



A Limited Partnership

Russia-China Relations in the Mediterranean

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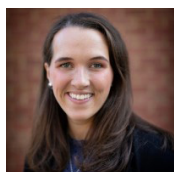
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

01	Executive Summary
02	Introduction
03	Background
04	Russian and Chinese Priorities and Actions in the Mediterranean
11	Russia-China Cooperation in the Mediterranean
13	Implications of Russia-China Alignment in the Mediterranean
14	Policy Recommendations
17	Conclusion

Executive Summary

The last several years have seen a worrisome increase in tensions in the Mediterranean involving age-old rivals such as Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus, as well as increased involvement from newer players like Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and China, or returning players in the case of Russia. Many analysts have noted an increase in power struggles between some of these actors in the region. It is against this backdrop of competition that observers have questioned whether the Mediterranean will become a new arena for increased collaboration between China and Russia. In the last several years, the two countries have increased their presence and influence in the Mediterranean, creating opportunities for growing cooperation at odds with U.S. interests and objectives in the region.

As the authors have argued in previous CNAS research, the increasing depth of Russia and China's partnership creates challenges for U.S. interests and increases the risk that both countries pose to the United States. For this reason, the United States should not write off Russia-China relations as just an uncomfortable or unnatural partnership. But nor should Washington seek to counter their cooperation in every dimension of their partnership or compete intensely in every region.¹ The alignment between Russia and China presents a comprehensive challenge; addressing it will require policymakers to prioritize and address their cooperation in the areas likely to pose the greatest threats to U.S. interests, and conversely, avoid focusing on areas of lesser concern. The Mediterranean is a region where U.S. policymakers should not overstate the potential for Russia-China cooperation, nor the significance of the implications of their partnership.

As Russia and China have increased their activities in the Mediterranean, they have done so largely through parallel and complementary efforts, rather than explicit cooperation. Russia and China share an interest in dividing the European Union and NATO and increasing their own image and influence in the region, especially at the expense of the United States' influence. However, the Mediterranean is not a priority for Russia or China; the two countries have divergent priorities in the region, and they pursue these priorities differently, limiting the common ground for active engagement between them. Russia has prioritized its security presence and relationships, while Beijing is focused on advancing its economic interests.

The Mediterranean is a region where U.S. policymakers should not overstate the potential for Russia-China cooperation, nor the significance of the implications of their partnership.

Russia and China, therefore, represent two different sets of challenges in the Mediterranean—Russia largely as a security challenge whose destabilizing actions unsettle the region, and China primarily as an economic one. The implications of their efforts in the Mediterranean are best considered individually rather than as stemming from their cooperation. Still, the alignment of their actions has the potential to erode U.S. influence in the Mediterranean to a greater extent than either of them would be able to do on their own.

The primary implications of Russia-China alignment in the Mediterranean include:

Crowding out U.S. regional influence. Increased Chinese economic engagement and Russian security involvement in the region are combining to decrease the real influence and relevance of the United States for Mediterranean countries focused on economic growth and preventing instability. As more countries in the region turn to China for investment in infrastructure, view China as their main trading partner, and seek greater access to the Chinese market, political and business elites could become increasingly beholden to China economically. Russia's intervention in Syria and support of the Assad regime has challenged the United States' and Europe's long-held claim to the position of primary security partner in the region. Although Russia lacks the capacity to become the dominant military power in the region, its relationships with Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya help burnish Russia's great-power credentials in the eyes of some states.

Exacerbating challenges to democracy and human rights. Reduced reliance on the United States and democratic partners in Europe, combined with the confluence of Russian and Chinese messaging on the failings of democracy and support for illiberal actors, will exacerbate authoritarian trends in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa and further weaken bonds to the democratic West. Russia and China's growing role in the region allows leaders to credibly threaten to move closer to Moscow and Beijing to dilute U.S. requirements for good governance, democracy, and other reforms.² The corruption that comes from doing business with Russia and China, and that some of the elite seek out for personal or political gain, also weakens democracy.

Enhancing Russian and Chinese military capabilities. Military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing allows China to improve its operational capacity outside the Pacific area. This does not mean that the two countries will become interoperable, but that they will be better able to operate together should they need to in case of conflict.

Amplifying the perceived decline of the United States' regional relevance. Russia and China are keen to portray the United States as a declining power. Both are working to depict the United States as disengaged in the Mediterranean region, amplifying perceptions of the United States' relative decline as a regional player. However untrue this message is, the confluence of Russian and Chinese efforts increases the dose of the messaging and amplifies regional perceptions of U.S. decline beyond what either country could manage on its own.

Looking forward, U.S. policymakers should monitor Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean and avoid overstating the significance of their engagement in the region, which could distract focus and resources away from other priorities. To address Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean, the United States and its allies should approach them as two distinct challenges: Russia a security one and China an economic one. The goal of such an approach should be to prevent Russia from becoming the preferred security partner and from expanding its influence out of the Eastern Mediterranean westward. The United States and its allies and partners also should work to prevent China from becoming the long-term dominant economic partner, resulting in mounting political leverage across the region. Still, the U.S. and Europe can take steps to mitigate the effects of Russia-China cooperation, especially reasserting U.S. leadership and increasing economic investment and diplomacy in the Mediterranean region.

Russia and China, therefore, represent two different sets of challenges in the Mediterranean—Russia largely as a security challenge whose destabilizing actions unsettle the region, and China primarily as an economic one.

Introduction

The Mediterranean has been at the center of global geopolitical competition for influence and resources for much of history. That is no less true today. The United States has a vested interest in supporting its allies and partners and, after an extended hiatus following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has renewed its efforts to extend influence into the region. While Moscow's increasing presence in the region (especially its 2015 intervention in Syria) is often described as an effort to reassert the Kremlin as a global power and indispensable player in the region, the Kremlin also sees its actions there as "part of a broader standoff with the West that stretches from the Atlantic to the Black Sea and from North Africa to the Arctic."³ From the Russian-occupied naval facilities in Sevastopol in Crimea across the Black Sea, through the Turkish Straits, and into the Eastern Mediterranean and thence to Libya, where Russia supported Libyan General Khalifa Haftar's faction battling for control there, Russia is back in the Mediterranean.

In addition to Russia, the struggle for Mediterranean influence has been joined by a new player: China. While Beijing does not typically conceive of the region as a single entity—more often addressing strategies toward sub-regions such as southern Europe or North Africa—China does have several key interests in the Mediterranean. These include advancing its strategic economic interests, garnering greater influence in a region of significant geopolitical importance, and expanding the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) reach and operational capacity.

As Russia and China increase their presence and influence in the Mediterranean, it creates opportunities for growing cooperation between them and is at odds with U.S. interests and objectives in the region. Indeed, policymakers and analysts alike are more attuned to the risks posed by the alignment between Russia and China. The United States and its allies and partners must navigate the challenges stemming from Russia-China cooperation, including those in the Mediterranean—the focus of this policy brief. Previous Center for a New American Security (CNAS) research highlights the risks that greater Russia-China cooperation presents for the United States and its democratic allies and partners. This research argues that the growing cooperation between Moscow and Beijing is amplifying the challenges that both actors pose. As the two countries' cooperation increases, they create a more potent force working against the United States and its interests, goals, and values. However, there are clear limits to the

depth of their cooperation. While the Mediterranean likely will not be a major source of friction between the two countries, it also is unlikely to be an arena for deep or sustained cooperation. The Mediterranean is not a priority for Russia or China; the two countries have divergent priorities in the region, and they pursue those priorities differently. U.S. policymakers, therefore, should monitor Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean and avoid overstating the significance of their engagement in the region, which could distract focus and resources away from other priorities.

