

178
JUNE
2017

RUSSIA IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: A counterweight to the West?

Jesús Manuel Pérez Triana, Security and Defence Analyst

In March 2014, in the midst of the Ukraine crisis, President Barack Obama claimed that Russia was merely a “regional power”. But the eastern Mediterranean has borne witness to how Russia has raised its status in the international arena in the time since. The governments of Cyprus, Greece and Egypt have seen Moscow as a counterweight to the West and have played the Russia card in their negotiations with Brussels and Washington. And for its part, in Syria Russia has conducted its first military intervention beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. The projection of Russian military and diplomatic power into the Mediterranean marks a new era in the relations between Russia and the West, opening up a new scenario of geopolitical rivalry that goes beyond that of the Russian “close stranger”.

Cyprus: special ties

The Republic of Cyprus was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement during

the Cold War and the arsenals of its National Guard contained weapons acquired in the Soviet Union. This defence connection with Moscow was maintained after the disso-

lution of the Soviet Union with the purchase of tanks and combat helicopters in the 1990s. In 1997 an international crisis broke out when the Cypriot purchase of the S-300 long-range anti-aircraft defence system from Russia was revealed. Turkey warned that it would take the deployment of the missiles in Cyprus as a *casus belli*. The “Cyprus missile crisis” was resolved by moving the missiles to Crete where they were placed in the hands of the Greek armed forces.

The special ties between the Republic of Cyprus and Russia returned to the news with the financial crisis that hit Europe in 2008. Cypriot banks had amassed considerable quantities of Greek private debt and were dragged into the Greek crisis due to overexposure. The prospect of a financial bailout, with the resulting social costs and restrictions on economic sovereignty put the possibility of

The projection of Russian military and diplomatic power into the Mediterranean marks a new era in the relations between Russia and the West, opening up a new scenario of geopolitical rivalry that goes beyond that of the Russian “close stranger”.

SYRIZA and ANEL both had sympathies for or ties to Vladimir Putin’s Russia, opening the door to a new foreign policy direction for Athens.

In Syria Russia has conducted its first military intervention beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War.

In October 2016, as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Egypt voted alongside Russia against a French draft resolution demanding an end to air operations over Aleppo.

The shipment of Russian arms and munitions was made regularly and discreetly during the first years of the Syrian civil war through the use of a fairly complex and opaque network of intermediary companies.

On the eve of the civil war, Syria was host to the only Russian military facility outside the territory of the former Soviet Union.

The re-emergence of Russia as a counterweight to the West in the eastern Mediterranean is more the result of the context of the European Union’s economic and political crisis than Russia’s strength.

some kind of agreement with Russia on the table in 2013. As well Russians making up a quarter of the tourists visiting Cyprus, large amounts of money also arrive, using Cyprus as a means of accessing third countries or merely as a fiscal paradise. According to estimates, between a third and half of the funds in Cypriot banks originated in Russia, with Cyprus being the second largest recipient of Russian investment in 2011 and the country that received the third highest amount of Russian investment over the 2005-2011 period.

In exchange for favourable loans, the Cypriot authorities were willing to negotiate Russia's entry in the exploitation of the offshore gas fields in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. But the Russian-Cypriot agreement concluded with a loan being granted at a low rate of interest which in no way constituted a rescue package that allowed the country's banking sector to be cleaned up. Thus the feeling was that the "Russia card" had been merely a diplomatic manoeuvre used by the authorities in Nicosia in their negotiations with the European Union, leaving the geopolitical situation in the status quo ante. Nevertheless, Moscow was not left empty-handed. It received permission to use the Andreas Papandreu airbase, formed of the military sector of Paphos International Airport, and the Evangelos Florakis naval base near Limassol on the island's southern coast. With the idea being to have bases from which to evacuate its citizens in the case of a crisis in the Middle East, Russia obtained rights of use only "in cases of emergency and for humanitarian

The eastern Mediterranean has borne witness to how Russia has raised its status in the international arena.

missions". Moscow, meanwhile, offered to act as mediator between the island's Turkish and Greek institutions, as well as seeking to be a partner in the exploitation and distribution of the natural gas on the bottom of the Mediterranean.

