

Addressing Russia's Search for New Strong- holds in the Mediterranean

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Introduction

The collapse of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, under an overwhelming advance by the heterogeneous bloc of Syrian rebels active since 2011, has opened new scenarios not only within this specific country but also across the Mediterranean chessboard. With their protégé out of the picture, Russia's strongholds in Syria are faltering, and key geopolitical players now have an opportunity to redefine their roles and spheres of influence. As events are still unfolding and fast paced, amidst all breaking

Executive Summary

This CARPO Brief analyzes Russia's evolving military strategy in the Mediterranean following the collapse of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. With the fall of its long-time ally, Moscow faces growing challenges in maintaining its foothold in Syria while seeking alternative strongholds, particularly in Libya. This paper examines Russia's efforts to preserve its presence at Tartus and Khmeimim while expanding operations in Libya. It also explores the broader geopolitical implications of Russia's Mediterranean repositioning, particularly its impact on European and NATO security. Among its policy recommendations, the Brief calls for the need for a unified response to deter further Russian entrenchment in Libya and mitigate security risks linked to Moscow's shifting Mediterranean strategy. It also recommends that NATO and the EU enhance naval surveillance, enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya, and encourage Syria's new leadership to restrict Russia's military access. It furthermore highlights the importance of engaging Türkiye as a key regional player to counterbalance Russian influence in the Mediterranean and North Africa.

news, how can we make sense of Russia's presence in the Mediterranean basin in the aftermath of Assad's fall?

Historically Rooted

Although Russia has always favored a continental strategy, it has never been disinterested in the Mediterranean basin, limiting itself, however, to one squadron: the Fifth Eskadra,¹ which has been present in these waters since 1958, following the U.S. intervention in Lebanon. The doctrinal ideas behind this choice were always related to the concepts of strategic mobility and forward deployment. But to strengthen their presence, they needed outposts: hence a whole series of agreements from the one with Albania for the port of Vlora that lasted until 1961, to the one with Egypt for the ports of Alexandria, Marsa Matruh, and Port Said, as a reward for supporting the Arab cause in the 1967 war against Israel. This allowed Russian ships to stop in Egyptian waters until 1976 when relations with Cairo soured because of strained relations with President Anwar Sadat. The Latakia outpost in Syria, on the other hand, perdured over time – remaining in function until today.

Complementarily, on the Mediterranean's southern shores, contacts between Russia and Libya are decades old.² In fact, during

the rule of Muammar al-Gaddafi, they had proven to be very productive in terms of business. After the revolution and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, Russian leader Vladimir Putin decided to forge a close relationship with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA), the military wing of one of the two now-divided Libyan political bodies, which, specifically, is based in Tobruk. This partnership's objective was to open a Russian front on the Mediterranean and the broader African continent, precisely because of Libya's strategic location. It was most overtly brought to light in Haftar's 2019–2020 offensive on Tripoli and the then-Government of National Accord (GNA), when he received support from Moscow through the infamous Wagner Group of Yevgeny Prigozhin.

This pattern of leveraging alliances to secure Russian influence around the Mediterranean basin is a common thread to Putin's approach in Libya but also Syria, where his support for Assad over the past decade ensured Moscow's military foothold in the Middle East. After Assad's fall, the last outposts standing in Syria are uncoincidentally the Mediterranean port of Tartus and the Khmeimim air base, near Latakia. The question on many people's minds is what will become of these two bases in the near future, as the regime's fall undoubtedly marks a breaking point in Russia's access to the Mediterranean basin.

¹ Saini Fasanotti, Federica (25.06.2024): 'Russia in the Mediterranean', in: *GIS Reports Online*, Available at <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-mediterranean/> (12.02.2025).

² Saini Fasanotti, Federica (01.09.2016): 'Russia and Libya. A brief history of an on-again-off-again friendship', in: *Brookings Commentary*. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/> (12.02.2025).

