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## **HIC SUNT DRACONES!**

### **RUSSIA ENTERS THE MEDITERRANEAN**

**Abstract:** *The Mediterranean region is developing the most complex international security environment in its modern history. The resurgent and aggressive Russia has established itself as a new great power in the Mediterranean and intends to dominate it for the coming decades. Through its militarized foreign policy, Moscow seeks to establish its preeminence in Europe through aggressive moves in eastern Europe, supported by the expansion of its military presence in the wider Mediterranean area. The Mediterranean is attractive to Russia not only because of its geographic proximity but also by the region's well-proven ability to generate and sustain both intrastate and international conflicts, its rich oil and gas deposits, and NATO's weakness highlighted by America's partial retreat from Europe. However, Moscow's newly found confidence in the Mediterranean is not likely to be left without due attention by the United States and its allies; an eventuality that carries a promise of lively a couple of decades for regional states.*

**Keywords:** *Russia, Mediterranean, Conflicts, Nuclear Weapons, Oil and Gas*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean region, the birthplace of the European civilization, historically always had a dominant power or powers calling shots and providing a stable political environment. Disputes among great powers and conflicts between them have also been frequent over many centuries of its varied civilizations. More recently, during the Cold War, the United States and its NATO allies held an undisputed upper hand over the chief rival, the Soviet Union. Since the late 1990s; however, the Mediterranean basin has been largely left to its own devices (Villegas, 2020). That is, until the late 2010s, when the resurgent Russia started to flex its muscles in this region much like many other places in its immediate neighborhood. The arrival of Russia signals a renewed competition over control and influence in the Mediterranean basin as the United States is not likely to leave this important region uncontested (Agazade, et. al., 2022).

There are three major factors that attract Russia to the Mediterranean: a profusion of potential for military conflicts in the region, similarly abundant fossil fuel reserves, and the on-again-off-again stand-off with NATO in Eastern Europe. For about two decades now, Russia has been pursuing policies to regain its lost power and influence in the international system by taking relatively small steps to achieve its broader objectives. Rather, what appears to be small steps in the West are significant breakthroughs for Moscow (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2021). For these two decades, Russia has done what many other great powers had done previously to achieve and maintain that status: it has been engaged in a continuous self-affirmation in parts of the world that are seen as important for Moscow's long-term objectives. The great power status is not a defined position in international affairs. There is no ideal state of being for international actors, at which point they may decide to take it easy and choose not to engage in international struggles anymore. To become and to remain a great power means a constant self-affirmation to enhance power capabilities, access resources, increase international influence, defeat current and potential future enemies, cultivate prestige, and so forth. In short, international politics is not a game (even though it is often compared to chess) that ends with a flag falling for any state, let alone those trying to achieve or maintain a great power status (Katz, 2021). If international political rivalries are games, they are not those that end at some point after which the players retire or pursue something else entirely.

Since the early 2010s, Moscow has found the Mediterranean available for testing its newly found capabilities (Clarke, et. al. 2020). Specifically, the 2011 Arab Spring shook the foundation of the Cold War-era regimes in the region without providing clearly outlined paths to the future. The fall of Gaddafi's experiment in Libya was brought about by the military intervention of the United States and its European allies. Initially, it seemed that those who overthrew Gaddafi would try to establish their control or influence over this oil-rich country. However, the Obama administration was either unwilling or unable to lead, while America's Western European allies either did not want the role or did not realize it was available (Pierini, 2021). This power vacuum left the door open for extremists that duly set up their "Islamic emirate" in the country and the likes of Russia and Turkey, states that have been seeking a great power status or their own (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2020).

Then the Arab Spring presented another gift to Moscow: the bloody civil war in Syria. Emboldened by the previous military successes elsewhere, in 2015, Russia deployed significant military assets in Syria to rescue the embattled Assad regime, which was about to collapse under a joint assault from revolutionaries, Islamic extremists, Turkey, and the intervention forces from the West. Unlike Libya, Syria is poor in natural resources, but it is located in a geographic area of the eastern Mediterranean that is very rich in conflicts. Syria has a dispute with neighboring Israel, and for decades, the State of Israel has been dealing with various actors engaged in insurgencies, terrorism, liberation movements, and cross-border attacks. Some others in the same neighborhood, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey, can hardly be called conflict-free (Ibraymova, 2021). The future of these states is certain, given that they appear to prosper under charismatic strongmen and wither whenever transition of power becomes necessary.