Greece: a new foreign policy direction

The victory of the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) in the Greek legislative elections held on January 25th 2015 was greeted with hope on social networks by those sympathetic to the idea of a leftward turn in Europe that would challenge the orthodoxy of the Brussels institutions. But on the morning after the election, jubilation became bewilderment when news arrived from Athens of a government formation agreement not with left-wing groupings but with the ultra-conservative party Independent Greeks (ANEL).

During the 2012 electoral campaign, SYRIZA had advocated a Greek withdrawal from NATO, the closure of its facilities on Greek soil and breaking off military relations with Israel. To be sure, seen through the prism of left-right ideology the government alliance with ANEL appeared incoherent, but it made sense given their common views of how Greece fits into the European Union. Out of either conviction or calculated interest, both parties had sympathies for or ties with Vladimir Putin's Russia, which opened the door to a

new foreign policy direction for Athens. The day the government alliance was announced, Prime Minister-designate Alexis Tsipras held meetings with the Russian and Chinese ambassadors, which were read as a message to the European Union. That very week the Greek government protested about the way the European Council had issued a communication blaming Russia for the intensification of the fighting in eastern Ukraine, thereby opening up a line of dissent on the Ukraine crisis. Some months later, in April 2015, Prime Minister Tsipras travelled to Russia where he called directly for the end of European sanctions on Russia.

A potential Russian economic aid package to Greece was not on the agenda at that meeting, but Alexis Tsipras made a second trip to attend the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2015. There Tsipras declared that Europe had been living in the illusion of being "the hub of the Universe in the literal sense" while "newly emerging forces are coming to play a more vital role at the economic and geopolitical levels", citing the examples of the cooperation between the BRICS countries and the Eurasian Union led by Russia. This time a hypothetical economic Russian bailout was openly proposed by the Russian press. But more than new loans, Moscow was offering an extension of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, which will connect Russia with Turkey through the Black Sea and presents itself as an alternative to the stalled Nabucco gas pipeline project, which would have taken gas from the Caspian Sea basin to Central Europe. According to the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, Greece could receive between €3bn and €5bn for the transit rights for Russian gas.

The predicted revenues of the Turkish Stream extension were a promise for the future and Greece had international creditors to face. Alarm bells rang in Washington, where perceived European intransigence towards Greece might be leading to the fall of Greece, pushing it out of the European Union into the arms of powers such as Russia. President Barack Obama himself took steps to ensure European leaders avoided what Secretary of the Treasury Jack Lew called a "geopolitical mistake".

Egypt: a tricky balance

Egypt, the most populous Arab country and champion of pan-Arabism, made a well-known change of alignment during the Cold War. With the Camp David Accords in 1979, it completed its transformation from Moscow's ally to Washington's. Military aid became a guarantee of both the alliance with the United States and peace with Israel in a country where the armed forces are the fundamental state institution. The Arab Spring put Washington in a difficult position and the 2013 coup d'état left relations between Egypt and the United States in crisis.

In 2014, Egypt was the second-largest recipient by volume of US military aid in the world, receiving \$1.3bn. But after the coup d'état in Egypt on July 3rd 2013, the US government decided to impose restrictions, allowing the shipment

of spare parts but not new systems. The delivery of 12 F-16 fighter-bombers, ten Apache attack helicopters, kits for the modernisation of 125 M-1 Abrams tanks, and 20 Harpoon anti-ship munitions was therefore halted, despite the fact that in the case of the Apache helicopters, the contract dated from 2009 and had already been paid for by the Egyptian Ministry of Defence. Pressure from Congress, which was key to the United States placing restrictions on military aid to Egypt, was a response to issues relating to the handling of funds and the final destination of the military material, deficiencies in which had been detected in an audit. Nevertheless, in April 2015 Washington approved the transfer of the withheld defence material but introduced reforms to the programme of military aid to Egypt: it changed the financing model for one that was less advantageous to the Egyptian Ministry of Defence and set the goal of focussing military aid on areas of US interest.