Scaling Back Yet Holding on in Post-Assad Syria

In the immediate aftermath of the rebels' seizure of Damascus on 8 December 2024, geolocated footage and satellite imagery revealed Moscow evacuating military assets and personnel. Within a week, approximately 1,000 Russian personnel had withdrawn from the capital,³ while convoys began relocating units and equipment from secondary bases near Manbij, Kobane, Palmyra, and Qamishli (co-operated with the Assad regime) to the primary installations at Tartus and Khmeimim (under direct Russian control).⁴ By January 2025, these bases had either been handed over to or seized by opposition forces.⁵

Transport aircraft and cargo ships were mobilized for evacuation, with commercial satellite imagery from 17 December revealing an unusual concentration of vehicles and containers at Tartus.⁶ In December, a small flotilla of Russian landing ships and cargo vessels departed Kaliningrad to support the

evacuation operations, but faced significant setbacks. In early January, the cargo ships *Sparta* and *Sparta II* arrived off the Syrian coast but remained adrift for weeks as the country's new authorities denied them access to the port of Tartus.⁷ These developments have created critical roadblocks for Russia's evacuation efforts, underscoring Moscow's logistical challenges in safeguarding its military assets in increasingly hostile dynamics. By 21 January 2025, *Sparta* and *Sparta II* were finally allowed to enter the Port of Tartus after a prolonged wait. Satellite imagery from the following days confirmed the disappearance of a significant number of Russian vehicles and materiel previously marshaled at a pier, likely indicating their transfer onto these vessels, which then departed for the western Mediterranean.⁸ Additional satellite images from 4 February show *Sparta* and *Sparta II* off the coast of Tunisia, alongside the *Alexander Otrakovsky* (Ropucha-class landing ship), *Admiral Golovko* (Admiral Gorshkov-class frigate), and *Admiral Grigorovich* (Grigorovich-class frigate).⁹

3 DI Ukraine (14.12.2024): 'In Syria, the Russians are fleeing through the folding evacuations of their soldiers' ['У Сирії росіяни скигають через складнощі евакуації своїх солдатів'], Telegram. Available at <https://t.me/DIUkraine/5022> (12.02.2025).

4 Milinfo Live (13.12.2024): 'Additional footage of the presence of Russian armed forces units at the Qamishli airfield in northeastern Syria' ['Дополнительные кадры присутствия подразделений вооружённых сил России на аэродроме Камышлы на северо-востоке Сирии'], Telegram. Available at <https://t.me/milinfoLive/137538> (12.02.2025).

5 Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine (16.12.2024): 'Russia cannot geopolitically influence multiple fronts simultaneously' ['рф не в змозі геополітично впливати на декількох фронтах одночасно'], SZRU. Available at <https://szru.gov.ua/news-media/news/rf-ne-v-zmozi-heopolitychno-vplyvaty-na-dekilkokh-frontakh-odnochasno> (12.02.2025).

6 Trevithick, Joseph (17.12.2024): 'Satellite imagery shows ramp-up in Russian forces massing at bases in Syria for withdrawal', in: *The Warzone*. Available at https://www.twz.com/news-features/satellite-imagery-shows-ramp-up-in-russian-forces-massing-at-bases-in-syria-for-withdrawal?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email (12.02.2025).

7 RBC Ukraine (11.01.2025): 'Russian ships denied access to Syrian port', in RBC Ukraine. Available at <https://newsukraine.rbc.ua/news/russian-ships-denied-access-to-syrian-port-1736510069.html> (12.02.2025).

8 Trevithick, Joseph (27.01.2025): 'Russian withdrawal from prized Syrian naval base now underway', in: *The Warzone*. Available at https://www.twz.com/news-features/russian-withdrawal-from-prized-syrian-naval-base-now-underway?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email (12.02.2025).

9 MT Anderson (28.01.2025): 'Med Sea Flotilla from 23 Jan 2025', X. Available at https://x.com/MT_Anderson/status/1884257764782043400 (12.02.2025).

