

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2020/21

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# Section One: Global Developments

The past year has been marked by the breakout of the Corona pandemic, concurrently with continued global instability in the geopolitical sense. The latter was manifested in a loosening of the global order, which is based upon international rules and institutions, which have been established since the end of World War II, leaving room, instead, to a more complex, fluctuating security setting we have experienced in the past few decades.

Presently, the inter-state strategic competition fulfills the main national security policy of leading states, particularly the United States' national security.

The world trade has been damaged, but the latter damage is not homogenous in term of geographic, world-wide spread, as well as in terms of the damaged sectors. The Corona pandemic has disrupted the order of crew replacement on ships, thereby causing severe maritime personnel management. Many seamen have found themselves imprisoned on ships for long time-stretches, unable to refresh the lines and be replaced. The challenges of Corona have not passed over the combat fleets of the world's countries, which have prepared accordingly.

In terms of terror and piracy, the data in those fields are quite comforting. In the past few years, there has been a stable decline in the number of pirate attacks in Eastern Africa, mounting to only a few attacks a year, as well as a decline in maritime terror attacks. However, ship owners' expenses to protect their ships on that matter are still on the rise.

There is still a significant via-Maris immigration in our region, mainly from the Libyan coast to Italy, as well as from the Syrian coast through Turkey, to Greece. Although tens of thousand immigrants per years are concerned, there is a continuous decline, compared to the years 2017-2018, when there were more than one hundred thousand immigrants.

The world's key fleets have faced the challenges of Corona, as well as continued geopolitical developments in various arenas in the world, including alterations of world order, toward a democratic-authoritarian world order (as opposed to democratic-liberal order). The latter is manifested by building up the force in the powerful countries' fleets and determining attributional threats.

An important arena, which has attracted attention recently, both on the world's powerful countries' part and on the part of local and regional parties is the *Red Sea Arena*. A substantial part of the world trade passes through this sailing passage, on its way to Suez Canal. Recently, its coasts have served as a ground for a regional

influence campaign, involving Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and other parties.

Apparently, in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean Sea regions, Russia continues to act toward establishing its regional position in the East Med, simultaneously to maintaining the multitude of relations it has nurtured, intending to strengthen its influence. Russia strives to stand aside, without directly intervening in the rivalries between the various parties in the region. The Russian fleet has firmed its hold in our region, mainly through its leasing bases in Syria (Taratus and Hamimim), as well as through collaboration with Egypt, involving a joint drill with the Egyptian fleet in the Black Sea in the past year. Russia has acted toward reinforcing its presence both in Libya and the Red Sea, through an agreement to use Port Sudan. Apparently, viewing the Russian efforts and resources on the western side of this mega-state, Russia leaves the Eastern Pacific region for the struggle between China and the United States.

The geo-strategic and geopolitical state in the South China Sea, where an sovereignty conflict has persisted for many years, between China and the surrounding countries has become more complicated, following several strategies and actions taken by China, partly based upon the Chinese culture and history, which have granted China the relative superiority in the current conflict.

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## Global Developments in the Maritime Domain

### *Shaul Chorev*

As in previous year, although this report's assessment focuses on the East Med and the Red Sea, the occurrences in this arena may not be addressed separately from the recent global development of general, and in the maritime domain in particular, because of the close affinities between events in the global domain and their influence on the region near Israel.

The year 2020 was characterized by continued *global instability* in its geopolitical sense, manifesting by a weakening of world order based upon international rules and institutions which have been established since the end of World War II, leaving room, instead, to a more complex, fluctuating security setting we have experienced in the past few decades. Presently, the inter-state strategic competition fulfills the main objectives of national security policy of leading countries, particularly the United States' national security.

**The present international order** is undergoing a transition process driven by interactions between its main players; the United States, China and Russia, and to a lesser extent, the European Union. Other rising powerful countries undermining this order. If successful, they will eventually establish a multi-polar world order.<sup>1</sup> Russian president Vladimir Putin exploits both turning the utmost attention on the part of Trump's government in the United States to East Asia (Pivot to Asia Policy), as well as the European Union's economic and political disorder. The vacuum of power yielded by this policy of the United States in the East Med has encouraged Turkey and Iran to fortify their efforts to expand their influence in the East Med. In that sense, the agreement signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates in September 2020 at the White House has driven a wedge in Iran's and Turkey's counter-proceedings. This trend of liberal global order alternation, which began even before 2020, was intensified due to the Corona pandemic, and the closure processes imposed upon the world by it, both in terms of people's movement and the movement of goods.

**China** is the main strategic competitor of the United States. It exploits its economic power to frighten its neighbors, as well as militarization of civil characteristics in the South China Sea. In recent years, China has begun to simultaneously "pull all the strings available to her". The conflict in the South China Sea has become a main source of international concern; its uncompromising conduct concerning Hong Kong's autonomy has accelerated. China has not been deterred by the wide media

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1 Schultze, P. W. (Ed.) (2018). Multipolarity: The promise of disharmony. Frankfurt: Campus Verlag

coverage, either. The last military conflict with India left a few dozens of killed and injured soldiers of both parties. United States President Donald Trump and China's Deputy Prime Minister Li Hu signed an agreement at the White House in early January 2020. The agreement reduced some American customs on Chinese goods, in return to Chinese obligations to purchase more agricultural products from America, as well as energy products and industrial products, and to address complaints on the United States' part concerning intellectual property rights violation. However, phase 1 of the agreement has not been fulfilled (Beijing and Washington have not been able to expand the trade scope of goods indicated even prior to the Corona pandemic breakout). The analysts argue this state is continuous and will determine the scene further into the year 2020. The failure itself is not surprising, but its magnitude certainly is.<sup>2</sup>

**Russia** has proven to be a significant counterpart to the west, in the East Med in general, in Syria, and recently, particularly in Libya, fulfilling significant military and diplomatic roles in the region. Vladimir Putin possesses a sole, yet prominent vision, namely, to restore Russia's glory. In recent years, Russia has violated the boundaries of neighboring countries, vetoing their decisions of economic and diplomatic nature, as well as those related to defense. However, Russia's willingness to politically join forces with China, against the United States has recently raised some doubts. China's support of Belarus governor Alexander Lukashenko in recent years, through his attempt to maintain independence from Putin's Russia, who insisted on a more profound political and economic collaboration between Minsk and Moscow; as well as the Chinese attempt to impose on Russia the prices of fuel, a significant part of which is purchased from Russia (over thirty per cents), and considering the fuel export constitutes more than sixteen per cents of the Russian GNP – may lead Putin to consider *moderating his proceeding to seek a close connection with China in the years to come*.<sup>3</sup> An evidence thereof is apparent through the Russian navy's prominent involvement in the bilateral exercise held early in September 2020 at the Bay of Bengal, as part of an exercise which has been held by the Indian Navy (China's strategic rival) every two years, since 2003, titled INDRA.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Reuters Staff, What's in the U. S.- China Phase 1 trade deal, *Reuters Business News*, January 15, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-china-details-factbox-idUSKBN1ZE2IF>

3 Stanislaw Skarzynski and Daniel Wongls, Putin's Russia Seeking a New Balance Between China and the West? *The Diplomat*, August 28, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/is-putin-russia-seeking-a-new-balance-betwen-china-and-the-west>

4 Abhijnan Rej, Indian and Russian Fleets Begin Exercise in the Bay of Bengal, *The Diplomat*, September 04, 2020. <http://thediplomat.com/2020/09/indian-and-russian-fleets-begin-exercise-in-the-bay-of-bengal>

**The European Union:** Prior to the Corona pandemic breakout, the European Union, newly led by Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, planned to implement a more assertive approach in the Union's relationships with China and the United States. The new approach manifested itself by intensifying technological regulation, a stricter enforcement or implementation of trade and customs rules, and even by intensifying military collaboration between the countries remaining within the European zone. As the Corona virus arrived in Europe, the latter altered its core orientation; rather than fighting against the United States and China in the geopolitical domain, the Union is now focusing upon the struggle against the Corona pandemic.

**The East Med** has been characterized in the past year by rising in the degree of tension between Turkey, striving, in correspondence to the 'Blue Homeland Policy' (Mavi Vatan), to expand its scope of influence, and its domination over the East Med, and Greece and Cyprus.<sup>5</sup> That is manifested through the signing of an internationally controversial agreement, dividing the economic water between herself and the Libyan regime in Tripoli, beginning gas search in the areas between Cyprus and Rhodes, relying upon navy forces, and challenging Greece, its main rival at this context. An ad-hoc coalition of countries, including Greece, Israel, Egypt and Cyprus was established, resisting this activity on Turkey's part. This coalition has avoided carrying out a military confrontation against Turkey, in spite of its opposition toward its activity. Rather, they merely performed joint naval exercises.<sup>6</sup>

**The Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman Area** constituted a sphere of collision between Iran and the United States, Britain and the gulf countries in spring 2019. The event involved damage to tankers carrying petroleum. Both parties were on the verge of an extensive, direct conflict. The United States moderated the tension in the area by temporary ban of direct military response, but set out to dissuade Iran from carrying out its nuclear plan by announcing new sanctions. Apparently, in spite of the rhetoric, neither the United States nor Iran is interested in a true military confrontation. As of summer 2020, both the United States and Iran were struggling against Corona virus breakouts. Hence both parties are less likely to be driven into taking military actions against one another.

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5 Ami Ayalon and Shaul Chorev, the 'East Med' is the crucible for the region's problems, *The Jerusalem Post*, August 24, 2020. <http://euro-sd.com/2020/03/allgemein/16506/military-cooperation-between-israel-greece-and-cyprus>

6 Military Cooperation between Israel, Greece and Cyprus, *European Security & Defense*, March 10, 2020. <https://euro-sd.com/2020/03/allgemein/16506/military-cooperation-/between-israel-greece-and-cyprus>

**The International Relationships and the United Nations' Standing** The Corona pandemic negatively affected the international relations between many countries, intensifying and causing an escalation of diplomatic controversies, resulting in a wide diplomatic tension. Although the United Nations Security Council made a decision entailing a global truce, the matter has not seemed to be supported by the council members, in the practical sense. The diplomatic relations have been significantly affected by the tension related to trade and shipping of medications, diagnostic tests and hospital supplies for the purpose of coping with the Corona virus disease. Leaders of several countries accused other countries for not curbing the disease effectively, causing an uncontrollable spread of the virus. Other accusations came from developing countries in Latin America and Africa, stating they were not able to find a sufficient quantity of materials for testing Corona disease, one reason being that other European countries and the United States were wasting the supplies in discussion.<sup>7</sup>

**The Security Environment** has become all the more complicated because of rapid technological changes occurring global, challenges posed by rivals of all various spheres of action, including the space and cybernetic spheres (The Cybers), as well as computerization and artificial intelligence technologies. For example, based upon media reports, Iran attacked Israel's water infrastructure, and Israel, in turn, responded on 9th May, 2020 by a Cyber attack against infrastructures at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas.<sup>8</sup> Those challenges within the security environment are becoming even more complex at surroundings where the mass media fulfills an important roles, responding within a short time to events taking place anywhere in the world. This progress of communication technology and general accessibility of other technologies empower so-called non-state players, who will exponentially expand their ability to influence people and events, both within the state and global.<sup>9</sup>

**Immigration and Urbanization Phenomena** displayed by some populations add more burden for the countries of destination for the immigrants, as well as a crisis in their civil society. The latter may induce an increased escalation and the development of nationalist regimes in liberal-democratic states. The Syrian civil war has radically changed the Middle East area, resulting in a humanitarian disaster encompassing

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7 Bradley, Jane, In Scramble for Coronavirus Supplies, Rich Countries Push Poor Aside, The New York Times, April 9, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/world/coronavirus-equipment-rich-poor.html>

8 El Jazeera, Israel cyberattack caused 'total disarray' at Iran port: Report, May 19, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/israel-cyberattack-caused-total-disarray-iran-port-report=200519163117789.html>

9 National Intelligence Strategy, of the United States of America 2019. Pp. 4–5. <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/5691327/National-Intelligence-Strategy-2019.pdf>

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more than half a million dead, and millions of refugees who fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Europe, inducing the conditions for the above mentioned occurrences. The immigration to Europe has occurred mainly through the sea, both from Syria (through Turkey) and North Africa, mostly through Libya. Areas where the economic scarcity is harsh, lack of various civil services (water, electricity etc.), climate changes, breakout of infectious diseases, or multi-national crime organizations may be conducive for development of instability isles or Failed States.

**The growing number of "defective" democracies** global arouses the concern of liberal democracy's decline of power. Thomas Ambrosio portrays and explains the burnout of democracy's legitimacy. Russia's rise to power under Putin's rule, and China's, under Xi Jinping's rule signifies a change in the international system's normative structure. Democracy is no longer the dominant paradigm. The authoritarian regimes possess consistently growing Soft and Sharp power<sup>10</sup> to exercise. The rise of right-winged, populist, is also a complementary factor to the dissatisfaction with democracy and the increasing desire of authoritarian government models.<sup>11</sup>

In the **global economy** field, the trend addressed in previous report has continued, namely, a gradual transformation at the Center of Gravity in the geopolitical, economic and geo-strategic fields from the *west toward Eastern Asia*. A new research by McKenzie & Company presents the GDP transition speed toward Eastern Asia. As of 2019, Eastern Asia holds a growing share of trade, capital people, knowledge, transportation, culture and resources. Out of eight global boundary-crossing flow types, only waste flows in the opposite direction, reflecting the decision made by China and the other Asian countries to reduce waste importation from developed countries. Presently, Asia constitutes approximately one-third of world trade in terms of merchandises, compared to a quarter ten years ago. Approximately at the same time, some of the international passengers movement through civilian flight increase from 33% to 40%, and its part within the capital flow raised from 13% to 23%, a change resulting from the increasing importance of this area, being highly significant for global economy's development. If this trend continues, by 2040,

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10 Sharp power is the use of manipulative diplomatic policies by one country to influence and undermine the political system of a target country.

11 Ambrosio, T. (2018). Authoritarian norms in a changing international system. *Politics and Governance*, 6(2), 120–123.



Eastern Asia countries are likely to produce more than fifty per cents of the world GDP, consuming nearly 40% of world's consumption.<sup>12</sup>

World growth is expected to decline by 4.9% in 2020, 1.9 percentage points below the global economy forecast, as of April 2020. The Corona pandemic's negative effect was greater than expected on activity during the first half of 2020. The recovery therefrom is expected to be more gradual than predicted in previous forecasts.<sup>13</sup>

## The Coronavirus Pandemic

In 2020, the above reviewed transformations and challenges were further intensified by Corona pandemic, which has taken millions of lives all over the world. A few political science researchers are questioning whether the pandemic may be considered an Inflection Point in the international relations field. Some argue that economic and medical evolutions have reduced the geopolitical influence of pandemics in past centuries. They state that examining the way in which the new Corona virus has affected the division of power and interest during the first half of 2020 indicates that the Corona virus' effect on global politics will not be a transformative one.<sup>14</sup> Other researchers, on the other hand, indicate that United Nations' Security Council's reluctance to "take charge" of the Corona pandemic, being a so-called "global event", arousing the concern that the escalating crisis may resort to international conflicts. The WHO (World Health Organization), which was supposed to be the "global projector", managing the crisis, has not received any support on the United States' part, which has ceased fiscally supporting the organization even before the crisis broke out. If the Corona crisis continues, it may cause the escalation of economic, social and even political tensions, which may lead more countries to follow the United States, namely, cease their fiscal support of the World Health Organization. Under such a scenario, the United Nations shall remain with limited resources on hand, restricting its ability to undertake the responsibilities entailed by a "global projector", as well as to maintain the steps already taken by the organization in various areas global. Sadly, ceasing fiscal support of such parties

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12 McKenzie & Company, the future of Asia: Asian flows and networks are defining the next phase of Globalization, September 18, 2019. <https://www.mckinsey.com/feature-insights/asai-pacific/the-future-of-asian-flows-and-networks-are-defining-the-next-phase-of-globalization#> [Accessed September 20, 2020].

13 WORLD ECONOMIC UPDATE, June 2020.

14 Daniel W. Drezner, The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After CORONAVIRUS, *International Organization* 74, Supplement 2020, The IO Foundation, 2020, 1–18. <http://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/song-remains-the-same-international-relations-after-covid19/C0FAED193AEBF0B09C5ECA551D174525>

during the Corona pandemic times may serve as a dangerous precedent in global diplomacy and international relations. The same applies not only for the health sectors, but also on other related sectors. At this context, it is noteworthy that aside from the Corona pandemic, the world is still subject to other severe, harsh threats, such as climate changes and hunger. The World Food Program has indicated that by the end of this year, consequently to the Corona virus emergence, the number of individuals facing acute hunger will have doubled, its rate reaching to more than 265 million individuals. Such a regression may also cause improvements that have been already attained in recent years, to dissipate completely.<sup>15</sup> The latter applies particularly to the Paris agreement.

Prior to the pandemic breakout, the volume and value of maritime trade shipping the global supply of food, energy and raw materials, as well as finished products and industrial components constituted more than 108.9 trillion ton/km<sup>2</sup> per year. The latter maritime trade encompassed more than 80% of the global trade's volume, and 60%-70% of the global trade's value. Two million seamen operated the global merchant navy, which rendered maritime transportation essential for the thriving of sustainable development.<sup>16</sup> However, as indicated by the early response to CORONAVIRUS pandemic spread moderation, the actions taken by countries, including travel restriction and border closure, negatively affected the global connectivity as far as all transportation sectors were concerned (continental, maritime and aerial), which, in turn, resulted in disruptions of supply chains and global trade flow (See Figure 2).

Consequently, the availability and supply of essential products, such as food or medications became more complicated, impairing countries' ability to respond to the pandemic and recover therefrom. The seamen community itself, too, suffered the inability to be assigned to ships and get off, mainly due to movement limitations imposed by certain countries, and restricting passenger flights, rendering seamen Corona crisis victims. Tens of thousands of the latter failed to get off the ships on which they had served very long time periods, nor join ships and replace existing

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15 Zaheer Allam, Oil, Health Equipment, and Trade: Revisiting Political Economy and International Relations During the CORONAVIRUS Pandemic, *Surveying the Coronavirus Pandemic, and its Implications*.

16 IMO, Coronavirus (CORONAVIRUS) – Joint Statement on the contribution of international trade and supply chains to a sustainable socio-economic recovery in CORONAVIRUS times, Circular Letter No.4204/Add.31 17 September 2020. <http://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/Documents/COVID%20CL%204204%20adds/Circular%20Letter%20No.4204-Add.31%20Coronavirus-%20Joint%20Statement%20On%20The%20Contribution%20fInternational%20Trade.pdf>

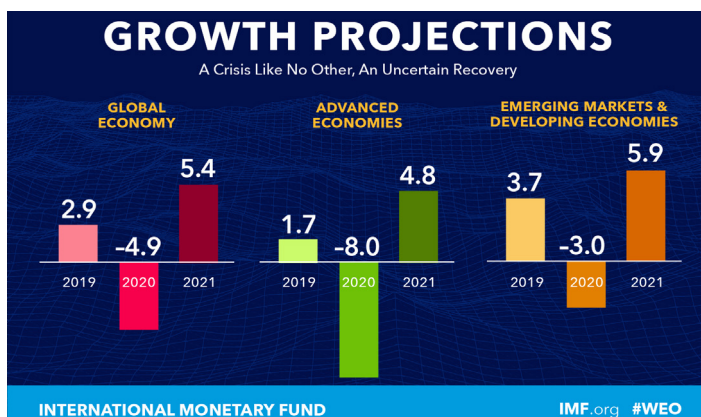


FIGURE 1: Economy Growth Projections, as of June 2020

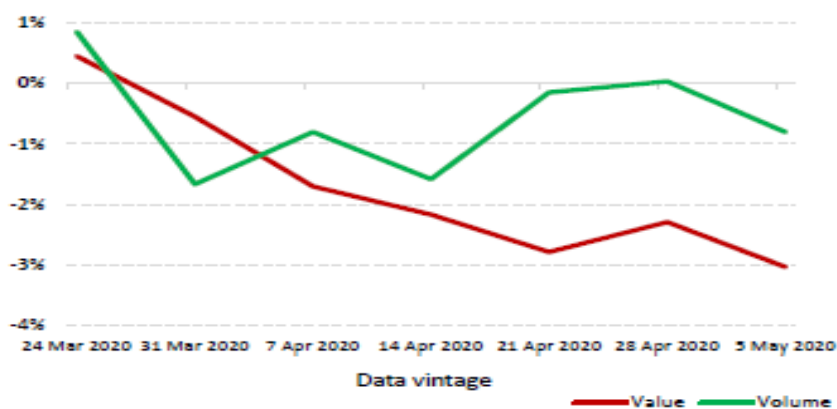
TABLE 1: An Updated Global Economic Growth Forecast (Annual GDP Changes, in Percentage)

(real GDP, annual percent change)	PROJECTIONS		
	2019	2020	2021
<b>World Output</b>	2.9	-4.9	5.4
<b>Advanced Economies</b>	1.7	-8.0	4.8
United States	2.3	-8.0	4.5
Euro Area	1.3	-10.2	6.0
Germany	0.6	-7.8	5.4
France	1.5	-12.5	7.3
Italy	0.3	-12.8	6.3
Spain	2.0	-12.8	6.3
Japan	0.7	-5.8	2.4
United Kingdom	1.4	-10.2	6.3
Canada	1.7	-8.4	4.9
Other Advanced Economies	1.7	-4.8	4.2
<b>Emerging Markets and Developing Economies</b>	3.7	-3.0	5.9
<b>Emerging and Developing Asia</b>	5.5	-0.8	7.4
China	6.1	1.0	8.2
India	4.2	-4.5	6.0
ASEAN-5	4.9	-2.0	6.2
<b>Emerging and Developing Europe</b>	2.1	-5.8	4.3
Russia	1.3	-6.6	4.1
<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b>	0.1	-9.4	3.7
Brazil	1.1	-9.1	3.6
Mexico	-0.3	-10.5	3.3
<b>Middle East and Central Asia</b>	1.0	-4.7	3.3
Saudi Arabia	0.3	-6.8	3.1
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	3.1	-3.2	3.4
Nigeria	2.2	-5.4	2.6
South Africa	0.2	-8.0	3.5
<b>Low-Income Developing Countries</b>	5.2	-1.0	5.2

Source: IMF, *World Economic Outlook Update*, June 2020

Note: For India, data and forecasts are presented on a fiscal year basis, with FY2020/2021 starting in April 2020. India's growth is -4.9 percent in 2020 based on the calendar year.

teams. As of August 2020, it was estimated that more than 300,000 seamen had been required to board or get off merchant ships. The global merchandise trade declined by 17.7% in May 2020, compared to the same month in 2019. The decline within the first five months of this year was widespread, yet affected export from the United States, Japan and European Union particularly. The economic shrink in China was smaller than the global average, since the latter successfully controlled the pandemic breakout, and was relatively swift in re-opening its economy.



Source: UNCTAD calculations

Figure 2: Decline in Trade Scope and Its Fiscal Value Consequently from CORONAVIRUS Pandemic

The CORONAVIRUS pandemic has not passed over *combat fleets*, either, even if some of the effects have remained uncovered, or hidden from the wide public. The media case which has reverberated most due to its command-related implications involved the Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier in March 2020, during an operational sailing. The crew members who were infected with CORONAVIRUS were evacuated, and the ship was called for anchorage at Bay Guam (an island under American patronage in the western Pacific Ocean). The captain, Colonel Brett Crozier, was interested in evacuating most of the ship crew, in order to prevent the pandemic spread, but his supervisors were deterred by the idea. A few days later, the colonel sent an e-mail message to three of his superior officers, and to the remaining seven navy captains, outlining a massive ship evacuation plan, since the virus may have not been tolerated on board. The letter was leaked to the press. On the next day, the fleet instructed to take off most of the crew to shore. Thomas Modly, Deputy United State Navy Secretary, suspended ship captain from its position. Modly's actions were controversial, and his later speech addressing the crew on board Theodore Roosevelt was publicly criticized. Consequently, Modly resigned from his position a

few days later. By mid-April, hundreds of crew members, including Crozier himself tested positive for CORONAVIRUS. One of them passed away. The Committee of Inquiry appointed by the United States Fleet to investigate the event submitted its conclusions on 19th of June, stating the Crozier's decisions in relation to handling the pandemic were erroneous, recommending not to return him to aircraft carrier commanding position.<sup>17</sup>

The United States Navy, which was involved in the struggle against the Coronavirus made its hospital ships USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy available to New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. Mercy left Los Angeles port on 15<sup>th</sup> of May, after having treated only seventy seven patients, who were not infected with Coronavirus. Meanwhile, Comfort return to its home port, namely, Norfolk, Virginia two weeks earlier, having treated 182 patients n New York City. The missions in both cities, and the few patients treated aboard both ships raised again questions concerning the future of those two veteran ships, which are not designated to be replaced by new ships according to the United States Navy Force Construction Plan.<sup>18</sup>

The pandemic affected other fleets' activity as well. For instance, the Royal British Navy postponed the sailing of HMS Queen Elizabeth for training, which was scheduled for early September, because several crew members tested positive for Coronavirus.<sup>19</sup>

## Global Maritime Trade: Key Trends

More than eight per cents of the global trade by volume, and more than seventy per cents of its fiscal values are shipped by sea. Being handled at the different sea ports around the world, the contribution and importance of maritime transportation for global trade and its development, are impossible to overstate. The Seamanship and sea ports constitute the spearhead of globalization, which, in recent decades, have brought about prosperity to consumers and suppliers both in developed and developing countries. Acknowledging the strategic role fulfilled by this sector,

- 17 Schmitt, Eric; Gibbons-Neff, Thomas (19 June 2020). "Navy Inquiry Faults Two Top Officers Aboard Roosevelt for Handling of Virus", *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/us/politics/carrier-roosevelt-coronavirus-crozier.html>
- 18 Gidget Fuentes, Beyond Mercy: Navy's COVID-19 Hospital Ship Missions and the Future of Medicine at Sea, USNI News, May 25, 2020. <http://news.usni.org/2020/05/25/beyond-mercy-navys-covid-19-hospital-ship-missions-and-the-future-of-medicine-at-sea>
- 19 The HMS Queen Elizabeth has postponed sailing from Portsmouth after crew members tested positive for COVID-19, *BBC News*, September 7, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-hampshire-54064886>

all structures addressing sustainable development put emphasis on this sector, perceiving it as a driving force for growth and sustainable development.

Economic growth is clearly linked to the increase in maritime trade. Researches addressing the matter indicated that a one-percent of global economic growth expanded trade scopes by 2.5 per cents.<sup>20</sup>

While the global trade had already slowed time by the Corona pandemic breakout, the economic and social disruptions resulting from the pandemic caused a dramatic decline in trade (Figure 3). The value of international trade in terms of merchandises declined by approximately five per cents in the first quarter of 2020, and is expected to decline further, by 27 per cents in the second quarter of 2020.<sup>21</sup> Figure 4 hereunder presents the substantial decline in the first and second quarters of 2020.