This brief first provides background on the current state of Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean, summarizing their respective interests and lines of action, and identifies the drivers and limits to their alignment in the region. Although a formal alliance is unlikely, some of China and Russia's interests are indeed aligned in the Mediterranean. Both countries share a desire to erode U.S. and European Union (EU) influence and a preference to deal with individual European states rather than the EU as a whole. Russia and China also both benefit from military cooperation, conducting bilateral exercises that improve the operational capacity of the Chinese navy (PLAN) and strengthen their ability to operate together. This brief also examines the ways in which Russia and China's aligning interests could be most damaging to U.S. security and foreign policy interests and identifies recommendations for ways the United States and its allies and partners should address the cooperation between the two countries in the region.

While the Mediterranean likely will not be a major source of friction between the two countries, it also is unlikely to be an arena for deep or sustained cooperation.

Background

Control of the maritime routes of the Mediterranean Sea has always been contested, especially since the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869. Great Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia all competed for influence and control. The United States entered the Mediterranean power game relatively recently because of the Cold War. At the height of the Cold War, NATO was the dominant military power in the Mediterranean region; after the Cold War ended, Russia withdrew from regions where it was historically present to focus on its domestic challenges and was no longer considered a threat. NATO forces were also reduced significantly in Europe. Later, NATO enlarged its membership, and the Black Sea became ringed by NATO allies Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Black Sea NATO partners Georgia and Ukraine also were assured at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008 that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."⁴

Russian President Vladimir Putin pushed back on what was seen in Moscow as NATO getting too close to Russian interests. Moscow saw NATO expansion as a threat, including to Russia's fleet in Sevastopol, Ukraine, which was critical to the Black Sea presence that Moscow has viewed as central to its security for centuries.⁵ In 2008 and 2014, Russian military actions in Georgia and Ukraine ended the possibility of NATO membership anytime soon for those two Black Sea NATO partners. In the years that followed, Putin exploited openings created by regional instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and perceptions of a U.S. intent to reduce commitments to the region to expand Russian influence politically and militarily. The Kremlin reinforced Russian facilities in Syria with rotations of limited numbers of special forces, combat aircraft, and warships. The Kremlin took advantage of the deteriorating relationship between the United States and Turkey to strengthen the Russian-Turkish relationship, including through sensitive arms sales. From the Russian-occupied naval facilities at Sevastopol in Crimea, across the Black Sea, through the Turkish Straits, and into the Eastern Mediterranean and thence to Libya, where Russian mercenaries supported General Haftar's faction battling for control there, Russia is back in the Mediterranean power game. But Russia now has a like-minded partner also interested in establishing influence in the Mediterranean: China.

Russian and Chinese Priorities and Actions in the Mediterranean

The last several years have seen an uptick in the activities and involvement in the Mediterranean by a wide range of actors, including Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France, Russia, and China. Many analysts have noted an increase in power struggles between these actors in the region. It is against this backdrop of competition that observers have questioned whether the Mediterranean will become a new arena for increased collaboration between China and Russia at the expense of the United States and its allies and partners. In the past several years, China and Russia have increased their presence and influence in the Mediterranean, creating opportunities for cooperation at odds with U.S. interests and objectives in the region. However, unlike their explicit collaboration in other regions—such as the Arctic—China and Russia have increased their Mediterranean activities through parallel and complementary efforts rather than more active cooperation. For the most part, Russia has prioritized its security presence and relationships, while Beijing is focused on advancing its economic interests. This section identifies Russia's and China's goals in the Mediterranean and the lines of effort they are pursuing to advance their respective interests.

Russia

Russia's domestic turmoil in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union required the Kremlin to pull back from regions like the Mediterranean and the broader Middle East where Moscow was historically present. For Putin, returning Russia to the Mediterranean after Moscow's extended hiatus from the region became an important symbol of Russia's status as a great power.⁶ The Kremlin also views the Mediterranean as a critical sphere of competition with the United States and its allies. As such, Moscow's efforts to reestablish its presence have focused largely on building its military, especially its naval presence. The Kremlin's transactional dealmaking has facilitated the reestablishment of its ties with historical client states like Syria and Egypt, along with governments and individuals and/or groups in the region, providing support for actors ranging from the forces of General Haftar in eastern Libya to far-right politicians in Italy. Russia's primary goals in the Mediterranean include increasing Russian security, given what the Kremlin sees as a prolonged standoff with NATO, undermining NATO and EU cohesion and influence, demonstrating Russia as a global power, and

advancing its economic interests. While these are the Kremlin's goals, its capacity to achieve these endeavors is limited.

Increasing Russian security. The Mediterranean is critical to Russia's ability to defend its position in the Black Sea and its Black Sea fleet based at Sevastopol in occupied Crimea. The Kremlin has long sought to provide forward defense for air and sea approaches to the Russian homeland. Its forward presence in the Eastern Mediterranean can interdict U.S. air and naval assets if needed, and/or prevent them from blocking or entering the Black Sea area. The Kremlin's drive for forward defensive zones is in many ways analogous to its long-held objective of maintaining what the Kremlin views as "buffer states" along its land border that would give its leaders space and time to mobilize the state in the event of conflict.⁷

Unlike their explicit collaboration in other regions—such as the Arctic—China and Russia have increased their Mediterranean activities through parallel and complementary efforts rather than more active cooperation.

Russia views its presence in the Mediterranean as a deterrent against potential U.S. and NATO offensive actions against Russia. Russian military planners are deeply concerned about the United States' ability to launch a combination of air attacks and long-range missile strikes on Russia, viewing this as a critical vulnerability relative to the United States.⁸ From the Russian point of view, the Mediterranean fulfills the function of extended defense. The only way to viably engage U.S. forces at the requisite ranges is to have a forward posture in the Mediterranean; otherwise, the United States has the freedom to operate well within striking range of the Russian homeland. Russia therefore has enhanced its military capabilities in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in ways that allow the Kremlin to hold European targets at risk.⁹ Moscow seeks to use its presence in the Mediterranean to demonstrate that it can destroy critically important objects meaningful to the United States and NATO, thereby increasing the costs that the United States and NATO would face should they pursue offensive actions against Russia.

Undermining NATO cohesion and influence. The Kremlin views its presence in the Mediterranean as an opportunity to undermine U.S. regional influence and weaken NATO cohesion. Because Russia defines its power in terms relative to the United States, the Kremlin views attempts to undermine U.S. and European influence as a means of enhancing Russia's own relative standing. The Kremlin's efforts to erode NATO and EU cohesion are intended to make these groups less capable actors, thereby reducing their influence in the region. Russia sees the Mediterranean as a key flank in its standoff with the West and a place where it can complicate NATO operations, planning, and decision-making.¹⁰ Russia's footprint and influence force the United States and NATO to take Russia's presence and military capabilities into account.

To that end, since 2014, Moscow has grown far more assertive in its efforts to undermine the political cohesion of NATO member states and complicate the consensus upon which NATO depends. For Russia, the goal is to keep Europe too divided and weak to threaten Russia's security or interests.¹¹ Russia likely views its recent warming relationship with Turkey, in particular, as a potential wedge between the United States and Turkey as well as within NATO. Moscow has sought to deepen its relationship with Ankara since at least 2016, when Putin was reportedly the first to offer publicly his support to Turkish President Recep Erdoğan after an abortive coup in Turkey. Turkish-Russian relations have continued to deepen since then, even though the two countries find themselves on opposite sides of conflicts in Syria, Libya, Ukraine, and, most recently, Nagorno-Karabakh. Not only does the Russian sale to Turkey of the S-400 air defense system undermine NATO air defense capabilities, but Putin likely calculates that his political support emboldens Erdoğan to pursue a more adventurist foreign policy that creates tensions within NATO and further aggravates the already troubled U.S.-Turkey relationship.

