely the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Without this possibility, the entire geostrategic projection of Moscow in the Mediterranean, and consequently throughout the Middle East and North Africa, would be tremendously reduced. Trivially, without the possibility of passing through the straits, Russia would not be able to supply the bases of Tartus and Hmeymim. The Convention guarantees Russia an incalculable strategic advantage, as it allows the transit of Russian ships through the straits and therefore access to the Mediterranean, but at the same time places restrictions on the access of foreign ships to the Black Sea, in particular, as regard what concerns Moscow, access by US warships. Thanks to the Convention, Moscow is free to send warships, weapons, and soldiers to the coasts of Syria, Libya and throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Such activity of Russia in the Mediterranean certainly represents a threat to Turkey, in particular as regards the two Syrian and Libyan theaters, however it is difficult to demonstrate that such activities represent a direct threat to Turkish territorial integrity and sovereignty. The possible application of Article 21 of the Convention by

Turkey to prevent the transit of Russian warships is a rather sensitive issue, a means of which Turkey can hardly avail itself. However, Article 29 of the Convention states that

At the expiry of each period of five years from the date of the entry into force of the present Convention each of the High Contracting Parties shall be entitled to initiate a proposal for amending one or more of the provisions of the present Convention.

To be valid, any request for revision formulated by one of the High Contracting Parties must be supported, in the case of modifications to Articles 14 or 18, by one other High Contracting Party, and, in the case of modifications to any other Article, by two other High Contracting Parties.

[...]

Should it be found impossible to reach an agreement on these proposals through the diplomatic channel, the High Contracting Parties agree to be represented at a conference to be summoned for this purpose.

Such a conference may only take decisions by a unanimous vote, except as regards cases of revision involving Articles 14 and 18, for which a majority of three-quarters of the High Contracting Parties shall be sufficient. The said majority shall include three-quarters of the High Contracting Parties which are Black Sea Powers, including Turkey.

On the basis of this article, the freedom of navigation of Russian ships across the straits could be threatened. In fact, the possibility that, through the convening of a special conference, three quarters of the coastal states of the Black Sea may decide to modify the provisions of articles 14 and 18, which set the limits to navigation through the straits for coastal and non-coastal countries, may be a serious reason of concern for Moscow. Due to the current geopolitical situation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the growing rivalry with Russia, the Montreux Convention is no longer convenient for Turkey. What should worry Moscow, however, is that Turkey is not the only nation to wish for a change in Montreux's provisions regarding freedom of navigation across the straits. The Convention allowed Russia to develop the hybrid warfare strategies by which it invaded Georgia in 2008 and occupied Crimea in 2014. The Russian aggressiveness in the Black Sea in recent years also makes it impossible to rule out the possibility of a Russian invasion of Transnistria, and therefore of Moldova, with a probable involvement of Romania in the conflict. Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Romania have therefore a great interest in supporting the opening of the debate on the revision of the Convention. However, of the six coastal countries of the Black Sea, five of them are part of the Convention: Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Russia and Ukraine (part of the USSR until 1991, it joined the Convention in 1992). Despite being a coastal country, Georgia is not a signatory to the Convention. Therefore, since the majority of three quarters of the coastal countries of the Black Sea is necessary for a possible modification of the provisions contained in articles 14 and 18 of the Convention, in the light of the above considerations, the tip of the balance becomes Bulgaria. Bulgaria, part of the Soviet Union until the dissolution of the USSR, has been a member of NATO since 1994 and of the European Union since 2007. Nonetheless, Sofia has continued to maintain strong historical and cultural ties with Russia, which remains its main energy supplier.

The annexation of Crimea by Russia has significantly changed the balance of power in the Black Sea. If until 2014 Turkey was the hegemon, thanks to the military bases installed in Crimea, which substantially transformed the Sea of Azov in a sort of "Russian lake", the situation has turned in Moscow's favor. The new Russian strategy provides for a growing upgrading of naval infrastructure in Crimea and an increase of the military presence in the Black Sea to the detriment of Turkey. Air defense systems and systems of coastal missiles installed in the Crimea allow Russia to cover the whole Black Sea surface. From the perspective of Turkey, this Russian military projection into the Black Sea constitutes a particularly worrying threat to its security. Moscow militarily encircles Ankara from Syria, Armenia and Crimea and indirectly presses from Iran, Iraq, Greece and Southern Cyprus. Russian imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean has prompted Turkey to reassess its NATO membership, as Turkey can hardly face the Russian threat without calling the Alliance involved. The Istanbul canal project fits into this context. For the reasons we have described, it is practically unthinkable for Turkey to restrict Russian freedom of navigation across the straits, just as it is extremely difficult to modify the provisions that establish the conditions of access to the Black Sea by non-coastal countries. However, with regard to the latter option, there is a valid alternative: to create an access way to the Black Sea to which the Montreux rules do not apply. The Istanbul Canal, in Turkish projects, represents precisely this alternative. It would be a channel parallel to the Bosphorus, which by 2027 would connect the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. Officially, President Erdoğan has repeatedly stated that he does not want to question the rules of the Convention. However, it is almost certain that the Montreux rules will not automatically apply to the Istanbul Canal. If the Istanbul canal were not to be subject to the Montreux provisions, this would allow Turkey to let third countries' warships remain in the Black Sea, indefinitely, as well as let larger warships like aircraft carrier in, which, according to the rules of Montreux, cannot access the Black Sea. This could favor, for example, the entry of US or other NATO countries' aircraft carriers, which would completely overturn the balance of power in favor of the Atlantic Alliance in the Black Sea. However, an excessive militarization of the Black Sea itself risks triggering a dangerous mechanism, very common in international affairs from a realist perspective, the so called security dilemma. It refers to a situation in which, actions by a state intended to heighten its security, such as increasing its military strength, committing to use weapons or making alliances, can lead other states to respond with similar measures, producing increased tensions that create conflict, even when no side really desires it. The militarization of the Black Sea by Russia and Turkey, as mentioned, has undergone a significant acceleration since 2014 by Moscow, but Ankara has also moved in this direction. Turkey has equipped its fleet with multiple warships, above all amphibious units, logistic support units, landing craft and submarines. The latest novelty is the new multipurpose amphibious assault ship Anadolu, which in addition to drones and helicopters, it is capable of deploying aircraft warrior AV-8B. In 2018, the share of GDP destined for Turkey's military spending has risen to 3% from 2% in the 2007-2017 decade. The defense spending forecasts are on the rise and this growth is supposed to continue because of the growing Russian threat to Anatolia.

After the occupation of Crimea, Russia placed four S-400 batteries on the peninsula, in addition to batteries of S-300 and Pantsir-S1. As regards coastal defense, Moscow has transferred to Crimea the P-800 Oniks 3 supersonic anti-ship missiles and Kh-35U subsonic anti-ship missiles. In Crimea, the Russian Armed Forces can also use helicopters Ka-27 and Ka-29, Tu-22M strategic bombers, nuclear submarines, frigates and missile corvettes. There is not just one village or inlet on the occupied peninsula in which Moscow has not installed surface-to-air missiles, early warning systems, radar or other assets.¹¹ The militarization of the Black Sea and the mechanism of the security dilemma end up representing a threat to the security of both countries; however, for geographical reasons, an air or naval conflict between the two countries in the Black Sea, albeit rather unlikely, would end up being more a threat to Turkey than to Russia. The Istanbul canal project, therefore, at least in abstract terms, could prove to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a greater military presence of NATO and countries linked to Turkey could significantly reduce Russia's military superiority in the Eastern Mediterranean and therefore, as mentioned, jeopardize the entire geostrategic projection of Moscow in the enlarged Mediterranean in favor of Ankara. On the other hand, however, it could trigger an excessive militarization of the Black Sea, higher than that already underway, with a subsequent probable triggering of the security dilemma mechanism that would pose a threat to Turkish security and territorial integrity.

Over 100 navy admirals have in fact recently signed a letter that raises doubts about Ankara's plans for navigability of Turkish waters. In the letter, the admirals stressed that it is "worrying" to open a debate regarding the Montreux Convention, defining this agreement as an agreement that "best protects Turkish interests". The fear is precisely due to the critical issues related to the passage of foreign war vehicles, in relation to the security of the region. The Turkish government strongly condemned the letter in question, asserting that the move "recalls the times of coups d'etat". The Turkish Ministry of Defense, declared that the text "had no other purpose than to undermine our democracy ". Following the publication of this letter, Turkish authorities arrested 10 retired Navy officers, believed to be the main perpetrators and creators of the letter's contents.

The Istanbul canal also has a further objective in an anti-Russian function, of a strictly geo-economic type. Ankara's goal is to divert the Russian oil tankers' route from the Bosphorus to the Istanbul Canal by introducing a toll for transit through the new canal. The provisions of the Montreux Convention gives it this possibility: Turkey can in fact make use of the provisions of the Convention relatively easily to postpone the transit of ships between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. The construction of a new canal would make it cheaper for Russia to pay the toll than to suffer the economic damage resulting from delays in oil deliveries. In fact, over a third of the oil exported by ship from Russia passes through the Turkish straits.

¹¹ Kuimova, A. & Wezeman, S. (2018). Russia and Black Sea Security. *Sipri*. (December 2018).

2.5.2 The thorny Ukrainian question

The imperialist ambitions of Russia and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean depend largely, as seen, on control of the Black Sea. After years of Turkish hegemony, the Turkish occupation of Crimea has led to a process of balancing of power with increasing tension and the risk of triggering a security dilemma. According to the realist theory of the security curve, when a country starts to arm itself to challenge the hegemon, at a certain point the so-called point of security threshold is reached, in which the hegemon starts to be worried about it. The hegemon therefore takes some counterbalance measures until the so-called point of absolute security threshold, beyond which an armed clash occurs. It follows the defeat of the old hegemon and the change of hegemony, or the defeat of the challenger and the persistence of the old hegemon. If the absolute security threshold point is not passed, on the other hand, the situation can remain in a balance of power. With reference to the Black Sea issue, the situation appears to be the latter. However, it could change quickly. The absolute security threshold point has not yet been reached but the militarization triggered by the Russian occupation of Crimea and the possible triggering of a security dilemma make the possibility of reaching and possibly overcoming this point absolutely not to be excluded. In this sense, one factor that could lead to a rapid acceleration towards this point is the thorny question of Ukraine. Turkey can tolerate, albeit reluctantly, and has done it until now, that Russia controls Crimea, as the control of the Peninsula does not attribute to Moscow such a decisive factor in exerting lethal pressure on the straits. However, a possible annexation by Russia of the Ukrainian territories between the two rivers Don and Dnestr would instead represent an unacceptable threat for Turkey by virtue of the extremely significant increase in Moscow's land pressure on Ankara.

In December 2020, Russia reacted strongly to the sale by Turkey of the Bayraktar Tb2 drones to Ukraine, warning Ukraine “not to foment militarist sentiments in the Ukrainians” The same reaction did not subsequently occur following Ankara's sale of the same drones to Poland. This reveals that if Russia can tolerate Turkey selling arms to its rivals, it cannot tolerate it in the case of Ukraine, as the stakes are too high. What really worries the Kremlin is not so much the sale itself, but the structural cooperation in the field of military and aerospace technologies that Turkey is establishing with Ukraine in an anti-Russian function, whose most important emblematic example is the start of the coproduction of the evolution of the same Bayraktar Tb2. A strategic and technological-military partnership that represents a preventive move by Ankara to discourage the Russian offensive against Kiev and that Moscow does not accept. This is not a strictly military move but a precise geopolitical strategy. The capacity of these drones is probably overestimated, also thanks to a very effective communication campaign by Ankara. With the coproduction of these, Turkey certainly does not have the aim of providing Ukraine with a weapon that could decide the fate of a possible conflict between Kiev and Moscow. However, it aims at establishing a strategic partnership that can indissolubly bind Ukraine to Turkey in anti-Russian function. The two countries are in fact cooperating on a series of projects and agreements in the defense sector starting from 2020. From that year, Ukraine has

purchased four Ada MILGEM class corvettes from Turkey, small warships that have their biggest advantage in terms of maneuverability. Also in this case the two countries then passed to joint production between the two war industries. In this context, Turkey considers Ukraine as a strategic military partner, also for the development of military technology, especially for the production of satellites, radars and missiles. This collaboration is particularly important for Ukraine at a time of tensions with Russia in the Donbass, as from its point of view it assumes important military and political deterrence functions. Turkey sees Ukraine as a key area between the Anatolian peninsula and Russia to avoid a land encirclement by Russia and limit Moscow's pressure on the straits between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Ukraine sees Turkey as the guarantor of its national security and territorial sovereignty against the Russian threat.

2.6 Iran, the ancient empire between the two imperialisms

2.6.1 The roots of the Russian-Iranian axis

Over time, the Islamic Republic of Iran increasingly looks to the East. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is the main promoter of the Eastern politics. In February 2018 he stated that “In foreign policy Iran should give priority to the East over the West, to the countries close to those far away” Khamenei argues that the West does not respect the promises and that even if the Iranian nuclear issue were resolved, western hostility towards the Islamic Republic would remain the same. The East is therefore depicted as the natural horizon of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Relations between Russia and Iran began in 2001, with the *Treaty on the basis of relations and principles of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation*. It is a twenty-year agreement that specifies the nature of the partnership between the two nations in the economic field, especially in the energy sector, but also in the sectors of transport, industry, technology, agriculture and public health.

For the reasons we have already explained, the relationship between the two countries is not a real alliance, but rather a strategic partnership based on two fundamental pillars: cooperation in the economic field and the convergence of political and geopolitical interests. Despite the critical issues previously referred to, however, the collaboration between Moscow and Tehran in the political, economic and military spheres has increased significantly in recent years, particularly in light of the evident tensions between the Islamic Republic and the United States. We already mentioned the Russian diplomatic action in support of Iran in the recent reopening of negotiations for the restoration of the JCPOA, including how decisive the killing of Soleimani was in this sense. However, this initiative is not to be interpreted as the only result of a precise calculation in which Moscow weighted in the balance its economic interests on the one hand and its geopolitical interests on the other, favoring the latter in a logic exclusively restricted to the contingency, albeit of extraordinary importance, of nuclear negotiations. Moscow and Tehran have been collaborating on the diplomatic front for years. The two countries have mutually committed to respect sovereignty, territorial integrity and mutual independence as well as not interfacing in their internal affairs. Under the terms of the 2001 agreement, the two countries have indeed affirmed their commitment to build relations on the principles of equality and mutual trust. Certainly from the Russian perspective, the dialogue with Iran is based on the convergence of the two countries on most relevant issues of the global agenda, in particular the need for a multipolar world order, the geopolitical situation in Syria and also the situation in Iraq. In short, Moscow believes that cooperation with Teheran is an important condition for the protection of its national interests and promoting stability in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East.

In the economic field, cooperation between the two countries is flourishing not only in the energy sector, but also in the trade and infrastructure sectors. To encourage trade, Moscow plans to build a new port near the city of Lagan on the Russian coast of the Caspian Sea. The structure aimed at favoring the country's trade with Tehran. Furthermore, recently, Iran borrowed \$ 5 billion from Russia specifically for infrastructure construction. These funds are supposed to be used for the construction of several major projects for the revival of the country's economy including the construction and modernization of three power plants.

From an economic point of view, Tehran's projection towards Moscow therefore pursues two main objectives. The first is to reduce the impact of US sanctions through the Kremlin's diplomatic support. Second, it is essential for Iran to increase its trade with Russia, but also with Central Asian countries including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. For the establishment of agreements and trade routes between Iran and Central Asia, the approval and mediation of Moscow is fundamental, which in turn sees Iran as a factor of regional stabilization and an obstacle to western interference.

The relation between Iran and Russia is therefore a strategic partnership and not an alliance, true, however the convergence of interests is quite solid, both from the point of view of economic cooperation and from the even more important point of view of sharing geopolitical interests. What makes this partnership strong is therefore a number of interests and threats shared by the two countries that make them precious for each other, starting with the search for an international order different from western hegemony.

2.6.2 The Turkish-Iranian hostilities

Relatively dormant for decades, the Turkish-Persian competition has once again become a decisive factor in regional geopolitics since the 2003 American military intervention in Iraq. The US intervention has substantially removed the division between the two respective territorial cores of the two countries, which dated back to four centuries ago, when in 1639 in Kasr-I Sirin was drawn the border that after the Ottoman conquest of Baghdad divided Anatolia and Ottoman Iraq from Persian Iran. The American invasion and the subsequent plunge of Iraq into chaos have opened to Iran the way to the Levant and at the same time have contributed in a fundamental way to the return of Turkey on the Middle Eastern scene. This rivalry has been turned on again specifically by Tehran's absolute refusal to concede to Ankara a sphere of influence in northern Syria. Iran now perceives the traditional area of competition with Turkey, namely northern Syria and Iraq, as entirely part of its empire. This is evident by virtue of the determination with which the Shiites are fighting to regain Idlib, a city located a few kilometers from the Turkish-Syrian border, where hostilities are still going on, the only area of the region remaining under the control of the rebels after the counter-offensive of the government forces supported by the Russians.

Inflaming the Turkish-Persian rivalry is not only the issue of Syria, where external actors, specifically Russia but not only, exert a decisive influence in the space of competition between Turkey and Iran, taking it away

from their availability. Furthermore, and perhaps even more, the tensions arise from the competition between the two countries to gain a decisive influence in the reconstruction of Iraq, one at the expense of the other. Iraq is divided into three large macro areas: the "non-Arab" Iraq, therefore Persian, today within the borders of the Islamic Republic, the "Arab" Iraq, the low Mesopotamia, and the high Mesopotamia. The last two are the object of tension between Turkey and Iran, as these territories have for both countries an enormous geostrategic importance. For Iran the Arab Iraq is essential for the defense of non-Arab Iraq and therefore of western Iran. For Turkey, this region represents the only way of access of Ankara to the Gulf, projection that today constitutes an important part of Turkey's defense strategy. Both Turkey and Iran conceive the Iraqi territory as a unique geopolitical space, to be dominated in its entirety to safeguard their national security. If Teheran is convinced that the defense of the Iranian plateau begins in the Mediterranean, Ankara has no doubt that the security belt of Anatolia begins in Baghdad.

2.6.3 Iran against Israel, the unresolvable clash that worries Moscow

Iran perceives itself as a nation that has been deprived of its "rightful" status as a regional power by foreign intervention. In particular, Iran perceives Israel as a regional competitor that has been set up by the United States to secure western interests in Middle East. The principles of Khomeini's revolution has been based on exporting the Islamic revolution against "apostates" in the region and forcing a clash of civilizations with the "infidel" West. This strategy aims at a hegemonic control of the Islamic and Arab world, with a commitment to destroy Israel, "the Little Satan," as a symbol of the US, "the Great Satan". The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Most Comprehensive Report of November 2011 was interpreted by Israel as an alarm of a growing lethal threat to its national security, since it expressed "serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program". From that moment on, deterring Iranian nuclear capabilities has become a primary Israeli security goal. On the other side, Iran continued develop its nuclear program fearing that Israel could strike first, as tensions between the two countries were increasing. This proliferation on both sides has continued until Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal in 2015 with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. Through this deal, Iran agreed to reduce by two-thirds its installed centrifuges, and not to enrich uranium over 3.67 per cent for at least 15 years. Israel's reaction was very harsh, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to convince the US to strike Iran in order to avoid a direct Israeli involvement. However, the US under Obama refrained from initiating a military offensive against Iran, fearing Iranian retaliation against American deployments in the Gulf region in sites close to Iran that could have been easily targeted by Tehran. Moreover, fearing a spur of a nuclear arms race in the region, and threatening oil prices, Obama pursued non-military means to deal with Iran and pursued a mixture of diplomacy and increasingly harsh sanctions to dissuade the Iranian regime

from pursuing its nuclear program.¹² Netanyahu criticized Obama's administration refusal to set what he called "red-lines" for Iran's nuclear program and addressing reporters in Jerusalem on 11 September 2012, he stated: "*Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel*".¹³ Obama nevertheless, preferred diplomacy over military action against Iran and Netanyahu failed to bring the US to go to war.

Netanyahu considered Trump's election as an opportunity to derail the JCPOA nuclear deal and he actively lobbied for the US to withdrawal from the agreement. The International Atomic Energy Agency did not provide evidences that Iran was violating the agreement and issued multiple reports confirming Iranian compliance with it. Nevertheless, Trump administration considered the deal as a means that allowed Iran to use the economic benefits of the agreement to expand its influence in the Middle East and formally withdrew the United States from the agreement in May 2018. Israeli political leadership started to support the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' approach, hoping that it would have led to the collapse of the Islamic Republic. This approach involved an overall long-term strategy of bringing the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, to normalize relations with Israel in order to create a much stronger block in the region against Iran.