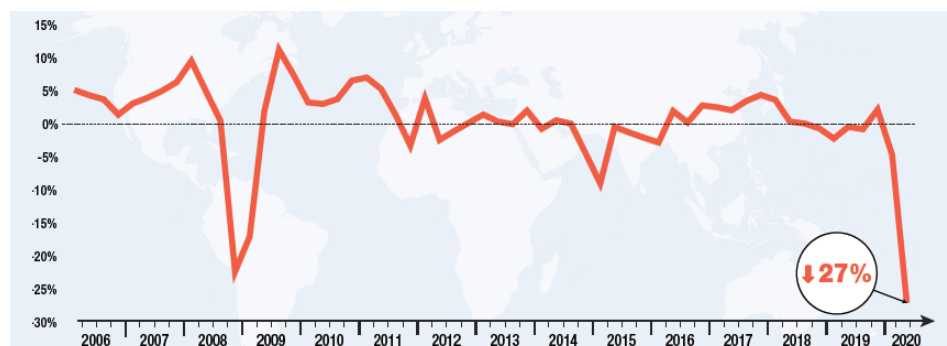


Figure 3: Trade Contraction due to Coronavirus vs. the 2008-9 Economic Crisis

A statistical research conducted in several large economies further emphasizes the dismal situation of international trade. Firstly, the up-to-date trade data indicate further decline in April and May. Secondly, except the first two months of 2020, the data pertaining to *China* indicate that the latter was more successful than other large economies, demonstrated the growth in China's export by three per cents in April 2020. Nonetheless, the other data pertaining to China indicate that such a recovery might be short-term, since import and export declined by approximately eight per cents in May 2020. Additionally, the intra-regional trade seems to have declined by

20 Cristina Constantinescu, Aaditya Mattoo, and Michele Ruta, The Global Trade Slowdown: Cyclical or Structural? IMF Working Paper. 2015 International Monetary Fund, January 2015  
<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2015/wp1506.pdf>

21 Global Trade Trends and short-term forecast, Trade contraction from COVID-19 deeper than the financial crisis, *UNCTAD*, June 20, 2020, P. 2  
[https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcmisc2020d2\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcmisc2020d2_en.pdf)

a significantly lower rate as far as Eastern Asian countries and the Pacific area are concerned. In the European Union, the intra-regional trade declined at a rate similar to that of the general trade. However, the statistical data pertaining to the United States indicate a much substantial decline in intra-regional trade

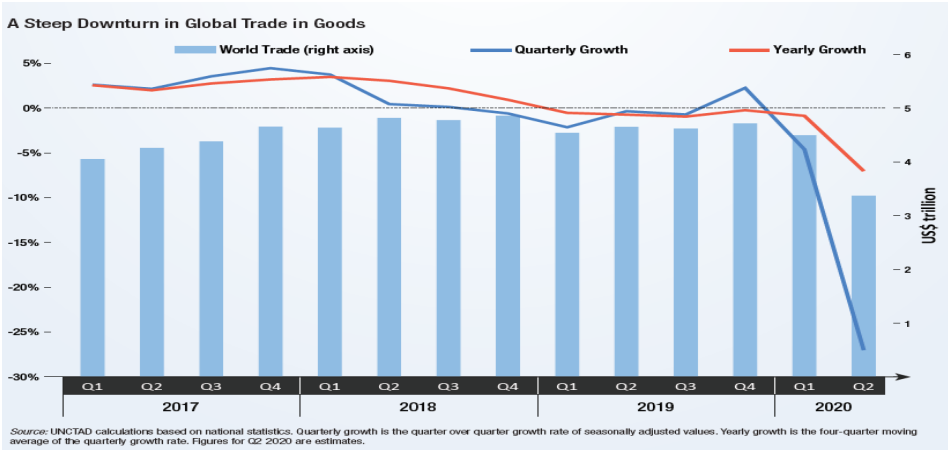


Figure 4: The Substantial Decline in Merchandise Global Trade in the First and Second Quarters of 2020

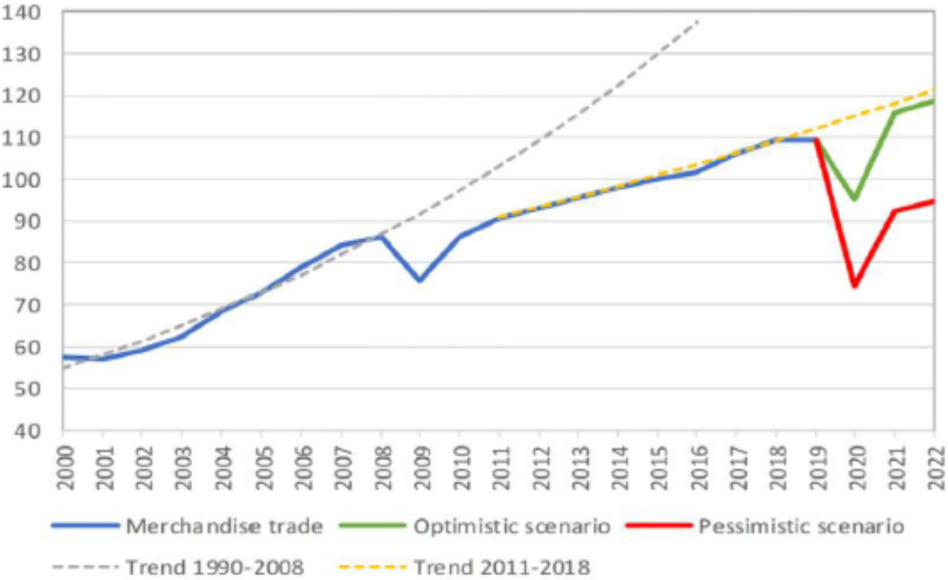


Figure 5: World Trade Volume Declined, Compared to the 2000 Trend (World Merchandise Trade Volume, 2000-2022. Source: WTO)

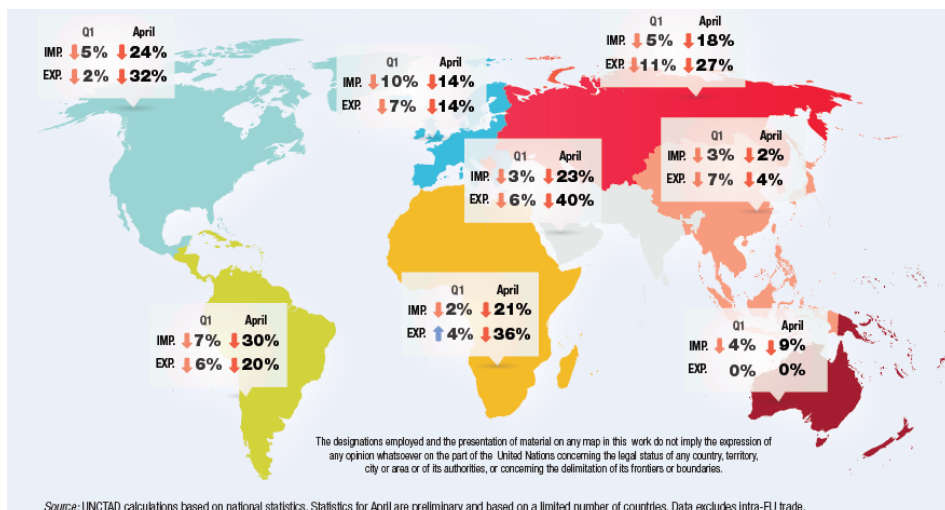
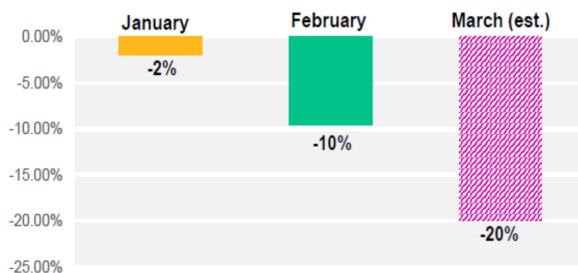


Figure 6: World Trade Decline by Areas



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Figure 7: Change in Container Shipping Volume, 2020

The demand for petroleum and tanker fleet condition: As of late 2019, the worldwide petroleum tanker fleet was of approximately 568 Dead Weight Tons capacity. Despite the increase in manufacturing relying upon alternative energy sources, the fossil fuel is still the main energy source. The completion of new tanker construction, coming from Chinese shipyards will be slightly lower than the previous forecasts. Petroleum product tankers' shipping rates will be negatively affected by the essentially low demand. Nevertheless, the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO) predicts that the average shipping rate per year will be higher than Breakdown Levels.<sup>22</sup>

22 Peter Sand, Shipping in a time of coronavirus, *Windward*, March 19, 2020 <https://wnwd.com/insights/shipping-in-a-time-of-coronavirus>



The termination of collaboration between OPEC (The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) resulted in a dramatic increase of the exportation of fuel from Saudi Arabia. However, the Coronavirus pandemic drastically decreased the global petroleum demand. The forecast states that the global consumption will be reduced within the annual calculation pertaining to 2020, compared to the previous year. The vehicle fuel demand declines, particularly as far as jet fuel is concerned, due to civil volume reduction of civil flights and economic activity during Coronavirus pandemic times.

**Relying upon the fuel tankers as a reservoir for surplus supply during Coronavirus pandemic times:** The imposing of lockdowns during Coronavirus pandemic times, so as to slow the spread of the disease has lowered the global demand of various fuel types by 30 million barrels a day, worsening supply surplus, while the land fuel storage capacity had neared the possible maximum by April 2020. Consequently, fuel manufacturers began using Super Tankers as an alternative means storing their crude oil stock. Such super tankers, possessing the capacity to store approximately two million petroleum barrels, charged a storage fee of more than five dollars per barrel a month, five times higher than the previous year's fee. By late April 2020, the quantity of stored at sea had reached 140-160 million barrels.<sup>23</sup>

**China's Surplus Trade** substantially expanded to 58.93 billion dollars in August 2020, compared to 34.72 billion dollars in the same month of the previous year, and far beyond the market forecast of 505 billion dollars (See Figure 8). The export increased by 9.5 per cents, the most rapid rate since last March, while import surprisingly declined by 2.1 per cents. The surplus trade with the United States in the country escalated to 34.24 billion dollars in August 2020, compared to 32.46 billion dollars in July.<sup>24</sup>

In the global shipping area, the three leading *Flags of Registration* happen to belong to economies that are not key ship owners, such as Panama, Marshall Islands and Liberia. Hong Kong and Singapore follow, placing fourth and fifth, respectively.

Nearly a half of the global tonnage is owned by Asian companies, followed by European and North American owners. China owns the highest rate of ships, yet the Greek and Japanese merchant fleets possess a greater tonnage.

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23 Oil tankers fill up as coronavirus crushes crude demand, Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide, April 30, 2020. <https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/oil-tankers-fill-up-as-coronavirus-crushes-crude-demand>

24 China Balance of Trade, Tradingeconomics <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/balance-of-trade> [Accessed October 3, 2020]

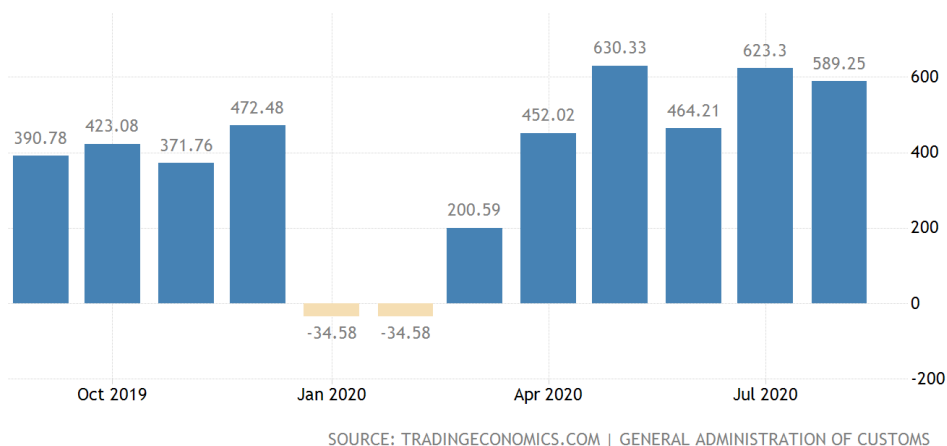


Figure 8: China's Surplus Trade October 2019-July 2020

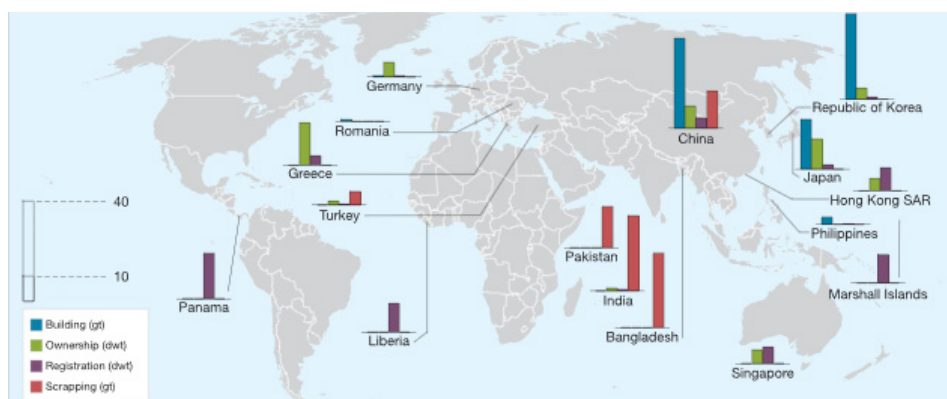


Figure 9: Vessel Building, Vessel Ownership, Vessel Registration and Scrapping by Geographic Area<sup>25</sup>

## New Sailing Passages

In recent years, the desire to deal with the problems related to the presently existing Choke Points has manifested itself by pretentious plans for digging new canals and expanding presently existing canals worldwide. More than two years ago, the expansion of Suez Canal came to a successful completion. Two pretentious digging enterprises remained on the agenda; Nicaragua Canal in Central America and Kra Canal at the center of Thailand. Generally, it may be stated that those two enterprises

25 Sources: UNCTADstat (UNCTAD, 2018a), Clarksons Research. <http://stats.unctad.org/handbook/MaritimeTransport/MerchantFleet.html> [Accessed October 3, 2020]

have not progressed. Apparently, the execution thereof in the near future is not on the agenda.

Kra Canal: Despite the agreement signed between China and Thailand in 2016, concerning a long-term construction project of the Kra Canal, otherwise known as the "Thai Canal", no significant progress has been made on this project. The canal is supposed to cross the Kra area, in the southern part of Thailand, providing a new sailing passage shortening the sailing time from the east to Europe, by bypassing Malacca Straits. In September 2020, the Thai government seemed to look into a continental transportation alternative to the proposed canal, thereby also annulling China's hopes for a strategic alternative to Malacca Strait. Now, Thailand also investigating the establishment of two deep sea ports, as well as a continental connection (a train and a road) between them. If and when this plan materializes, as far as ordinary merchandises will shorten by two to three days the duration of merchandises arrival from East Asia to Bengal Bay, as stated by the Thai Minister of Transportation Saksiam Chidchob.<sup>26</sup>

A matter worth investigation is the establishment of continental logistic corridors, one of which, being applicable for the Middle East, is addressed in an article within this assessment.

## The Passages in the Arctic Oceans

In the past year, and consequently to the expeditious iceberg defrost trend, the use of the Transpolar Passage as from the second half of the century (2050) has come on the agenda (Figure 10). The greatest extent of interest is shown precisely by the Chinese government, who views the passage as an alternative route to its target markets.

The disappearance of the Arctic sea ice, even for one summer, as indicated by the document assessing the Marine Arctic shipping, will cause "the disappearance of perennial sea ice in the middle of the Arctic Ocean".<sup>27</sup>

Such a scenario bears substantial implications on planning, construction and operational standards of all future Arctic marine activity. In the absence, of hard,

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26 Thailand Takes a Step Back from Kra Canal Proposal, The maritime Executive, September 21, 2020. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/thailand-takes-a-step-back-from-kra-canal-proposal>

27 Arctic Council, Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment 2009 Report, Arctic Council Norwegian Chairmanship 2006-2009, P. 34. [https://www.pame.is/images/03\\_Projects/AMSA/AMSA\\_2009\\_report/AMSA\\_2009\\_Report\\_2nd\\_print.pdf](https://www.pame.is/images/03_Projects/AMSA/AMSA_2009_report/AMSA_2009_Report_2nd_print.pdf)

perennial ice, any water refrozen will take the form of seasonal ice, which will be much thinner and possible to pass through. In other words, no nuclear-powered icebreakers will be necessary (with which Russia is presently equipped). In the following decades, in the summertime, there may be a passage through the Arctic Ocean in a regular ship, even if the insurance company and polar code still require icebreaker ships.



Figure 10: The Transpolar Passage – Icebergs' Condition as of Mid-Century (2050)

While most of the world does not approach the climate changes surrounding us with the proper severity, China is the only country preparing for the matter. The world's greatest nation follows the rapid global warming with great interest. Even if humanity ceased emitting all greenhouse gasses, those which had already been emitted into the atmosphere would cause long-years warming effects. Since the world apparently is not doing enough to limit our greenhouse gasses emission, a warmer world is awaiting us, where the arctic ice cover might disappear in the summertime by 2050, or even earlier.

In its arctic policy, published in January 2018, China refers to the Trans-Arctic route as "The Main Passage". China does not address the phenomenon in a dramatic tone, yet in the same matter-of-factly tone typical of the Chinese policy documents: "... the arctic shipping passages include the northeastern passage, the northwestern passage and the main passage". The Chinese Arctic policy also mentions the polar Silk Road, which is often viewed as a synonym to the northern Via Maris. Let it be borne in mind, however, that this policy indicates that China strives to established a

polar silk road, by collaboration with other interested parties, through arctic shipping passages development".<sup>28</sup>

A report issued for the American Congress, updated in September 2020, indicates that the American fleet has issued a series of strategy documents and route maps in recent years, addressing geopolitical and geostrategic aspects in the Arctic area.<sup>29</sup> The last one is a strategic forecast published in January 2019, stating the American Navy shall protect the United States from an attack, maintaining the nation's strategy and its influence in the Arctic area. The marine forces shall act to deter any type of aggression and maintain peace in the area. As for the crises which might break out in the area, the strategy states crises are to be resolved under conditions accepted by the United States, its allies and partners.

The following strategic objectives were assigned for the American Navy in the strategy document published in 2019:

- Protect the American sovereignty and nation from attack.
- Guarantee continued stability and conflict avoidance in the Arctic area.
- Maintain freedom of navigation and navigation
- Promote partnerships of intra-American parties, as well as partnerships with allies and partners to attain the above objectives.

Aside from the thorough reviews given in the Congress' report on the matter, there appears to be no clear policy on the United States' part also converted into the means to be developed through building up the American force for the decades to follow. Also, United States does not seem to acknowledge the area as a potential inter-power struggle area.

As for the environmental influences of sailing through those routes, there is some concern that the ships sailing in the area, continuing the use of the heavy fuel type labeled mazut, will worsen the situation due to emission effects of detrimental nitrogen and sulfur oxides, as well as black carbon particles, which remain longer in a marine environment. Antarctica prohibits the use of heavy fuel, yet this prohibition has not yet been enacted by the International Marine Organization (IMO) in the Arctic area.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Mia Bennett, The Arctic Shipping Route No One's Talking About, *The Maritime Executive*, August 5, 2019. <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-arctic-shipping-route-no-one-s-talking-about>

29 Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress, Updated September 10, 2020, pp. 127–128. <https://gas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41153.pdf>

30 *The Northeast Passage and Northern Sea Route* by Willy Østrem

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## Exclusive Maritime Borders – Contribution and Issues Under Conflict

In relation to the Delimitation of the Maritime Borders between neighboring countries, there is still an ample number of inter-state controversies concerning the exclusive maritime area borders, as well as controversies associated with fishing rights in those areas. The prominent conflict pertaining to the matter, which has by now become an inter-power conflict is taking place in China Southern Sea. The up-to-date review of this conflict's status appears in an article by Dr. Benny Ben Ari, within this report's framework.

In the East Mediterranean area, the following three unresolved crucial controversies have still remained:

1. Northern Cyprus' filed prosecution by Turkey for part of the maritime borders surrounding Cyprus.
2. Turkey's demand from Cyprus and Greece for part of Cyprus' and Greece's exclusive maritime borders (see a chapter in this review outlining Turkey's blue homeland policy). The main conflict between Turkey and Greece is related to the question whether settled islands are entitled to maritime borders. The 1982 maritime convention supports the Greek argument, but full acceptance of Greek demands is rather problematic from the Turkish viewpoint, as its shore in the Mediterranean is long (approximately 1800 kilometers), but a rather limited maritime border area.
3. The Israel-Lebanon Conflict concerning the delimitation of maritime border between both states. In correspondence to the policy document published by HMS on the matter, and the renewed mediation efforts by the American Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Middle East, HMS published several position papers on the matter.<sup>31</sup> The large-scale explosion at the Beirut port on the 4th of August this year, too, made the Lebanese capital vibrate with shock. The explosion, in which hundreds of people were killed, and thousands were injured left more than three hundred thousand people homeless, took place in Lebanon which by then had already collapsed economically, struggling against the Corona pandemic breakout, as well as against the greatest than ever trust gap between the citizens and the states. Apparently, governmental negligence caused the explosion of thousands of kilograms of a volatile chemical, which had been improperly stored at the port for years. If Israel seeks routes to assist the Lebanese nation after the

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31 See Benny Shpanier's research titled Paths of Peace: Inquiring the Conflict of Israel-Lebanon Maritime Border Conflict from the Maritime Law Viewpoint, Heikin Geostrategy Cathedral and the Haifa University Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, July 2019 <https://ch-strategy.hevra.haifa.ac.il/index.php/studies-and-publications/books>

disaster it experienced, this is indeed an important route, which, if successful, will facilitate Lebanese search under water, which may even result in revealing a natural gas field, that might be of assistance to Lebanon in the following years. Even if Israel is obliged to compromise, there is an opportunity not to be missed.<sup>32</sup> This activity does not mar Israel's interest in economic zone regulation. Israel must hold the bull by the horn, namely grab the opportunity to have an attentive mediator for Israel on the one hand, and a window of opportunities in Lebanon on the other hand, and thereby transform a reality which has lasted many years. Another energy rig in the Mediterranean Sea will probably serve both Israel and Lebanon well.<sup>33</sup>

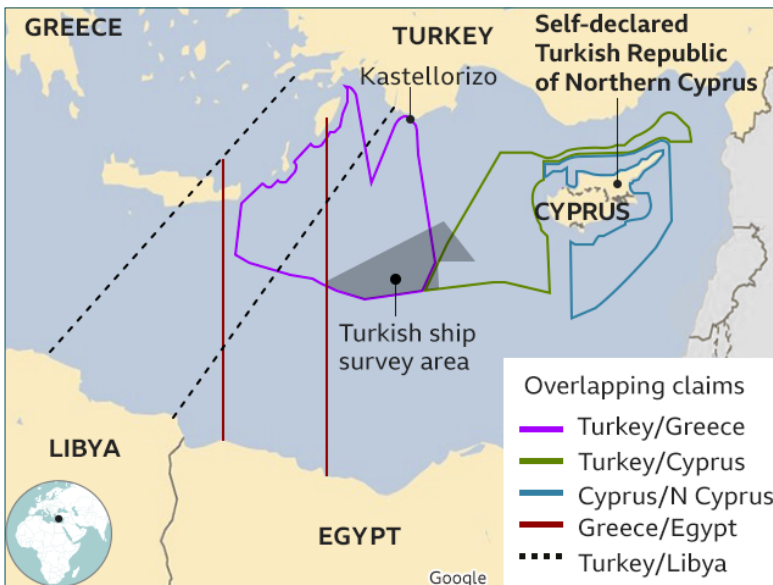


Figure 11: Areas of Conflict at the East Mediterranean, Including the Gas Search Field.

Source: BBC

In October 2020, the spokesperson of Israeli Ministry of Energy published the following message:

Minister Steinitz confirms: Israel and Lebanon shall engage in direct contact with American mediation concerning the economic zone between them ... At a conference which took

32 Shaul Chorev and Benny Shpanier, A Propitious Time Not to be Missed, *Yisrael Hayom*, 14 September 2020. [https://www.israelhayom.co.il/writer\\_articles?tid=134014](https://www.israelhayom.co.il/writer_articles?tid=134014)

33 Pazit Rabina, Experts: Israel May Reach an Agreement with Lebanon Concerning the Marine Border, *Makor Rishon*, 21 September 2020. <https://www.makorishon.co.il/international/266647>

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place about two weeks ago, headed by the Minister of Energy and his senior officers, also involving parties from the offices of the Prime Minister, and Ministries of Law and Defense, Israel's negotiation terms were established. The breakthrough between both countries was documented briefly afterward, during the recent visit of the David Schenker, Assistant Secretary to American Foreign Affairs Minister.<sup>34</sup>

The above mentioned conflicts were further augmented recently by several one-way actions related to the delimitation of East Mediterranean states' economic zones"

1. **The Turkish-Libyan Agreement** which was signed on 27th November 2019, in which Turkey signed with the Libyan Government of National Accord, headed by Faiz Al-Saraj. The agreement outlined an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) between the governments. The delimitation zone is to block the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea at a marine segment divided between those two countries. The agreement aroused extensive protest and many international declarations, mostly by Greece, Egypt and Cyprus, which are damaged by the Turkish-Libyan memorandum, whether directly or indirectly. The Turkish move may transform the rule of play within the East Mediterranean marine area, and will, in fact, do so. The move in question is of geostrategic significance in general, and particularly as far as Israel is concerned, and deserves attention.<sup>35</sup> As for Israel, being considered an "island state", where more than 99% of the trade is maritime (import and export in terms of weight), this is an unreasonable scenario. The fact that the context for the breakout of two of Israel's wars (Operation "Kadesh" and the "Six Days War") was the question concerning the right for freedom of navigation Tiran Straits and Suez Canal, is not to be overlooked. Thus, for instance, the merchant vessel "Bat Galim" was stopped by the Egyptians at Suez Canal in 1954, ignoring the Convention of Constantinople, which had guaranteed free sailing through the route concerned. The State of Israel should realize the new situation that has formed, view the Turkish move a crucial strategic threat and consider prospective ways of action.
2. **The Palestinian Authority's Declaration of its own economic zone:** Prior the United Nation's General Assembly conference in fall 2019, the Palestinian Authority published its marine zone across from Gaza Strip. The publication

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34 Minister Steinitz Confirms: Israel and Lebanon Shall Engage in Direct Contact with American Mediation Concerning the Marine Borders between them, The Ministry of Energy, A Spokesmanship Message, 1 October 2020.  
[https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/press\\_0212020](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/news/press_0212020)

35 For further discussion, see an article by Chorev Shaul and Benny Shpanier, titled This is the Way in Which Turkey Might Block the Mediterranean Sea for Israel, Ynet, 23 December 2019.  
<https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5647292,00.html>



included an outline of the territorial waters, the nearby waters and the exclusive economic zone within 200 marine miles (Figure 12). The publication, signed by the Palestinian Authority's Minister of Foreign Affairs, arranged as commonly acceptable within such declarations, the Authority's rights within each zone. It also includes a long list of the exact border points at sea, as well as the zone's map. Apparently, this publication caught both Egypt and Israel off guard. The Egyptians responded with a message to the United Nations' secretariat on 31st December 2019, where they rejected Palestinian Authority's demand, reasoning that the territories declared are under Egyptian control, according to the Convention on the Law of the Sea. The Egyptians further argued that based upon the maritime law, the zone which the Palestinian Authority claims belongs to the Egyptians, a fact ignored by the publication. Furthermore, part of the area in question has already been divided between Egypt and Cyprus, through an official agreement, as acceptable by the international law. Since the Egyptians are a party with the Convention of the Law of the Sea, as are the Palestinians, the former argue that this is the law in force, and should, therefore be implemented.

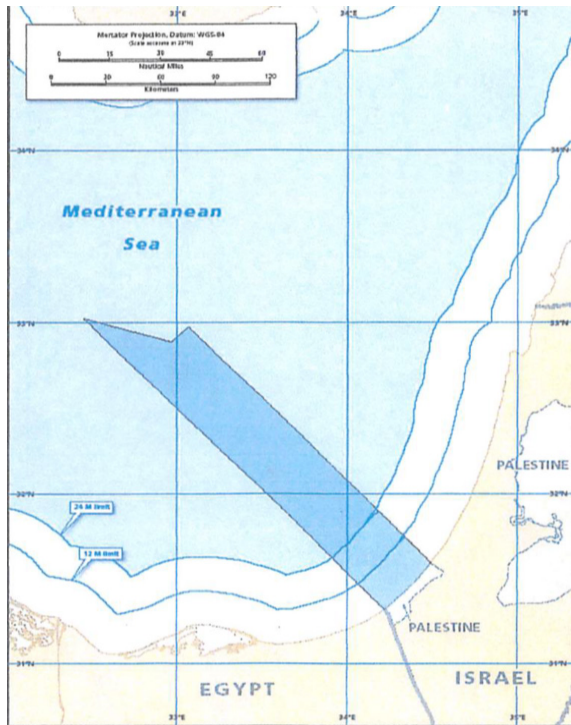


Figure 12: The Palestinian Authority's Declaration of its Economic Waters Zone, September 2019

The response of Israel, which is not a party within the Convention on Law of Sea, as opposed to Egypt and the Palestinian Authority, was delayed by nearly four months, on 14 January 2020. Israel's arguments focus upon the Authority's having no power on hand to declare those zones, since it is not a recognized state entity, according to international law. From the practical viewpoint, this declaration is of no significance, because Israel is the actual dominator of all the waters facing its coasts, including the marine zone facing the Gaza Strip. Hence, in spite of the legal right for which the Palestinian Authority claims, it possesses no practical ability to fulfill the claimed authority.

While Egypt is addressing the issue within the international law's framework, raising legal arguments stating the Convention on the Law of Sea does not permit the Palestinian Authority's move, Israel, which is not a party to the Convention on the Law of Sea, may only raise claims related to lack of power on the Palestinian Authority's part to make the very move. In other words, in this conflict, as well as in other matters perhaps the Israeli and Palestinians do not speak the same language, hence the prospect of resolving the conflict is low.

3. **The Greece-Egypt Agreement:** The Greece-Egypt marine border delimitation, signed on 6<sup>th</sup> August, constitutes a direct counter-reaction on both states' part, to the marine border delimitation agreement between Turkey and the Libyan Government of National Accord, signed on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2019.

## Marine Piracy and Terror

Marine piracy and terror pose a significant threat to sailing safety, human life and life welfare. Additionally, they may damage the inter-state relationship in terms of exit bases located within a given state's territory. Even while writing this report, marine piracy may well be distinguished from marine terrors in terms of attack's nature, attack methods and the means employed, as well as the areas where marine terror acts and marine piracy occur. Although at present there is resemblance between the action methods of both (damaging vessels, marine luggage theft and hostage taking), their goals are different; terrorist actions are underlain by ideological motives, hence they require publication so as to exert psychological pressure on governments and publics, while piracy uses possessions it has captures and hostages for profit purposes only.

Figure 13 hereunder presents all security events occurring in the Arabian Sea, Horn of Africa, Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea, divided into the following sections; terror events, vessel hijacking, mining etc.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, in its report of the first quarter

36 Lydelle Joubert, State of Maritime Piracy 2019, Accessing the Human Cost, *Stable Seas*, July 10, 2020. <https://stableseas.org/publications/state-piracy-2019>

of 2019 the International Maritime Bureau of the Trade Office (IMB) reveals fewer *piracy and armed robbery* events against vessels, compared to the first three months of 2019. In the first quarter of 2019, IMB reported of 38 piracy and armed robbery at sea events, a decline of 28 events, compared to the first quarter of 2018. The report indicates that 27 stowaway episodes occurred; seven vessels experienced shooting episodes, and four cases of attempts to go aboard a vessel and take over were identified. For the first time since the first quarter of 1994, no hijacking of vessel had been reported. The Gulf of Guinea represented a high rate of piracy attacks and armed robbery at sea, with 22 incidents reported during the first quarter of 2019. This is the same area where all global crew kidnapping occurred, of 21 crew members in five different incidents.<sup>37</sup>

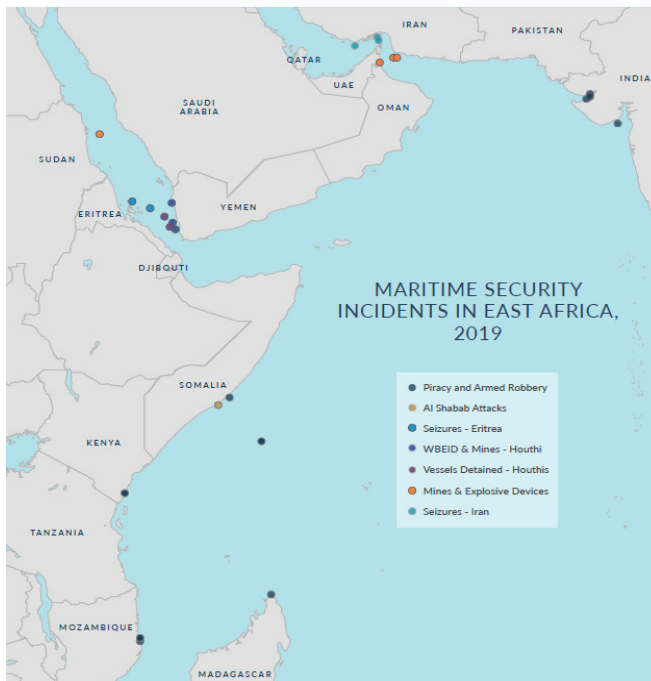


Figure 13: Marine Security Episodes in the Arabian Sea, Horn of Africa, Red Sea and Gulf of Oman in 2019

IMB manager Michael Howlett views combat fleet patrols, security means on board, collaboration, information exchange and information transparency are the key

37 Maritime piracy incidents down in Q1 2019 but kidnapping risk in Gulf of Guinea persists, ICC Commercial Crime Services. <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/maritime-piracy-incidents-q1-2019-kidnapping-risk-gulf-guinea-persists/> [Accessed September 28, 2020]

factors which facilitate the coping with piracy and armed robbery crimes. However, Howlett adds, "the threat on the crew is still real, whether by violent packs or armed, opportunistic thieves who face the crew".<sup>38</sup>



Figure 14: All incidents of piracy and armed robbery against vessels in the first quarter of 2019<sup>39</sup>



Figure 15: Piracy and armed robbery incidents in the first quarter of 2019 – by attack types

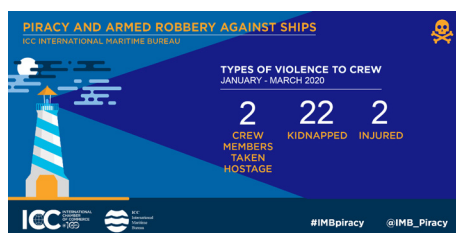


Figure 16: Piracy and terror in the first quarter of 2019 – by types of violence toward crew

Because of the extensive activity occurring at the Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa, initiated by a force acting on behalf of the United Nations, or an independent activity of fleets as the Chinese or the Indian fleets, the data is reassuring. Nonetheless, one case is reported where a Yemenite fishing boat titled "Al-Azham" was hijacked. It served as the mother vessel in that attack on fishing boats on Somalia coasts in April 2019. The joint force acting under the protection of the United Nations (EU NAVFOR) managed to intercept the hijacked fishing boat, arrested the pirates and released the hostages aboard. The hijacking called attention to the fact that the piracy threat outside Somalia had not been wiped out, but merely suppressed.