However, despite setbacks, Russia is not entirely relinquishing its presence in Syria. On 28 January, the first official Russian delegation arrived in Syria since the fall of the regime to discuss Russia's continued use of its military bases.¹⁰ The delegation included high-ranking Russian officials, including Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Presidential Special Representative to Syria Alexander Lavrentyev,¹¹ with discussions expected to occur with Syria's new authorities (i.e., Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – HTS) in the following days. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated on 3 February to national media outlets that Russian and Syrian officials would maintain contact on "all issues," including Russia's continued access to the Port of Tartus.¹² However, the departure of multiple Russian vessels from Tartus in late January 2025 suggests Moscow is not optimistic about the outcome of these negotiations.¹³ The presence of these ships off the coast of Tunisia further indicates they are not bound

for Libya. Additionally, Ukrainian sources report that *Sparta II* turned off its automatic identification system after leaving Syria – a common practice among ships in Russia's "shadow fleet".¹⁴

So far, Russia appears intent on maintaining a reduced yet strategic presence centered on Khmeimim and Tartus. Notably, drone footage of Khmeimim in mid-December showed ongoing activity, with transport aircraft, helicopters, and fighter jets in use, while air defense systems – including S-300s and S-400s – were being repositioned westward to protect key installations.¹⁵ However, the ongoing restrictions on Tartus, marked by the interim government's suspension on 20 January of the agreement that allowed a Russian company to manage and invest in the port, have already impacted Moscow's capacity to sustain its forces in the country.¹⁶ Even before these restrictions, the fall of Assad has severely affected Moscow's capacity

10 Reuters (28.01.2025): 'Russian government delegation arrives in Syria for talks, TASS Reports', in: *Reuters*. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-government-delegation-arrives-syria-talks-tass-reports-2025-01-28/> (12.02.2025).

11 RT Russia (28.01.2025): 'Russian high-level delegation arrived in Damascus' ['Российская высокопоставленная делегация прибыла в Дамаск.'], in: *RT Russia*. Available at <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/1427055-rossiya-delegaciya-vizit-damask> (12.02.2025).

12 TASS (03.02.2025): 'Peskov: Russia to continue talks with Syria on fate of Tartus base' ['Песков: РФ продолжит переговоры с Сирией о судьбе базы в Тартусе'], in: *TASS*. Available at <https://tass.ru/politika/23039715> (12.02.2025).

13 Karr, Liam and Kathryn Tyson (24.01.2025): 'Russia continues pivot to Libya and Mali', Institute for the Study of War. Available at <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/africa-file-january-24-2025-russia-continues-pivot-libya-and-mali-saf-advances-khartoum> (12.02.2025).

14 Center of National Resistance of Ukraine (04.02.2025): 'Ukrainem Russian weapon transfers from Syria' ['Україна контролює рух російських суден, які возять зброю із Сирії'], *SPROTYV*. Available at <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/ukrayina-kontrolyuye-ruh-rosijskyh-suden-yaki-vozyat-zbroju-iz-syriyi/> (12.02.2025).

15 Mitch Ulrich (06.12.2024): 'The Russian convoy is heading South on the M1 towards the direction of Tartus, Syria', X. Available at https://x.com/Mitch_Ulrich/status/1865093374853648408 (12.02.2025).

16 Al-Watan Online (19.01.2025): 'Tartus customs director to "al-Watan"' ['Mudir jamarik Tartus li "al-Watan"'], in: *al-Watan Online*. Available at https://www.alwatanonline.com/مدیر-جمارك-طرطوس-للالوطن-الرسوم-الجمركي/?ocid=Nabd_App (12.02.2025).

to maintain its forces in the Mediterranean, with the last Russian submarine departing the Strait of Gibraltar on 2 January.¹⁷

It is therefore reasonable to assume that the prospects for Russian-Syrian relations returning to their former strength are slim, as HTS holds the upper hand in negotiations and can extract more significant concessions from Moscow. The continued evacuation of military assets from Tartus further underscores Russia's struggle to adapt to the new political landscape, while uncertainties remain over the future of its military installations in Syria.

