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review paper

## **THE SOUTH AND EAST MEDITERRANEAN POWER STRUGGLE: CASES OF LIBYA AND SYRIA**

Slobodan JANKOVIĆ<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract.* In this paper, the author uses the neoclassical geopolitical approach to analyse the power struggle in the Mediterranean as an echo of the changing world order by studying two war theatres in the Mediterranean, Libyan and Syrian. Jankovic firstly explained the importance of the Mediterranean Sea for the world economy and politics and examined the political and geographical features important for understanding the wars in these two countries.

In the second chapter, the author presents the Italian neoclassical geopolitical school. In the third part of the study, he overviews the geopolitical significance of the two mentioned countries. In the fourth chapter, the author argues that certain geographic elements and historical heritage account for understanding the political action of various actors in the Libyan and Syrian wars. Through the lens of the Italian neoclassical geopolitical school, he questions regional policies of the USA, Russia, France, Turkey, Egypt, and Israel. Finally, the author has two conclusions: a) he argues that the traditional geopolitical school of the Apennines is valid for the analysis of Mediterranean power politics, and b) he indicates that the wars in Libya and Syria are clearly showing that multipolarity auspicated by the Russian president in 2007 has come to this part of the world.

Key words: Libya, Syria, Mediterranean, U.S. Middle East policy, Egypt, French Mediterranean politics, Turkish interventions, Italian geopolitics.

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<sup>1</sup> Slobodan Janković, PhD, Head of the Centre for Neighbourly and Mediterranean countries; Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics (Serbia). Email: slobodan@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs

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## INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean Sea continues to weigh global economic importance even when the European global share of GDP is diminishing. *Mare Nostrum* accounts for roughly 20 percent of world sea trade, 30 percent of global oil trade, and 25 percent of container services. This commercial aspect was underlined after Egypt had enlarged the Suez Canal, and China started investing in Mediterranean shipping in the framework of its Belt and Road initiative. (Confitarma, 2018, p. 27)

Aside from economic trends, the Mediterranean in the past ten years has become the theatre of two multinational wars, Syrian and Libyan, involving countries from more than three continents. Parts of the Middle East and North Africa have been an important playground for weighing the strength of influence among several big and mid-range powers. In particular, Syria, Libya, Iraq and with minor importance (although with immense human tragedy) Yemen, proved to be theatres for assertive and status quo powers. While Iraq is embedded in the Middle East, Libya and Syria have parts of the Mediterranean coast. The seashore of Libya and Syria facilitated intervening countries to act, and to assert their influence in this area. Libya is mostly desert and a sparsely populated country, with important deposits of oil, some natural gas, and other minor riches.<sup>2</sup> Syria, on the other hand, is a medium-sized country with regional importance. It is clear that this part of the world continues to be significant for power politics. What is the importance of Libya and Syria, in the Mediterranean policy for local and outside actors?

These two countries are for different reasons important for intervening states – the United States of America (U.S.), Russia, France, the United Kingdom (UK), Israel, and Turkey. Italy and Egypt have strong interests in Libya. Iran helped Assad since the war started as his grip on power provides airlift and connection between Tehran and their affiliate Hezbollah in Lebanon, and is part of the area connecting the Shia population from Lebanon to the Persian Gulf. Wars in these countries started in the situation in which the USA started its pullout in Iraq (2011) and was reluctant to engage militarily farther under then-president Obama.

A broader Mediterranean power struggle important for centuries in order to control the trade routes between significant parts of Africa, Asia and Europe, today is increasingly significant for the protection of oil and gas sea exploitations. U.S. domination in the sea between Europe, North Africa and South-West Asia is increasingly challenged in the second decade of the century. Russia, another extra-regional actor, returned as a big power by projecting military force in Syria since

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, Libya “produced 2.2% of the world’s crude oil output and was ranked 4th among African countries and 17th globally in terms of the volume of crude oil produced. Libya produced 15.9 billion cubic meters of natural gas, which was about 0.5% of the world supply of gas.” See: Mowafa Taib, “The Mineral Industry of Libya”, in: *Minerals Yearbook*, United States, Bureau of Mines 2010.

2015. France, Turkey, Israel and Italy are regional countries with military and economic interests in other Mediterranean countries. Israel intervenes in Lebanon and against targets in Syria, Italy and France have deployed armed forces in Libya, France was one of the leading countries in aggression against that country and participated also in the military operations in Syria. Turkey sent its armed forces and logistic help to Libya. We will conduct a neoclassical geopolitical analysis in the tradition of the Italian school by studying the policies of international actors in the determinant area and analysing the importance of the position of the areas in question for the Mediterranean policies of the mentioned countries.