As for the *economic implications* of piracy and armed robbery, no new data were published in 2018. The 2017 data (Figure 17) suggest an overall economic cost of 1.4 billion dollars, out of which the cost of marine security employment is 292 million

<sup>38</sup> ibid

<sup>39</sup> IOC – Commercial Crime Service. <https://icc-ccs.org/index.php/1259-imb-piracy-report-2018-attacks-multiply-in-the-gulf-of-guinea>

dollars, and the cost of international forces activity engaging in the matter is 199 million dollars (a decline from 228.3 million dollars cost in the previous year).

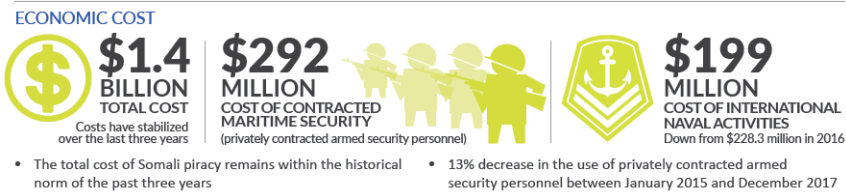


Figure 17: The economic cost of piracy and armed robbery in 2017<sup>40</sup>

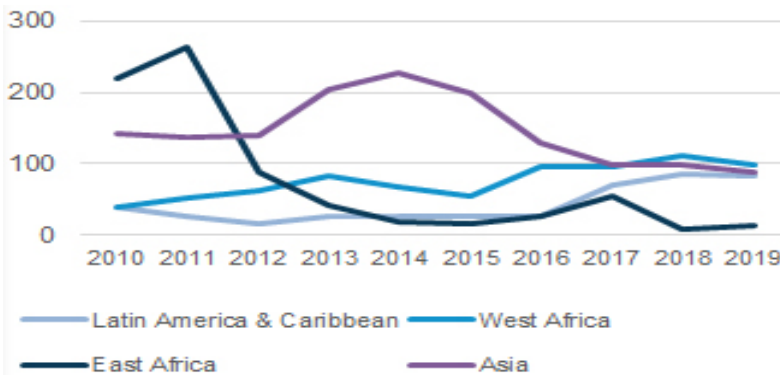


Figure 18: Number of piracy and armed robbery acts on vessels in 2019 by areas<sup>41</sup>

### Maritime Terrorism

Although there is no consensual definition for terror, one of the common definitions is *"the employment or methodical threat to employ acts of violence by an individual or a group so as to induce fear and to terrorize civil population in order to attain political aspirations or goals"*.<sup>42</sup>

The years 2018 and 2019 signified a decline in marine terrorism threats by organizations as Al-Qaeda, which was, among other things responsible for damaging the American battleship USS Cole in the Gulf of Aden in 2000.

40 The State of Maritime Piracy 2017, The Assessing of Economic and Human Cost, Ocean Beyond Piracy, Reducing Violence at Sea

41 <https://www.oneearthfuture.org/news/maritime-piracy-report-constantly-evolving-threat>

42 Senia Febrica, *Maritime Security and Indonesia: Cooperation, Interests, and Strategies*, Oxon, Routledge, 1<sup>st</sup> edition: 2017, p.26

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At the time, Iran managed to expand its influence in Yemen, strengthening the Houthi movement as a threat on the state's local stability, as well as on the sailing routes near Yemen coasts. Iran was extensively assisted by the Houthis, who served as proxies, a position which allowed the former not to assume direct responsibility for the organization's terroristic activity. In the 2019 report, we covered some of the Houthi activities in the Red Sea, including damaging Saudi vessels, both battleships and civil vessels.<sup>43</sup>

Iran has threatened since the moment of revealing its nuclear plan to damage the petroleum transportation from the Persian Gulf in case of attack on its nuclear facilities, or later on, when the United States withdraws, in 2018, from the nuclear agreement, by imposing further sanctions on Iran. The reason for the "tanker war" breakout in May 2019 in the Persian Gulf was, as remembered, the arrest of the Iranian tanker "Stena Impero" in Gibraltar by the British, while it was transporting petroleum to Syria, disobeying the European Union sanctions.

Since the Iranian attacks, American strike forces have occasionally conducted operations for the sake of *freedom of navigation assurance in the Straits of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman*. As of September 2020, a task force consisting of the USS Nimitz (CVN-68) conducted an operational patrol and a passage through the Strait of Hormuz (Transit Passage). The force which operated under the command of the fifth fleet, also included the guided missiles battle cruiser USS Princeton, and the guided missiles battleship USS Sterett, which, additionally to the passage through the Strait of Hormuz also conducted marine drills with regional partners. The Strait of Hormuz passage draws the American vessels to the Iranian area and the threats on the part of the IRGCN navy. The force's activity relied upon the port facilities of the fifth fleet, located in Bahrain.<sup>44</sup>

In the time periods in-between operations of a task force passage through the Straits of Hormuz, the American navy has maintained regular presence outside the Persian Gulf, the Northern Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman since May 2019, when the aircraft Lincoln was called to the region, so as to facilitate a quick American response against Iran.

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43 Maritime Terrorism: A Rising Threat from Al-Qaeda and Iranian Proxies, *European Eye on Radicalization*, May 14, 2019. <https://eeradicalization.com/maritime-terrorism-a-rising-threat-from-al-qaeda-and-iranian-proxies-2>

44 Sam LaGrone, USS Nimitz Now Operating in the Persian Gulf, USNI, September 18, 2020. <https://news.usni.org/2020/09/18/uss-nimitz-now-operating-in-the-persian-gulf>

The purpose underlying Iran's attack of tankers or establish such a threat, is to induce security-related tension in the Persian Gulf and near (the western part of the Indian Ocean), which is geared at raising the transportation costs for key petroleum consumer and to exert international pressure on the United States.

Out of concern lest maritime terror's leaking to the Horn of Africa and Bab-Al-Mandav Strait, the Inter-Governmental Standing Committee on Shipping requested the vessels of the European Union fleet expand their activity to the Horn of Africa, so as to cope with all types of maritime crime in the Indian Ocean, including terrorism, drug smuggling and human trafficking.<sup>45</sup>

*To sum up*, the maritime terrorism has evolved its nature and become a weapon in the hands of Iran as part of its policy against the United States and other western countries, including against various regimes in the region, as Yemen's and Saudi Arabia's regime. The scope of this terrorism depends upon the progress toward problem resolution in the political aspect, or, alternatively, to its worsening. The military solution may facilitate maintaining a low degree of terroristic activity, but not completely eliminate it.

### **Immigration through Marine Routes**

Refugee immigration to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea is not a phenomenon new to this decade. It has taken lives of many thousands of refugees, in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea and reach Europe. However, the refugee movement has substantially intensified in the past decade because of the *refugees of the civil wars in Syria, and African refugees coming from Sub-Sahara countries to Europe, through the coasts of Libya*.

Following the steps taken on the matter by the European Union countries, the flow of refugees arriving through marine routes appears to subside. Overall number of refugees who made their way to Europe in 2020 (as of September 2020) was 55529 people, while in 2019, the number of refugees was 123,663, and 141,472 in 2018. The refugees who arrived to Europe through marine routes by September 2020 (Greece, Italy, Spain, Cyprus and Malta) numbered 51'039, while 4,490 arrived through continental routes. Due to drowning or for another reason, 495 refugees died; in 2019 – 2,277 and 2,277 in 2018. It should be borne in mind that Turkey holds in its territory more than three million refugees of the Syrian civil wars, which

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45 Operation ATALANTA flagship ESPS SANTA MARIA and JS OHNAMI met at sea to conduct a PASSEX in the Gulf of Aden, September 21, 2020. <https://eunavfor.eu/operation-atalanta-flagship-esps-santa-maria-and-js-ohnami-met-at-sea-to-conduct-a-passex-in-the-gulf-of-aden>

were suspected of intentions to continue their journey to Europe. In 2015, the European Union reached an agreement with Turkey in return to a three billion euros payment, and an obligation to renew the European Union membership proposal, in return to assistance in the prevention of refugee fleeing in an attempt to make their way to Europe. The deal, which was agreed in a special European Union summit in Brussels with Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, is a key part of the immigration crisis management.<sup>46</sup> However, in a criticism expressed against Turkish president in October 2019 regarding the entrance of his army to the Kurdish enclave in Syria, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to reopen the routes to immigrants to Europe. That was not his first threat, and it was a response to the global criticism concerning his military operation in the northern part of Syria.<sup>47</sup> This incident implies the fragility of handling the refugee crisis and the cynical use thereof by politicians.

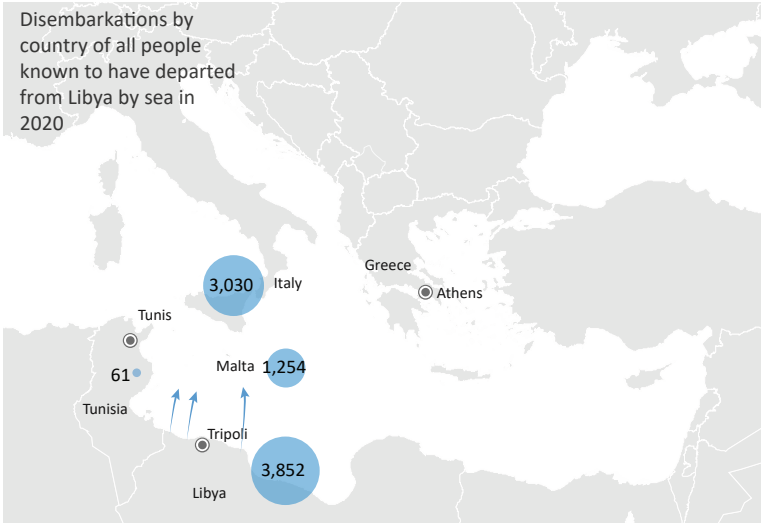
Upon the global recruitment to the struggle against the Coronavirus, many countries in Europe in outside have employed unusual means for their border control, restricting flights and continental movement in their border passages. UNHCR and United Nations' refugee agency called European countries to maintain compassionate work methods, and to multiply their efforts to strengthen the shelter systems in Europe during those rough times. The agency calls European countries to amplify coordination, solidarity and division of responsibility, viewing the movement of refugees and immigrants through the Mediterranean Sea, growing more intense. The refugee agency declared that in spite of the most difficult circumstances faced by many countries due to the Corona pandemic, the protection of life and basic human rights must remain the guiding star within their decision making, emphasizing that marine search and rescue are both a humanitarian duty and a duty dictated by the international law.<sup>48</sup>

46 Leo Cendrowicz, Refugee crisis: EU pays €3bn to Turkey in exchange for help on dealing with European migration, *Independent*, November 29, 2015. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-eu-pays-3bn-to-turkey-in-exchange-for-help-on-dealing-with-european-migration-a6753861.html> [Accessed October 5, 2020]

47 Erdogan threatens to flood Europe with 3.6 million refugees if EU calls Syria operation an 'invasion', *Wn.Co*, October 10, 2019. [https://article.worldnews.com/view/2019/10/10/Erdogan\\_threatens\\_to\\_flood\\_Europe\\_with\\_36\\_million\\_refugees\\_i](https://article.worldnews.com/view/2019/10/10/Erdogan_threatens_to_flood_Europe_with_36_million_refugees_i)

48 News comment on search and rescue in the Central Mediterranean by Gillian Triggs, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, *the UN Refugee Agency*, 1 May 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/5eac53214/news-comment-search-rescue-central-mediterranean-gillian-triggs-assistant.html>





Includes Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 [1999]). The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 19: The number of refugees who left Libya on their way to Europe through marine passages in the first quarter of 2020<sup>49</sup>

Departures from Libya by sea since 2017 (January to May 2020)

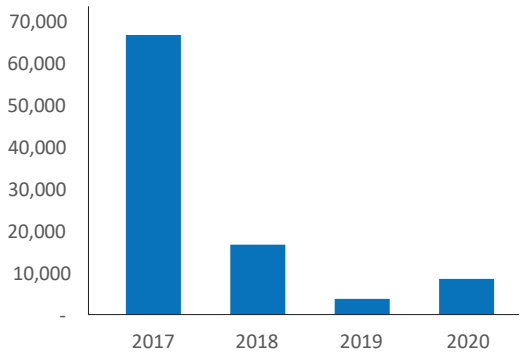


Figure 20: The number of refugees leaving the coasts of Libya through marine passages in 2017-2020<sup>50</sup>

The UNHCR recommended that as for the refugees who managed to leave the coasts of Libya through sea enhancing search and rescue capacity at the central

49 UNHCR, Arrivals to Europe from Libya – May 2020, Regional Bureau for Europe. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77525> [Accessed September 28, 2020]

50 ibid

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Mediterranean, because of the multitude of drowning cases, imploring the patrol forces not to send the captured persons to Libya, which is not a safe place for alighting passengers to the coast.<sup>51</sup> There is doubt as for the responsiveness of the marine forces operating in the region to accept this recommendation.

In light of this situation, the European Union considers the idea of establishing immigrant absorption and screening centers in North Africa, attempting to deter people from going on life-endangering journeys to Europe, through the Mediterranean.

It is important to remember that ceasing the flow of refugees from Libya to the southern Europe countries became apparent after Italy began training the coast guard force of the Libyan Government of National Accord in 2017, and finance its activity. Those forces are train to intercept refugees and stop them even prior to going onto sea, or near the Libyan coasts. In late July, the killing of three youngster was document, after they were intercepted at sea by the Libyan coast guard, whose operation is financed by the European Union. This incident shed light on the fate of ten thousands of immigrants and shelter seekers who returned to Libya to cope with arrest, abuse and torture by the smugglers. The are part of more than 6,200 men, women and children who were intercepted at the central Mediterranean and returned to Libya in 2020. Since 2017, the number of migrants and refugees is around 40,000, and perhaps even more.<sup>52</sup>

## Warfare within the Cybernetic Sphere

The importance of warfare within the cybernetic sphere (both defense and offense) is growing and becoming more intense over time. This is manifested by the development of relevant technological capacities by the various states, and a more frequent employment f those capacities. The maritime sphere and the operation conducted therein are sensitive to this type of warfare, since it is global, border-crossing and demands a high degree of connectivity. Cyber security events occurring within marine infrastructures, such as sea ports of international significance may affect many, broad sectors in the marine trade and transportation activity.

The Iranian port cyber attack in May 2020, which was attributed to Israel by the "Washington Post", and Iran's difficulty to swiftly recover from this attack,

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51 ibid

52 Mat Nashed, what happens to forcibly returned to Libya? The Humanitarian, August 5, 2020. <https://thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/08/05/missing-migrants-Libya-forced-returns-Mediterranean>

demonstrate the significance of highly severe damage within the cybernetic sphere through an activity which does not lead the parties to a broad military conflict, but causes the victim severe damages.<sup>53</sup>

Viewing the matter's importance, the Center for Maritime Policy and Strategy published on its home page two articles on the matter; an article by Itay Sela and Ido Ben Moshe, titled "Cyber Threats on the Port Front" and an article by Ofir Kafri and Dr. Carmela Lutmer, titled "International Collaborations in Cyber Security within the Marine Sphere".

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53 Washington Post: Israel linked to cyberattack on Iranian port, Reuters, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. <https://www.chinadailyasia.com/article/130959>

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## Key Naval Fleets – Trends and Changes

### *Shaul Chorev*

The following is a review of the changes and trends within the world's largest war fleets, compared to the previous report from 2019, focusing upon arenas of action, operation strategy and force establishment plan of each. The review of each fleet will devote a mission-related for its activity within the East Mediterranean, a region constituting the main focus of the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center (HMS).

### The United States Fleet

Prior to reviewing the trends and changes within the world's largest, strongest fleet, it is necessary to address the United States' political and security-related objectives, as phrased by the Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper.

**The United States' Political-Security-related Objectives:** Dr. Mark T. Esper, the 27<sup>th</sup> Secretary of Defense of the United States published the ten emphases he views within the American Ministry of Defense's activity, including, among other things, the following objectives; re-inquiry and approval of all force establishment plans and the operational response against China and Russia; obtaining a higher degree of sustainable preparedness; development of a customized plan for enhancing allies and establishment of partnerships; focusing upon China as the United States' rival; modernization of the force and expanding investment in game-changing technologies; determining joint war games, drills and joint train plans with United States' allies.<sup>1</sup>

In August 2019, the Americans established SPACECOM (The American Space Command), and in December that year, the U.S. Space Force which is, in fact the new combat command, and the first new force of the United States Army since 1947. Their goals are to maintain the freedom of use, trade and navigation in space. Those goals express the acknowledgement of the growing importance of space as a new warfare sphere. In March 2020, a communication satellite was launched as the American Space Force's first national security mission. The United States placed thousands of American soldiers in Saudi Arabia in summer 2019, so as to calm the Saudi people following Iran's attack on their petroleum facilities in September 2019. Simultaneously, the United States reduced its military forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 soldiers, attempting to promote a political solution between the Taliban and the existing government.

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1 US Department of Defense, Implementing the National Defense Strategy: A Year of Successes, July 2020. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/17/2002459291/-1/-1/1/NDS-FIRST-YEAR-ACCOMPLISHMENTS-FINAL.pdf> [Accessed September 20, 2020].

The European Command (EUCOM) attempted a change by placing more than 9,500 American soldiers who were placed on German grounds, by expanding deployment of United States forces to Europe for drills and training. Those actions indicate president Trump's policy for reducing American presence on European grounds, minimizing the budget-related obligation deriving from this presence.

The United States resumed its obligation to maintain freedom of sailing through Freedom of Navigation Operations in conflict areas, including the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman and the South China Sea. As all may recall, an international force consisting of several state was established in September 2019, in order to deter threats on the global trade in the Gulf of Arabia and Gulf of Oman by Iranian marine provocations. It is important to bear in mind that Iran does not acknowledge the Transit Passage in any part of its territorial waters or through the Strait of Hormuz, casting restriction on Innocent Passage in the area as well, one motive being to oppose the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Ending North Korea's Nuclear Plan: A second summit meeting of Trump and Kim Jong Un, which took place in February 2019 in Vietnam, abruptly ended, yielding no deal.<sup>3</sup> Nuclear arms manufacturing by North Korea continued in spite of the aggressive sanctions. A report by the United Nations' experts team, which has not yet been officially published indicates that Pyongyang has probably developed the ability to manufacture smaller nuclear apparels, which may fit its ballistic missiles, also intensifying its nuclear material manufacturing.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, North Korea continued engaging in ballistic missiles with submarine head launching experiments. An institute specifying in researches addressing North Korea's nuclear arms recently analyzed up-to-date satellite photographs of Sinpo shipyard, presenting the experiments raft, serving for underwater experiments of submarine arms development. According to the report, the raft's location at Sinpo shipyard "might signify an approaching underwater experiment, though such launching at a time of typhoon storms seems unlikely". It is estimated that a missile launched from the raft will be limited to a 185-310 mile range, which will not pose any direct threat on the continent of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Farzin Nadimi, Clarifying Freedom of Navigation in the Gulf, The Washington Institute, PolicyWatch 3154, July 24, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3huMdyY>

3 North Korea nuclear summit ends abruptly with no deal, NCB News, February 28, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3rx6QPn>

4 Julia Masterson, UN Experts See North Korean Nuclear Gains, Arms Control Today, Arms Control Association, September 2020. <https://bit.ly/3mUHCan>

5 Hyung-Jin Kim, Seoul: North Korea may conduct underwater-launched missile test, *The Associated Press*, September 17, 2020. <https://bit.ly/38DwSlm>

The United States allocates the world's largest budget to its military forces. Consequently, the American fleet has still possessed the greatest power. The 2021 fleet budget is 207.1 billions of dollars, which reflects no substantial change, compared to the 2020 budget.

### *The Operational Response*

Figure 1 presents, in a bird's eye, the operational response, based upon a planned order of forces consisting of 306 vessels, out of which 101 vessels in active field duty by the various worldwide operational arenas.

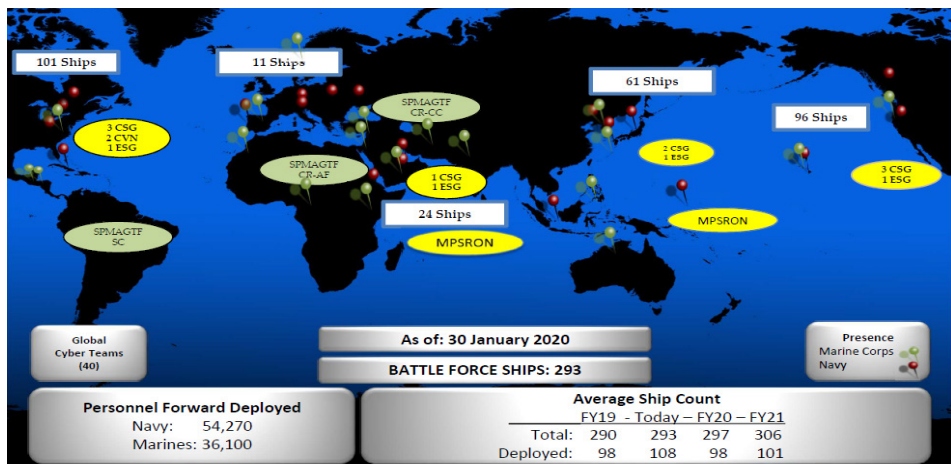


Figure 1: The United States Fleet Operational Response, 2021<sup>6</sup>

The emphasis for 2021 – All Domain Dominance:

- Prioritization, reinforcement and renewal of nuclear deterrence, so as to assure timely supply of next generation's submarines, Columbia model.
- Continued enhancement of military preparedness to provide the United States with a well-prepared, trained force.
- Lethal force supply, through a greater extent of investment in navy modernization and crucial technologies.
- Focusing upon enablers and dominance in all conflict spheres; sea, air, land, cyber, secure communication, awareness of combat arena within space and establishment of an integrated fire force.

6 Department of the Navy FY 2021 President's Budget. [https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/DON\\_Press\\_Brief.pdf](https://www.secnav.navy.mil/fmc/fmb/Documents/21pres/DON_Press_Brief.pdf) [Accessed September 21, 2020].

- Prioritization of more "capable" platforms over less capable legacy platforms, rapidly responding to the changing threat.
- Adapting the response to the national defense strategy (NDS), geared at great power competition.

In the United States' navy's force establishment (Table 1), the number of new vessels entering the ordered force (8) is smaller than it was in previous years (12 in 2020 and 2019). Based upon this force establishment plan, apparently the navy will face difficulties while attempting to reach the goal it established in terms of vessels number (355). Plus, in order to withstand this objective, the navy will be required to include the unmanned vessels, which will be integrated into operational service within the following years. In the 2021 budget year, the navy plans on extending its vessels ordered force from 297 to 306, out of which, 101 will be operationally deployed.

Table 1: American Navy's Force Establishment Plan

Battle Force Ships (SCN)	FY20			
	FY19	PB20	Enacted	PB21
Columbia Class Submarine (SSBN 826)	AP	AP	AP	1
Ford Class Aircraft Carrier (CVN 78)	0	1	1	0
Virginia Class Submarine (SSN 774)	2	3	2	1
Arleigh Burke Class Destroyer (DDG 51)	3	3	3	2
Freedom/Independence Class Littoral Combat Ship (LCS 1/2)	3	0	0	0
Guided Missile Frigate (FFG (X))	0	1	1	1
America Class Amphibious Assault Ship (LHA 6)	AP	0	*	0
San Antonio Class Amphibious Transport Dock (LPD 17) (Flight II)	AP	AP	*	1
Lewis B. Puller Class Expeditionary Sea Base (ESB 3)	1	0	0	0
Spearhead Class Expeditionary Fast Transport (EPF 1)	1	0	1	0
John Lewis Class Fleet Replenishment Oiler (T-AO 205)	2	2	2	0
Navajo Class Towing, Salvage, and Rescue Ship (T-ATS 6)	1	2	2	2
<b>New Construction Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>8</b>

Table 2: Plan of Research, Development, Experiments and Operational Assessment for Unmanned Vessels

Unmanned (RDTE,N)	FY20			
	FY19	PB20	Enacted	PB21
Medium Unmanned Surface Vehicle	1	0	0	0
Large Unmanned Surface Vessel	0	2	2	2
Extra Large Unmanned Undersea Vehicle (XLUUV)	5	0	0	0
<b>Unmanned Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

The Corona pandemic might also affect the pace of American order of battle. A report submitted to the Congress indicates that all American Navy's vessel construction plans, including those of the coast guard's may be affected by the Corona pandemic.

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The report specifically indicates the Columbia SSBN (ballistic missile submarine, due to the plan's high priority (namely, navy's top priority). The plan's tight schedule for the planning and construction of the first submarine in the series implies the threat on the submarine's first operationality date, which is due in 2031. According to the report, any postponement in the initial operationality will bear severe ramification on United States' Strategic Nuclear Deterrence Posture.<sup>7</sup>

The Corona pandemic also resulted in American Navy's battleships' haul deployment records. According to American Navy's message to the press, the USS Stout deployed at sea 208 consecutive days, breaking San Jacinto patrol vessel's deployment haul time, as well as USS Dwight D. Eisenhower's haul time.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Navy's Operation in the East Mediterranean***

Since President Obama's 2012 declaration of "Pivot to Asia Policy", the American Navy's operation in the East Mediterranean has considerably reduced. It is also noteworthy that since the United States decreased its dependence upon petroleum coming from the Middle East area, the area's geo-economic and geo-political significance has been substantially declined in the eyes of the United States. This is well demonstrated by the United States' lack of military-marine involvement in the tension between Turkey and Greece in summer 2020. United States did nothing but sending the logistic vessel USS Hershel Woody Williams, which arrived at the Gulf of Souda, Crete, an activity erroneously perceived by the media as a mission aimed at watching over the worsening tension between NATO ally members, Greece and Turkey, because of energy right in the East Mediterranean. The Sixth fleet spokesman rushed to amend the interpretation given, stating: "The vessel arrived to provide pre-planned logistic support, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August joined pre-planned trainings with regional forces."<sup>9</sup> This declaration implies that the United States, through the Sixth Fleet, bears no pretensions to serve as an influential party within the events occurring in the East Mediterranean. In this sense, President Trump's policy is not different than that of his predecessor Obama. Rather, in some senses, its trend have even been intensified.

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7 Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress, COVID-19, Impact on Shipbuilding Programs, September 17, 2020, pp. 26-27. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32665>

8 Mallory Shelbourne, Destroyers USS Stout, USS Kidd Wrap Up Long-Haul Deployments, *USNI News*, September 29, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2KLx13V>

9 Megan Eckstein, USS Hershel 'Woody' Williams In Eastern Mediterranean for Training as Greece-Turkey Tensions Continue, *USNI News*, August 20, 2020. <https://bit.ly/37ypdeP>



The leaving commander of the United States marine forces in the Mediterranean Sea and North Africa, Admiral James Foggo, who terminated his position early in September 2020, made the following statement at an Internet conference: "The East Mediterranean has become one of the world's most kinetic regions", further stating: "We must come up with a new strategy which will facilitate our progress within this geo-strategic scene, which is becoming all the more complex".<sup>10</sup> This is undoubtedly an accurate observation, but apparently will not influence the decision makers in Washington. For instance, the Sixth Fleet, which traditionally operated in the Mediterranean area, was assigned for new missions this year. In May 2020, for the first time since the 1980's, had operated at the Sea of Barents, west to the coast of Norway.<sup>11</sup>

Although the United States does not employ the political dimension of the maritime strategy in the East Mediterranean (employing marine forces for political purposes), she does employ other political tools so as to maintain its standing as a super-power in the East Mediterranean. For example, the United States lifted for one year the embargo she cast on Cyprus in 1987, aimed at preventing an arming campaign, which will delay the United Nations' efforts toward merging Cyprus. As a matter of fact, the embargo was cast on the southern, Cypriot-Greek part of the island, the abode of the international government commonly recognized in Cyprus. So as not to upset the Turkish, Washington announced the lifting of the embargo for one year, with a renewal option, to allow Cyprus purchase non-lethal equipment. United States ambassador to Cyprus announced that the United States would continue encouraging the Cypriot governmental authorities to rebuke fueling services provided to the Russian navy in Cyprus, viewing the position inducing non-stability in the region.<sup>12</sup>

### **People Liberation Army Navy – PLAN (The Chinese Navy)**

The growing importance of the Chinese marine interests, which have already been reported in the previous assessments, has caused the Chinese navy to keep on increasing the frequency of its operations, their duration and their distance from

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10 Lenny Weston, Russia turning eastern Mediterranean into a militarized hot spot, Navy's Foggo says, Stars and Stripes, June 24, 2020.

11 Thomas Nilsen, U. S. Sixth Fleet enters the Barents Sea with missile defense destroyer, The Barents Observer, May 4, 2020. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en-security/2020/05/us-sixth-fleet-enters-barents-sea>

12 Diego Cupolo, US officials say partial lift of Cyprus arms embargo not related to Turkish-Greek tensions, AI Monitor, September 2, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3hlg2lr>

China.<sup>13</sup> This activity corresponds to the emphasis put on sea by the White Paper, the strategic document published by China in May 2015, titled "Defense at the Open Sea".<sup>14</sup>

In another document, published in July 2019, China presents the role of her armed forces as follows: "In defending important waters, islands and reefs within the eastern Sea of China, southern Sea of China and the Yellow Sea. The forces have acquired full situation awareness of the nearby waters, perform actions to defend common rights and law enforcement, properly handle marine and air situations and respond with resolution to security threats, violations and provocations at sea".<sup>15</sup>

As stated, China does not provide data related to its defense budget, including the Chinese navy empowerment budget (Table 5 whose origin is SPIRI Institute indicating a 261 billion dollars). As for maintaining China's interests overseas, the document indicates as follows:

Maintaining Chinese interests beyond its boundaries, constitutes an important part of China's national interests. One of the missions faced by China's armed forces is to efficiently defend the safety and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens, as well as Chinese organizations and institutes overseas. For that purpose, China establishes marine forces, develops logistic facilities overseas and enhances its capability in performing various military tasks.<sup>16</sup>

The report for the American Congress from August 2020, titled China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities), addresses several topics related to the Chinese navy's gaining power and its operational strategy:<sup>17</sup>

- The effort has been going on over 25 years, since the beginning of the mid-1990's, turning the Chinese navy into a much more modern force, possessing new capabilities.