Is the Geopolitical Board Reshuffled Yet?

At present, there is no confirmed information on the final destination of personnel and equipment Russia plans to relocate from Syria. Based on recent events, it has become clear that Libya could receive some of these assets. However, despite its strategic importance in Russia's regional calculations and important pre-existing relationships, barriers to a full relocation exist.

In the long term, Russia will likely explore alternative basing options beyond Syria to sustain its Mediterranean presence. One possible

candidate is Algeria, a traditional Russian ally that receives 85% of its military equipment and training from Moscow.¹⁸ Algeria boasts 13 major commercial ports and ship repair facilities, including infrastructure to support Kilo-class submarines, which could technically service Russian naval assets.¹⁹ However, geopolitical obstacles remain. Algeria's strong economic interests and commercially viable shipping infrastructure may make Algiers reluctant to host a permanent Russian base without a compelling strategic incentive. Moreover, Russian activities in Mali have strained relations between Moscow and Algiers, creating uncertainty over whether Algeria would be willing to offer sustained logistical or basing support.²⁰ While Russia may attempt to negotiate maintenance arrangements, this would be a far less reliable alternative to the full logistical autonomy it currently enjoys in Tartus.

Another potential alternative is Port Sudan, where Russia has long sought to establish a Red Sea naval presence. Moscow has switched allegiance from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF),²¹ partly to improve its maritime access. However, despite years of negotiations, efforts to finalize a naval agreement remain stalled,

17 Naval News (05.01.2025): 'After loss of Tartus, Russia now has no submarines in the Mediterranean', in: *Naval News*. Available at <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/01/after-loss-of-tartus-russia-now-has-no-submarines-in-the-mediterranean/> (12.02.2025).

18 Zoubir, Yahia H. (11.01.2024): *Algerian-Russian Relations: Military Cooperation*, Middle East Council on Global Affairs. Available at <https://mecouncil.org/publication/algerian-russian-relations-military-cooperation> (12.02.2025).

19 Army Recognition (03.04.2024): 'Russian shipyard completes refit of Algerian Kilo class submarine Akram Pacha', in: *Army Recognition*. Available at <https://armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2024/russian-shipyard-completes-refit-of-algerian-kilo-class-submarine-akram-pacha> (12.02.2025).

20 Menas Associates (13.08.2024): 'Further deterioration in Algeria-Russia relations after Battle of Tin Zaouatene', in: *Menas*. Available at <https://menas.co.uk/blog/further-deterioration-in-algeria-russia-relations-after-battle-of-tin-zaouatene> (12.02.2025).

21 McGregor, Andrew (08.07.2024): *Russia Switches Sides in Sudan War*, Jamestown Foundation. Available at <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-switches-sides-in-sudan-war/> (12.02.2025).

making Port Sudan an unreliable option in the short term.²² Even if a proposed base – capable of hosting four Russian warships²³ – eventually materializes, it would be an inadequate substitute for Tartus. The logistical and operational constraints of transiting the Suez Canal, particularly in emergencies, would significantly weaken Russian naval flexibility in the Mediterranean. Additionally, the visibility of ship movements through the canal would limit Moscow's ability to operate discreetly.