The will of Iran and Israel is therefore clearly that of moving war against each other and there seems to be no possibility of dialogue at the moment. The only factor that has so far avoided a large-scale conflict between the two countries is deterrence. For deterrence to work, what is necessary is the capability of carrying out a threat to inflict unacceptable costs upon each other from both sides. Even though Jerusalem has never confirmed or denied to have a nuclear arsenal, it is widely accepted that Israel is a nuclear power. A 2014 study for the bulletin of Atomic Scientists estimated the Israeli nuclear stockpile at 80 warheads for delivery by aircraft, land based ballistic missiles, and sea-based cruise missiles and submarines.¹⁴ Furthermore, a strategic assessment report on Israel's nuclear program presented to the Center for Strategic and International studies has estimated the Israeli nuclear arsenal at more than 200 boosted and fusion weapons, fighter jets F15I, F-16I with nuclear-armed cruise missiles, advanced conventional precision strike capability and three Dolphin submarines armed with nuclear missiles.¹⁵ Given Israeli higher strike capability, in a hypothetical Iranian-Israeli nuclear clash, Israel would possibly strike all major Iranian cities and highly populated places, inflicting up to 28 million dead in short term, resulting therefore in massive population and economic damages. Contrarily, Iran's lower strike capabilities, would "only" give Iran the option of targeting Israel's two largest urban complexes, striking at Haifa and Ashdod-Tel Aviv-Yafo axis, inflicting up to 800,000 dead in short term, nevertheless causing unacceptable, albeit minor, costs to Israel. Having made these considerations, the

¹² Sachs, N. (2012). The upcoming Obama-Netanyahu meeting and Iran's nuclear program. *Brookings*. (March 1, 2012)

¹³ Ravid, B. (2012). Israel's warning to the US, *Haaretz*. (September 11, 2012)

¹⁴ Kristensen, H.M. & Norris, R.S. (2014). Israeli nuclear weapons. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 70 No. 6, pp. 97-115.

¹⁵ Cordesman, A.H. (2007). *Iran, Israel and nuclear war*. Strategic assessment report presented to the center for strategic and international studies. (November 19, 2014)

hypothesis of a large-scale or nuclear conflict between the two countries seems to be a very unlikely hypothesis. However these are theoretical considerations and there is no certainty that deterrence is a sure way to avoid an escalation. This escalation could start right from Syria. According to Israel, Tehran is trying to intensify its presence in Syria by establishing a permanent base, although Israeli operations have helped to limit the influence of the Iranian enemy. In addition, Israeli intelligence sources have stated that pro-Iranian armed groups, including the Quds Force, have strengthened their presence near Sayeda Zainab, in southern Damascus, where they would have established several underground bases. In particular, Tehran, according to Jerusalem, is moving parts of its advanced missile industry and weapons into pre-existing underground compounds to develop a sophisticated arsenal within its range to strike several Israeli population centers. Israel has been carrying out airstrikes in Syria since 2011, aimed primarily at striking pro-Iranian militias stationed in eastern and southern Syria. In the last months, there has been a considerable increase of air strikes by Jerusalem on alleged production centers of Iranian missiles and weapons in Syria. The operations seem to be aimed at repelling what Israel considers a stealthy territorial invasion by Iran, according to intelligence sources. In particular, on Israel's list of targets are infrastructure that could allow Iran to produce precision-guided missiles on Syrian territory, eroding Israel's regional military advantage. In fact, according to Israeli intelligence sources, some underground compounds extend up to 10 km, making it difficult for even Israeli "bunker-buster" bombs to penetrate deep into the ground. Israel fears that there are already underground fortifications that cannot be destroyed with conventional weapons, tunnels dug into the mountains equipped to resist even bunker busters. One of the military research and development sites, a mountain complex near Masyaf, in western Syria, has been bombed twice by Israel in six months for its suspected role in the development of unconventional chemical weapons, including poison gas. However, Jerusalem will have to be careful not to undermine the strategic convergence established with Moscow on Syria, useful to guarantee a secure control of the northern borders. Specifically, Russia's interest in maintaining strong ties with Israel and vice versa is fundamentally tied to security reasons for both and specifically the interest that Moscow and Jerusalem share in collaborating in the fight against Islamic terrorism. This explains why Benjamin Netanyahu's government has expressed no value-based criticism of the Russian military intervention in Syria. Instead, Netanyahu has repeatedly referred to the benefits of Russian action against Islamist terrorism there. In view of the massive US and EU condemnation of Russian over Chechnya and Syria, Israel's stance is a political gain for Moscow, helping to uphold the Kremlin's narrative of leading the fight against international terrorism. At the same time, Moscow can exploit its relation with Israel, as a Western ally, internally, to brush aside the impression that Russia has been isolated by the entire Western community. Avoiding isolation by the West is especially important for Moscow during the crisis over Ukraine. Ultimately, Israel declined to

participate in sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States in response to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Donbas.¹⁶

Trust and freedom of maneuver have been the cornerstones on which Israel has been able to establish its historical relationship with the United States. While mistakenly thinking it could replicate the same pattern with Moscow, the model has not worked. The reality on the ground has shown an important presence of Iran in Syria and a Russia balanced in its role of arbitrator replacing the US in the Middle East disorder and in particular in the management of the conflict between Israel and the Islamic Republic. Due to the increasing Iranian military activities in the south of the country, the Israeli military and political establishment is becoming more and more doubtful about how much they can trust the Russian constraint to prevent the threats against Jerusalem's security in light of the proximity between Moscow and Tehran.

¹⁶ Averbukh, L. & Klein, M. (2018). *Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties*. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-59408-2>

2.7 Russia's engagement in the South Caucasus

2.7.1 Russian geopolitical interests in the region

Russian former President Dmitry Medvedev defined the south Caucasus region as Russia's "strategic backyard" or "zone of privileged interest". Then President Putin referred to it as the object of Russian "spheres of privileged interests". However, the collapse of the Soviet Union has allowed many foreign powers, most notably NATO, but also Turkey and Iran, to exert influence over the former Soviet Republics, historically firmly under the control of the Russian Empire first and then the USSR. A primary objective of Russian foreign policy is therefore to regain full control over its own "strategic backyard". To pursue this goal, Moscow has implemented a strategy based on the establishment of a network of international organizations and institutions in various fields, such as economic cooperation or security, to bind to itself the former Soviet states and remove them from foreign influence. According to a realist conception of international institutions, namely aimed at serving the interests of those who establish them, Moscow settled a network of institutions that are based on the premise and assumption of common history and interests. This network includes for example the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, not all of the newly independent states welcomed membership, owing to the perception of these institutions being Russian-led and influenced. Armenia is the only one of the three South Caucasus states to have joined the CSTO and EAEU, which effectively prohibits any significant security cooperation with the EU or NATO. Azerbaijan did not join the CSTO or the EAEU. However, Azerbaijan also cannot join NATO, because it would mean a direct challenge to Russia in what Moscow perceives as its sphere of influence, which may evoke a military response. Actually, Azerbaijan became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011. Because one of the terms for membership is that one cannot be part of a military bloc while also a member of the NAM, Azerbaijan's choice is a clear signal that its orientation is neither with Russia nor with the West. However, Azerbaijan maintains very strong bilateral relationship with Turkey, which Ankara exploits to counterweight Russian influence in the region. The relationship even has its own slogan, "one nation, two states", which implies a very close bond also in ethnic and cultural terms. Finally, Georgia, started to look towards the West, seeking the protection of NATO, which in turn pushes to expand its influence to the East and extend to former soviet countries the Euro-Atlantic integration, promising to secure them from Russia's geopolitical orbit. NATO's influence in the South Caucasus and its relationship with Georgia led, albeit indirectly, to the conflict in 2008 between Georgia and the pro-Russian separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Georgia did not tolerated the rapprochement between Russia and South Ossetia, while Moscow did not see with favor the ambitions of Tbilisi to join NATO and the European Union. Thanks to the mediation of the European Union, they negotiated a peace agreement that put an end to the conflict. However, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and broke off diplomatic relations with Tbilisi. Moscow

withdrew its troops from Georgia but not from the separatist regions. This maneuver inaugurated a new Moscow strategy to project its influence in the region, which, proved to be very effective, the Kremlin replicated 12 years later in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This strategy consists in maintaining frozen conflicts and “controlled instability”, exploiting the continued presence of Russian security forces in the region, serving geostrategic interests and retaining the geopolitical status quo. Indeed, the current status quo is clearly beneficial to Russia’s interests and Russian main goal is to preserve its economic and military sphere of influence while preventing any of the South Caucasian states from looking to NATO. As long as the South Caucasus states are divided and politically destabilized, Moscow can exert its influence on them. Yet, Russia uses its role as a mediator for asserting its own interests rather than as an actual conflict resolution instrument.

2.7.2 The reasons for Moscow's non-intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh

In the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Russia's failure to intervene militarily in support of its ally Armenia led, as we have quickly seen, to the defeat of the latter in the conflict against Azerbaijan supported by Turkey. For Moscow, however, the defeat on the battlefield represents anything but a political defeat. The Russian Federation, as anticipated, has only one goal in the Caucasus: the maintenance of the status quo. From this point of view, apparently, the war and the loss of Armenia's control over Nagorno-Karabakh, which had endured for over two decades only because it served Russia's interests, represents a threat for Russia's security and risk to trigger a spill-over across the Caucasus that alters Russia's influence in the region in favor of rival Turkey. In reality, the non-intervention of Russia is a precise strategic choice. To understand it is necessary to analyze briefly the internal political situation in Armenia. As mentioned, Russia's geostrategic objective in the Caucasus is to maintain the status quo. However, in this sense, Turkey in itself does not represent the main threat to Russian influence in the region in itself, which is actually the pressure of the West and NATO. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, in this sense, represented a thorn in Moscow's side by virtue of his excessive inclination towards the West and the United States. Armenia, in fact, has always been a valuable strategic ally for Russia in Central Asia to pursue its stability goals. However, bilateral relations between the two have changed since 2018 with Pashinyan's rise to power. The democratic reforms he has undertaken, not to mention the imprisonment of a number of Russian-affiliated oligarchs and former pro-Russian President Kocharyan, irritated Moscow very much. Russia has seen in the Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression of Nagorno Karabakh an opportunity to reestablish its political control over the country with a peculiar strategy, namely to renounce to the control over the region in order to regain the political influence over the country, proposing itself as mediator of the peace agreement in order to resume its role of regional hegemon. Russian strategy has worked on both fronts. Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement mediated by Russia to end the military confrontation over Nagorno-Karabakh. All disputed territories previously under Armenian control returned to Azerbaijan. In fulfillment of the agreement, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed along the border in

Nagorno-Karabakh for a period of five years with automatic extension for other five years. In this way Moscow, which already has military bases in Armenia, further strengthens its military presence in the South Caucasus. Moreover, thanks to the success of its mediation in this agreement, Moscow highlights the inability of the Western powers to exert any influence on the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia, as the Russian agreement comes after two failed ceasefires mediated first by France and then by the United States.

Moreover, the agreement negotiated with Azerbaijan throws Armenia into a situation of political uncertainty and instability. After the signing of the agreement, which sanctioned the de facto defeat of Armenia on the battlefield, mass protests broke out in the country defining the agreement a betrayal of the nation and calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister Pashinyan. The Russian media have fomented this anger of the population insisting that Russia's military non-intervention in Armenia was due to its hostile attitude towards the Federation and its bias towards the West. By creating insecurity, anger, frustration and fear in the Armenian population, Russia has promoted the idea that Armenia cannot survive as a state without Moscow's protection and to prove it Moscow decided to sacrifice the territories of Nagorno Karabakh. The defeat on the field has in fact highlighted Armenia's vulnerability from a military point of view against the Azerbaijani enemy, a factor that Russia intends to exploit in order to bring the country back towards a new political and strategic integration with Moscow.

Moreover, Moscow's intervention in defense of Armenia would have jeopardized the profitable cooperation with Baku in the energy sector. In fact, Azerbaijan tries to maintain its sovereignty by conducting a balanced foreign policy. This has essentially meant the cultivation of economic and political ties with a diverse spectrum of actors, in a diverse spectrum of formats. Although less entangled than Armenia, Azerbaijan is still quite dependent on Russia, including for arms deliveries. A military intervention by Russia against Baku would therefore have damaged flourishing economic relations between the two countries and in particular would have seriously jeopardized the possibility of collaborating with Azerbaijan in the project of development of the International North-South Corridor (ISTC), a project of vital importance for Moscow. It is, in fact, a gas pipeline that would connect India to the north of Russia through Iran and Azerbaijan.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the fact that Russia acted opportunistically in response to the war, but also, to a certain extent, actively contributed to the outbreak of the conflict. It is highly unlikely that Russia was unaware of Azerbaijan's plans to attack Armenia. Moscow has extensive capabilities to collect, control, and monitor military and civilian communications and troops and materials movements in the South Caucasus. It is practically impossible that preparations for offensive operations by the Azerbaijani army could have escaped Moscow's control. Moreover, the Azerbaijani offensive began on September 27, one day after the end of the Russian strategic exercise Kavkaz-2020, which took place on both Russian and Armenian soil. It is highly unlikely that Azerbaijan would have initiated an offensive when considerable Russian forces were still deployed in the region without consulting the Kremlin, even given the size, intensity and far-reaching objectives of this military operation.

Any attempt to change the status quo in the post-Soviet space undermines Russia's credibility and reputation. Russia has been ready to punish threats to the status quo in the South Caucasus as evidenced by the war in Georgia in 2008. Russia unexpectedly reacted calmly to the Azerbaijani invasion of Armenia and has repeatedly rejected Yerevan's request for military assistance. Therefore, it is far from impossible to exclude the hypothesis that Moscow, aware of an imminent offensive of Baku in Nagorno-Karabakh, has decided not to prevent the conflict in any way, but to use Azerbaijan to politically destabilize the country at a time when it seemed to want to turn its back on Moscow and look to the West.

Chapter 3

Turkish foreign policy in the enlarged Mediterranean

3.1 The reasons for Turkish realism

3.1.1 The Turkish Geostrategic Imperative

In recent years, there has been a certain tendency to trace Turkey's expansionist policy in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East to the personal ambitions of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, namely to his neo-Ottoman imperialist project. Such a view overlooks the structural dynamics that characterize the history of the Turkish state and the primacy of geography in shaping its foreign policy. The fact that Turkey seeks to expand its influence in this area has nothing to do with individual leaders and their ideologies. There is a much more precise logic, which explains the continuity of Ankara's geostrategic thinking in the region since the founding of the Republic. A thread that began with the annexation of the Syrian province of Alexandretta in 1939 and continued with the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, up to the recent military intervention in Libya and Syria and the occupation of Rojava in 2019.

The Turkish refusal to acquiesce to the Republic of Cyprus' claims to its own exclusive economic zone, the strong opposition to the attempt to establish an autonomous Kurdish entity on its southern border, the growing Turkish military presence in Libya are all components of a precise security strategy. All of them reflect a long-standing and enduring Turkish interest: maintaining an influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East in order to prevent other powers from posing a threat to its national security. The key to interpreting Turkish foreign policy and expansionism is therefore not ideology, but geography. The geographical position of Turkey has imposed to Ankara a precise geostrategic priority in the course of history: the creation of a security belt around the Anatolian peninsula aimed at safeguarding the security and survival of the nation. From the very beginning, Turkey has espoused structural offensive realism as the guiding doctrine of its foreign policy conduct regardless of the ideology of its leaders. Atatürk was a progressive leader eager to modernize and westernize Turkey. He was aware that Anatolia was vulnerable to an invasion from the Mediterranean if Turkey did not control Alexandretta and ordered its annexation. Ecevit, Turkey's prime minister in 1974, was a left-wing democrat, but he argued that Cyprus was an "aircraft carrier en route to the soft underbelly of Turkey", from which Anatolia could be bombed and, therefore, it could not be left in the hands of a hostile country. Erdogan is an Islamist. Despite their obvious ideological differences, these three leaders harbored the same geostrategic ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean, confirming the realist diktat that a country's internal security depends on its position of strength and power.

The Arab uprisings had initially fueled Ankara's hopes of extend Turkey's influence in the region. Turkey had ties with movements that led the opposition in many of the countries in revolt. Therefore, Ankara hoped that the spread of democracy in the Arab world would mean the coming to power of governments that would establish closer ties with Turkey. The Turkish government supported the uprisings and then the democratic transition in Tunisia and Egypt through political support and economic aid. After the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammed Morsi as president of Egypt, Turkey intended to establish a strategic

partnership with the new Egyptian government that could significantly change the balance of power in the region in its favor. However, after the collapse of President Morsi in Egypt in 2013 and the rapid evolution of the Syrian uprising into civil war, it soon became clear that instead of leading to a democratic transition, the uprisings, with the exception of Tunisia, would have led to the restoration of authoritarian regimes or prolonged civil wars as in Syria and Libya. Ankara began to perceive developments in the Middle East largely as new threats to Turkey's national security and regional aspirations. As a result, Turkey's new policy in the Middle East began to show an increasing commitment to zero-sum competition with other regional powers and an increased use of military power. Before the Arab uprisings, Ankara was particularly careful to keep itself out of the main rivalry in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The uprisings, however, led to intense competition between them for power and influence, and Turkey itself became part of this regional polarization.

After the failure of the Arab uprisings and the escalation of civil wars in Libya and Syria, Turkish policy in the Middle East has undergone a significant doctrinal shift. The main architect of the previous foreign policy doctrine was Ahmet Davutoglu, first Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister of Turkey until his resignation in 2016. Since the early 2000s under Davutoglu's leadership, Turkish foreign policy has been shaped by soft power and an active globalizing approach. During this period, the environment was suitable for such an approach by Turkey, as its ability to balance Islam, democracy and secularism had resulted in a wave of trust and interest from the West, and likewise, as mentioned, Ankara was careful to maintain good relations with other countries in the Arab world, keeping itself neutral with respect to regional rivalries. During his years as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, Davutoglu implemented a new set of foreign policy principles based on the doctrine dubbed the "Strategic Depth Doctrine," the key feature of which was the "zero problems with neighbors" policy. This approach was based on the assumption that Turkey needed to free itself from the belief that it was constantly surrounded by enemies and needed to improve its relations with all its neighbors. This new approach represented a huge revolution in Turkish foreign policy, an exception in history that lasted for just over a decade.

As mentioned, the outbreak of the Arab revolts represented for Ankara the hope of a structural change in the Arab world and the possibility of a passage from a system of authoritarian regimes to a system of democratic regimes with which to establish greater cooperation and dialogue. Turkey has explicitly claimed leadership as the bearer of the democratization process in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The goal was to export the "Turkish model" of democratization and modernization to make the Middle East more stable and secure. However, these uprisings, which had initially brought hope of structural change in the region in favor of greater democratic participation of the people, have instead opened the way to internal wars and restoration of authoritarian regimes. The military coup in Egypt and the internal war in Syria put an end to Turkish hopes for a structural change in the region, which instead was taken as hostage to the power games and interests of the great powers. The Arab revolts have turned into internal wars and geopolitical power games, and Turkey

was not immune to such a radical change that resulted in the need for a radical change in its foreign policy approach.

The growing conflicts and instability in the region made it necessary, if not imperative, to adjust Turkish foreign policy, since with the failure of the Arab revolts Ankara went in a few years from glimpsing the hope of a more democratic and globalized Arab world to having to face an increasing number of threats to its national security. These threats were determined first of all by the intensification of geopolitical power games staged by the great powers to strengthen their hegemonic positions, exert their influence and maximize their interests at the expense of each other and therefore also at the expense of Turkey itself. However, several other factors represented a real threat to Turkish national security. For instance, the profound influx of refugees from the theaters of war towards Turkish national borders and the terrorist danger coming from the self-proclaimed Islamic State. However, what Ankara was most concerned about, more than ISIS or the waves of refugees, was the possibility of a significant increase in the Kurdish threat to its southern border. Turkey's main goal was the overthrow of Bashar Al-Assad's regime, an objective for which Ankara pledged to support the rebel forces. However, Turkey was particularly concerned about eliminating Kurdish groups in Syria as early as 2012. In this sense, the main goal of the Turkish government was to convince the United States to create a buffer zone along the border. What made things extraordinarily complicated for Turkey was that the Kurdish armed group, the People's Protection Units (PYD), had become the main US tool in the war against ISIS, as part of President Obama's "surrogate war" doctrine.

Davutoglu's resignation paved the way for Erdogan to blame him for recent foreign policy failures and to restore Turkey's traditional doctrine of aggressive foreign policy, now in the context of changing global and regional realities as well as rising nationalist populism. The new doctrine starts from the assumption that a new multipolar global order is emerging and that this requires Turkey not only to redefine its place in it but also to act independently to pursue a power project that can return the country to the role of great power lost with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. So this new doctrine is not the reason for changes in Turkey's Middle East policy, but more its justification. It is not a neo-Ottoman or imperialist ideology that guides Erdogan's choice of an aggressive foreign policy, but two precise factors, the first historically contingent, the second historically structural. The first is the evolution of the political and geopolitical situation in the region, which has led to the failure of Davutoglu's soft power policies, based on the possibility of establishing a dialogue with new democracies that were never born in the Arab world. The second, as mentioned, the historical structural condition that sees Turkey in a situation of permanent threat posed to its national security by foreign powers, basically for geographical reasons. This condition imposes an aggressive offensive realist approach to pursue its security interests and the creation of a security belt around the Anatolian peninsula as a geostrategic imperative, to prevent foreign powers from posing a threat to the survival of the state.