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13 Ronald O'Rourke, China Naval Modernization: Implications for U. S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), August.

<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33453.pdf>

14 Blasko, J. Dennis, "The 2015 Chinese Defense, White Paper on Strategy in Perspective: Maritime Missions Require a Change in the PLA Mindset. The Jamestown Foundation, May 29, 2015.

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/556c27634.html>

15 Andrew S. Erickson, Full Text of 2019 Defense White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (English & Chinese Versions), The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, First Edition 2019, July 2019 July 24, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2KXk6fF>

16 Ibid.

17 China Naval Modernization: Implications for U. S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress Updated, October 2, 2019, Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/227>.

- The navy has conducted a growing number of operations in farther waters, including wider water regions of the western Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and nearby waters, on the way to Europe. The Chinese navy is undoubtedly the largest of all Asian countries' navies. Plus, in recent years, the number of its battleship exceeds that of the American navy's.
- Several American observers express concern with the vessel construction rate at the Chinese navy, particularly with the construction of larger vessels, which may result in interruption of the balance between the Chinese navy's relative size and the United States navy.
- The Office Net Assessment, a branch of the American Ministry of Defense states that by late 2020, China will have possessed a battle marine force of 360 vessels, compared to an estimated total of 297 vessels for the American navy at the same time. Plus, this rate will have increased to 400 vessels by 2025 and 425 by 2030.
- The Chinese navy's vessels, planes and its arms systems are growing more modern, possessing greater capabilities compared to those they possessed in the early 1990. Now, they are similar in capabilities of many other western navies.
- China's maritime modernization effort encompasses a wide variety of plans to purchase platform and arms, including ASMB (anti-ship ballistic missiles), ACSM (anti-ship cruise missiles), submarines, field vessels, airplanes, unmanned vessels and command and support of command and control, communication, computer, intelligence, monitoring and patrol systems.
- China's marine modernization effort also includes enhancement in maintenance and logistics, doctrine, manpower quality, education, training and drills. In many cases, the material quality is comparable to that of the American navy's. China quickly catches up in all aspects.<sup>18</sup>
- The Chinese navy is considered a great challenge for the American navy's capability, since the Chinese navy's goal was to attain control and maintain it during war at "blue waters" regions in the western Pacific Ocean, an unprecedented challenge for the American navy since the end of the Cold War at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. China's navy poses the greatest challenge at present for the United States' long-standing position as a leading military power in the western Pacific Ocean.

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18 Unclassified ONI information paper prepared for Senate Armed Services Committee, subject "UPDATED China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U. S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030m" February 2020, p. 3. Provided by Senate Armed Services Committee to CRS and CBO on March 4, 2020, and used in this CRS report with the committee's permission.

- China's military modernization effort is also aimed at developing military capacities for a prospective military war campaign against Taiwan, when necessary, in order to attain a greater degree of control on China's near marine area, particularly southern Sea of China, as well as in order to impose China's view stating the latter has the right to arrange foreign military operations in its EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone), laying up to 200 miles from its coasts;<sup>19</sup> for China's defense through SLOC (Sea Lines of Communication), particularly those connecting China to the Persian Gulf; for annulling United States' influence in the western Pacific Ocean, and to clarify China's standing as a leading regional power and a global center of power.<sup>20</sup>
- China is interested in her navy's becoming part of operations aiming at area denial/anti-access, capable of deterring the United States' intervention in a conflict in the near sea area of China, surrounding Taiwan, or any other similar outline (Figure 2). Other missions for China's navy include maritime security operation against piracy, evacuation of Chinese citizens from foreign countries if necessary and humanitarian assistance (HA) or disaster response (DR) operations.
- Until recently, China's maritime modernization effort has appeared to be less focused upon expanding the general platform size (namely, vessels and aircraft), but more focused upon increasing the number of quality vessels. However, apparently it seems as though emphasis has been put upon the Chinese navy's order of force's size, its composition, quantity and quality of the manpower serving it.
- Although China's marine modernization effort has considerably enhanced China's capabilities in recent years, the present navy is estimated as possessing limitations and weaknesses in certain aspects, including joint operations with others. There is no doubt that the Chinese navy vessels are still inferior in terms of their capabilities, compared to those possessed by the United States navy, but over time, this gap drawing nearer and nearer to a close.
- The main gaps identified in the Chinese navy are' anti-submarine warfare (ASW), long-term focus, limited ability for reverse logistics at sea for battleships operating away from their home ports;<sup>21</sup> the capability of training a multitude

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19 For additional discussion, see CRS Report R42784, U. S. – China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress, by Ronald O'Rourke.

20 Roderick Lee, "The PLA Navy's ZHANLAN Training Series: Supporting Offensive Strike on the High Seas," China Brief, April 13, 2020.

21 Will Mackenzie, Commentary: It is the Logistics, China, National Defense, June 10, 2020.

of crew members for the new vessels;<sup>22</sup> lack of recent combat experience. China is acting toward minimizing or overcoming such limitations and weaknesses, but there should be no room for misbelief that the navy in its current state is capable of carrying out missions that are of interests to the leaders of China. The more its capabilities improve, so will the variety of missions the navy is capable of carrying out.

Aside from the Chinese navy's modernization, China has substantially expanded its coasts guard which is, undoubtedly the largest of all coast guards in Eastern Asian countries. China also operates a prominent marine militia, consisting of a multitude of fishing boats. China mainly relies upon its marine militia and coasts guard in order to lay its marine claims at its nearest sea and defend them, while the navy operates beyond the horizon, as a potential backup force.

Table 3: Number of Chinese Navy's Battleships in the Years 2000-2030<sup>23</sup>

Figures include both less-capable older units and more-capable newer units

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	3	4	4	6	8
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	5	4	5	6	7	10	13
Diesel attack submarines	56	56	48	53	55	55	55
Aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers	19	25	25	26	43	55	65
Frigates, corvettes	38	43	50	74	102	120	135
<b>Total China navy battle force ships, including types not shown above</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>425</b>
<b>Total U.S. Navy battle force ships</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>297</b>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>

**Source:** Table prepared by CRS. Source for China's navy: Unclassified ONI information paper prepared for Senate Armed Services Committee, subject "UPDATED China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U.S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030," February 2020, 4 pp. Provided by Senate Armed Services Committee to CRS and CBO on March 4, 2020, and used in this CRS report with the committee's permission. Figures are for end of calendar year. Source for figures for U.S. Navy: U.S. Navy data; figures are for end of fiscal year.

**Note:** n/a means not available.

In 2019, China recognized the need of its armed force to fulfill a more active role in *promoting its foreign policy*, emphasizing the global nature, growing more prominent, attributed by Beijing to its military force.<sup>24</sup> In recent years. The Chinese

22 Minnie Chan, China's Navy Goes Back to Work on Big Ambitions but Long-Terms Gaps Remain, *South China Morning post*, August 22, 2020

23 China Naval Modernization: Implications for U. S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, Updated September, 2020, P.31. <http://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/243>

24 *Ibid* v

Communist party leaders instructed the Chinese army to enhance its operational preparedness level. The latter instruction was manifested by expanding the scope of army drills and their complexity.<sup>25</sup> One example for that may be found in the Chinese navy's operation in late 2019 in the Gulf of Oman and Sea of Arabia area. The marine maneuvering, shared by China's, Russia's and Iran's navies which was conducted in late 2019 in the Gulf of Oman took place at a time when the United States was attempting to escalate the sanctions against Iran, constituting a significant affront against the former.<sup>26</sup>

China demonstrates a multi-layered defense approach regarding its coasts, including diverse means, from continental ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, attack aircraft, to various vessels operating in subordination to three theaters; north, center and south (Figure 2). This view greatly depends upon a command, control and monitoring system to gather the data for the three regional theaters. In the other half of the 2000's, China executed an information revolution associated with this challenge. In the opinion of Erickson & Chase, who inquired this matter in 2011, China's leaders perceive their state as facing with a strategic setting where "the military competition is based upon intensifying informatization". The navy strives for increased automation and linking of data between a large number of new space systems for navigation, sensation and communication, as well as anti-satellite capabilities. This system faces two main dilemmas:<sup>27</sup>

1. Balancing attack-defense within information warfare.
2. Centralization vs. decentralization

Erickson and Chase indicate that the experience from other fleets suggests that when the connectivity increases, the centralization will increase more concretely. The question being raised is, will the Chinese navy employ its enhanced C4ISR capabilities in order to move the information down, to lower ranks, thereby empower junior commanders to make decisions? Or, alternatively, attempt to leverage new ISR

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25 Ibid viii

26 For further reference on the matter see Ido Gilad's article at the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, 'The Increasing Presence of Foreign Fleets at the Arabian Sea', 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020, p. 4. <https://hms.haifa.ac.il/index.php/he/component/content/article/24-2018-10-29-11-11-06/190-ido-gilad-incasing-the-presence-of-foreign-fleets-in-the-arabian-sea?Itemid=108>

27 Andrew S. Erickson and Michael S. Chase Informatization and the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy, in Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-dzu Yang, eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, CD: Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2011, Chapter 10. [http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Erickson-Chase\\_PLAN-Informatization\\_NDU\\_2011.pdf](http://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Erickson-Chase_PLAN-Informatization_NDU_2011.pdf)

capabilities and an increasingly growing communication capability, thereby further enhancing centralized C2 in the higher ranks? Apparently, the latter possibility is more fitting to the Chinese army's present approach. Such approach may serve well area denial operation, but not "blue water" far away from China, where commanders are required to possess an ability to construct an independent maritime picture and independent thinking.

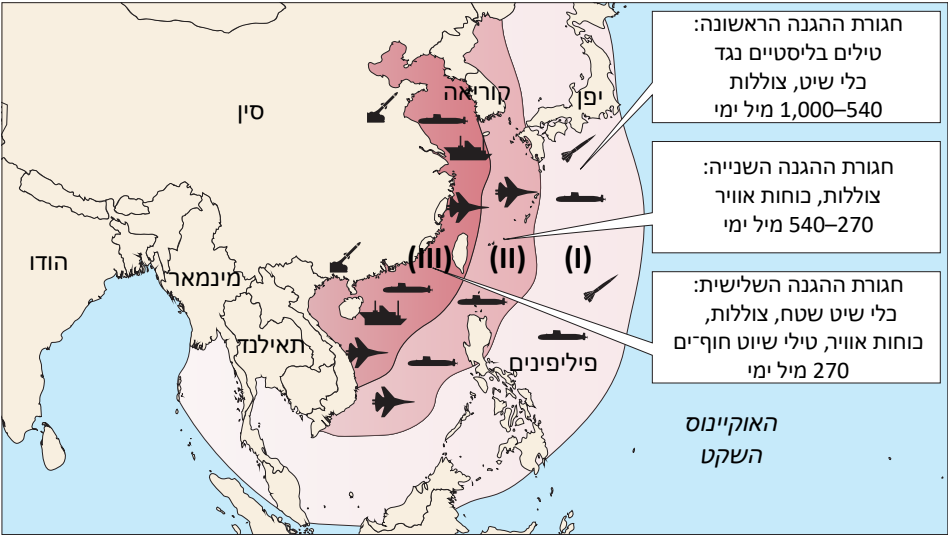


Figure 2: The Chinese Navy's Set of Forces and Means for Fulfilling the Strategy of Anti-access/area denial in the south China Sea

**China's Operation in the East Mediterranean Sea:** In the past decade, China has intensified its involvement in the Middle East and in the East Mediterranean Sea, using its so-called full wallet, so as to guarantee influence on key allies in the region as a means to promote its global aspirations. In early 2020, Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry announced that Cairo would continue its collaboration within the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing China's economic grant as a key factor to the Egyptian interest in enhancing the mutual collaboration. By then, the Greek port of Piraeus had become the main gate to central and southeastern Europe. The investment by Chinese maritime company COSCO in the Piraeus port had increased the port's container output to 4.9 million TEU in 2018. Consequently, Piraeus became the second largest port in the Mediterranean Sea, and the 36<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of size. This port's performance allowed COSCO company attain a 51% ownership at first, and later on, expand its port ownership to 100%. COSCO company has continued purchasing shares in the Zeebrugge (85%) and Valencia \*51%) port

terminals, as well as over 35% of the Bilboa and Vado Ligure, Italy facilities. In light of the above described situation, United States' ambassador to Greece, Geoffrey Pyatt warned the Greek government that he hoped the planned privatization of the Alexandroupoli port would attract American or European investors, rather than Chinese or Russian ones. In spite of the intensifying activity and the Chinese influence in the East Mediterranean region, no deployments or drills by the Chinese fleet took place in the region in 2020.



Figure 3: Division of Chinese Navy's battleships for the defense of China by the various theaters<sup>28</sup>

## The Indian Fleet

In the past two decades, the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region has consistently increased, because of the global economic activity's expansion. A matter

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Brimelow, What newly released pentagon maps reveal about China's growing military reach, Business Insider India, September 13, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/new-pentagon-maps-show-chinas-increasing-military-power-and-reach-2020-9>



manifesting itself also by the economic center of gravity migrating eastward, and the social mobility occurring therein. This situation is a consequence of widespread trade in the region, and a growing need for providing the countries in the region and its citizens with maritime security. The region is becoming the global trade and energy supply center. Two-thirds of the global container trade passes through this region; both rising economies, India and China, as well as Japan's highly developed economy are dependent upon the sea routes in the Indo-Pacific region for purposes of trade and energy supply. Aside from the piracy threat, the security within those sea routes is important, since both important choke points, namely Bab-Al-Mandab and Malacca Strait are located on both ends of the region. Plus, this region is the home of more than 50% of the world's population, and is known to be rich in marine resources and minerals.

The region's significance does not rule out various viewpoints relating thereto. India views the region as a comprehensive, open, integrated and balanced sphere. It constantly emphasizes strategic relationships, as well as common challenges and opportunities between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Oceans. The United States, on the other hand, views this area a place which must be free and open, emphasizing the importance of rules or behavioral norms in the region, thereby attempting to contain China's role within the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations – Asean – perceives the region as a political system which was established through collaboration of various social groups, particularly consociations, based upon common power, thereby bringing China into the area, not only to fulfill certain interests, but also seeking ways for collaboration with it in the region.

Table 4: Indian Fleet's Modernization Budget (70.5 rupee = 1 dollar)

Modernisation Head	2019-20 (BE) (Rs in Crore)	2019-20 (RE) (Rs in Crore)	2020-21 (BE) (Rs in Crore)	% Increase in 2020-21 (BE) over 2019-20 (BE)
Aircraft & Aero-Engine	2,400	1,150	4,640	93.3
Heavy & Medium Vehicles	45	25	30	-33.3
Other Equipment	3,500	3,600	3,000	-14.3
Joint Staff	929	929	1,022	10.0
Naval Fleet	12,182	15,434	12,746	4.6
Naval Dockyard/Projects	3,050	4,017	4,182	37.1
Total	22,106	25,155	25,620	15.9

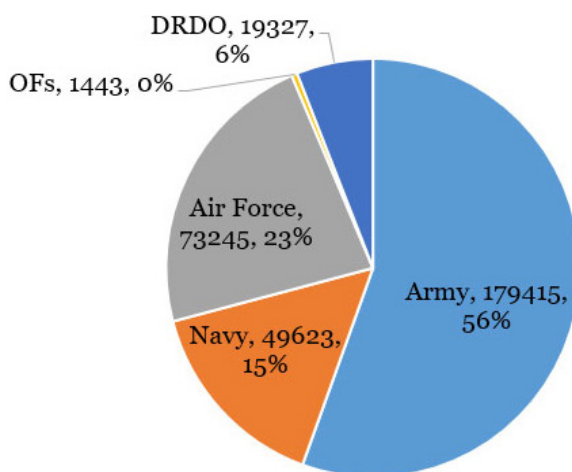


Figure 4: The Indian Fleet Budget 2020-2021. Division of the Indian defense budget between the fleet branches and the fleet's development party; the Indian fleet's part constituting 15% of the overall Indian defense budget (70.5 rupee = 1 dollar)<sup>29</sup>

### *The Indian Battle Fleet: Size and Composition*

**Development of "blue waters" fleet capabilities:** Considering the challenges faced by the Indian fleet in the Indian Ocean, it is highly important India develops a fleet capable of long-term operation in the Indo-Pacific region. Aside from developing the ordinary marine capability, the Indian fleet commanding parties have emphasized in recent years the need to be equipped with an ordered force of three aircraft carriers, one for each branch within the Indian Ocean (western, southern and eastern).

The current ordered force includes approximately 150 field ships and submarines. As of July 2020, the Indian fleet operates one aircraft carrier, another aircraft carrier is under construction, and amphibious transport dock, 8 landing ships, 10 battleships, 13 frigates, one nuclear activated attack submarine, two ballistic missiles submarines, 15 conventional attack submarines, 23 corvettes, 10 large marine patrol vessels, 4 fleet tankers, various auxiliary ships and small patrol ships.

One of the main objectives within the Indian fleet modernization's framework is *enhancing India's deterrence capabilities against its neighbor from north, Pakistan*. This is manifested by increasing the number of aircraft carriers, nuclear and conventional submarines, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, construction of battleships

<sup>29</sup> Laxman Kumar Behera, India's Defence Budget, 2020-21 The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), February 04, 2020.  
<https://idsa.in/issuebrief/india-def-budget-2020-21-lkbenera-040220>

and attack and patrol aircraft. India intends to purchase a wide variety of advanced weapons for its marine arsenal, including advanced anti-ship missiles, torpedo and aircrafts for field warfare and anti-submarines. During President Trump's first official visit to India in February 2020, an arms deal was agreed between both states, of a three billion dollars worth, including, among other things, the supplying of 24 MH-60R Seahawk helicopters for the Indian fleet, in order to enhance the capabilities of warfare against the submarine and the field. The helicopters to be provided to the Indian fleet will be equipped with secure communication, allowing them to become integrating into future operations with American vessels and aircrafts, or with other western fleets, possessing those capabilities.

In 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, the American government announced it had responded to India's request to provide it with ten AGM-84L missiles Harpon Block II, as well as 16 torpedoes for launching from aircraft, all worth 155 million dollars. Purchasing such advanced marine arms systems may, therefore, undermine the deterrence framework's stability existing in southern Asia. It may encourage India to consider facing the various marine capabilities possessed by Pakistan.

Due to its economic limitations, Pakistan, India's traditional, long-standing rival, is incapable of competing with India in terms of the Pakistani fleet's scope of equipment and modernization. Accordingly, it faces two options; a long-term option, to purchase similar arms systems, albeit expensive from the international market, such as from Russia, China or from both, in return to which, Pakistan may be in a political token for those purchases. The second option, is to develop, even if within a limited framework, its existing capabilities, based upon the fleet in being doctrine, which is capable of harming the Indian fleet, should a conflict arouse, through means of anti-field vessels and submarines means of warfare.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Indian Fleets Operation***

The Indian navy's operation occurs in the shadow of China, its neighbor from north, as well as in light of border conflicts in the Ladakh region. In 2020, the India-China continental border conflicts aroused again. Additionally, another focus of tension had remained between the two countries in the Indian Ocean, where China rather substantially expanded its presence. One aspect to the tension is manifested by a military aspect, where Chinese submarines are cruising that region, and military vessels occasionally patrol. Yet the other dimensions is the development projects,

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30 Haris Bilal Malik, Pakistan's Befitting Response to India's Offensive Naval Buildup, Modern diplomacy, May 10, 2020. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/10/pakistans-befitting-response-to-indias-offensive-naval-buildup>

and mainly the ports China is building in countries like Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh and the Maldives Islands, considered as India's so-called backyard, and its traditional area of influence. Thus, China constitutes a threat on the Indian interests within the Indian Ocean; China possesses a hold of the Hambantota port (Sri-Lanka), which is only a few hundreds of kilometers from Indian coasts. China provides military equipment to India's neighbors, that is, submarines to Myanmar, frigates to Sri-Lanka, equipment to Bangladesh and Thailand. Thus, in a way, it attempts to establish foothold and some control over this region.<sup>31</sup>

The Indian fleet has been in a high alert state since the India-China military conflicts began in the Ladakh region, and some of the vessels have been deployed in the Indian Ocean. In a sharp message to China, due to the growing tension in the Ladakh region border, battleships of the Indian navy and a strike force of the American navy, led by aircraft carrier USS Nimitz conducted a passex in mid-July 2020, in the Indian Ocean region (ICR). The passex involved four battleships of the Indian fleet and four battleships of the United States fleet. This passex was preceded by a comprehensive exercise and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, dominating the marine trade routes of the Chinese ships. Additionally, the Indian navy and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force conducted a similar exercise in June 2020.

Because of the growing tension, the Indian fleet's senior commanders held a three-day conference in mid-August 2020, which was designated to convey a political message to China. A senior Indian officer addressed the gathering on the media, stating: 'the conference becomes even more important in light of the recent incidents on our northern borders, along with the unprecedented challenges posed by the Corona pandemic, which will provide the higher marine leadership a broader forum to discuss the conduct in terms of operations, livelihood and holding assets and purchase.'<sup>32</sup>

As part of establishing an anti-China coalition of countries, India has considered the Australian navy's invitation to join the annual marine exercise titled Malabar Naval Exercise. This exercise should also involve the navies of Japan and the United States. If the Indian proposal is approved by the Australian government, all the

31 The Big Picture – Indo-Pacific: Strategic Importance, Drishti, September 7, 2019. <https://www.dishtiiias.com/loksabha-rajasabha-discussions/the-big-pictures-indo-pacific-strategic-importance>

32 Pawan Bali, Amid tensions with China, Indian Navy begins three-day Naval Commanders Conference, Deccan Chronicle, August 20, 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/190820/amid-tensions-with-china-indian-navy-begins-three-day-naval-commander.html>

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) members will participate in the marine exercise to be held in the Gulf of Bengal, so as to cue China that aggression at sea will not be overlooked.<sup>33</sup>

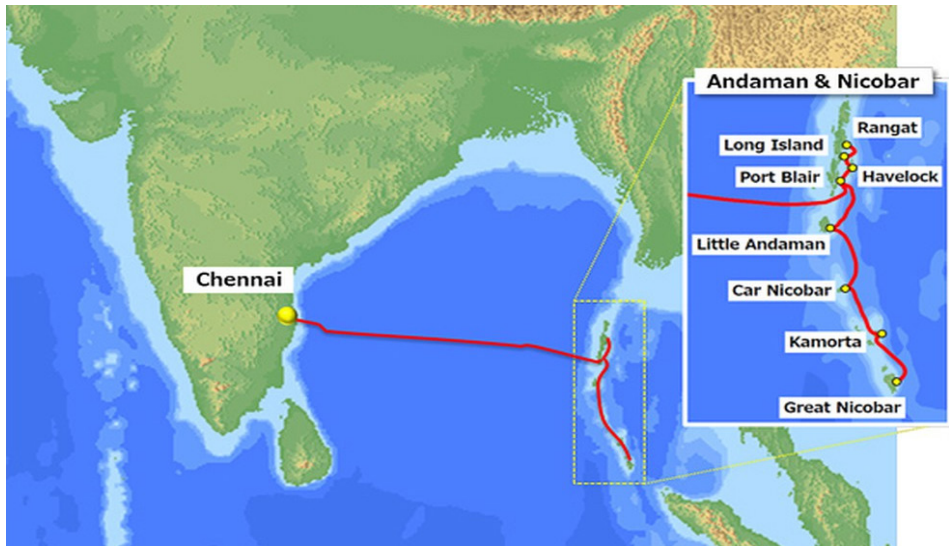


Figure 5: Gulf of Bengal – Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Following the marine incidents which occurred in Straits of Hormuz and at the Gulf of Oman in May 2019, where several tankers were attacked, and because of the Indian economy's dependence upon the petroleum coming from that region, in mid-June 2019, the Indian navy launched Operation Sankalp in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman region, in order to secure tankers sailing the region while flying the Indian flag. The mission was executed by two battleships owned by the Indian fleet (INS Chennai). Additionally, patrol airplanes of the Indian fleet conducted patrol flight in the region.<sup>34</sup> It is noteworthy that India is involved in the civil operation of the Iranian Chabahar port. This Indian grasp implies the importance the region holds for India, as a rising foreign marine power, but also as a neighboring country close thereto. India possesses a multitude of interests, mostly economic and energetic

33 Pawan Bali, Indian, US navies carry out passage exercise in Indian Ocean amid China tensions, Deccan Chronicle, July 20, 2020. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/210720/indian-us-navies-carry-out-passage-exercise-in-indian-ocean-amid-china.html>

34 Indian Navy launches Operation Sankalp in Gulf of Oman, *Business Standard*, June 20, 2019. <https://bit.ly/34sO5IR>

ones, being a consumer of petroleum and its products produced at the Persian Gulf basin, transported by the marine sailing route in the region.<sup>35</sup>

To sum up, India and the Indian fleets fulfill a role of a marine power located at a strategically important region in terms of the rivalry developing between the United States and China. The rivalry build in the China-India relationship causes India to draw closer to the United States. This latter step has been taken after many years when she was one of the leading countries in the non-identifying countries block. The Indian fleet is undergoing impressive construction processes, positioning it as a "regional blue waters fleet" within the Indian Ocean-Pacific Ocean arena of action.

## The Russian navy

From the beginning of the last wave of reform of the Russian armed forces in 2009, the Russian leadership has been sending the message that the Russian navy has survived its crisis, returned to its former glory, and capable of fulfilling missions commensurate with a superpower's navy. This has been expressed in two prominent events:

1. **The annexation of Crimea** and Russian control of the port of Sevastopol, which is also the home port of the Russian navy on the Black Sea, close by to which are the navy's shipyards, and which play an important role in its maintenance.
2. **Expansion of the navy's missions** in its six operational zones (the Atlantic Ocean, the Arctic, Antarctica, Indian Ocean, Pacific Ocean and Caspian Sea), while giving preference to a permanent presence by the Russian navy in the Mediterranean Sea, and increasing its strength in the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans.

**The strengthening of the Russian army and the orders of priority** detailed in the 10-year plans, called "State Armament Plans" (GPVs). 2020 is included in the 10-year plan for the years 2011–2020, which put budget priority on the Russian navy and its aerospace arm. The latest strength building plan, GPV 2027 (which covers the years 2018–2020), put the priority on Russia's ground forces and rapid response forces (including maritime rapid response forces).

The Russian navy has more than 280 sailing vessels (about 69 submarines and 217 surface vessels) of various kinds, but there is a contradictory assessment regarding the operational fitness of some of these vessels.

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35 See Ido Gilad's article "Increasing the Presence of Foreign Fleets in the Arabian Sea, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2020, The Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, Haifa University. <https://hms.haifa.ac.il/index.php/he/component/content/article/24-2018-10-29-11-11-06/190-ido-gilad-increasing-the-presence-of-foreign-fleets-in-the-arabian-sea?itemid=108>

The Russian navy is organized in fleets: The Northern Fleet, the Pacific Ocean Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet and the Baltic Fleet, and one flotilla in the Caspian Sea. Their main objectives are: sea area denial to an enemy and defense of Russia based on nuclear deterrence via the Russian submarine fleet.

Due to resource constraints that affect the navy's size, the Russian navy focuses on defending the country's coastline, given that it has limited power to operate expeditionary forces far away across the ocean. The Northern Fleet includes Russia's nuclear submarines and is also responsible for the Arctic Ocean and the North Sea. Following Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Black Sea Fleet developed, grew and began operating many ships that had previously operated in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and especially in the area of the Syrian coast. The Russian navy is responsible for the artillery corps protecting Russia's coastline and ports, and it is armed with shore-to-see missiles and anti-ship missiles.

The rising importance of the Arctic Ocean: The Russian navy continues to build nuclear-powered icebreakers that will enable them to lead convoys in areas where there is danger from ice bergs. Russia's present icebreaker fleet includes 40 ships, of which 11 are new ships that are either in the planning stage or whose construction has been completed. Of these 40 ships, about 27 operate in the ocean and some are nuclear powered. In September 2017, the Russian navy launched the "Sibir" icebreaker, the second in a series of three icebreakers that, according to the Russians, are the strongest and largest icebreakers in the world. Sibir is 173 m long and is capable of carving a path through 2.8 m thick ice. The icebreakers are being constructed for operation in the Arctic Ocean and the Yenisei River estuary according to the design of the Rosatomflot nuclear agency.

The Russian army strengthening program for 2020 contains a budget allocation of almost 120 billion Euro, approx. 22% of the entire budget, for modernization of the navy. As part of this program, the Black Sea fleet is meant to receive 15 new ships (nine surface ships and six conventional submarines) by 2020. The first new ships were to have entered active service in 2014.<sup>36</sup> President Putin tasked the military and defense industries with acting to supply and manufacture ships, with the priority on installing the 3M22 "Zircon" anti-ship hypersonic cruise missile. According to the Russian minister of defense, in December 2019, he noted that these missiles will be integrated into five new ships whose accelerated construction is anticipated in 2020, as well as, as part of the systems upgrading planned to be carried out on existing

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36 Dmitri Boltenkov, Reform of the Russian Navy, in Mikhail Barabanov (Ed.), *Russia's New Army*, Moscow, Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2011, p. 83.

platforms in the navy. An inherent and continuing problem of the Russian navy is the level of logistical support on Russian ships, which hurts their level of combat operational preparedness in their various action zones. Whereas the Syrian port of Tartus has remained the single support base in the Mediterranean Sea for Russian ships, its military importance has nonetheless stayed marginal. As part of its 2011–2020 armament plan, Russia planned to develop infrastructure for the Russian navy in the port of Latakia also. Moreover, the Russian minister of defense, Sergey Shoygu, noted the possibility that the future expeditionary force will also use the logistical support of ports in Crete, Greece and Montenegro. We can say that the lessons learned by the Russian navy from its involvement in the Syrian civil war justify the expensive strengthening and modernization program of the Russian navy that began in 2011, and that, when completed, will allow it to deploy a modern Mediterranean Sea naval task force.<sup>37</sup>

In June 2020, Russia, for the first time, made public its nuclear deterrence policy, and through which announcement it wished to broadcast the type of threats and conditions under which it might use nuclear weapons, as well as its nuclear deterrence strategy. Russia clarified that it will view any launching of a ballistic missile against it as a missile carrying a nuclear warhead, given the inability to know in advance what payload the missile will carry (conventional or nuclear).<sup>38</sup> Western analysts address this policy with skepticism and assert that, today, conventional weapons play an important role in Russia's concept of deterrence, despite the prevailing agreement within the Russian army about conventional abilities being deficient when talking about deterrence. Accordingly, some analysts believe that Russia maintains an "escalate to deescalate" strategy—where Russia might threaten, at an early stage in a military conflict, to use nuclear weapons so as not to risk losing.

