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## **THE STRATEGIC RELEVANCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN: LOCAL INSTABILITIES AND INTERNATIONAL THREATS**

**Abstract:** *The Mediterranean is usually observed as a gateway to Europe, mainly in terms of migratory processes. Over the last few years, the progressive shift of interest to Asia by the United States has led to new opportunities for competing regional players, which affect the local security framework. In this new scenario, the Mediterranean takes on relevance no longer only as a gateway to Europe, but as a crucial strategic area for the penetration of the African continent. The latter has long been known as the incubator of the new jihadist threat, which is finding new life and increasingly assuming the characteristics of a hybrid threat. In such a crisis scenario, the security of the Mediterranean is no longer limited to the coastal countries of North Africa but inevitably includes the Sahel area. Here, for years now, the progressive formation of a united front of instability has been observed, crossing Africa from the east to the west coast (here called the "Black Belt Road"), through the bridging of different crises. Considering the European and Italian military presence through operations Barkhane and Takuba, the security of the Mediterranean directly affects the future scenarios of Western military involvement in the African continent.*

**Keywords:** *Mediterranean; security; terrorism; jihadism; EU; Africa.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The entire area of the Mediterranean basin is usually the subject of lively academic and political debates about its position as a gateway to Europe. This concept, closely connected with its geographical location and its historical past, takes its cue from the role that the Mediterranean plays in the context of migratory routes directed towards Europe starting mainly, but not only, from the ports of Maghreb. This perspective has inevitably conditioned the strategic framework of the Mediterranean in the context of security studies, limiting its geographical scope and a thorough analysis of the main factors involved. Observing the Mediterranean basin as a one-way communication route leading from Africa to European ports has often limited the debate on security in the Mediterranean to strengthening the defence of southern European borders. This offers only a partial assessment of a much more relevant geographical area, especially taking into consideration its southern side (Biscop, 2003). The latter has now seen growth over time not only in its strategic importance but also in its geographical conception, ending up encompassing surrounding regions and countries in proximity to the Maghreb (Aning & Amedzrator, 2014).

Precisely, this side of the Mediterranean is crucial in terms of security and terrorist threat, considering the increasingly prominent role of the African continent as a new stage of the jihadist phenomenon (Warner et al., 2020). The mixture of terrorism, illicit trafficking of various kinds, high inefficiency of the State apparatuses, and migratory processes, now make Africa an integral part of the Mediterranean, and therefore European and transatlantic, security calculus (Lesser, 2019). This change of perspective, therefore, requires broadening the concept of the Mediterranean basin, to also include the area beyond the Maghreb which extends into the Sahelian region, and at the same time also broadening the concept of the overall security framework. This involves examining the peculiar factors of local threats, which thrive because of well-defined characteristics which in turn intersect the jihadist cause, thus generating transnational threats. This paper builds on the definition of “*Black Belt Road*” [1] implemented by Lombardi (2019) but goes beyond in observing and connecting the factors at the basis of the consolidation of an instability front that poses a risk to international security in terms of terrorist threats, geopolitical competition, migratory and economic processes. This mechanism in turn has repercussions on Western military involvement in Africa, laying the foundations for a rethinking of inter-institutional cooperation in the context (Charbonneau, 2017).

## 1. STRATEGIC CHANGE

Over the last few years, there has been a gradual rethinking of the strategic involvement of the United States in Europe and the Mediterranean. In terms of the numerical presence of US military contingents, there has been no actual withdrawal or a real disengagement. But, especially during the Trump presidency, the United States has long questioned, at least on a political level, the governance structures of European security that emerged after World War II. The realignment of the priorities of the United States in Europe and the Mediterranean was offset by the attention paid to the Asian context (Jisi & Ran, 2019). This phenomenon is the result of China's exponential growth as a geopolitical rival and the territorial defeat of the Islamic State (IS). This last event caused the Middle Eastern theatre to lose its strategic importance, considering the "*war on terror*" by now a fragmented and extended process over much wider scenarios than the Levant. Already at the time of the Obama administration, therefore, we witnessed the development of the concept of *pivot to Asia*, to mark the structural shift of the strategic centre of gravity towards crucial theatres for the geopolitical challenges of the 21st century (Silove, 2016). The competition with China, combined with a loss of interest in the jihadist threat in the Middle East, has led the United States to drain part of the resources from the Mediterranean theatre in favour of the Asian one. Furthermore, the hasty downsizing of the fight against jihadist terrorism on the Middle Eastern front was accompanied by the lack of perception of the emergence of state actors in the vacuum of power that was opening. Countries such as China, Russia, Turkey, for example, have taken advantage of the enormous opportunities provided by the Mediterranean in terms of penetration, allowing old and new regional powers to project their power in the context.

