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The Greater Mediterranean Between Peace and War: **Maritime Power, Energy Security, and the Strategy of a Crowded Century**

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Abstract

“Old Theatres – New Challenges,” captures with precision the transformation we are witnessing across the maritime domain. Historic basins of maritime activity—from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans to the Greater Mediterranean—are confronted with new covers of complexity: technological acceleration, evolving security norms, pressure on critical infrastructure, and the rise of non-traditional threats that shape the boundaries between peace, competition, and conflict.

In my remarks, I will examine the Greater Mediterranean as a single, interconnected strategic system—one that links Europe, the Middle East, and Africa through flows of trade, energy, information, and security externalities. I will consider how hybrid dynamics, emerging technologies, and shifting legal interpretations reshape both cooperation and competition in this space. Above all, I will explore how maritime stability increasingly depends not only on naval capability, but also on coherent governance, resilient infrastructure, and a shared understanding of risk among regional and global actors.

When Fear and Disruption Become Strategy

The sea has never been silent. It speaks in tides of power, commerce, and conflict, and it carries the pulse of civilization itself.

Modern conflict has no relevance of its old shape. Technology, like cyber tools, drones, precision strikes, AI-enabled targeting, has made fear and disruption strategic ends in themselves. The object is no longer the flag over the hill; it is the **system** behind the hill: the finance rails, the power grid, the port, the data cable. Hybrid and asymmetric methods blur

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the boundaries between peace and war, replacing decisive battles with cumulative pressure—economic, informational, psychological—applied at sea and from the sea. In this theatre, the Greater Mediterranean is not a map—it is a living system.

I. The Greater Mediterranean as a Strategic Ecosystem

The Greater Mediterranean—Mediterranean, Black and Azov Seas, the Red Sea with Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal—has re-emerged as the center of world politics. Today, we stand before the **Greater Mediterranean**, not as simple observers of history, but as protectors of a living strategic organism that connects three continents and four seas — the Mediterranean, the Black, the Azov, and the Red — bound by the narrow channels of the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal.

This vast maritime continuum has re-emerged as the critical center between peace and war, prosperity and threat.

It is no longer a theatre of regional concerns, it is the world's central maritime frontier.

It is a single operational theatre whose conflicts spread across continents:

- **Trade & chokepoints:** Gibraltar, the Turkish Straits, Suez are valves of global circulation.
- **Energy:** Offshore gas, interconnectors, LNG hubs, and seabed cables are the new high value targets.
- **Security externalities:** State fragility in North Africa and the Levant, terrorism, migration, and the diffusion of armed groups.
- **Great-power rivalry:** Russia's reconstituted Mediterranean squadron; China's commercial and dual-use presence; NATO/EU posture; regional ambitions (Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Gulf states).

In such a sea, **fragmented governance is strategic risk**. Navies, coast guards, regional organizations, and private consortia often pull on different ropes. The result is duplication without direction. A coherent maritime strategy must recognize the theatre's unity and act for that reason.

II. Law and Power at Sea: UNCLOS, Norms, and Revisionism

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea UNCLOS is the pillar of maritime order: innocent passage, EEZs, continental shelves, freedom of navigation—rules that keep commerce moving and conflict bounded. Most states are parties; some are not. Non-parties may observe many provisions as **customary international law**, yet **legal credibility** and **political legitimacy** suffer when enforcement is demanded without full accession.

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Two theatres expose the strain between norm and revision:

- **South China Sea:** Militarized artificial features, violations into neighbors' EEZs, pressure against freedom of navigation.
- **Eastern Mediterranean & Aegean:** Disputed claims, coercive surveys, naval "escorts" in areas claimed by Greece and Cyprus; instrumentalization of gray-zone tactics against a rules-based regime.

The debate over whether a non-party (e.g., the U.S.) can uphold UNCLOS principles contains four tensions:

1. **Lack of formal membership** weakens legal standing.
2. **Customary law loyalty** offers a limited basis but is questioned in weight against treaty law.
3. **Global norm steward ship** by sea powers argues necessity over form.
4. **Hypocrisy critiques** erode diplomatic traction.

Conclusion: Law without capability is rhetoric; capability without law is provocation. Legitimacy at sea demands **both**: loyalty to UNCLOS and credible, equal means to uphold it.

III. Globalization Afloat: Opportunity and Friction on the Water

Over 80–90% of world trade by volume journeys the waves. In the last two decades:

- Seaborne trade **doubled**; vessel traffic **multiplied**; developing countries now carry nearly **half** of global trade.
- **Megaships** squeezed cost, but magnified chokepoint risk (remember *Ever Given*).
- **New frictions** rose with scale: piracy, trafficking, IUU fishing, ecological stress, and mass migration.

Maritime security must therefore do three things simultaneously:

1. **Keep arteries open** (FONOPs, convoying where needed, maritime domain awareness).
2. **Police the commons** (anti-piracy, counter-smuggling, SAR, environmental enforcement).
3. **Shield the nodes** (offshore platforms, LNG terminals, port clusters, subsea cables).