Then there are the Balkans, again not rich with natural resources, but conflicts, which Moscow can also commodify under the right circumstances. Of the unsettled disputes in the Balkans, Russia has paid much attention to the Kosovo question. Indeed, Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 1999 was directly linked with the Kosovo war; rather, it was occasioned by his predecessor's inability to make a decision in critical moments toward the end of the NATO-Serbia war (Tchantouridze, 2000). Since 1999, Moscow has cited the Kosovo precedent a number of times to justify its aggressive actions towards Russia's neighbors, specifically, after Kosovo was recognized as a sovereign state by the United States, the United Kingdom, and a score of their

allies in early 2008. The same year, Russia cited the Kosovo precedent when its military invaded Georgia (to prevent an alleged genocide). Later Moscow organized mock referendums for independence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, again citing the Kosovo precedent, with an outcome of Russia establishing diplomatic ties with these two self-proclaimed states. Russia similarly justified its invasion of Crimea in early 2014, followed by another referendum to declare independence from Ukraine and a formal petition to Moscow to be admitted as a member of the Russian Federation (Barlovac, 2014). Another potential arrangement in the Balkans that Russia can effectively exploit is the status of the Republika Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Russia has to counter the United States and its NATO allies in its quest to maintain a great power status. Since at least 2008, Russia has been involved in a low-profile strategic arms race with the world's most preeminent power. Russia has been engaged in modernizing its mobile intercontinental ballistic missile arsenal, has developed new long-range cruise missiles, deployed a new class of attack submarines, resumed regular patrols by long-range bombers, and more recently, Moscow started promoting exotic weapons such as hypersonic missiles, a tsunami-triggering torpedo, a nuclear drone submarine, nuclear-powered cruise missiles, independently maneuverable ballistic missile warheads, and an energy weapon of unknown design (Kroenig, et. al., 2020). With these strategic weapons innovations, Moscow intends to counter the United States' ability to deploy massive weapons systems capable of operating in vast geographic areas, aided by electronic and cyber warfare assets. If Russia were to plant its modern weapons in the Mediterranean region, it would allow the Russian high command to negate America's advantage in weapons systems by giving it virtually no time to react to a potential Russian attack (Sutton, 2021).

## **2. CONFLICTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN**

The wider Mediterranean region has an impressive list of active and potential military conflicts. Moscow's approach to armed conflicts, whether they are intrastate or international, is guided by its enduring desire to increase its international power and influence, especially in its immediate continental neighborhood. For this purpose, Moscow views active and potential conflicts as international commodities, violent and death inducing goods and services that can be traded for Russia's national interests. Historically, great power trade with each other to make better arrangements for themselves and their allies. Normally, the main currency of such trade are the

interests of smaller powers. Such transactions are even more palatable if the said small powers are not militarily allied with the great powers bargaining with each other.

The current disposition of the balance of power around the Mediterranean region is such that many countries that are not formally allied with either the United States or Russia are experiencing violent conflicts, or have experienced conflict in recent past or have some sort of domestic dispute that can be revived with some effort (Thompson & Vogler, 2020). The Mediterranean countries that are in the grips of violent conflicts are Syria and Libya – Moscow is an active participant in both. Then there is a rather long list of countries in which violent conflicts can be revived: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia (in relation with Kosovo), Macedonia, Lebanon, and Israel. The dispute between Turkey and Greece in the eastern Mediterranean also looks interesting (Axt, 2021). Finally, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, the countries that have experienced decades-long Russian military incursions are not far from the Mediterranean.