3.1.2 Nationalism in the service of geopolitics

As explained so far, in a multipolar world marked by geopolitical competition, Turkey aims to be an autonomous power to pursue its national security strategy. In order to achieve this goal, Turkey's new ruling class has implemented a forward-looking project aimed at justifying and nurturing imperialist ambitions. In his speeches President Erdogan has crafted a communicative strategy centered on the national will, on ending supposed obedience to foreign powers and rising to the rank of great power. Anatolian neo-nationalism is based on the cult of the state and the perennial suspicion of foreign enemies, perceived as a threat to the survival of the state itself. In fact, nationalism is a fundamental aspect in nations that pursue an aggressive foreign policy as it serves to justify cross-border activism. Erdogan is the main proponent of a Turkish empire that plays a prominent role in the competition between great powers.

After the failed coup in 2016, the AKP allied with the MHP, a right-wing Turkish nationalist movement, to save the state and its institutions after purging them of the supporters of the alleged mastermind of the subversion, Fethullah Gülen. The two parties have formed an official alliance, coordinating their respective campaigns and centering them on a security and anti-terrorist agenda, as well as on an extremist approach to the Kurdish question. The convergence between the two political formations created a peculiar blend of nationalism, ottomanism, religiosity, and cult of the state. This approach provided to a certain extent the domestic justification for aggressive foreign policy. These ideas contrast only seemingly with the Turkish model of a modern, prosperous Muslim democracy firmly anchored in the US-led liberal order. Indeed, since 2001, American administrations have used this model to push other Middle Eastern regimes to democratize and reform their economies, making Turkey a pillar of American policy in the region. In reality, this strategic partnership matters more to Ankara than to Washington. Firmly linked to the Atlantic Alliance and the United States for reasons of geostrategic convenience that we will shortly analyze in detail, in order to realize its project of becoming a regional power Ankara has relied on its desire to present itself as a democratic and progressive alternative to an authoritarian and conservative model of Islam. Along this rift in the Arab world, Turkey is competing with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to reach a top position in the Sunni world, seeking to bring the other countries of the Middle East and North Africa on its side and expand Turkish influence through diplomacy, trade and other instruments of soft power.

Particularly emblematic of nationalist rhetoric serving geopolitical and national security needs in Erdogan's communication strategy is a tweet by the Turkish President dating back to November 5, 2019.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/RT Erdogan/status/1191762099980120065>

Bu bayrak inmez.

Bu ezan susmaz.

Bu ülke bölünmez.

Bu Millet diz çökmez.

Bu devlet, inşallah ilelebet payidar kalır.

The flag will never be lowered

Prayer never silenced

The country never divided

The people never kneeled

The State, God willing, will always survive

These few lines encapsulate the essence of Erdogan's entire communication strategy, based on nationalist and religious rhetoric to serve geopolitical purposes.

"The flag will never be lowered" "The country never divided" and "The people never kneeled" are clear messages that hymn nationalist rhetoric. "Prayer never silenced" emphasizes the importance of the religious component in the Turkish power project. "The State, God willing, will always survive" is the most important sentence in this tweet and was written last as everything said before is instrumental to this last goal. From this last sentence, it is possible to infer the realist nature of Turkish politics. This characteristic is the most important of all, more than nationalism and more than religion, as these two are instrumental to the former. It is not a case that Erdogan speaks of "survival" of the state, a term typical of realist vocabulary. The ultimate goal of Turkish politics is therefore the survival of the State in the realist sense of the term, understood as the neutralization of any external threat to survival itself. As we have seen, this objective is not and cannot be in question, as it depends on structural historical-geographical conditions obliging Turkey to assume a realist interpretation of international affairs. Any nationalist or neo-Ottoman project to recover past glories are nothing but political and rhetorical artifices to pursue and justify Turkey's only real goal: the survival of the state, and these words of Erdogan exemplify this concept very clearly.

3.1.3 The Atlantic choice

This geo-strategic imperative must necessarily be combined with the other Turkish security imperative: maintaining a strategic partnership with the United States. This issue presents several problems and fuels

divisions within the Turkish state between those who want to preserve the country's traditional Atlanticism and those who are pushing for a departure from the Atlantic Alliance. Certainly, the support of the United States to the Kurds in Syria has given credibility to those who theorize the incompatibility of Atlanticism with Turkish national security interests. Such internal divisions within the Turkish state have very deep roots. During the Sixties, a strong current of the Turkish army advocated strategic independence from the United States and NATO. This so called anti-imperialist faction was on the verge of taking power with a coup d'état in 1971, which failed because of a counter-coup by the pro-American faction. The strategy to neutralize the left-wing anti-American faction, still present and strong in the public opinion of the country and in the same state apparatus, implemented by President Erdogan, belonging to the Atlanticist faction, consists in the insertion in the state apparatus itself of elements coming from national-conservative environments with a strong religious imprint. For Erdogan, keeping Turkey in the wake of Atlanticism is a fundamental component of Turkish security strategy. For this reason, in 2001 he founded the AKP, a political party in rupture with the traditionalist anti-American and anti-Western Islamic circles, exploiting a general convergence of views between the pro-American right-wing nationalists and conservative Islamists in an imperialist and nationalist function. Nationalists and conservative Islamists share an allegiance to the Atlantic choice, as well as a view of Islam as an integral part of national identity. In the Turkish view, there is no contradiction between supporting Islamist forces, such as the Libyan GNA, and honoring traditional Atlanticism. This is a strategic choice perfectly in line with the traditions of the Turkish state: it is enough to remember the mobilization of religious conservatism during the Cold War to fight the advance of the left, perceived as a threat to the permanence of the country in the Western bloc. Moreover, this strategic positioning is dictated by a convergence of geo-strategic interests between Ankara and Washington, namely countering Russia in the Black Sea and the Caucasus, where Turkish and Western interests tend to coincide.

In this sense, we have seen how the United States are particularly interested in maintaining close ties with Turkey in order to benefit from the realization of the Istanbul Canal project. This infrastructure should unite from 2027 the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea and it promises to upset the balance of the area to the detriment of the Russian Federation. Certainly, the new passage will increase the bargaining power of the Turks, increasingly able to dictate the rules of the game. Aware of the strategic importance of this project, Turkey intends to use it to link its interests more and more to those of the United States in an anti-Russian function. Turkey also intends to play a leading role in the development of Eurasian civilization, which after decades of domination by the Soviet Union rejects Russian influence and aims at the enfranchisement of individual states from Moscow. In Eurasia, there are five Turkic states: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This contributes to conflicting strategic interests between Turkey and the Turkic states on the one hand and Russia on the other. The Russian Eurasian vision is based on Moscow's desire to consolidate its dominance over Central Asia and the Caucasus. Turkey therefore fulfills in Eurasia a precise geopolitical function as an instrument of the hostile policy of the United States towards the Russian Federation.

Looking at Turkey's geographical position and analyzing its remote and recent history it is possible to understand that Ankara will always try to project strength and influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East for reasons of national security, regardless of the ideology of its leaders. In the same way, for the same security reasons, it is easy to deduce that pro-Atlantic position will be maintained in an anti-Russian function, as a guarantee of Turkish territorial integrity and national security itself, despite several dissenting voices within the same state and military apparatus.

3.2 The Turkish strategy in Syria

3.2.1 From the regime change strategy to the change of strategic priorities

The outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 represents, more than the other Arab uprising scenarios, the factor that determined the failure of Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighbors" and the restoration of Ankara's traditional offensive realist policy. In fact, in 2011 Davutoglu, then Foreign Minister, and Erdogan himself, then Prime Minister, attempted to implement a peaceful solution to bring about a gradual democratic transition. Turkey's first reaction to the crisis was in fact to try to persuade the regime to meet the people's demands for democratization by suggesting Assad a rapid implementation of social and economic policies and reforms, while offering at the same time Turkish help to bring about the changes. However, this strategy soon proved to be unfeasible as it soon became clear that the Assad regime did not intend to implement any kind of political liberalization or economic reform process. Ankara's strategy in fact was based on the wrong assumption that the political and diplomatic relations previously established with Damascus during the years of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy would have guaranteed enough influence on the regime to convince Assad that a process of democratization and liberalization would have been the best solution to the crisis. In this sense the Turkish political establishment, particularly in the persons of Erdogan and Davutoglu had greatly overestimated their own capabilities. As the violence exacerbated and the regime's repression of protesters increased, Turkey changed its strategy in Syria by starting to arm members of the Syrian opposition, in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood, breaking ties with Damascus and implementing a policy of regime change. This strategic shift represented the tacit admission of the failure of Davutoglu's "Strategic Depth" doctrine, leading to his own resignation in 2016 and paving the way for Erdogan to return to traditional Turkish aggression in foreign policy.

As the uprising turned into civil war, Ankara intervened militarily convinced that the Syrian regime would soon have fallen. Once again, however, Ankara misjudged the situation and Turkey's gamble of a rapid capitulation of the Assad regime did not pay off. Far from collapsing, thanks to Iran and Russia's military support, as previously detailed, pro-government forces have gradually regained much of the previously lost territory.

Moreover, Turkey has failed to provide an adequate response to the rise of jihadist groups in the region, in particular the Islamic State, which initially took control of large areas of Syrian territory. Indeed, Turkey's strategy has also included support for extremist elements of the anti-Assad opposition, such as the militias of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. This strategy severely damaged Turkey's international credibility due to its ambiguous relations with extremist groups, as has been previously explored. The strengthening of the Syrian Kurdish militias, supported by the United States to fight the expansion of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, represented another strategic disaster for Turkey, as we will analyze in detail

below. A further negative consequence of the Syrian civil war on Turkey's internal security, as mentioned, was a huge influx of refugees from Syria. This influx has negatively affected Turkish security as it has created a difficult social situation in the southeastern regions of the country, where several incidents of violence occurred. In conclusion, Turkey's regime change strategy in Syria failed, essentially due to Russian and Iranian intervention in support of the regime. At the beginning of 2016, Syria represented for Turkey a source of multiple threats to its national security and territorial integrity, such as jihadist terrorism, mass immigration, but especially Kurdish separatism, and it was clear that the only way out was to adopt a new strategy.

Not only Russian military intervention in 2015 caused the balance of power in the conflict to shift back in favor of the pro-Assad front at the expense of Turkey. Furthermore, the regime also took advantage of Barack Obama's reluctance to further engage the US in the Middle East and the divisions within Sunni Arab countries resulting from the coup in Egypt and the subsequent tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. In this context, Turkey found itself completely isolated and Erdogan tried to change his approach to the Syrian conflict towards a more pragmatic stance. Ankara stopped using the rhetoric of regime change and agreed to participate in talks with Russia and Iran to find a solution to the conflict. In other words, Turkey has revised its strategic priorities, replacing the removal of Assad as its main objective with the containment of direct threats to its territorial integrity, such as Islamic terrorism and Kurdish separatism. Thus Turkey, together with Iran and Russia, promoted the start of a negotiation process between the Syrian regime and opposition representatives in Astana. In carrying out these negotiations, Ankara's main concern is to prevent the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan in Syria. To achieve this goal, Ankara is ready to cooperate with Damascus and Teheran, both of whom are in turn interested in preventing the creation of a Kurdish state in order to safeguard Syria's territorial integrity. In this sense, Ankara leverages on the fact that it de facto still controls parts of northern Syria. However, Erdogan is aware that he has to reach a compromise with both Moscow and the regional powers.

3.2.2 Analysis of the Kurdish issue

In Syria, since the beginning of the rebellion in 2011, the weakening of the central government has allowed the PKK to expand its territorial control over the northern part of the country. When the Syrian government decided to relinquish control of the northeastern provinces in the summer of 2012, immediately the PKK declared self-rule in those areas, generating new challenges to Turkey's security. After the fall of Mosul and the occupation by ISIS in summer of 2014, the Kurdish separatist cause gained a new lynchpin from an international actors' perspective in both Iraq and Syria. By allying themselves with the international anti-ISIS coalition, Kurdish separatists have received a great deal of international recognition, allowing them to make substantial territorial and political gains. The US decision to rely on the PYD as the main force against ISIS in Syria has given great strength to the Kurdish separatist cause. In particular, with the Kurdish recapture of

Tal Abyad against caliphate forces in the summer of 2015 thanks to US support, Kurdish forces geographically linked the areas under their control taken from the Islamic State and the regime into one large Kurdish-controlled area. These developments have greatly increased Turkish concerns about the emergence of an independent Kurdish state along its southern borders under US protection. Fears began to creep into the Turkish political and military establishment that there was a US plan to create an independent Kurdish state in Iraq, which would then eventually be expanded to include Kurdish territories in Syria, and even possibly Turkish Kurdistan. In fact, the Kurdish threat was beginning to grow even within Turkey's national borders. Turkish security forces carried out an intense number of operations to eliminate the presence of the PKK from several urban centers, where the separatist forces were trying to replicate the methods used in Syria and Iraq, asserting their control over various parts of different cities through urban guerrilla techniques.

In 2016, after years of support for rebel groups, Turkish main concern began to be predominantly the Kurdish expansion in northern Syria. Thus, in summer, Ankara launched the military Operation Euphrates Shield against the presence of ISIS in a strip of territory on its southern border. This operation was aimed at fighting ISIS, however, through this move, Turkey sought to prevent the possibility of the PYD defeating the forces of the caliphate, thus taking over the same strip of territory from the Islamic State, and taking control of it. In early 2018, Turkey launched another military operation, operation Olive Branch, to end PYD control in Afrin, a region located in northwestern Syria. With this operation, Ankara made explicit its determination not to tolerate the presence of hostile separatist forces along its borders. Thus, the PYD-led Syrian Democratic Forces established their position in the northeast of the country and asserted their authority there, with the support of the United States. Turkey opposed this move, claiming that the expansion of the PYD was at the expense of the local population and that it would not recognize the new status quo, and explicitly stated that it would counter the territorial and political conquests of the PKK and its regional extensions. After months of dialogues and some tensions with US allies, Turkey carried out another military incursion in October 2019, the stated aim of which was to end PYD control along the entire border with Syria. This operation, Operation Peace Spring, culminated in the establishment of a zone placed under the control of Turkish-backed forces in the line between Tal Abyad and Rasulayn.

As previously illustrated, Turkey's regional policies have undergone a drastic change by virtue of the transformation of the Middle East order. A crucial factor in this change has been Turkey's approach to Kurdish separatist actors. Growing uncertainty in the second phase of the Arab Spring and the fragmentation of the regional order presented Turkey increasing and pressing challenges to its security, threatening its national survival. Concerns about national survival and territorial integrity have dominated Turkish foreign policy strategy since the failure of the strategy of "exporting the Turkish democratic model" to the Arab world with the coup in Egypt and the escalating war in Syria. Meanwhile, the return of a strategic culture focused on concerns for national survival has facilitated the adoption of a new realism in Turkish foreign policy. As the separatist threat steadily increased, Turkey began to view the Kurdish issue as a major destabilizing element. As a result, the main driver of its action in the Syrian theater became the quest to respond to the perceived

threats posed by Kurdish separatist forces, and Ankara engaged in a long game of eliminating PKK territorial gains in Syria and Iraq, altering its initial strategic objectives.

In any case, the strategic factors underlying Turkey's assertive policy in recent years represent the new standards of its Middle East policies: Turkey will continue to view the external environment through defensive lenses, the new foreign and security policy focused on realism will continue to shape its reactions to other regional crises. On the other hand, however, Ankara will increasingly rely on self-help as part of its quest for strategic autonomy, as in the wake of the Kurdish issue Turkey has begun to perceive its conventional Western partners as unwilling or unable to help manage challenges to its power strategy. All this, however, without ever questioning the membership and loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance, which is considered as the main guarantor of Turkey's national security. In short, the search for greater strategic autonomy in the management of regional crises, particularly in the Middle East, aimed at a greater ability to protect its national interests in the management of these crises, as demonstrated by the autonomous and resolute action in Libya. That said, on the other hand, without renouncing its belonging to the Western bloc, a fundamental factor for the protection of Turkish national security and a fundamental and indispensable strategic partner in other theaters, such as the Black Sea. Moreover, Turkey will continue to base its security doctrine on cross-border preventive military action, a particularly risky foreign policy line at a time of particular uncertainty in the fluid geopolitics of the enlarged Mediterranean. To the extent that aggressiveness has become the defining element of the new foreign policy orientation, this approach is likely to create new risks as much as it addresses some of Ankara's urgent security needs, in line with the realist paradigm of the security dilemma. Turkey is currently involved in many regional conflicts through a number of cross-border operations and it faces the risk of military escalation in many theaters, such as the sensitive issue of the straits we addressed in detail above. In fact, the new offensive attitude has triggered the creation of counterbalancing coalitions by other regional and international actors, who feel threatened by Turkish aggressiveness, as in the case already illustrated of the Russian reaction to the Turkish-Azeri military initiative in Nagorno-Karabakh, which ended up reducing Turkish and Western influence in the region to increase that of Russia.

Tab. 3.1 The evolution of Turkish strategy in Syria

| <i>Before 2016</i> | <i>After 2016</i> |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overthrow of Assad and regime change • Establishment of a democratic Sunni government • Containment of the Kurdish separatism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elimination of the Kurdish threat • Elimination of ISIS • Containment of migratory flows |

3.3 The Turkish strategy in Libya

3.3.1 The Turkish intervention in the conflict and its reasons

Turkey's intervention in the Libyan civil war is the most striking manifestation of the new strategic approach based on the concept of "advanced defense", namely a massive use of military force and the projection beyond national borders for the defense of the nation. In this sense, Libya is certainly one of the fulcrums of Turkish strategy, which makes it necessary to read the Turkish projection in Libya in the light of Ankara's Mediterranean strategy.

From the Turkish perspective, the events occurred since the outbreak of the Arab Springs and the deep geopolitical transformations experienced by the Mediterranean have intensified the competition between regional and international actors, triggering a structural transformation of the balance of power that poses a serious threat to Turkish national security. In this sense, there are two main issues of concern for Ankara: access to the Central Mediterranean conquered by Russia, already dominant in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the ability of the United Arab Emirates to project its influence on North Africa. These dynamics have exponentially increased the level of threats to Turkey.

At the outbreak of the rebellion in Libya in 2011, the insurgents, as well as many of the protagonists of the Arab Springs, showed some sympathy towards Turkey, considered a model of successful democratic Islamic state, led by a moderate Islamic party, allied to the West, and projected towards a steady economic growth. Although Turkey had good political and economic relations with Gaddafi's Libya, Ankara immediately showed itself well disposed towards the rebels, seeing in them the possibility of a spread of political Islam, in Libya as well as in the other scenarios of rebellion of the Arab Springs. Turkey's popularity among the opposition forces was however short-lived and the Muslim Brotherhood did not obtain good results in the first democratic elections in Libyan history held in the aftermath of the revolution. At the same time regional developments drastically reduced Ankara's ambitions. In Egypt, the Turkish ally that emerged victorious from the 2011 revolution, President Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was deposed by a military coup in 2013 and in Syria, the revolution failed and civil war began. After the political defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey began to support the government in Tripoli, seeing in the GNA as a political shore available to dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood and permeable to the influence of Ankara. On the contrary Turkey perceived the LNA as a dangerous revisionist militia manipulated by the powers of Arab militarist authoritarianism opposed to Turkey, especially Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. When, following the 2014 elections, the rivalry between the Tobruk and the Tripoli-based blocs crystallized and a dual power structure emerged, the UAE and Egypt began to support Haftar, contributing decisively to the tightening of the crisis. Subsequently, the LNA gained the support of Russia for the reasons that we have already analyzed.

