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After the Russian invasion of Ukraine: France and Italy face rupture in the east, but also in the south

Admiral (ret) Pascal Ausseur

Director General of FMES

The major changes that are disrupting their strategic environment require Italy and France to overcome their differences in terms of visibility in the Mediterranean, their relationship with the southern shore, their perception of the terrorist threat and their analysis of geopolitical risks. Drawing on their experience, their positioning and their mutual complementarity, the two countries can help the European Union to develop a strategy that will enable it to survive. For Europe is in danger and the threats are accumulating, not just in the east but also in the south.

AN END TO PRETENCE

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marks a break. We are definitively leaving a period of "strategic weightlessness" which for 30 years allowed European countries, and in particular France and Italy, to behave as if tensions, power relations and war had disappeared from our reality. Since the unbridled expansion of economic liberalism and globalisation at the beginning of the 1980s, and even more so since the fall of the Soviet Union ten years later, Europeans considered themselves to be at the 'end of history' and to have entered a new world, governed by norms and the law of the market, all of which was supposed to make the use of force obsolete. War was definitely behind us and global consumption, pacifying society and regulated by international law, was our horizon.

However, for all those who had military responsibilities in relation to geopolitics, the return of history and the balance of power were already apparent by the end of the 1990s. From the Kosovo war in 1999 onwards, we witnessed and participated in renewed competition between global and regional powers, each defending its own model and zone of influence: the United States, China and Russia, but also including France, Italy, Turkey and Iran... We have witnessed (and sometimes participated in) the proliferation of challenges to international law and the use of uninhibited power relations, whether in Iraq by the Americans, in the China Sea by the Chinese, in Georgia and Ukraine by the Russians, in Libya by the French and the British, in the Caucasus by Azerbaijan or in the Eastern Mediterranean by the Turks. This rise in tensions was accompanied by a general increase in arms spending, which ran counter to the massive disarmament of European countries, beset by their irenic vision.

Faced with this reality, which did not correspond to their expectations, Europeans preferred to hide war behind pretences: military interventions were claimed to be 'maintaining order', with or without UN legitimacy (the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, or the Sahel), or to support a party considered legitimate during a local conflict (Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, or Libya), or were discreet, below the threshold of open conflict and therefore acceptable (Georgia and Crimea). These hypocrisies, tributes of the vice of power to the virtue of multilateralism, allowed us to believe that international law remained an objective - at least in principle.

The war that started on 24 February 2022 is not a pretence: it is explicitly about Russia subjugating by force a state that it considers illegitimate. Because of the historical importance of the event, the geopolitical weight of Russia - a permanent member of the Security Council - and the geographical proximity of the conflict, this war is a wake-up call that forces Europeans to look at the world as it is and not as they had hoped it would become. Yet there is a risk of denial: Europeans could try to cling to their irenic vision by focusing only on "the Putin problem". This would be a mistake, because not only is the war Russia has unleashed a source of instability as such in Eastern Europe, but it adds to a structural instability of our strategic environment, especially on our southern flank, an instability we can no longer ignore.

IN THE SOUTH, TENSION IS ADDED TO TENSION

The first effect of the war in Ukraine has been to add tension to a region that is already structurally under tension. As a border zone between two worlds that are drifting apart, the Mediterranean is - to use a physicist's comparison - a kind of dielectric between two plates of a capacitor with diverging potentials, far from the objectives that the Europeans had set thirty years ago. Once again, we had bet on overcoming rivalries between peoples through economic and social development, which would automatically lead to virtuous governance, societal homogenisation and, ultimately, democratisation. This convergence through the economy was considered ineluctable. Its principle underpinned all the agreements signed at the time - the EU's Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation (MPC), NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (MD) and the Oslo Israeli-Palestinian agreements - and anticipated the quasi-automatic pacification of this region, which was to be progressively integrated into a form of European melting pot. Contrary to these expectations, socio-economic development, cultural and societal evolutions, modes of governance and demography have followed different routes on the two shores of the Mediterranean, which has reinforced misunderstandings, resentments and resentment towards Europe from the countries on the southern shore.

This disappointment generates tensions of all kinds: firstly, within the societies of the South themselves, frustrated by the disappointed hopes of economic and social improvement and fractured by contradictory influences (Western, anti-Western, nationalist or Islamist). Secondly, between the countries of the southern shore and Europe, the latter being perceived both as a rejection zone and as a fortress indifferent to the fate of its deprived neighbours. Finally, between the countries of the southern shore, which have never overcome their rivalries and are often in opposition. The antagonism between Morocco and Algeria is the most obvious example. Anti-Westernism, nationalism and Islamism form both the receptacle and the ideological supports of these tensions which continue to spread.