One of the US government's reasons for lifting the restrictions on the transfer of military material to Egypt was the rise in jihadist violence in the Sinai Peninsula and the possibility that the chaos generated by the new phase of the Libyan civil war would spread into the country. The Egyptian government's clear concern about its relations with its largest defence supplier in the midst of two conflicts – one local and one regional – prompted it to search for new suppliers.

President Sisi's first visit to a non-Arab country after the 2013 coup was to Russia in February 2014; President Putin returned the visit in February 2015. Cairo's new relationship with Moscow includes the habitual Russian package of agreements on energy and defence. The bilateral negotiations resulted in the signing of weapons sales agreements, and Russia completed the sale to Egypt of 50 MiG-35 fighter jets and 46 Ka-52 attack helicopters, as well as S-300 anti-aircraft defence systems, which represented a leap in Egyptian capabilities. As a gesture of good will Russia also gave a corvette warship to the Egyptian navy. In the civil field, Russia granted a credit to Egypt in November 2015 of \$25bn to be repaid over 35 years for the construction of a nuclear power station to be built by the company Rosatom in the north of the country and which should be ready in 2022.

On October 31st 2015 the two countries were united by the tragedy involving a plane from the Russian airline Metrojet, in which an explosive device detonated shortly after take-off from the tourist enclave of Sharm El Sheikh. The plane, carrying Russian tourists home to Saint Petersburg, fell into the Sinai Peninsula killing all 224 occupants. Just a few months later, the Egyptian authorities declared that it had been a terrorist attack. In this context, Russia has offered advice on the fight against the jihadist groups operating in Sinai. Within the framework of this new phase, a joint military exercise focussed on the anti-terrorist fight, "Defenders of Friendship", took place on Egyptian soil over 11 days in October 2016. The Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported of secret negotiations for the establishment of a Russian mil-

itary base in Sidi Barrani (located around 95km from the border with Libya) on October 10th but this possibility was quickly denied by an Egyptian government spokesperson.

One issue of regional importance on which Russia and Egypt share an international agenda is the Syrian civil war. On October 8th 2016, as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Egypt voted alongside Russia to oppose a French draft resolution demanding an end to air operations over Aleppo. On the same day, Russia presented a draft ceasefire resolution for which Egypt voted in favour. The direction of the Egyptian votes produced unease in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The latter had given economic support to the government that emerged from the 2013 coup but cut the supply of hydrocarbons to Egypt due to the disagreement. This new international role for Egypt led the Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs to propose that it should participate in the multilateral peace negotiations over Syria.

Egypt's harmony with Russia and Iran's stance on Syria is based on the Egyptian government's hostility to the Islamist political agenda – not for nothing did the current president lead a coup d'état against the Muslim Brotherhood. The distancing from its traditional allies in the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula is due to differences over the support for Islamist forces in places such as Syria and Libya. In the latter country, Egypt has intervened militar-

The governments of Cyprus, Greece and Egypt have seen Moscow as a counterweight to the West and have played the Russia card in their negotiations with Brussels and Washington.

ily and supplied fighter jets to the Tobruk government, while Turkey and Qatar, for their part, support the Tripoli government.

An indication that the Egyptian strategy is to diversify its allies and not to break with the West (in the end the contracts with US defence companies have continued) is the new relationship established with France. President Hollande visited Egypt in April 2016, where he announced loans worth \$2bn and signed a number of bilateral agreements. Egypt bought French defence systems worth €1bn, including satellite communication systems, Rafale fighter jets, two "Mistral" class amphibious assault ships, a FREMM class frigate and three "Gowind" class corvettes. The purchase of Rafale fighter jets is significant because of their overlap in both features and missions with the MiG-35s bought from Russia. We may therefore deduce that Egypt is looking to ensure it can maintain its military capacities in the case of a relations crisis with any of its strategic partners.