This legitimacy that led Haftar to go on the offensive first with the military operation in Fezzan and then with the offensive on Tripoli, which began in 2019. These dynamics have significantly weakened the position of Turkey and the allies of the Government of National Accord. Ankara therefore perceived the need to increase its support for the GNA in order not to be cut off from the process of solving the Libyan crisis. Turkey intervened in May 2019 sending to Tripoli armored vehicles heavy, armaments and especially the Turkish-made drones, Bayraktar TB2. At first, however, the Turkish commitment alongside the GNA did not seem able to balance the Russian-Emirati support received by LNA and the conflict continued to unbalance progressively in Haftar's favor. At the beginning of the battle of Tripoli, in November 2019 the GNA seemed on the verge of capitulating. It was at this point that Ankara enacted a decisive and unprejudiced move by offering the GNA direct military support, a blatant violation of the arms embargo on Libya decreed by the UN, in exchange for Tripoli's signature a on an agreement to redefine the maritime borders and related Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, on November 27, 2019, the GNA and Turkey signed two memoranda of understanding, one on cooperation in the security field and the other on the drawing of maritime borders. The latter comes in the wake of one of Turkey's historical claims. In fact, Ankara has long complained that the current maritime borders of the Eastern Mediterranean have penalized Turkey through an unfair division of the submarine plate, largely functional to the interests of Greece, and claims recognition of its sovereign rights in this area, even in light of the recent discovery of important deposits of natural gas in those waters. From January 2020, Ankara authorized the sending of substantial military aid in support of the GNA: ammunition, anti-aircraft devices, missile emplacements, drones and warships. The Turkish Air Force has been increasingly employed in military operations in Libyan airspace. The Turkish government also has favored the transfer of pro-Turkish mercenary fighters from Syria to the Libyan front. Ankara's support soon proved decisive in rebalancing the fate of the conflict. In the spring of 2020, the GNA recaptured the city of Garyan, used until then by the LNA as a logistic hub of the offensive, thus putting a first stop to Haftar's advance towards Tripoli that seemed unstoppable. In fact, after the defeat in Garyan, Haftar was forced to withdraw from other Tripolitan positions. The partial retreat of the LNA has worried Moscow, which has sent on the field the private military company Wagner, an instrument that has allowed Russia to enter directly into Libya. Despite this, the military support provided by Ankara to Tripoli has steadily increased leading to a total reversal of the balance on the field until the conquest in May 2020 of the air base of Al-Watiyya by the GNA forces, following a long sequence of military operations. This event upset the balance of the Libyan civil war, since it allowed the Tripoli government to gain air superiority and cut Haftar's supply lines to the west and south of Tripoli. The LNA and its Wagner Group allies were therefore forced to halt the offensive on the capital and withdraw from the entire western Libyan front.

In short, in the Mediterranean Turkey has found itself completely isolated in a hostile context. In order to prevent this unfavorable equilibrium from assuming a structural character, Ankara has deployed an aggressive strategy that in the specific context of Libya aims to put pressure on the regional anti-Turkish bloc through the massive use of military force. In this sense, from the Turkish perspective, the strategic importance of Libya

lies in the fact that the dynamics occurred in the country have strongly contributed to destabilize the Mediterranean and condemn Ankara to isolation. The Libyan policy is therefore a fundamental element of the Mediterranean strategy of defense of Turkey's national borders.

3.3.2 The new anti-Russian Turkish-US axis in the Mediterranean

The barricading of the Russians in Sirte and Al-Gufra, where Moscow has deployed substantial military assets and has created, an impressive defensive infrastructure, reveals that the pacification process in the country is very much uphill and that the Russian presence on Libyan soil intends to be significant and permanent. This presence has alarmed not only Turkey but also its NATO allies, leading them to reconsider their disengagement in the country, which has never been a geopolitical priority for the US. According to reports from AFRICOM's military leadership, Russia has deployed air defense systems in Libya. This exacerbates the threat to Europe's southern flank because of the possible creation of an A2/AD (anti-access/area-denial) zone in North Africa, exactly as happened in Syria. In this sense, the US military leadership openly states that the success obtained in Libya makes Turkey an ideal partner to take the necessary measures to ensure the stability of the North African country and to balance and contain the Russian presence. This threatening presence has led Turkey to emphasize its membership in NATO and to make it a privileged instrument of its Mediterranean geopolitics. A message of progressive rapprochement between Ankara and Washington and of the reorientation of the Turkish strategic axis towards the US and the Atlantic Alliance after the tensions resulting from the misunderstandings in the management of the Syrian crisis and the Kurdish question. These misunderstandings have generated a series of factors that have insinuated in the rooms of power in Washington the fear that Turkey really intended to distance itself from the United States, in search of greater strategic autonomy. In addition to Turkey's invasion of northeastern Syria to drive out the Kurds, Ankara has engaged in a series of maritime provocations by exploring and drilling in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, Turkey has threatened to buy S-400 missiles from Moscow, a move that can be interpreted as a signal to the US of its desire to seek a strategic and military autonomy. This provocation has led to the interruption of the delivery of US F-35 aircraft to the Turkish Air Force. Tensions between the two countries also increased after the resolution with which Congress officially qualifies the massacre of Armenians in 1915 as genocide.

However, for their part, the United States have a great interest in bringing Ankara on their side in order to drive Russia out of the Mediterranean and limit Iranian influence in the Middle East. Moreover, Washington is perfectly aware that Turkey, although indissolubly linked to the Atlantic Alliance, is striving to obtain a strategic autonomy that will soon allow it to behave as a great power. As mentioned, in fact, Ankara intends in the near future to overcome the condition of incompleteness to free itself from the American orbit, at least in the management of regional crises, as demonstrated by its autonomous and unscrupulous conduct in the Libyan crisis. Although Ankara remains unable to survive without the United States, it is convenient for

Washington to get closer to it before it matures the capabilities and resources to act autonomously in the management of regional geopolitics. In this regard, what worries the United States is above all Turkey's intention of enlarging its borders on the seas, to the detriment of its neighbors, the Greeks and Cypriots, as we will see later. This maritime revisionism and Ankara's ambitions to exercise exclusive sovereignty over waters that the US Navy considers to be at its absolute disposal, goes against the American idea of controlling all naval routes in the Mediterranean, the founding element of American naval superiority.

The rapprochement between the United States and Turkey is therefore a strategic necessity for both countries to stop the advance of their rivals in the Mediterranean. *If Russia takes a base on the coast of Libya, the next logical step is to permanently deploy long-range anti-aircraft capabilities there. If that day comes, it will create very real security concerns for Europe's southern flank*¹⁸ explained the head of US air forces in Europe, General Jeff Harrigan. Moreover, from a Turkish point of view, Ankara still lacks logistic and naval capabilities to supply the positions it is laboriously carving out far from Anatolia. The Turks are in Libya, in Yemen, in Somalia, in Qatar but without yet the necessary capabilities to manage such a network of naval bases. It is not only a matter of means or material resources, it takes the experience and know-how that none better than the United States can provide.

The new Turkish-US axis in the Mediterranean is thus a key strategic component of Ankara's national defense strategy on the one hand and an important element of the US strategy of containing Russia in the Mediterranean on the other. However, this strategic partnership is not without its controversial points. In particular, several issues divide Turkish and US interests in the Mediterranean and Ankara must handle them very carefully if it want to continue to benefit from Washington's support. First, Ankara must refrain from igniting tensions with other NATO members in the Mediterranean. Following the naval incident between Turkey and France off the coast of Libya in June 2020, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien stated that *NATO allies should not be aiming crosshairs at each other. That's not good. We are very sympathetic to France's concerns.*¹⁹ Hence the most sensitive issue, namely the problem of Ankara's ambition to extend Turkish sovereignty over the Greek and Cypriot seas, which we will address in detail below. In short, the extension of Turkish sovereignty over these waters presupposes an internal NATO war. If Ankara goes to war in the Aegean, Washington will be faced with a forced choice. Moreover, Ankara will have to refrain from striking the Middle Eastern allies of the United States: if the Turks were to attack directly their Saudi or Emirati rivals, triggering an intra-Sunni military escalation in the Gulf or the Mediterranean, the Americans would not certainly stand by and watch. Finally, Ankara will have to give up making S-400s operational in order to get back into the F-35 program.

¹⁸ Harrigan, J. (2020) *Russia deploys military fighter aircraft to Libya*. United States Africa Command. (May 29, 2020).

¹⁹ O'Brien, R. (2020). *US backs France in standoff with Turkey over warships*. Associated Press. (July 15, 2020).

3.3.3 Turkish strategic objectives in Libya

In order to protect its sphere of influence in the country, Ankara is aware of the need to demonstrate that it has the necessary capabilities to ensure order in the region. The lessons learned from the Syrian experience are in this sense fundamental and today the Turkish authorities are fully aware of the importance of the international legitimacy of the new Libyan government. In other words, political stability is a fundamental prerequisite for Turkey to achieve its strategic objectives in Libya. Precisely for this reason, Turkey is trying to increase exponentially its influence on the new Libyan institutions through bilateral cooperation agreements in the energy, economic and security fields. The cooperation in this last field is essential to guarantee political stability to the country as the Turkish military support is a fundamental element of the country's security in the eyes of the international community. Turkey has warships off the coast of Libya, which are essential for the implementation of the operational concept based on the joint use of naval, air and land forces that has characterized Ankara's intervention in Libya. Turkish Navy warships, which have been operating in the Mediterranean since early 2020, have helped consolidate Turkey's control of Libyan airspace. Moreover, Ankara is conducting negotiations with Libyan institutions regarding the concession of two military bases, the Al-Watiyya air base and the Misurata naval base. For Turkey, this process is a race against time and against Russia. Ankara must achieve its strategic objectives in Libya, first the peace necessary to stabilization, before a military action by Russia, or the realization of air bases by Moscow in the portions of territory controlled by the Kremlin, can change the balance of military power and especially air superiority. As well as Russia in Syria, in Libya Turkey intends to carve out the role of the actor able to guarantee order and stability. The dynamics that will take place in the North African country in the near future will therefore have a decisive impact on the process through which Turkey is shaping its national security strategy. In this context, Ankara will have to assess challenges and opportunities with great care. If Russia or other regional rivals try to challenge Turkey militarily or even politically in an attempt to weaken its position in Libya, Turkey is likely to adopt an even more military-oriented approach because of the strategic importance that the control of Libya holds to its national security strategy.

3.3.4 The new strategy of cross-border military operations

With the military intervention in Tripolitania, the Turkish Armed Forces have achieved the strategic objective outlined by the new doctrine of cross-border military operations, namely to produce a decisive impact on regional conflicts and change the course of them in Turkish favor. This is only the first step in Ankara's strategic design. Its geopolitical importance does not lie in the defense of Tripoli per se, but in the effect that this operation has on regional geopolitical dynamics. In Tripolitania, Ankara has defined a model to be replicated in other scenarios as well. This approach based on military support for national causes is the result

of the learning process triggered by the Syrian catastrophe. Turkey looks back with great regret at the wasted opportunities in Egypt and Syria. The chaos that erupted in the Arab world in 2011 with the Arab Springs was a perhaps unrepeatable opportunity to alter the regional geopolitical balance in its favor. Ankara, however, was completely unprepared for the appointment and it is quite evident that the course of the Syrian revolt and the outcome of the anti-Turkish coup in Egypt would have been very different if Turkey had been able to express on those occasions the military strength exhibited in Libya. The lesson that Ankara has drawn from the Syrian affair concerns both the indispensability of protecting its regional allies and the necessity of using its military power for this purpose. In this sense, the rescue of the Tripoli government, bastion of the Muslim Brotherhood in North Africa, has also served Turkey to regain credibility with its regional allies. In fact, after having deluded them and induced them to expose themselves, Ankara abandoned the Sunnis of Mosul, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian rebels to their fate.

In this strategy of support of its regional allies, Doha represents the most important of them. After defeating the UAE in Libya, Turkey is progressively moving into Yemen with the rather obvious objective of establishing a strategic base to move an offensive against Abu Dhabi in the event of an Emirati aggression against Qatar, which would legitimize a direct military intervention of Ankara in the Gulf. Escalation that could also take place in Somalia, where Turkey controls the government of Mogadishu and the Emirates the separatist regions of Somaliland and Puntland. This last circumstance presents strong analogies with the Libyan conflict.

In Iraq, Ankara has adopted a far more aggressive and assertive approach. The area between the Anatolian and Iranian plateaus is a key space for Turkey's offensive realist national security strategy. What brings Ankara to push towards Mesopotamia is mainly the need to contain Iran's projection towards the Mediterranean, therefore foiling the risk of encirclement. The configuration of Mesopotamia as an area of primary interest of Anatolian geopolitics dates back at least to the first American invasion of Iraq and the birth of Iraqi Kurdistan with the settlement of PKK on the mountainous areas on the Iraqi-Iranian border by the United States. Such circumstances forced Ankara in the subsequent thirty years to counter the presence of the Kurds in Iraq with targeted operations by the Turkish Special Forces. In this sense, since 2016 Turkey has radically changed its approach. Ankara conducted massive military operations against the PKK within Iraqi national borders until May 2019 when Turkish military forces launched the Operation Claw, aimed at severing the PKK's logistical network in Iraq, which was followed by an offensive dubbed Operation Claw-Tiger. With the latter, Ankara occupied the Hamitir area and the Haftanayn region in the north of the country. However, the most important strategic aspect of Turkish progression in Iraq does not lie in the damage inflicted on the PKK or in the acquisition of control of border territories. The real Turkish victory lies in the fact that Ankara is successfully using the Kurdish organization as a pretext to take root in upper Mesopotamia.

With all the relevant differences, after the failure of the regime change operation due to the Russian-Iranian intervention, since 2016 Ankara has been able to develop a similar approach in northern Syria to counter the PKK threat, succeeding in entrenching itself in the area of the Turkish-Syrian border, west and east of the

Euphrates. Unlike Iraq, at present there is no real prospect of a Turkish breaking through in the Levant, as Russia and Iran have long since closed the window of the opportunity that opened up in front of Ankara in 2011. However, Turkey's management of the fragments of Syria in its possession reveals the nature of Ankara's long-term strategy based on the creation of a security belt that includes the creation of a safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Finally, Turkish support to Azerbaijan in the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict against Armenia is part of this strategic logic. The deployment of Turkish military means, and in particular the Bayraktar TB2 drones, have contributed decisively to determine the fate of the conflict in favor of Baku.

In Libya, Ankara has therefore launched a strategic design to be replicated along the fundamental lines that define the Turkish imperial project.

Tab. 3.2 *Turkish Objectives in Libya*

| <i>Geopolitical Objectives</i> | <i>Political Objectives</i> | <i>Economic Objectives</i> |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting Russian influence in the country • Acquire the control of the Central Mediterranean • Limiting Russian pressure on NATO's southern flank • Countering Saudi-Emirati influence in north Arica | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabilizing the country under its own hegemony • Establishing a government led by the Muslim Brotherhood | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtaining benefits from agreements for the division of sovereignty over Mediterranean waters • Establishing a beneficial cooperation in the energy sector |

3.4 The Turkish Maritime Strategy

3.4.1 The *Blue Homeland* Doctrine

The importance of the maritime dimension in Turkish geopolitical strategy dates back to the early republican period. It puts its root in the pre-eminence given by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the strategists of the time to the peninsular character of Anatolia and the consequent importance of the seas that bathe it. The Kemalist maritime strategy had a mainly defensive value, while in the current version acquires a prevalent offensive declination, the result of the greater power that today Ankara is able to unleash compared to the first republican period. The decisive characteristic of this strategy consists in the geographical location of Anatolia in the center of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass, which combined with the predominantly maritime dimension of geopolitical competition requires Turkey to find a way out to the oceans. The imperatives of Ankara's maritime strategy are codified in the new Turkish geopolitical doctrine, *Mavi Vatan*, *Blue Homeland*, elaborated by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz. This doctrine is based on the assumption that the imperialist geopolitical projection of Turkey, and therefore its national security strategy, depends on the hegemony on the seas bordering Anatolia: these are precisely the ones that make up the Blue Homeland. The idea at the basis of this doctrine is that the Turks must understand the sea as they have understood the land for centuries, and therefore expand their sovereignty over the waters as they have always done on the ground. The Blue Homeland is divided into two quadrants by the Turkish straits. North of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, Turkey plays a fundamental strategic game, on the outcome of which depend most of the regional geopolitical balances. As we have seen, in the course of the last few years Russia has completely overturned the power relations with Turkey in the Black Sea, starting from the fortification of Crimea. Moscow's dominance over the Black Sea has determined a decisive acceleration of the Istanbul Canal project. Thanks to such a structure, Turkey would have the instrument to determine the fate of the clash between the United States and Russia between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in favor of its own allies allowing the Americans to crush the Russians in order to re-establish the Atlantic supremacy north of the straits.

However, the heart of Turkey's maritime strategy is south of the straits. It is here that Turkey intends to become a major maritime power. It is also in this key that the Libyan campaign should be interpreted: the victory in Libya has allowed Turkey to take root in North Africa, which allows Ankara to exert a pincer pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean on several fronts.

The theater of strategic importance most relevant to Ankara's projection in the Eastern Mediterranean is certainly Cyprus. The island is at the center of a geopolitical dispute between Ankara and its bitter and historical rival Athens since 1974, when a coup d'état by Greek Cypriot nationalists for the annexation of the island to Greece led to the military intervention of Turkey. The latter sent its troops to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority, in the northern part of Cyprus, and then established its control here. To date, the Republic

of Cyprus occupies about two-thirds of the island's territory, while the remaining part is under the control of the so called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, founded in 1983. The Turkish government has demarcated the boundaries of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' maritime sovereignty area by deploying warships and drones to protect Cypriot waters, which represents the southeastern border of the Blue Homeland. The violation by Greece or Greek Cyprus of Turkish rights in Cypriot waters would trigger an internal NATO military escalation with hardly predictable consequences on the internal balances of the Atlantic Alliance. Another unavoidable strategic objective for Turkey's Mediterranean strategy is the control of the Dodecanese Archipelago, another aspect of the traditional Turkish-Greek confrontation. Without the direct control of the archipelago, today available to Greece, Ankara will never be able to become a true Mediterranean power. If Cyprus and the Dodecanese are the immediate and unavoidable objectives, the Suez Canal, and therefore access to the Indian Ocean, is the final objective of Turkey's Mediterranean geopolitics. As previously discussed, the geopolitical and military dynamics and the power relations between Ankara and Moscow do not allow Turkey to break through in Cyrenaica, making impossible to reach the Suez Canal with an overland advance. In this sense, Ankara intends, on the contrary, to exploit its military success in Libya to force Egypt to soften its hostile attitude. In short, Ankara intends to force Cairo to recognize the validity of the agreement with the government in Tripoli on the division of maritime sovereignty areas and make a similar agreement with Egypt that guarantees it access to the Suez Canal. Furthermore, with the signing of the maritime agreement with the GNA, Ankara has blocked the EastMed pipeline project. By virtue of this agreement, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel cannot build pipelines without Turkey's consent. Ankara perceives the cooperation between Jerusalem, Cairo, Athens and Nicosia for the construction of a pipeline to European markets as a means to exclude Turkey from the Mediterranean energy geopolitics, in order to harness Turkey in its own land borders. That is why inhibiting the completion of EastMed is a fundamental step to maximize the Turkish sphere of influence in the Mediterranean.

3.4.2 The strengthening of the Navy and the militarization of the straits

In order to pursue an aggressive strategic maritime project as the Turkish one, it is essential to have a powerful war machine on the sea; in particular, it is necessary to have a strong and modern Navy, able to act capillary and to engage successfully in any naval battle. In 2020, the Turkish defense industry developed and successfully tested an anti-ship cruise missile with a range of more than 200 kilometers. The new missile, named Atmaca, will soon be put into production and will replace the US Boeing Rgm-84 Harpoon rockets in the Turkish naval forces. The need for ballistic system modernization emerged in 2015, when the Russian Navy employed cruise missiles launched from the Eastern Mediterranean and Caspian Sea to strike Islamic State positions in Syria. The use of such expensive and sophisticated technology to hit targets better guaranteed by airstrikes was a clear signal Moscow intended to send to Ankara, a demonstration that Russia could strike

Turkey from any maritime border without having to fly over airspace. Hence the need to equip itself with modern anti-ship devices. In fact, Ankara's aggressive strategy in the Mediterranean would not be feasible without targeted defensive structures aimed at making the straits and southeastern Thrace unassailable. In May 2020, Erdogan declared a coastal area of about 20 square kilometers in the district of Kirklareli prohibited military zone. This decision rather blatantly reveals Turkey's intention to build a new naval base in Thrace. A decision that would meet the demands of NATO allies who ask for the realization of a zone of air interdiction A2/AD in anti-Russian function. The Turkish strategy in this sense is very clear: militarize the straits with the establishment of a base at the mouth of the future channel of Istanbul. Russia on its part cannot afford to lose control of the Black Sea, its only access to the warm seas and therefore an essential aspect of its geopolitical projection in the Mediterranean, as seen. In this sense, Transnistria plays a role of enormous geostrategic importance, as it is the ideal point to exert multiple military pressures on the straits. In fact, the Moldovan region, on the one hand, has always harbored pro-Russian separatist sentiments, and on the other, it lends itself very well to the deployment of modern missile systems by virtue of its geographical position in the Balkans. For this reason, the hypothesis of a Russian invasion of the region is a concrete possibility in the near future. In fact, if Moscow were to succeed in deploying its missile batteries in Transnistria, they would hold in check Istanbul, which is about 650 kilometers away, and the possible base in Thrace. Above all, Turkey would not have adequate instruments to respond to such a threat, especially if the Americans were to opt for the transfer of the atomic warheads stationed in the Turkish base of Incirlik to the Romanian base of Deveselu, depriving Turkey of their atomic umbrella. This is also the reason why Russia considers strategic its military presence in Libya and the realization of air bases in Cyrenaica. If Washington wants to avert the threat that Russian fighter jets can hit NATO installations in Europe, starting from Sigonella, it will have to give up its grip on the Black Sea. More specifically the US should move its nuclear arsenal away from Turkey to allow Moscow to build its base in Transnistria, the starting point to implement a strategy of deterrence to avert the Turkish counter-offensive in the Black Sea.

