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THE MENA REGION POWER COMPETITION AND THE CHALLENGES TO SECURITY

ABSTRACT: The paper presents the challenges to stability arising in the MENA region and having a possible impact on Western peace and security. It identifies the regional actors' efforts to maximize their power, Russia's revisionist efforts, China's ambitions, as well as the phenomena (or asymmetric threats) of migration and terrorism. The paper focuses on the competition of power and concludes that the strategic value of the region around the South Eastern Mediterranean has increased, that Western states should determine and coordinate their policies, and their institutions should increase their efforts and presence, cooperating, among others, with other pro-Western countries in the region.

KEYWORDS: China, Greece, EU, Iran, Israel, Libya, MENA, Middle East, migration, NATO, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, terrorism, Thucydides, Turkey, USA

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the short- and long-term challenges to Western security, appearing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.¹ To do so I am going to present the policies of both regional and international actors, who, as they compete for power and hegemony in the region, endanger peace and stability. In my opinion the reasons of the current instability remain systemic, non-domestic, and in no case due to religious antagonisms. After all, in Syria, Iraq, or Libya, no-one is fighting over the issue who is the rightful successor to Prophet Mohammed, but over who is going to control, partially or totally, these three states.

This approach, focusing on power competition, is rather a traditional one. It distances itself, however, from the two dominant and often aphoristic tendencies that are usually adopted by some of the political literature and the press in order to understand these issues and analyse the events of this region. The first claims that the basic cause of what is happening in the region is a competition for energy resources (hydrocarbons), provided by the simplistic approach of geography to international politics, usually supported with maps and (often imaginary) plans for pipelines. The second approach focuses on intra- or inter-faith hate and clashes. It claims that the cause of the instability in the region is religion, appearing both as a competition between the two dominant Muslim denominations, Sunni and Shia Islam, and as an effort of some of their factions to wage a war against the infidels of the region and, more generally, of the West.

Obviously, in my perspective, both explanations are essentially inadequate as they focus on the partial and not the general, and ignore the everlasting efforts of peoples and states for

¹ The views expressed in this paper are strictly personal and not of any governmental institution or authority.

security and/or power maximization. One of the main instruments of achieving security is power, which can be used for pursuing a variety of other aims too, including regional or even global hegemony. Other goals, such as energy resources or religious purity, may be used for mobilization purposes by those seeking power, or may ensue the acquisition of power. This is not to mean that in some particular cases resources or religious faith (or ideology) may not be the driving force in domestic or international developments. Indeed, in a few cases just profit² or just religion could be the main factor explaining the behaviour of people³ and even of states.⁴ After all, did the 17th century wars in Europe take place because of religion, or because of the painful birth of the modern state and the modern international system?

Yet, even in the cases involving gains and faith, it is through power and conquest that the peoples and states are trying to achieve their goals. The analyst should be careful, however; because, eventually, the two approaches, pursued to their end, open the way to two rather dogmatic and thus vague understandings of international relations, which blur reality. The first is the Marxian approach, ultimately inducing everything to capitalist competition for profit. And the second is the “Clash of Civilizations” approach,⁵ inducing everything to cultural and religious conflicts, and somehow inviting a concept created as one among many readings of international reality to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Given the above, my approach and method of analysis for the needs of this paper cannot be based but on a power approach of international relations, and particularly on Offensive Realism,⁶ a paradigmatic proposal integrating assumptions of Classical and Structural Realism.⁷ John J. Mearsheimer maintains that in a condition of systemic anarchy, states, particularly great powers, seek security, meaning to protect “their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order”. States, however, having realized “that power is the key to their survival”, try to maximize it; thus, they are “relentlessly seeking power” and aiming at regional and even world hegemony.⁸ “Consequently, states pay close attention to how power is distributed among them, and they make a special effort to maximize their share of world power. Specifically, they look for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals. States employ a variety of means – economic, diplomatic, and military – to shift the balance of power in their favour, even if doing so makes other states suspicious or even hostile”.⁹ States “look for opportunities to take advantage of one another” and “work to ensure that other

² One can think of the mercenaries or of colonial powers.

³ See, f. ex., those that Martin Wight, categorizes as the “revolutionary”, men ready to sacrifice and be sacrificed for maintaining the existing or creating a new world according to their views. Wight, M. *International Theory: The Three Traditions*. London: Holmes & Meier, 1992.

⁴ One can think of states such as France or the USSR, for a limited period of time after the respective revolutions, carrying the burden of exporting their ideology.

⁵ Huntington, S. P. *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 1997.

⁶ Mearsheimer, J. J. *The Tragedy of Great Powers Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. 4. 21.

⁷ The term “Defensive” Realism has been coined and used by John S. Mearsheimer to describe Kenneth Waltz’s Structural Realism and in order to counter-distinguish his own “Offensive” Realism. Waltz has maintained that “the first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their position in the system”; states pursue their security through power, but they “cannot let power, a possibly useful means, become the end they pursue”; see Waltz, K. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979. 126.

⁸ Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy*. 21–22.

⁹ Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy*. 34.

states do not take advantage of them”; obviously what “they care about” is “relative power, not absolute power”.¹⁰