### NEOCLASSICAL ITALIAN SCHOOL

The relation between politics and space is the heart of geopolitical thinking. Often cited thought of one of the classics of geopolitics Nicholas Spykman is “Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent.” (Spykman, 1944, p. 41). Among various geopolitical influences in Italy, the local variant of classical geopolitics persists and continues to evolve directly from Giorgio Roletto and Ernesto Massi through Gianfranco Lizza up to Edoardo Boria, Paolo Sellari, Matteo Marconi and Alessio Stilo.<sup>3</sup> What characterized it in the 1920s and 1930s is still the trademark of the Apennine school. Namely, the insistence upon the history and contextualization of it coupled with the understanding of how politics uses geographical features. (Jankovic, 2020, pp. 107-8). Marconi, who as Stilo represents the fourth generation of the Italian school, insists also to add judgement and ethical background in geopolitical thinking. (Marconi, 2012, 48).

Carlo Jean, one of the neoclassical Italian geopoliticians, claims that the Mediterranean Sea is a geopolitical region and that any analysis of it cannot neglect its ‘sea hinterland’ (i retroterra marittimi). (Jean, 2012). This heartland area of *Mare Nostrum* is represented not only by the coastal states but also by those on the shores of the Black Sea and by another extension most of the Middle East. Some authors discard the Mediterranean as a fiction, a colonial product of the texts of Vidal de la Blache (traditional French geopolitical school), as Maria Paradiso.<sup>4</sup> Still, it is legitimate to analyse processes in a wider area as they do influence different shores not only via commerce but also increasingly through migration and wars. The case

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<sup>3</sup> On Italian geopolitical thought see more in: Slobodan Janković, “Geopolitička misao apeninskog poluostrva: učitelji i učenici”, (Geopolitical Thought in The Apennine Peninsula: Teachers And Students), *Međunarodni problemi*, Vol. LXXII, br. 1, str. 101–125.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Paradiso, “Esiste ancora il Mediterraneo?”, in: Marconi, Matteo, Sellari, Paolo, Verso un nuovo paradigma geopolitico: raccolta di scritti in onore di Gianfranco Lizza, Tomo I, Aracne editrice, Roma, 2015, pp. 339-343.

study of Libya and Syria is useful as two examined countries have been part of the lost empire (of the Ottoman sultanate) or have been a former European colony (Libya), and the mandate territory (Syria). Today they represent theatres involving many Mediterranean actors in Jean's understanding of the geopolitical region.

How history and political judgement decisions influence the usage of a territory? Italy, a former colonial ruler of Libya (1911-1943), soon after World War II sought to reestablish the presence in that country situated opposite the Apennine peninsula, and even today maintains a strong interest in that desert country. Italian adhesion to NATO was publicly justified by a promising stronger role in international relations and for maintaining former colonies in Africa. (Bagnato, 2010, 411-413.) After World War II, as soon as Italy started to develop its foreign economic policy, it sought to reestablish ties with the former colony. The first attempts were made already in 1958 by Enrico Mattei (+1962) legendary director of Italian Energy company ENI. The year after, the Italian company was assigned the first concession for oil exploration and exploitation. (Cereghino, Fasanella, 2015b, 243-44.).

Some ten years later, a Libyan army officer schooled in Italy led a coup d'état and soon expelled the British and American army bases in 1969. Gaddafi will nationalise oil and make contracts with Italian ENI. (Cereghino, Fasanella, 2015a, 238, 265). This Italian interest and engagement with Libya continued until this day.

French interest in Syria has been constant since the actions of Napoleon III and brief intervention in Syria (1860-1861).<sup>5</sup> Still, it is mostly tied to its experience as mandate power in between the two world wars and regards both Damascus and Beirut. Many important families in Lebanon nurture ties with France like Hariri or Aoun. This relation with Lebanon is related to Franco-Syrian relations. Syria and France had ups and downs in their relations. Hafez el Assad's reach to power in 1970 marked improvement in previously weakened good ties with Paris. Macron's presidency is marked with open enmity of the official Paris against Damascus, as the French were insisting on aggression, and for the removal of Syrian President Bashar Assad from power. (Morici, 2015, 13-15; Maselli, 2018).

## **IMPORTANCE OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY**

Geographic determinants surely affect policy planning and action. Be it for how military operations are to be conducted, be it a place along or outside main trading

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<sup>5</sup> There is an informative thesis on French intervention: Valérie Fortin-Gagné, *L'expédition de la France au Liban sous Napoléon III (1860-1861)*, Département d'histoire, Faculté des arts et des sciences, Université de Montréal, mai 2015, [https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1866/13454/Fortin-Gagne\\_Valerie\\_2015\\_memoire.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1866/13454/Fortin-Gagne_Valerie_2015_memoire.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y) accessed: 10/4/2020.

routes, quality of soil and natural riches, or variables regarding distance from the country that is projecting its power or closeness to the borders of its rival country. For example, Georgia and Ukraine have added importance for the U.S. and NATO strategies because they are bordering Russia and can be reached via sea. This potential maritime connection facilitates economic and eventual military cooperation. Besides that, Ukraine has symbolic meaning for Russian history. Syria and Libya are both maritime Mediterranean countries. Both belong to the Arab and Muslim world, and both have been under relatively secular regimes, and that more or less exhausts the similarities. Vuković and Đorđević explained why geography “still mattered” for policy planning when the U.S. was weighing its military options. Isolation and encirclement of war theatre in Syria were impossible due to presence of Hezbollah and Iranian forces, connection with Lebanon and unwillingness of three of five neighbouring states to contribute to eventual aggression (Đorđević, Vuković, 2018, 11-14, 30). Later on, Russia prevented military intervention of the eventual Western coalition.