As already noted in the Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Center (HMS) reports, in July 26, 2015, President Putin approved the **New Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation**, which details the Russian navy's strategy (Morskaja Strategija), its mission and the program for building up its strength. This doctrine replaces the one approved in 2001. In addition, it determines that the Russian navy will focus on the following **three objectives**: Nuclear strike capability through its underwater branch,

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37 Igor Delanoë, Russian Naval Ambitions in the Mediterranean, Focus, Foreign Policy/Defense, "Russian Naval Ambitions in the Mediterranean", Russia 2014, Editions du Cherche Midi, French-Russian Observatory Yearbook 2014, publication from the French-Russian Observatory, April 2014, pp. 383–384. (commissioned)

38 Russian Armed Forces: Military Doctrine and Strategy, *Strategic Deterrence and Escalation Management*, August 20, 2020. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11625.pdf>



integration of the navy in its land strike capability through cruise missiles (as seen in the attacks of targets in Syria) and protection of the motherland's shores (including areas held by Russia in the eastern Mediterranean Sea) and ensuring anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) to other navies in these regions. The latter two missions can be accomplished smoothly both by submarines and by small surface vessels such as frigates and corvets. We can thus see that in the present Russian maritime strategy, the mission of the large surface vessels described above is very limited.

As part of Navy Day 2020, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, a flotilla was held in St. Petersburg, during which President Putin declared that Russia will add new ships, vessels and armaments to the navy to demonstrate its growing strength. He further stated that Russia needs a strong navy to protect its interests and to this end, during 2020, another 40 ships of various models will be added to operational service, and he noted that recently the construction of six additional ships had begun in Russia's leading shipyards.<sup>39</sup>

According to a report from the US Congress, the ability of the Russian defense industry to develop and manufacture new advanced technology systems is limited, and budget constraints may lead to decisions about purchase of less expensive but proven systems.<sup>40</sup> Despite the low oil prices and the negative economic forecast, it is reasonable to assume that Russia will fund the strengthening program (GVP 2027) with 330 billion dollars (about 3%–4% of its gross national product), which is in practice a more limited-in-scale program than GVP 2020. The economic pressure may, in the future, reduce its scope further. To date, the Russian navy enjoyed relatively high funding compared to other combat force arms, which fact enabled it to build new surface vessels and submarines, and to develop precision armaments after many years of limited budgets. In the construction of surface ships, the Russian navy preferred to develop "small" warships, having high and accurate firing power, which can be retooled modularly for various tasks thus enabling flexibility in using fire power. The Russian navy focused on developing long-range weapons with precision strike capability.

A large number of the Russian navy's ships are over thirty years old and require assorted repairs to extend their service lifetime. The Russian shipyards have problems building ships larger than 7,000 tons. As a consequence, Russia is depending more and more on frigates armed with different types of weapons, with anti-ship

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39 Michael Daventry, Putin reveals plan to expand Russia's navy with 40 new vessels, *Euro News*, July 26, 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/26/putin-reveals-plan-to-expand-russia-s-navy-with-40-new-vessels>

40 Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms, *Congressional Research Service, In Focus*, July 20, 2020. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11603>

vertical launch systems (hypersonic missiles, cruise missiles and anti-submarine torpedoes). Nevertheless, the missile development program, and especially cruise missile development, is experiencing a number of difficulties because Russia has always based its engine production on Ukrainian manufacturers, which stopped in 2014. Despite the budget supplements transferred in the past decade to the Russian shipyards, they are still not able to meet the strengthening program objectives, and are falling behind by years in their supply in comparison with the projected dates.<sup>41</sup>

As already described in the previous report, analysis of the future combat arena conducted by the Russian navy led to the understanding that littoral warfare will comprise a larger and larger part of the navy's operations in the coming years. Accordingly, the Russian navy decided to abandon the construction of large warships (aircraft carriers and cruisers), and through radical operational thinking to characterize, plan and build smaller ships (on the scale of frigates and conventional submarines), armed with advanced combat systems, which will have an advantage over those of the enemy on the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

In the 2019 report, we described the advances made in development of the new Russian torpedo, the "Poseidon", which is the largest torpedo ever developed by any country whatsoever. The torpedo, with a diameter of 2 m (6.5 feet) and longer than 20 m (65 feet), is three times bigger than a regular torpedo. President Putin announced that a test launch was supposed to have happened in spring 2019 from a Russian submarine.<sup>42</sup> The torpedo, alleged to be able to carry a nuclear head and a conventional head, is expected to enter service in 2027 and be launched from the Oscar II submarine, or from the new Belgorod model submarines (K-329). Because of the torpedo's size, the precise shape of the six "Poseidon" torpedo tubes on the submarine is still unclear, and one expert has speculated that they will be installed in a type of circular launcher in order to minimize the quantity and size of launch doors, and enable easier loading of the torpedo onto the submarine. The project itself is especially grandiose, although from the perspective of strategic response, it offers a mediated outlet (an underwater one) that is the most invulnerable of all existing defense systems to anti-ballistic missiles (ABM). The method it uses to hit power targets (cities) is still unclear, and in particular, the torpedo's final track is unknown.

41 Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities, Navy, Congressional Research Service (CSR), July 20, 2020, p. 2. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF11589.pdf>

42 H. I. Sutton, Russian Poseidon Intercontinental Nuclear-Powered Nuclear-Armed Autonomous Torpedo, *Covert Shores*, February 22, 2019. [http://www.hisutton.com/Poseidon\\_Torpedo.html](http://www.hisutton.com/Poseidon_Torpedo.html) [Accessed September 25, 2020]

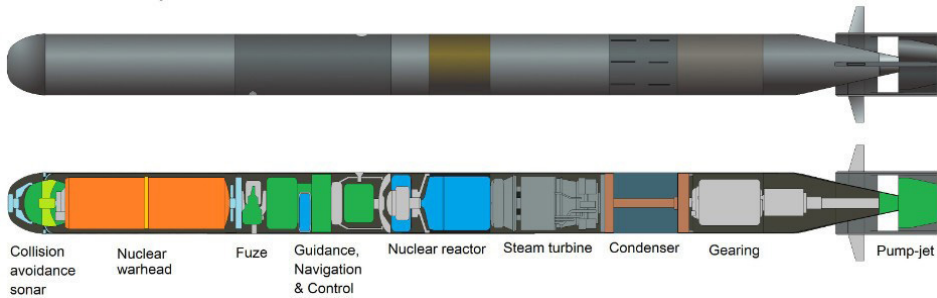


Figure 6: A Kanyon Status-6 Russian torpedo with a nuclear head

The marine part of the Russian nuclear triad has also been upgraded, both in terms of submarines and in terms of their launching abilities. The new Borei class nuclear ballistic submarine, which in 2000 began its sea trials, is two years behind schedule and when it enters active operational service, it will be armed with Bulava SS-N-32 ballistic missiles.<sup>43</sup> To maintain the existing order of force, the old Delta IV class submarines were simultaneously upgraded and equipped with SS-N-23 ballistic missiles, which are intercontinental missiles with a range of 8,200 km, running on liquid fuel and able to carry a nuclear payload with warheads that split upon impact.<sup>44</sup>

**The maritime aspect of the conflict with Ukraine:** On November 25, 2018, a serious international incident took place when the Russian defense services' federal coast guard (FSB) fired on and seized three ships belonging to the Ukrainian navy, which had been trying to sail from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov through the Kerch Strait on their way to Mariupol port. The Kerch Strait is the waterway between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. The strait serves as a gateway to the Sea of Azov, which borders on Russia and Ukraine (see Figure 7). A bilateral convention gives both countries the right to use the waterway. It is also the location of a new bridge, 19 km long, built by Russia as a showpiece, costing an estimated 4 billion dollars. Since the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, Russia

43 Maxim Strachak, The Borei-A SSBN: How Effective Is Russia's New Nuclear Submarine? The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, June 16, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-borei-a-ssbn-how-effective-is-russias-new-nuclear-submarine>

44 SS-N-23 "Skiff", CSIS Missile Defense Project. <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/ss-n-23> [Accessed September 25, 2020]; Julian Cooper, How much does Russia spend on nuclear weapons? SIPRI, October 1, 2018. <https://sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/how-much-does-russia-spend-nuclear-weapons>

significantly raised its military presence in the area.<sup>45</sup> The Kerch Strait has become a military friction point and where 24 Ukrainian servicemen were captured, along with their three ships, and taken into Russian custody. The sailors and the ships were returned to Ukraine in fall 2020, after many months of being held in jail by Russia.

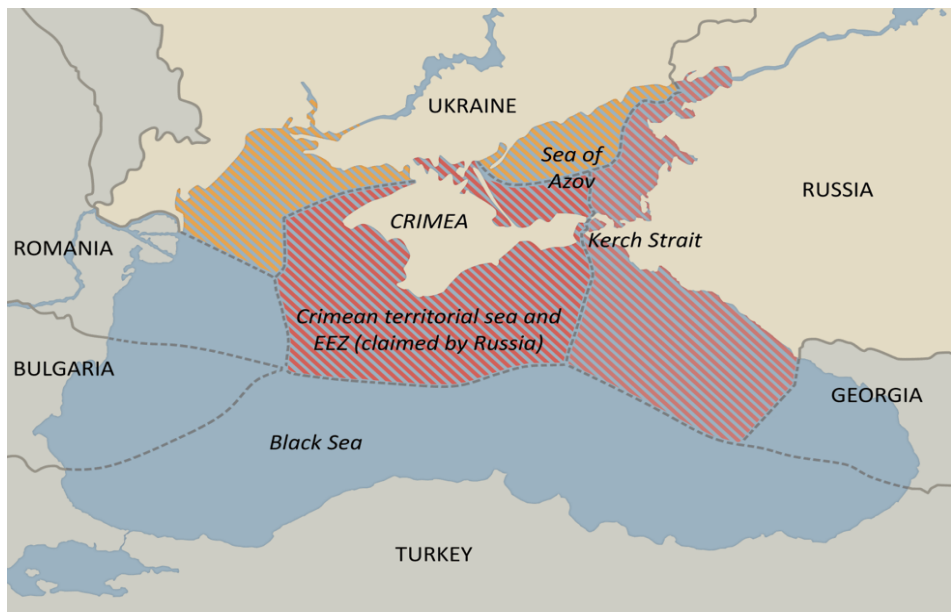


Figure 7: Kerch Strait – Sea area and sovereignty

During the incident itself, NATO forces and the US Sixth Fleet abstained from helping the Ukrainians, but in the past year, the US has stepped up its support to Ukraine's maritime forces. In June 2020, the US Foreign Office announced that it was authorizing the sale of 16 Mark VI patrol boats to Ukraine. These patrol boats are equipped with optical sighting machine guns that are used by the US navy for combat in rivers and constrained water areas. The transaction will cost 600 million dollars, of which 250 million dollars are being given to the Ukrainians as foreign aid. The US navy is also helping Ukraine develop its intelligence capabilities in order to

45 Andrew Roth, Kerch strait confrontation: what happened and why does it matter? *The Guardian*, November 27, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/27/kerchstrait-confrontation-what-happened-ukrainian-russia-crimea>

improve its abilities to conduct patrols and build a maritime and aerial picture of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.<sup>46</sup>

In 2020 NATO accorded Ukraine the status of an "enhanced opportunities partner", which countries such as Sweden, Finland, Georgia, Austria and Jordan already hold. The significance of this act is that Ukraine will have enhanced access to joint programs and exercises and other information collaborations, including conclusions published at the end of exercises. It must be emphasized that the US navy and NATO, from time to time, conduct patrols in the Black Sea as part of the freedom of navigation activities in the region.

The creation of **cooperation and coalition building with the Chinese navy**: Since 2014, Russia and China have been strategic partners, including the sale of advanced military equipment and more detailed plans of bilateral and multilateral military exercises. Economic and diplomatic cooperation between the two countries has also tightened, albeit not to the same extent. It is reasonable to assume that the bilateral cooperation will not advance to the level of a full treaty because of the differences in geopolitical interests and the asymmetry of the countries' power, and that Russia will continue to refuse to recognize completely China's rise as a geopolitical power.<sup>47</sup> US actions to put pressure on both Russia and China have had the effect of bringing the latter closer. The joint naval exercises that they conduct usually have a confrontational message for the US, and their complexity is continually increasing. Nevertheless, the over "conventionality" and bad coordination of the exercises has been criticized, as was the continuing lack of a joint command structure.<sup>48</sup> A confrontational message of this type was sent to the US in late December 2019 during a broad naval exercise held in the Gulf of Oman, whose objective was coordinated with the cooperation described above, and in which, besides from ships from the Russian and Chinese navies, ships from the Iranian navy also participated.<sup>49</sup> The objective of the joint

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46 David B. Larter, After a Kerch Strait confrontation, the US beefs up Ukraine's maritime forces, *Defense News*, July 2, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/07/02/afterthe-kerch-strait-confrontation-the-us-moves-to-beef-up-ukraines-maritime-forces>

47 Dmitry Gorenburg, An Emerging Strategic Partnership: Trends in Russia-China Military Cooperation, *George C. Marshall, European Center for Security Studies*, April 2020, Number 054. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/emerging-strategic-partnership-trends-russia-china-military-cooperation-0>

48 Andrej Krickovic, The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership: Cautious Riser and Desperate Challenger, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2017, pp. 299–329.

49 Ben Westcott and Hamdi Alkshali, China, Russia and Iran hold joint naval drills in Gulf of Oman, *CNN Digital Expansion 2017*, December 27, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/27/asia/china-russia-iran-military-drills-intl-hnk/index.html>

exercise was the demonstration of the presence and strength of Russia and China in the face of the coalition led by the US against Iran.

**In the area of export of maritime weapons systems,** Russian still supplies ships and advanced weapons to many navies, including the Indian navy, which despite its closeness to the US navy, continues to maintain a special relationship with the Russian navy. Naval systems constitute 8% of all export of weapons systems by the Russian armament industry, which in 2019 made a total of 13 billion dollars in sales.<sup>50</sup> These sales are very important for the Russian economy, whose performance is not very good.

**The activities of the Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean Sea:** As already noted in last year's annual report, Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean Sea focuses on three main objectives: exploitation of the geographic position of the Mediterranean Sea to improve Russia's security, use of Russia's standing in the Mediterranean Sea to increase its standing as an alternative world power to the US, and support of the Syrian government of President Assad.

A central feature of this strategy is the placement of a trustworthy military force in the Mediterranean Sea. A permanent force in the region is important for several Russian objectives, including protecting Russian access and reducing Russia's vulnerability to surprises.<sup>51</sup> To reach this objective, Russia intervened very heavily in the Syrian civil war, and was instrumental in helping save Assad's government. This was also seen in the nuclear negotiations with Iran when sometimes it supported pressure on Iran and sometimes defended Iran in the UN. Russia succeeded in formulating a new contract with five countries on the Caspian Sea, including determining their littoral rights,<sup>52</sup> and negotiating an end to the Syrian civil war.

In return for its crucial military support of Assad's government, Russia gained access to and control of upgraded military bases ("warm-water bases"), in Syria—the Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim air base.<sup>53</sup> From these bases, Russia can project power

50 Russia makes \$13 billion worth of arms sales in 2019, *Defence.AZ*, December 17, 2019.

[http://defence.az/ru/news/140079/russia-makes-\\$13-billion-worth-of-arms-sales-in-2019](http://defence.az/ru/news/140079/russia-makes-$13-billion-worth-of-arms-sales-in-2019)

51 Dmitry Gorenburg, Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean, *Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies*, Harvard University, September 18, 2019.

52 Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia and 4 Other Nations Settle Decades-long Dispute Over Caspian Sea," *The New York Times*, August 12, 2018.

53 Yuliya Talmazan, "Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases: Minister of defense," *NBC News*, December 26, 2017 ("Putin added ... that while Russia might be drawing down much of its forces, its military presence in Syria was a permanent one and that it would retain enough firepower to destroy any Islamic State comeback.").

to the Middle East, the Balkan and throughout the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea. If, in the future, a maritime conflict transpires, Russia, positioned in the region, can conduct an area denial strategy against the US.

The Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean Sea is based mainly on the Black Sea navy, and its size ranges from 8–15 assorted types of ships. The Russians are diligent about conducting navy exercises in the eastern Mediterranean Sea at least once a year in September. In 2020, too, the Russians announced the closure of areas on behalf of a two-stage firing exercise to be conducted by it in September 2020 (see Figure 8). The two areas, apparently overlap the areas in which Turkey was conducting seismic searches for gas deposits, and which are disputed by Cyprus and Greek. The website of the Turkish navy related to closure of the areas in advance of the exercise and noted that Turkey entreated Russia not to interfere with the seismic studies of the Turkish ships being conducted south of the Greek island of Kastellorizo and east of Cyprus. Unofficial sources in Russia, however, responded that the exercises were a show of strength on the part of Russia against NATO, and not an attempt to back Turkey in its quarrel with Greece and Cyprus regarding economic waters in the region.<sup>54</sup>



Figure 8: The areas that were closed because of Russia's naval exercise in the eastern Mediterranean Sea in September 2020

54 Selcan Hacaoglu and Henry Meyer, Russia to Hold Naval Exercise in Mediterranean Amid Tensions, *Bloomberg*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-03/russia-will-hold-naval-exercise-in-mediterranean-turkey-says>; Boyko Nikolov, what is Putin preparing in the Mediterranean? Russia began exercises, but against whom? *BulgarianMilitary.Com*, August 24, 2020? <https://bulgarianmilitary.com/2020/08/24/what-is-putin-preparing-in-the-mediterranean-russia-began-exercises-but-against-whom>

During 2020, Syria served as a launch pad for Russian **operations in Libya**, where civil war still rages, including aircraft deployment to support the Wagner PMC Group. The Wagner PMC Group is a Russian military organization that is sometimes described as a private military company. The group operates as a 'contractor' for projects having a military aspect around the globe, including being involved in battles in conflict areas. The Wagner PMC Group has been fighting for months in the western Libyan region to support the Khalifa Haftar and against the Turkish forces that back the Government of National Accord (GNA), its enemy. During the fighting, these groups used covert tactics and Russian air power. The Washington Institute calculates that "*[a] though Moscow would face many challenges if it tries to establish permanent offensive and AZAD capabilities in Libya like it has in Syria, its covert actions thus far show a commitment to playing the long game against NATO in the East Mediterranean*".<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that adopting the A2AD strategy in Libya will not be such a simple strategy, and Russia's position in Libya is not the same as its position in Syria. In other words, in contrast to Assad's government, the world-recognized government of Libya did not invite Russia to enter the country, which, therefore, forced Putin to take more covert actions. Moscow is also confronting more serious resistance in Libya, given that the Turkish support in Libya, which is at odds with that of Russia, has changed the balance of power for the benefit of the GNA, and Russia's activities against Turkey will require a different sort of effort from Russia. Nevertheless, in the past, Russia successfully thwarted the actions of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan against the Kurds in northern Syria by using the threat of additional Syrian refugees from Idlib moving toward Turkey. At the end of the day, however, neither Putin nor Erdoğan want a direct clash, and instead, they continue to cooperate whenever possible and conduct business ad hoc. Moscow is not committed to opposition leader Haftar as it is to Assad, and accordingly, it is liable to abandon him if pressure from Turkey or other players in the region grows too strong.

**To summarize**, the Mediterranean Sea will continue to play a key role in the strategy of the Russian navy because of its strategic importance as a place allowing access to southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. From Russia's perspective, the Mediterranean Sea symbolizes the increased competition between Moscow and Washington. By building its naval forces, Russia hopes to prevent NATO from having access to the region, to protect the southern regions of Russia, and to assist

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55 Anna Borshchevskaya, Russia's Military Activity in the East Mediterranean Echoes, Its Approach to Syria, *The Washington Institute, Policy Watch 3334*, June 17, 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-military-activity-east-mediterranean-echoes-its-approach-syria>



as a benefactor of the states it presently and potentially has under its patronage in the region. Nevertheless, maintaining the forces it has in the Mediterranean Sea is less preferable to the Russian strategy than defending the motherland. Sustaining a maritime presence in the Mediterranean Sea is a more efficient strategy for the Russian navy than competing with the US navy in the open sea ("blue waters"), since Russia does not have the resources or global aspirations to challenge the US superiority around the world, and compete with the US navy in traditional power projection missions and expeditionary forces in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia's traditional navy of Soviet era surface ships will continue to focus on status projection, visiting ports and similar operations designed to exude the image of a superpower. Moscow's focus on developing and enlarging the Mediterranean Sea flotilla is, therefore, a limited target to reach, yet one that aligns well with Russia's foreign policy in the region.<sup>56</sup> Russia has its own agenda for the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and it is not interested in increasing Turkish influence in this region, because this would mean that it is liable to lose traditional clients and naval control of waterways to and from the Suez Canal.

### The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) naval forces

In 2020, NATO conducted operational activities in Afghanistan, Kosovo and the Mediterranean Sea. At the beginning of 2020, the EU states rejected the US request that Europe also leave the nuclear agreement with Iran (in effect, this was directed at France and Germany who are parties to the agreement). The EU foreign minister, Josep Borrell, even declared that the EU will aspire to maintain the agreement with Iran as long as Iran adheres to its commitments.

**Policy and strategy:** The meeting of the NATO defense ministers, which was held on May 14, 2020, was the first online meeting ever held by the NATO defense ministers in all its 71 years. The meeting was dedicated to the alliance's response to the CORONA pandemic and operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In June 2020, a second online meeting was held in which NATO's readiness to deal with the second wave of the pandemic was reviewed. Likewise, during the meeting the security implications of Russia's growing missile stockpile, including dual use conventional-nuclear missiles, were discussed. During the meeting, the member states adopted an essential and balanced package of political and military steps to meet these challenges. To prepare a multiyear program for the next decade, and especially given the political aspects of

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56 Dmitry Gorenburg, *Russia's Naval Strategy in the Mediterranean*, *Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies*, Harvard University, September 18, 2019.  
<https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2019/09/18/russias-naval-strategy-in-the-mediterranean>

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a program such as this, the secretary general of NATO appointed a team of experts from ten different states to prepare the program, which, clearly, after being approved by the NATO members will constitute the alliance's new strategic concept.<sup>57</sup>

The **three core missions of NATO that were defined in the 2010 strategic concept** are: Collective defense, crisis management and collaborative security. The **collective defense** mission had primacy during the Cold War. **Crisis management** was a response to terror and other threats that emerged from the chaotic Middle East and North Africa. **Collaborative security** focused on strengthening the alliance to reduce the instability among NATO members. A decade has passed since these missions were defined, and in the opinion of experts dealing with this topic, NATO would do well to delineate an additional mission for itself—**preserving stability** that is not limited to Europe itself, but also to other wider regions around the globe. This mission could include, among others, maintaining freedom of the seas and unimpeded passage through chokepoints; restraining military activities in space and the North Pole; and countering cyber operations that undermine the stability of countries. International norms exist for a significant part of the global challenges, and NATO's job, according to these experts, is to unite and strengthen these norms.<sup>58</sup>

Several events that affected NATO in general, over the past year, and its naval forces in particular:

- A tenuous relationship between the alliance's member states and the US during the presidency of Donald Trump (greater than at any period since the end of WWII). Even if the US and the EU are not in direct conflict, President Trump's unpredictable and unilateral policies created challenges for the EU (including his announcement about the withdrawal of US troops stationed on German soil).
- Dealing, in eastern Europe, with a more and more aggressive Russia hoping to exploit the rift within the EU and NATO, and enlarge it through nurturing rightwing populist movements and the use of disinformation networks as well as increasing its military strength. Further, there is the ambiguity in the Black Sea and its surroundings regarding the possible additional steps that Russia will take in the entire region, and especially in Ukraine.
- Problems inside the EU states such as the rise in xenophobia, terror and multinational crime as well as new challenges from cyberspace.

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57 Secretary General appoints group as part of NATO reflection process, *NATO News*, 31 Mar 2020. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_174756.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_174756.htm)

58 Hans Binnendijk and Timo S. Koster, NATO needs a new core task, *Defense News*, July 22, 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/07/22/nato-needs-a-new-core-task>

- The impact of Britain's exit from the EU while remaining in NATO. It is worth remembering that Britain has the highest defense budget among NATO members, after the US, that it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and that its naval forces have a range of capabilities (including independent nuclear deterrence capability). With Britain's exit from the EU, 80% of the alliance's defense budget will be coming from non-EU members.
- Deteriorating relations with Turkey, which is also diverting its operations to the East and is interested in purchasing Russian weapons systems alongside Turkey's conflict with Greece and Cyprus related to the demarcation of the border of its economic waters.
- In southern Europe, the Syrian and Libyan civil wars have created a situation of instability and contributed to friction between NATO members (e.g., France and Italy) regarding the way to handle these crises.

The operational naval response: The European Maritime Force (EuroMarFor – EMF) is a standing military force whose mission is to conduct naval, aerial and amphibious operations. The force is on standby to go into action within five days after getting the order. It was set up in 1995 to fill missions defined in the Petersburg Declaration, i.e., control of the sea, humanitarian missions, peacekeeping operations, crisis response actions, and peace enforcement. NATO acts according to its naval strategy, which also delineates NATO's naval activity parameters (collective defense, crisis management, joint security and naval security). NATO maintains permanent naval forces that are meant to provide it with the ability for immediate naval response. NATO's naval command headquarters (MARCOM) is located at Northwood, Middlesex, Britain, and its commander is also the force's naval commander (COM MARCOM) as well as NATO's naval expert responsible for consulting on matters of the sea to the strategic level, which is at NATO headquarters in Mons, Belgium.

In line with this and the recent events noted above, NATO is meant to deal in the near future with a series of **security challenges**:

- The challenges created by Russia and their intricacy, even if not as an enemy, at least as a bitter opponent.
- The complex challenges of the civil wars in Syria and Libya and the tensions in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea.
- The deepening instability of the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea including the situation in Libya.
- In the north – The rise in importance of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea and their significance for the security of NATO.

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Even though **Britain's exit from the EU** is not yet complete, it is now clear that its active participation in NATO will continue. Nevertheless, at this point already, issues that will have to be dealt with are arising, such as preserving Britain's sole responsibility, after it leaves the Union, for patrolling its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), and not share this mission with other EU members. In the framework of the existing agreements of all the EU countries, free access to the territorial waters of member states, more than 12 miles from shore, is granted. After leaving the EU, Britain will need to renegotiate its free access to territorial waters.<sup>59</sup>

**Lack of NATO involvement in the Syrian civil war:** The completion of the withdrawal of the last US troops remaining in the Kurdish enclave in northeast Syria in October 2019, and its agreement to let Turkey intervene in the region to create a buffer zone between Turkey and Syria, has left the strategic processes in the region, in particular, to Russia' attention together with Turkey and Iran. Among NATO members, there is no consensus about how to solve the crisis between Turkey and other NATO members. For example, Norway, Germany and Holland declared that they will stop arms sales to Turkey. Erdoğan has threatened that he is "liable to open the gates, and send 3.6 million refugees into Europe," and the head of the Greek government, Kyriako Mitsotakis, Turkey's neighbor who is likely to be the first to be hurt from such a step, called for NATO to prepare for this to happen and to increase navy patrols in the Aegean Sea.<sup>60</sup>

**NATO operations also in the Black Sea:** Since Russia annexed Ukrainian territories in the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, NATO has increased its presence in the Black Sea. In 2020, and despite the CORONA pandemic, NATO's ships continued to patrol the Black Sea. Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) and Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 (SNMCMG2) entered the Black Sea in July 2020 to conduct additional routine operations and participate in two regional exercises organized by the Bulgarian and Ukrainian navies. The commander of the SNMG2 declared that "[t]his visit to the Black Sea is yet another example of NATO's ongoing regional commitments with our Allies and partners".<sup>61</sup> It is likely that these patrols contribute to heightening the maritime awareness of NATO forces in everything related to the region of the Black Sea, but by themselves, they cannot influence Russia's policy

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59 UK Won't Be Able to Protect Its Waters After Brexit, Former Navy Chief Says, *Sputnik*, September 2, 2018.

60 Turkey's relationship with NATO tested over Syria operation, *BioReports*, October 14, 2019. <https://bioreports.net/turkeys-relationship-with-nato-tested-over-syria-operation>

61 Public Affairs Office at MARCOM, NATO forces return to the Black Sea, *NATO News*, July 14, 2020. <https://mc.nato.int/media-centre/news/2020/nato-forces-return-to-black-sea>

toward Ukraine in the area, as it was expressed recently in the clash between the Russian and Ukrainian navies in the Kerch Strait, and discussed in the section on the Russian navy.

**Operation Sea Guardian:** Following the Warsaw Conference in 2016, it was decided to stop Operation Active Endeavour and replace it with Operation Sea Guardian, ally with the EU's Operation Sophia, and coordinate operations with the operations of the Italian coastguard. The operation was intended to provide NATO with the ability to immediately respond in the force's region of activity in the Mediterranean Sea. The task was assigned to Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2), which usually comprises from 4–6 ships, frigate–battleship size, and which, starting from May 10, 2020, has been conducting operations of this sort in the Mediterranean Sea. SNMG2 has conducted various activities such as tracking the movement of commercial ships, analysis of automatic identification system (AIS) data and interrogation of suspicious ships. These activities help build a comprehensive picture of the maritime environment in the area. Since SNMG2 began its support of Operation Sea Guardian, the group has conducted its activities in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and patrolled opposite the Suez Canal, prior to entering the center of the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea, in parallel to overseeing the movement of commercial ships into and out of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The operations heighten operational maritime domain awareness to increase and safeguard the security of the entire Mediterranean Sea.