This regional climate, which is structurally hardening, has three main consequences.

The first is a political hardening that aims to overcome the instability within the societies of the southern shore, instability that has not stopped growing since the Arab revolutions of 2011. Abdelmadjid Tebboune's takeover after the 2019 Hirak in Algeria, the concentration of power under Kais Saïd in Tunisia and the authoritarian excesses of Marshal Sissi in Egypt and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey all aim to keep a frustrated population under control, populations with no prospects and affected by the forces of fragmentation, particularly Islamist ones, which weaken nation states. The image of chaos projected by countries with weak or failed governments, such as Lebanon, Libya and Iraq, only strengthens the autocratic resolve of these heads of state.

These countries also tend, and this is the second consequence, to play power relations with European countries in order to obtain advantages and unite their populations around anti-European sentiment. Morocco challenging Spain with migrants, Algeria raising the spectre of France as the "traditional and eternal enemy" and Turkey threatening the European Union over maritime rights and its claims on Cyprus, are all examples of this.

Finally, these states are reinforcing their military capabilities to deal with the growing risks of regional conflict. Unsurprisingly, military expenditure is increasing, particularly in the South. By way of

illustration, the increase in the tonnage of navies (the preferred tool of state power) between 2008 and 2030 is reckoned at 52% for Morocco, 120% for Algeria and 170% for Egypt.

It is on these already glowing embers that the war in Ukraine is pouring fuel of all kinds, the first of which is economic. By generating a surge in the price of wheat and hydrocarbons in a region that is a major importer, the war will weaken societies already shaken by the Covid-19 crisis, the global economic recession, the decline in tourism and high inflation. Thus Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, all of them emerging or middle-income countries, are penalised by the drop in Russian and Ukrainian tourism (which represented a quarter of visits to Turkey and almost a third to Egypt), by their dependence on wheat imports (Turkey 25% and Egypt 23% are, along with China, the countries whose cereal supply depends most on Russia and the Ukraine) and fertilisers, by the increase in the price of hydrocarbons and foodstuffs and by the drop in investor confidence and world demand. This negative impact will be accompanied by an increase in the disparity between countries, that will relate not only to their dependence on Russia and raw materials, but especially to their status as oil and gas exporters. Thus, Algeria and Libya, producers of oil and gas, are expected to fare well as increases in energy revenues should compensate for these difficulties. These differences in the impact of the crisis could increase tensions between neighbours.

Most countries in the South will therefore experience increasing social tensions in the coming months, which could lead to a political hardening of the powers in place to avoid a resurgence of revolutionary movements. The situation will be favourable to targeting Westerners as scapegoats, a Pavlovian reflex fuelled by well-tested Russian propaganda.

THE SOUTH: A NEW RUSSIAN FRONT LINE?

In the field of information warfare in the southern Mediterranean, Russia's action is decisive because it has proven know-how and growing geopolitical weight. Taking advantage of the American disengagement initiated by Barak Obama from 2012 and of the European disinterest in this region considered by Europe as intractable, Vladimir Putin has gradually established himself over the past ten years as a key player in the Mediterranean basin.

This Russian involvement in the Mediterranean is not at all unusual. The Mediterranean, with its permanent access to the warm seas represents Moscow's natural area of expansion and the historical obsession of Russian power ever since it wished to have a say in world affairs. This access is not straightforward for the Russian Navy: it requires control of the Black Sea - which explains the Russian strategy towards Ukraine; easy access through the Turkish straits - which sheds light on the complicit relationship between Presidents Putin and Erdogan; and support points all along the deployment zones - which has led to the continuation of the bases of Tartus and Hmeimim in Syria. The Russian strategy in the Mediterranean is therefore both classic and logical in principle. It poses problems for Europeans only because it is part of a global strategy of revenge against the West, now explicitly characterised as an enemy, and of destabilisation of the European Union, which is perceived as prey. Russia's political and military deployment on the southern shore, which a few years ago could be seen as the expression of a classic strategy of influence, now has the characteristics of a threat to the countries of Europe.