Libya at the centre of the South Mediterranean is opposite Italy and the EU. In the study of the historical foundations of the Libyan war in 2011 and the subsequent importance of that territory for the Mediterranean politics, Roberto Motta Sosa traditionally describes the Mediterranean as the Middle area, a place in between three continents. He indicated growing demographic, and economic disparities among northern and southern coastal countries, in particular when compared with the situation in 1950 and recent years. (Sosa, 2016, p. 4). Libya is geographically at the centre of the South Mediterranean, but historically, due to predominantly desert territory, it has a small population and did not have historical importance like Egypt or even Tunisia and Morocco. If Libya has a small population and amount of cultivated area, it has a large territory of 1.759.540 km<sup>2</sup> and the longest maritime coastline in North Africa extending for 1.770 km<sup>2</sup>. It was the last territory in Africa recognizing the Ottoman sultan as sovereign, which indicates the lesser geopolitical value of that territory in the period of colonial policies. Its position vis-à-vis Italy was important for controlling or blocking the irregular migration from Africa toward the EU.

This country has the richest oil resources in North Africa, which along with smaller amounts of gas were exported regularly. In 2012, Libya controlled the largest proven oil reserves in Africa (36.85%, followed by Nigeria 28.55%) (Anyanwu and Erhijakpor, 2013, 7). Before the revolution, fossil fuel exports provided an annual profit of at least 70 billion dollars to the country. Italy was the single largest importer of Libyan oil (376.000 barrels per day), and France, Spain and Austria were also great importers. Apart from Libya's key trade partner – Italy, China also imported oil from Libya, covering some 3% of its needs.

“Gaddafi used the oil wealth to force foreign companies to leave the greatest portion of their income in Libya (the EPSA-4 Agreements — usually over 90%) if

they wished to continue to conduct research in order to exploit. After the sanctions were lifted in 2003, Libya started opening up to foreign investments primarily in the energy sector, which were followed by investments in infrastructure and tourism. The opening of two major iron mines was announced in 2010.” (Janković, Gajić, 2015, 58-59).

Syrian geopolitical importance is rather regional and has implications for the control of Lebanon and Israeli security. Historical heritage and politics shape the geographical features of it. Since Syria was one of the centres of Arab countries and it covered in times also contemporary Lebanon and sometimes parts of Palestine, together with the fact that part of its recent territory, the Golan Heights, is occupied by Israel, makes bases for its policies against the Jewish state and the interests in Lebanon. Ethnic, tribal and political ties between Lebanon and Syria intensified after Damascus intervened at the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon.

It was primarily Israel (also Turkey because of the Kurdish issue) that was interested in the weakening and eventual division of Syria.<sup>6</sup> Due to part of the river basin of the Euphrates and a small tract of the right coast of the Tigris, Syria is involved in the management of the most important water flows in Mesopotamia, and due to a system of dams built in Turkey, conflict with the northern neighbour has been perpetuated until the AKP came to power in Ankara in 2002. Stefan Jojić wrote about the Kurdish issue and Turkish aggression in Syria related to the potential dangers of the political and military strengthening of Kurds connected with the PKK (guerilla or terrorist organisation active in Turkey and Iraq), after partially lost trust and support of Turkish Kurds for the AKP. (Jojić, 2018, 58-59). Thus, the multiethnic composition and position of the river courses reversely determine politics between Ankara and Damascus.

Israel has sought for long to disintegrate Syria, as it was Egypt as the militarily most capable Arab country to challenge its objectives in the region. Aside from Syria, Saddam`s Iraq was also the aim of Israeli policies. (Janković, 2019, 299-309). With the end of the Cold War, defence cooperation between Tehran, Damascus and Hezbollah served all partners to strengthen their position.

## **SYRIA, LIBYA AND MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS**

Mezran and Varvelli published a collection of papers on roles of foreign factors in the years-long armed conflict still ongoing in Libya. It presents a good review of interests, roles and actions of big powers, regional countries, and the Gulf States.

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<sup>6</sup> See more in: Слободан Јанковић, *Блискоисточна криза: рат без мира*, Институт за међународну политику и привреду - *Сатена mundi*, Институт за међународну политику и привреду, Београд 2019.

(Mezran and Varvelli, 2017). A short overview of foreign and regional actors is another element in this geopolitical analysis, starting with power dominating the Mediterranean at the beginning of the second decade of the century.

### **The Challenge to the U.S. in the Mediterranean**

There is no strict U.S. Mediterranean strategy. Countries along this coast are in the Pentagon's view divided among three U.S. military strategic commands: *Allied Joint Force Command* is in the Mediterranean (Naples) (previously *European* renamed in 2004), but it covers only European countries including Turkey, CENTCOM encompasses those from Syria to Egypt, while most of North Africa is under AFRICOM.<sup>7</sup> In the wake of the Arab Spring, the U.S. had a dominant position in the Mediterranean Sea, ever since the end of the Cold War. Interests of Washington in the countries in the south and east of the Mediterranean Sea may be understood through major processes and policies it favoured in the past two decades.