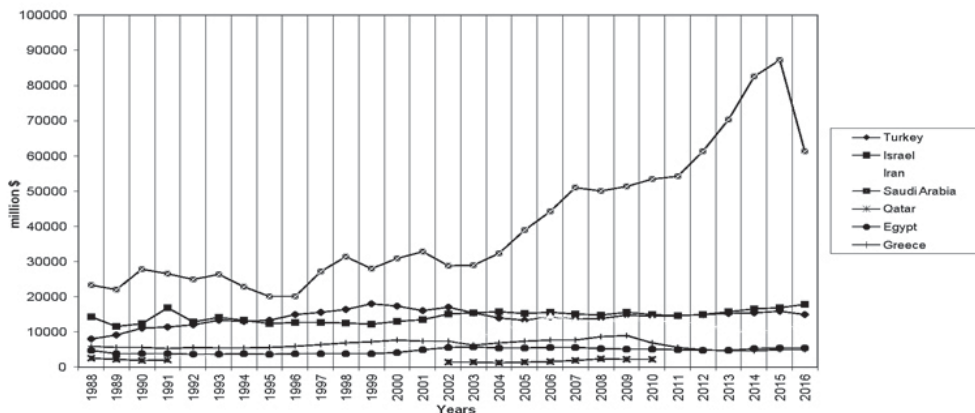
Next, I will first present the competition and the power maximization drives of the regional players, particularly those of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Then, I will examine the revisionist behaviour of two international actors, namely, Russia, which reappeared and is trying to become a player anew in the region, and the slow but steady emergence, for the first time in history, of China. My analysis, third, will focus on two major issues, considered by many as asymmetric threats, having presently their roots in the region, migration and terrorism. Finally, I will draw my conclusions, which, simply summarized, suggest that the West, with its political and military institutions and together with the Western or pro-Western countries in the region, has an important role to assume and play in order to maintain stability and peace.

REGIONAL COMPETITION FOR POWER

Unfortunately, competition in the Middle East was and is a permanent condition. This is clearly demonstrated by the defence spending of the countries in the region, over the last thirty years after the end of both the Cold War and the conflicts with Israel, as presented in the annexed Tables 1,¹¹ 2, and 3.

Table 1

Military expenditure, in constant (2015) US\$ m., 1988-2016



Initially, after WWII and the creation of all the existing states, competition took place along the lines of the Cold War and, especially, among the Arab states, rallying against the State of Israel, and, progressively, those few countries in the region which were allying with or tolerating it. Then, after 1979, the changes in Iran changed the balance and the atmosphere in the Middle East; Iran's religious leadership provoked tensions between Sunnis and Shiites, the country went to war with Iraq, called for the destruction of Israel and the abolition of all pro-American Arab regimes.

¹⁰ Mearsheimer. *The Tragedy*. 36.

¹¹ All four tables presented in this paper are based on data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2017". SIPRI. <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

Table 2

Military expenditure, in constant (2015) US\$ m., 1988-2016

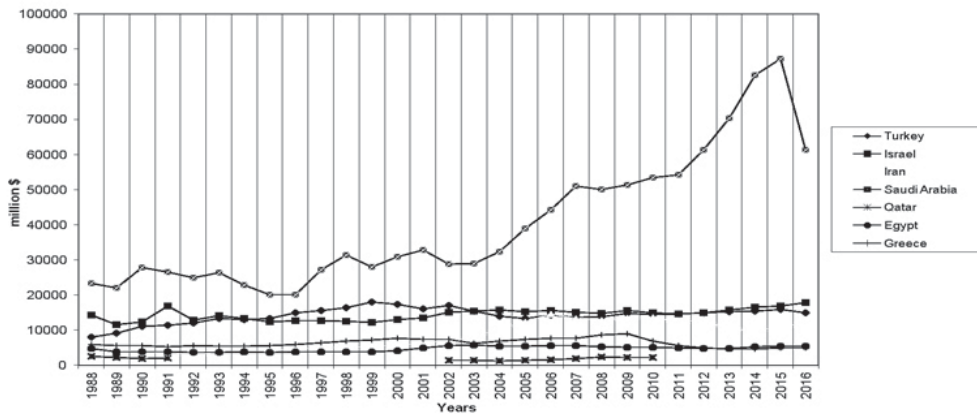
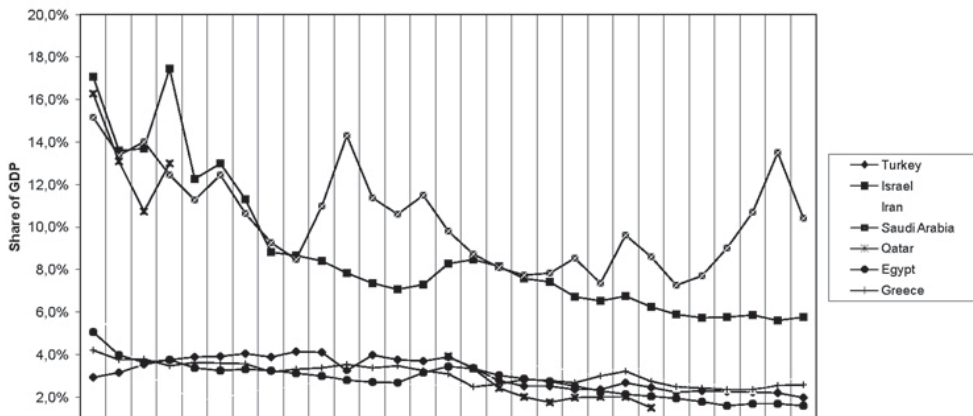


Table 3

Military expenditure as percentage of gross domestic product, 1988-2016



Things shifted again, however, after the end of the Cold War. The disappearance of any Soviet influence permitted the West to intervene in the Middle East twice; first in order to guarantee the existence of Kuwait (1991) and, second, in parallel with Afghanistan, to fight against Saddam Hussein's government, which at the time was considered as a sponsor of international terrorism. After this second war, the United States became the dominant and uncontested power in the entire Middle East. The only states not having relations with the West were Syria, and, for a limited period of time, Khadafy's Libya.

Recent events, however, started after the withdrawal of the US from Iraq, leaving an important power vacuum in the region. Moreover, Shiites, living mostly in the southeast of the country, dominated Iraq, and the Kurds came to control the northern part of it. Those who had been in power since the creation of the country and formed the majority of the population, the Sunni Muslims, were ousted. It is precisely these people and the middle level cadres in the armed forces and the public administration, living in the center of Iraq, which contributed to the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS).