These geopolitical actors have shown that they interpret the role of the Mediterranean innovatively with respect to European countries, perceiving its "offensive" function towards the African continent and not only defensive in terms of migratory flows and jihadism. This activism is notable for its various facets, which have seen the various actors pursue their own international agenda to achieve different strategic objectives. This has involved the deployment of instruments of economic, commercial, and military nature, often in combined forms. These different

strategies on the part of the various state actors have intercepted the trajectory of jihadist terrorism over time, encouraging and amplifying its proliferation factors and increasing the risk scenario for African states included in the Mediterranean and European security frameworks. The conflict that involved Crimea in 2014 and the growing Russian involvement in Syria, for example, marked a progressive and powerful return of Moscow to the Mediterranean, taking the opportunity not only to interfere in the Western sphere of influence but also to project the own power towards the penetration of the African continent. This has also produced significant spillovers on the fight against jihadist terrorism, as evidenced by the parable of IS in the Levant, or by the recent involvement of the Wagner Group proxies in Africa. Likewise, the growing assertiveness of Erdogan's Turkey has been witnessed, to fill the power gaps and engage in a wavering relationship with the West, increasingly characterized by growing tension [2]. An example of this is provided by the ongoing competition between France and Turkey, in addition to the atavistic tensions between the latter and Cyprus (Mallinson, 2020). Ankara is one of the main players trying to carve out a new space in the Mediterranean, using the sea as a launching pad to support the penetration of the African continent and support an ambitious international agenda. The strategic role played by Erdogan in the framework of post-Gaddafi Libya, for example, is instrumental to the creation of a ports network that allows the reach of the Turkish navy to be extended. This doctrine, which takes the name of *Blue Homeland*, aims to outline a new geopolitical horizon that sees the Mediterranean as its fulcrum of expansion, to promote the enlargement of Turkish influence into the African continent [3].

The political tensions regarding the United States' support to ancient alliances and the commitment in the Mediterranean basin are also linked to the debate within the European Union (EU) about the elaboration of a common foreign policy by the member States. The pursuit of an effective EU foreign policy is part of the broader process of European integration and has long been at the centre of political and academic debate (Pirozzi, 2014). Furthermore, the pursuit of a common foreign policy is also a necessary precondition for the development and implementation of a security and defence policy common to all member states. Although the EU created the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), within which the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is included, EU states often move in this area on their own, pursuing policies disconnected from community objectives. This has so far weakened the positions of the EU on the international stage, primarily in the Mediterranean. This strategic

weakness has also been deepened precisely by the migratory crisis back in 2015. They have produced a vast echo in European societies, bringing to the fore political parties openly hostile to the EU (Simon, 2012).

On the one hand, this has pushed national governments towards fragmented management of migration policies and of the Mediterranean itself, aggravating tensions and security risks. On the other hand, these crises pushed to focus even more on the vision of the Mediterranean as a gateway to Europe, forgetting the strategic role it plays for European security also in terms of projection towards Africa. In this way, European countries have also provided new spaces for manoeuvre to China and Russia, interested on the one hand in weakening Western hegemony in the region, on the other in building new strategic ties in the competition between powers. The two countries have chosen different strategies to achieve certain objectives. China has promoted a vast commercial campaign across the African continent, investing heavily to build infrastructure and secure profitable contracts for essential raw materials (Benabdallah, 2021). African countries have thus become a key piece of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), becoming recipients of investments that are difficult to repay and allowing the installation of military bases of Beijing such as the one present in Djibouti [4]. On the contrary, the Russians, through paramilitary proxies such as the Wagner Group, have aimed to offer a security side to the African autocrats, justifying the penetration of the continent and the creation of their own sphere of influence in the region with the fight against jihadist terrorism (Cristiani, 2020). The strong involvement of external actors in the Mediterranean, however, not only signals its centrality in the framework of the new competition between regional and international powers but has important repercussions on the threats to international security. The latter is often the result of local tensions and destabilizations which, by crossing the specific crisis factors of the context with the presence of external actors, end up projecting themselves on an international level as well [5].