Moscow seeks to use its presence in the Mediterranean to demonstrate that it can destroy critically important objects meaningful to the United States and NATO.

In addition to deepening its partnership with Turkey, the Kremlin continues to strengthen existing pro-Russia sentiment in Italy, Greece, and Cyprus. Because

Russian leadership feels threatened by what it views as an increasingly aggressive NATO, the Kremlin looks for opportunities to contest the alliance using "grey zone" tactics, such as disinformation and cyber-attacks designed to undermine NATO cohesion while not rising to the level of inciting a military response.¹² The Kremlin also sees these countries as conduits of influence over European policymaking, especially on sanctions.¹³ By nurturing pro-Russian sentiment in Greece, Italy, and Montenegro, for example, Russia creates organizations and individuals who work to support Russian interests and undermine European cohesion.¹⁴

Demonstrating Russia as a global power, indispensable player, and stakeholder in global decisions of consequence. Russia seeks to be seen as an indispensable player in the Mediterranean and the only actor able to deal with all sides in any conflict.¹⁵ Putin likely judges that with Russia's return as a global power, Moscow once again should be a player in the region with a say on any major decisions of consequence. Russia's intervention in Syria was driven largely by Putin's desire to push back on U.S. influence, thwart what the Kremlin sees as U.S. efforts to topple leaders Washington does not like and prevent the United States from dictating events in Damascus. By intervening to support the Assad regime, Putin reaffirmed himself as a reliable partner to fellow autocrats and a player in Syria who must have a seat at the table when Syria is discussed. Similarly, in Libya, Russian support for Haftar and the deployment of mercenaries into the country has made the Kremlin a stakeholder in events there.

Advancing economic interests. Sanctions placed on Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent occupation of Eastern Ukraine have increased the urgency with which Moscow has sought out alternative economic relationships. Moscow views the Mediterranean as an opportunity to offset some of the economic pressure it has faced, especially since 2014, particularly through arms sales, energy deals, and grain exports. Russia's relationships with countries including Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, and Libya have been important in this regard. For example, trade and tourism between Russia and Turkey have increased—in 2019, Turkey attracted more tourists from Russia than any other country.¹⁶ Russia is advancing major energy projects, including the Turkish Akkuyu nuclear plant and the TurkStream gas pipeline between the two countries.¹⁷ In Libya, the oil industry provides Russian firms with an opportunity to invest, while countries such as Algeria remain important arms purchasers.¹⁸ Russia is also a large exporter of grain and competes with the EU as the

world's top wheat exporter—Turkey and Egypt are two of the top recipients of Russian wheat.¹⁹

To advance these interests in the Mediterranean, Russia is pursuing the following lines of action:

Expanding Russia's military footprint. A primary pillar of Russia's approach to the Mediterranean has been the expansion of its military footprint, especially its naval presence. In 2013, Russia reestablished its Mediterranean Squadron, creating a more robust and permanent naval presence. Since then, Russia has maintained its naval posture in the Eastern Mediterranean by sourcing ships from the Black Sea, Northern, and Baltic fleets. In addition to the Black Sea fleet acquiring six new attack submarines, three frigates, and several patrol and small missile ships, Russia has also begun major overhauls of some of its Soviet-era Black Sea ships. To help provide air and maritime defense of the Black Sea, the Kremlin has deployed to Crimea the S-400 and S-300 air defense systems, *Bastion* and *Bal* coastal defense systems, and *Pantsir* point-defense systems alongside air force and naval units.²⁰

While the Russian navy's mission in the Mediterranean is primarily related to territorial defense, the development of its ship-based cruise missile capability has given it an offensive punch. For example, Russia is deploying more advanced diesel submarines capable of launching Kalibr cruise missiles. According to retired Admiral James Foggo, former head of U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, a "kilo-class submarine can go anywhere in European waters and strike any European or North African capital from under the waves."²¹ This modernized force gives Russia more flexibility and capability in countering Western activities in the Mediterranean. Russia has improved maritime access to the Mediterranean from the Black Sea and can more easily maintain a constant regional maritime presence to spread its influence in surrounding countries.²²

Russia is securing expanded access to Mediterranean ports and bases, with the possibility of eventually contesting NATO's dominance in the central Mediterranean. In Syria, Putin retains Russian forces at Hmeimim airbase near Latakia and at its naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus—the only naval base for Russian warships in the Mediterranean, where Russia has stationed two *Varshavyanka*-class submarines since 2017. Although Syria remains the critical partner for Russia, efforts to enhance cooperation with Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and other states are also important, as Moscow has partnered with regional powers to obtain access to key ports. In 2015, Putin signed a deal with Cyprus that gave Russian navy ships access to Cypriot ports. Cairo agreed in 2017

Although Syria remains the critical partner for Russia, efforts to enhance cooperation with Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and other states are also important, as Moscow has partnered with regional powers to obtain access to key ports.

that Egyptian bases could once again be used for Russian combat aircraft, and in 2019 Russia conducted its largest air defense drill there ever.²³

In addition to its anti-access/area denial capability in the Black Sea, Russia deployed smaller numbers of similar air defense systems in Syria in 2018, combining Russian air defense and electronic warfare systems with modernized equipment formerly commanded by Syria. Although these deployments are significantly smaller than what Russia has in Crimea, Russia can use these capabilities to protect its strategic investments in the Eastern Mediterranean and challenge U.S. influence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East.²⁴

Using Syria as a springboard for influence in the region. Russia's military success in Syria has been a boon for its position in the Mediterranean. In addition to using its basing and capabilities in Syria to support Russian military operations in the Eastern Mediterranean, Putin's success in shoring up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also demonstrated the Kremlin's reliability as a partner and the value of Moscow's politico-military backing. By supporting Assad's failing regime in 2015, Russia retained one of its only allies outside of the confines of its "near abroad" and reestablished itself as a military and political force in the region.

Syria has been a springboard for expanding Russia's influence in several additional ways. Perhaps most directly, Russia's presence in Syria has been a foundation for its operations in Libya, where the Kremlin has expanded its military footprint. After its operation in Syria, Russia had the requisite experience and, in its view, mandate to insert itself into Libya's civil war. Moscow's provision of military, diplomatic, and financial support to Libya's eastern-based faction led by Haftar in Tobruk and the Libyan National Army (LNA) under Haftar's control is dependent on logistics provided by Russian bases in Syria. The Wagner Group, a Russian "private" military company, has spearheaded Russian activities in Libya and has deployed several hundred Syrian mercenaries to multiple training sites, airfields, forward bases, and

key energy and infrastructure sites to secure Russian interests.²⁵ In 2020, the Department of Defense's Africa Command revealed the additional deployment of at least 14 MiG-29 and Su-24 jets sent to Libya through bases in Syria, operated by the Wagner Group and supported by the Russian military.²⁶

Finally, the Kremlin used its actions in Syria to enhance Russian operational capabilities. Russia's 2008 war with Georgia revealed the Russian military had shortcomings that Moscow is addressing, including through its operations in Syria, to build a more capable Russian force.²⁷ In Syria, for example, Russia tested the Iskander-M (SS-26), one of the Russian military arsenal's most potent weapons, which is of little operational use in the Syrian conflict.²⁸ Such deployments of new weapons systems in Syria not only help to train personnel and test the readiness, deployability, and capacity of the Russian force, but also help Russia amplify its influence by demonstrating modern Russian military prowess.