In relative terms the takeover of power in Baghdad by Shiites was an important increase of power for Iran and a loss for Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf States, Turkey, Israel, Jordan,

and, to a certain extent, for the West. This is why neighbouring states started getting involved first in Iraq, assisting directly or indirectly the IS, and next, when the conditions came to permit it, in Syria. Let us take a closer look to the policies of the regional actors, as they behaved in the very near past and as they are today.

Iran

After Khomeini's Islamic 'Revolution', Iran has primarily focused on its security, as it faced the enmity of the West and that of the Arab countries on its border (Iraq) and across the Gulf. Progressively, Iran started to form allies abroad, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and later Hamas in Israel, and progressively supported the Assad regime in Syria, especially after the end of the Cold War, when the latter was progressively and increasingly isolated. As a balancing tool, Iran has also supported and mobilized any Shiite groups anywhere, to its benefit especially in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Iran then passed to power maximization, contributing to strategic weapons proliferation. It has increased its defence spending, pursued the acquisition of short, medium, and long range ballistic missiles, and initiated a nuclear weapons program. With the deal to freeze its nuclear program, Iran sought to alleviate the hardships of the international embargo, taking into consideration, however, that its program is the most advanced among those in the Middle East. With the exception of Pakistan to the East and Israel to its West, Iran is closer to the nuclear option than any other close competitor in its neighbourhood.

Iran was successful in several other cases. First, it successfully supported the Shiite government of Iraq, fighting together with its forces and other pro-western actors against the IS. Thus Iran has a friendly neighbour and at the same time eliminated a major and dangerous force next to its border. Second, Iran has fought successfully alongside with Assad and the Russians in Syria. This gave it an increased say for the future of Syria, as it is testified by its participation, together with Russia and Turkey, in the Astana negotiations; through these talks and given the described situation in Iraq, Iran may successfully seek access for its products to the Mediterranean. The friendly relations with the Assad regime has also given Iran the opportunity to strengthen its friendly paramilitary formations in Syria and Lebanon and to arm them, according to Jerusalem's claims, so as to undertake attacks against Israel.¹²

Third, Iran has successfully provoked and conducted a proxy war in Yemen against Saudi Arabia's allies and interests. In fact, despite its war efforts and an almost pan-Arabic alliance, Saudi Arabia finds itself 'encircled' by Iran for the first time. And not only that! Fourth, most recently Iran has benefited from the Saudi Arabia-Qatar crisis, and further increased its influence in the Persian Gulf. If things do not change, given the Shiite populations within Saudi Arabia, Iran appears as having the tactical advantage over Saudi Arabia and, for the first time, across the Gulf. Last but not least, fifth, Iran played a decisive role in the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil. Its forces made an important contribution to the recapture of Kirkuk and the Kurdish backing off from the independence goal. Thus Iran not only demonstrated its military capabilities but also eliminated any strong centrifugal forces in its own Kurdish population.

¹² Ahronheim, A. "Israel may have struck the Syrian weapons facility before Hezbollah could take-over". The Jerusalem Post. 7 September 2017. <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Israel-may-have-struck-the-Syrian-weapons-facility-before-Hezbollah-could-take-over-504469>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

Overall, Iran appears successful and strengthened in relation to its neighbours and competitors in the region. This is perhaps the main reason for the recent reaction of the current US administration, which was internationally related and critically commented only in relation with the freezing of Iran's nuclear program.¹³ Iran may have frozen or slowed down its nuclear program but it is not going to stop its power maximizing efforts in the Middle East; it is left to be seen whether it is going to turn its attention eastwards too.

Saudi Arabia

During and after the Cold War, Saudi Arabia was the privileged interlocutor of the U.S. and the West in the region. The Saudi Kingdom appeared as the basis of stability, both in the fields of security and energy. In the past, it faced Saddam Hussein and Iran; yet given its size, its technological and military might, and the support from the U.S., it may have felt secure.

Saudi Arabia, however, has also been involved in power maximization efforts. Besides its continuous financing of Muslim organizations abroad it has sustained an important military budget; in fact, it maintains the fourth or the fifth defence spending position around the world, after the U.S., Russia, China, and competes for the fourth position, depending on the year, with France.

Yet, in most of its recent policies, Saudi Arabia has been unsuccessful. It has been actively involved in the financing of the forces opposing the Assad regime, which were eventually defeated and Assad is still in power. Saudi Arabia has succeeded in forming an almost pan-Arabic coalition to deal with the Shiite surge in Yemen but the conflict is not over yet and Saudi Arabia can in no way claim victory. It has also tried to discipline Qatar and united most of the Gulf states against it, without, again, succeeding in ending the crisis, as Qatar continues some of its policies and rejects the Saudi settlement terms; moreover, it seems that this crisis has brought Qatar closer to Iran and to Turkey.

Finally, Saudi Arabia tried, unsuccessfully again, to block the Iranian nuclear agreement. What it succeeded, however, together and unofficially with Israel, is that the current U.S. administration, besides publicly reaffirming its support, changed its policy towards Iran. This, the formation of the coalition for Yemen, and the visit of the Saudi King in Moscow may appear as slight successes in a series of failed policies. Yet, Saudi Arabia remains a very important player in the region, which cannot be ignored by friends or competitors.

Turkey

Observing Turkey's past 50 years may easily lead to the conclusion that it follows a policy of maximizing its power. This is obvious in its defence spending, in its efforts to acquire the secrets of nuclear weapons, the development of a short range ballistic missile system, the acquisition of satellites, its plans to build a helicopter carrier, its intention to buy F-35 military aircraft from the U.S. and the S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems from Russia.

