

# Geopolitics of the Mediterranean Sea Area During and After the Cold War (1949-1989)

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*The current war conflict in Syria and constant warfare between the Israeli state and the Palestinians which recently erupted once again in Gaza strip brought the region of the Middle East to the world attention once again. However, the Middle East is a natural-geographic continuation of the Mediterranean Sea basin and, therefore, it is a part of the broader Mediterranean geopolitical game. Nevertheless, the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Mediterranean Sea basin is probably of the highest level from the global perspective.*

An importance of the Mediterranean Sea area in geopolitical and geostrategic standpoint one can understand from the very fact that this area is situated at the crossroads between three continents and making *de facto* a bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa.[1] The Mediterranean Sea area as well as connects two oceans – the Atlantic and Indian. It is a true fact that the lands around the Mediterranean Sea were the core of the Ancient World culture, civilization, and history which gave a basis for the present-day modernity and especially the background of the Western civilization.[2] An economic importance of the area is in the fact that the Mediterranean was and is on the way of vital world trade routes.

## Demarcation Lines

The Mediterranean Sea area is actually the demarcation line between several “worlds”: Judeo-Christian and Islamic; developed and underdeveloped; democracy and authoritarianism, etc. It is important to notice that this area was faced with the highest number of the wars in the whole history. In modern time, the Mediterranean was one of the most significant places of the Cold War (1949-1989), between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In addition, the first two post-Cold War crisis all over the world, the First Gulf War (1991)[3] and the dissolution of ex-Yugoslavia (1991-1995) followed by the Kosovo War (1998-1999)[4] involved the Mediterranean Sea area and had direct implications on the political life on the area.

Today, in the area can be distinguished from five military-political-economic influential groups:

- 1) The European Union, the Council of Europe and the NATO.
- 2) The Russian Federation.
- 3) The League of Arab States.
- 4) Non-allied countries (Israel, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Former

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – FYROM).

5) China.

During the Cold War period, the world security system was grounded on the concept of the “Balance of Fear”. [5] According to the NATO strategy, the main danger was expected in both Central Europe and the “Western Wing” of the NATO. [6] Subsequently, the Mediterranean Sea area, as the “Southern Wing” of the NATO was considered as of a lesser importance in general NATO war strategy during the Cold War time. Further, parts of the area outside the NATO was called as “Out of Area”. [7] The whole region was considered in fact as a part of the key Central-European frontline toward the Warsaw Pact at least till 1960’s when the USSR fleet was present in the Mediterranean Sea. The US “Sixth Fleet” in the Mediterranean Sea was also supposed to symbolize the support to the allies within the global confrontation. [8]



Source: Oriental Review

The fact of importance is that within the NATO Mediterranean segment there were and still are political fragmentations and even the conflicts (ex., the Cyprus crisis in 1974). On the one hand, Turkey, Italy, and Portugal were completely integrated into the NATO while Greece’s involvement into the organization was and is strictly determined by the conflict with Turkey over Cyprus, the Aegean islands and Trace at the Balkan Peninsula. France and Spain do not participate fully in the NATO military structure. In general, the conflict between Greece and Turkey was and is the most significant one within the NATO serving:

- 1) As the crucial source of fragmentation within the NATO “Southern Wing”.
- 2) As a source for destabilizing the security of the Mediterranean Sea area. [9]

However, with the dissolution of the USSR, the unification of Germany and the abolishment of the Warsaw Pact (1989-1991) a period of the Cold War became over with a clear Western military-political victory primarily by the USA. The post-Cold War era is firstly characterized by the disappearance of the balance of superpowers, the “clash of civilizations” and with the international relations within the framework of the “West against the rest”. [10] The most significant outcome of those events is the fact that the bloc division of Europe so far disappeared. Moreover, instead of being the main rival to the USA and the NATO, the post-Soviet Russia turned into its main partner (until the Ukrainian crisis started in 2014) in attempts to establish a new global security system known as “The New Order” and led by the US administration. [11] This term was used by the US President George Bush (Senior) in November 1990 in his address to the US Congress. The US is using this maxim in order to inform all the world actors that it has reserved for itself the leading role in the new international relations. The fact is that after the period of bipolar world division, the dominant East-West confrontations now are replaced by crossing and mixing in the Mediterranean Sea area with tensions and conflicts of the North-South relations.