After the U.S. had won the hegemony over the Mediterranean with the operation *Desert Storm* in Kuwait and Iraq in 1991, Syria along with Egypt, Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon, began to follow the IMF programs of structural adjustments, proposed even by the UN. Thus, West and Western-dominated organizations (UN, IMF, World Bank) imposed neoliberal solutions. At the same time started the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and in parallel, Washington was a mediator in achieving the second Arab-Israeli peace agreement, the one with Jordan in 1994. After that Syria, Iraq and Iran became key regional enemies of a major American ally in the Middle East, of Israel.<sup>8</sup>

The process of complex changes in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was announced by the U.S. and its Western partners already in 2003 and 2004.<sup>9</sup> It was a sort of justification for the occupation of Iraq and its announced democratization. (Carothers, 2007). Back then, already affirmed domination seemed to be set for deepening control by pushing for more internal reforms. The only regimes not fully accepting U.S. domination were those in Damascus and Tripoli, though Libya campaign had its own rationale. Ben Ali and Mubarak were remnants of Arab socialist nationalism. Tunisia and Egypt, whose leaders defied western

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<sup>7</sup> See the map at: Mark Thompson, "Tracking CINCellulite", *Time* May 17, 2013 <https://nation.time.com/2013/05/17/tracking-cincellulite/> accessed: 29/3/2020.

<sup>8</sup> See more in: Slobodan Janković, *Bliskoistočna kriza: rat bez mira (Middle East Crisis: War Without Peace)*, Catena Mundi and Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Slobodan Janković, Промене на Блиском истоку и у Северној Африци — Ка постсувереном светском поретку, (Changes in the Middle East and in North Africa — Towards the post-sovereign world order), *National Interest*. (Nacionalni interes), Belgrade N. 2/2011, vol. 11, pp. 261-315.

recommendations, were criticized, at least since 2005.<sup>10</sup> In order to transform the outdated regimes that tried to limit internal economic reforms encouraged by Washington and by International organizations like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund (IMF), major events were used or prepared. This was coupled with the interests of Israel, the U.S. major local ally to achieve change in Syria. Assad family was and still is the only regional state actor in alliance with Iran and Russia, and thus represents a potential target for regime change orchestrated by the West. What ensued since the end of 2010 is political, social, and economic turmoil that affected almost all of the MENA countries.<sup>11</sup>

The broader network used to tie the countries of the Mediterranean with Washington is NATO. This organization was for long looking at the south. Before the Arab Spring, NATO had the *Mediterranean dialogue* (since 1994) and the *Istanbul Cooperation Initiative* launched in 2004.<sup>12</sup> It served to deepen the ties between the West and Muslim world in a broader strategy of NATO and U.S. military expansion.

As Washington was leading its war on terror, the Atlantic alliance was divided on Iraq (2003) which induced planners in the White House and the Pentagon for more effective *ad hoc* partnerships for the ‘interventions’. According to public testimony of retired U.S. general Wesley Clark, already in 2001, the Pentagon planned for regime change in seven countries, among them Libya and Syria.<sup>13</sup> It was part of the new strategy for a *Greater*, later renamed *Broader* Middle East. It was clear, at least since 2007, that the real objectives of the NATO and U.S. military presence in the *Broder* Middle East is aimed against Russia and potentially to prevent China from spreading its influence. It was in that year that U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates asked more resources for a big army operable to fight large armies (and not only paramilitary and terrorist groups). “Four days later President of Russia Putin had a famous speech at the Munchen Security Conference, publicly criticising aggressive imposture of American influence worldwide.”<sup>14</sup> In that year famous journalist Seymour Hersh published the legendary article *Redirection* on the secret

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<sup>10</sup> For Egypt see: “The Backlash against Democracy assistance”, *National Endowment for Democracy* June 8, 2006, pp. 4, 7, 15, 26, 27.

<sup>11</sup> See for more in: Slobodan Janković, *Bliskoistočna kriza: rat bez mira*, op. cit; and Slobodan Janković, “Transformation of the Middle East after the Arab Spring”, in: (Ed) Taro Tsukimura, Ivona Lađevac, *Major International Issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century from a Perspective of Japan and Europe*, Global Resource Management Program, Doshisha University, Japan Institute of International Politics and Economics, Makedonska 25, Belgrade, 2015, (178), pp. 127-145.

<sup>12</sup> “Istanbul Cooperation Initiative”, *NATO* 28 June 2004, <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/2004/06-istanbul/docu-cooperation.htm> 28/04/2008.

<sup>13</sup> “Wes Clark - America’s Foreign Policy «Coup»”, 05.11.2007, Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY2DKzastu8>, accessed 16/05/2011.