Libya may therefore become, at least for the time being, an emergency fallback until a more permanent solution is found. In practice, early reports indicate that, since mid-December, Moscow has been operating more than one flight per day from Syria's Khmeimim Airbase to Libya's al-Khadim Airbase in Cyrenaica – a known hub for Russian and Wagner Group activities.²⁴ While the exact contents of these shipments remain unclear, the use of An-124 and Il-76 supercargo planes points to a significant logistical operation, reinforcing the scale of the transfer.²⁵ Some reports suggest that advanced Russian

air defense systems – like radars and S-400 SAMs – may be among the equipment being transferred.²⁶

Furthermore, Italian sources report that Russia is transferring personnel and equipment to Libya's Maaten al-Sarra airbase, near Chad and Sudan.²⁷ Once active during the 1980s Libyan-Chadian war, the base is now being restored by Russian technicians and reportedly former Syrian forces, with Haftar's approval. If operational, it would complement Russia's existing airbases in Libya near al-Khadim, al-Jufra, Brak al-Shati, and al-Qardabiya. Satellite imagery indicates ongoing repaving of the runway and storage area renovations, and reports suggest that Russian forces are building additional facilities, including housing and security perimeters.²⁸ Reportedly, Saddam Haftar, son of Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar, has deployed LNA forces to secure the base.²⁹ However, the base's poor condition poses deep logistical challenges, adding a new layer of complexity to Moscow's efforts to establish a swift regional alternative to Syria.

22 Black, Edward and Sidharth Kaushal (14.01.2025): *Russia's Options for Naval Basing in the Mediterranean After Syria's Tartus*, Commentary, Royal United Services Institute. Available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-options-naval-basing-mediterranean-after-syrias-tartus> (12.02.2025).

23 Top War (13.02.2024): 'Russia-Sudan naval base agreement not yet ratified' [Посол России в Хартуме: Судан пока не ратифицировал соглашение о создании базы ВМФ РФ], in: *Top War*. Available at <https://topwar.ru/236157-posol-rossii-v-hartume-sudan-poka-ne-ratificiroval-soglashenie-o-sozdanii-bazy-vmf-rf.html> (12.02.2025).

24 Abdulkader Assad (14.12.2024): 'Russia launches air bridge to Libya', in: *Libya Observer*. Available at <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/russia-launches-air-bridge-libya> (12.02.2025).

25 Flight Radar (no date): 'Flight tracking information', in: *Flightradar24*. Available at <https://www.flightradar24.com> (12.02.2025).

26 Faucon, Benoit and Lara Seligman (18.12.2024): 'Russia air defense bases in Syria and Libya', in: *Wall Street Journal*. Available at <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0?> (12.02.2025).

27 Abdulkader Assad (15.01.2025): 'Haftar gives Russian forces military base near Chad-Sudan border', in: *Libya Observer*. Available at <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/haftar-gives-russian-forces-military-base-near-border-chad-and-sudan> (12.02.2025).

28 Agenzia Nova (14.01.2025): 'New front: Russia reactivates base on Chad-Sudan border' [Fonti nova: la Russia amplia la presenza in Libia riattivando una base al confine con Ciad e Sudan], in: *Agenzia Nova*. Available at <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/libia-fonti-nova-la-russia-riattiva-una-base-al-confine-con-ciad-e-sudan/> (12.02.2025).

29 Mohamed Tailamun (23.01.2025): 'Images of a significant LNA force advancing towards Matan Al-Sarah AFB, showing Starlink's impact on field communications', X. Available at <https://x.com/MTailamun/status/1882210004394233950> (12.02.2025).

Moreover, whilst Eastern Libya could be a potential destination for the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean and related equipment,³⁰ especially after Russia reportedly pursued expanded access to the ports of Benghazi and Tobruk in 2023,³¹ both ports have significant limitations. Although a valuable deep-water port in the Maghreb, Tobruk lacks the necessary infrastructure – such as repair facilities, a dry dock, large berths, and expansion potential – to support the relocation of Russian ships. On the other hand, Benghazi is a well-equipped port capable of hosting vessels of that tonnage. Yet its central position along the eastern Gulf of Sirte presents strategic vulnerabilities: Transport operations from Benghazi would take longer and be more prone to detection by NATO member states. Not least, much of its infrastructure remains unusable due to damage from a decade of conflict and would require significant investments (financial and human) to rehabilitate.