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IV. The Mediterranean as the World's Microcosm

Everything the oceans will become, the Mediterranean already is: crowded, disputed, significant.

- **Energy & EEZs:** Hydrocarbon prospects sharpen claims. East-Med cooperation (Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, partners) meets Turkish revisionism, with surveys under escort and legal maxims challenged at sea.
- **Migration & SAR:** Humanitarian imperatives meet sovereignty and politics; responses must be lawful, coordinated, and humane.
- **Environment:** Overfishing, pollution, and habitat loss—security externalities with strategic timelines.
- **Chokepoints:** Suez as global barometer; Gibraltar as gateway; Turkish Straits as control under Montreux; all three as **risk multipliers**.
- **Proxy conflict:** Syria and Libya export instability; weapons flow; militias become de facto maritime actors.
- **Great-power overlaps:** Russia's fixed points in Syria and naval presence; NATO reassurance; China's port stakes within Belt and Road.

Lessons here scale outward to the Indo-Pacific, Arctic, and Indian Ocean: the future looks Mediterranean—**busier, narrower, riskier**.

V. Energy as Strategy: From Commodity to Coercive Instrument

The post-Cold War illusion that energy was a “non-traditional” security issue has collapsed.

- **Russia–Europe:** A regional energy security complex of asymmetric interdependence became securitized after the Ukraine crises; pipelines became leverage; contracts, coercion.
- **Eastern Mediterranean:** Offshore gas recast alliances and naval posture; EEZ lines now sit under the shadow of warships and drones.
- **Critical infrastructure:** Platforms, pipelines, interconnectors, and **undersea cables** are now strategic targets—physically and in cyberspace.

Operational implications: Maritime strategy must integrate **energy defence**—mapping critical knobs; building layered protection (surface, subsurface, air, cyber); developing rapid attribution for hybrid strikes; and establishing **doctrinal clarity** on the status of offshore assets in conflict.

VI. The Argument for Allied Presence—and How to Make It Work

A persistent, **collective** naval presence—legally grounded in UNCLOS—deters unilateralism and stabilizes busy seas. To be credible, it must be more than ships in the picture:

- **Deterrence & stability:** Show that closing straits or harassing EEZs will fail.
- **Legal legitimacy:** Pair patrols with legal posture; use courts and arbitration where available; message in one voice.
- **Norm promotion:** Uphold free passage and peaceful dispute resolution; rebut gray-zone tactics with coordinated responses.
- **Crisis prevention:** Multinational patrols, shared MDA, rapid-response mechanisms, de-escalation hotlines.
- **Readiness & interoperability:** Regular exercises, common TTPs, compatible comms and data, joint protection plans for energy and cables.
- **Blockade as law enforcement (*exceptional*):** If mandated and lawful, apply with strict ROE, escalation control, and diplomatic off-ramps.

Allied presence is a **promise to the order**, not a prelude to adventurism.

VII. Threats with Salt on Them: Terrorism, Trafficking, and Gray-Zone Actors

Maritime terrorism targets ships, ports, and offshore nodes; trafficking networks exploit gaps between jurisdictions; IUU fleets gut fisheries and livelihoods. The answer is **whole-of-maritime governance**:

- **Unified tasking** across navies, coast guards, police, customs, and environmental authorities.
- **Attribution & lawfare:** Evidence packs for sanctions and prosecutions; financial targeting of enablers.
- **Human security:** SAR that is lawful and humane; reception and processing that respects obligations and deters exploitation by smugglers.
- **Technology:** Satellite AIS analytics, unmanned ISR, fused operational pictures shared across allies and regional partners.

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VIII. The Modern Fleet: From Hulls to Networks

The 21st-century navy is a **networked organism**:

- **Unmanned systems** (UAV/USV/UUV) expand ISR and strike options at lower risk.
- **AI & big data** compress sensor-to-shooter timelines and predict threats.
- **Integrated air and missile defence**, including directed energy, counters saturation attacks and drone swarms.
- **Hypersonics** alter deterrence calculus—requiring both offensive reach and defensive adaptation.
- **Cyber** becomes coequal with kinetic; ships, ports, and platforms need zero-trust architectures, hunt teams, and rapid recovery drills.
- **Green propulsion & energy** extend endurance, reduce signatures, and align with environmental duty.

Doctrine must keep pace: multi-domain concepts, littoral-to-blue-water agility, and seamless coalition C2.

IX. Chokepoints: Where Geography Holds a Veto

Three lessons from three straits:

- **Suez**: A single grounding can rattle markets; terrorism in the Sinai is a constant latent risk; redundancy (re-routing, stockpiles) matters.
- **Turkish Straits**: Montreux gives Ankara leverage; Black Sea crises ricochet into the Aegean; diplomacy and naval posture must be tuned together.
- **Gibraltar**: A Western sentry; disputes between allies must never compromise maritime vigilance.