**Turkey's relationship with NATO:** Turkey's aggressive actions in the eastern Mediterranean Sea have resulted in Turkey, a NATO member, being described by the *New York Times* in the following way: Turkish Aggression Is NATO's 'Elephant in the Room.'<sup>62</sup> Turkey's latest actions, which include, among others, unilateral steps and confrontational declarations, necessarily constitute a threat to countries such as Greece, Cyprus, Israel, the EU states, the US and NATO as a whole.<sup>63</sup> France protested that during the patrol of a French frigate in the area of Cyprus, and when having stopped a suspicious ship that was carrying equipment from Turkey to Libya, per the arms embargo imposed on Libya by the UN, a Turkish frigate that had been in the area intervened and locked its fire-control radar (pinged) on the French ship three different times. Operationally, this type of action is liable to lead to opening of fire, and this is a very aggressive action in symbolic terms. The French protested that

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62 Steven Erlanger, Turkish Aggression Is NATO's 'Elephant in the Room', *The New York Times*, August 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/world/europe/turkey-nato.html>

63 Marc Pierini, How Far Can Turkey Challenge NATO and the EU in 2020? *Carnegie Europe*, January 2020. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Pierini\\_Turkey.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Pierini_Turkey.pdf)

Turkey was trying to enable the transfer of arms to the government in Tripoli, which action contravened the UN Security Council's decision, and described the actions of the Turkish ships as "aggressive in the extreme" and "unacceptable by a member of NATO against another member of the alliance." Turkey responded that France violated the UN's decisions and NATO's decisions by supporting the rebel forces of the Khalifa Haftar against the Government of National Accord (GNA), headed by Fayeز al-Sarraj. The meeting of the alliance's defense ministers in August 2020 did not result in compliance with France's request to censure Turkey's action, and raised tensions between the two NATO members. The **president of France, Emmanuel Macron**, said that "Turkey is provoking tension" with what he termed "its unilateral decision to send research ships to survey the seabed in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea that is in Greece's economic waters, which only Greece has the right to exploit," and sent French warships to conduct exercises with the Greek navy in the region.<sup>64</sup>

Turkey is involved in a serious conflict with Greece (also a NATO member) in everything relating to demarcation of economic waters. The Turkish president signed an agreement with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya regarding delineation of the economic waters of the two states that ignores the rights of Greece and Cyprus in the matter. The issue led to a near maritime clash when the two countries deployed their navies adjacent to the disputed area. Pressure that was put on Turkey by Germany and the actions of the secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, led to the two states deciding to let the situation lie. Stoltenberg emphasized, in his talks with the head of the Greek government and the president of Turkey, the importance of resolving the situation in the spirit of allied solidarity and international law. According to him, military delegations from Greece and Turkey met many times at NATO headquarters in Brussels in the aim of creating deconfliction mechanisms to prevent maritime and aerial incidents and accidents. The secretary general noted the progress in the talks and stressed that NATO constitutes an important platform for consulting on matter of ongoing security.<sup>65</sup> According to experts who deal with NATO's relationship with Turkey: "In the final analysis, ..., Turkey today has a triple identity: a strategic partner for Europe, especially in the economic and trade fields; Europe's adversarial interlocutor in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East; and a negative player within NATO. The challenge for EU leaders in 2020 is to combine pushing back Turkey's actions when

64 Anthee Carassava, France Sends Forces to Mediterranean as Greece, Turkey Dispute Territory, *Voanews*, August 14, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/france-sends-forces-mediterranean-greece-turkey-dispute-territory>

65 NATO Secretary General discusses Eastern Mediterranean with Prime Minister Mitsotakis, *NATO News*, September 24, 2020. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_178323.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_178323.htm)

they run counter to EU core interests with cooperation when there is ground for joint action. In trying to do so, they should not expect an easy ride."<sup>66</sup>

As noted, **NATO's doctrine** has not been updated to deal with challenges that have developed, and in particular, those from the **Mediterranean Sea**. Accordingly, the leaders of the countries who participated in NATO's July 2016 Warsaw Summit decided to change the operational plan and operational concepts and adopt a new operational plan (which replaced the operational plan from 2001, Operation Active Endeavour), Operation Sea Guardian. The latter's objective was defined in the following way: "coordination with maritime stakeholders in the Mediterranean Sea to deter, to prevent acts of terror and to mitigate other security risks." The tasks assigned to this force are: building an up-to-date picture of the operations in the Mediterranean Sea and maintaining it in order to assist in identifying possible security risks, and performing three main tasks: maintain maritime situational awareness, deter and counter terrorism and enhance capacity building.<sup>67</sup> The center overseeing the task forces and building the situational awareness is located in Northwood, Britain.

**The various interests NATO members have in Libya:** During 2020, and against the background of the ongoing civil war in Libya, the opposing interests of some NATO members that have forces operating in Libya have sharpened acutely. Turkey, for example, provides massive amounts of essential support to the recognized government (GNA), and has, through military troops in 2020, succeeded in changing the balance of power on the ground. In opposition, France, as noted earlier, is operating vigorously in the sea to enforce the embargo placed on Libya by the UN.<sup>68</sup> As of 2017, the Italian coastguard has worked intensively to **prevent the stream of refugees** from reaching Italy from Libya, which activities are conducted in coordination with GNA in Tripoli, and which have sharply reduced the stream of refugees from North Africa to southern Europe (for further details, see the section on immigration via the sea in the chapter on global developments). Operation Sophia, run by the Italian navy for this purpose, caused disagreement between the alliance members because the Italian prime minister, Paolo Gentiloni, in April 2019, signed an order prohibiting

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66 Pierini, 2020, p. 11.

67 Fact Sheet, Operation Sea Guardian, Allied Maritime Command Northwood UK, Media Center, October 7, 2019. <http://www.mc.nato.int/media-centre/fact-sheets.aspx>

68 The UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on Libya in February 2011, which applies to supply or arms and military equipment to Libya or from it. Since September 2011, the Security Council has allowed arms supplies to the entities considered as Libya's government as recognized in the world, first the National Transitional Council (NTC) and today the Government of National Accord (GNA), contingent on the supplies being approved by the Sanction Committee.

patrol boats from rescuing people at sea. This led to Germany withdrawing from the mission and protesting that Italy's position undermines the operation's urgency. After Italy closed its waters to rescue and charity boats, the European countries could not reach agreement about the question of which countries should retrieve most of the refugees at sea.<sup>69</sup> Against this background, diplomatic talks were held between NATO members in Berlin, Germany, where at the end it was decided to terminate the activities of Operation Sophia in its present form.<sup>70</sup>

In the shadow of conflicting interests of some NATO states in Libya in recent years, as noted above, and without efforts to mediate these differences, the NATO secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, took the initiative and announced that NATO fully supports the work of the UN to find a political solution for the crisis. After Stoltenberg spoke to the head of the Libyan government, Fayeze al-Sarraj, on the phone, "in order to discuss the latest developments in the country". He emphasized the need to recruit the support of all the opposing factions in Libya and all the members of the international community, to support the process that the UN is leading, and to respect the UN's arms embargo. Stoltenberg also expressed support for the process being led by Germany, the EU President, which complement UN efforts to achieve peace and stability in Libya.<sup>71</sup>

Can NATO rise above the interests that are at cross-purposes in Libya and advance peace and rapprochement processes between the various adversaries—we will have to wait and see.

## The Egyptian Navy

In 2019, a chapter comprehensively reviewing the Egyptian navy was included in the Center's annual report. The two reasons that led to the writing of this chapter were:

1. For the first time, the navy is undergoing a process of refurbishment and strengthening that unequivocally positions it as one of the strongest navies in the Middle East region. The navy itself operates in two main sectors: the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. In the Red Sea sector, it faces several challenges that can affect Egypt, and especially impact navigation from and to

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69 Italy to 'block and seize' refugee rescue ship, *Aljazeera*, May 10, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/italy-seize-charity-ship-rescued-migrants-190510111404317.html>

70 Jacopov Barigazzi, Operation Sophia to be closed down and replaced new Libya naval mission will have a different name and area of operation, *Politics*, February 17, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/operation-sophia-to-be-closed-down-and-replaced>

71 NATO Secretary General discusses eastern Mediterranean, Libya with Foreign Minister of Turkey, NATO News, 19 August 2020. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_177523.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_177523.htm)



the Far East, which occurs at one of the most sensitive chokepoints—the Suez Canal.

2. The purchase of four German submarines (without going into the process itself and the political aspects) illuminated just one angle of the strengthening process of the Egyptian navy and the defense security forces' position relative to this strengthening and maintaining the qualitative edge that Israel needs to preserve in the Middle East.

The events that were added in 2020 and influenced the activities of the Egyptian navy were, first and foremost, the deterioration that began in Libya's domestic affairs. In addition, there has also been the Turkish involvement, which led to Egypt being concerned that Turkey, which has ever since the ousting of Morsi been in a political conflict with Egypt, may under circumstances place Turkish forces or proxies on its western border with Egypt, and endanger the security of the Egyptian government.

Against the background of the agreement signed at the end of 2019 between Turkey and Libya on the division of their EEZs, Greece and Egypt declared and demarcated their EEZs, which act underscores, in practice, their joint border, and challenges Turkey's and Libya's aspirations to search for gas in the area, and their joint maritime agreement. According to the treaty signed by them, Egypt and Greece are exclusively allowed to search for resources existing in the area, including petroleum and gas reservoirs.

Against the background of the tension between Turkey and Egypt and the enmity that emerged between the French and Turkish navies (as described above), the Egyptian and French naval forces conducted a joint exercise at the beginning of July 2020 in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Two stealth Aquitaine class frigates (built both for the Egyptian navy and for the French navy) participated in the exercise. They focused on methods for organizing collaboration toward implementation of combat tasks against adversarial naval formations as well as surface and air targets. The Egyptian army spokesman noted that "the exercises are intended to increase the cooperation between the Egyptian and French armed forces in a way that will contribute to improving their abilities and collaborative experience as well as safeguard security and stability in the Mediterranean Sea".<sup>72</sup> In August 2020, the Egyptian and Greek navies held bilateral exercises in the Mediterranean Sea after a visit by Greek ships to Alexandria port. The Greek navy included MEKO class frigates

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72 Sarah Mukabana Egypt, France conduct joint naval drills in Mediterranean SeaCGTN Africa, July 26, 2020. <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/07/26/egypt-france-conduct-joint-naval-drills-in-mediterranean-sea>

and the Egyptian navy included Oliver Hazard Perry class frigates. The exercises were held as part of the general command plan of the Egyptian armed forces to raise military cooperation with all friendly states in the region. There is no doubt that the tension that arose in the Mediterranean Sea in the summer of 2020 was exploited to conduct joint naval exercises and visits to ports as tools in the toolbox of the state levels of different countries in the region.



Figure 9: Two Aquitaine class frigates during the joint French–Egyptian exercise, July 2020, in the Mediterranean Sea

Additionally, Egyptian army forces, at the beginning of July 2020, held a wide-ranging amphibious landing exercise near the border with Libya. Both the Egyptian navy and air force participated in the exercise, called HASM-2020. Local journalists and security correspondents also joined the forces. The forces used the Mistral class Abdul Nasser helicopter carrier, supplied by the French to Egypt, Gowind corvettes, Perry frigates and a type 209 conventional attack submarine.<sup>73</sup>

In the Red Sea, at the beginning of 2020, the Egyptian navy inaugurated the new port of Barnice, located near the border between Egypt and Sudan, and that will be the base used as the supply center for the Egyptian southern navy. In the state ceremony that was held with the participation of President A-Sisi and the senior army command, the speakers noted that the new base positions the Egyptian navy close to the southern entrance of the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait and Yemen. The base also moves the Egyptian navy closer to the Horn of Africa, an important place for Egypt's and the Suez Canal's national security as well as protecting Egyptian interests in the Red Sea, and supports the coalition headed by Saudi Arabia, which

73 Dorian Archus, Egypt conducts large scale exercise HASM-2020, Naval News, July 19, 2020. <https://navalnews.net/egypt-conducts-large-scale-exercise-hasm-2020>

is fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen who are supported by Iran. Egypt President A-Sisi, who dedicated the new base, was also the person who, in 2017, opened the naval headquarters in the same place.<sup>74</sup>

Against the background of the rising tension in the southern Red Sea, in 2020 the Egyptian navy held several joint exercises with friendly navies in the Red Sea region: the Egyptian frigate Suez and the Spanish frigate Santa Maria participated in wargames held at the Barnice army base in the southern Red Sea. The joint exercise demonstrated high coping and combat ability as well as the readiness of the Egyptian naval forces. Drills for defending against air strikes, for strengthening naval attack deterrence and supply and fueling at sea were held.

On January 22, 2020, the Morgen 16 naval exercise was held in the Red Sea in which the Royal Saudi navy and Egyptian naval forces participated. The drills continued for several days and included a series of joint drills between the two countries that were wide-ranging and strengthened the maritime security measures in the region.

Undoubtedly, the Egyptian navy recognizes the strategic importance of the Red Sea for Egypt, understands that terror and pirate attacks and the sense of insecurity that permeates the region, especially in the area of Bab al-Mandab Strait, may significantly affect Egypt's economy and security (in light of the large part the tariffs paid for passing through the Suez Canal comprise of the Egyptian government's income), and, accordingly, are prepared to safeguard navigation in the region using its own forces, or in partnership with friendly navies.

There is no doubt that the Egyptian navy has been transformed into one of the dominant navies in terms of its operations and order of force both in the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

## **Changes in the security policies and resource allocation to these in selected countries**

### ***Security expenditures – general trends***

The total amount of global military expenditure in 2019 was 1,917 billion dollars, according to the new data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The total amount of global military expenditure in 2019 is 3.6% greater than in 2018, and the annual increase was the greatest since 2010. The five states that had

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74 Hassan Abdel Zaher, New naval base boosts Egypt's presence in the Red Sea, The Arab Weekly, January 19, 2020. <https://thearabweekly.com/new-naval-base-boosts-egypts-presence-red-sea>

the largest military expenditure in 2019, which constitutes 62% of the total amount, were the US, China, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia. This was the first time that two Asian states (China and India) appear among the three countries with the largest military budget.

The 2019 global military expenditure represented 2.2% of the global gross domestic product (i.e., the global product), equal to about 249 dollars per person. "Global military expenditure was 7.2 per cent higher in 2019 than it was in 2010, showing a trend that military spending growth has accelerated in recent years,' says Dr Nan Tian, SIPRI Researcher. 'This is the highest level of spending since the 2008 global financial crisis...'"<sup>75</sup> Figure 10 demonstrates the progress of security budgets since the beginning of the 1990s, segmented by area.

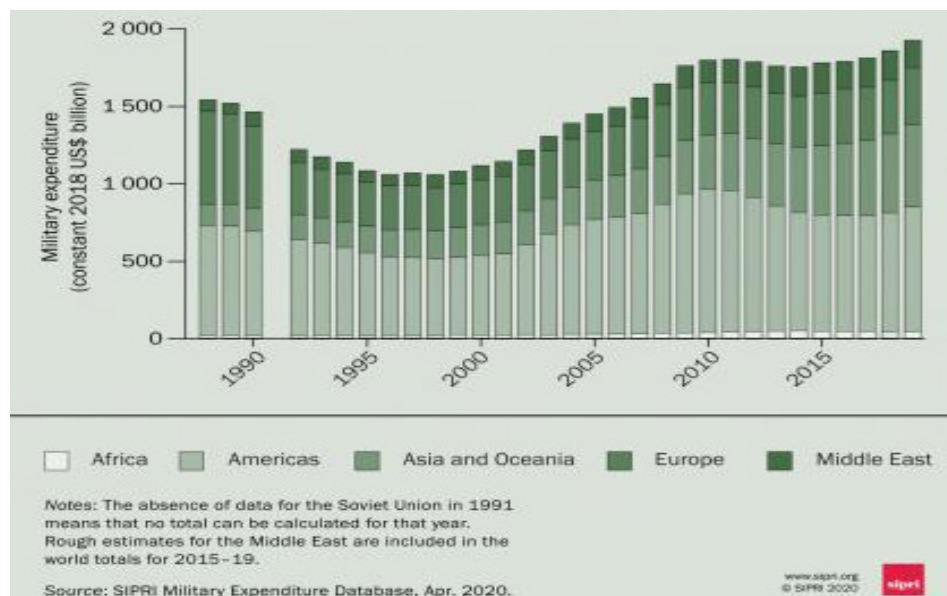


Figure 10: Global military expenditure by region for the years 1998–2019

The **US** military expenditure grew 5.3% to a total of 732 billion dollars in 2019, and constituted 38% of global military expenditure. The increase in US expenditure in 2019 alone was equal to Germany's entire military expenditure for the whole year.

75 Global military expenditure sees largest annual increase in a decade—says SIPRI—reaching \$1917 billion in 2019, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), April 27, 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/global-military-expenditure-sees-largest-annual-increase-decade-says-sipri-reaching-1917-billion>

The increase reflects the change in US policy in everything related to competition between superpowers.

Table 5: Data for the ten countries with the highest military expenditure globally

Rank	Country	Military expenditure, 2019 (US\$ b.)	Change in military expenditure (%)		Military expenditure as a share of GDP (%)		Share of world total, 2019 (%)	
			2018–19	2010–19	2019	2010		
2019	2018							
1	1	United States	732	5.3	-15	3.4	4.9	38
2	2	China	(261)	5.1	85	(1.9)	(1.9)	(14)
3	4	India	71.1	6.8	37	2.4	2.7	3.4
4	5	Russia	65.1	4.5	30	3.9	3.6	3.4
5	3	Saudi Arabia	(61.9)	-16	14	(8.0)	8.6	(3.2)
6	6	France	50.1	1.6	3.5	1.9	2.0	2.6
7	9	Germany	49.3	10	15	1.3	1.3	2.6
8	7	United Kingdom	48.7	0.0	-15	1.7	2.4	2.5
9	8	Japan	47.6	-0.1	2.0	0.9	1.0	2.5
10	10	South Korea	43.9	7.5	36	2.7	2.5	2.3

( ) = estimated figure; GDP = gross domestic product.

Note: Figures and percentage shares may not add up to stated totals or subtotals due to the conventions of rounding.

**China** and **India** lead in military expenditure in Asia. China's military expenditure reached 216 billion dollars in 2019, an increase of 5.1% compared to 2018, whereas India increased its defense budget by 6.8% to 71.1 billion dollars. The tension and antagonism among India, Pakistan and China were prime motivators for India's large military expenditure.

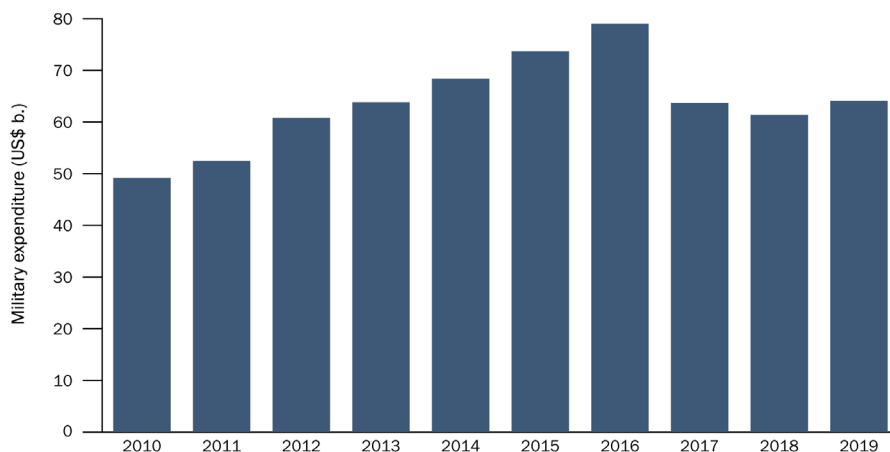
In east Asia, in addition to China and Pakistan, **Japan** (47.6 billion dollars) and **South Korea** (43.9 billion dollars) had the highest military expenditure in Asia and Oceania. The military expenditure in this region has risen steadily since 1989.

**Germany** led Europe in growth of military expenditure, which grew by 10% in 2019, totaling 49.3 billion dollars. This increase is the most significant among the 15 leading countries in military expenditure in 2019. The increase in German military expenditure may be partially explained by the concept of an increased threat from Russia, common to many NATO members. The military expenditure of **France** and **Britain** remained relatively stable.

There was a sharp increase in military expenditure among **NATO members in central Europe**: for example, Bulgaria's expenditure grew by 127%, primarily because of

payments for new warplanes, and Rumania by 17%. The total amount of expenditure by all 29 NATO member states was 1,035 billion dollars in 2019.

In 2019, **Russia** had the fourth largest military expenditure in the world. We note that in recent years, Russia developed military modernization programs and adopted a more assertive foreign policy. Russia's military expenditure grew significantly in the past two decades. In realistic terms, we are talking about 30% between 2010 and 2019, and in nominal terms, 175% (Figure 11). Even though Russia's military expenditure decreased in 2017 and 2018, it grew again in 2019, reaching 65.1 billion dollars. The military burden on Russia's economy, that is, military expenditure as part of its gross domestic product, was 3.9% in 2019. This was higher than in 2010, but much lower than the peak, which was 5.5% in 2016.



**Figure 1. Russian military expenditure, 2010–19**

Notes: Figures are in US\$ b. at constant (2018) prices and exchange rates.

Figures and percentage shares may not add up to stated totals or subtotals due to the conventions of rounding.

Figure 11. Russian military expenditure, 2010–2019<sup>76</sup>

In its multiyear military modernization program, Russia allocates high priority to certain parts of its armed forces. For instance, its nuclear program has received focused priority since the beginning of the 2000s, and its delivery systems, and especially its naval arm, underwent broad modernization. In addition to upgrading these systems' equipment, they also received broader media exposure.

<sup>76</sup> Siemon T. Wezeman, Russia's military spending: Frequently asked questions, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, April 27, 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2020/russias-military-spending-frequently-asked-questions>

SIPRI noted that the Russian media and the official media tend to reflect the image of progress in modernization of the armed forces in every aspect of military abilities. This is extremely evident in the official information related to integration of new equipment. Nevertheless, the Swedish institute noted that a **gap exists between the levels of modernization** that were declared and what is actually seen by independent observers. Many large armament programs never reached the targets for which they were budgeted, and Russia has delayed or reduced purchase plans.<sup>77</sup> These programs may still be changed, especially in relation to the recession that is predicted will follow the COVID pandemic. Following the publication of the programs for 2020–2022 at the end of 2019, the price of petroleum entered a period of fluctuation and volatility. These economic factors are likely to limit Russia's future military expenditure.

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77 Ibid.

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## Geography and Strategy in the Red Sea – The Current Situation

***Benni Ben Ari and Moshe Terdiman***

### General

The Red Sea is an intercontinental sea. It is the northwestern extension of the Indian Ocean, which is bordered by the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula and the eastern coast of northeastern Africa. At its northern extreme, the Red Sea splits into two long and narrow gulfs. The eastern one is the Gulf of Aqaba (gulf of Eilat) and the western one is the Gulf of Suez which connects the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean by way of the Suez Canal. On the western shores of the Red Sea are Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea, with Djibouti at its southern tip. On its eastern shores are Saudi Arabia and Yemen and at the northern tip, on the shores of the Gulf of Aqaba, are Jordan and Israel.

The Red Sea has been an important sea route since the dawn of history, primarily for the countries on its shores and for the adjacent regions. It was already a major trade route between Europe and Asia in the time of the Roman Empire (including a land segment by way of Egypt), used by Arab, Indian and even Jewish traders.<sup>1</sup> The Red Sea has been serving as a major route for pilgrims traveling to Mecca. The Western powers had strategic and economic interests in the Red Sea only after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which significantly shortened the route between Europe and Asia.

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the Second World War, only three powers had a significant presence in the Red Sea and its environs: Britain, France and Italy, and they guaranteed economic and military stability. Even after oil began to flow through the Persian Gulf and the trade routes to Asia, there was no increase in strategic interest in the Red Sea, and the blocking of the Suez Canal from 1967 to 1975 did not constitute an insurmountable problem since oil tankers were able to circumvent it by going around southern Africa. Only France maintained a presence in the region, a force that consisted of several thousand troops in Djibouti. The US was primarily concerned with its interests in the Persian Gulf and did not adopt a policy toward the Red Sea nor did it maintain any military forces there; rather it relied primarily on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Since the mid-1970s, only Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have maintained a military presence in the northern Red Sea while

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1 For further details on trade in the Red Sea, see Aryeh Roneh, *Shipping in the Writings of the Cairo Geniza*, Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy and the Maritime Policy and Strategy Research Center, (September 2020), Haifa University. [Hebrew]



forces of the French navy have protected the trade routes in the southern section, in spite of the—mostly land-based—local conflicts (between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Somalia and Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti and Eritrea and Sudan, as well as the civil war in Yemen). Apart from events connected to the Israeli-Arab conflict, maritime traffic in the Red Sea has not been disrupted since the early 1990s, although the Somali pirates started their attacks against international shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. When the level of maritime piracy increased to a point that it threatened sea routes to and from the Red Sea, foreign naval forces were sent to the region, primarily to the Gulf of Aden, the Horn of Africa and the coast of Somalia. Since the early 2000s, a number of joint naval task forces have been established (Combined Maritime Forces – CMF) with the participation of 33 countries (some of which operate as part of the task force and others that operate independently), which protect the routes. This has significantly reduced piracy activity, to the point that it was almost eliminated completely in 2017.

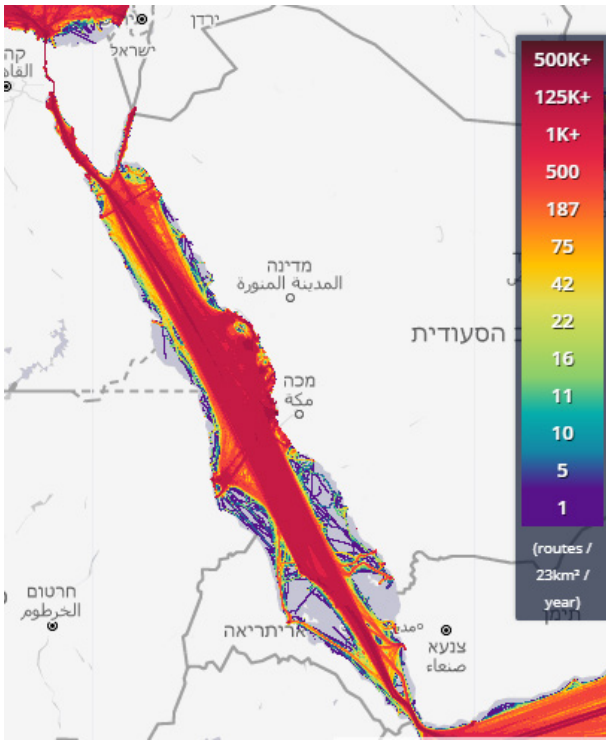


Figure 1: The density of traffic in the Red Sea (aggregate data for 2019). Tens of thousands of ships use the main shipping lanes in the Red Sea<sup>2</sup>

2 Processing of data retrieved from [www.marinetraffic.com](http://www.marinetraffic.com).

## Chokepoints and their importance

Apart from the oil, gas and mineral deposits, the main strategic factor which contributes to the Red Sea's importance is that it is a shipping lane that connects Europe and Asia, which explains the importance of its chokepoints. There are three maritime chokepoints in the Red Sea, one of which connects the Red Sea to the Suez Canal (the Strait of Jubal and the Strait of Milan), another one connects the Red Sea to the ports of Eilat and Aqaba (the Straits of Tiran) and have international significance and a third—the Bab al-Mandeb Straits — which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean .

### *Bab el Mandeb*

Bab el Mandeb is a strait that connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and it is one of the most important strategic chokepoints in the world. It is 20 miles wide and contains a number of islands. The Perim island divides the strait into two routes: the eastern one which is small and narrow with a width of about 2 miles and a depth of 30 meters and the western one which is larger and wider, with a width of about 16 miles and a depth of 300 meters. More than 60 ships pass through the strait each day. It is considered to be a dangerous shipping route which limits the traffic of ships, and in particular tankers, to two lanes whose width is only two miles – one for entry and one for exit from the strait. In addition to the geographic constraints, the straits are located in a politically unstable region where there are threats and challenges to the freedom and security of shipping.



Figure 2: The Bab el Mandeb Strait between Ras Menheli in Yemen and Ras Siyyan in Djibouti<sup>3</sup>

3 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Bab-el-Mandeb.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Bab-el-Mandeb.png)

The factors that have made the Bab el Mandeb Strait dangerous to shipping originate in the political instability in some of the neighboring countries. The war in Yemen between Houthi rebels and the regime has resulted in rebel attacks on shipping and the Houthis’ threat to close the strait for Saudi and UAE vessels. The increasing pirate activity in the areas near Somalia and the Horn of Africa has also threatened the international shipping. However, thanks to the activity of the CMF in recent years, the scale of pirate attacks on ships in the region has been reduced to only a few each year.<sup>4</sup> Also Iran’s policy, which supports the Houthi rebels against Saudi Arabia, as well as the friction between it and the US and the Somali pirates’ activity- all has led to the increased presence of Iranian ships in the area of the strait with the goal of demonstrating presence and project power.

***Straits of Jubal and Milan***

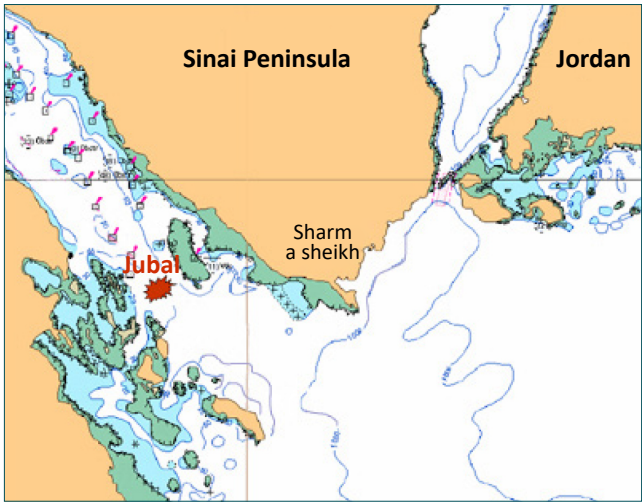


Figure 3: The Straits of Jubal and Milan at the entrance to the Gulf of Suez<sup>5</sup>

The Strait of Jubal, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Suez, is only six miles wide at its narrowest point, and it is surrounded by a huge number of sand bars and shoals, as well as being the location of a significant number of ship wrecks. The depth in the center of the strait is about 80 meters and in its southern portion is 500–700 meters; however, it is filled with coral reefs and, as a result, even in the areas of deep water where the shipping lanes are passing, there are sand bars at

4 ICC International Maritime Bureau; Piracy and armed robbery against ships report, (2020). [https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2019\\_Annual\\_Piracy\\_Report.pdf](https://www.icc-ccs.org/reports/2019_Annual_Piracy_Report.pdf)  
5 <http://www.amutayam.org.il/?CategoryID=616&ArticleID=1469>

shallow depthsthat constitute a danger to ships. To the east of the Strait of Jubal is the Strait of Milan which is even shallower and narrower and is not used for regular shipping traffic. It does allow for the passage of ships up to a certain size but requires precise and careful navigation.

### *The Straits of Tiran and the islands of Tiran and Sanafir*

These two islands are located at the entrance to the Strait of Tiran between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. The islands are sandy and barren and sit atop coral reefs. Between the island of Tiran and the Egyptian coast are two shipping lanes that are separated by coral reefs. The eastern lane, called the Grafton Passage, is less than a kilometer wide with a depth of about 80 meters and it is used for northbound shipping. The western lane, called the Enterprise Passage, is about 1200 meters wide and is used for southbound shipping. The depth of the strait ranges between about 250 meters in the western passage and about 70 meters in the eastern passage and its overall width at its narrowest point is about 4 km.