But since the rise in power (2002) of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), under the leadership of the country's current President Erdoğan, Turkey has adopted a set of

¹³ Landler, M. and Sanger, D. E. "Trump Disavows Nuclear Deal, but Doesn't Scrap It". *The New York Times*, 13 October 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

policies aimed at rising to the status of a global power. According to Davutoğlu, Turkey could play a global role; he wrote about the objectives of Turkey's foreign policy:

These goals aim to build a strong and respectable Turkey that is able to make an original contribution to the world community. To achieve them, Turkey must make progress in all directions and in every field, take an interest in every issue related to global stability, and contribute accordingly. This collective effort will make Turkey a global actor of this century. Turkey's actions are motivated by a great sense of responsibility, entrusted to it by its rich historical and geographic heritage,¹⁴ and by a profound consciousness of the importance of global stability and peace.¹⁵

Within this framework of this thinking, Turkey has also adopted policies expressing the neo-Ottoman ambitions of its leadership, whose major consequence was Turkey's turn towards the Middle East. Turkey progressively tried to appear as the leader of the region's Muslims (and even globally). More specifically, she first broke-up its ties with Israel and projected the image of the Palestinians' protector. Then, she welcomed the rise in power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and supported President Morsi for as long as the latter stayed in office.

Turkey, under Erdoğan, has reached towards Syria and Assad. Their relations have improved significantly with mutual visits at the highest level and to the point that in 2008 Turkey tried to mediate between Syria and Israel, and in 2009 between Syria and Iraq. As a matter of fact, in 2009, the three neighbouring countries met to resolve the issue of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In the same period of time, the commercial relations between Turkey and Syria were strengthened significantly, particularly after Turkey's condemnation of Israel's intervention in Gaza (December 2008). They went even further and in 2011 agreed that Turkey trains Syrian armed forces, which combined with Turkey's relations with Iran, raised questions within NATO. At the same time, Erdoğan and Assad agreed to jointly build a "friendship dam" on the border between Turkey and Syria.¹⁶

However, the 2011 political developments in Syria changed Turkey's attitude. Turkey not only froze its relations with Syria, criticized and tried to pressure Assad,¹⁷ but, given its bordering, became the country through which other states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, channelled weapons towards Assad's opposition. Turkey also became the transit country for all people, including those belonging to extremist organizations, who went to fight against Assad and who, eventually ended up fighting together with the IS and with Al-Nusra. It also became the reception country for all the Syrian regime's dignitaries who escaped and of those wounded in the fights. Moreover, with the purpose of increasing its influence within Syria in the post-Assad era, it opened its borders to Syrians, thus contributing to an increased flow of refugees later on.

As the war did not turn the way Turkey had expected, there was another change in its policy. Turkey stopped opposing Assad and focused its efforts in averting the creation

¹⁴ The "rich historical and geographic heritage" is the indirect reference to what Davutoğlu called the "strategic depth".

¹⁵ Davutoğlu, A. "Turkey's zero problems foreign policy". *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/20/turkeys-zero-problems-foreign-policy/>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

¹⁶ Kouskouvelis, I. "The Problem with Turkey's "Zero Problems". *Middle East Quarterly* 20/1. 2013. 51.

¹⁷ "Turkey imposes economic sanctions on Syria". BBC News. 30 November 2011. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15959770>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

of an independent or even autonomous Kurdish region next to its border and within Syria. With this in mind, Turkey has even invaded Syria and has been maintaining its forces there to date.

These changes of Turkey's policy towards Syria have initially created a crisis in its relations with Russia, Syria's most important ally, which reached a climax when the Turkish Air Force downed a Russian military aircraft. Yet, after this crisis and Turkey's new change of policy – this time not opposing Assad – the two countries improved their relations and now follow a rather common path in Syria,¹⁸ with Russia condoning even Turkey's intrusion in Syria.¹⁹ Thus, Turkey was included in the Astana discussions on the future of Syria. Russia started preparations for building two nuclear power plants²⁰ and agreed to sell S-400 missiles²¹ to Turkey.

Under Erdoğan, Turkey's political and commercial relations with Iran remained almost undisturbed, even during the time when the West had imposed sanctions on the latter or while Turkey and Iran were supporting different sides on the Syrian battlefield. Recently, the two countries have aligned against the perspective of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq.²²

However, these policies in the Middle East led to the distancing of Turkey from its traditional Western orientation. In addition to the problems with Israel, Turkey's relations with NATO member Greece have not improved; Turkey continued, for example, to violate the Hellenic airspace,²³ despite the fact that Greece had mitigated its opposition to Turkey's EU accession. Turkey, in addition to not ending the illegal occupation of the island, has created new problems with EU member Cyprus through attempting to block the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Ankara has never stopped harassing militarily both the Republic and the companies involved in these activities.²⁴

Turkey's relations with the US and the West in general became more tense and complicated after the July 2016 military coup attempt to overthrow Erdoğan. The latter first indirectly accused the previous US administration for instigating indirectly the coup. Tensions increased, however, with the new administration too, as Turkey opposed the arming of the Kurds in Syria (and in Iraq) by the US for fighting against the IS, and as she created problems to the operation of the NATO base in İnçirlic. Moreover, the continuous violations of human right in Turkey, the systematic persecution of politicians, journalists, and foreign nationals, as

¹⁸ Tol, G. and Vatanka, A. "Turkey's New Alliances". *Foreign Affairs*, 4 September 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2017-09-04/turkeys-new-alliances>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

¹⁹ "Turkey announces start of Idlib operation". *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 October 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-announces-start-of-idlib-operation-120494>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁰ "Turkey to hold first deep drilling for oil and gas in Med in 2018: Minister". *Hurriyet Daily News*, 11 October 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-hold-first-deep-drilling-for-oil-and-gas-in-med-in-2018-minister-120693>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²¹ "Russia receives down payment from Turkey on S-400 air defence systems". *Russia Today*, 29 September 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/405023-russia-turkey-s400-systems/>, Accessed on October 30, 2017.

²² "KRG will pay the price, Erdoğan says over independence referendum". *Hurriyet Daily News*, 30 September 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/they-will-pay-the-price-erdogan-says-over-krigs-independence-referendum-120173>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²³ "2017 Aggregate Incidents' Data." Hellenic National Defence General Staff. <http://www.geetha.mil.gr/en/violations-en/2015-01-27-12-57-42/5847-2017-aggregate-incidents-data.html>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁴ Kouskouvelis, I. "'Smart' leadership in a small state: The case of Cyprus". In Litsas S. and Tziampiris A. (eds). *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Power and Politics*. London: Ashgate Publishing, 2015.

well as the involvement in the political processes within NATO and EU countries, such as Germany,²⁵ in combination with Erdoğan's rhetoric,²⁶ made things worse.