<sup>14</sup> According to: Slobodan Janković, *Bliskoistočna kriza: rat bez mira (Middle East Crisis: War Without Peace)*, op. cit., p. 130.



plan of the Pentagon against Syria, Tehran, and Shiite political groups.<sup>15</sup> This policy clearly was in line with Israel's interests, after the previously failed war against Hezbollah in 2006. Immediately after the war, supported by former British PM Tony Blair, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney visited Saudi Arabia and soon both countries started to fund Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood groups in Lebanon and Syria (in Syria it was Syrian National Salvation Front). (Todd and all, 2013, 38, 39).

When the U.S. started its war on terror, Libyan leader Gaddafi was already in talks with Western countries, and in 2003 official Tripoli paid for victims of terrorist attacks conducted in the 1980s. (Gabellini, 2012, 198). After international sanctions were lifted, Libya invested billions in Italy, France, Spain, the UK, and in the USA. (Ibid, Janković, 2011). Nevertheless, Gaddafi thought that he could continue with the independent policy, keep the maximum profit of oil and even spread the virus of economic and thus political independence in Western and Central Africa with the project of the golden dinar.<sup>16</sup> In 2011 along with the UK and France, the U.S. conducted aggression against Libya and gained lucrative contracts. However, what ensued is a bloody civil war in which eventually the once rebelled Libyan general Khalifa Haftar is closest to victory in 2020.<sup>17</sup>

According to Wesley Clark the emergence of ISIL is again connected to the U.S. anti-Shiite and anti-Syrian strategy. Support for the creation of that monstrous entity by West and Turkey is confirmed by other sources as well. (Janković, 2019, 309-10). Anyhow, that phenomenon helped for the return of the U.S. Army units in Iraq since 2014, and in neighbouring Syria. Since September of that year, the U.S. military is present in parts of Syria, initially expanding the range of its actions officially because of fighting ISIS. (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Russia's return as a big power in the Middle East, problems between Washington and Ankara, Washington's reluctant policy in Syria (repeated threats by Obama over red lines)<sup>18</sup>, were more than not welcomed by hawkish Israeli lobbyists, Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>19</sup> By 2018, the U.S. Think Tank Center for Strategic and International

<sup>15</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, "The Redirection", *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2007, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa\\_fact\\_hersh?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh?currentPage=all), accessed: 10/03/2012.

<sup>16</sup> See more of the reasons why Libya was attacked in: Slobodan Janković, *Bliskoistočna kriza: rat bez mira (Middle East Crisis: War Without Peace)*, op. cit., 156-159.

<sup>17</sup> For the actions on the battlefields and changes of territorial control between LNA forces headed by Haftar and Tobruk Parliament against GNA forces representing parliament in Tripoli see web page: <https://libya.liveuamap.com/>

<sup>18</sup> Although Obama initiatives garnered some diplomatic success.

<sup>19</sup> For a relatively neutral view, albeit claiming the usage of chemical weapons by the Syrian official Army without evidence see: Greg Jaffe, "The problem with Obama's account of the Syrian red-line incident", *The Washington Post* Oct. 4, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/10/04/the-problem-with-obamas-account-of-the-syrian-red-line-incident/> accessed: 29/3/2020.

Studies (CSIS) already published an analysis of the need for the U.S. to re-establish a strategic approach in the area.<sup>20</sup> The year after that assessment, the U.S. agreed with Turkey to move its troops from North Syria towards North East, leaving the Turkish, Russian and Syrian forces to take over parts of the territory previously controlled by the Kurdish units – U.S. partners until then. (Alaaldin, 2019). Hence, the second decade of the 21st century begun with U.S. domination and ends with this great power in retreat, with the presence of numerous actors seeking to assert their own interests.

### Russia returns

Americans started the *War on Terror* in 2001 that should have lasted indefinitely. Russia just had begun economic recovery after years of poverty, and China was far away from being an economic superpower. In such circumstances Libya opted to negotiate and pay for lifting sanctions. Gaddafi offered the hand to the West and tried to 'bribe' it by pouring billions into western companies (Italian, French, British, American and others).<sup>21</sup> In parallel, it seems that he asked for guarantees from Russia, which in 2008 was not prepared for engagement in the Middle East. (Parfitt, 2008). Back then, he secured the cancellation of debt worth 4.5 billion and offered contracts worth billions of US dollars for Russian companies.<sup>22</sup> As Russia was economically growing steadily, it was focused on internal political and security consolidation (fighting terrorism in the North Caucasus) and developing cooperation among former Soviet republics and with China and India. The first significant diplomatic confrontation, by some erroneously defined as a challenge, was in 2007 when Russian President emphasized that the BRIC countries economically surpassed the EU, and that world basically needs a new distribution of power free from fear of the United States. That means that Moscow is preparing for engagement outside the perimeter of the former Soviet republics. (Kremlin, 2007).

Since Russia criticized U.S. policy, it was clear that it envisaged itself as a proxy target of Washington. Ukraine and the Caucasus were clear potential places of strategic pressure on Russia. Coloured revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia undermined Moscow's position in these regions and potentially represented new starting points for pressuring it. In order to prevent interference of the West in the

<sup>20</sup> "Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor", *The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)* May 22, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/restoring-eastern-mediterranean-us-strategic-anchor> accessed: 26/3/2020.