Jihadist terrorism is one of the main threats affecting the Euro-Med area. This phenomenon has undergone numerous changes in the post-9/11 international chessboard. This involves a variation in terms of protagonists and strategies pursued, as well as of geographical reference theatres. The loss of IS territoriality following the intervention of the international coalition in Syria and Iraq has certainly not entailed the disintegration of the threat that the jihadist

organization represents. On the contrary, it has resulted in its diffusion and dynamization that was made necessary following the loss of control in the original territories of the Siraq (Syria and Iraq), the founding core of the jihadist narrative, allowing for a transnational deployment outside the original territorial core. Following this migration, today the African continent represents a strategic and crucial landing point. Thanks to its peculiar characteristics, it has allowed IS to find the ideal conditions to take root and renew itself, exploiting the already existing crisis factors and the structural weaknesses of local institutions. In this way, the jihadist galaxy was able to proliferate again, offering a different type of threat, hybrid, compared to the classic canons of interpretation used to observe the jihadist phenomenon at the beginning of the 2000s [6]. To best intercept this change in threat, both in geographical and methodological terms, it is therefore necessary to broaden the notion of the Mediterranean by favouring a more inclusive interpretation that also embraces the Sahel. This welding makes it possible to frame in a sufficiently accurate manner the picture of shared local crises that are projected on the Mediterranean, intercepting the interests of geopolitical powers and thus exploding into international threats that catch Europe in the middle.

## **2. THE INCLUSION OF THE SAHEL IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SECURITY FRAMEWORK**

The loss of territoriality by IS in the Middle East following the intervention of the Western coalition has led over time, as previously highlighted, to the shift of the geographical centre of gravity of the jihadist organization. This process has involved not only IS and its local ramifications, but also other organizations included in the jihadist galaxy, such as al-Qaeda (Larémont, 2011). This progressive shift has created a migratory process of global jihad with consequent rooting in the African continent. In this new context, the constant consolidation of a new form of jihadism has been noted, which is proliferating in a sort of laboratory of extremism. Therefore, we are witnessing a terrorist phenomenon of a different kind than that observed and studied in the context of the Middle East and Afghanistan.

This migration of the jihadist threat has led, over the last few years, to a gradual and constant increase in European involvement in Africa, especially in the Sahel region. This

increased commitment entailed above all an important deployment of military contingents, with France playing a leading role also considering its historical and cultural ties with the region. In addition, the need to increasingly resort to the military tool to counter jihadism in the Sahel has produced important theoretical reflections on the inclusion of this region in the strategic conception of Mediterranean security. This has highlighted the continuity of social, political, geographical, and criminal factors existing between the Maghreb and the Sahel, with the consequent need for a joint strategic analysis concerning the Mediterranean area. The French military intervention in the framework of Operation Barkhane, however, has not so far produced the desired results, failing to limit the proliferation of the jihadist threat and paying a high price in terms of resources invested and men lost. Also, in order to face these difficulties, Paris has tried to identify a European side in the management of the multiple Sahelian crises. The attempt at the "*Europeanization*" of the military intervention in the Sahel by President Macron is part of the strong debate underway within the European Union about the elaboration of a European strategic sovereignty and the promotion of common defence policies (Balduino, 2020). If on the one hand, France's objective was to alleviate the burden on its own shoulders, on the other hand, a connection between the security of the Sahel and that of the Mediterranean has been progressively highlighted, stressing the common features between the two contexts.