Turkey's attitude led to reactions from various governments and resulted in an almost complete freeze of Turkey's EU accession process.²⁷ It led governmental officials to warn Turkey, analysts to start questioning Turkey's membership²⁸ and its future within the Alliance,²⁹ and President Trump's former Chief Strategist in the White House to consider her as "more dangerous than Iran".³⁰

Turkey has not gains from its neo-Ottoman drive and her quest for regional hegemony. Instead, Turkey is facing economic problems, internal terrorism, and two Kurdish entities along its southern border. What is potentially destabilizing the region, however, is that Turkey has not changed its plans or ambitions. What is problematic for the West are Turkey's dealings with Russia and Iran, the polarization of her public opinion against the West, and the unpredictable behaviour of Erdoğan towards the US and European states. In other words, Turkey wants to become a global power, as it was announced by Davutoğlu years ago, and is trying to emancipate herself from the West, creating rifts within the Alliance's cohesion.

GLOBAL PLAYERS IN THE MENA REGION

It is certain that the international system is no longer at the unipolar moment as it was at the turn of the millennium. Despite this fact, it is also certain that the US is still the leading state in all aspects and by all measurable standards in the World, especially in terms of military power, as shown in Table 4.

Yet, the choices made by the U.S. (and other Western states) in the MENA region, and primarily the decision to withdraw its forces from Iraq, created a vacuum of power that other states of the region (that we have just examined) and outside of it, tried to fill. Among the latter are Russia and China, two states which aspire for a global role and have a different strategy in and purpose for their involvement in the MENA region.

²⁵ "Party founded by Turks in Germany uses Erdoğan posters in campaign". *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 September 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/party-founded-by-turks-in-germany-uses-erdogan-posters-in-campaign.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117697&NewsCatID=351>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁶ "We don't need you: Erdoğan warns US". *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 12, 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-again-says-us-ambassador-bass-prompted-visa-crisis-120740>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁷ "Juncker: Turkey is taking giant strides away from EU". *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 13, 2017. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/juncker-turkey-is-taking-giant-strides-away-from-eu.aspx?pageID=238&nID=117904&NewsCatID=351>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁸ Cook, S. A. "The American Alliance With Turkey Was Built On a Myth". *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/12/the-american-alliance-with-turkey-was-built-on-a-myth/>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

²⁹ Pierini, M. "Europe's Policy Options on Turkey". Carnegie Europe. 27 September 2017. http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=73228&utm_source=rsemial&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWVRoaVlq-YzNOMk0xWVdFeiIsInQiOiJldWtPSEsrWDNXRlFNaFp2TWtleDFVZGh4S4m4ZT1oydUNvYzV4bHJKS1BwbnJCckdFTzIqbn1NJSGITWfJ2QWlpUFpSM2JkTzQ2WVJFY0pnUmlaMk9mVXZoaanFZRIVmSTQxT-WYIRmZvOHdrZnByQmFKREx0bkt6MldLWVdhOHNUbcJ9, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

³⁰ Barak D. "Steve Bannon: Turkey is more dangerous than Iran". *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 28 October 2017. <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1066421/steve-bannon-turkey-more-dangerous-iran>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

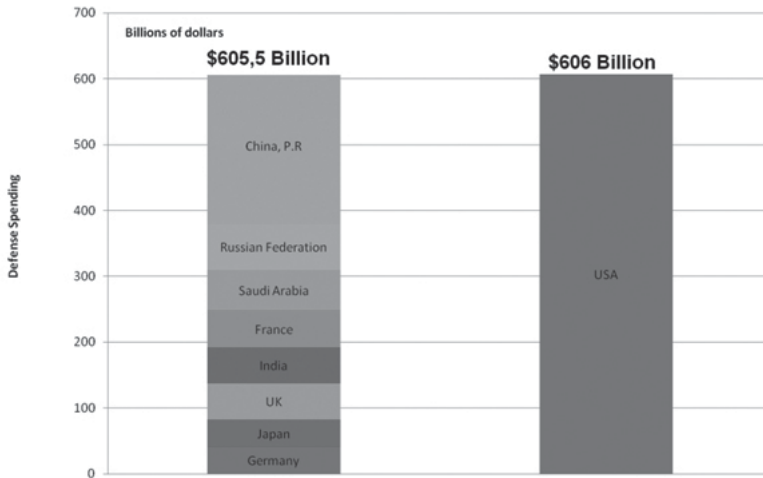


Table 4: Comparison of US defence spending with other major states (2016) – in constant 2015 prices

Their policies in the MENA region may be considered as a challenge of strategic nature or importance as it may threaten the status quo of the entire region or may upset the existing regional and general balance of power to the detriment of the West. Russia is trying to reassert itself and China to become a player in the area for the first time in history.

The Bear reappears in warm waters

Today, Russia, taking advantage of the Syrian turmoil and trying to reassert itself in the Mediterranean and in the MENA region, presents a major strategic challenge for the West in the area. Russia first tried to reduce the pressure exercised against her after the invasion of Crimea by spoiling the Western efforts to overthrow Assad and its regime. In fact, Russia gambled both in the Crimean and the Syrian cases and, given the proximity of the former and the lack of a clear Western strategy and cohesion in the latter, appears internationally to have eventually won in both.

Russia provides support to the Assad regime and fights against the Islamic State (IS) as much as it was necessary for maintaining the regime. In exchange for this support, Russia maintains its naval facilities in Tartus, built an air base, and obtained a free pass to install in Syria anything suitable for its plans. Of particular interest are the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) systems deployed in Syria – clearly not necessary for the fight against the IS, which, as it is well known, does not fly any planes...! Moreover, Russia's collateral gain is the fact that it manages to keep religious extremists outside of its border and to obtain a possibility to have an indirect influence on the prices in the energy market.