Ultimately, Russia faces a strategic dilemma in maintaining its Mediterranean footprint if it loses Tartus. Libya, Algeria, and Sudan each offer partial solutions but come with significant limitations in terms of infrastructure,

political stability, and logistical feasibility. Moscow will likely continue leveraging multiple access points rather than committing to a single alternative, adapting its strategy based on evolving geopolitical dynamics and operational needs across the Sahel.

These physical limitations must be considered in conjunction with legal ones. Indeed, with UNSC resolution 2292 (2016)³² and subsequent resolutions³³ came the UN arms embargo on Libya, due to be monitored using aerial, satellite, and maritime assets. Three primary modalities of enforcement are in place in and around Libya's territorial waters. On the one hand, UN Member States are authorized to search, seize, transfer, and dispose of all items prohibited by the arms embargo, as well as collect evidence directly related to the carriage of such items in the course of such inspections, and are encouraged to collaborate to that end. On the other hand, Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI (hereafter 'IRINI') was launched in March 2020³⁴ with the core task of implementing the UN arms embargo on Libya, notably through the inspections of vessels off the coast of Libya.³⁵ Finally, the UN Panel of Experts is meant to

30 Tatarigami UA (19.12.2024): 'When Bashar al-Assad's regime fell in Syria, a critical geopolitical question emerged: can Russia maintain its foothold in the MENA region, and if so, how?', X Thread. Available at <https://x.com/Tatarigami-UA/status/1869806833369817588> (12.02.2025).

31 Faucon, Benoit (15.09.2023): 'Russia seeks to expand naval presence in the Mediterranean', in: *Wall Street Journal*. Available at https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/russia-seeks-to-expand-naval-presence-in-the-mediterranean-b8da4db?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email (12.02.2025).

32 UN Security Council (03.08.2020), 'Chronology of UN Resolutions and Reports on Libya', *UN Security Council Report*. Available at <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/libya.php> (12.02.2025).

33 UN Digital Library (31.05.2024): 'UN Resolution 2733 (2024)'. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4050344?ln=en&v=pdf> (12.02.2025).

34 The operation's mandate was extended to 31 March 2025 with Council Decision (CFSP) 2023/653, available at https://www.stradalex.eu/en/se_src_publ_leg_eur_jo/toc/leg_eur_jo_3_20230321_81/doc/ojeu_2023.081.01.0027.01 (14.02.2025).

35 EUNAVFOR MED Operation IRINI (no date): 'Mission and deployed assets'. Available at <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/#mission> (12.02.2025). For a more complete information on IRINI's deployed assets, see Operation IRINI, 'Assets'. The official webpage, originally published in January 2020, is available at https://www.operationirini.eu/media_category/assets/ (14.02.2025).

regularly provide reliable information on activities by UN Member States or Libyan stakeholders that are in violation of the UN arms embargo, in complement of the work of the Libya Sanctions Committee established by UNSC resolution 1970 (2011).

De facto, however, violations of the UN arms embargo are frequent and, whilst monitored with available tools, culprits defy international standards of accountability on the regular. Russia in fact has a longstanding history of violating the UN arms embargo on Libya, enabling the transfer of military assets to the country. A 2021 UN Panel of Experts report in fact described the embargo as “totally ineffective,” highlighting “extensive, blatant” breaches by various actors, including Russia.³⁶ The arms embargo in fact did little, for instance, to stop Türkiye from providing extensive military support to the GNA, and now the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli since 2019,³⁷ including among other things the deployment of Syrian mercenaries, military equipment and drones, such as the Bayraktar TB2.³⁸

Given these precedents, it is highly plausible that Russia could continue to flout the embargo, shifting assets from Syria to Africa via Libya to further its strategic goals (especially, but not exclusively, via air). Yet, it is one of many factors complicating the establishment

of Libya as a permanent home for Russia’s full-scale operation in the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, Moscow has in the past decade been driven by the strategic goal of boosting its own positions to the detriment of European positioning on the African continent – which has taken it beyond its traditional outposts in Libya. Yet, be it in Mali, the Central African Republic, Niger, Sudan, and more, Moscow’s interventions never focused on stabilization, but rather on disruptions and minimal natural resource exploitation.³⁹ The only country where stabilization was seen as a concrete objective was Syria – a focus that may now be switched to Libya. The advent of the war in Ukraine made Russia’s presence in Africa all the more vital in its quest to destabilise Europe.