Moscow's presence in the area, either through its own resources or through military cooperation, has enabled it to become a key player on the southern flank. Russia has a permanent military presence in the eastern and central Mediterranean which allows it to support its operations in the region, gives it the capacity to influence the restructuring of the gas industry in the area - a sector that is essential for its economy - and to support its regional diplomacy, which is a mixture of military interventionism, political influence and arms sales. Russia has thus become a reliable ally of authoritarian regimes (Syria, Egypt, and Algeria), the arbiter of peace in Syria even if this role is regularly contested by Iran and Turkey, the adjudicator of regional powers (Syria, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), and an effective disrupter capable of weakening Europe on the southern shore (Libya and Mali). The now explicit opposition between Europe and Russia means the latter now has freer reign, limited for the time being to the media and political spheres. If the engagement in Ukraine restricts Moscow's military deployment in the area, it should not reduce its activism because the strategic interest of

engagement in southern Europe is growing. The tensions at work in Eastern Europe are indeed being extended to the Mediterranean, which is becoming an indirect frontline against the Europeans.

Europe, and in particular France which is in the front line through its involvement in Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, will have to be particularly vigilant to counter this growing antagonism. The fact that all the North African states, with the exception of the Libyan government in Tripoli, refused to vote for Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council is a significant political signal. This policy of anti-European influence extends to the entire African continent and is in tandem with Turkey's activism and China's growing presence in Africa. These three revisionist countries have launched a long-term war of communication promoting a very negative image of European countries that is spreading among the populations. The consequences could be disastrous given the growing political, economic and especially demographic links between Europe and its South.

RUSSIAN MILITARY ACTION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN?

But Moscow's war on Europe may not remain limited to the realms of political influence. From its bases in Tartus and Hmeimim in Syria and its deployments in Libya and Mali, Russia is once again carrying military influence and creating a much more threatening environment for European forces deploying in the area, whether in the Sahel, Libya or the eastern Mediterranean. Some 13,000 troops, of which 40% are mercenaries, 40 fighter-bombers, some 20 helicopters, 4 frigates and 2 submarines are deployed in the area. This set-up, combined with the numerous anti-aircraft (S400 and S300), anti-ship (Kalibr, Bastion and Zircon) and anti-land strike (Kalibr and Iskander) missile sites deployed in the region, aims to be able to deny Western forces access to the area if necessary.

If Russian forces do not win sufficiently in Ukraine, it is not impossible that the Kremlin will use its damaging capabilities all around the Mediterranean basin to create a diversion. Several scenarios are conceivable: disrupting NATO and EU operations aimed at restricting arms trafficking and migration off the coast of Libya, facilitating migratory movements by operating with Malian and Libyan networks in conjunction with the Wagner group, or promoting destabilising actions in the Sahel and West Africa.

The possibility of a direct military threat to European military assets from the sea or from friendly countries cannot be excluded in view of the escalation in Ukraine. In this area, particular attention should be paid to European surface ships and submarines. The neutralisation of the cruiser Moskva in the Black Sea showed that such an attack has a strong political impact while not being considered as an aggression on national territory. President Putin might be tempted to use this same lever to force European countries into a controlled escalation, without the risk of collateral damage.

France, which is particularly active in the region and has complex relations with its former colonies, is a priority target in this strategy. Its ousting from the Central African Republic and Mali demonstrates Russia's ability to act effectively in the political, military and informational fields to achieve its ends. Algeria's close relations with Russia, particularly in the field of armaments, open up worrying possibilities in this area. Algeria has powerful attack capabilities (modernised Kilo submarines capable of firing cruise missiles, Kalibr and RBS 15 missiles, MU90 torpedoes) that can pose a threat in the western Mediterranean and along the coast.

FRANCE AND ITALY MUST RISE TO THE CHALLENGE OF THE DENIAL OF REALITY

Finally, the last impact concerns Europe's strategic posture. Until now, Europe has been doubly short-sighted with regard to the geopolitical challenges of the Mediterranean. On the one hand, trapped in an irenic conception of history that had excluded the dynamics of power and war, it refused to see the growing threats that enveloped it. On the other hand, it reserved its last military efforts for the Russian threat, under the insistence of Great Britain and the countries of Eastern Europe. The EU was thus powerless to understand and respond to the structural security challenges of its south. Will the war in Ukraine be an opportunity for it to abandon its strategic posture and wake up? Nothing seems certain.