Faced with the novelty posed by the jihadist threat, and its relocation from the original theatres to Africa, a new conceptualization of the geographical region usually considered when referring to the Mediterranean has been debated. The main European organizations dedicated to the security and defence of the continent, i.e. the EU and NATO, have long since expanded the concept of the Mediterranean to include the Sahel region as well, thus widening their gaze beyond the ports of the Maghreb and the countries of North Africa (Venturi, 2017). This led to conceive the definition of "*Deep Maghreb*" (Profazio, 2016), precisely to indicate the continuity, not only territorial, between North Africa and the Sahel, and consequently its impact on the Mediterranean security framework [7]. The definition of this region as an integral part of NATO's southern flank helps to understand the relevance of this area in the Euro-Med framework. The growing awareness of the centrality of the Sahel and the enlargement of the very concept of the Mediterranean testify to the importance of the African continent in the fight against jihadist terrorism at a global level.

Therefore, the inclusion of the Sahelian region in the framework of the Mediterranean basin does not have a purely geographical implication but involves a strategic expansion for the regional security framework. In the first place, this involves expanding the framework of studies on security in the Mediterranean beyond the borders of the southern European countries or the coastal states of North Africa. As previously underlined, in the light of geographical, cultural and social factors, it is difficult to consider the Maghreb from the Sahel separately as regards the potential for international threats. The porosity of the borders facilitates the proliferation of smuggling concerning arms, migrants and illicit goods between the countries of the two areas and the projection towards Europe. This element allows also the mobilization of criminal

networks among the area, including terrorist groups. The progressive consolidation of these ties causes that the destabilization of one of the two contexts affects the security framework of the other. The weight of these areas in the regional security framework is also evidenced by the growing European military commitment, first with Operation Barkhane and later with the European task force Takuba, an international security device made up of the armies of 13 European countries. The military mission also provides a crucial role for Italy which in January 2022 reached Full Operational Capability (FOC) in Mali [8] before the decision by the European governments involved to leave the country in February 2022 following the tensions with Bamako [9]. On the one hand, the difficulties encountered by the Takuba Task Force testify to the complexity of the local framework and the need for a broad and multidimensional approach [10]. On the other hand, the growing European military commitment confirms, on the one hand, the importance of the Mediterranean area, in its broadest interpretation, for European security. Not only, therefore, in its classic interpretation of a gateway to Europe but also as a crucial bridge to the African continent, a battleground not only for the geopolitical competition between powers but also for the fight against the jihadist threat.

### **3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AFRICAN CONTEXT**

The various countries that make up and populate the Maghreb and Sahel regions have certain social, economic and geographical characteristics that make them an ideal context for the proliferation of the new jihadist threat. Within them, deep economic, social and ethnic crises are thriving which are welded to the threat produced by jihadism (Alcaro, 2014). The weakness of local government institutions, unable to offer answers to the numerous crisis factors, contributes to augmenting the distrust of the population towards the authorities, increasing sympathy towards the jihadist phenomenon and encouraging the processes of radicalization and recruitment. In addition to this, existing geographic factors also affect the development of this threat. The porous borders existing between the Maghreb and the Sahel, for example, favour the development of illicit trafficking in which phenomena of crime and banditry are welded to the jihadist ideology. The ease with which it is possible to establish terrestrial communication routes on which illegal and migrant goods can travel has massive repercussions on the security framework of the Mediterranean and, consequently, of European countries. These mechanisms are facilitated by the presence of grey areas, especially in the Sahel, or de-stabilized areas. These free zones contribute to the spread of corridors of instability that easily find their way to the sea both towards the north, therefore towards the ports of the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic outlets.



This explains how the threat picture that is projected on the Mediterranean basin is not confined to the simple coastal strip of North Africa or the southern European offshoots, but it is necessary to refer more and more often to the concept of "*Deep Maghreb*". The poor results obtained so far employing military operations that have involved the West support the idea that any dysfunction, crisis or change in these peripheral areas for the classical notion of the Mediterranean produces a direct impact also on the whole enlarged picture.

#### 4. THE BLACK BELT ROAD

In light of the aforementioned factors, this study takes on the definition of "*Black Belt Road*" to indicate a territorial belt that connects Africa from coast to coast, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, which in turn is connected through the Indian Ocean to the Middle Eastern scenarios up to the Khorasan (Lombardi, 2019). This area is the result of a fusion between different ethnic and tribal crises that involve different countries but which, thanks to the similarity of triggers, find elements of continuity and feed each other overflowing from the single local context. It is easily exploited by jihadist organizations, IS and al-Qaeda and their local branches, which exploit the ongoing destabilization to promote their cause, increasing tension and proposing themselves to local populations as a valid alternative to weak local institutions. This capitalization of discontent allows the jihadist galaxy to increase the processes of radicalization and recruitment. In this way, the *Black Belt Road*, therefore, offers a geographical space that allows the proliferation of jihadist phenomena, connecting different scenarios and providing a communication route that facilitates the permeability of the jihadist threat. This, therefore, allows the expansion of terrorist organizations even outside the original classic scenarios. In this territorial band, therefore, we are witnessing the laboratory of a new form of jihadism that has typical peculiarities that are different from what has been experienced so far.