The Ukraine crisis of winter 2021-2022 provides an instructive insight into the bargaining arrangements Russia tries to negotiate with smaller states' national interests. For most of 2021, Moscow's objective in Ukraine was to get the Minsk process of a peaceful settlement of the consequences of the military revolt in eastern Ukraine settle so that the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" received a broad autonomous status within Ukraine. The settlement would have included a veto power to stop Ukraine's membership into a military alliance, i.e. NATO. In 2021, the Minsk process objectives, according to the Russian plan, did not include Crimea, which Russia seized by force from Ukraine in 2014. This meant that the signing the final document on the settlement of the military conflict in eastern Ukraine would have recognized Crimea as an integral part of the Russian Federation, and Ukraine would have relinquished all its legal claims on this peninsula annexed by Russia. In response, Kyiv tightened its position regarding the conflict resolution with Russia, and the foreign ministers of Germany and France informed the Russian counterpart that Moscow's scheme would not work (*Vedomosti*, 2021). In response Moscow upped the ante: in December 2021, the Russian leadership started sending more troops to the Russo-Ukrainian border reaching a full-scale invasion force by January 2022. Moscow also deployed troops in the neighboring Belarus ostensibly for joint war games, and started naval war games in the Black Sea, south of Ukraine, and the Baltic Sea, north of Ukraine. While denying any intention to invade Ukraine militarily and change its government by

force, Moscow demanded a new security arrangement with the United States. The cornerstone of Moscow's new proposal: Ukraine and Georgia must never join NATO. Again, in theory such an agreement would work, if the Russians were to agree to transfer back to Ukraine and Georgia those provinces that they had seized from 2008 to 2014. However, Moscow denies that they have any troops in either Georgia or Ukraine: Moscow calls Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the provinces of Georgia that the Russian military control, "sovereign states," while Ukraine's Crimea has been annexed by the Russian Federation. As a bargaining tool, instead of making a compromise arrangement with the United States, Russia increased military movements toward the borders of Ukraine in a vain attempt to sway the U.S. and NATO to adopt its demands.

Besides the ongoing and frozen conflicts, the Mediterranean region may soon experience disputes and conflicts between traditional adversaries (Bloch & Saber, 2021). Unresolved disputes, such as the one in Cyprus, are the most likely triggers for renewed clashes (Adar & Toygür, 2020). However, conflicts may also be restarted by competitions for natural resources (Stanič & Karbuz, 2021). In recent years, oil and gas exploration companies have been very active in the Mediterranean region, discovering gas fields that appear to hold significant reserves of yet unexploited gas and oil fields (Kesseba & Lagos, 2019).

### **3. OIL AND GAS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN**

The Russian government under Putin's leadership has made deliberate and purposeful efforts to pave its road back to a great power status through oil and gas sales. No small part in this scheme have been played by oil and gas delivery pipelines. Currently most European countries depends heavily on Russian gas deliveries, and Russia remains one of the major crude oil exporter in the world (Mamedov, 2021). Moscow plays tremendous importance on controlling or influencing geographic space where oil and gas pipelines run (Krashennikova, 2019). The war in Chechnya, which raged from the late 1990s through the early years of Putin's presidency, among other things, seriously threatened Russia's ability to export oil and gas from the Caspian basin to European markets. Although not the only reason for war with Georgia in 2008, Russia capturing a significant portion of Georgia's Black Sea coast has translated into Georgia no longer competing with Russia for Central Asian oil and gas exporting routes.

Historically, great powers have tried to dominate international communication or transportation routes to gain the upper hand in international trade, capture a strategic advantage or both. Until the second half of the 20th century, the British sea power ruled the waves. After World War II, the United States became the most dominant sea power, and as such, it has maintained the trade routes open for international trade. As China became the second only to the United States in economic wealth and influence, it started the belt and road initiative to develop continental rail and road transportation networks to better connect China with the rest of the world economy. Around the same time, Russia started concentrating on control and ownership of oil and gas delivery pipelines. Russia is one of the largest exporters of oil and gas globally, but in addition, it has strived to place some controls over the export of the same resources from neighboring countries, such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. By expanding into the Mediterranean basin, Moscow now has an opportunity of becoming a player in the export of oil and gas from Libya. In addition, Russia has started establishing its presence ports in the Mediterranean basin that can potentially influence the distribution of oil and gas (Strigunov, et. al. 2022).