Thus, notwithstanding the numerous, tangible limitations of relocating assets from dismantled Syrian military bases to Libya, it must however be said that Moscow does not seem to have, at present, another easily accessible Mediterranean alternative. Its more than established relationship with Libya’s Eastern leadership and the country’s strategic location are factors that Russia can in fact leverage in times of crisis – such as now. In this game of sides, the Turkish presence could prove crucial, as already seen on the Bosphorus Strait, where Russia’s warships have been denied direct access to the Black Sea since 2022.⁴⁰

36 UN News (17.03.2021): ‘Libya arms embargo totally ineffective, UN expert panel’, in: *UN News*. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1087562> (12.02.2025).

37 Smith, Will A. (30.09.2021): ‘Turkey’s drones and proxies are turning the tide of war’, in: *National Interest*. Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkeys-drones-and-proxies-are-turning-tide-war-194576> (12.02.2025).

38 Stein, Aaron (11.06.2021): ‘Say hello to Turkey’s little friend. How drones help level the playing field’, in: *War on the Rocks*. Available at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/say-hello-to-turkeys-little-friend-how-drones-help-level-the-playing-field/> (12.02.2025).

39 Tůma, Petr (18.11.2022): ‘Mali: West out, Russia in, and then?’, in: *Atlantic Council*. Available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/mali-west-out-russia-in-and-then/> (12.02.2025).

40 Black, Edward and Sidharth Kaushal (14.01.2025): ‘Russia’s options for naval basing in the Mediterranean after Syria’s Tartus’, in: *RUSI Commentary*, RUSI. Available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-options-naval-basing-mediterranean-after-syrias-tartus> (12.02.2025).

Europe's and NATO's Security Calculations in the Mediterranean

Uncertainty in the Mediterranean basin is an increasingly precarious scenario for Europe, which finds itself caught between concrete security threats and a lack of unified strategic direction. The unfolding events surrounding Russia should not be viewed solely as a reaction to Assad's fall, but rather as part of Moscow's broader geopolitical ambitions – that extend far beyond Syria and into the heart of Europe's southern shores.

Until recently, Europe's primary concern with Russia's presence in the region stemmed from the Wagner Group, Moscow's unofficial yet highly disruptive instrument across the Middle East and Africa. Its operations – most notably in the Sahel – exacerbated instability, undermined Western-backed counterterrorism efforts, and cemented Russia's foothold in key strategic theaters. However, the forced absorption of Wagner's African assets into the Russian Ministry of Defense, following Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, has proven anything but seamless. With Moscow suffering setbacks across multiple fronts, European policymakers would do well to reassess their approach to Russian maneuvering in the Mediterranean.

While Russia's long-term plans in Africa remain uncertain, what is clear is that Moscow cannot afford to relinquish its presence in the Mediterranean. This should prompt

NATO, and particularly its European members, to reinforce their engagement along the Alliance's southern flank, rather than allowing Russia to dictate the terms of strategic realignment in the region. Still, Western states have shown little urgency in countering Russia's expansion. Libya offers a glaring example: Since 2019, no cohesive strategy has been deployed to curb Russian influence there, despite Libya's centrality to European energy security and migration control.