Seeking to maintain good relations with the United States, Russia and its traditional regional allies means preserving a tricky balance. All the more so if we bear in mind that Egypt is going through a deep economic crisis, which some local experts qualify as the most serious since the 1930s. As

with Greece and Cyprus, given Russia's economic situation its capacity to replace the economic support provided by Egypt's traditional partners is debatable.

Syria: a historical ally

Syria was Moscow's ally during the Cold War and an important client of the Soviet military industry. The Russia that rose from the ashes of the Soviet Union inherited this special tie. With the international embargoes on Iran, Iraq and Libya, the Syrian government became the **Russian defence industry's leading client** in the region. The **contracts signed** totalled \$4bn in 2012. At the same time, other additional ones worth \$2bn were negotiated. As it happened, the circumstances were such that Libya took years to make large arms purchases and just after the lifting of the international embargo, with the contracts with Russia only recently signed, the civil war broke out. The fall of Colonel Gaddafi's Libyan regime meant Russia saw **contracts** worth \$4bn disappear. Hence the importance of Syria, which has become one of the five largest clients of the Russian defence industry worldwide.

Shipments of Russian arms and munitions were made regularly and discreetly during the first years of the Syrian civil war through the use of a fairly complex and opaque network of intermediary companies disentangled by Tom Wallace and Farley Mesko, two investigators from the **C4ADS** organisation using only open sources. They were called "**The Odessa Network**" because many of the compa-

A hypothetical Russian economic bailout for Greece was openly raised by the Russian press, but Moscow only offered an extension of the Turkish Stream gas pipeline.

nies' headquarters were based in the Ukrainian port city. The Russian shipments have ranged from assault rifles to advanced anti-aircraft and anti-ship missile systems.

On the eve of the civil war, Syria was host to the only Russian military facility outside the territory of the former Soviet Union. A total of 600 military personnel and Ministry of Defence officials **lived in Tartus in 2011**. Even today, the city's port remains the only support infrastructure for the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean. The **Russian facilities** there were until recently basic and nothing compared to US naval bases like Rota and Naples. They consisted of two piers to which was fastened a **floating workshop** from the Black Sea Fleet on rotating deployments. The Port of Tartus hosted the Russian flotillas deployed in the Mediterranean, while the only Russian aircraft carrier was obliged to lay anchor in the bay due to lack of space in the port. The Kremlin announced on December 23rd 2016 that **Russia had signed an agreement with Syria** to carry out expansion works on the Russian facilities in Tartus. **According to RT**, after the work the Syrian port will be able to host Russian aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.

The first decisive Russian intervention in the international arena in favour of Bashar al-Assad's regime occurred in 2013, after the chemical weapons attack on August 8th against the Syrian civilian population had opened up the possibility of Western military intervention. President Obama had stated **in a press conference on August 20th 2012** that the use or even the transport of chemical weapons in Syria would constitute a "red line" that would change his "calculus" on the conflict. After a **build-up of US forces in the eastern Mediterranean**, a military intervention seemed plausible. In London on September 9th a meeting took place between the British and American foreign policy chiefs, and John Kerry and William Hague met the press. Answering the question of which option remained to President Assad to stop a possible Western attack, **Kerry said** that he would have to hand his chemical weapons over to the "international community". The Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, quickly offered to mediate and the Syrian government accepted the proposal. The Syrian chemical weapons arsenals were eventually destroyed in an US navy vessel. The role played by Russia, sparing the Syrian regime from a military operation by hesitant Western powers, was considered a great victory of Russia diplomacy which made the country an important actor in the Middle East. Reaffirming his commitment to supporting the Damascus government, in July 2015 **Vladimir Putin warned** that Russia would respond to Western intervention in Syria during the visit to Moscow of the Syrian foreign minister, Walid Mualem.