Tethering capitals to Moscow through arms sales and energy deals. Arms sales serve a two-fold purpose for Russia, both providing an economic boost and working to tether Mediterranean capitals to Moscow, which allows the Kremlin to maintain a foothold in the region. In addition to its arms sales to Syria—where Russia supplied 71 percent of Syria's imports of major conventional weapons from 2008–2012—Russia is also a major source of arms in Egypt and Algeria.²⁹ According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data for 2015–2019, Africa has imported 49 percent of its military equipment from Russia—with Egypt and Algeria at the top of the list.³⁰ Algeria alone has purchased a wide range of Russian heavy military hardware, including more than 500 T-90SA main battle tanks and 300 modernized BMPT-72 Terminator 2 infantry fighting vehicles.³¹ Egypt, for its part, also imports a significant number of Russian arms invoking U.S. criticism. In 2019, Russia and Egypt signed an arms deal worth at least \$2 billion that included the purchase of more than 20 fourth-generation Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets (Flanker-E), following previous deals between the two countries for tens of MiG-29 jets, Ka-52K helicopters, and coastal defense units.³² On February 25, 2021, Russia announced that Egypt received five Sukhoi Su-35 advanced combat aircraft. Egypt chose to move forward with the deal despite possible exposure to U.S. sanctions.

At the same time, Russia is using its oil and gas assets and expertise in exploration and development to attempt to influence governments around the Mediterranean.³³ Many of these relationships are long-standing. Russia has, for example, invested significantly in Algerian oil and

gas. Most recently, in 2020, Algeria's Sonatrach signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia's Lukoil to discuss partnerships in production and exploration in the North African country.³⁴ Energy ties also have been a critical pillar of Russia's relationship with Turkey, with projects such as TurkStream and the Akkuyu nuclear power plant developing alongside the rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara. Turkey, however, has taken steps to increase its energy independence, as seen in its decreasing imports of Russian natural gas. In Libya, too, Russia wants to revitalize stalled investments in the energy sector. In 2017, the Libyan national oil corporation signed a cooperation agreement with Russia's Rosneft to help redevelop Libyan oil fields.³⁵

As Russia pursues these arms sales and energy ties, Moscow is looking to cultivate dependence, relationships with governing elites, and patronage networks that the Kremlin expects will advance Russia's broad interests.

Capitalizing on frustration with Washington and the EU. Russia seeks to amplify the view held by many Eastern Mediterranean regimes that the United States is less committed to the region and uninterested in developing partnerships. Putin also touts his “no strings attached” support as standing in contrast to America's values-based foreign policy—a view that some authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments have been receptive to. For example, Putin exploited the rift between Washington and Cairo to deepen historically close relations following former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's ousting and U.S. sanctions on arms sales.³⁶ Russia has also taken advantage of Turkey's frustration with Washington to drive a wedge between the two formerly close allies. In selling the S-400 defense system to Ankara, Putin demonstrated his ability to compartmentalize his sometimes contradictory conflicts. In the case of Turkey, he ignores those conflicts where he is on the opposite side of Turkey (such as in Libya and Syria) in favor of the economic and geopolitical benefits the deal with Turkey created.³⁷

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Russia has pursued a related strategy in some southern European countries. There, the Kremlin has sought to exploit southern Europeans' frustration with the so-called EU North-South divide. Especially following the 2008 financial crisis and the prolonged contraction of their economy, some Italians grew disillusioned with Brussels and frustrated by the EU's perceived neglect of Italy. Taking advantage of that tension, the Kremlin has used its commercial links in Italy to gain influence. In the energy field, Italy's ENI partners with Russia's Gazprom and Rosneft and Italy is among Gazprom's biggest customers.³⁸ Italian business leaders from the energy, finance, and agriculture sectors regularly advocate for Russian-European ties and are critical of sanctions. The head of Russian operations for Italy's largest bank, Intesa, for example, said in 2017 that sanctions were "illegal" and "imposed due to ideological reasons."³⁹ Russia sees both economic and political value in investing in relations with Italy and other western Mediterranean countries to sow discord within the EU and NATO.

China

China is quickly becoming an important player in the Mediterranean, despite being a relative newcomer. While Beijing does not typically conceive of the region as a single entity—it more often addresses strategies toward sub-regions such as southern Europe or northern Africa—it is possible to identify several key drivers of China's approach in the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ These drivers include advancing its strategic economic interests, garnering greater influence in a region of significant geopolitical importance, and expanding the capacity of the PLAN to operate outside its routine operating areas in the Pacific.

Protecting and advancing economic interests. Beijing's increasing activity in the region is driven in large part by its expanding economic interests. The Mediterranean is at the heart of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's massive global infrastructure project. First announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI has since become the cornerstone of China's economic statecraft and is central to Xi's drive to establish China as a central global player.⁴¹ More than 80 percent of trade between China and the EU—Beijing's largest trading partner—is by sea, so Beijing has invested in reducing shipping times and costs through the Mediterranean.⁴² Investment in the relatively weak economies of southern Europe also offers entry into the broader EU market as well as the potential to construct seamless trade and investment routes to better access the world's largest commercial region. Additionally, while China does not view the

Mediterranean as critical to its energy security, it does import energy from countries in the region, including Libya and Algeria. China is the world's largest importer of oil and natural gas, and its economy is highly dependent on imported fossil fuels.⁴³

Influencing geopolitics. Beijing's mounting economic leverage in the Mediterranean serves its overall geo-strategic and security interests. Deepening diplomatic and economic ties with countries and individual elites increase China's leverage in key southern European countries at a time when Beijing is looking to forestall EU movement toward a more hardline position on China. Chinese leaders also seek to undermine the Biden administration's push for a more united transatlantic response to Chinese investment practices, intellectual property theft, human rights abuses, "wolf warrior diplomacy," and promotion of digital authoritarianism, among other issues.

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Beijing ultimately seeks to establish greater leverage and influence in the Mediterranean, chipping away at the dominant roles of the United States and European powers in the region. Beijing's growing economic weight and diplomatic and security ties in the Mediterranean serve to ensure that countries will recognize China as an increasingly important regional player and consider its interests when formulating policies or making official statements. China's growing voice on the many critical geopolitical issues in this region, combined with its economic leverage, have enabled China to increasingly challenge Western norms in international institutions and promote its own approach to governance. In North Africa especially, Beijing is using its growing engagement to promote its development model that combines authoritarianism with state-led economic growth—a model that has an eager audience among regimes across the Middle East/North Africa region.⁴⁴

Expanding military reach and capacity. China seeks to expand its military reach in the Mediterranean largely to defend growing economic and political interests in

the region. Greater military presence in the region is important for protecting critical trade routes that make up the BRI. PLA access in the region is also critical to ensure capability to protect Chinese citizens and interests in the event of unforeseen crises or disasters without relying on foreign powers. During the Libyan crisis in 2011, Beijing's reliance on a Greek frigate to help evacuate more than 3,500 stranded Chinese workers was a source of nationalist frustration in China. The incident underscored to Chinese leaders the need to have their own access in the region to protect Chinese interests and individuals. In addition, increased Chinese military presence in the Mediterranean—and expanding defense relationships—helps achieve the goal of establishing the PLA as an independent expeditionary military with the access and resources to protect China's growing interests around the world and “fight and win” global wars by 2049.⁴⁵

Beijing's growing economic weight and diplomatic and security ties in the Mediterranean serve to ensure that countries will recognize China as an increasingly important regional player and consider its interests when formulating policies or making official statements.