In the first place, there is a form of ideologically less pure jihadism than the phenomenon consolidated in the Levant. The combination of common crime factors, the so-called *crime-terror nexus* (Hübschle, 2011), allows us to witness a form of ideology less linked to the paradigms of jihadist orthodoxy and with greater contamination of elements of banditry. In this context, jihadism is seen as a sort of vector capable of acting as a driving force for the criminal

appetites of individuals and groups, which exploit the operational force of jihadist networks to carry on their illicit trafficking. Furthermore, the jihadism of the *Black Belt Road* is also devoid of the characteristics of statehood observed in the Middle East with IS, for example, which is also the result of a very different cultural background (Van Engeland, 2017). It should be emphasized that in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean region, by now, there are realities where the concept of State understood in its *Weberian* meaning is by now deeply in crisis and no longer recoverable. Especially in the African context, where ethnic and tribal ties have a much more specific weight than the canons of statehood understood in the Western conception (Kasapoglu, 2019).

Secondly, the proliferation of the *Black Belt Road*, and its consolidation, is favoured by the endogenous factors connected to the African political and social framework. Among them it is possible to mention for example:

- civil conflicts and sectarian tensions;
- *Crime-Terror nexus*;
- the dysfunctionality of government institutions;
- the variability of national borders, often fruits of the colonial past and in many cases altered *de facto* or *de jure* following precisely the ethnic or tribal fault lines;
- deep inequalities in the distribution of income and resources;
- democratic deficits and the presence of *failed states*;
- migration flows;
- the proliferation of weapons;
- the presence of ambitious regional and international players;
- competition for energy resources;
- the lack of a regional security architecture.

More and more in recent years, especially following the so-called Arab Springs, these factors of instability spread across the African continent, proliferating also in the Maghreb and in states previously considered relatively safe from the jihadist threat (Bauer, 2013). The similarities now existing between the Sahel countries and those of North Africa in terms of crisis factors in the social, economic and security fields increasingly bring these two areas together, strengthening the concept of Deep Maghreb. Furthermore, the similarity between the crisis factors of the two areas makes the possibility that the destabilization that can be observed in specific areas may also be reproduced on the coasts of the Mediterranean, to the further detriment of an already highly precarious security framework.

The combination of the crisis factors set out is therefore leading to the formation of a new form of threat related to terrorism and jihadism. This is increasingly assuming the connotations of a hybrid threat, where the military plan mixes with other tools aimed at conducting a multidimensional offensive and able to escape the classic interpretative canons of the conflict. The consolidation of the *Black Belt Road* has important repercussions in terms of combating jihadist terrorism, both in Europe and in the African continent itself, since it acts as an incubator of this new form of threat. Therefore, it offers the possibility of proliferation to the various jihadist networks, not necessarily limited to IS but including the plethora of groups that constitute the extremist galaxy. In this way, the *Black Belt Road* allows a series of local tensions, mostly the result of the previously mentioned crisis factors, to evolve into international threats that are projected on the entire Mediterranean basin.

The coexistence of numerous international actors, who pursue agendas opposed to those of the West, triggers a further element of opposition and tension. This is reflected not only in the security framework of European countries but also in the future of international missions involving Western military contingents. Faced with a consolidation of such a front of destabilization, and the enlargement of the geographic sphere relevant to the Mediterranean security framework, a strategic rethinking on the part of the main organizations involved in European security and defence is needed. Such a strategic change, and its connection with local crises capable of projecting themselves on the international level, therefore, requires a comprehensive and holistic interpretation of the threat. It also inevitably passes through the promotion and development of new forms of inter-institutional cooperation (Biermann & Koops, 2017), which primarily concern the main actors involved in European defence, i.e., the EU and NATO. Both of them, although engaged since the end of the Cold War in a process of developing their skills and having the capacity to carry missions out of area, in any case need coordination with local institutions, such as the African Union (D'Amato, 2021). Therefore, a strengthening of regional security governance and the promotion of new forms of coordination for the carrying out of joint missions is indispensable for a precise strategic framework of the threat that insists on the Euro-Mediterranean region.