Russia's presence in the eastern Mediterranean, specifically in Syria, has increased Moscow's negotiating power with oil-rich states of the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia (Shaikh, 2020). The outcome of the Syrian conflict, Syria's place in the Arab world, and Iran's influence in Syria -- all these factors are very important for the Gulf states. Due to its growing influence in the region, Moscow has been able to negotiate advantageous oil production levels within the OPEC+ framework, which, according to an official Russian source, has yielded for Russia's state budget an additional revenue of \$100 billion (Mamedov, 2021).

Russia is one of the largest exporters of oil and natural gas. It makes at least \$165 million a day by selling natural gas to Europe (Sullivan & Northam, 2022). The revenue from the sale of oil and gas funds the operation of the Russian state. It also fully funds the country's expensive military machine. Russia is the only state in the world that relies solely on its national manpower, military production, and resources to provide for its defense and security needs. Russia does not have to enter into a military alliance with other states, purchase military equipment manufactured elsewhere, or purchase foreign technology to equip, arm, and modernize its armed forces. This military autarky includes the fuel (gas, diesel, petroleum products) necessary for the long-term

operations of its massive armed forces. In short, Russian oil and gas reserves not only fund the Russian military and keep it up-to-date, but also provide plenty of affordable petroleum products to fuel its long-term operations.

However, the Russian oil reserves are not infinite. According to the estimates produced by British Petroleum in 2014, if the world continues to consume oil at the annual rate of 2014, the proven oil reserves would last 53.3 years (Tully, 2014). That estimate was made almost 8 years ago. No doubt, technology will improve, new oil reserves will be found, and during the years of global crises similar to one created by Covid-19, oil consumption will be less, and the oil reserves may last a couple of decades beyond their projected end. But the oil shortage crisis will likely start much sooner, especially for the countries that both rely on oil exports and require plenty of cheap oil to fund their own national defense and security needs (OGJ, 2021). Russia is the prime candidate among the states that are more likely to feel the effects of the diminishing oil reserves than the rest of the world. To delay the inevitable end of its domestic oil reserves that fund the Russian military machine, Moscow has to secure access to as many oil reserves outside Russia as possible. Further, when the oil crunch time comes, the great powers will start hoarding oil, blocking access routes to oil fields, and may claim control of choke points traditionally used for crude oil transportation. The Mediterranean region provides excellent opportunities for all of the above. Libya, where Moscow is closely involved through its proxy military force, has sizable oil reserves. Egypt's Suez Canal and Gibraltar, some of the busiest passages for trade, also represent very convenient choke points for a great power that may decide to control trade and transportation through the Mediterranean. The Turkish Straits are essential for access to eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. If Moscow manages to diminish European states through Ukraine-type crises over the next two or three decades, it will likely establish itself as an undisputed overlord of the Mediterranean.

#### **4. MOSCOW'S DRAGONS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN**

Moscow's long-term objectives in Europe go beyond its interests in the Mediterranean region. Russia would like to see a separation between the United States and Europe, especially when it comes to defense and security affairs. Moscow can be confident that there is not much sympathy for Washington in the European Union when it comes to international trade issues. The Russian leadership has developed its gas pipelines projects as to enchant Europeans, and has met



with approvals in some important European capitals. The European Union as a unit does not pose an economic threat to Russia even though European leaders frequently invoke economic sanctions to deter or punish Moscow's militaristic foreign policy. This constant talk about sanctions is mostly annoying, but still Moscow would prefer such nonsense to cease altogether. To avoid future such complications or annoyances, Moscow would prefer not to see unity among the EU capitals (Bastian, 2021). Seeding discord among Europeans is a goal that can be met through active and decisive measures. The center of gravity for such measures is currently in Eastern Europe, more specifically in Ukraine. However, the center of gravity can be transferred elsewhere, closer to the NATO borders, especially if the Ukraine question is resolved somehow. In fact, one can argue that in the case of protracted preparations for war, Moscow would benefit from shifting its potential target of attack frequently and unexpectedly.