To advance these interests, China is pursuing the following lines of action:

Expanding port and infrastructure investment. Beijing is investing in logistics and infrastructure projects across the Mediterranean region as part of its effort to build out the BRI.⁴⁶ About three-fifths of Chinese exports travel by sea, and the Mediterranean is China's most direct route to Europe.⁴⁷ Additionally, North African countries' proximity to European, African, and Asian markets, high number of industrial zones, and high levels of investment in infrastructure development further encourage Chinese investment.⁴⁸ A core component of those efforts is Greece's port of Piraeus, which has become China's primary gateway for its exports into southern, eastern, and central European Union nations. China's involvement in Piraeus first began in 2009 when Athens offered the state-owned Chinese shipping company COSCO a concession to operate two piers at the container terminal

for 35 years. China subsequently obtained operational control of the third terminal through its 51 percent ownership of the Piraeus Port Authority in 2016.⁴⁹ COSCO also arranged for Huawei, China's flagship telecom manufacturer, to install an IT network and a communications system in Piraeus. This ability to install Chinese proprietary technology through the BRI in the Mediterranean further benefits Chinese economic interests.⁵⁰

Italy, Spain, Turkey, and Israel have all seen notable increases in Chinese infrastructure investment through the BRI. In Italy, the first G7 country to sign on to the BRI, COSCO and Qingdao Ports International together acquired majority shares at the major port terminal Vado, which operates the largest refrigerated cargo facility in the Mediterranean.⁵¹ The container terminal is now one of the most technologically advanced in the Mediterranean, with a 700-meter quay and a fully automated yard.⁵² The port gives COSCO another key foothold in the Mediterranean, adding to the company's growing portfolio in Europe.⁵³ In 2017, COSCO reached a deal in Spain for a 51 percent stake of Noatum Port, a container terminal operator in the ports of Valencia and Bilbao. COSCO also has invested heavily in the Turkish port of Ambarli. The Export-Import Bank of China is also financing a high-speed rail connection from the port of Piraeus to Budapest, helping to penetrate European markets and expand foreign trade links for Chinese companies.⁵⁴ In June 2019, the Israeli city of Haifa signed a deal with Chinese company Shanghai International Port Group to build the largest seaport on the Mediterranean—and operate it for the next 25 years. The deal prompted the United States to raise security concerns with its close partner Israel, given the port's location near where the U.S. Sixth Fleet docks and related intelligence collection concerns.⁵⁵

China has rapidly expanded investment in North Africa. China elevated its relationships with both Algeria and Egypt in 2014 to comprehensive strategic partnerships and has since demonstrated increasing interest in building and financing major infrastructure projects in both countries. By 2018, Algeria was the third-largest recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa; China has invested in various large infrastructure projects in Algeria and made strategic advances in information communications technology infrastructure, with Chinese telecom companies ZTE and Huawei both gaining significant market shares.⁵⁶ In Egypt, now the fourth-largest recipient of Chinese investment in Africa,⁵⁷ China has invested in projects in the New Administrative Capital, the Suez Canal Economic Zone, and various other industrial zones across the country.⁵⁸

Egyptian leaders have underscored the centrality of BRI investments to Egypt-China relations.⁵⁹ Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia also have signed BRI partnership agreements.⁶⁰ Chinese firms have undertaken several major development projects in Morocco, including the Noor 2 and Noor 3 solar parks.⁶¹

China's bilateral trading relationships in the region are growing. Southern European countries' trade with China continues to expand along with that of the European Union as a whole; China overtook the United States as the EU's biggest trading partner in 2020.⁶² China's exports to the Maghreb have increased significantly since the early 2000s.⁶³ China was also the third-largest trading partner for Israel in 2019, trailing behind only the United Kingdom and the United States. Since diplomatic relations between Israel and China were established in 1992, Israeli exports to China have increased to nearly \$4 billion, with imports from China exceeding \$6 billion in 2017. Chinese investments in the country are estimated to be worth over \$11 billion during that period.⁶⁴

Securing energy resources. China's need to secure the massive energy supply required to power its economy drives its investments in select resource-rich countries in the Mediterranean. For example, China is investing \$1.7 billion to build the Hunutlu coal-fired power plant on Turkey's Mediterranean coast, which is projected to produce 3 percent of the country's electricity upon completion.⁶⁵ Chinese energy companies also have sought a greater role in the Algerian market. China's three major state energy enterprises, China National Petroleum Corporation, China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation, and China National Offshore Oil Corporation have worked in Algeria for over 20 years.⁶⁶ After civil war broke out in Libya in 2011, China and many other countries were forced to evacuate their citizens and pull out of major projects and investments. However, Libya's oil exports to China have more than doubled since 2017, and China is eyeing post-reconstruction opportunities.⁶⁷ As Chinese oil companies seek to compete with the biggest international oil majors, the Mediterranean will be a key development field.⁶⁸

Leveraging economic influence for political gain. Beijing's economic influence in the region has granted it greater leverage to achieve political ends, particularly with southern European countries facing pressure to side with the EU on joint issues regarding China. The prime example of this is Greece's decision to block an EU statement on China's human rights violations at the United Nations in 2017—the first time the EU was not able to issue a unified statement at the U.N. Human Rights Council. While Greece's EU peers had imposed

austerity measures in return for economic assistance that worsened the country's recession-induced humanitarian crisis in 2010, China had offered infrastructure investments that Greek leaders saw as a salve for their economic woes.⁶⁹ Beijing's promises of future investment have proven to be a potent tool of political influence by playing into Athens' economic insecurities.

China's deepening economic engagements with regional countries, combined with expanding Chinese Communist Party engagements with ruling parties in the region, offers opportunities for the Chinese government to promote its own development and governance model as a legitimate alternative to democracy and what it portrays as the heavy-handed interference of the West. China's professed “non-interference policy” and investment approach is of particular relevance in North African countries ruled by regimes with questionable commitments to democracy and human rights. China bolsters illiberal leaders who view European and U.S. conditions on investment and aid—as inconsistent though they may be—as economically restrictive and politically inconvenient.

Beijing's promises of future investment have proven to be a potent tool of political influence by playing into Athens' economic insecurities.

Growing diplomatic and unofficial engagement. China has dedicated resources and energy to mounting diplomatic engagement in the Mediterranean, especially through an increasing number of multilateral forums. These efforts have been particularly notable as tensions between some Mediterranean states and their traditional partners in Europe and the United States have grown in recent years. For example, China initiated the first of a series of meetings under the “Forum of Marine Cooperation between China and South European Countries” and declared 2015 the “China-Greece Maritime Cooperation Year.” An event held in Egypt in June 2019 to discuss the relationship between Egypt's economy and China-Africa cooperation, and China-Egypt cooperation under the framework of BRI, was representative of similar events across the region that have enhanced China's visibility and influence.⁷⁰ Greece's decision to join the 17+1 grouping of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and China in 2019 was a notable success for Beijing, though this was ultimately

tarnished by early 2021 when numerous CEE leaders snubbed the annual gathering despite an appearance by Xi Jinping himself—signaling growing skepticism around the benefits of engagement with China.⁷¹

Outside of formal diplomacy, China is expanding investment in people-to-people exchanges, academic and research institutes, and cultural outreach to enhance its strategic influence in the region, cultivate relationships with local elites, and complement official party propaganda. Chinese cultural centers and Confucius Institutes, which Beijing views as key elements in its global propaganda push, have been opened across North Africa. For example, there are two Confucius Institutes in Egypt, located at Cairo University and the Suez Canal University.