Chokepoints are less places than **strategic conditions**; guarding them means fusing legal, diplomatic, and military instruments.

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X. Regional Rivalries as Global Tutors

- **Israel–Iran/Hamas/Hezbollah:** Multi-front pressure with maritime implications from gas rigs to naval interdiction.
- **Cyprus & the Aegean:** The unfinished business of division and maritime delimitation; coercive surveys erode norms; European solidarity and measured firmness are essential.
- **Libya & Syria:** Civil wars that turned coasts into arms highways; lessons for interdiction, embargo enforcement, and post-conflict maritime governance.

What happens here will echo in the **South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Arctic:** EEZ disputes, lawfare, coast guard militarization, and gray-hull brinkmanship—all rehearsed in the Mediterranean.

XI. Building a Navy for the 21st Century: A Program

1) Technological Innovation and Modernization

- Unmanned systems across all domains; AI-enabled decision support; resilient comms.
- Hypersonic offense/defense; directed-energy counters; integrated IAMD at sea.
- Cyber offense/defense embedded in fleet ops; supply-chain integrity; red-team culture.
- Greener platforms for endurance, signature management, and sustainability.

2) Flexibility and Multi-Domain Operations

- Littoral agility plus blue-water reach; expeditionary logistics; contested logistics concepts.
- Submarines for deterrence and ISR; robust anti-submarine warfare to deny adversary stealth.

3) Power Projection and Global Presence

- Carrier and amphibious groups modernized for UAV integration and stand-in forces.
- Forward-deployed fleets at the seams of instability; pre-positioned stocks and access agreements.

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4) Chokepoints and SLOCs

- Persistent surveillance; allied patrol rotations; rehearsed contingency plans for disruption.
- FONOPs where claims threaten commons; legal messaging aligned with operational acts.

5) Alliances and Partnerships

- Routine bilateral/multilateral exercises (NATO, MED, ASEAN, Quad as relevant).
- Capacity building for frontline littorals; interoperable C2 and data standards; secure information-sharing cells.

6) Climate and Environment

- Arctic capability (ice-class assets, comms, survival); disaster relief as core mission.
- Environmental stewardship: anti-pollution operations, fisheries enforcement, protected-area respect.

XII. Protecting the New Prize: Offshore Energy and the Seabed

Maritime power now includes the duty to **defend economic lifelines**:

- **Doctrine**: Clarify the legal status and ROE for defending offshore platforms and subsea infrastructure during crises and conflict.
- **Layered defence**: Patrol craft, ASW screens, counter-UUV nets, counter-drone/CRAM, and rapid-repair teams for cables/pipelines.
- **Cyber hardening**: Segmented ICS/OT networks, continuous monitoring, incident playbooks, red-teaming with energy operators.
- **Attribution & response**: Hybrid-attack investigation cells; graduated response ladders (legal, economic, cyber, kinetic).
- **International coordination**: UNCLOS-compliant measures; burden-sharing among operators and states; exercises that simulate sabotage and repair.

As seabed mining accelerates for rare minerals, expect **new disputes** over claims, environmental standards, and security of operations. Prepare now: legal frameworks, inspection regimes, and protective concepts of operation.

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XIII. From Coexistence to Coherence: An Allied Method

To prevent drift from contested peace to chronic confrontation, allied and partner states—especially in the Mediterranean—must move from parallel statements to **shared strategy**:

- **Common threat picture**: A fused maritime domain awareness picture, including cyber and space inputs, shared in near-real time.
- **Task-organized presence**: Standing multinational patrols with rotating leads; mission sets tied to EEZ assurance, SAR, embargo enforcement, and critical-node protection.
- **De-escalation architecture**: Sea-to-sea hotlines; incident-at-sea agreements; pre-agreed arbitration pathways.
- **Energy-security alignment**: Diversify sources and routes; interconnect grids; reduce single-supplier leverage; align industry resilience with naval protection.
- **Lawfare & diplomacy**: Use courts and arbitration aggressively; expose violations publicly; sanction repeat offenders; pair every patrol with a legal brief.

Coherence is cheaper than crisis—and far cheaper than war.

Epilogue: Navigate, Don't Drift

Thucydides warned that war invents its own conditions. In our time, those conditions are maritime: chokepoints under stress, platforms under threat, cables in the dark, migration on unseaworthy hulls, and navies asked to be warriors, constables, diplomats, and engineers at once.

If we resign the Greater Mediterranean to fragmentation and unilateralism, we will normalize the gray zone and invite miscalculation. If we marry **law to power, technology to doctrine, and national will to allied coherence**, this sea can again be a platform for **order and opportunity**.

The task is not to promise decisive victory tomorrow, but to **deny strategic surprise every day**; not to brandish power recklessly, but to **signal with clarity**; not to wait for the catastrophic incident, but to **shape the environment** so it never arrives.

The sea is patient. History is not.
Let us not drift. **Let us navigate.**

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