Currently, the United States, and by extension NATO, has an advantage over Russia in weapons systems development. Weapons systems are computerized systems that integrate communications, precision strike, cyber, stealth, space, and related technologies covering vast geographic areas. They can be deployed quickly and counter enemy forces efficiently. Such advances in weapons technologies coupled with the new American doctrine of flexible response can severely undermine the opponent's ability to threaten a nuclear strike or deliver a limited nuclear strike to force the other side's surrender. Adopted in the Obama administration, the flexible response strategy is designed to counter those nuclear weapon-armed great powers engaged in strategic competition with the United States: Russia and China (Arkin & Ambinder, 2022). The flexible response strategy is even more effective against smaller adversaries such as North Korea or Iran.

Specifically for Russia, geographic space plays a significant role in its nuclear strategy. The largest country in the world, spanning two continents and eleven time zones, Russia's geography is ideal for strategic competition with nuclear weapons in which potential adversaries are faraway lands threatened with a massive nuclear attack. In addition to the traditional massive nuclear attack strategy, Russia's current military doctrine adopted and revised by successive Putin administrations allows limited nuclear strikes against nuclear and even non-nuclear capable states (RG, 2014). Presumably, such attacks can occur against allies of great powers to deter them from engaging Russia in a conventional or, in an extreme case, nuclear war. The only great power Russia

may wish to deter with this strategy is the United States, with its smaller NATO allies serving as nuclear hostages of Russia. However, if the United States were to deploy its advanced weapons systems closer to the Russian borders, it could potentially negate Moscow's ability to successfully implement the limited nuclear strike strategy against America's smaller allies. Moscow sees this as a threat to its power and influence globally, hence its extreme sensitivity to NATO enlargement approaching its borders.

To counter this perceived threat, Moscow needs to reduce the geographic distance between its nuclear strike-capable weapons and their potential targets (Thornton, 2019). For this purpose, it has deployed a handful of nuclear-capable submarines in the Mediterranean Sea (lenta.ru, 2021). The submarines of Project 636 "Varshavianka" are known in Russia as "black holes" because they are incredibly silent and challenging to locate when submerged (Ivanov, 2020). These subs are equipped with the "Kalibr-PL" long-range cruise missiles that carry nuclear warheads. In fall 2021, Russia had five such submarines in the Mediterranean Sea. Five does not sound much, but each of these submarines can destroy a country the size of Italy. Moscow rotates these submarines in the Mediterranean and can keep them in the region courtesy of the Tartus naval base in Syria. According to the 2017 agreement with Damascus, Moscow can keep up to 11 vessels in the Tartus base, including those carrying nuclear weapons (*RIA Novosti*, 2017). That year Russia received sovereign jurisdiction over the base for 49 years (Karmanau, 2019). Deploying nuclear weapons closer to NATO's European members is not an idle gesture: at the joint news conference with President Macron of France on February 7, 2022, President Putin unambiguously warned that Russia, as a nuclear power, would not be pushed around, even though NATO's superiority in conventional arms was clear (*Yahoo Finance*, 2022).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Russia's expansion into the Mediterranean region has not been an accident or an outcome of bored policy-makers in Moscow looking for something to do. Moscow's plans in this region are rational and deliberate but at the same time predatory and dangerous. What Russia may achieve in the Mediterranean is not given; instead, its actions are a huge gamble. Whether Moscow succeeds or fails in its long-term plans will largely depend on further actions by leading European countries, and of course, the United States. Russia will face difficulties in the Mediterranean or elsewhere if met by a unified Western pushback; however, such unity has become impossible to achieve in the

face of aggressive Russian moves in Eastern Europe. Even in the times of acutely critical days of the Ukrainian crisis that threatened a major war in eastern Europe, the West struggled to find a common stance. In comparison, Moscow is not threatening Europe with a war in the Mediterranean, but Russia is planning a slow and gradual assumption of the role of the dominant power in the region.

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