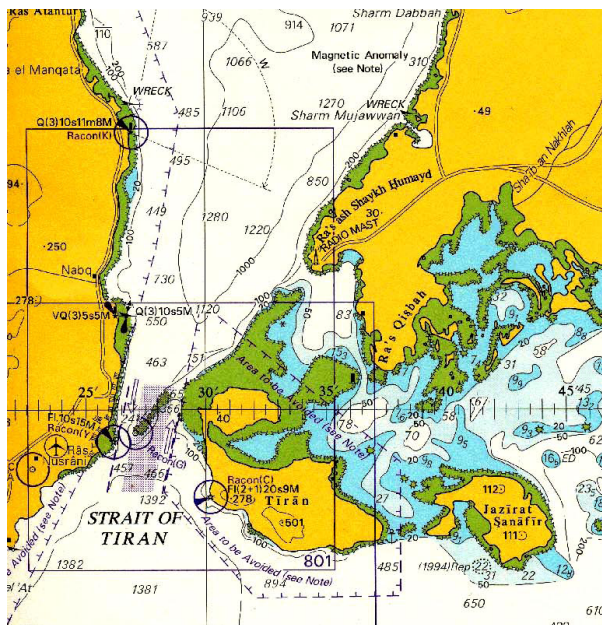


Figure 4: Tiran and Sanafir at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba<sup>6</sup>

6 [https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99\\_%D7%98%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9F](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99_%D7%98%D7%99%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%9F); <https://www.electronicpoint.com/forums/threads/admiralty-chart-with-led-sequences.252299>

The islands were ceded by Saudi Arabia to Egypt in 1949 (after the capture of Umm Rashrash [Eilat] by the IDF) and were returned to Saudi Arabia in 2017 with the consent of Israel (since they were part of the Israel- Egypt peace accord signed in 1979).

Only in the last three decades has the Red Sea and its vicinity become a focus of geopolitical and geostrategic conflict, while at the same time the economic activity of the countries in the region—most of which are poor and undeveloped—has flourished.

### The Red Sea – both a source and a conduit for energy

The main route for the transport of oil and gas from the Persian Gulf to Europe is by way of the Suez Canal and the SUMED oil pipeline in Egypt.<sup>7</sup> The oil travels through the Bab el Mandeb Strait, through the Red Sea and then by way of the Strait of Jubal to the Gulf of Suez. Much smaller quantities travel through the Straits of Tiran in the direction of Jordan and Israel. At the same time, oil and gas is transported from the fields in the Red Sea and from the Saudi East-West Pipeline northward to the Suez Canal and southward to Asia, primarily to India, Singapore and China. In 2018, 6.2 million barrels of crude oil and oil distillates passed through the strait each day in the direction of Europe, the US and Asia, accounting for 9 percent of all oil transportation by sea (Figures 5 and 6).<sup>8</sup>

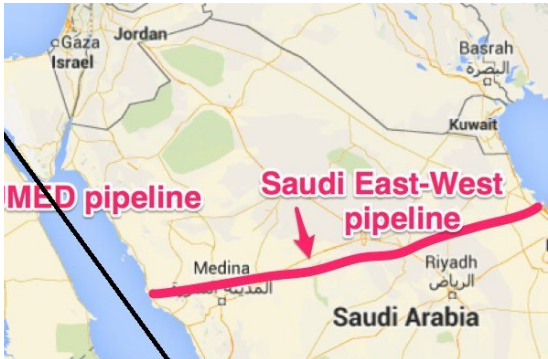


Figure 5: Oil pipelines in the Red Sea region<sup>9</sup>

7 The SUMED oil pipeline is also known as the Suez Mediterranean pipeline. It is used for the transport of crude oil from the terminal at Ain Sukhna on the coast of the Red Sea to Alexandria on the coast of the Mediterranean. The pipeline’s aim is to serve as an alternative for oil tankers travelling from the Persian Gulf to the Suez Canal. It is 320 km long and has been active since 1977.

8 <https://safety4sea.com/bab-el-mandeb-strait-crucial-for-oil-and-natural-gas-shipments>

9 <https://twitter.com/tankertrackers/status/982167978593599489?lang=da>

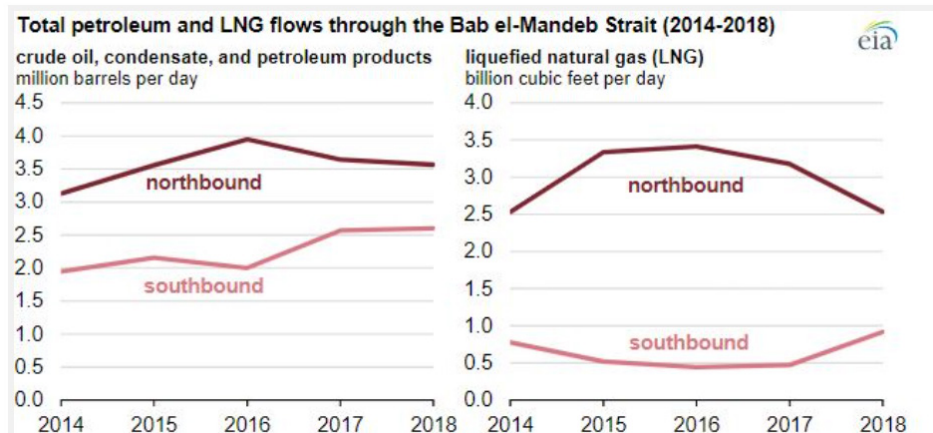


Figure 6: Traffic of oil and gas through the Bab el Mandeb Strait<sup>10</sup>

Since the Red Sea is a primary route for the transport of global oil and thanks to the normalization agreements (the Abraham Accords) between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, it is now possible to use the oil pipeline from Eilat to Ashkelon in order to transport oil from the UAE by a maritime route through the Red Sea and from Ashkelon to the Mediterranean. .

In parallel to the geopolitical developments that have been taking place during the last two years thanks to the discovery of large amounts of natural gas in Saudi Arabia's economic waters, the Red Sea has also become a source of energy in its own right and has not only served as a conduit for energy transportation. On March 10<sup>th</sup> 2019, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum declared a tender to receive price quotes from international companies for oil and gas exploration in ten maritime blocs in the Red Sea, a move that enraged Sudan, since some of the exploration will take place in the economic waters of the Halaib Triangle<sup>11</sup>, an area that is under Egyptian control but is contested by Sudan.

Egypt suffers directly from the threats in the Bab el Mandeb Strait due to both the shipping traffic through the Suez Canal and the supply of oil to the SUMED pipeline.

10 "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments," US Energy Information Administration (27 August 2019).  
<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073#>

11 The Halaib triangle is an area on the border between Egypt and Sudan on the coast of the Red Sea. The sovereignty over the area has been contested by the two countries since Sudan's independence in 1956. Starting in the mid-1990s, Egypt has had de facto control of the area. It has issued a tender for oil exploration in the triangle's waters.

In addition, the conflict between Egypt and Sudan has escalated in view of the warming of relations between Sudan and Turkey following the leasing of the Suakin port in Sudan (which is located on an island very close to shore). Turkey leased the port for 99 years on the basis of it being an Ottoman fortification in the past.

This tension passed quickly and on December 29<sup>th</sup> 2019 Tarek al Mulla, the Egyptian Petroleum Minister, declared that Chevron and the joint Shell - Mubadala consortium from the UAE had won the tender. This helps explain the opening of the Berenice Military Base (Egypt) in January 2020 which is meant to send a clear message to Sudan and to protect the natural resources located in the economic waters of Southern Egypt.

It is still too early to tell whether this change, which symbolizes the entry of the Red Sea into the global energy market, will mean greater importance for the Red Sea or perhaps will create a common energy market between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea, in which Egypt will have the leading role. It is also too early to know whether this change will contribute to the prosperity of the countries in the Red Sea basin or whether it will constitute a source of conflict and struggles for power. Only time will tell.

### **Blockading and mining of the straits in the Red Sea**

The blockading of the Red Sea will prevent the passage of tankers and cargo ships coming from the Persian Gulf or from the Indian Ocean on their way to the Mediterranean Sea and will make it necessary for them to sail around Africa, a much longer and more expensive trip. It will also prevent the passage of ships from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, on their way to Asia and Africa. Since all of the straits in the Red Sea are maritime chokepoints and have geostrategic importance, regional players have exploited the possibility of blocking ship traffic in order to achieve political or strategic goals, in order to impose an economic blockade and as a basis for political negotiations following acts of terror.

The blockading of the Straits of Tiran by the Egyptians in 1956 and 1967 led to Operation 'Kadesh' and the 'Six Day War', respectively. In both of these episodes, the islands of Tiran and Sanafir were captured by Israel. In 2017, sovereignty over the islands was passed back to Saudi Arabia by Egypt.

The Suez Canal was nationalized by Egypt in 1956, which then prohibited the passage of Israeli ships through it. At the end of the Six Day War (1967), the Canal was blocked

to shipping until 1975<sup>12</sup>, when it was cleaned and the debris that had blocked the passage of ships was cleared. After the revolution in Egypt in 2011, a number of incidents were reported in which ISIS linked terrorist organizations threatened to disrupt the traffic of ships through the canal and made attempts to do so.

The Strait of Jubal was mined by the Egyptians in the Yom Kippur War (October 1973) and the Siris oil tanker, which was on its way from Eilat to Abu Rodeis, was sunk as a result. The crew was rescued by Israel Air Force helicopters. A few weeks later, the Sirena tanker was damaged by a mine but managed to continue on to Eilat.

A terror attack was carried out in the Bab el Mandeb Strait on June 11<sup>th</sup> 1971 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) against the Coral Sea, an Israeli tanker that was flying a Liberian flag and was on its way to Eilat. The tanker was hit by several RPGs rockets but continued to sail.

Egypt asked Southern Yemen to blockade the straits to Israeli ships during the Yom Kippur War. On October 7<sup>th</sup> 1973; it was reported that three torpedoes were fired at a tanker called the Samson but missed.

## Yemen and the Houthis

The countries bordering the Red Sea are all Muslim, apart from Eritrea and Israel. But this fact has not prevented political and military conflicts over sovereignty and energy sources.

The civil war in Yemen (which began in 2015) made it possible for the Houthi rebels (the Ansar Allah movement) to threaten and carry out various attacks against international shipping through the Bab el Mandeb Strait starting in 2015. The Houthis are supported by Iran which supplies them with modern weaponry, including coast-to-sea missiles, sea mines and remote-controlled explosive boats. They are able to threaten shipping because they control the whole southwestern and western side of Yemen up to the border with Saudi Arabia (including the capital Sana'a) and also the Red Sea coast. Commercial ships, tankers and fishing vessels have been damaged by floating mines (of which there are hundreds) that were laid by the Houthis in the vicinity of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Yemeni coast.

The Houthi rebels held the port city of Al Hudaydah, which is located on the coast of the Red Sea and is where their naval force is stationed. Their vessels have operated

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12 The blockade followed the capture of the Sinai Peninsula by Israel in the Six Day War and continued until the signing of the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Egypt following the Yom Kippur War (1974).



against the navies of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and even the US since 2015. The rebels' naval forces have carried out numerous successful operations against Saudi and Egyptian vessels in the Red Sea. Among others, they fired missiles at vessels of the Egyptian, Saudi and American navies; they have dispatched unmanned suicide boats; and they have used naval commando forces in various missions, including the capture of autonomous underwater vessels belonging to the US Navy.<sup>13</sup>

In January 2017, the naval forces of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia initiated Operation 'Golden Arrow' in order to recapture the coastal strip under the control of the rebels. Ships of the Saudi navy located and evacuated sea mines, both in the approaches to the Yemenite ports and along the international shipping lanes.

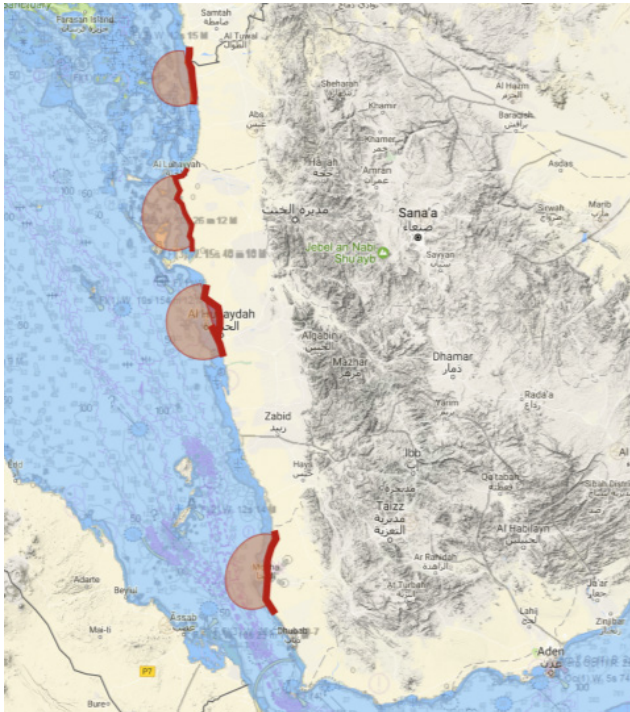


Figure 7: Areas of the Yemenite coast with a high risk of mines as of May 2017<sup>14</sup>

13 For further details on the maritime aspects of the Houthi fighting, see Yoram Laks, "Iran – the Maritime Involvement and Influence in the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea," Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2016, Shaul Horev and Ehud Goren (eds.), p. 95–108, Haifa University [https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN\\_Report201617.pdf](https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN_Report201617.pdf)

14 UK P&I, Special Advisory: Naval mines and MBIEDs off Yemen (19 May 2017). [https://www.ukpandi.com/-/media/files/imports/13108/bulletins/28037---170519\\_nya\\_m\\_special\\_advisory\\_yemen.pdf](https://www.ukpandi.com/-/media/files/imports/13108/bulletins/28037---170519_nya_m_special_advisory_yemen.pdf)

The war in Yemen, which has been raging for more than five years, has seriously reduced the port activity in Yemen. A number of ports that had ceased functioning have now restored their operations and in particular the largest port in the country located at the city of Aden. Nonetheless, the output of the ports is low due to, among other things, the fear among international companies of working with the ports in Yemen.

The recent attacks against ships in the Gulf of Aden and in the Bab el Mandeb Strait have emphasized the risks in navigating through these waters. Maritime alerts have been issued by various organizations in view of the numerous risks and the large swath of the ocean that is under threat. The CMF has established a Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC)<sup>15</sup> in which its ships patrol, provide protection and search for and remove mines.



Figure 8: The Maritime Security Transit Corridor in the Bab el Mandeb Strait and in the southern Red Sea

## Geopolitics in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa

There are a number of basic facts underlying the geopolitical developments in the Red Sea in recent years. From a geopolitical perspective, and apart from the countries along the coast of the Red Sea, the Red Sea basin includes four additional countries:

15 COMBINED MARITIME FORCES (CMF), Maritime Security Transit Corridor (MSTC). <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/maritime-security-transit-corridor-mstc>

Eritrea and South Sudan, which do not have access to the sea, but are dependent on the Red Sea for their import and export needs, and Somalia and Somaliland, which are located on the coast of the Gulf of Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea.

Throughout history the Red Sea has served as an essential trade route between Europe and the West on the one hand and Asia and Africa on the other. As a result, the countries located at the choke points (the Suez Canal and the Bab el Mandeb Strait), i.e. Egypt, Yemen and Djibouti, have great strategic importance. In this context, it is important to recall that geographically the Red Sea is an integral part of three different geographical regions, which meet at the Bab el Mandeb Strait: The Middle East, Africa and the Indian Ocean basin.

During the past two decades, freedom of navigation in the Red Sea has been under threat from three sources that originate from Yemen and Somalia, both of which are failed states without a stable government.

The first is the rise of al Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen and Somalia. The al Qaeda organization in the Arabian Peninsula has carried out two maritime terror attacks: on October 12<sup>th</sup> 2000 against the USS Cole while it was anchored in the port of Aden, which killed 17 American sailors and wounded 39; and on October 6<sup>th</sup> 2002 against the Limburg, a French oil tanker, in which one crew member was killed and 26 wounded.

The second source is the Somali pirates who operate along the coast of Somalia and have disrupted trade in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean, starting in the latter half of the 2000s. During this period, Somali pirates have attacked hundreds of vessels, have kidnapped dozens of vessels and have taken hundreds of hostages. However, as a result of the establishment of an international force by the EU and an international maritime policing force, the number of attacks by Somali pirates has been on the decline since 2010, although in recent years they have begun to attack ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean with renewed vigor.

The third source is the civil war in Yemen, which began five years ago. A coalition of states under the leadership of Saudi Arabia initiated Operation 'Decisive Storm', with the goal of expelling the Houthis from Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, which they captured earlier that year, and restoring control of the country to the government of Yemen headed by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Countries located on the coast of the Red Sea are involved in this war: Sudan, Egypt and Jordan are directly involved; Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia are involved indirectly by providing the coalition with access to their territorial waters, their air space and the bases in their territory. The Houthis have attacked coalition ships using explosive boats, sea mines and anti-ship

missiles, as well as US Navy ships because they provide support to the coalition forces. Subsequently, they also attacked commercial vessels and threatened to block international passage through the Red Sea. As a result, the Houthis currently constitute a very real threat to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the international trade that passes through it.

The island of Socotra is located strategically at the approaches to the Red Sea. The group of islands is 'on paper' under the sovereignty of Yemen but since April 2018 the military forces of the UAE have controlled the island, including its port and airport, and have provided humanitarian aid to its inhabitants. The UAE has essentially annexed the island despite the protests of Yemen. In February 2020, units of the Yemenite army rebelled joined the forces supported by the UAE. Administrative control was restored to Yemen in May 2018 despite the flag of the UAE flying over the government buildings in Hadibu, the capital.<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of September 2020, Yemen claimed that the UAE is trying to convert the island into a military base and according to foreign sources it may be serving as a base for Israeli Intelligence in order to gather information in the region, particularly the Bab el Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, and to track the Iranian navy in these areas.<sup>17</sup>

The Federal Republic of Somalia is a state in eastern Africa whose regime suffers from a lack of stability and is unable to impose its will on the various forces in the country. Actual control and authority in the country is in the hands of autonomous entities, such as Puntland or an independent entity that is not recognized internationally, namely Somaliland, as well as rival groups and factions that lead the forces of resistance and opposition.

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16 Socotra is under the control of the Southern Transitional Council which broke off from the government of Yemen. It is recognized by the West and the Council has won the support of the UAE. Therefore, the UAE still has a military presence in Socotra.

17 Yemen Ready to Counter Israeli Military Presence on Occupied Islands: Expert, Tasnim News Agency (19 September 2020). <https://bit.ly/34LrUbw>; UAE, Saudi Arabia accused of allowing Israel onto Yemen's Socotra, TRTWorld (2 September 2020). <https://bit.ly/381WQ9t>; UAE, Saudi Arabia let Israel send intelligence agents into Yemen: reports, TheNewsArab (2 September 2020). <https://bit.ly/3ee5SRS>; "Israel will establish an Intelligence base on the Island of Socotra together with the UAE," nziv (August 26<sup>th</sup> 2020). <https://nziv.net/51459> [Hebrew]



Figure 9: The island of Socotra at the approaches to the Red Sea<sup>18</sup>



Figure 10: The new states in Somalia<sup>19</sup>

**Processes of peace, reconciliation and normalization in the Horn of Africa**

The need to ensure freedom of navigation through the Red Sea and to eliminate the threats to it, forms the background to the struggles over hegemony among the global powers and the regional powers. These struggles—or more correctly the rare convergence of interests between the global powers, the regional powers and the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia, which have exploited these struggles in order to further achieve their goals and to promote their status and the status of their countries in the international arena—have directly contributed to the processes of reconciliation and normalization that have characterized the countries of the Horn of Africa during the past two years.

During the first half of 2018, the conditions were ripe to achieve stability in the Horn of Africa, for the first time in the modern history of the region. The achievement of regional stability in the Horn of Africa was a joint interest of the US and China. Saudi Arabia and the UAE played an important role in mediating between the two. Abiy Ahmed, who was elected as the Ethiopian Prime Minister on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, sought to exploit this rare opportunity in order to strengthen the status of Ethiopia as a regional maritime power with access to the sea. Similarly, Isaias Afwerki, the President of Eritrea also sought to exploit the opportunity in order to improve Eritrea’s international status and in order to remove the sanctions imposed by the UN in 2009.

18 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oman\\_Sea\\_map-fr.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oman_Sea_map-fr.svg)  
 19 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115069>

These peace processes began to coalesce on July 9<sup>th</sup> 2018, when Abiy Ahmed and Isaias Afwerki signed a joint declaration for peace and friendship and announced an end to the 20-year-old state of war between their countries and the renewal of diplomatic relations. Already at the end of that month, President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmaajo of Somalia made a historic visit to Asmara, during which the presidents of Somalia and Eritrea declared a resumption of relations between their countries. At the same time, Afwerki played a key role in the reconciliation process between the government of Ethiopia and some of the opposition organizations which were headquartered in Asmara. On September 5<sup>th</sup> 2018, the presidents of Somalia and Eritrea and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia held their first three-way summit meeting in Asmara, at the end of which they signed a joint declaration for economic, social, cultural and military cooperation and announced that they would work together to promote regional peace and security. The next day, the foreign ministers of Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea arrived in Djibouti where they met with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti. As a result of the meeting, Eritrea and Djibouti agreed to renew relations between them. Apparently, Saudi Arabia was also involved in the mediation activity between the two countries. Ten days later, on September 16<sup>th</sup>, the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the peace processes in the Horn of Africa became known. This occurred when Afwerki and Abiy Ahmed signed a peace, friendship and cooperation agreement between their two countries in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the presence of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud; Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Saudi heir apparent; Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayedbin Sultan Al Nahyan, the Foreign Minister of the UAE; Moussa Faki Maamat, the Chairman of the African Union; and António Guterres, the Director General of the UN. The next day, on September 17<sup>th</sup>, there was an historic summit meeting in Jeddah between the presidents of Djibouti and Eritrea at the invitation of the Saudi heir apparent, Mohammed bin Salman.

As a result of these developments, the UN Security Council decided unanimously on November 14<sup>th</sup> 2018 to remove the arms embargo and sanctions that had been imposed on Eritrea in 2009 due to its supplying of weapons to the al-Shabaab terror organization that has been active in Somalia (a claim that Eritrea always denied) and due to its refusal to resolve its border dispute with Djibouti. In addition, Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

The regional peace processes are continuing. On the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 the leaders of Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea arrived in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia for a second summit meeting. They stressed respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of Somalia. The third summit meeting took

place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, where the leaders adopted a joint plan of action for 2020 and beyond which focused on the stabilization of peace, regional stability and security and the promotion of economic and social development.

Although the peace, reconciliation and normalization processes are attracting investment to the Horn of Africa countries (Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland, Eritrea and Ethiopia) from all over the world, they are also having an effect on the rivalries between the global powers and the regional powers for hegemony and influence in the Red Sea basin.

### **The struggle for hegemony among global and regional powers in the Red Sea basin**

The guarantee of freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the activity to eliminate the threats to it, together with the peace, reconciliation and normalization processes taking place in the Horn of Africa exist in the background to the rivalries taking place in recent years among the global powers and the regional powers for hegemony and influence in the Red Sea.

The first rivalry is between the global powers—primarily Japan, China, India, the US, France and Russia—over hegemony and influence in the Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa, which includes a foothold in the Gulf of Aden, Djibouti and the Horn of Africa countries. The second rivalry is between the key countries located in the region—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey—which began in June 2017 when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and Mauritania cut off relations with Qatar. This rivalry has focused on the western shore of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Due to its strategic location on the Bab el Mandeb Strait and its stable presidential regime, Djibouti is home to the largest number of foreign military bases in the world. Djibouti gained its independence from France in 1977 and until 2002 there was only a single French military base located in the country, which was the largest outside France. In 2001, as a result of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack, President Ismail Omar Guelleh invited the global powers to establish military bases on Djibouti's territory in order to fight terror. In 2002, the US established 'Camp Lemonnier' in Djibouti, its largest permanent military base in Africa, for the purpose of fighting terrorism in Somalia and Yemen. Djibouti is also the home for military bases of the EU, Italy, Japan and China. Stationed at the French military base are also German and Spanish soldiers who are there to combat Somali maritime pirates.

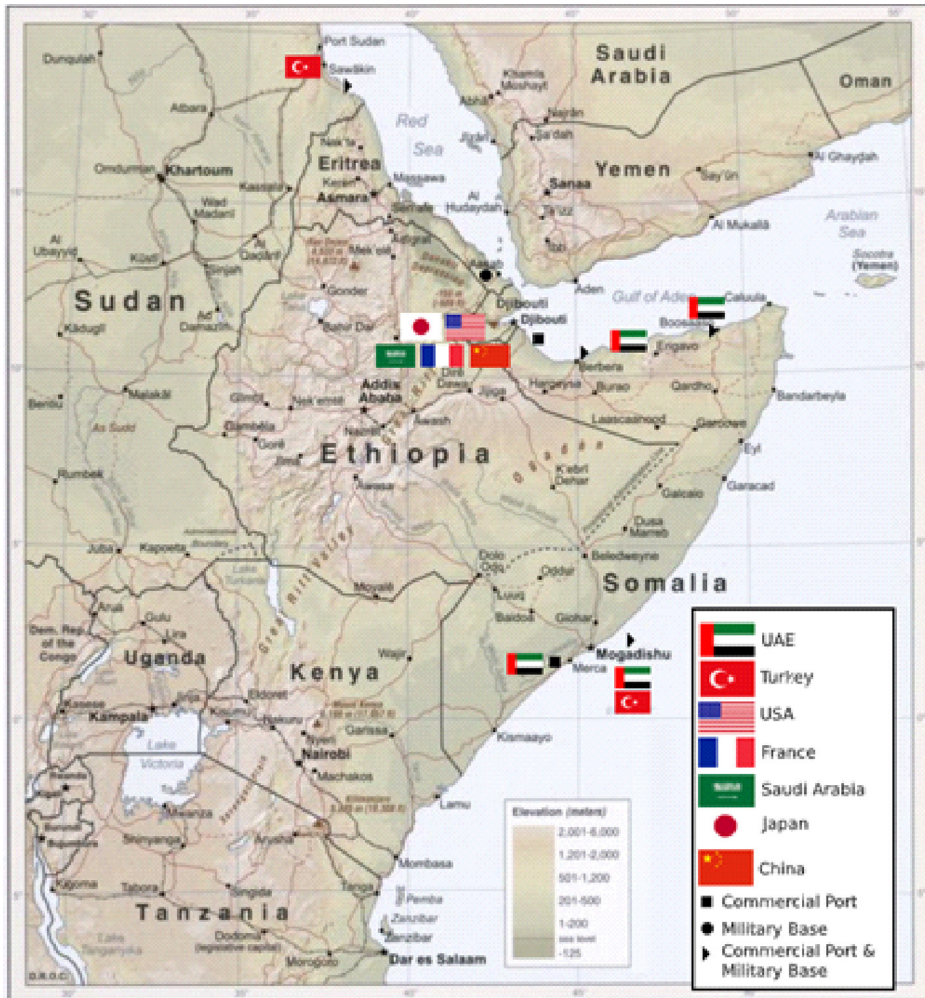


Figure 11: The geopolitical situation in the Horn of Africa and the Bab el Mandeb Strait<sup>20</sup>

The last military base to be established in Djibouti is the first Chinese military base located outside of China, which was inaugurated on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2017. According to Chinese officials, the purpose of the base is to support peacekeeping activity, Chinese humanitarian activity in the region and maritime missions along the coast of Somalia and Yemen against Somali pirates. However, the establishment of the base should be viewed as part of the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative or the

20 John Calabrese, The Bab el-Mandeb Strait: Regional and great power rivalries on the shores of the Red Sea, *Middle East institute*, 29 January 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/bab-el-mandeb-strait-regional-and-great-power-rivalries-shores-red-sea>



Maritime Silk Route Initiative of President Xi Jinping. The goal of this program is to create an economic and political land and sea network along China's important trade routes. The Chinese navy will secure this maritime network by establishing a chain of military bases in strategic locations and thus, China will essentially achieve indirect control of its major maritime trade routes. The scope of infrastructure construction at the Chinese base is on a particularly large scale and hints at broader intentions.

The establishment of the Chinese base in Djibouti is also part of the struggle for hegemony in the Indian Ocean between China on the one hand and India, Japan, Australia and the US on the other. It is not surprising therefore that the establishment of the Chinese base, which China is continuing to expand, is raising concern in Japan, which in response has expanded its own military base in Djibouti in an effort to block the growing Chinese influence.

Against the background of the regional peace processes in the Horn of Africa and Somalia's improved international status, the region has during the last two years become the site of another rivalry – that between China and the US. In August 2018, Somalia officially joined the Chinese Belt and Road project. In December 2018, the President of Somalia declared that his government had granted 31 tuna fishing licenses to China, and a year later, on May 13<sup>th</sup> 2019, the Chinese Exim Bank declared that it had signed an agreement with the government of Somalia according to which it would lend the government of Somalia \$200 million in order to rebuild the port of Mogadishu. In exchange, the bank would have exclusive fishing rights on the coast of Somalia and would become part owner of the port of Mogadishu until the loan is fully repaid.

At the same time, the US took a number of diplomatic steps to strengthen its presence in Somalia, including the reopening in October 2019 of the American embassy in Mogadishu.

During 2018, Russia also penetrated the Red Sea basin, with focus on the sale of arms and the development of trade, and it is seeking to develop good relations with Saudi Arabia in view of its large Muslim population. It is important to mention in this context that in 2008 Russia sent naval vessels into the Gulf of Aden in order to operate against the Somali pirates. According to reports during the last two years, Russia has discussed the construction of military bases with Somaliland and Eritrea. As of now, Russia still has no permanent base in the Red Sea, but Djibouti and Sudan have agreed that ships of the Russian navy can use their ports.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE view the countries located along the Red Sea as their western security belt in the context of the war in Yemen and as guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. In contrast, Turkey and Qatar are doing everything in their power to block the expansion of Saudi Arabia and UAE influence in these countries, including an attempt to gain a stronghold there themselves. These two rivalries are manifested primarily in the establishment of military bases or the leasing and management of ports in strategic locations in the Red Sea basin. The goal is to gain a foothold and influence in the region or alternatively to block the expansion of their rivals' influence. Although Qatar does not have any military or infrastructure presence in the Red Sea basin, it has a substantial influence over the events there. It supported the mediation in 2009 between Sudan and Chad and also between the government of Sudan and some of the rebel groups in Darfur which eventually signed peace agreements; it has invested heavily in Sudan and Ethiopia, primarily in agriculture and development; and it is leasing land in those countries in order to grow food; in 2017, it helped fund the election campaign of the current president of Somalia, Mohamed Farmaajo; and it provides hundreds of millions of dollars in funding to the central government in Somalia for infrastructure, educational and humanitarian assistance.