The lifting of visa restrictions and travel advisories for Chinese tourists has further increased China's economic importance across the region. More than 400,000 Chinese tourists visited in 2017, up from 125,000 in 2015. There are also increasing numbers of Chinese citizens residing in North African countries. Driven by increased economic investment, Algeria alone hosts more than 50,000 Chinese workers, forming one of the largest Chinese communities in Africa.⁷²

Beijing has also sought to enhance its soft power in the region through assistance to regional countries hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic in Europe, in mid-March 2020, China sent planeloads of medical teams, masks, and ventilators to Europe. Huawei donated more than two million face masks to Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, and Poland.⁷³ China also sent North African countries large amounts of medical supplies and provided technical assistance to tackle the pandemic.⁷⁴ When Xi spoke with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in February 2021, for example, he expressed China's support for Egypt's battle with COVID-19, promising to assist the country with its coronavirus vaccine needs.⁷⁵

Expanding military footprint. Beijing has pursued multiple defense cooperation relationships to gain access and influence in the Mediterranean. China has cultivated relationships with the two major North African military powerhouses—Egypt and Algeria—seeking to establish itself as a military player in the region while avoiding involvement in regional conflicts.⁷⁶ North African countries are also the primary destination of Chinese weapons in Africa, constituting 42 percent of Chinese exports to the continent, with purchases by Egypt and Algeria leading the way.⁷⁷ Egyptian and Chinese naval forces carried out joint military drills off Egypt's Mediterranean coast in August 2019.⁷⁸

China also cooperates with partners outside the region, especially Russia, to gain operational experience in the Mediterranean. In 2015, Beijing announced joint exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean Sea, and in July 2017 China conducted small-scale live fire drills in the Mediterranean on its way to a joint exercise with the Russian navy in the Baltic Sea.⁷⁹

However, Beijing does not intend to remain reliant on partners and is seeking greater individual military access in the region. China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, thus obtaining strategic access to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal in Egypt.⁸⁰ China expanded the military base in April 2021 by adding a major pier that can support aircraft carriers in the future.⁸¹ The PLAN will likely continue to establish additional military facilities and conduct naval exercises to build its capacity to operate in the region.

Russia-China Cooperation in the Mediterranean

So far, Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean has been limited. Although the two countries share an interest in reducing U.S. influence there, they have pursued this objective largely through different means. Because China prioritizes its economic interests and Russia its security presence and relationships, there is little common ground that would facilitate their active cooperation in the region. To date, their cooperation has focused mainly on military exercises. Russia and China began bilateral exercises in the Mediterranean Sea in 2012 and have continued them since. The Chinese navy, for example, sent a large warship (the LPD *Jinggangshan*) to the Eastern Mediterranean to support Russian vessels in 2013 during the Syrian Civil War. China also demonstrated its support for Russia by deploying ships to the Mediterranean in May 2015.

Looking forward, the convergence of Russia's and China's broad geostrategic goals—namely their shared desire to erode U.S. and EU influence and undermine EU and transatlantic cohesion—will facilitate some cooperation in the region. Nonetheless, their cooperation is likely to remain limited precisely because neither country prioritizes the region, they rank their interests within the region differently, and they pursue distinctive approaches to advancing those objectives. China is seeking primarily economic opportunities and influence, while Russia is looking for business opportunities and to make gains on security issues—especially if those gains help deny NATO the ability to dominate the Mediterranean. Below, we discuss the factors that will

both facilitate and constrain the depth of their cooperation in the region.

Shared desire to erode U.S. and EU influence. Putin and Xi share a belief that the United States' efforts to support democratic political processes, transparent and pluralistic institutions, and the rule of law threaten their own hold on power.⁸² They share a mutual interest in pushing back against a U.S.-led liberal international order based on universal values. This will be the primary factor facilitating their partnership in the Mediterranean and beyond. In many ways, U.S. and European interest and posture in the region will be a key factor affecting the efficacy of Russian and Chinese efforts. A lack of U.S. and EU efficacy in their engagement—for example, the European Council has been unable to reach a clear consensus on the EU's policy in Syria, Libya, or Turkey for the past decade—has created a vacuum that Russia and China can fill.⁸³

China is seeking primarily economic opportunities and influence, while Russia is looking both for business opportunities and to make gains on security issues—especially if those gains help deny NATO the ability to dominate the Mediterranean.

Shared interest in dividing the EU and transatlantic partnership. China and Russia view their efforts to fragment the EU and transatlantic alliance as a way to mitigate the challenge that Europe and the United States pose to their security and political interests. In the Mediterranean, this means that Russia and China prefer to deal with individual European states rather than the EU as a whole. Greece's vote to block an EU statement on China's human rights record at the United Nations in 2018—one year after COSCO's decision to take a 51 percent stake in the Greek port of Piraeus⁸⁴—underscored the value for China of economic leverage with individual EU countries.⁸⁵ The European Union's decision to place a hold on approving the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in the wake of Chinese sanctions likely reinforced Beijing's view of the EU as a growing hindrance to its regional goals. Russia, too, seeks to work bilaterally with member states rather than working with the European Union as a whole. Moscow's

divide-and-conquer strategy was on full display after EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell's visit to Moscow in February 2021. Moscow ramped up its criticism of the European Union but made clear it would seek productive relations with member states. The effects of Russia's deepening relationship with Turkey have also had consequences for NATO cohesion. This painful truth was on full display in May 2021 when Turkey insisted on blocking any NATO action against Belarus after Putin ally Alexander Lukashenko forced down a Ryanair jet and hustled off a member of the Belarusian opposition. Such action by Turkey is NATO's worst nightmare: allied unity becoming vulnerable to a Russian veto delivered at the North Atlantic Council by an ally.

While there are factors facilitating Russia-China cooperation, the following factors are likely to constrain the depth of that cooperation:

Competition for arms sales. In the Mediterranean, instability and ongoing conflicts will likely drive a steady demand for arms. Russia is traditionally a primary supplier of arms in this region, but China's military spending and arms sales have increased in recent years. China's increased arms sales may lead to competition with Moscow over the weapons market in the Mediterranean.⁸⁶ China's arms sales are primarily predicated on economic gain, whereas Moscow—though it enjoys the economic benefits—values arm sales more as a means to strengthen influence and tether countries that buy Russian military equipment to Moscow.

Possible Russian frustration with China's economic influence. More broadly, as China builds out the BRI across the Mediterranean, there is potential for the natural growth in Beijing's influence to bristle the Kremlin. Currently, there is no evidence that this is the case. Instead, in other regions like Central Asia, Russia has sought to align its efforts with Beijing rather than oppose it. For example, Putin has sought to link up his Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) plan with China's BRI. Although China's Belt and Road infringes on Russian economic and political interests, Moscow appears to calculate that it cannot turn it back, and instead attempting to benefit where it can, even if Beijing benefits more.⁸⁷

Looking forward, however, Russia is likely to be at a disadvantage in the region because Moscow lacks the resources that Beijing brings. In Syria, for example, Chinese investment will likely increase as the country rebuilds. China is already assisting with humanitarian aid and reconstruction and is set to become a player in the country's reconstruction.⁸⁸ Beijing also seeks to cooperate with Damascus on counterterrorism.⁸⁹ However, a

growing role for Beijing in the country likely would run up against Moscow's interest in maintaining significant influence there. China's resource advantage also has the potential to irk the Kremlin in other places where Russia values its influence, including Turkey and farther afield in Iran where Beijing and Tehran in March 2021 inked a 25-year cooperation deal,⁹⁰ which could amplify concerns with some elites around Putin about the risks associated with Russia's close partnership with China.

Divergence in methods used to advance their objectives. Russia plays a destabilizing role in the region. Russia's deal-making and interests-based approach creates contradictions in the region. The Kremlin's actions such as its insertion of Wagner forces into Libya and its conflicted relationship with Turkey run counter to the stability that Beijing prefers. Especially as China's economic footprint in the region grows, Beijing will continue to prioritize stability that protects its investments. Though Russia and China are working towards similar overarching objectives—namely to undermine U.S. and European influence—divergence in their methods could generate friction that limits the depth of cooperation.