## 5. FUTURE SCENARIOS

As highlighted, the security framework in the Mediterranean requires an expansion of the geographical concept of the area under consideration and an awareness of the multitude of factors at stake, primarily concerning the actors involved and the social, economic and political specificities of the contexts affected by the phenomena. In face of this, the risk scenario that impacts the entire area requires a rethinking of the security governance and a comprehensive approach that primarily includes the main institutions involved in European defence, namely NATO and the EU. Over the last few years, both organizations have equipped themselves with

specific doctrines aimed at drawing up a more complete strategic assessment of the sea and the Mediterranean in particular. In addition, the two institutions have established specific forms of partnership and frameworks aimed at increasing cooperation with the African shore of the Mediterranean and aimed at establishing new forms of joint governance. An example of this is the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD), a cooperation forum between NATO and some of the countries in the area, which integrates with similar initiatives launched in the EU framework such as the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. The success of these forms of cooperation and their evolution towards new, more sophisticated forms will be at the basis of the trajectories of the Mediterranean security framework in the coming years. In fact, NATO and the EU have already coordinated maritime missions in the past (Riddervold, 2014), such as those in the context of combating Somali piracy (Gebhard & Smith, 2015).

Any inaction in this field, on the contrary, threatens to increase the crisis factors that have already exploded in the region. The particular complexity of the context, the result of the intertwining of numerous triggering causes, will need in the future to overcome the hitherto purely military approach that is not sufficient to produce long-term effects. The combination of skills between the two organizations, capable of addressing both the military and civilian aspects of crisis management, will make it possible to offer a comprehensive response to the threats to security in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study highlighted the main crisis factors affecting the security framework of the Mediterranean, an area capable of projecting the local crises that are going through it and transforming them into international threats. Preliminary to any evaluation is the awareness of the enlargement of the very concept of the Mediterranean basin, which can no longer ignore the inclusion of the Sahel in its geographical definition. The latter region has marked crisis factors that stimulate its destabilization and weld together the various tensions produced. The similarity existing between the Sahelian and North African contexts makes it possible to replicate these crises also in the coastal context overlooking the Mediterranean, widening the already existing tension. Considering the Sahel as an active part of the Mediterranean also allows us to focus attention on what is happening in relation to the jihadist threat. This refers to the consolidation of a destabilization belt of which this paper, building on the definition of "*Black Belt Road*", aims to highlight the main structural elements. It mixes the numerous crisis factors and the characteristics of the African context, welding together different tensions and violent impulses

and bringing together phenomena of common crime, jihadist terrorism and popular discontent. This mixture is enabling the creation of a new form of jihadism, expanding into this area facilitated by porous borders and the absence of state authority. The military interventions conducted over the last few years by various European contingents have not offered a lasting solution to these problems, precisely because they are only focused on the military aspect.

A multidimensional threat such as that currently posed by jihadist terrorism in the Mediterranean basin intersects the strategies of foreign powers that move in the same area by promoting their own international agenda. Countries such as China and Russia, as well as actors such as Turkey and Iran, have long been moving in the *Mare Nostrum* both directly and through proxies. They pursue both military and economic strategies aimed at opposing European countries and filling the gaps left by the restructuring of the US presence, now perceived as projected towards the Asian theatre. This intertwining between geopolitical competition and jihadist terrorism favours the proliferation of threats that overflow from the regional and local plan to lead to the international one, putting at risk the security framework of the Mediterranean basin and, consequently, of European countries. Faced with such a varied and complex threat, the institutional collaboration between organizations such as the EU and NATO is necessary for a comprehensive threat approach. This also requires strategic awareness on the part of European countries that the Mediterranean is not just a gateway to the European continent but a strategic asset to be controlled in a pre-emptive function as regards the threats that are developing in Africa.

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