<sup>21</sup> "Kadhafi impose sa loi grâce au fric", *Courrier International* 08.03.2011, Интернет, <http://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2011/03/08/kadhafi-impose-sa-loi-grace-au-fric>, скинуто: 18/05/2011. Taken from: Slobodan Jankovic, „Libijska kriza i njene posledice”, pregledni članak, *Međunarodna politika*, God. LXII, br. 1142, april–jun 2011, IMPP, Beograd 2011, str. 30-51.

<sup>22</sup> "Отношения России и Ливии. Справка", *Ria novosti* 31.10.2008. <https://ria.ru/20081031/154145392.html> accessed: 23/3/2020.

Caucasus, Russia continued to collaborate with the remaining countries non-allied with the U.S. – Syria and Iran, and to offer economic cooperation to many MENA countries, and also to Libya.

After the Georgian war and diplomatic confrontation with the West over the status of the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohija, Russia managed to stop or pause the actions of its rivals. But in 2011, it was not ready to react so far outside its borders in order to guarantee Gaddafi's Libya. Since 1991, it was focused on energy deals and the export of arms. (Oldberg, 2016, 11). Was it a mistake or calculus, it is hard to say. (Rozin, 2013). However, if Libya was a mistake, Russia played best its last card in the Mediterranean. Not only that it previously diplomatically blocked the UN authorisation for removing Assad *manu militari*, but also in September 2015, it entered the war to keep its ally afloat and help him to restore control over the most parts of the country in the course of the next four years. "In Syria, Russia's military decisively affected the civil war and also tested and demonstrated capabilities that showed off Russian boldness, lethality, flexibility and reach. Its attacks included the first combat use of various types of Russian precision-guided munitions." (Faith and Chorev, 2019).

From the initial enmity with Turkey over Syria and the downed jet, it gradually involved Ankara in the Astana talks since December 2016. (Ria Novosti, 2017). It was a result of a failed coup in July 2016, when Erdogan seemed to have received critical intelligence from Russia in order to avoid deposition if not losing a life. (The Moscow Times, 2016) The tactical partnership between Ankara and Moscow since then deepened tensions inside NATO and gave more diplomatic weight to Russia. It became again respected player in the wider Mediterranean region and even managed to be heard over Libya by endorsing Khalifa Haftar, just as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (Mezran and Varvelli, 2017, 8, 18, 19). Russian private military company Wagner Group is acting according to Russian interests and fights alongside Haftar's forces. Already in 2017, Western analytics concluded that Russia, Egypt and the UAE secured the "key role for themselves following Western powers' abdication of a larger role in Libya." (Mezran and Varvelli, 2017, 8).

## Turkey

Syrian, just like later Libyan intervention can be understood also as a way to partially restore some of the foreign policy economic, political and cultural expansion started by Turkey under the guidelines of former Prime minister and Minister of Foreign affairs Ahmet Davutoglu.<sup>23</sup> Turkey, which shares an 822 km

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<sup>23</sup> See more on the intentions of Turkey in the previous period in: Slobodan Janković, "Vectors of Turkish foreign policy: What remains of the strategy for 2023?", *Međunarodni problemi*, Belgrade 2016 Volume 68, Issue 1, pp: 7-23.

long border with the southern neighbour, was almost immediately a sponsor of the so-called Syrian armed opposition. It hosted the military headquarters of the 'Free Syrian Army' and was likely the organiser for the illegal trade with various Islamists' controlled territories in the war-torn southern neighbour. (Jankovic, 2013, 143, 154; Janković, 2019, 310-11). Another internal reason for the aggression was the Kurdish issue, and when Kurds after the battle for Kobane managed to connect space controlled by them along the border with Turkey, Ankara prepared and in 2018 launched an operation to gain enclave of Afrin at the northwest of Syria. It was the second military operation (after the Shield of Euphrates in 2016) aimed against the creation of a strong Kurdish controlled territory that could trigger or support the terrorist activities of the PKK in Turkey.

If participation in the Syrian war is also a result of the previously failed foreign and internal policies, Turkish intervention in the Libyan war has a clear geoeconomic explanation. It is a conflict with Greece, Cyprus and Israel over the exploitation of gas in the Mediterranean Sea that was the main driver behind political decision to intervene in Libya. (Ahmedzade, 2020). Besides that, the decision to send troops in Syria and Libya is part of the policy of Erdogan after surviving the attempt of the coup d'etat to deal more aggressively in the foreign arena.

Both in Syria and Libya, it was also the ideological alliance of Turkey with the Muslim Brotherhood that influenced Ankara to pick sides in the war. Finally, public explanation for the war was also the need of Turkey to protect its brethren, the Libyan Turks, the descendants of Ottoman settled warriors Kuloglu, or in the local dialect Koroglu. Conveniently, they mostly live in Misrata and Tripoli, and their existence, like that of Turkmens in Syria and Iraq has always been a useful pretext for military involvement of Ankara. (Tastekin, 2019).

Thus, Turkish intervention is an example of how political decision uses the historical framework and geographic factors to promote certain policy.