Implications of Russia-China Alignment in the Mediterranean

As argued in previous CNAS research, the increasing depth of Russia and China's partnership creates challenges for U.S. interests.⁹¹ For this reason, the United States should not write off Russia-China relations as just an uncomfortable or unnatural partnership. But nor should Washington seek to counter their cooperation in every dimension of their partnership or compete intensely in every region.⁹² The alignment between Russia and China presents a comprehensive challenge and addressing it will require policymakers to prioritize and address those areas likely to pose the greatest threats to U.S. interests and, conversely, avoid focusing on areas of lesser concern. The Mediterranean is one of those regions where U.S. policymakers should not overstate the potential for Russia-China cooperation or the significance of the implications of their partnership. Doing so has the potential to distract the United States from more pressing priorities.

Russia and China prioritize different interests in the region and pursue those interests differently. They represent two distinct sets of challenges in the Mediterranean—Russia largely as a security challenge whose destabilizing actions unsettle the region and China primarily as an economic one. Working in tandem,

they have the potential to be more effective at eroding U.S. influence in the Mediterranean than either of them would be on their own. Yet, beyond the amplification of each other's broad efforts to undermine U.S. influence, the implications of their efforts in the Mediterranean are best considered individually rather than as stemming from their cooperation. The primary implications of Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean include:

Crowding out U.S. regional influence. Increased Chinese economic engagement and Russian security involvement in the region are combining to decrease the influence and relevance of the United States for Mediterranean countries focused on economic growth and the prevention of instability. As more countries in the region rely on China for investment in infrastructure, view China as their main trading partner, and seek greater access to the Chinese market, political and business elites could become increasingly beholden to China economically.⁹³ Russia's intervention in Syria and support of the Assad regime has also challenged the United States' and Europe's claim to the position of primary security partner in the region. The uncoordinated response since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 shows clear cleavages among U.S. allies and exposes contradictions and indecisiveness within U.S. foreign policy. Concurrently, Russia has seized opportunities to enhance its influence, resuscitating the Assad regime and pandering to fringe groups in NATO nations. Although Russia lacks the capacity to become the dominant military power in the region, its relationships with Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya burnish perceptions of Russia as a great power. These dynamics encourage countries in the region to pursue hedging strategies and seek out alternative partners who are less conditional in their support.

China's resource advantage also has the potential to irk the Kremlin in other places where Russia values its influence, including Turkey and farther afield in Iran.

Exacerbating challenges to democracy and human rights. Reduced U.S. and European political influence in the region, combined with the confluence of Russian and Chinese messaging on the failings of democracy and support for illiberal actors, will exacerbate authoritarian trends in the Eastern Mediterranean and North

Africa. Russia and China's growing influence enables regional leaders to credibly threaten to turn to Moscow and Beijing to offset U.S. political pressure for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The United States is no longer the only show in town and can be played off against its adversaries to dilute the conditions (like good governance and other reforms) that come with U.S. aid or arms sales. Even in Europe, Russian support for anti-NATO and anti-EU political parties—including in Italy, Greece, France, and Spain—further strains liberal democracies.⁹⁴ Growing Chinese economic influence in southern European countries, such as Greece, also complicates efforts to coordinate EU positions on issues involving human rights. Moreover, the corruption that comes with doing business with Russia and China, and that some elite seek out for personal or political gain, also weakens democracy.

Enhancing operational capabilities. Military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing allows China to improve its operational capacity and increases their ability to operate together in the same theater. This does not mean that the two countries will become interoperable, but that operating together will become easier over time. Russia and China's joint operations signal their willingness and capacity to stand together, and China could also use its control of European infrastructure, like ports and rail, to slow a NATO response to Russian aggression. In the case of conflict, China might slow U.S. reinforcements by “finding technical reasons” for a port to be unusable for cargo operations, which would impede the ability of the United States to reinforce Europe.⁹⁵ These two factors combine to pose a greater threat to the United States than either Russia or China could on its own.

The uncoordinated response since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 shows clear cleavages among U.S. allies and exposes contradictions and indecisiveness within U.S. foreign policy.

Policy Recommendations

Given limited practical cooperation between China and Russia in the Mediterranean, effectively addressing their relationship in the region will require rightsizing the effort. Policymakers and military planners should monitor Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean but avoid overstating the significance of their engagement in the region, which could distract focus and resources away from other priorities.

To address Russia-China cooperation in the Mediterranean, the United States and its allies should approach them as two distinct challenges: Russia as a security one and China as an economic one. The goal of such an approach should be to prevent Russia from becoming the preferred security partner and from expanding its influence out of the Eastern Mediterranean westward. The United States and its allies and partners should also work to prevent China from becoming the dominant economic partner, which would bolster its mounting political leverage across the region. Although limited, the Mediterranean also provides some opportunities to pull at the seams in China-Russia relations. The following policy recommendations reflect the challenges that Russia and China pose separately and together, while recognizing the inherent limitations of Russia and China's cooperation in the Mediterranean.

PREVENT RUSSIAN MILITARY INFLUENCE FROM EXPANDING.

Russia and China seek to amplify perceptions of U.S. disengagement and lack of commitment to the region. Strengthening key relationships will be important to countering these messages, and also to preventing Russia from using any such openings to expand its influence out of the Eastern Mediterranean westward. Doing so will be especially important in terms of U.S. relationships with Turkey and Egypt.

Turkey

Repairing the U.S.-Turkey relationship is a priority; many complex issues remain unresolved with Turkey, but talks have begun between Presidents Biden and Erdoğan to untangle the knot. Erdoğan is a transactional leader and needs to see that a return to a closer relationship with the United States is preferable to one with Russia. Repairing Turkey's relationship with both NATO and the United States would also enable the United States to work more easily with Turkey to address other problems in the Eastern Mediterranean, including in Syria, Cyprus, and Libya. The return of the traditionally strong U.S.

friendship with Turkey would be a powerful counter to Russian influence in the region.

Egypt

The Biden administration rightly makes support for human rights in Egypt a central feature of its relationship with Sisi while continuing to be one of his major military backers. The Russians also continue to woo Sisi with military support. China, too, has invested billions in projects in Egypt, such as helping Egypt to build a new administrative capital. To counter such strong Russian and Chinese influence, the United States will need to convince Sisi that despite U.S. criticism of Egyptian human rights abuses, partnership with the United States is preferable to that with Russia and China. The United States, in coordination with the EU and European partners, will have to ensure that Egypt has attractive alternatives to investment and financing offered by China to limit Beijing's economic—and potentially political—leverage over the country.

COMPETE WITH AND ADDRESS CHINA'S ECONOMIC INFLUENCE.

U.S. relations with the nations of the Eastern Mediterranean should be based on more than military assistance. While a strong military-to-military relationship is important and can be an offset to Russian military assistance, balancing Chinese influence will call for economic engagement and assistance, in particular U.S. and European business investment and development. The United States' ability to effectively calibrate the approach will be complicated by the authoritarian nature of many of these nations.

Although limited, the Mediterranean also provides some opportunities to pull at the seams in China-Russia relations.

Provide alternatives to Chinese investment. Competing with China in the Mediterranean will require the United States and the European Union to offer regional countries alternatives to Chinese state-backed investment. Rather than attempting to directly compete with China's massive BRI investments, Washington should leverage the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which has a wider mandate to support private investment in foreign development projects than its

predecessor, to target support for projects in countries with weaker regulatory environments where China is actively competing. The DFC should partner with European development finance institutions and multilateral development banks to support projects that comply with higher labor and environmental standards and do not saddle countries with the debt burdens that often result from non-transparent deals with Chinese policy banks and state-owned enterprises.