The shipment of new arms for the Syrian army was followed in summer 2015 by the sending of **advisers and trainers**, a symptom of **greater Russian commitment** to the war after Bashar al-Assad himself recognised the exhaustion and lack of personnel in his armed forces. The red line for the Syrian government was the fall of the garrison at the **Abu al-Duhur airbase**, which left practically the whole province of Idlib in the hands of the **Jaish al-Fatah** opposition forces. The obvious direction of travel was the coastal strip of Syria, stronghold of the Alawite minority and cradle of the al-Assad clan. After requesting help from Moscow, on September 30th 2015, the Russian military intervention in Syria officially and publicly began – the first outside the borders of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War.

The Russian deployment consisted, principally, of sending an air contingent to "**Bassel Al-Assad International Airport**" in the province of Latakia, forty kilometres from Tartus. Its facilities were extended and adapted by the Russians to convert it into the **Khmeimim** airbase. The tasks on the ground were shared. If Russia carried out aerial attacks, the effort of supporting the governmental forces on the ground fell to Iran, which was charged with organising and training the Syrian militias of the **National Defence Force**. What is more, given the scarcity of Syrian combat personnel, Iran has facilitated the deployment of Shia militias and volunteers from Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Russia's intervention has contributed to changing the course of the war between the regime and the opposition forces,

a war that since its beginnings has witnessed individual victories for one or another group without any definitive result being glimpsed. The government forces retook the initiative, achieving milestones like **surrender of Daraya**, cradle of the revolts against the regime, after four years of siege, and the **taking of Aleppo**. Nevertheless, the fall of the historic city of Palmyra into the hands of Islamic State, whose **liberation in March 2016** was celebrated by the Russian authorities with **a concert** in the city itself, shows that a complete victory for Damascus remains some way off. In fact, the end of the Russian intervention was announced in **March 2016** and again in **January 2017**. But, although part of the contingent was repatriated at that time, the Russian military operation remains ongoing. In fact, it has been announced that the Khmeimim airbase will be converted into **a permanent Russian base**.

According to **comments** made in December 2016 by the Russian defence minister, Sergey Shoigu, the intervention in Syria has provided an opportunity to test 162 weapons systems in combat and detect deficiencies in them. Russia's military intervention in Syria has undoubtedly served as a showcase for its military industry. Having an airbase on Syrian soil, there was no need to send an aircraft carrier or to fire the "Kalibr" cruise missiles from vessels in the Caspian Sea or a submarine in the Mediterranean. These were obviously shows of military strength.

Despite the one-off impacts of the advanced armaments used by Russia, Moscow has carried out a "low cost" military campaign, in which its air force has extensively used unguided munitions such as **cluster bombs** and **incendiary bombs**. What is more, the **Russian air force has used the tactic** of bombing from a great height to minimise the risk to its aeroplanes and crew, but which brings with it a consequent lack of precision and as a result an inordinate number of civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian facilities such as **hospitals**.

Russia's military intervention in Syria has undoubtedly served as a showcase for its military industry.

The re-emergence of Russia as a counterweight to the West in the eastern Mediterranean is more the result of the context of the European Union's economic and political crisis than Russia's strength. The potential Russian economic bailouts for Cyprus and Greece were put on the table more as negotiating trump cards with the EU than actual realities, if we consider the size of the Russian economy. But in this tug of war, Russia has made geopolitical advances. Similarly, the new relations with Egypt and the central role in Syria have been possible because the Kremlin has occupied the vacuum left by the United States in the region. The absence of a clear and coherent strategy from the White House during the Obama presidency was undoubtedly the product of doubts about the results of a limited military intervention generated by the experience of the 2011 intervention in Libya. The rounds of peace talks in Kazakhstan and meetings like the tripartite summit between Russia, Turkey and Iran clearly show that the **United States finds itself outside** the group of truly influential actors in the conflict, whereas Russia continues to play a central role.