Thus, Russia obtained anew a military and political presence in the region. It can shape the future of Syria, it can influence the Kurdish issue, and it can put pressure on Israel, Turkey, and Iraq. Its presence in Syria gave Moscow the opportunity to come closer with Iran, supporting it in its quarrel over the nuclear deal with the West and, even holding common naval exercises in the Caspian Sea with it – letting aside their frictions over the Caspian energy resources.

This needs to be seen as complimentary to Russia's efforts for a political, economic, and military comeback in entire South Eastern Europe. In this region Russia has been supporting various political parties, and is using Orthodoxy (as in the past communism) and, occasionally, pan-Slavic ideas as ideological tools. Economically, Russia is trying to enter the markets of the countries in the region, through its major, Kremlin-run companies or through "independent" entrepreneurs. Given the economic situation and needs of these countries, and the lack of present alternatives, some of these efforts are successful; yet, in the military sector, the Russian efforts and initiatives appear to have a limited effect only.

Although Russia tries to rise internationally, her successes should not be exaggerated the way it is done by some of the public opinion in many Western countries. In fact, Russia annexed illegally Crimea and, more generally, has an obvious tactical advantage just outside her border. But it is right there, just along the border, that she has suffered a retreat, the loss of her influence in the rest of Ukraine; because in estimating gains and losses, one should take into account that once the whole of that country used to be part of Imperial Russia, not just of the Soviet Union. As a result of this observation, it follows that more should be done by the West in the area of public communication, stressing the contribution of the North Atlantic Alliance since 1949, and also the Alliance's overall defence spending, or even just that of the US, which is much higher compared with those of any other (revisionist) power.

As for Syria, the Russian presence depends on several premises: how long the Assad regime will hold, how long the Iranian factor will converge, and, for how long, if needed, Russia can sustain its forces abroad economically and militarily. Clearly, at this moment, Russia has no other ally in the region, and in this particular theatre she does not have the tactical advantage. Therefore, Russia is trying to exploit all opportunities that are offered by any player in the region, including NATO member Turkey. It is obvious that Russia supports Turkey on all issues that may provoke Turkey's Western allies and promotes its interests in every occasion and irrespectively of the Russian policies towards other players in the Middle East. Thus, one day Rosneft strikes a deal with (Iraqi) Kurdistan,³¹ whose independence Turkey opposes with all her forces, and a few days later President Putin meets with President Erdoğan in Ankara to discuss the region's agenda, including the Kurdish issue.³²

However, despite President Putin's efforts and his meetings with the leaders of countries like Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the overall influence of Moscow in the MENA countries remains concentrated in Syria. Yet, one has to follow developments in Libya too, where the Russian diplomacy is trying to expand its influence.

The Dragon enters the scene

The second medium-term strategic challenge, if one takes into consideration what is happening in the Pacific and what was decided at the 19th National Congress of the Communist

³¹ "Russia's Rosneft Clinches Gas Pipeline Deal with Iraq's Kurdistan". *The New York Times*, 18 September 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2017/09/18/business/18reuters-kurdistan-rosneft.html>, Accessed on 20 September 2017.

³² Chulkovskaya, Y. "Putin, Erdogan emerge all smiles from Ankara meeting". *Al-Monitor*, 29 September 2017. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/erdogan-putin-turkey-russia-meeting-kurdistan.html>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

Party,³³ is presented by China. China has a different policy towards its neighbours in the Pacific, and a different policy, as a whole, towards the MENA,³⁴ the other African, and the European countries. Today, given a change of policy by the US, communist China appears even as the defender of free trade – a position which clearly favours its state interests.

Recently, China has adopted the “Belt and Road Initiative” towards Europe and the rest of the world. However, this is not just an initiative but a Grand Strategy, whose fruits are going to appear in the years to come. To implement this strategy, China has increased its relations with the Middle Eastern countries.³⁵ It has also increased its presence in Eastern³⁶ and Sub-Saharan Africa. China, indicatively, is the first or the second investor in Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Niger; buys lands systematically and extensively, and in some of these countries it was/is a major weapons supplier. Ethiopia has become “Africa’s China”, and it is common knowledge that countries like Niger or Namibia (in the South) do not produce only oil, but also radioactive materials.

Perhaps, one may counter-argue, China does not appear as a major challenge in the MENA region. I must admit that it does not present an immediate military threat. Yet, the West and its security institutions need to observe and take under consideration China’s *modus operandi*, which is very much different from the Russian or the Western practices. China avoids direct or confrontational policies. China, for example, has quietly turned reefs in the South China Sea into artificial islands capable of hosting military planes. When freedom of aerial navigation is enforced in that Sea by US planes, China responds that it “always respects freedom of flight”.³⁷ And when its trade is threatened by US Administration decisions, China makes itself useful by offering to be a mediator with North Korea, to whose arsenal build-up Beijing has already contributed...

In the years to come, China will continue increasing its presence in the MENA region and in the EU, primarily through commercial transactions and investments and through the benign interactions in the areas of science and culture. Usually, China enters the scene, by offering advantageous commercial and investment deals to states and businesses, which the EU, the U.S., or Western corporations do not offer. This is the case, for example, with the “Cooperation between China and 16 Central and Eastern European Countries” (known as the “16+1” scheme). Yet, all this ‘peaceful’ and ‘cooperative’ approach needs to be assessed in the light of the important increases in defence spending, featuring China as the second spender worldwide, and her ambitions to become a global player.

³³ China shall “transform” the “people’s armed forces into world-class forces”. See: “Resolution on CPC Central Committee Report”. *China Daily*, 24 October 2017. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/25/content_33675880.htm, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

³⁴ Pintér, M. G. “China in the MENA Region”. *Defence Review* 145/1. 2017. 241–258.