### **French interventions**

French policy in the Mediterranean is influenced also by historical and geopolitical factors, as Parisian politicians tend to secure control of the shores across the sea. Colonial legacy and economic domination in foreign colonies represent determinants that support the decision-makers' will to act.

After decades of promoting the EU framework for cooperation with the African continent, France returned as an intervening power against Libya (2011). Previously it was the main instigator of cooperation with North Africa among the European Community members. This cooperation started with the Global Mediterranean Policy (GMP) in 1972 and continued with the Barcelona Process – the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (in 1995). The EuroMed was basically a failure

to be repeated with the European Neighbourhood Partnership in 2005. (Jankovic, Gajic, 2015). When France during the presidency of Nicholas Sarkozy promoted the Mediterranean Union, it was blocked by Berlin. Nevertheless, in Libya, after the fallout of Gaddafi triggered by Franco-British aggression, an old French-Italian rivalry, present in the area since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gradually evolved.<sup>24</sup> It happened within a complex political context.

At the time of the outbreak of the Arab Winter, France was leading a sterile Union for the Mediterranean (UfM launched in 2008), and was eager to impose itself in the European and the broader framework as a power broker. Its president wanted to re-launch the politics of *grandeur* and establish military and security cooperation with the UK in November 2010 — ‘*entente frugale*’. “Apart from aiming to maintain and strengthen their own military capacities in a period of economic crisis, the Franco-British cooperation was aimed at forging a partnership with the USA and Germany has been deliberately left out”, because of its previous obstruction of the French Mediterranean project. (Janković, Gajić, 2015, 54-55).

Since the demise of the previous regime, the country has gradually dissolved into chaos. “(N)one of the priorities planned by the international community for the post-regime transition has been achieved. Not only has the country been divided into two main political centres of powers, but it has sunk into an endemic civil war and the ensuing chaos has made it home to terrorists, criminals and smugglers.” (Illardo, 2018, 1). Although French soldiers, just like Italian, are stationed in the North African country, officially to train forces, for the time being, Russia and Egypt got to profit the most, as European powers that have already invested a lot of resources in securing their economic and political interests. After years of playing on both sides, as in 2016 when Paris collaborated with Haftar against ISIS (Mezran, Varvelli, 69), France finally opted to support the winning party, namely Tobruk and General Haftar. By doing so, it got into a rift with Turkey. This dispute between Ankara and Paris is part of a larger geopolitical struggle over the Mediterranean, as French Total and Italian ENI, energy companies are in negotiations with the Greek Cypriot government to explore and exploit natural gas deposits in the waters claimed partially also by Turkey. (The Soufan Center, 2020).

## Egypt

“Egypt in the post-Muslim Brotherhood rule is an important regional actor that shares many of the Israeli and Greek concerns.” (Inbar, 2014, p. 29) Al Sisi rule put back the country on the Nile River at the forefront of the Arab world with internal

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<sup>24</sup> See more on Franco-Italian rivalry in Libya in: Roberto Motta Sosa, “Libia. Radici storiche di un caso geopolitico”, *Fondazione De Gasperi*, Roma 2016.

investments helped by Saudis and with initial participation in the Yemen war. But, Egyptian cooperation with Greece and Cyprus, on the one hand, and its direct support to General Haftar in Libya clearly shows its growing regional ambitions.

Al Sissi (Abdel Fattah Saeed Hussein Khalil al-Sisi) formed a new Eastern Mediterranean partnership with Israel, Greece and Cyprus, building stronger ties also with Russia. That is why experts from the Israeli BESA Center vowed “Every effort should be made by Western powers to prevent Egypt from moving closer to Russia.” (Ibid). Its support for the Tobruk House of Representatives or secular forces is logical if one understands the general ideological rift between bearers of the Muslim Brotherhood, a world view defeated in a military coup in Cairo in 2013 dominant in Tripoli and Ankara. It seems that the Egyptian and the UAE military air forces conducted operations against Islamists in Libya in 2016. (Mezran and Varvelli, 2017, 19).

Israel already in 2010 entered into diplomatic conflict with Turkey over the Gaza freedom flotilla raid. Since then, officials in Jerusalem were looking for a new major ally in the Middle East. Until 1979, it was Iran and later it was Turkey. After security cooperation has already evolved in the Mubarak era, two countries, Israel and the post-Muslim Brotherhood Egypt indirectly cooperate through their partnerships with Greece and Cyprus. (Zemenides and Harris, 2019).

Besides these Mediterranean partners, Cairo has developed cooperation with the UAE in Yemen and Libya, where this oil-rich country is seeking to expand its political influence in an unprecedented military engagement.