The EU could in fact be comforted by denial, and reinforce its rejection of a world that is decidedly far removed from the model that has shaped the generation of men and women now at the helm, one oriented towards the quest for individual well-being and a consumer-oriented societal harmony. The European countries could then seek the protection of the United States to curb the Russian threat, and that of legal and maritime barriers to limit its interactions with the southern shore. Security through withdrawal and isolation, so to speak. This option would perhaps gain a few years of tranquillity, but it would not allow us to overcome the structural challenges we face and from which we cannot escape: on the one hand, the Americans' long-term priority is in Asia and it is unlikely that they will take European interests into account beyond what is necessary to defend their own. The interests of Europeans, as Russia's neighbours, differ from those of their allies across the Atlantic. On the other hand, the Mediterranean and Africa will remain on our doorstep, with their major demographic, economic and societal imbalances, and only a strong proactive involvement will make it possible to create a new and more stable balance, enabling the emergence of a harmonious coexistence that is essential to Europe's future. The "Fortress" or "seive" options are not viable solutions because they both lead to the submerging of Europe.

This war in Ukraine, by its brutality and proximity, offers the possibility of an "electroshock of reality" which might allow Europeans to understand that the survival of their model is no longer a given. Confronted on its own continent with an attempt at military annexation of a country that identifies with it and calls for help, Europe can respond as it has begun to do, with intelligence and courage, thus indicating to the world that it has left behind the wait-and-see attitude and the moralising posture that have made it a spectator of its own history.

It is certain that if the Europeans, first and foremost the French, Germans and Italians, show the world that they are determined not to be subject to the decisions of others, but rather to take the lead in the difficulties and opposition they face, the view of their neighbours to the east and south will change. This new posture involves taking on the balance of power, accepting the risks involved, taking on the effort and even the suffering inherent in dealing with a history that is once again unfolding in tragedy. But it will allow Europeans to take the initiative again and to take advantage of the new respect that it may generate, to propose new balances based on clear thinking and courage - but also on generosity - because no one can think that the status quo, which would maintain an enormous developmental imbalance on our doorstep, can continue.

The European countries must therefore vigorously and robustly strengthen their military capabilities (2% of GDP is probably not enough). They must have the courage to clearly identify their strategic interests and the efforts they are prepared to make to defend them, a prerequisite for regaining the respect they have lost. They must identify and name their adversaries and allies. They must counter the information war being waged against them in Africa and the Middle East, as well as on their own territory. They must put in place a real policy of development and economic cooperation with those countries of the South that share the same interests (the 300 billion € in public and private investment planned by the EU between now and 2027 is also probably insufficient). Our societies need to redefine a real societal project, capable of uniting and responding to the challenges of the 21st century, far removed from the image of satiated, idle, fearful and selfish populations portrayed by our opponents.

France and Italy, by virtue of their influence in Europe and their location on the Mediterranean, have a particular role to play in this volte face. It requires them to leave behind the sterile competition that too often marks the Mediterranean diplomacy of the two Latin sisters. On the one hand, Paris must stop neglecting the expertise and strategic interests of its neighbour - the intervention in Libya in 2011 being a textbook case in this point, one with particularly painful consequences. On the other hand, Rome must accept its responsibilities and move away from a policy of ambiguity, which by trying to accommodate everyone renders it impotent and ultimately obliges it to submit to Washington's decisions. Italian policy towards Turkey's policy in the Mediterranean is an example of this. If Rome and Paris manage to elaborate a common strategy to respond to the new challenges of the southern flank, including those in the eastern Mediterranean, they will have the credibility and the influence to guide their partners in this existential struggle for the European Union.

For let us make no mistake. The way Europe responds in the long-term to Russian aggression and North-South imbalances will position it in the new geostrategic playing field. Will it confine itself to moralising postures? Will it enter the dialectic of the balance of power and accept the risks that go with it? Will it accept the efforts inherent in this tug of war? Will it succeed in articulating a policy that addresses its challenges both in the East and in the South? Will it stop sacrificing its future in favour of its immediate welfare? The whole world is watching us and our neighbours, whether friends or rivals, will draw their own conclusions about our ability to defend our interests, our values, our allies and our destiny in the face of adversity. Our ability to organise our long-term coexistence with our strategic environment, both to the east and to the south, will therefore depend on our intelligence and our courage.



FMES

Fondation Méditerranéenne
d'Études Stratégiques



INSTITUT FMES

Maison du Numérique et de l'Innovation
Place Georges Pompidou - F 83000 TOULON

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