“Grey Zone”

The disappearance of one out of two Cold War superpowers eliminated the “global threat” in

the area of the Mediterranean until 9/11 2001. Instead of the bipolar struggles, the Mediterranean Sea area became in a strategic point of view the so-called “Grey Zone”[12] at least until the current war in Syria. Concerning the security of the Mediterranean area, after the removing of the Iron Curtain in 1989/1990 the new challenge reflected through focus shifted from the East-West toward the political, economic even and cultural confrontations and friction between the North and the South, between the developed and underdeveloped areas of the world, with regard to the demographic explosion of the South (i.e., the North and Central Africa in the case of the Mediterranean Sea area) and the problems of an unemployment followed by the illegal migration waves from the South to the North.[13]



NATO's premier anti-submarine warfare exercise in the Mediterranean Sea, March 2018. (Source: Oriental Review)

A security issue of the last decade of the Cold War period followed by the post-Cold War time in the area of the Mediterranean Sea was and is characterized and challenged by increased regional nationalism in many cases, but not exclusively connected with the Islamic fundamentalism, like during the time of the “Arab Spring” started on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010.[14] It is important to notice that many Mediterranean countries have almost 100% Islamic population, what means that political life is mainly based on the Islamic (theocratic) values.[15] An influence of Islam on the political life in those countries is day by day in the process of increasing what is very visible, for instance, in Egypt and Libya after the successful street-style revolutions in which Hosni Mubarak and Muammar el Gaddafi lost power or even more visible in the case of the current war in Syria.[16] The objective of Islamic fundamentalists is to establish pure Islamic states based on Koran like it was a case with the Taliban Afghanistan before the US military intervention after 9/11.[17] The model of such kind of a theocratic state offered the Islamic revolution in Persia in 1979 when the pro-Western regime of Shah Reza Pahlavi (directly supported by the US) was abolished and removed with the model of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in the Republic of Iran.[18] This example was and is followed by several ultra- Islamic parties, movements and organizations all over the Islamic world as it is the case, for instance, with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria or with the Bosnian Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in the 1990s.[19] Speaking about the regional nationalism of the Arabic and Islamic countries it is necessary to mention, alongside with Khomeini's Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, and the pan-Arabism of Gamal Abdel Nasser supported by the society-organization of “Muslim Brothers”[20] or Saddam Hussein's neo-pan-Arabism, etc.

### Conflict Sources

There is no doubt that the Mediterranean region was and is, and probably will be, one of the most conflict-prone areas all over the world. There is virtually no one country in the region whose state boundaries were not or are not questioned by their neighbors or cannot be questioned from a historical point of view. After the end of the bipolar confrontation between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact, there were two military struggles in direct relations with the Mediterranean region. There were the First Gulf War, in which one of the Mediterranean country (Turkey) was strongly involved, and the civil war in the former Yugoslavia as one of the Mediterranean countries. In addition, there are several constant conflict sources in the region. The most important of them are:

- 1) Israeli-Palestinian friction.
- 2) The question of the Kurds, who are living in four countries – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.
- 3) Friction between Libya and Egypt and Libya and Algeria.
- 4) The local conflicts in Sudan, Chad, and South Sahara.