3.4.3 The Greek challenge to Ankara in the Eastern Mediterranean

In response to the new aggressive Turkish approach in the Eastern Mediterranean, which defines as a primary objective the acquisition of the control of Greek waters and the Dodecanese islands, Greece is trying to redefine its geostrategic role in the Mediterranean in a defensive function. In this sense, Athens' strategy is very simple: to offer itself to the US as a military platform in an anti-Russian function in the Eastern Mediterranean, thus acting as an alternative to the American need to rely on Ankara to contain Moscow's aggressiveness. This strategy is based on the assumption that excessive Turkish expansionism in the Mediterranean risks undermining the US maritime supremacy and the control of all Mediterranean Sea routes. Aware that the Turkish-US partnership is not in question, Athens therefore tries to leverage Washington's concern for an

excessive growth of influence of its Turkish ally in the Mediterranean and the fear of a change of hegemony in the control of it. In this sense, Athens intends to present itself as an equally efficient alternative in an anti-Russian function, but less inconvenient. Greece in fact poses itself as a small but well-armed ally, able to contain the advance of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean and to contain the projection of Moscow in the warm seas. Therefore, Greece intends to use the US containment of the Russian Euro-Mediterranean projection to weaken in turn the Turkish one. In this sense, Athens has recently signed with Washington an agreement of mutual defensive cooperation on four bases. Larissa, which has essentially a strategic function of "lookout tower" in the Mediterranean; Alexandropoli, with the aim of creating a naval base and an air base that would allow the supply of the NATO allies Romania and Bulgaria bypassing the Bosphorus; Stefanovikio, for logistical support to F-16; Crete, where the enlargement of the base of Suda is planned. Following this agreement, the US Congress also passed a bill to promote the security and energy partnership with Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act. This bill provides for military funding to Greece and, for the first time, to Cyprus, the end of the arms embargo on the Republic of Cyprus, as well as the interdiction of Russian ships from the military ports of Cyprus used until then for the operations in Syria.

The other aspect of American anti-Russian containment that Greece is banking on is the US goal of European enfranchisement from Russian hydrocarbon imports. In this sense, Greece would like to play a key role through the export of American LNG to Europe. In short, Greece tries to exploit every possible variable in order to defend the status quo between the Aegean and the Mediterranean, aware that the success of the project will depend primarily on the room for maneuver that Washington will grant to Turkey. However, the project of containing Turkish expansionism by offering an anti-Russian alternative to the United States presents several obstacles. First, as mentioned, the new Turkish-US axis in the Mediterranean is strengthening strongly, especially by virtue of the dynamics of the Libyan conflict and the function of containment of Russia that Ankara plays in the central Mediterranean. In fact, the United States certainly feel more threatened by a stable military presence of the Russians in Libya than by the Russian influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is now only to be contained, as it is not possible to eliminate it given the position of strength now acquired by Russia in Syria. Secondly, the Istanbul Canal project represents for the United States a unique opportunity to overturn completely the balance of power in the Black Sea in favor of NATO. In short, the cards that Ankara can play as an ally against Russian expansionism in the Mediterranean are better than those held by Athens are. All that Turkey has to do is to avoid a direct military confrontation with Greece or the Republic of Cyprus, because in this case it would give Washington a serious motivation to consider a change in the strategy of containment of Russia, possibly relying completely on Athens and abandoning Ankara. It is difficult to think that in the event of an internal NATO conflict the United States would not take Athens' side, also because, if this apparently rather remote eventuality were to materialize, a Greek-Turkish conflict could only arise from an aggressive move by those who have an interest in the overthrow of the current status quo, namely Turkey.

3.4.4 Ankara's constraints in the Mediterranean

In pursuing its strategy in the Mediterranean Turkey is not dependent on itself. The imbalance between ambitions and resources inextricably binds the success of Ankara's imperial strategy first to the support of its US ally. Turkish unscrupulousness in the Mediterranean is based on a fundamental premise: the belief that Turkish expansionism is perceived in Washington as a far lesser threat than Russian pressure on Europe and Persian imperialism, and the consequent US need for Turkish aid to contain these enemies. The success of Turkey's strategy depends in large part on the outcome of this gamble. Moreover, Turkey's projection in the Mediterranean has prohibitive costs for Ankara. To finance it, more or less directly, is Qatar. In the long term, the dependence on Doha is clearly the main geopolitical limitation of Turkey. Ankara has therefore a strategic interest in the consolidation of the link with the small Emirate of the Gulf, as well as, possibly, the widening of the tension between Qatar and the other Gulf monarchies, rivalry that represents the fundamental factor that allows the Turkish imperialist ambitions to feed.

Tab. 3.3 The objectives of the Blue Homeland strategy

| <i>North of the straits</i> | <i>South of the straits</i> |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter reversal of the balance of power in the Black Sea • Militarization of the straits • Construction of the Istanbul Canal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquisition of control of Cyprus • Acquisition of control of the Dodecanese Archipelago • Access to the Oceans through the Suez Canal • Acquisition of control of the Eastern Mediterranean to the detriment of Russia and Greece • Acquisition of control of the Central Mediterranean through Libya • Balancing US naval superiority in the Mediterranean • Limiting energy cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean as much as possible |

3.5 Turkish-Greek hostilities and the energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean

3.5.1 The reasons for the Turkish-Greek conflict

The disputes between Turkey and Greece arise from the fact that Ankara claims its sovereignty over part of the territorial waters of Greece by virtue of the fact that the Aegean islands, according to the Turkish authorities, cover an area less than 5 thousand square kilometers. It is therefore completely incorrect to attribute to Greece a slice of continental shelf greater than the Turkish coast in the Aegean, much larger, arguments that led Ankara to vote against the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982. In fact, Article 3 of the above-mentioned Convention states that *Every State has the right to establish the breadth of its territorial sea up to a limit not exceeding 12 nautical miles, measured from baselines determined in accordance with this Convention*. Article 4 instead clarifies that *The outer limit of the territorial sea is the line every point of which is at a distance from the nearest point of the baseline equal to the breadth of the territorial sea*. Greece has always preferred to maintain its territorial waters along a width of six miles compared to twelve miles that the Convention would grant. Turkey would perceive the possible extension to twelve miles as an excessive provocation, as Turkish ships would be forced to cross Greek territorial waters to reach free sea areas. As far as overflying maritime areas is concerned, international law, according to the rules of the International Civil Aviation Organization of the UN (ICAO), establishes that national airspace is the aerial nautical equivalent of territorial waters. The other key space in the Greek-Turkish dispute is the Dodecanese. The archipelago of the southern Aegean, ceded to Greece by Italy with the Treaty of Paris in 1947, gives an important advantage to Athens because it allows it to strangle in the bud the Turkish maritime projection by obstructing the passage to the ships that from the Turkish straits sail towards the Suez Canal. For this reason, the acquisition of control over this archipelago represents for Turkey a first fundamental step to be taken for the realization of the Blue Homeland strategy.

The Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), according to the Convention, can extend no further than two hundred miles from the baselines from which the breadth of the territorial sea is measured and they become effective following the formal proclamation by the coastal state. The EEZ guarantee the sovereign rights of a state for the exploration and exploitation of natural resources lying on or above the seabed and its subsoil. The application of an EEZ by one state therefore risks reducing international navigation and overflight space for all other states. Ankara interprets differently the provisions of the Convention and considers that the islands, under certain conditions, do not automatically generate Exclusive Economic Zones. In this sense, Ankara invokes the existence of its own continental platform that would make it directly adjacent to Egypt and Libya.

This interpretation has an energetic effect in the case of the EEZ of Cyprus but has obvious implications in the otherwise limited Turkish freedom of navigation in the Aegean in the presence of the myriad of Greek islands. The recent events in Libya, the growing Turkish influence in the Mediterranean and the progress of Turkish naval capabilities significantly raise the risk of a Greek-Turkish clash, as evidenced by mutual threats.

3.5.2 The EastMed project and the Turkish-Libyan agreement

The discovery since 2009 of gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean between Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt has offered Greece an excellent opportunity to institutionalize an anti-Turkish front, in particular by exploiting the rivalry between Ankara and Cairo. Greece's strategy is based on the European desire to diversify its sources of energy. Greece intends to propose itself as a port of transit and marketing of gas in order to compete with Turkey for the role of energy hub of southeastern Europe. Athens therefore participated very actively in the establishment of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (Emgf), which took place in Cairo in January 2019 on the initiative of Egypt, with the participation, in addition to Greece, of Cyprus, Israel, Italy, the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. Turkey perceived the establishment of this Forum as a tool of its rivals Greece, Cyprus and Egypt to hit Ankara's energy interests and curb its ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, crossing the waters of Cyprus and those of Crete, joining Greece on the Peloponnese peninsula and then crossing the Otranto Channel to reach Europe, the corridor is perceived by Ankara as a belt of strength to exclude Turkey from the energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, the format of the Emgf provides for the possibility of access of new members with the consent of those already present, but the Egyptian and Greek veto on the participation Turkey is evident. Ankara has thus started an escalation of moves aimed at hindering the realization of the EastMed pipeline. This project aims at transferring between 9 and 12 billion cubic meters per year of offshore gas to be pumped from Israel and Cyprus to Greece and then to Europe. At first, acting as a protecting power of the Turkish Cypriot community, Ankara has prevented international companies from exploring in the blocks disputed with Northern Cyprus, by deploying its Navy, and then carried out explorations in waters falling within Nicosia's Exclusive Economic Zone, despite European sanctions.

The signing of the 2019 maritime delimitation agreements between Ankara and the Government of National Accord in Tripoli originates in this context. In exchange of military support, Ankara secured control over a portion of the sea that impinges on the Greek continental shelf and the islands of Crete, Kasos, Karpathos and Rhodes. Shortly thereafter, in addition, Ankara announced military exercises off the coast of Libya. The Turkish move makes extremely difficult the hypothesis of a gas pipeline linking the extraction areas of Israeli and Egyptian competence to Greece and Europe, as the EastMed today would have to pass through Turkish waters. In fact, the memorandum between Turkey and Tripoli, grants Ankara the possibility to start drilling activities both in the waters of Crete, as it does not recognize its continental shelf, and in the western part of

the EEZ of Cyprus. Overlapping the southeastern strip of the Exclusive Economic Zone claimed by Greece, the Turkish continental shelf touches the islands of Crete and Rhodes. It includes also the small island of Kastellorizo, east of Rhodes, which is only one nautical mile from the Anatolian coast, whose position close to the Turkish coast and far from the Hellenic mainland significantly benefits Greece to the detriment of Turkey in the delimitation of territorial waters. The Turkish-Libyan presence in those waters therefore breaks the connection between the potential Greek and Cypriot EEZ. Turkish ultimate goal is to claim the rights on Mediterranean energy resources and to cancel the sovereignty of Athens guaranteed by the principles of the Convention. In this sense, the Greek-Cypriot front considers unacceptable the apparent strategic rapprochement between Israel and Turkey through the instrument of energy collaboration to contain Iranian influence in Mesopotamia, geopolitical objective of both Ankara and Jerusalem.

3.6 Turkey and the tensions between the Gulf regimes

3.6.1 Turkish-Qatari relations

The development of positive relations between Turkey and Qatar originates from the rise to power of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. Turkey's economic and political transformation and its new, independent foreign policy have attracted the interest of the small Gulf Emirate, particularly by virtue of a common religious moderation that allows them to present themselves as modern Islamic states. Qatar's domestic and international policies and proximity to Turkey, especially its relations with Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, began to cause friction with the other Gulf Monarchies. In particular, Doha's independent foreign policy conduct has irritated Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, for whom the Qatari posture resulted in the weakening of the collective security of the Gulf States. With the outbreak of the Arab Springs in 2011, this disagreement has sharpened significantly. The two conservative powers Saudi Arabia and UAE believed that the Qatari pro-Arab Spring foreign policy jeopardized the cohesion of the GCC and the stability of the entire MENA area. Specifically, the role played by the Qatari television station Al Jazeera in the revolutions that led to the overthrow of pro-Saudi and pro-Emirati authoritarian regimes in Cairo and Tunis, triggered the ire of Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar. Therefore in March 2014, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, citing as a reason the support to terrorist groups and interference in the internal affairs of other Arab countries by the Qatari authorities. In December of the same year, Turkey and Qatar signed an agreement for the deployment of Turkish Armed Forces in Qatari territory. If for Doha this agreement constituted a military insurance in case of a war clash with the other Monarchies, for Ankara a military outpost in the Gulf guaranteed an opportunity to raise its status in the region, pivoting on the intra-Gulf crisis to counter the geopolitical plans of Saudi Arabia and UAE. Certainly, Turkey's military presence in Qatar is one of the factors that have contributed to the Saudi and Emirati perception of Qatar's conduct as a threat to their own interests. Thus in 2017 Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Bahrain and Egypt, announced the severing of diplomatic relations with Qatar, triggering a crisis that involved the entire Arab world. Since then, Turkey has been the Islamic country that has done the most to support Qatar under siege. Beyond the rhetoric, Ankara has shown its support to Doha by deploying new forces in its Qatari base soon after the beginning of the crisis. There is no certainty that Turkish troops in Qatar would be sufficient to repel an offensive by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, but what mattered to Ankara was the demonstration of hard power that sent the message to all regional players that Turkey now plays a leading role in the Gulf's security architecture. In short, Ankara's military support in the GCC crisis and Doha's economic aid in Turkey's military operations have proven how useful bilateral relations are for both to mitigate the repercussions of regional isolation. In other words, in the post 2011, and particularly in the aftermath of the 2017 intra-GCC crisis, the region has witnessed the rise of

a new "progressive" Sunni axis hinged on the relationship between Doha and Ankara, as opposed to the "conservative" one sponsored by Saudi Arabia UAE. Turkey will continue to play a crucial role in Qatar's resistance to pressure from other Gulf regimes. At the same time, Doha will remain an important ally in implementing Ankara's ambitious foreign policy in the region.

3.6.2 Turkish-Emirati tensions

The Turkish-Emirati rivalry undoubtedly has important ideological roots. In fact, Turkey, since the rise of Erdogan, has proposed itself as an example for the Arab world of a successful model of compatibility between Islam and democracy, contrasting the traditional authoritarianism of the Gulf Monarchies. With the onset of the Arab revolts of 2011, Erdogan has exploited the religious-Islamic characterization of his party to propose Turkey as the natural leader of a modern Arab-Muslim world. On the other hand, the Emirates are strongly opposed to political Islam in all its forms because they fear that a spread of democracy in the Arab world represents a danger for the stability of the Gulf regimes. They consider the Muslim Brotherhood, and other similar movements supported by Turkey and Qatar, to be terrorist organizations to be eliminated by all means and wherever. For this reason, the countries controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood are hostile by nature. Therefore, Abu Dhabi has taken on a key role in coordinating and supporting anti-Islamist forces to thwart their rise throughout the region. In Egypt, Emirati support was instrumental in the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood-linked government of Mohammed Morsi and the subsequent establishment of a pro-Emirati, pro-Saudi authoritarian government. In Syria, despite an initial Emirati-Turkish united front for the overthrow of the Iranian-backed Shiite regime, the Emirates subsequently offered its support to Kurdish militias. In particular, when the Turkish army unleashed the Olive Branch offensive in northern Syria in January 2018, Abu Dhabi sent economic aid to the Kurds to finance resistance against the Turkish advance in the country. In Libya, after the defeat of Haftar's forces to which they had offered their support, the UAE followed Libyan developments intensively, coordinating with its Egyptian ally and threatening large-scale military interventions even during negotiations. Abu Dhabi considers Libya a front of the utmost importance and does not intend to leave room for Ankara's ambitions. In this sense, the absolute priority is represented by the danger of a Turkish advance in Cyrenaica that could threaten Egypt, and it is in this regard that Abu Dhabi and Cairo are ready to intervene again militarily against Turkey. Turkish operations in the Eastern Mediterranean and particularly in the Greek and Cypriot EEZ represent in this sense for Abu Dhabi an opportunity to widen the anti-Ankara front and to tighten new alliances with European countries in an anti-Turkish function. This was made evident by the recent intensification of diplomatic activities between Cyprus, Greece and the UAE, which brought to the first trilateral summit of the foreign ministers of these countries, held in 2019 in Abu

Dhabi. They also contributed to the conclusion in May 2020 of a joint declaration strongly condemning Turkish military involvement in Libya, signed by the UAE, Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and France.

Finally, the UAE and Turkey are both interested in increasing their influence in the Horn of Africa. In this context, they support opposing factions in an internal conflict in Somalia. In Sudan, on the other hand, Erdogan had developed a strong personal relationship with the former Sudanese president, Umar Al-Basir, whose government was overthrown in 2019 by an Emirati-backed coup led by General Abd Al-Rahman Burhan. Curiously, the events in the Horn of Africa appear to be a repeat of the events in North Africa, as the situation in Somalia bears many similarities to the events in Libya while the events in Sudan bear many similarities to what happened in Egypt in 2013.

At the same time, however, the ideological rivalry masks a geopolitical competition for spheres of influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Abu Dhabi sees Ankara as the most dangerous strategic threat to its interests, a threat it is increasingly determined to counter.

Ankara's imperialism is in fact the biggest obstacle to the Emirati geopolitical project, which is based on a well-defined strategy: to become the most attractive partner in the Middle East of the regional hegemon, whoever it may be. In other words a second best strategy. This strategy worked very well as long as the regional hegemony was exercised by the United States. Since 2001, the UAE has been the first Arab government to support the US war on terrorism, contributing militarily to the US campaign in Afghanistan. Close cooperation with the United States, which has continued in various regional theaters, has allowed Abu Dhabi to increase exponentially its influence in the Middle East while securing itself Washington's protection. However, Obama's approach to the Arab Springs had deeply troubled Abu Dhabi's leadership. In particular, the benevolent neutrality in the face of the election of Morsi in Egypt, represented for the UAE a dangerous signal of an excessive rapprochement of Washington to the Sunni Islamist front, represented by Turkey and Qatar. It made the Abu Dhabi leadership fear that Ankara and Doha, both good partners of the Americans, were preparing to overtake the Emirates as US privileged partners in the Middle East. For its part, Ankara is convinced that the proven effectiveness of the Emirates' lobbying campaigns in Washington against it poses a structural threat to its relationship with the United States. The Turkish government believes that the Emiratis strongly supported the failed July 15, 2016 coup and that they convinced their contacts at the CIA and Pentagon to remain neutral. Whether or not there was any involvement in the coup by Abu Dhabi, that event gave an existential characterization of zero-sum game to the Turkish-Emirati rivalry.

Although the American element plays a key role in shaping the rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Ankara, the gradual disengagement of the United States from the Middle East, which began with Obama's presidency, has opened an unprecedented gap that countries like Turkey and the Emirates now aspire to fill. Offering itself as the indispensable partner in the Middle East for the hegemonic power does not mean seeing the United States as the exclusive reference. For this reason, the Emirati leadership has implemented a historic repositioning.

In fact, the Emirati authorities have recently engaged in intense diplomatic activity to bring them closer to the Russian Federation, seen by Abu Dhabi as the ideal future hegemon of the Middle East in an anti-Turkish

function. Russia-Emirati relations go beyond a mere strategic partnership, as they become closer year after year, involving a multiplicity of sectors. Both countries have repeatedly stressed their intention to stimulate growth in the region and to cooperate in resolving the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen, as well as to normalize the relations of the Gulf countries with Israel.

Chapter 4

Analysis of the outcomes

4.1 The prospects of Syria, a *Pax Russica*?

Since September 2015, when Russia intervened to prevent the collapse of the regime, Moscow's influence in Syria has grown steadily. Since Russian forces came into play, the government has recovered much of the territory that had been lost. By 2021, the regime controls two-thirds of the country, with the remaining third in the hands of the US-protected YPG and, to a lesser extent, the various rebel factions (which also include jihadist forces).