Greece is an especially important target for such efforts. The good news is that the United States already has begun a number of defense, energy, and other investment initiatives with Greece to strengthen U.S. relations with Athens; however, it has done so too late to offset the earlier inroads made by China. Again, offering the Greek government investment opportunities that present alternatives to BRI initiatives—even if not competing directly—will be crucial in offsetting Chinese influence. One example of such an opportunity was when, on February 18, 2021, the Hellenic Leaders Group sent a letter to the U.S. International DFC after reports that it was reconsidering engagement in Southeast Europe, including Greece. It stated that “developments in EastMed increase urgency for active U.S. engagement in the region, and DFC is a prime tool for such engagement.”⁹⁶ Support by the DFC for Mediterranean countries, including Greece, will reinforce an economically viable alternative to the model of opaque financing—and limited political oversight and democratic accountability—that China (and Russia) are offering.

Washington should also target efforts in the technology sector. China's BRI-related investments will focus on its “digital silk road” in the coming years, adding state-aligned Chinese companies' leverage over countries' information communications technology infrastructure to its toolbox for potential political coercion. Armed with alternatives to Chinese investment and technology—including those developed through collaboration with European technology and telecom companies—Washington will be more effective in messaging to discourage Mediterranean countries from welcoming Chinese companies to construct the information communications technology backbone of their economy, which could render them vulnerable to future Chinese government coercion. The United States must strive to prevent regional countries from adopting not just Chinese technology, but also illiberal standards and normative approaches to cybersecurity and internet governance.

Dedicate more resources to public diplomacy in the Mediterranean. The United States should dedicate more resources to public diplomacy in the Mediterranean

to highlight U.S. investment and its impact in bolstering prosperity and economic development, as well as Washington's enduring diplomatic commitment to the region. Much of China's success in translating economic influence into political influence is attributable to its effective messaging and diplomacy about Beijing's investments and support for countries' development. Particularly in the democracies of southern Europe, China's recent use of aggressive "wolf warrior diplomacy" and coercive economic policies to silence Beijing's foreign critics presents an opportunity for Washington to remind countries of the risks of permitting an authoritarian China to gain greater leverage over their economies and foreign policies. Most importantly, the United States must rededicate itself to vigorous diplomacy that underscores Washington's commitment and leadership in helping the region address massive political, economic, and health challenges in the wake of COVID-19 and eliminate the vacuum that China has been happy to fill.

The United States must strive to prevent regional countries from adopting not just Chinese technology, but also illiberal standards and normative approaches to cybersecurity and internet governance.

Build on mounting awareness of the risks of China's economic engagement. Mediterranean countries will, of course, continue to engage economically with China, but Washington and its European allies and partners can take action to ensure such engagement does not translate into dependence and relatively greater Chinese political influence. The United States and its European partners should build on mounting awareness of the risks of China's economic engagement for local economies and political institutions—particularly in southern Europe—by supporting civil society partners in amplifying calls for greater transparency around deals with China and demands for better terms that benefit local businesses and workers.

PREPARE FOR INCREASING ALIGNMENT.

At the same time, points of alignment between Russia and China in the Mediterranean identified in this report should be accounted and prepared for.

Conduct wargaming, simulations, and scenario planning. U.S. officials should consider situations in which Russia and China work together in the case of a conflict. The United States would prefer to focus on contests with Russia and China in primary theaters—the East China Sea and the Baltics. But the deepening relationship between them raises the potential that the two countries could jointly deploy forces to pursue a shared interest or objective. Questions remain, for example, about what might lead China and Russia to deploy forces jointly in the Mediterranean. Officials should think through these questions by continuing with wargaming, simulations, and scenario planning to be better prepared in the Mediterranean theater.

Strengthen deterrence in the Mediterranean. The United States retains only a limited military footprint in the Mediterranean and so would feel the pressure from an increasing Russian and Chinese military presence. The United States can address this challenge best in cooperation with European allies, primarily through NATO. The United States and NATO, along with the European Union, could project a more regular, visible presence in the region both through forward presence and more exercises. Efforts along this line already have been made: In 2019, the U.S. Navy announced that its naval base at Souda Bay in Greece would serve as the new home to the USS *Hershel "Woody" Williams*, a *Lewis B. Puller*-class expeditionary mobile base. When the ship arrived at Souda, it was the first time in 40 years a U.S. Navy warship was based in Greece. The decision to increase capabilities in the region coincided with increased Russian activity in the Eastern Mediterranean and concern about unrest in North Africa.⁹⁷

LOOK FOR LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLOIT THE SEAMS IN THE RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONSHIP IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

While there are some tensions between Russia and China, the United States has a limited ability to exploit these divergences. In other words, in most cases, the United States has little leverage to exacerbate the tensions between Russia and China. This does not mean that Washington should not try. Moving forward, U.S. policymakers must be mindful of the tensions between Russia and China and look for ways to pull at the seams of their relationship. As both nations increase their cooperation in the Mediterranean, Russia and China could find themselves at odds when the confluence of their interests no longer coincides. Taking advantage of those seams will be key to mitigating their cooperation.

One potential fissure could arise in Turkey. Russian influence in Ankara is critical to many of Moscow's objectives, including access to the Mediterranean as well as influence over Turkish actions in regional conflicts where both nations are on opposite sides. But Chinese influence in Ankara is significantly increasing as Turkey turns to Beijing for help with its struggling economy. China is Turkey's second-largest import partner after Russia, and China invested \$3 billion in Turkey between 2016 and 2019, with the intent to double that going forward. The past few years have seen Chinese investments in Turkish ports and the construction of a railroad line running from Turkey into Central Asia and thence to China. A Chinese consortium bought a controlling interest in Istanbul's famous Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, which crosses the Bosphorus between Europe and Asia. As Erdoğan faced multiple currency crises with the lira, Chinese banks were on hand with cash to shore up the Turkish currency.⁹⁸ If China's footprint expands, Russia may resist sharing its influence in Turkey with China, giving Erdoğan the opportunity to play one suitor off the other. Although the ability of the United States to proactively exacerbate any such tension will likely be limited, policymakers should watch this and other fissures carefully for openings Washington could use to stoke tension between China and Russia.

Conclusion

Against a backdrop of rising tensions and competition in the Mediterranean, observers in Washington and Europe have begun to question whether the region will become a new arena for increased collaboration between China and Russia. In the last several years, both countries have increased their presence in the Mediterranean, creating the potential for cooperation that could clash with U.S. and allied interests and objectives in the region.

Yet, despite their growing presence in the Mediterranean, China and Russia have largely been pursuing their own objectives—which align in some areas—using different approaches. Their cooperation in the Mediterranean, therefore, has been limited to date. They do not depend on each other to build influence in Europe; they need only to stay out of each other's way. China's booming levels of trade with Europe conducted via an expanding network of ports and transportation networks financed by Beijing underpins its influence in Europe. China does not require cooperation with Russia to make this happen. Nor do the Russians need Chinese help to deepen their relations with NATO ally Turkey or their client Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, who

has become dependent on Russian military support to stay in power. As Russia and China have increased their activities in the Mediterranean, they have done so largely through parallel and complementary efforts, rather than explicit cooperation.

As such, the United States should not overstate the extent and significance of the China-Russia partnership in the Mediterranean. Doing so would detract resources and attention that would be more effectively used to address other priorities. Instead, policymakers should address each challenge individually—Russia as a security challenge and China as an economic one. As Washington continues to monitor the China-Russia partnership, efforts to strengthen U.S. and European relationships in the Mediterranean would go some way to mitigate part of the impact that their alignment does have. If the United States and Europe are able to offer the nations of the region attractive alternatives to deepening reliance on China and Moscow, they can blunt the inroads and influence that both nations are pursuing in the Mediterranean.

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