### **Italian lack of will**

As old colonial power in Libya, and positioned directly to the north of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, Italy has a long tradition of cooperation with regimes in Tripoli. Struggle to keep positions in the former colony and other southern Mediterranean countries (development of energy cooperation with Egypt and Libya) dominates the politics of Rome ever since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Sosa, 2016). Two countries are important for the control of irregular migration flows from Africa to the EU. Before the war, the Berlusconi government has had an agreement since August 2009 to stop these flows, but as wars ravaged the countries, migrations soon resumed. As the Italian governments follow the official UN and EU policy since 2011, they supported the Tripoli government and have their forces stationed in the country since 2011 in various missions. Still active is *Missione bilaterale di assistenza e supporto in Libya (MIASIT)*, which has up to 400 people, terrestrial, and navy logistics. After fully sidelining with American policy in the time of Obama, Italy lost the possibility to have contracts in the eastern part of the country dominated by Haftar’s forces. ENI now has investments in

Tripolitania and is trying to secure them through diplomacy and involvement with Tripoli. (Mezran, Varvelli, 21). Still, by the end of 2019, Rome lost its diplomatic ace as it is openly and fully for the one side in the conflict. It is manning the military hospital for forces nominally loyal to Tripoli Prime minister Fayez Mustafa al-Sarraj. (Ibid, 123). This policy that could be defined as bandwagoning, but is more accurately the capitulation of Rome in internal and foreign policy, for the time being, makes Italy dependant on the uncoordinated Brussels foreign policy.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

After examining the importance of the political activities of different players in Libya and Syria, we can confirm the complexity and importance of the Mediterranean for global politics. Geographical position and historical heritage definitely play a certain role in foreign policy calculus, but only after political decision to use them. Overview of the power politics in the Mediterranean, of different regional and extra-regional actors for their interventions and activities versus Libya and Syria one could conclude the validity of the Italian neoclassical approach that puts the political action and political interest as the major variable for the geopolitical value of some territory. Wars in Libya and Syria definitely exceed their merely geographical or economic importance.

Russian growing military and political presence in the Mediterranean (along with Chinese Belt and Road initiative) is paving the way for multipolarity announced in Putin`s speech in 2007 and for the changed regional order in the Mediterranean. As Tony Chavez explains,

“Access to the Mediterranean Sea means access to the world, and Russia and China are seeking to gain veto power, via geopolitical and geo-economical influence, over other nations` economic, diplomatic and security decisions. Reaching the Persian Gulf from the East Coast of the United States through the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal, for example, is shorter compared to the West Coast of the United States across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The threats, then, are twofold. First, Russia and China have begun to sew instability in the eastern Mediterranean that concerns U.S. allies and partners, as well as U.S. economic interests. Second, Moscow and Beijing seem to be betting that the Mediterranean is an ideal choke point to challenge U.S. policy” (Chavez, 2018).

Turkey after suffering foreign policy failure of its policies of zero problems with neighbours and internal political polarisation, intervenes militarily in the examined countries, making it one of the military most engaged countries of the world (with their army participating in military operations in Iraq, Syria and Libya). In both cases, its leadership recalled historical and geopolitical reasons in order to

justify them. Egypt together with the UAE is seeking to regain political importance in the Arab world, by endorsing and helping Haftar's forces.

As before the Arab Spring Russia and China continue to affirm their presence in the Mediterranean, Russia militarily and politically through Libya and Syria, and China economically and diplomatically backing Russian initiatives. The U.S., France, and in particular Italy, despite maintaining some military presence (France in both countries, Italy in Libya, and the U.S. in Syria) are slowly losing ground in the Mediterranean.

If the first and second Iraqi wars were announcing and confirming American-led Western domination in the Mediterranean, the Libyan and Syrian war outcomes would demonstrate a changed balance of forces. Of course, this process is not something that cannot be transformed or slightly changed, but it is clear that multipolarity has already arrived in *Mare Nostrum*.

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## **BORBA ZA PREMOĆ NA JUŽNOM I ISTOČNOM SREDOZEMLJU: SLUČAJEVI LIBIJE I SIRIJE**

*Apstrakt:* U ovom radu autor koristi neoklasični geopolitički pristup u analizi sukoba sila na Sredozemlju. Ova borba predstavlja eho promena svetskog poretka kroz analizu dva ratna poprišta, libijskog i sirijskog. Janković isprva objašnjava značaj Sredozemlja za svetsku privredu i politiku. On ukazuje na politička i geografska obeležja bitna za razumevanje ratova u te dve zemlje.

U drugom poglavlju autor predstavlja italijansku neoklasičnu geopolitičku školu. U trećem delu studije on vrši pregled geopolitičkih obeležja pomenutih zemalja. U četvrtom delu rada autor tvrdi da pojedine geografske osobine i istorijsko nasleđe doprinose shvatanju političkog delanja različitih aktera u ratovima u Libiji i u Siriji. Kroz optiku italijanske neoklasične geopolitičke škole on ocenjuje regionalne politike SAD, Rusije, Francuske, Turske, Egipta i Izraela. Konačno on izvodi dva zaključka: a) tradicionalna geopolitička škola sa Apenina je korisna za analizu politike sile u Sredozemlju, i b) navodi da ratovi u Libiji i u Siriji jasno ukazuju da je multipolarnost, koju je ruski predsednik najavio 2007. godine, stupila u ovaj deo sveta.

*Ključne reči:* Libija, Sirija, Sredozemlje, američka bliskoistočna politika, Egipat, Francuska politika na Sredozemlju, turske intervencije, italijanska geopolitika.

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