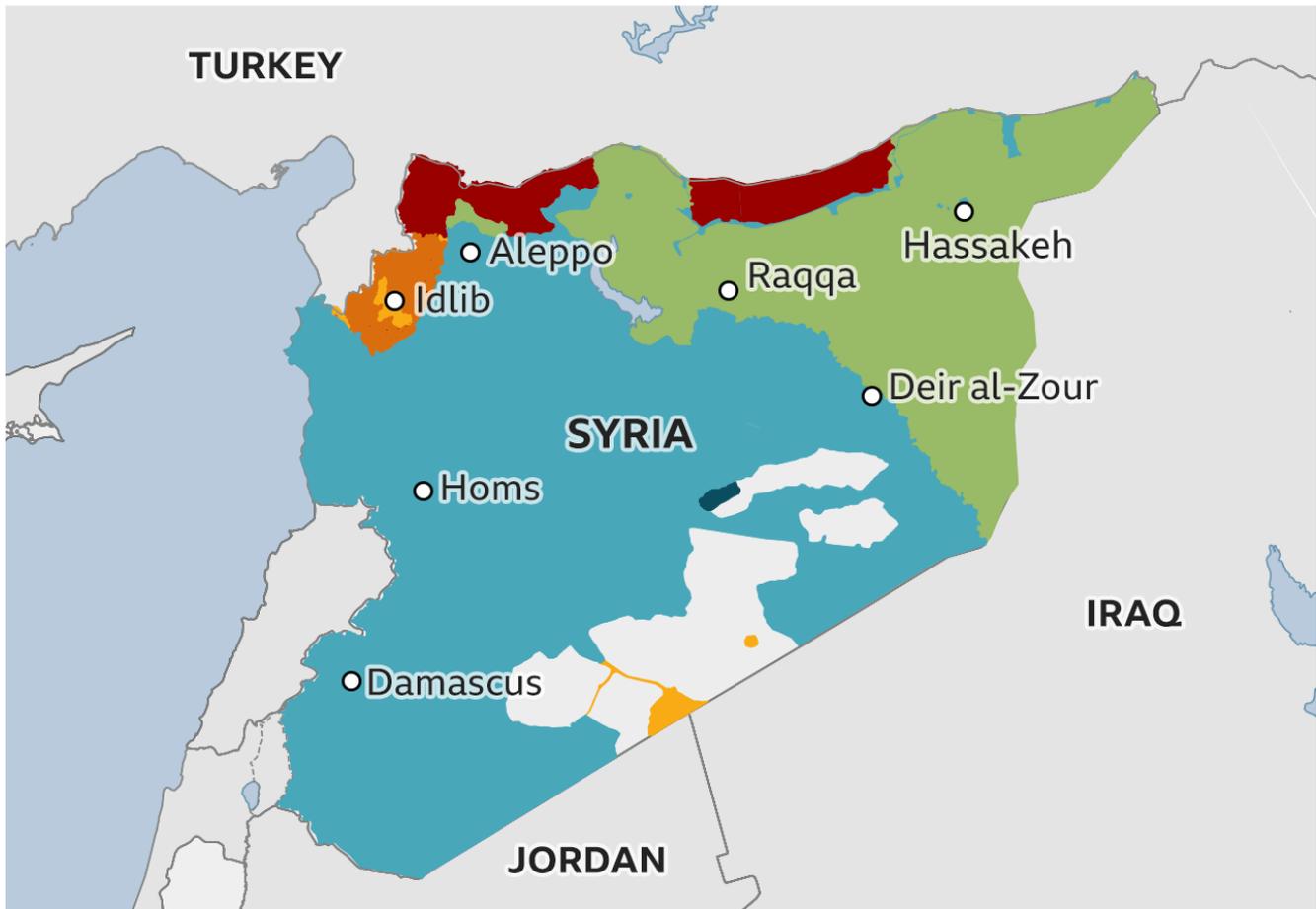
Fig. 4.1

Who controls what in Syria

Feb 2021



- Kurdish forces
- Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish military
- Syrian government
- Jihadist forces
- Syrian rebels
- Islamic State group



Source: Janes Conflict Monitor



Not only Russia's military intervention has been a success, but Moscow has also promoted and mediated the Astana talks. These are a series of peace talks among the diplomacies of Russia, Turkey, and Iran, that began in December 2016. The United Nations play an observer role. The main objective is to find a permanent solution to the enduring civil conflict in Syria, also touching on issues such as the drafting of a "post-war" constitution, political transition, security and refugee return. The first meeting was held in January 2017 in Turkey, with the aim of further strengthening the UN-sponsored Geneva peace talks. Where the UN failed, Moscow has had some success with the implementation of de-escalation zones that, despite repeated violations, have helped to calm the conflict. During the last meeting, held on July 7 and 8, 2021, the participants turned their attention to Idlib, the northwestern governorate still placed, for the most part, under the control of opposition groups. For several years, the Idlib province has been the center of tensions dividing Russia and Turkey in the Syrian theater. The area has gradually become a sort of stronghold where opposition groups that the Syrian government forces expelled from the rest of the country take refuge. The city has a strategic importance for Moscow because there are still several fighters from the North Caucasus who have fought in the Middle East and persevere to harbor anti-Russian sentiments from there. The idea of neutralizing these threats at a safe distance from home is one of the reasons why President Vladimir Putin initially decided to engage in the Syrian campaign. Moscow therefore does not intend to withdraw without having achieved the goal. Indeed, the fact that Idlib continues to be partially controlled by terrorist groups is a source of great concern for Russia, and Moscow's patience is running out in the face of Turkey's inability to take responsibility for driving jihadist groups out of the de-escalation zone. For its part, however, Turkey continues to resist in order to maintain control over the province, as it is strategically very important for Ankara to maintain an outpost in northern Syria in an anti-Kurdish function. Moscow is certainly not willing to abandon its interests in the region to leave room for Ankara's ambitions, but it is willing to negotiate on the details of the operation. In this regard, Ankara, Tehran and Moscow stressed the need to respect the truce established by the agreement of March 5, 2020 and to implement the points enshrined in it.

In addition, they agreed on the organization of a new meeting of the Constitutional Committee, the sixth. The aim of the body, promoted by the United Nations, is to draft a Constitution for Syria, which should then be approved by the Syrian people, in order to end the conflict through a mechanism in which Syrians themselves are the protagonists. However, the five meetings, held until January 2021, have not led to any concrete result. In order to pursue its geo-strategic objectives outlined above Moscow has two priorities: keeping Assad in power and preserving Syria's territorial integrity. Everything else is instrumental to these two objectives, on which the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions depend. As explained above the Iranian presence in Syria is a key factor in pursuing these two objectives. However, Russia also maintains close ties with Israel, whose top priority is to prevent Iran from having a permanent military presence on Syrian soil, which is why Russia would be interested in limiting Iranian influence in post-war Syria. Moreover, Moscow is also interested in limiting Tehran's influence because it needs to pander to the interests of the Gulf monarchies and, in particular, of Saudi Arabia, whose contribution in terms of investments is fundamental for the economic reconstruction

of the country. Moscow is fully aware that in order to establish in Syria a *Pax Russica* with full success, it needs the support of both Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose interests it must keep in mind. In this sense, there is a factor that plays in Moscow's favor: the economic crisis that Iran is going through because of international economic sanctions. Tehran must therefore minimize the extent to which sanctions are damaging the Iranian economy. This crisis has forced Iran to slow down its support for Bashar al-Assad, as the cost of Iran's military intervention is extremely high, allowing Moscow to strengthen its position, to the detriment of Tehran, especially in a prospective of reconstruction of the country.

For their part, the Gulf monarchies, having lost the Syrian conflict from a military point of view, have opted for a change of strategy. The rivalry between the members of this bloc has contributed to the weakening of the Syrian opposition, which is divided into a multitude of factions whose survival depended directly on the economic support of the Gulf monarchies. In light of the failure of the military option in Syria therefore, they seem to have resigned themselves to the fact that Bashar al-Assad remains in power and they have decided to normalize ties with the regime with the intention of distancing it from Iran.

As for Turkey, the (aspiring) great power of our analysis and Russia's main rival in the geopolitical clash to gain decisive influence in Syria, Ankara has made several miscalculations that have forced it over time to revise its strategy on the Syrian issue. Turkey has paid a high price for its involvement in the conflict. In addition to the military defeat on the field, we must underline the arrival of millions of refugees on Turkish soil, the intensification of the Kurdish conflict and terrorist attacks against Turkish targets. Turkish intervention in support of the rebels at the beginning of the conflict was motivated by the desire to overthrow a Shiite regime allied to Iran. However, Turkish priorities have changed several times over the years, in particular with the entrenchment of the Islamic State in the Syrian territory and the support provided by the US allies to the Kurdish militias of the Democratic Union Party, main architects of the defeat of ISIS but considered by Ankara the first danger to national security. Therefore, in the course of time the Turkish objective in Syria has passed from being the overthrow of Assad, in favor of the establishment of some kind of Sunni government, to the creation of a safe zone in the north of the country to protect its borders from the Kurdish threat. Nowadays, Ankara's main concern is the possibility of the creation of a federal state in which the Kurds could enjoy some degree of autonomy in the northern regions. With the failure of the military operation in Syria due to Russia's intervention in 2015, safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity has paradoxically become a priority for Turkey; territorial integrity that can only be restored under Assad's full control, because that is what Moscow wants.

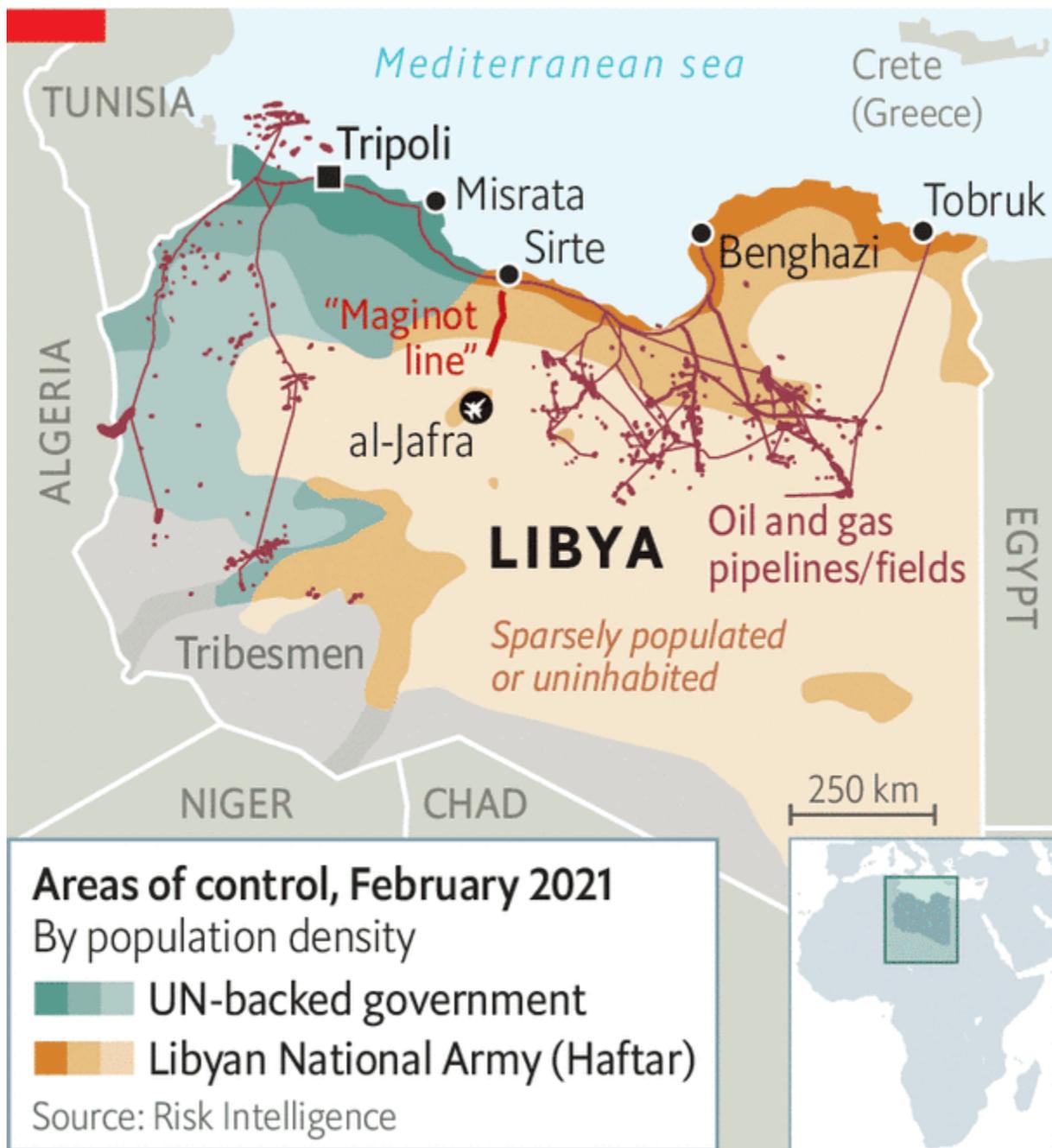
For Russia, Syria is a Mediterranean outpost, a springboard towards the oceans, fundamental component of an offensive projection. On the contrary, despite the huge geopolitical and military investments of the last decade, for Turkey the Levant territories are currently a dispensable periphery of the defensive strategy of Anatolia. The reluctance to sink the blow to counterattack in the governorate of Idilib, where the Armed Forces of Ankara remain thirty kilometers from the border, and the boldness with which instead the Turks have penetrated into Libya made it very clear. Contrast that sharply reflects Ankara's real geopolitical priorities and

the awareness that Anatolia must be defended firstly in the seas surrounding it. Therefore in the islands and in the lands fundamental to control these basins. Cyprus, Crete, Ukraine, of course Libya.

In conclusion, Russia seems to be the only actor with the ability to impose itself as a hegemonic power over Syria. However, Moscow will have to take into account the interests of the main powers present in the country. For the Kremlin it is essential that Bashar Al-Assad remains firmly in power in order to guarantee Syria's territorial integrity, a need also shared by Iran. Turkey will agree to normalize definitively relations with the Syrian regime if there is a commitment to neutralize Kurdish militias and end the autonomy of Rojava. Finally, the *Pax Russica* will also require the approval of Saudi Arabia and Israel, who are demanding an end to Iran's military presence. If it is able to meet the needs of such a diverse range of stakeholders, Moscow will definitively establish itself as a hegemon in Syria.

4.2 Libya, a war over for real?

Despite the election of the transitional government by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum on February 5, which should lead to elections on December 24, 2021, the established equilibrium that defines the geostrategic structure of Libya, or rather the two Libya shared between Turkey and Russia, does not seem to be altered. If on the political level, the new transitional executive presents a positive image of a united Libya, on the geopolitical and military level the current structure sees the country cut in two. The United Nations estimates that there are 20 thousand foreign soldiers, contractors and mercenaries in Libya supporting the two factions. The foreign fighters would be divided between more than 1000 Turkish soldiers, at least 7000 Syrian militiamen deployed with the GNA, about 3000 Russian contractors from the Wagner group and about 7000 Syrian mercenaries deployed with LNA. Turks and Syrian pro-GNA mercenaries control the areas of Tripoli and Misurata, the Russian contractors with pro-LNA mercenaries are in al-Gufra and Sirte. Pro-Turkish forces are building in Tripolitania training facilities and deploying air defense and missile batteries to protect the bases. For their part, pro-Russian forces are building a massive fortified defensive line covering at least 70 of the 120 kilometers separating the Mediterranean coast west of Sirte from the al-Gufra region, consisting of a large anti-tank ditch bordered by a concrete quay, protected by bunkers, artillery emplacements and minefields. Along the ditch there are about thirty fortifications dug in the desert equipped with anti-aircraft defenses with Pantsir mobile missile batteries. An imperious military structure, which traces de facto a furrow between the two Libya, which will be united by the reopening of the coastal road but will remain firmly separated by a fortified line clearly aimed at countering any offensive operations of the GNA and the Turks. Sirte, in fact, as well as the al-Gufra air base, constitutes a priority military objective for the GNA, which has always maintained that it wants to recapture it before negotiating a peace agreement. This defensive line, therefore, only reaffirms the strategic value of the two locations, confirming that Libya is divided in two and will remain so. The possession of al-Gufra and Sirte, where Moscow seems willing to establish its own air base, allows the LNA to have a springboard from which it is possible to launch new offensives against Tripoli. The conquest of the two Russian-protected strongholds would allow the GNA to secure Tripolitania and threaten the oil crescent in the Gulf of Sirte, where the collectors of oil produced from wells in the Cyrenaica desert are located. For this last reason, specifically, the defense of this area represents a strategic priority for Moscow and in this way it is explained the realization of a huge military structure to protect it. As far as the future of Libya is concerned, that trench is also a symbol of the obstacles that Libyan institutions may encounter in the future in implementing the political reunification and reconstruction of the country. That trench shows that the war is not over and that the foreign forces engaged on the ground have no intention of abandoning the field and complying with the ceasefire of last October.



The Economist

The composition of the transitional government clearly reflects the interference that Russia and Turkey exert on Libyan internal affairs. In fact, the list that emerged in the vote belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, a choice that reflects the victory on the field of pro-Turkish forces. Nevertheless, the new executive has been welcomed in Tripoli but also in Tobruk. The reason for Moscow's approval of a government oriented towards Ankara is simple: its weakness. In particular, the absence of prominent Tripoli figures, has positive aspects also for the Kremlin. The meager weight of the interim government's leaders does not faze either the GNA and LNA leaderships, nor Moscow and Ankara. In fact, the appointment of Dubayba,

as Prime Minister of the transitional government, and of Al-Manfi as head of the Presidential Council, actually delivers the country, at least temporarily, into the hands of a weak political leadership, which can hardly impose itself by limiting the influence of external actors. In fact, they are second level personalities, chosen to lead the interim government precisely because of both Turkish and Russian consensus. Negotiations carried out for months, in which each party tried to promote its own first level candidates in order to gain a favorable position in the process of reconstruction of the country and considerable political influence, have not been of any use. During the negotiations, it seemed that Moscow and Ankara would have opted for the election of two leaders close to the LNA and GNA respectively, namely Aguila Saleh, president of the Tobruk parliament, and Fathi Bashagha, interior minister in the GNA government. However, too many vetoes against them have led to the exclusion of these candidates, despite the support of the United Nations and the European Union. The defeat of the bigwigs from Tripoli and Tobruk is a factor that could weaken the already fragile peace process, as Moscow and Ankara have cleverly placed non-strong personalities at the head of the government, who cannot put obstacles in the way of their own interests.

The Russian position towards Libya is based on a complex set of national geopolitical interests, political interests and state and private economic calculations, and its goal is to obtain a strong position in the country both towards the West and towards the Middle Eastern countries. The strong presence of Ankara in Tripoli complicates the scenario. Moscow intends to safeguard itself by maintaining ties with Tripoli, in particular through the contracts that several Russian energy companies have signed with the Libyan national oil company. Contrary to what happens in Syria, in Libya the Federation seems to want to play a secondary role. The idea is to achieve a scenario in which both European and regional powers need Russia to carry out the process of reconstruction of the country. The Kremlin, in short, wants to lead the game behind the scenes. However, this backstage role that Moscow is willing to play in Libya should be understood as the condescension of not being a protagonist in the country's reconstruction process from a political-institutional point of view, leaving room for Turkey as the major supervisor of the country's political reconstruction. In short, Moscow is willing to renounce the role of hegemonic power in Libya, also by virtue of the fact that its geostrategic projection on the country does not represent, as explained, a fundamental component of its defensive strategy of national security, as is the case with Syria. For the Kremlin, the success of its action in Syria is a strategic imperative, while the attainment of a strategically privileged position in Libya was an opportunity that Moscow tried to seize, clashing, however, with the extremely harsh Turkish opposition. As previously illustrated, in fact, the control of Libya represents a fundamental aspect of Ankara's defensive strategy for the creation of a security belt to defend its national borders. On the other hand, Moscow does not intend to renounce its economic interests in the country and in this sense has deployed all its military power to protect them. In other words, Moscow does not intend to adopt an aggressive approach in Libya as in Syria in order to establish itself as a hegemonic power. However, the Kremlin does not intend to renounce its permanent presence in the country also from a military point of view, a presence which, as seen, is also part of the broader offensive realist strategy of exerting pressure on the southern flank of the Atlantic Alliance and

which for this reason has aroused great concern in Western powers. The West has long dwelt on the presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya, primarily the Wagner group, and on the lethal danger of the realization of Russian air bases in Cyrenaica that would guarantee Moscow air superiority over the Central Mediterranean. Such a significant Russian military presence on Libyan soil represents for Turkey (and in perspective also for NATO) an existential threat. Therefore, the equilibrium between Russia and Turkey with regard to the Libyan dossier in the medium term seems destined to crack.