This would need to radically change, since as Europe and the United States steadily lose ground in Africa, Russia has continued to advance unchecked. Yet, given Russia's growing vulnerabilities – spread thin across multiple conflicts – the European Union should seize the opportunity to adopt a more assertive maritime strategy. This could include closer coordination with Türkiye, a fellow NATO member state, which has demonstrated an ability to act decisively when its strategic interests are at stake, as seen in Libya and its firm control over the Bosphorus Strait. Türkiye's interventions have not only secured its regional foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean but have also enabled it to dictate key energy and security arrangements, notably through its maritime agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) in 2019.⁴¹ If Europe is to recalibrate its security posture in the Mediterranean, engaging with Ankara as a pivotal player may be an unavoidable step.

⁴¹ Gingeras, Ryan: (02.06.2020): 'Blue homeland. The heated politics behind Turkey's new maritime strategy', in: *War on the Rocks*. Available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/blue-homeland-the-heated-politics-behind-turkeys-new-maritime-strategy/> (12.02.2025).

Policy Recommendations

- **Europeans should focus their immediate efforts on reaching a consensus on a strategic line of sight, notably within NATO, on how to engage with Russia amidst its asset reshufflings in the Mediterranean.** Engaging through NATO could help bridge the Europe-Türkiye relationship in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Syria and Libya. Working through NATO could in fact diminish Türkiye's concerns about being marginalized from European decision-making circles, while providing Europeans with a platform on which to reduce Turkish standalone influence. Such cooperation would not induce Ankara to abandon its controversial agreement with the Libyan government on maritime boundaries, but it could help Europeans discourage Türkiye from weaponizing Mediterranean politics, gas reserves, or migration to extract concessions from the EU. Moreover, while significant changes in Turkish policy may be unlikely, constructive engagement through NATO could enable European countries to encourage Türkiye to adopt more restrained military operations and support diplomatic efforts aimed at reducing tensions with Kurdish groups, particularly in Syria.
 - **NATO Member States should be more proactive in standing their ground against the opening of new Russian outposts in Syria, Libya, or other coastal Mediterranean states.** *"Russia remains the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security,"* states the 2024 NATO's Washington declaration.⁴²
- European states must therefore coordinate closely with the United States to draw a firm red line against further Russian military entrenchment in the Mediterranean. Any attempt by Moscow to establish new footholds should be met with a unified and unequivocal response, signaling that such actions will not be tolerated.
- **European states should consider increasing NATO and EU naval patrols in the Mediterranean, particularly near Libya, to monitor Russian activities and enforce the UN arms embargo more effectively.** This includes expanding European naval missions such as Operation IRINI to counter illicit arms flows and prevent further militarization of Libya by external actors. This should be part of a new strategic EU policy for Libya that accounts for present dynamics whilst working with regional actors like Türkiye to limit Russia's growing presence on the African continent. It could also entail enhancing intelligence-sharing between NATO Member States to more effectively track Russian logistics and influence operations in the Mediterranean basin.
 - **To limit Russia's military foothold in Syria, Europe and NATO should encourage the new Syrian authorities/HTS-led interim government to enact further restrictions on Russian bases in the country, ensuring Moscow cannot use them to further project power in the Mediterranean.** Leveraging diplomatic pressure and reconstruction aid, Europeans should condition Damascus' access to financial support to the gradual removal of Russian forces,

⁴² NATO (15.07.2024 [10.07.2024]): 'Washington Summit declaration'. Press Release 2024 001, NATO. Available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm (12.02.2025).

offering a phased sanctions relief mechanism as an incentive for disengagement from Moscow. At the same time, expanding targeted sanctions on Russian military logistics in Syria would disrupt Moscow's ability to sustain its reduced presence while preventing the flow of military assets to other countries like Libya. To reinforce this shift, NATO should work with Türkiye and regional partners to establish alternative security arrangements, reducing any perceived need for Russian military protection. By combining economic incentives with diplomatic and military deterrence, Europe and NATO can accelerate Russia's decline as a regional power while supporting Syria's democratic transition.

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