³⁵ For China’s role in the Middle East, see: Chaziza, M. “China and the Independent Kurdish State”. BESA Center. *Perspectives* 590. 18 September 2017. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-independent-kurdistan/>, Accessed on 30 October 2017. Also: Yellinek, R. “Why Are Relations Tightening Between China and Turkey?” BESA Center. *Perspectives* 576. 1 September 2017. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-turkey-relations/>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

³⁶ Elazar, G. “China in the Red Sea: The Djibouti Naval Base and the Return of Admiral Zheng He”. BESA Center *Perspectives*. Paper No. 567. 23 August 2017. <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/china-red-sea-djibouti/>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

³⁷ “US warplanes fly over disputed South China Sea”. *Ahram online*. 7 July 2017. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/273199.aspx>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

China's strategy has not gone unnoticed by the two major EU member states, Germany and France, and the European Commission, at whose initiative certain measures have been taken. However, these measures do not address the main reason why it is so easy for China to strike such kind of agreements and increase its influence in Europe and its adjacent areas.

TRANS-BORDER PHENOMENA AND THE MENA REGION

In the recent years the MENA region has been directly linked, if not identified, in the eyes of the Western public opinion and of security planners, with two major phenomena. They are migration and the terrorist activities of political and radicalized Islam. They are phenomena transcending borders and for different reasons and purposes are or may become sources of instability, not just for the region, but for other areas around the world.

Migration

The phenomena of refugee and migration are a major challenge of our times and of those to come, and a major issue for three states adjacent to the region, namely Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Dealing with migration constitutes a huge political, economic, ethical and security challenge for all Western states, not just continental Europeans, as the reactions to migrants threaten political stability and, thus, indirectly, the West's cohesion. With hundreds of thousands of war and environmental refugees and of economic migrants knocking at its door, the West and, more particularly, Europe, appear to be uncomfortable, indecisive, politically divided, and old in their reflexes. Nationalistic and xenophobic feelings have surfaced, damaging Europe's unity, moral prestige and interests.

The refugee crisis and especially migration are of strategic importance. One should not forget that half of the 1.2 billion people living in Africa are under the age of 25. The migration phenomenon is of strategic importance also because of the basic causes triggering such movement of people, which is becoming a mass movement, are war, underdevelopment, and environmental changes, i.e., draught and intensive desertification.

It is widely accepted that the West has its share of responsibility for underdevelopment and for environmental change. Yet, those conflicts in the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa pushing people to exodus are caused by regional actors' antagonisms and by non-state actors, such as al-Qaeda, the IS and their affiliate groups in Africa. It is these antagonisms and, particularly, the non-state actors that have led to conflicts and have contributed to the failure of states, i.e., Libya, Syria, and Iraq.

Obviously, the situation in Libya is different from that in Syria and Iraq. The West needs to clarify its policy towards this country and the two governments, and has to contribute to stabilization, defence capacity building, border control, and maritime security. These efforts need to be undertaken and implemented fast because Libya is the doorway to migration towards Italy. In these efforts, cooperation with neighbouring states, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and, to the South, Chad, needs to be sought; moreover, defence capacity building and maritime security have played and need to play a much more important role. For years now, Italy has been receiving the burden of migration waves from there, and needs all solidarity possible from EU and NATO member states.

Syria and Iraq are, however, the main source of the refugee wave, which reached its peak between 2014 and 2016. The primary receivers to the Northwest are Turkey, Greece, and, at the end of the road, Germany, receiving the biggest part of refugees in Europe. Turkey,

servicing its interests, has initially opened its borders and received the refugees; but once her policy changed, Turkey opened its western borders in order to put pressure on Greece and the EU and gain both politically and economically.

Greece, in particular, has witnessed the largest ever population movement in its recent history and, despite its dire economic situation, has assisted refugees rather successfully. This happened, to a large extent, thanks to the Hellenic Armed Forces (HAF). The HAF contributed to the overall efforts with the construction and management of dozens of refugee facilities and dealt with tens of thousands of people across the country, demonstrating that the HAF is not in crisis. At the same time, the excessive illegal migration was dealt with as a potential source of individual security threats for the country, Europe and NATO, because it was not just connected to terrorism but was potentially able to unbalance other socio-economic equilibria. The HAF, in this unusual setting, strived, on the one hand, to transform civilian functions into military, and, on the other, turn military functions into civilian, in order to run successfully the refugee reception facilities. The lessons learned are undoubtedly valuable and ready to be shared with Greece's partners as best practices, and studied as a contribution to stability and security of the country and the region.

Terrorism

It seems that presently the flow of refugees from Iraq and Syria has diminished. Yet, the wars in Syria and in Iraq are not over. Nuclei of the IS forces are still putting up resistance, various warring parties in different areas of Iraq and Syria continue their armed struggle, and secessionist tendencies, together with the antagonistic involvement and the revisionist influences of Iran, Russia, and Turkey, threaten the unity of both countries. Thus, as this region has been, due primarily to the IS, the major field of breeding and exporting terrorism to neighbouring countries and to the West, continuing the fighting against terror prone groups, dealing with hybrid war tactics and persisting in stabilization efforts, poses another major challenge for Western countries.

Of course, in the medium term the IS appears to be territorially defeated. The risk of terrorism, however, is not eliminated, as extremist ideas are going to survive, and since many of those extremists fighting for the caliphate are citizens of EU member states – as they are of Russia and of many Balkan or Arab countries – and are going to return home. Many of them have already fled the Middle East and moved in Libya, sub-Saharan Africa, and even in the Philippines to continue their struggle. Therefore, intelligence and counter terrorism activities need to be stepped up, the relevant activities of European countries better coordinated, and diplomatic efforts intensified. Moreover, special emphasis should be given on how some states help terrorist groups or use terror methods against their opponents or even their citizens, and how to avoid this happening again in the future.