4.3 The Southern Caucasus remains Moscow's “backyard”

Despite all the problems, from the tensions in Georgia, to the recent internal Armenian political rebellion, to the presence of radical Islamic movements on the territory, the South Caucasus is still firmly under the control of the Russian Federation, which maintains on the region most of the geopolitical weight held historically despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In Georgia, Moscow maintains remarkable elements of strength, namely a great geopolitical influence through the two secessionist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose independence is protected by Moscow. These territories, whose autonomy is not recognized by Tbilisi, ensure the Kremlin a very important leverage to control the region. As for Armenia, after the military defeat in the conflict against Azerbaijan and the resulting internal chaos, Russia guarantees its security. Moreover, it is the Russian army to protect it from Turkey, the country that a century ago committed genocide against Armenians, not yet recognized by Ankara. Azerbaijan is in a different situation: it has its own energy resources that give it strength and security. For Baku Russian protection is not indispensable, even though it maintains excellent forms of economic cooperation with Moscow, particularly in the energy sector. The main levers of Moscow's control and influence in the region are therefore the security provided to Armenia and the military presence in the separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which affects Georgia from the inside. In the Kremlin's eyes, however, the region has a strategic weight in the confrontation with the West, despite the extremely limited NATO presence. Washington, like Brussels, has supported and politically supports Georgia, especially its territorial claims on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, after the war of 2008 and the clear victory of the Russian side, Tbilisi expected a much more concrete support from NATO. Since the end of that conflict, Washington has not played a particular role in the South Caucasus, while Moscow continues to occupy positions of strength, as shown by the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has caused a further increase of the Russian role in the region. The relations of Moscow with Azerbaijan and Armenia are very complex. The last war has highlighted how complicated it is for Russia to maintain at the same time very close relations with Armenia, but strong economic and infrastructural cooperation with Azerbaijan. Moscow in this situation moves pragmatically, pursuing its own interests. It has been careful not to intervene in the conflict in support of Armenia, taking advantage of the conflict between the two countries to bring the Armenian Republic firmly under its influence. Thanks to its strong position therefore, the Kremlin is able to play the role of the leader of the region and it manages to play between the two enemies taking advantage of both. After the 2020 conflict, the military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh is allowed only to Russian armed forces and today, more than in the past, Yerevan needs Moscow to maintain its security. If a short time ago Armenian leader Nikol Pashinyan naively thought he could move away from Russia and turn to the West, today it is clear that whoever takes power in Armenia must submit to Moscow's diktats.

Armenia-Azerbaijan peace deal

- Armenian forces to withdraw by 15 Nov
- Armenian forces to withdraw by 1 Dec
- Area of deployment for Russian peacekeepers
- Armenian forces to withdraw by 20 Nov
- Areas regained by Azerbaijan in the war



The relationship between Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus is very complex. These two countries face each other in various scenarios, most notably in Syria and Libya. They have opposing geopolitical interests in the Caucasus as well. However, in this theater, unlike the others, the confrontation is less harsh and both sides are more inclined to compromise. Both set themselves limits and are careful not to cross them, not to exacerbate their conflict. The participation of Turkey in the conflict in Nagorno Kharabakh in support of Baku and the subsequent agreement, which reserves a role for the Turks as observers in Azerbaijan, is a relative victory for Ankara, which has somehow forced Moscow to accept the Anatolian intrusion in its "backyard". However, the Kremlin has managed to contain Turkish penetration to a great extent and to bring under its full control a country that was dangerously moving towards the West, which is undoubtedly a great victory for Moscow.

Conclusion

The realist and aggressive policies of Russia and Turkey in the enlarged Mediterranean have led these two countries to clash in various scenarios in the period following the Arab Springs, contending for regional hegemony. Russia's realist policy in the Middle East and the Mediterranean stems from the need to reassert itself as a pivotal power in the region in order to contain NATO expansion and maintain the regional status quo to prevent a wave of democratic revolutions from destabilizing the Federation. For Turkey, on the other hand, a realistic foreign policy is a structural condition deriving from historical and geographical factors, which oblige it to assume an aggressive behavior in order to safeguard the survival of the state. The strategies of these two countries are in clear conflict as both aspire to the role of regional hegemon. Russia in order to consolidate its status of great power, enlarge its geostrategic projection and threaten the West. Turkey because it aspires to become a great power, but above all because its historical and structural objective of survival depends on the creation of a security belt around the Anatolian peninsula that guarantees national security. This security belt starts from the seas surrounding it, to the north and south of the straits, to control which it is necessary to extend its influence to the territories surrounding these seas. Hence the need to extend its influence to North Africa and the Mediterranean. Of course, this strategy also has a territorial dimension, hence the need to expand its influence to the south and east, in Syria, Iraq, the Southern Caucasus, and possibly even to the Gulf.

Moreover, Russia's will to maintain the regional status quo based on the presence of authoritarian regimes in order to avoid a destabilizing domino effect for the Federation clashes with Turkey's will to promote a moderate vision of Islam based on the promotion of democracy and political participation in the Islamic world. The different theaters of conflict have given shape to different results depending on the variables at play, the actors involved in each of them, and especially the strategic importance covered in the strategy of the two powers.

For Russia Syria represents an outpost of indispensable strategic importance for its geostrategic projection in the Mediterranean. Thanks to the military bases of Tartus and Ḥumaymīm Moscow is able to assert its dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean. For Turkey, the control of Syria is not a priority in its national security strategy, since its own coasts overlook the same seas that bathe the Syrian coasts and the control of these seas from Ankara's point of view comes more from the control of Cyprus and the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean. The only inalienable objective in the Syrian theater for Turkey is the limitation and possibly the elimination of the threat that derives to its territorial integrity from Kurdish separatism. In addition, for Russia, in terms of the threat of the spread of democracy in the Arab world, Syria represented the most dangerous scenario due to its geographical proximity to the Russian sphere of influence and the former Soviet republics compared to the scenarios of North Africa. While from a Turkish perspective, Syria was not a country where the Muslim Brotherhood had taken root as it had in Egypt or Libya.

Russia has been able to avail itself of a valuable ally in Syria, namely Iran, for which maintaining control over the country, and therefore keeping the Assad regime in power, is a factor of fundamental strategic importance, for which Teheran has employed considerable military resources. On the other hand, the support to the rebellion provided by the Sunni bloc has been extremely fragmented due to internal clashes between the sponsors of the opposition, in particular between Turkey and the Gulf Monarchies. On the other hand, Russia has managed to establish or consolidate relations, mainly economic, with the supporters of the rebel factions, trying to mediate between Saudi and Emirati interests and those of Iran, in order to take a leading role in the process of reconstruction of the country and establish itself as a hegemonic power. The mediation between the interests and ambitions of the Gulf countries and those of Shiite Iran represents the challenge that Russia must face in order to establish definitively itself as a hegemonic power in the Levant, after having defeated Turkey on the battlefield. Without forgetting the more difficult task of finding a compromise between Iranian expansionism and Israel's concerns about Iran's presence in Syria.

In Libya, the situation is in reverse. Control of the North African country is a key component of Turkey's national defense strategy based on control of the seas. The presence in Libya guarantees Ankara an outpost from which to project its influence on the Central Mediterranean and press on the Eastern Mediterranean at the expense of its rivals Greece and Cyprus. Moreover, the affirmation of a government linked to the Muslim Brotherhood represents the opportunity to spread political Islam in the Arab world, what has not worked in Egypt. For Russia, Libya is not a strategic priority, but a second level objective. Certainly, the military presence in Syria allows pressing on NATO's southern flank, but in front of Turkey's determination Russia is not willing to engage in a tough military confrontation for the hegemony of the country, as it happened in Syria. However, if in Syria Russia is the clear winner of the confrontation, in Libya Turkey is not so. Victorious on the field thanks to the huge deployment of military resources, victorious from a political point of view thanks to the establishment of an interim government close to the Muslim Brotherhood, from a purely geopolitical point of view Ankara has not achieved a clear victory over Moscow. Russia is in fact willing to play a secondary role but not to give up its interests in the country. These interests are mainly linked to the exploitation of energy resources in Cyrenaica and to the position of strength deriving from the military presence in the same region. To protect these interests Moscow is increasing its presence in the Eastern part of the country, where it also intends to build air bases. Libya is thus a politically quite united country that goes towards the elections of December 2021 under the leadership of an internationally recognized government, but de facto divided in two. On one side the Turkish Tripolitania, on the other the Russian Cyrenaica, and the risk of new tensions is quite high. In short, Russia will probably not sink the blow to gain exclusive hegemony over the country, but it could do so if it were to see its interests threatened, which are guaranteed by its presence, more military than political, in the eastern part of the country, a presence that represents a threat to Turkey and NATO. Therefore, Moscow will not give up its presence in Cyrenaica, which is also functional in limiting Turkey's expansionism in North Africa that could threaten its ally Egypt. In addition, Russia wants to ensure a stable military presence in Libya, not so much to threaten directly NATO's southern flank, as to be able to assert this presence at the

negotiating table in the event of a possible new reversal of the balance of power in the Black Sea. This is a theater decidedly more relevant for the confrontation with Turkey and the West, as it guarantees Moscow to protect its geostrategic projection in the Mediterranean and its access to the warm seas. If, as it seems, the realization of the Istanbul Canal will allow the Americans to take the Russians by the throat in the Black Sea, then in this case Moscow could use the card of pressure from the South in the Central Mediterranean to make the Americans lose their grip on the straits.

Regarding the South Caucasus and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, we observe a formal victory of Ankara and a substantial victory of Moscow. In fact, if after the conflict of 2020 the disputed territories have passed from the control of pro-Russian Armenia to the control of pro-Turkish Azerbaijan, the Russian influence on the region has been strengthened at the expense of the Turkish one. In fact, Russia sacrificed the disputed territories in order to re-establish firmly its control over a country that was looking westward and aimed to leave the traditional orbit of Moscow and side with Washington. Through this sacrifice, Russia has reasserted its role as an indispensable actor in protecting Armenian security against the threat of Turkey and other regional rivals, bringing the country firmly back within its sphere of influence. If, in fact, for Russia the South Caucasus represents its own "backyard" where any kind of external interference is not allowed, Turkey exercises in the region a role of containment instrument of Russia on the behalf of NATO, more than a promoter of its own national interests. This region is in fact the least relevant ring of the security belt of the Anatolian Peninsula, after the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Levant and Mesopotamia.

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Summary

Many scholars of offensive realism argue that the US policy towards Russia even after the end of the Cold War had the result to keep relations between these two countries in a zero sum logic. Despite initial agreements not to expand NATO to the East, this eastward expansion process continued uninterrupted until 2010, representing, from a Russian perspective, a strong threat to the territorial integrity of the Federation. Russia has in fact started to act adversely, in a logic according to which the more power it has, the less power others have to oppose it and its interests. Since the Western allied countries have expanded considerably to the east, a global-scale balancing process was necessary in order not to diminish Russia's power and ability to pursue its own interests. In recent years, the Russian Federation has adopted an increasingly assertive and aggressive foreign policy strategy.

The Russian Federation intervened in Syria to reassert itself as a great power and to create an outpost for its geopolitical expansion in Middle East. This gives an idea of the importance that this theaters have for Moscow's national interests, suggesting that the dynamics of the Mediterranean and the Middle East represent a key point in Russia's power strategy aimed at becoming the only great power to influence the geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics of the region. In this sense, Russia's new strategy in Middle East was shaped by the desire to preserve the status quo in the region. In fact, Putin's great fear was that the Arab Springs were a continuation of those Color Revolutions instigated by foreign powers against the Russian Federation. He was convinced that the establishment of democratic governments in the Mediterranean area or in Middle East would trigger a wave of revolutions throughout Eurasia through a dangerous domino effect. On the Other hand, Turkey hoped that the spread of democracy in the Arab world would mean the coming to power of governments that would establish closer ties with Ankara, which could significantly change the balance of power in the region in its favor. In fact, the Arab uprisings had initially fueled Ankara's hopes of extend Turkey's influence in the region. Turkey has explicitly claimed leadership as the bearer of the democratization process in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and established ties with movements that led the opposition in many of the countries in revolt. The fact that Turkey seeks to expand its influence in this area however, has nothing to do with individual leaders and their ideologies. The key to interpreting Turkish foreign policy and expansionism is the structural dynamic that characterize the history of the Turkish state and the primacy of geography in shaping its foreign policy. The geographical position of Turkey has imposed to Ankara a precise geostrategic priority in the course of history: the creation of a security belt around the Anatolian peninsula aimed at safeguarding the security and survival of the nation. Turkish main foreign policy goal is in fact maintaining an influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East in order to prevent other powers from posing a threat to its national security. The Arab revolts soon turned into internal wars and geopolitical power games, and Turkey was not immune to such a radical change. The new Turkish foreign policy approach starts from the assumption that a new multipolar global order is emerging and that this requires Turkey to act

independently to pursue a power project that can return the country to the role of great power lost with the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The gradual disengagement of the United States from the Middle East and the Mediterranean since the Obama administration has given way to a growing geopolitical juxtaposition between Russia and Turkey across the whole enlarged Mediterranean. Indeed, both countries aimed to become the new regional hegemon; Russia with the goal of maintaining the status quo and preventing the establishment of democratic regimes, Turkey with the goal of spreading political Islam in the post-Arab Spring regional order. The conflict between these two countries for hegemony over this area took place particularly in two scenarios in the period immediately following the Arab Springs, Syria and Libya. More recently, tensions renewed in a third scenario, namely the South Caucasus, specifically the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 represents the factor that determined the beginning of Ankara's aggressive foreign policy in the post Arab Spring Period. Turkey's first reaction to the crisis was to try to persuade the regime to meet the people's demands for democratization. However, this strategy soon proved to be unfeasible as it soon became clear that the Assad regime did not intend to implement any kind of political liberalization or economic reform process. As the violence exacerbated and the regime's repression of protesters increased, Turkey changed its strategy in Syria by starting to arm members of the Syrian opposition, in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood, breaking ties with Damascus and implementing a policy of regime change. As the uprising turned into civil war, Ankara intervened militarily convinced that the Syrian regime would soon have fallen. At the beginning of the war in Syria, Turkey's objectives were primarily the overthrow of the Assad regime and the establishment of a democratically inspired Sunni government, as well as the containment of the threat of Kurdish separatism. The Gulf Monarchies have also contributed to the support of the rebellion against the regime, but for very different reasons. Turkey on one side and Saudi Arabia and UAE on the other shared the desire to bring down the regime. The Syrian Assad regime is in fact a Shiite regime, allied with Iran, the main Shiite power in the Middle East and regional rival of both Turkey and the Gulf Monarchies. Therefore, in addition to being a geopolitical confrontation at a regional level, the clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia is an ideological and religious clash between the leading country of Shiite Islam and the country representing the Sunni Wahhabi conservatism. The control of the Syrian territory represents a first level strategic priority for Iran and for the entire Shiite bloc, the only way to supply weapons to its armed arm in Lebanon Hezbollah, a fundamental pawn in the Shiite power strategy, and Iranian militias have supported the regime since the beginning of the Arab Springs. Although Turkey and Gulf Monarchies shared the desire to overthrow the Shiite Assad regime, they had an opposite vision of the country's future. If Turkey intended to support the rebels in order to establish a democratic government in the country and spread political Islam, the goal of Saudi Arabia and the UAE was the opposite, that is, to maintain an authoritarian government in order to keep the status quo. This division within the Sunni bloc led these countries to support different rebel

groups fighting for different goals, resulting in an extremely fragmented opposition front. Relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia broke down in 2013, when Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backed the military coup that removed the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, with which Turkey was politically linked. Despite these divisions, the rebels supported by the Sunni powers were on the verge of winning the war. However, Russian military intervention in 2015 supporting the regime caused the balance of power in the conflict to shift back in favor of the pro-Assad front and pro-government militias recaptured much of the lost territory. Russian intervention in favor of the Syrian regime was dictated by Moscow's desire to establish itself as the new regional hegemon in the Middle East but also by the desire to maintain the status quo in the region in order to prevent democratic regimes from taking root in this area. In addition, Russia shares a strategic partnership with Iran based on common geopolitical and economic interests, in particular the desire to limit American influence in the region and a fruitful economic cooperation in the energy sector. As mentioned, however, the primary motivation for the Russian intervention in Syria in support of the regime was to establish an outpost in the Middle East to project its influence throughout the region and establish itself as a new hegemonic power replacing the US. In 2017, Moscow signed an agreement with the Syrian government that allows Russian military forces to use the military bases of Tartus and Hmeimim for 49 years and then for 25 years more. These bases are of fundamental importance for the pursuit of Russian strategic interests in Middle East. The presence of these two bases represents a fundamental component of Moscow's geostrategic projection in the Mediterranean. They guarantee Russia air and naval superiority in the Eastern Mediterranean and the possibility of exerting pressure on NATO's southern flank.

Furthermore, the regime also took advantage of Barack Obama's reluctance to further engage the US in the Middle East and the divisions within Sunni Arab countries resulting from the coup in Egypt and the subsequent tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. In this context, Turkey found itself completely isolated and Erdogan tried to change his approach to the Syrian conflict towards a more pragmatic stance. Ankara stopped using the rhetoric of regime change and agreed to participate in talks with Russia and Iran to find a solution to the conflict. In other words, Turkey has revised its strategic priorities, replacing the removal of Assad as its main objective with the containment of direct threats to its territorial integrity, such as Islamic terrorism and Kurdish separatism. Thus Turkey, together with Iran and Russia, promoted the start of a negotiation process between the Syrian regime and opposition representatives in Astana. In carrying out these negotiations, Ankara's main concern is to prevent the creation of an autonomous Kurdistan in Syria. To achieve this goal, Ankara is ready to cooperate with Damascus and Teheran, both of whom are in turn interested in preventing the creation of a Kurdish state in order to safeguard Syria's territorial integrity. In this sense, Ankara leverages on the fact that it de facto still controls parts of northern Syria. In fact, on March 5, 2020, thanks to the mediation of Russian President Putin and his Turkish counterpart Erdogan, the pro-government forces of President Bashar Al-Assad, supported by Russia, Iran and the Lebanese paramilitary organization Hezbollah, reached a ceasefire agreement with opposition groups, supported by Turkey and, to a lesser extent, by Saudi Arabia and the United States. The aim of the aforementioned agreement was to put an end to the conflict, still

particularly violent in the governorate of Idlib, in northeastern Syria, the last stronghold left under the control of the rebels.

Indeed, Russia call for strengthening Iran's role as a legitimate actor in a Middle East security system. From a Russian perspective in fact, Iran's role in Syria is doubtless indispensable. Against the clear American military superiority in the Middle East, Russia can adopt a single strategy, which is to create a collective security system including Middle Eastern countries and external powers with local interest. In this sense, Iranian presence in Syria represents the most important piece of this puzzle, to which it is impossible to renounce. Nevertheless, Russia is successfully trying to establish relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Monarchies. By moving closer to them, Russia is putting pressure on Iran, which is interested in reducing Saudi and Emirati influence in the region from a political and economic point of view. Russia is in this way exploiting the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry to its advantage. Russia tries to pursue its own interests by keeping itself as neutral as possible with respect to Iran's regional rivalries with Saudi Arabia and Israel, but Iranian aggressiveness, particularly towards Israel, can be a severe test for Russian diplomacy. Indeed, Iran perceives Israel as a regional competitor that has been set up by the United States to secure western interests in Middle East. The International Atomic Energy Agency's Most Comprehensive Report of November 2011 was interpreted by Israel as an alarm of a growing lethal threat to its national security, since it expressed "serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program". On the other side, Iran continued develop its nuclear program fearing that Israel could strike first, as tensions between the two countries were increasing. This proliferation on both sides has continued until Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal in 2015 with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. Through this deal, Iran agreed to reduce by two-thirds its installed centrifuges, and not to enrich uranium over 3.67 per cent for at least 15 years. Israel's reaction was very harsh and the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to convince the US to strike Iran in order to avoid a direct Israeli involvement. However, the US under Obama refrained from initiating a military offensive against Iran, fearing Iranian retaliation against American deployments in the Gulf region. Moreover, fearing a spur of a nuclear arms race in the region, and threatening oil prices, Obama pursued non-military means to deal with Iran and pursued a mixture of diplomacy and increasingly harsh sanctions to dissuade the Iranian regime from pursuing its nuclear program. The International Atomic Energy Agency did not provide evidences that Iran was violating the agreement and issued multiple reports confirming Iranian compliance with it. Nevertheless, Trump administration considered the deal as a means that allowed Iran to use the economic benefits of the agreement to expand its influence in Middle East and formally withdrew the United States from the agreement in May 2018. This approach involved an overall long-term strategy of bringing the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, to normalize relations with Israel in order to create a much stronger block in the region against Iran. The will of Iran and Israel is therefore clearly that of moving war against each other and there seems to be no possibility of dialogue at the moment. Israel has been carrying out airstrikes in Syria since 2011, aimed primarily at striking pro-Iranian militias stationed in eastern and southern Syria. The operations seem to be aimed at repelling what

Israel considers a stealthy territorial invasion by Iran, according to intelligence sources. In particular, on Israel's list of targets are infrastructure that could allow Iran to produce precision-guided missiles on Syrian territory, eroding Israel's regional military advantage. Israel fears that there are already underground fortifications that cannot be destroyed with conventional weapons, tunnels dug into the mountains equipped to resist even bunker busters bombs. Russia's interest in maintaining strong ties with Israel and vice versa is fundamentally tied to security reasons for both and specifically the interest that Moscow and Jerusalem share in collaborating in the fight against Islamic terrorism. The reality on the ground has shown an important presence of Iran in Syria and a Russia balanced in its role of arbitrator replacing the US in the Middle East disorder and in particular in the management of the conflict between Israel and the Islamic Republic. Due to the increasing Iranian military activities in the south of the country, the Israeli military and political establishment is becoming more and more doubtful about how much they can trust the Russian constraint to prevent the Iranian threats against Jerusalem's security in light of the proximity between Moscow and Tehran.