Russian heavy missile cruiser Pyotr Veliky makes port call in Tartus, Syria (Source: Oriental Review)

### Concluding Remarks

Finally, its eastern part is of the enormous conflict potential out of the whole area of the Mediterranean Sea region. The area of the Mediterranean Sea was and is one of the key strategic points of interest for the NATO from the very time of creation of this military organization in 1949 during the Cold War in order to challenge the real or potential threats for its own security. Within a global concept of the NATO security system, Turkey, Greece and Italy compose a sub-system of countries which belong to its “Southern Wing”. The main areas of activities by these countries are the Middle East and the Balkans. However, regardless a fact that Turkey, Greece, and Italy belong to the same security umbrella system offering by the NATO, there are serious differences in regard to the NATO regional policy, especially between Turkey and Greece, which brought these two countries almost to the open war conflict in 1974 over the Cyprus question. They also had different policies toward the question of succession of the former Yugoslavia in 1991-1995 followed by the Kosovo War of 1998-1999. The future of their mutual cooperation within security model offered by the NATO primarily depends on the question how Turkey and Greece can settle their bilateral problems in particular connected with the question of the future of Cyprus.

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### Notes

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[3] See: Alastair Finlan, *The Gulf War 1991*, Osprey Publishing, 2003; Richard S. Lowry, *The Gulf War Chronicles: A Military History of the First War with Iraq*, Lincoln, NE: Iuniverse, 2008.

[4] See: Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2002; Alastair Finlan, *The Collapse of Yugoslavia 1991-1999*, Osprey Publishing, 2004.

[5] See: John Lamberton Harper, *Cold War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; Carole K. Fink, *Cold War: An International History*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2014; William T. Walker, *America in the Cold War: A Reference Guide*, ABC-CLIO, 2014.

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[7] Luigi Caligaris, "Security Challenges in Alliance: The Southern Periphery", *International Spectator*, No. 4, 1992, p. 5.

[8] On the US navy presence in the Mediterranean Sea area, see: *Importance of United States Naval Forward Presence in Mediterranean Affairs*, Naval Postgraduate School: Pennyhill Press, 2014.

[9] On the post-Cold War Mediterranean security challenges, see: Nikolaos A. Stavrou (ed.), *Mediterranean Security at the Crossroads: A Reader*, Duke University Press, 1999; Stephen C. Calleya, *Security Challenges in the Euro-Med Area in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Mare nostrum*, New York: Routledge, 2013.

[10] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1992; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, NY: Touchstone Rockfeller Center, 1997; Susanne Peters, *The "West" Against the "Rest": Geopolitics After the End of the Cold War*, Geopolitics, 1999; Kanayo Nwankwo, *The West and the Rest: In the Wells of Hell*, Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2008; *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, Foreign Affairs, 2013.

[11] Richard Rosencrance: *A New Concept of Powers*, *Foreign Affairs*, New York, 1992. However, more accurate term for the post-Cold War international relations framework is "The NATO World Order" (Vladislav B. Sotirović, "The NATO World Order, The Balkans and The Russian National Interest", Vladislav B. Sotirović, *Balkanica. Scientific Articles in English*, Vilnius: Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences Press "Edukologija", 2013, pp. 110-129).

[12] Richard Falk: "In Search of a New World Model", *Current History*, Philadelphia, April 1993, p. 145.

[13] On the problem of migration and security, see: Elspeth Guild, *Security and Migration in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009; Thanh-Dam Truong, Des Gasper (eds.), *Transnational Migration and Human Security*, Berlin-Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011.

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[15] Mark Gasiorowski (ed.), *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 2014.

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- [18] On Islamic Republic of Iran and Islamic fundamentalism, see: Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, New York: Times Books-Henri Holt and Company, 2006; Lawrence Davidson, *Islamic Fundamentalism: An Introduction*, Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2013.
- [19] During the time of the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), SDA and Muslim Bosnian-Herzegovinian government were getting full diplomatic, financial and material support by Iran.
- [20] See: Hesham Al-Awadi, *The Muslim Brothers in Pursuit of Legitimacy: Power and Political Islam in Egypt under Mubarak*, I.B.Tauris, 2014.

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