There is one more reason to focus on the link between some states and terrorism: that in the conflict of Syria we have witnessed the use of chemical weapons, in the form of state terrorism too. Nobody should forget that chemical weapons, despite their limited geographic impact, are still weapons of mass destruction. For many years, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and missile systems in the Middle East was a primary source of concerns. It was also thought that with the end of Saddam's regime in Iraq and with the agreement imposed on the Syrian regime, the risk of chemical weapons has been contained. However, reality is very much different, as it was demonstrated by their inhumane use some months ago, or by

the tendency to acquire strategic weapons by various states in the region, such as Turkey,³⁸ Iran,³⁹ or Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

On the basis on all the above presented challenges – to remind them: regional actors’ maximization behaviours, Russian and Chinese ambitions, migration, and terrorism – every citizen and decision maker, even the most sceptical one, should be convinced that the Western presence needs to be further increased in Syria and in the entire region. It is simply unnatural that no major Western power, for example, the U.S., or any other Western member of the UN Security Council, such as France or the U.K., sits at the negotiating table for the future of Syria. This needs to be understood by Russia and by regional powers, particularly by NATO member Turkey; it should be made clear through traditional diplomatic channels and, if necessary, through (military) diplomacy, available to and based on the might of Western economic and defence institutions. Moreover, the Western strategy on a variety of issues should be determined, crystallized, and implemented, including the position towards a number of countries, such as Russia, China, Iran, and even NATO member Turkey, and the Western diplomatic efforts should be better coordinated.

The situation demonstrated the importance of the region around the Eastern Mediterranean, therefore specific initiatives need to be taken. These initiatives may include: (a) the closer cooperation, but also the attainment of economies of scale between NATO and EU activities; (b) the closer cooperation with stable states in the region, such as Cyprus (an EU member), Israel, Jordan, and Egypt; and, (c), taking advantage of existing security networks, such as between Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, or between Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt.

It is obvious that the importance of the Alliance’s southern flank has been critically enhanced even though its cohesion has been put under stress by a member state. It seems that the new environment needs to be further assessed, initiatives to be planned and implemented, and the situation pertaining to Alliance cohesion clarified, in one direction or another.

It is equally obvious that stepping up the operations of Western security institutions in the Eastern Mediterranean and around its shores requires engagement with the new tasks as well as defence budget increases. A long time ago, Thucydides⁴¹ first and Demosthenes⁴²

³⁸ World Nuclear Association. “Nuclear Power in Turkey”. 21 June 2017. <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-t-z/turkey.aspx>, Accessed on 30 October 2017. Flood, R. “Turkey is trying to get an ATOMIC BOMB in secret weapons plan, warns expert”. *Sunday Express*, 8 August 2017. <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/838694/Turkey-atomic-bomb-Recep-Tayyip-Erdo-an-nuclear-weapon-fears>, Accessed on 30 October 2017. Also: “Turkey test fires first domestically made ballistic missile”, *Middle East Eye*, 11 May 2017. <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-test-fires-first-domestically-made-ballistic-missile-1395267736>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

³⁹ “Iran tests new ballistic missile hours after showing it off at military parade”. CNN. 24 September 2017. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/23/middleeast/iran-ballistic-missile-test/index.html>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

⁴⁰ Dorsey, J. M. “Saudi-Iranian Rivalry Fuels Potential Nuclear Race”. *Huffington Post*, 5 April 2017. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/saudi-iranian-rivalry-fuels-potential-nuclear-race_us_58e4dc7fe4b09dbd42f3dbf7, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

⁴¹ Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*: “war is won more with the mind and with plenty of money” (2.13.2); “war is fought less with weapons and more with money, which make weapons efficient” (1.83.2); and “gold and silver ... ensure the success in the war and in everything else” (6.34.2).

⁴² Demosthenes. *Olynthiac I*: “Money is needed, and without money nothing can be done that ought to be done” (1.20).

second stressed the importance of money in the conduct of military affairs, and particularly in war. In order to do that, the West needs to address a major challenge related to the Alliance cohesion. In fact, one of the greatest problems for the Athenians and their great political and military alliance, according to Thucydides, was not just the lack of leadership after the death of Pericles; it was the non-fulfilment of obligations and the allies' defection, even in a tight bipolar and warring international system as the one of that time.

Today, the international system is no longer bipolar, and the unipolar moment seems to have passed. Today, however, many feel secure, thanks to the efforts of their allies in the past. For many years also central and northern regions of Europe have been priority. This was and is still understandable and opportune. Yet, as it was shown, things have tremendously changed, and Greece, Italy, France or Spain – all of them across the MENA region – cannot be just the providers of security for the north, the centre or the east of Europe, because back then all was quiet in the Mediterranean region ... Members of the EU and particularly those of the North Atlantic Alliance need therefore to discuss the new strategic challenges on the basis of the compelling reality and on the basis of the conclusions reached at the Warsaw Summit.

All is no longer quiet in the region around the Mediterranean! The interests of many states within the Alliance are at stake. It is my assessment that the Alliance is moving in the direction of tackling the challenges of the southeast, and does what it knows and is best at: provide security for its member states and stability for the region to the benefit of all. At least this appears to be the intention out of the recent creation of NATO's "Strategic Direction South"⁴³ and out of the earlier creation of NRDC-GR.

Greece, at the crossroads of three continents, is ready to do her share and guarantee, as always, free and safe access to what I call the Mediterranean maritime highway. However, all the member states have to understand the strategic challenges of our times across the Mediterranean and in the MENA region, to act according to the common security interests, and get prepared. As Thucydides has advised more than 2,400 years ago: let's prepare actively as if we always had to deal with rivals who decide wisely; and we should not base our hopes in the mistakes they will make, but in the foresight for our own security [...]. for the prevailing is the one who is trained for the great needs (1.84.4).

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⁴³ "NATO Strategic Direction South officially opens". NATO SHAPE. 5 September 2017. <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2017/nato-strategic-direction-south-hub-officially-opens>, Accessed on 30 October 2017.

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