In Libya the revolt against the Gheddafi's regime started in 2011 soon turned into a bloody civil war between the Tripoli government, led by Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj, and the Libyan National Army, led by General Haftar. In the Libyan conflict, what happened in Syria in 2015 happened in 2019 with reversed parties. If the Russian air force intervention had prevented the capitulation of the Assad regime at a time when the rebel forces supported by Turkey seemed on the verge of winning the war in 2015, the decisive Turkish military support for the GNA counter-offensive prevented the Haftar's troops to take over Tripoli in 2019. On 23 October 2020, again thanks to the mediation of Erdogan and Putin, as on 5 March 2020 for the Syrian case, the GNA and the LNA reached an agreement at a meeting of the 5 + 5 Joint Military Committee, an organ composed by members of both sides warring. The agreement provides for a truce on all Libyan fighting fronts and the removal of military forces and foreign mercenaries from the country within 90 days from the day of the agreement. The deadline, however, has not been respected and several fighters are currently present on Libyan soil. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, a series of intra-Libyan meetings that began in late 2020 with the aim of leading the country towards elections and towards the democratic legitimacy of Libyan institutions, elected an ad interim government at a meeting in Geneva in February 2021. The new executive, which should represent in theory Libyan unity, is nothing more than the political expression of the balance of power that emerged on the battlefield, where the military victory of the GNA and Turkey was clear.

Turkey's intervention in Libya was motivated by geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic reasons. Libya, even more than Syria, represents for Turkey a geographical area of fundamental interest for its strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this sense, the support for the Government of National Accord was due to political-ideological reasons and to the link between the GNA and the Muslim Brotherhood. On the contrary Turkey perceived the LNA as a dangerous revisionist militia manipulated by the powers of Arab militarist authoritarianism opposed to Turkey, especially Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey's intervention in

the Libyan civil war is the most striking manifestation of the new strategic approach based on the concept of "advanced defense", namely a massive use of military force and the projection beyond national borders for the defense of the nation. In this sense, Libya is certainly one of the fulcrums of Turkish strategy, which makes it necessary to read the Turkish projection in Libya in the light of Ankara's Mediterranean strategy. The decisive characteristic of this strategy consists in the geographical location of Anatolia in the center of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass, which combined with the predominantly maritime dimension of geopolitical competition requires Turkey to find a way out to the oceans. The imperatives of Ankara's maritime strategy are codified in the new Turkish geopolitical doctrine, *Mavi Vatan*, *Blue Homeland*, elaborated by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz. This doctrine is based on the assumption that the imperialist geopolitical projection of Turkey, and therefore its national security strategy, depends on the hegemony on the seas bordering Anatolia: these are precisely the ones that make up the Blue Homeland. It is also in this key that the Libyan campaign should be interpreted: the victory in Libya has allowed Turkey to take root in North Africa, which allows Ankara to exert a pincer pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean on several fronts. In particular, with the signing of the 2019 maritime delimitation agreements between Ankara and the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, Ankara secured control over a portion of the sea that impinges on the Greek and Cypriot continental shelf in exchange of military support to the GNA. The Turkish move makes extremely difficult the hypothesis of a gas pipeline linking the extraction areas of Israeli and Egyptian competence to Greece and Europe, the so called EastMed project. This project aims at transferring between 9 and 12 billion cubic meters per year of offshore gas to be pumped from Israel and Cyprus to Greece and then to Europe and it is perceived by Ankara as a belt of strength to exclude Turkey from the energy competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, the memorandum between Turkey and Tripoli, grants Ankara the possibility to start drilling activities both in the waters of Crete, as it does not recognize its continental shelf, and in the western part of the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus. The Turkish-Libyan presence in those waters therefore breaks the connection between the potential Greek and Cypriot EEZ. Turkish ultimate goal is to claim the rights on Mediterranean energy resources and to cancel the sovereignty of Athens and Nicosia over these waters, guaranteed by the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In particular, Turkey claims sovereignty over the territorial waters of Cyprus and the Greek Dodecanese islands. However, the Suez Canal, and therefore access to the Indian Ocean, is the final objective of Turkey's Mediterranean geopolitics. Since the geopolitical and military dynamics and the power relations between Ankara and Moscow in Libya do not allow Turkey to break through in Cyrenaica, making impossible to reach the Suez Canal with an overland advance, Ankara intends to exploit its military success in the country to force Egypt to soften its hostile attitude. In short, Ankara intends to force Cairo to recognize the validity of the agreement with the government in Tripoli on the division of maritime sovereignty areas and make a similar agreement with Egypt that guarantees it access to the Suez Canal.

From the Turkish perspective, the events occurred since the outbreak of the Arab Springs and the deep geopolitical transformations experienced by the Mediterranean have intensified the competition between

regional and international actors, triggering a structural transformation of the balance of power that poses a serious threat to Turkish national security. In this sense, there are two main issues of concern for Ankara: access to the Central Mediterranean conquered by Russia, already dominant in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the ability of the United Arab Emirates to project its influence on North Africa. When, following the 2014 elections, the rivalry between the Tobruk and the Tripoli-based blocs crystallized and a dual power structure emerged, the UAE and Egypt began to support Haftar, contributing decisively to the tightening of the crisis. As for Russia, the fall of Gaddafi represented for the Kremlin the loss of a valuable ally in the region and a potential significant loss of influence in favor of Turkey, supporter of the GNA. In addition, in this case Russia's interests in the region are linked to the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves. The 2011 uprising and the instability following Gaddafi's deposition had seriously jeopardized Russia's interests in Libya in this sector, and the prospect of a Turkish-sponsored government posed an even greater threat to Moscow's interests. This fear resulted in a symmetrical strategy with respect to that adopted in Syria to support the Assad regime, based on military support in exchange for agreements to obtain privileges on the exploitation of energy resources. The direct involvement of Russian forces in the Libyan conflict began in 2016 and it involved, in addition to the use of the aviation, the deployment of mercenaries from the Wagner company, in direct support of Haftar's army. Haftar in fact presented himself as the only credible champion of the fight against extremist Islamism in Libya and the only true guarantor of order and security in the country's areas he reconquered and governed. Russia was particularly interested in the stabilization of the eastern area of the country, in particular Cyrenaica, where many of the Federation's oil and energy companies carried out their activities of extraction and production, at least until the outbreak of the war. For all these reasons, Haftar was gradually perceived by Moscow as the right man to reconcile and lead Libya. The Russian intervention in Libya, has an ulterior geostrategic motivation of enormous importance, namely that of having an influence on the Mediterranean, and specifically the possibility of having a military base on the southern flank of NATO. Libya offers a very large coastal area just southwards Italy, the most important American outpost in terms of military bases in the Mediterranean. In short, in the Mediterranean Turkey has found itself completely isolated in a hostile context. In order to prevent this unfavorable equilibrium from assuming a structural character, Ankara has deployed an aggressive strategy that in the specific context of Libya aims to put pressure on the regional anti-Turkish bloc through the massive use of military force. In this sense, from the Turkish perspective, the strategic importance of Libya lies in the fact that the dynamics occurred in the country have strongly contributed to destabilize the Mediterranean and condemn Ankara to isolation. The Libyan policy is therefore a fundamental element of the Mediterranean strategy of defense of Turkey's national borders. On the contrary, for Russia, Libya, unlike Syria, represents a geostrategic objective that is not a first level one. In Syria, from a Russian point of view, there is a vital stake from a geostrategic point of view, since the entire geostrategic projection of Moscow in the Mediterranean depends on the control of the Levant. In Libya, the objective pursued by Russia is first to consolidate the convergence of interests with Egypt and the Gulf Monarchies and to protect the agreements signed by Libyan public company National Oil Corporation (Noc) with Russian companies such as Rosneft

and Tatneft. Moscow in fact shares with the Gulf monarchies the concern of a wave of revolutions that would alter the status quo in North Africa. Russia fears that the establishment of regimes with democratic aspirations in this area could cause a dangerous domino effect that would destabilize Eurasia and thus jeopardize its sphere of influence and consequently its own national security. In this Russia has a great ally in the authoritarian regimes of the Gulf and Egypt. For them, containing the spread of political Islam in the Arab world is a top priority to preserve their own survival. The Gulf monarchies cannot allow the concept of democracy to spread throughout the Arab world, while for Egypt the threat of the Turkish-sponsored Muslim Brotherhood represents the greatest threat to its political stability and national security. Russia therefore did not need to intervene militarily in Libya and win the confrontation on the ground at all costs, as it did in Syria.

On the other hand, especially by virtue of the increase of the Turkish military presence in the central Mediterranean, a strategic objective of Moscow was to obtain a foothold in Libya, which allow it to maintain a constant presence in the central Mediterranean. Moscow's strategy in Libya was clear right from the start: to limit its direct military and political involvement by betting on two options, both favorable. A much more cautious approach than the decisive intervention in Syria. If the Libyan conflict were resolved with the victory of Haftar and the collapse of the government recognized by the international community, Russia would collect the benefits of military support provided to the LNA. If, on the other hand, thanks to the Turkish intervention, the government forces were able to drive Haftar's troops out of Tripolitania, as it actually happened, the conditions would have been set for a substantial partition of Libya with Turks and Russians in the front line in the negotiation process. The only strategic imperative was to prevent the GNA from extending eastward its successes on the battlefield, reconquering Cyrenaica. This would have allowed Serraj to unite the whole Libya under a government led by the Muslim Brotherhood and heavily influenced by Turkey. However, this option was highly unlikely from the start: Egypt would have prevented it without doubt by all means, not excluding direct intervention in the conflict. The military support provided to the LNA by Russia should therefore be interpreted mainly in order to protect the oil exploration and production sites, which are mostly located in the eastern part of the country, controlled by Haftar. Furthermore, Russian policy towards Libya aimed at increasing the Kremlin's influence in the country has to deal with the opposition of the West. The New Biden presidency looks very concerned to Moscow's rise to the position of new hegemon of the Mediterranean area in recent years. Having already left Russia ample space of maneuver in Syria and elsewhere, by virtue of their growing disengagement, the United States does not seem willing to allow Russia to increase its presence also in Libya. Washington's change of course is in this sense more likely as Moscow's moves will be perceived as threatening. The barricading of the Russians in Sirte and Al-Gufra, where Moscow has deployed substantial military assets and has created an impressive defensive infrastructure, reveals that the pacification process in the country is very much uphill and that the Russian presence on Libyan soil intends to be significant and permanent. This presence has alarmed not only Turkey but also its NATO allies. According to reports from AFRICOM's military leadership, Russia has deployed air defense systems in Libya. This exacerbates the threat to Europe's southern flank. In this sense, the US military leadership openly states that the success obtained in

Libya makes Turkey an ideal partner to take the necessary measures to ensure the stability of the North African country and to balance and contain the Russian presence. This threatening presence has led Turkey to emphasize its membership in NATO and to make it a privileged instrument of its Mediterranean geopolitics. In this sense, from the perspective of Turkey, also Russian military projection into the Black Sea constitutes a particularly worrying threat to its security. Russian imperialism in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea in particular has prompted Turkey to reassess its NATO membership, as Turkey can hardly face the Russian threat without calling the Alliance involved. The annexation of Crimea by Russia has significantly changed the balance of power in the Black Sea. If until 2014 Turkey was the hegemon, thanks to the military bases installed in Crimea, which substantially transformed the Sea of Azov in a sort of "Russian lake", the situation has turned in Moscow's favor. The new Russian strategy provides for a growing upgrading of naval infrastructure in Crimea and an increase of the military presence in the Black Sea to the detriment of Turkey. The Istanbul Canal, in Turkish projects, represents the solution to this problem. It would be a channel parallel to the Bosphorus, which by 2027 would connect the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara. If the Istanbul canal were not to be subject to the provisions of the Montreux Convention, this would allow Turkey to let third countries' warships remain in the Black Sea indefinitely, as well as let larger warships like aircraft carrier in, which, according to the rules of Montreux, cannot access the Black Sea. This could favor, for example, the entry of US or other NATO countries' aircraft carriers, which would completely overturn the balance of power in favor of the Atlantic Alliance in the Black Sea. In this sense, on the other hand, the presence in Libya and the possibility to build some military bases represents for Russia a strategic resource of incalculable value. If Washington wants to avert the threat that Russian fighter jets can hit NATO installations in Europe from the bases in Cyrenaica, it will have to give up its grip on the Black Sea. More specifically, if, as it seems, the realization of the Istanbul Canal will allow the Americans to take the Russians by the throat in the Black Sea, then in this case Moscow could use the card of pressure from the South in the Central Mediterranean to make the Americans lose their grip on the Eastern Mediterranean.

In the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Russia's failure to intervene militarily in support of its ally Armenia led to the defeat of the latter in the conflict against Azerbaijan supported by Turkey in 2020. For Moscow, however, the defeat on the battlefield represents anything but a political defeat. The Russian Federation in fact has only one goal in the Caucasus: the maintenance of the status quo. From this point of view, apparently, the war and the loss of Armenia's control over Nagorno-Karabakh, represents a threat for Russia's security and the risk to trigger a spillover across the Caucasus that alters Russia's influence in the region in favor of rival Turkey. In reality, the non-intervention of Russia is a precise strategic choice. Turkey in itself does not represent the main threat to Russian influence in the region, which is actually the pressure of the West and NATO. Armenia has always been a valuable strategic ally for Russia in Central Asia to pursue its stability goals. However, bilateral relations between the two countries have changed since 2018, with Pashinyan's election as Armenian Prime

Minister. The democratic reforms he has undertaken and his declared proximity to the West irritated Moscow very much. Russia has seen in the Turkish-Azerbaijani aggression of Nagorno Karabakh an opportunity to reestablish its political control over the country with a peculiar strategy, namely to renounce to the control over the region in order to regain the political influence over the country, proposing itself as mediator of the peace agreement in order to resume its role of regional hegemon. Therefore, Armenia and Azerbaijan signed an agreement mediated by Russia to end the military confrontation over Nagorno-Karabakh. All disputed territories previously under Armenian control returned to Azerbaijan. In fulfillment of the agreement, Russian peacekeepers have been deployed along the border in Nagorno-Karabakh for a period of five years with automatic extension for other five years. In this way Moscow, which already has military bases in Armenia, further strengthens its military presence in the South Caucasus. Moreover, the agreement negotiated with Azerbaijan throws Armenia into a situation of political uncertainty and instability. After the signing of the agreement, which sanctioned the de facto defeat of Armenia on the battlefield, mass protests broke out in the country defining the agreement a betrayal of the nation and calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister Pashinyan. By creating insecurity, anger, frustration and fear in the Armenian population, Russia has promoted the idea that Armenia cannot survive as a state without Moscow's protection. The defeat on the field has in fact highlighted Armenia's vulnerability from a military point of view against the Azerbaijani enemy, a factor that Russia intends to exploit in order to bring the country back towards a new political and strategic integration with Moscow. Russian strategy in the South Caucasus consists in maintaining frozen conflicts and "controlled instability", exploiting the continued presence of Russian security forces in the region, serving its geostrategic interests and retaining the geopolitical status quo. Indeed, the current status quo is clearly beneficial to Russia's interests and Russian main goal is to preserve its economic and military sphere of influence while preventing any of the South Caucasian states from looking to NATO. As long as these states are divided and politically destabilized, Moscow can exert its influence on them.

Since September 2015, when Russia intervened to prevent the collapse of the regime, Moscow's influence in Syria has grown steadily. Since Russian forces came into play, the government has recovered much of the territory that had been lost. By 2021, the regime controls two-thirds of the country, with the remaining third in the hands of the US-protected Kurdish forces and, to a lesser extent, the various rebel factions.

Turkish intervention in support of the rebels at the beginning of the conflict was motivated by the desire to overthrow a Shiite regime allied to Iran. However, Turkish priorities have changed several times over the years, in particular with the entrenchment of the Islamic State in the Syrian territory and the increase of the Kurdish separatism. Therefore, in the course of time the Turkish objective in Syria has passed from being the overthrow of Assad, in favor of the establishment of some kind of Sunni government, to the creation of a safe zone in the north of the country to protect its borders from the Kurdish threat. Nowadays, Ankara's main concern is the possibility of the creation of a federal state in which the Kurds could enjoy some degree of

autonomy in the northern regions. With the failure of the military operation in Syria due to Russia's intervention in 2015, safeguarding Syria's territorial integrity has paradoxically become a priority for Turkey. For their part, the Gulf monarchies, having lost the Syrian conflict from a military point of view, have opted for a change of strategy. In light of the failure of the military option in Syria therefore, they seem to have resigned themselves to the fact that Bashar al-Assad remains in power and they have decided to normalize ties with the regime with the intention of distancing it from Iran.

In order to pursue its geo-strategic objectives Moscow has two priorities: keeping Assad in power and preserving Syria's territorial integrity. Everything else is instrumental to these two objectives, on which the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions depend. As explained above the Iranian presence in Syria is a key factor in pursuing these two objectives. However, Russia also maintains close ties with Israel, whose top priority is to prevent Iran from having a permanent military presence on Syrian soil, which is why Russia would be interested in limiting Iranian influence in post-war Syria. Moreover, Moscow is also interested in limiting Tehran's influence because it needs to pander to the interests of the Gulf monarchies and, in particular, of Saudi Arabia, whose contribution in terms of investments is fundamental for the economic reconstruction of the country. Moscow is fully aware that in order to establish in Syria a *Pax Russica* with full success, it needs the support of both Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose interests it must keep in mind. If it is able to meet the needs of such a diverse range of stakeholders, Moscow will definitively establish itself as a hegemon in Syria.

Despite the election of the transitional government by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum on February 5, which should lead to elections on December 24, 2021, the established equilibrium that defines the geostrategic structure of Libya, or rather the two Libya shared between Turkey and Russia, does not seem to be altered. If on the political level, the new transitional executive presents a positive image of a united Libya, on the geopolitical and military level the current situation sees the country cut in two. The Russian position towards Libya is based on a complex set of national geopolitical interests, political interests and state and private economic calculations. Contrary to what happens in Syria, in Libya the Federation seems to want to play a secondary role. The idea is to achieve a scenario in which both European and regional powers need Russia to carry out the process of reconstruction of the country. The Kremlin, in short, wants to lead the game behind the scenes. In short, Moscow is willing to renounce the role of hegemonic power in Libya, also by virtue of the fact that its geostrategic projection on the country does not represent a fundamental component of its defensive strategy of national security, as is the case of Syria. On the contrary, the control of Libya represents a fundamental aspect of Ankara's defensive strategy for the creation of a security belt to defend its national borders. However, Moscow does not intend to renounce its economic interests in the country and in this sense has deployed all its military power to protect them. In other words, Moscow does not intend to adopt an aggressive approach in Libya as in Syria in order to establish itself as a hegemonic power. However, the Kremlin does not intend to renounce its permanent presence in the country also from a military point of view, a presence which is also part of the broader offensive realist strategy of exerting pressure on the southern flank of the Atlantic Alliance and which for this reason has aroused great concern in Western powers. Such a

significant Russian military presence on Libyan soil represents for Turkey an existential threat. Therefore, the equilibrium between Russia and Turkey with regard to the Libyan dossier in the medium term seems destined to crack.

After the 2020 conflict, the military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh is allowed only to Russian armed forces and today more than in the past Yerevan needs Moscow to maintain its security. If a short time ago Armenian leader Nikol Pashinyan naively thought he could move away from Russia and turn to the West, today it is clear that whoever takes power in Armenia must submit to Moscow's diktats. The relationship between Russia and Turkey in the South Caucasus is less tense than in Syria and Libya. They have opposing geopolitical interests in this area as well. However, in this theater, unlike the others, the confrontation is less harsh and both sides are more inclined to compromise. Both set themselves limits and they are careful not to cross them, not to exacerbate their conflicts. The participation of Turkey in the conflict in Nagorno Kharabakh in support of Baku and the subsequent agreement, which reserves a role for the Turks as observers in Azerbaijan, is a relative victory for Ankara, which has somehow forced Moscow to accept the Anatolian intrusion in its "backyard". However, the Kremlin has managed to contain Turkish penetration to a great extent, and to bring under its full control a country that was dangerously moving towards the West, which is undoubtedly a great victory for Moscow.