Also, Turkey, which is an ally of Qatar, is increasing its presence in Somalia, Sudan and Djibouti (in addition to its military presence in Qatar) as part of its plan to expand its traditional sphere of influence. More importantly, it is seeking to guarantee its access to sources of energy, in view of its depressed economic situation. In October 2013, the government of Somalia signed an agreement with the Turkish Bayrak company for the development and management of the port of Mogadishu for a period of 20 years and a new concession was signed in 2020 for an additional 14 years, which includes a terminal and exclusive maritime service in the port of Mogadishu. In September 2017, Turkey opened in Mogadishu its largest military base outside its borders. In January 2020, Somalia invited Turkey to search for oil in its economic waters.

After establishing its presence in Somalia, Turkey then turned to Sudan. On December 24<sup>th</sup> 2017, President Erdogan made the first official visit by a Turkish president to Sudan. During the visit, an interim agreement was signed, according to which Turkey would rebuild Suakin's port, the ancient Ottoman port city located on the shore of the Red Sea, as a tourist site and as a transit point for pilgrims on their way to Mecca and Medina, and would also build a shipyard there that would service commercial vessels. On March 26<sup>th</sup> 2018, Qatar and Turkey signed an agreement with Sudan with a value of \$4 billion to develop Suakin. It is important to mention that this facilitates

a joint Turkish-Qatari presence in the center of the Red Sea, thus creating a barrier between Egypt and the UAE base in Eritrea.

Furthermore, Turkey is expanding its influence in the Red Sea basin and is strengthening its presence in Djibouti as well. As a result of the maritime cooperation agreement signed between Turkey and Djibouti in January 2015, which was approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Parliament in February 2019, Turkey will set up a free trade zone in Djibouti that will be located near the multi-purpose port of Duralle. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is also strengthening its presence in Djibouti. In February 2020, Saudi Arabia and Djibouti signed a plan for commercial cooperation in which they agreed that Saudi Arabia would set up a free trade zone in Djibouti.



Figure 12: Turkey’s geostrategic triangle<sup>21</sup>

The UAE penetrated the Red Sea basin prior to the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen. In 2008, the DP World company signed a contract with Yemen for the development and management of the port of Aden and in that same year the company signed an agreement with the government of Djibouti for the management and development of the container port in Duralle, which would be the largest in Africa, for a period of 20 years. After the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen, the UAE focused on assisting the Yemenite government in taking control of the Red Sea coast and the Gulf of Aden and to neutralize the threat from the Houthis against international shipping

21 <http://turknews.ca/turkey-to-restore-suakin-island-and-build-naval-dock>

in the Red Sea. In this context, the UAE captured the island of Perim in the Bab el Mandeb Strait from the Houthis and, according to reports, the President of Yemen leased the islands of Socotra and Abd al Kuri to the UAE for a period of 99 years. With the outbreak of the civil war in Yemen, Djibouti granted Saudi Arabia and the UAE use of a facility to support their military activity in Yemen. However, at the end of April 2015, the UAE cut its relations with Djibouti and as a result Saudi Arabia and the UAE transferred the focus of their activity to Eritrea. At the end of April 2015, the UAE signed a 30-year lease for military use of the deep-water port at Assab and the nearby airfield. Since then, this base has served as one of the main bases of the military coalition in the war in Yemen. At the same time, the UAE has strengthened its military presence in Somalia. In May 2015, the UAE opened a military training base in Mogadishu which it funds and began to train Somali soldiers to fight the terror organization Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen which is affiliated with el Qaida. In February 2017, Somaliland signed an agreement with the DP World company to upgrade the port of Berbera and to manage it for a period of 50 years. Furthermore, it allowed the UAE to use the airfield and port at Berbera, which is located about 250 km south of Yemen, as a military facility in support of its activity in Yemen. In April 2017, the autonomous region of Puntland signed an agreement with DP World for the development and management of the Bassasso port for a period of 30 years.

However, during the past two years, the UAE presence in the Horn of Africa has diminished. On February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018, Djibouti unilaterally terminated the agreement with DP World to manage the container port at Duralle since it transferred part of the control over the port to China. However, the UAE is not giving up in this matter and has filed suit against Djibouti and even against China for violating the agreement. The UAE has won six cases against Djibouti in the London International Court of Arbitration and the High Court of England and Wales, but Djibouti is ignoring the verdicts. The relations between Somalia and the UAE soured following the call by President Farmaajo of Somalia to cancel the agreement signed by Somaliland with DP World, according to which it will manage the port of Berbera. The UAE closed its training base in Mogadishu in May 2018 and also the one in Puntland which was used for the training of a maritime police force. A year later, the UAE suffered another setback when the President of Somaliland declared in September 2019 that the airfield which the UAE had built in Berbera would be used only for civilian purposes and would no longer be used for military purposes as originally agreed on.

Therefore, the UAE is currently strengthening its presence in South Yemen, where it supports the Southern Transitional Council; in Somaliland, where DP World manages the port of Berbera, and where the UAE is financing the construction of the corridor

leading from it to the border with Ethiopia; and in Eritrea whose government signed an agreement with DP World in February 2020 to upgrade its ports.

Nonetheless, the UAE, which at first successfully expanded its influence among the countries along the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, was in the end left with only a small number of strategic footholds.

Egypt, an ally of the UAE and Saudi Arabia, is demonstrating its military power and its intentions in the Red Sea basin by creating a task force to guarantee freedom of navigation in the northern Red Sea and by opening, in January 2020, the Berenice military base<sup>22</sup> which is located near the border with Sudan. This is the largest Egyptian military base in the region and it is intended to protect Egypt's southern shores and the natural resources located there, as well as ensure international freedom of navigation from the Red Sea to the Suez Canal and to the oil terminal of the SUMED pipeline at Ain Sukha in the Gulf of Suez. The complex includes a naval base, an air base, army units, training facilities and more. The Egyptian navy is increasing its strength in the area and in 2017 established the Southern Fleet whose theater of operations is the Red Sea. The fleet includes a helicopter carrier, corvettes and multipurpose vessels that enable rapid military intervention.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, Egypt is interested in strengthening its presence in the southern Red Sea in view of the difficulties in its negotiations with Sudan and Ethiopia with respect to the 'Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam' which Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile. As a result, Egypt is negotiating with Djibouti in order to create a massive Egyptian free trade zone in Djibouti. In addition, in June and July of 2020 Egypt negotiated with South Sudan and Somaliland in order to establish a military base in their territory; however, Ethiopia was opposed to the idea and as a result the negotiations failed.

Even though Ethiopia does not have access to the sea either, it is transforming itself into a regional maritime power in the Red Sea. Since the election of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, he has been working to ensure access to the sea for Ethiopia, which it lost when Eritrea became independent in 1993. Although Ethiopia made use of the port at Assab in Eritrea until 1997, since then almost all of its exports and all of its imports have been passing through the port of Djibouti. In March 2018, Ethiopia, Somaliland and DP World signed an agreement according to

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22 Dan Arkin, "Sea, Land and Air: The Egyptian army inaugurates a new base", Israel Defense (January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020). <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/he/node/41665>

23 For further detail on the expansion of the Egyptian Navy, see "The Egyptian navy in the modern era: Its past and its future," *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2020*, Shaul Horev and Ehud Goren (eds.), p. 190–211, Haifa University. [Hebrew]

which Ethiopia will own part of the shares in the Berbera port. In addition, the three sides agreed that the government of Ethiopia would invest in infrastructure in order to develop a corridor in Berbera that would serve as a commercial gateway to the interior of the country. Immediately after being elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed made three official visits – to Djibouti, Sudan and Kenya – in order to ensure that Ethiopia would have a foothold in the port of Djibouti, in the port of Port Sudan, which is the largest in Sudan, and in the port of Lamu in Kenya. At the same time Abiy Ahmed is busy rebuilding the Ethiopian navy with the assistance of France and Norway and on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, Lema Magersa, the Defense Minister of Ethiopia, declared that Ethiopia had established a navy whose base would be located at Djibouti and whose headquarters would be located at Bahir Dar, on the shores of Lake Tana. The role of the navy is to monitor events in the region, in light of the fact that the only port currently being used by Ethiopia for its imports and exports is located at Djibouti.

In sum, the outcome of this maneuvering for power is that Turkey is strengthening its presence in the Red Sea in Sudan and in Somalia, while the UAE is strengthening its presence in Eritrea, Somaliland and South Yemen. Meanwhile Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in addition to Turkey, will have a presence in Djibouti.

### **The security alliances in the Red Sea**

In parallel to the struggles for power among the global powers and the regional powers, Saudi Arabia has during the past two years initiated a regional alliance made up of most of the countries located along the Red Sea. Its goal is to secure the international shipping lanes in the Red Sea and to halt the Iranian penetration into the region. On December 12<sup>th</sup> 2018, the representatives of Egypt, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and Jordan met in Riyadh to discuss the creation of the alliance. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea gathered in Riyadh to sign the charter of the Council of Arab and African Countries Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The goal of the charter is to encourage cooperation in securing international shipping in the Red Sea and economic cooperation between the member states. As of now, the Council is not yet active since the declaration is waiting for ratification by the parliaments of its members. However, it is already clear that there will not be any military force at the disposal of the Council since each of the member states has its own military and therefore its security activities will be carried out through bilateral or collective coordination. The core of this alliance is made up of Saudi Arabia and Egypt who have been holding joint military exercises and maneuvers in the Red Sea

with the participation of representatives of some or all of the Council's members. It is important to mention that among the countries located in the Red Sea basin, three are not members of the Council, namely Ethiopia, apparently as a result of the tension between it and Egypt over the Renaissance Dam; Somaliland whose inclusion would imply recognition of its independence; and Israel.

The Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a bloc of eight countries in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, has also joined the effort to protect freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2019 established a special task force of experts with the goal of formulating a joint regional plan of action with a clear timetable with the goal of protecting the security and economic interests of the region.

It is possible that in the future, these two bodies will join forces, particularly in light of the fact that some of the countries located along the African coast of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden are members of both organizations and efforts are being made to consolidate them.

### **Israel's' policy in the Red Sea basin**

Since its independence, Israel's foremost strategic interest in the Red Sea has been to protect its freedom of navigation and to foil efforts to interfere with it. In this context, the Straits of Tiran, which serve as Israel's only maritime route of access to the Red Sea and Africa, are of particular importance. Therefore, the closing of the straits to Israeli ships by Egypt in 1956 and 1967 constituted a "casus belli" – a pretext for war. At the end of the day, the peace agreements between Israel and Egypt (1979) and between Israel and Jordan (1994) provided an anchor for Israel's freedom of navigation (at sea and also in the air) through the Suez Canal, in the Straits of Tiran and in the Gulf of Eilat. Therefore, Israel was involved in and consented to the transfer of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi Arabia as part of the development of the future city of Neom in northeastern Saudi Arabia, which will stretch over the territories of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula. In the southern Red Sea, Israel has worked to reinforce freedom of navigation through diplomatic contacts with Ethiopia. Starting from May 1993, when Eritrea won its independence and Ethiopia lost its access to the sea, Israel has strengthened relations with Eritrea and used them in order to create an expanded military presence in Eritrea.<sup>24</sup> It has also informal relations with Djibouti and Somalia.

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24 An American company: "Israel has a military base in Eritrea," *Globes* (December 12<sup>th</sup> 2012). <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000805648> [Hebrew]

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In addition, according to foreign media reports, Israel has been involved in the war in Yemen and until January 2016, when Sudan cut off relations with Iran, Israel was also involved in the effort to halt the smuggling of arms by way of Sudan to Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Starting in January 2016, Israeli interests have been to prevent the smuggling by sea of arms from Iran to the Gaza Strip which are meant to be used against Israel.

The geopolitical developments described above provide Israel with a number of opportunities. From a security perspective, the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2020 creates the possibility of security and military cooperation with the UAE in order to ensure freedom of navigation and to prevent smuggling of Iranian arms to the Houthis in Yemen, as well as the possibility of an increased presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Recall that the UAE has a presence in South Yemen, in Somaliland and in Eritrea. In July 2020, Ishmael Khaldi was appointed as Israel's ambassador in Eritrea, the first Israeli diplomatic presence in the country for many years. This appointment creates a rare opportunity for cooperation with the UAE on the military-security level and in order to create an Israeli presence in this important country. In addition, already in August 2020, there were unconfirmed reports of an Israeli presence on the island of Socotra and the construction of an Intelligence base (according to the report) on the island which is operated jointly by Israel and the UAE.

On the political level, Saudi Arabia is interested in creating a regional alliance to block Iranian expansion and Israel's important place in this coalition constitutes the basis for the warming of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain (2020). As a result, and also in view of the Sudanese understanding that the way to the US and removal from the list of countries that support terror passes through Israel, Israel and Sudan announced on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 an agreement for normalization, which would begin with the establishment of economic and trade relations, with emphasis on agriculture.<sup>25</sup> This followed a telephone conversation between US President Donald Trump, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Sudanese President Abdallah Hamdok and Chairman of the Supreme Military Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. However, and even though Israel's situation in the Red Sea basin has never been better—it has relations with all of the countries in the region—without full diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and subsequently with the rest of the countries in the region which may will follow soon, it cannot participate in the Council of Arab and African

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25 "Israel and Sudan have declared a normalization agreement between the countries, mediated by the US," *Haaretz and Reuters* (October 23, 2020). <https://bit.ly/382iECe> [Hebrew]



Countries Bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and cannot take an active part in economic cooperation in the region.

Moreover, the establishment of the EastMed Gas Forum, whose members include three countries located on the Red Sea basin, namely Jordan, Israel and Egypt, can constitute a basis for the creation of a joint gas forum for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea. This is especially the case if natural gas or oil deposits are found in Egypt's economic waters in the Red Sea. In this case, Israel will be able to integrate economically also in that region.

## Conclusion

Israel's strategic goals are directly and closely connected to its economic goals. Israel's main goal is to prevent a blockade of the Bab el Mandeb Strait to maritime traffic between Eilat, the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean – to and from Asia and Africa.

In recent years, there has been a real danger to maritime navigation in the Red Sea. The Houthi rebels who are supported by Iran have planted hundreds of sea mines along the shipping routes that pass through the Red Sea. Neutralizing these mines will require a period of five to six years. Various countries have been called on to join the effort to remove the threat of sea mines in the Red Sea.

The security, political and economic developments in the Red Sea basin in recent years have transformed it into a dynamic and changing landscape, but one that is highly explosive. Therefore, Israel needs to exploit the regional opportunities that have recently emerged and to expand its integration within the region.

However, in order for Israel to integrate within this region it must first decide on its policy, based on a continuous monitoring of regional developments. These developments are occurring at a fast pace and the interests that determine the actions of the global powers, the regional powers and the states in the region are highly complex. If Israel is interested in integrating within this landscape or at least protecting its essential interests, it must have a deep understanding of the interests of all the players and of the resulting opportunities and challenges.

## The Russian Navy – Main Trends in 2020 and their Implications for the Middle East

*Ido Gilad*

### Background

The year 2020 was characterized by the spread of the Corona pandemic, a slowdown in economic activity and a drop in international trade. The global economic crisis did not pass over Russia. The rising level of infection (despite the Russian reports of the development of the Sputnik-V vaccine) and the overall economic slowdown have had an impact on a variety of its global maritime activities, including those of the Russian navy. However the key maritime geo strategic goals continued to develop in the North Arctic region and consistently in the Middle east, i.e. East Mediterranean Syrian coast footholds, the Libyan coast and a Red sea planned logistic facilities as mentioned (16<sup>th</sup> November 2020) in Port Sudan. Russia's hegemony aims to export & supply energy with emphasis on fossil fuels and particularly natural gas, refers to the Eastern Mediterranean arena as well, in spite of the global crisis fall in demand, prices and production of these energy products. The decline in this field of activities effected the income of the Russian economy, since energy products constitute one of Russia's largest export sectors. The regional impact of the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean is liable to hinder Russian involvement in the development of offshore energy projects, such as in Lebanon, Libya, etc., as well as its sea transportation.

Nonetheless, naval activities during the past year aspired to meet the basic planning, as was directed on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 by Admiral Nikolai Evmenov, the commander of the Russian navy (see Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>

This year, Russia is marking the 237<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Black Sea Fleet (on May 13<sup>th</sup>). At the event, Admiral Evmenov stressed the important role played by this fleet affecting the Russian navy's operational capabilities in the Mediterranean "Permanent Operational Formation of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea."<sup>2</sup>The operational experience partly is an outcome of the fighting against the terrorist targets since 2014 in Syria.

- 1 The Russian Ministry of Defense site – The Navy; June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. [http://xn--d1acaykgvdf0he1a.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12295177@egNews](http://xn--d1acaykgvdf0he1a.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12295177@egNews)
- 2 From the Russian Ministry of Defense site, May 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 – Greetings from Admiral Nikolai Evmenov, the commander of the Russian navy on the anniversary of the fleet which was founded in 1783. [http://xn--d1acaykgvdf0he1a.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12291947@egNews](http://xn--d1acaykgvdf0he1a.xn--90anlfbebar6i.xn--p1ai/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12291947@egNews)



Figure 1: Admiral Nikolai Evmenov, the commander of the Russian navy<sup>1</sup>

Another event marked this year was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany as part of 'The Great Patriotic War' on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (deferred from May 9<sup>th</sup> as a result of the Corona pandemic). The event included all Russian fleets, including the Black Sea one. Simultaneously, a Kilo-class submarine sailed (above the surface, as by the convention) in a southbound direction through the Turkish straits from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. A possible added value to this passage could have symbolized a "show of the flag" daylight expression by a Russian strategic vessel, with relations to the festive national memorial event (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: A Russian Kilo-class submarine passing through the Turkish straits on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2020<sup>3</sup>

3 From the Forbes site, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/06/23/image-shows-russian-submarine-appearing-to-break-international-treaty/?sh=74aee2157b82>

Additional projection of power this year included Naval day which was marked at various bases, including the Syrian coast, on July 26<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup> The annual 'Caucasus 2020' exercise, under the command of the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, took place during September 21–26, 2020 in the Southern Theater. Some 20 vessels from the Black Sea Fleet took part as well as from the Caspian Sea naval squadron. In addition, missiles as other weapons were fired as President Putin observed.<sup>5</sup> In late September, the Russian navy held a joint exercise with the Indian navy. This joint maritime cooperation between the two navies has various geostrategic implications, primarily with respect to China (see below). On November 17-24, four Egyptian combat Naval vessels participated in the "Friendship Bridge-III -2020" great maneuver held for the first time in the Black sea region<sup>6</sup>

The rest of the activities, subject to the Corona policy imposed by the Russian navy, included the activities of the various fleets. In the East Mediterranean, in addition to the navy's routine activities, a large-scale joint exercise held with the Syrian navy (on August 21<sup>st</sup> 2020).<sup>7</sup> Like many other activities of the Russian navy in the shadow of the Corona virus, warship' crews were isolated, following the experience of other foreign warships since April 2020, within the USN 'Theodore Roosevelt' and the French 'Charles de Gaulle' aircraft carriers.

The buildup of power, development of weaponry, and procurement of the Russian navy continued this year, even though it could have possibly slowed due to the pandemic impacts. In these contexts, there were reports about weaponry tests and some missiles launches, It including the "Tsirkon" Hypersonic Missile, with the speed of Mach 8, from a surface vessel (October 7<sup>th</sup> 2020, see Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> In addition, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, an R-30 "Bulava" intercontinental ballistic missile had been launched from a Borei-class submarine, project 995.<sup>9</sup> A number of

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4 From Tass News Agency, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1158531>. The preparations could be seen starting about two days earlier and included the participation of a variety of vessels and aircraft. See the Sputnik site in Arabic, July 24<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/military/202007241046090817>

5 From the Tass News Agency, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1204499>

6 From YouTube, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=F649m\\_Lg32Y&feature=emb\\_logo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F649m_Lg32Y&feature=emb_logo) Film shows the northbound passage of the Dardanelles over Novorssisk port. According to the mentioned publication Vessels in participation were: Frigate Frame, Frigate OHP class, Corvette Gowind, and Ambassador-III missile boat.

7 From Izvestia, August 21<sup>st</sup> 2020. <https://iz.ru/1050910/2020-08-21/voennye-rf-i-flot-sirii-proveli-sovmestnye-ucheniia-v-tartuse>

8 Tass News Agency, October 7<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1209579>. See Figure 3.

9 Tass News Agency, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1219491>. See Figure 4.

reports during the year, indicated about some deliveries of new vessels to the navy. President Putin in person participated the ceremony of a new icebreaker held on beginning of November 2020 in the St. Petersburg shipyards. Vessel named 'Viktor Chernomyrdin'<sup>10</sup> of project 22600 (not the atomic propulsion ice breaker 22220 which is still under construction). The attendance in the event of President Putin emphasizes the importance that he attributes to the development of the Northern Arctic region and the development of the Russian ice breakers fleet.



Figure 3: Test launch of the Tsirkon hypersonic missile, October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020



Figure 4: Test launch of an R-30 Bulava ballistic missile from a Borei-class submarine, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020

## Visits and joint maneuvers in order to show the flag

A force composed by two 'Udaloy' destroyers class 'Admiral Vinogradov' & the 'Admiral Tributs' accompanied by a tanker, left Vladivostok, home port of the Pacific Fleet to participated in the 'Indra' naval exercise together with the Indian navy (September 4–5, 2020). The joint naval exercise took place in the Strait of Malacca, delivering apparently a political mutual message towards China, emphasizing the tightened relations between the two countries. The exercise was preceded by a visit of the Indian Minister of Defense to Moscow, where he met with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Shoigu.<sup>11</sup>

Another group from the Northern Fleet, led by another Udaloy class anti-submarine destroyer, 'Admiral Kulakov' accompanied by a tanker & tugboat sailed (September-October 2020) over the Mediterranean and visited ports in Algeria, Cyprus, Syria and Greece /Piraeus port.<sup>12</sup> Another joint maneuver between the Russian and Egyptian

10 Tass News Agency, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/society/1219653>.

11 The Economic Times, September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/quad-in-action-india-us-japan-australia-navies-begin-first-phase-of-malabar-naval-exercises/videoshow/79047994.cm>.

12 Tass News Agency, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1215151> (report of the visits to Greece).

navies (above mentioned) held in the Black Sea at late Nov.2020. As the Egyptian force passed through the Turkish straits forth and back, it could be viewed as a political message directed toward Turkey.<sup>13</sup> It is worthwhile at this point to describe the rivalry between Egypt and Turkey in recent years, after the regime of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi during 2012–13. Morsi's regime was ideologically based on the Moslem Brotherhood movement in Egypt and that was the reason to create a close accord of relationship with Ankara, despite some historical tensions between the two countries. Both sought for the leadership over the Sunni Muslim world. Morsi's removal from power soured the relations between the two countries, hence both sides had put efforts competing the other, combining huge interests in developing their maritime capabilities, emphasizing their navies. In Turkey the maritime dimension had been developed towards a new doctrine which is called: nation's 'Blue Homeland' ('Mavi Vatan' in Turkish).<sup>14</sup> The rivalry over ideological-religious hegemony of the Muslim-Sunni world reached geo-economic and geo-energetic elements too, with deep attention to the production of fossil fuels in the Eastern Mediterranean. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) established in Cairo (January 2020) is dedicated to advance the coordinated exploitation of these resources and the possibility of implementing an EastMed gas pipeline to connect EastMed with south Italy. The Forum members include the neighboring countries: Israel, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority and Italy. France has asked to join while the US serves as an observer, while Turkey is excluded. Both Turkey & Egypt have been attempted to accelerate their maritime development in other means too, in order to achieve the status of a 'regional power'. Among various frictions being held between the two countries, rivalry in the Libyan front has recently reached the point of a true conflict, and there is a danger of escalation. As Turks support the forces of the Tripoli government (GNA) headed by Fayez al-Sarraj, while Egypt supports the Eastern faction (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar, together with Russia, France, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf Emirates.

Russia attempts to stay away from the Turkish-Egyptian rivalry, even though its involvement in the Libyan complex as others tenses its relations with Turkey. The relations between Russia and Egypt are also complexed. As aforementioned the two share the same side in the Libyan arena, both have shared (end of November 2020) a first mutual naval maneuver in the Black sea for the first time. They share trade also of arms supply to Egypt; Russia constructs infrastructure assets in Egypt, among

13 Tass News Agency, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020; Tass, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1210889>; and October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1210037>.

14 For a full survey of the Blue Homeland policy, see the chapter by Omri Eilat and Ayal Hayut Mann.

them a nuclear energy reactor in El Dabaa, on the coast, west of Alexandria, close to a water desalination plants ; the creation of a commercial-industrial zone east of Port Said, etc.

### **The expected impact of Russian activity with respect to the US**

During the Obama presidency, the US adopted a policy of reducing its presence in the Middle East, preferring other regions with priority of global focal points, among them China is first within an emphasis to East Asia, by a motto called "Pivot to Asia". Nonetheless, Russia continues to be a leading focus of interest for the US and "*Russia will be high on America's foreign policy agenda, including the Mediterranean basin*".<sup>15</sup> US attention continues to be focused on the Russian presence in Syria, Its' developed role in Libya during the past year and in North Africa. In recent days another arena has risen in the Red sea, with the intent to gain a "logistic facility" at Port Sudan. According to Lesser(2020) <sup>14</sup>every American government will continue to show interest in the Mediterranean region, however US would prefer to be part of an efforts led by the EU rather than leading a direct accord under its dominance activity in the Mediterranean arena.

### **The growing presence on the Syrian coast**

In late May 2020, President Putin ordered an expansion of the Russian presence on the Syrian coast. Two months later (on July 30<sup>th</sup>), a directive issued by the Kremlin went into effect in order to reinforce Russia's foothold in the logistic maritime center at the port of Tartus, and the better define of the airspace west of the Khmeimim airbase (in central Syrian coast), serves also as main headquarters of the Russian forces in Syria. This directive also expands the foothold on the coast in the Latakia district, in the vicinity of the northern border with Turkey, area that is called Kesab.<sup>16</sup>

The publication date of the directive marked five years of Russian involvement and fighting in Syria. The permanent presence in Syria was officially approved by Minister of Defense Shoigu on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. He stated that along the 5 years

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15 Lesser I.O.(2020). "The United States and the Mediterranean in an Age of Shocks," in: Euro-Mediterranean policy observatory (IEMed.) Year Book 2020. Pp.248-250. [www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2020/US\\_policy\\_Mediterranean\\_lan\\_Lesser\\_IEMed\\_YearBook2020.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2020/US_policy_Mediterranean_lan_Lesser_IEMed_YearBook2020.pdf)

16 From the official site for legislation of the Russian Federation, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2020. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202008190057?index=3&rangeSize=1> This document is an extension of the directive of August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015. Also: the Tass News Agency, May 29<sup>th</sup> 2020. <https://tass.com/defense/1161849> ; the Al-Arabiya Network, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-aworld/syria/2020/08/20>.

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period "air strikes and cruise missiles (assumed that also 'Caliber' naval missiles are involved-I.G.) were used to destroy 133,542 terrorist targets, including 400 unlawful refineries and about four thousand refueling facilities. A large number of opposition fighters were killed, including 865 commanders and 4,500 Muslim militia members from former CIS countries"<sup>17</sup>

The five years of activity in Syria have kept the Assad regime in power, as President Assad compensated the Russians by giving them a desired permanent foothold in Syria. The official agreement upon was signed in the summer of 2017 and as mentioned was expanded last summer (2020). This includes the leasing of the ports at Tartus and the Khmeimim Air Base, including the coastal strips adjoining these assets. The period of the Russian lease was specified as 49 years (until 2066) with a possibility of a 25-year extension (to the year 2091, almost till the end of the present century). It appears therefore that Russia does not intend to give up its presence in the theater any time soon. Furthermore, the directive issued in the summer of 2020 allows Russia to address its permanence status in Syria, as a message towards the US, as to other players as the regional active powers, in particular Iran, Turkey and even Israel. To other foreign players and potential investors in the region such as China, Eu, the Persian Gulf countries and others. Russia continues currently in propping up Assad's regime despite the lack of political and economical solution to the enormous damages caused by the war, and even more, its costs in terms of the victims & the population from a demographic upheaval that resulted from the massive migration within the country and the immigration abroad. In addition, there has been a significant damage to the country's infrastructure and uncertainty has risen even more due to the Corona crisis. Local incidents in the Syrian coastal area included repeated attempts to attack the Russian bases by the local opposition and terrorist forces by means of drones and various other methods. There also were large-scale fires in October 2020 in the areas under Alawite control on the Syrian coast. In order to protect their bases in Syria, the Russians have employed various methods. Among the protective measures in the port of Tartus, there had been a deployment of sea mammals (which occurred at least two years ago) for the defense of underwater targets (see Figure 5, comment 18).

Efforts to find a solution to the crisis in Syria and the surrounding regions will require a multidimensional approach, on both: the military level and the socioeconomic, political and diplomatic levels. The Russian maritime presence in Syria is based upon a

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17 From Tass, September 30, 2020 (the fifth anniversary of Russian involvement in the fighting). <https://tass.com/world/1206679>.



basic policy document for Russian naval strategy up to 2030 (published in July 2017).<sup>18</sup> The document describes the Russian navy as "one of the effective deterrents in the maintenance of Russian strategy" and is intended to ensure the permanent presence of the Russian navy in the Mediterranean and at essential maritime passages.<sup>19</sup> The fighting in Syria is mentioned in the document as an important international arena, with the potential to endanger Russian strategic interests.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 5: Sea mammal pens on the pier in the port of Tartus<sup>21</sup>

## The importance of the port of Tartus for Russia

The Syrian port of Tartus has served as an important stronghold for the Russian navy in the Mediterranean since 1971, when an agreement was reached with President Hafez Assad for the use of the port by the Soviet Union. The agreement was expanded in 1974 following the 'Yom Kippur War' (October war 1973). The Russian presence in the port has therefore been maintained for about 50 years so far and has been expanded in recent years, as mentioned above. In late 2019 and prior to the Corona

18 The Kremlin site, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017: Document 55127 signed by President Putin. Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations Period Until 2030. It is worth mentioning that it extends previous documents published in 2001 and 2015.

19 *ibid.*, Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations Period Until 2030, Chapter 4, paragraphs 32 and 38 g.

20 *ibid.*, Chapter 2, paragraph 27.

21 From <http://www.hisutton.com/Russian-Navy-In-Tartus-Syria.html> June 24<sup>th</sup> 2020: Russian Navy Deployed Marine Mammals to Defend Base in Syria. The identification is attributed to at least as early as September-December 2018.

pandemic, Russia addressed its intention to invest about half a billion dollars in the port in order to expand its infrastructure.<sup>22</sup> Russia's motives for such expansion could increase its powerful presence as a counterweight to other European superpowers and other players in the Middle East, in order to "*modify its military activity*".<sup>23</sup> The Russian presence in the port of Tartus is illustrated in Figures 6 and 7.



Figure 6: The deployment of first-line ships in the port of Tartus; two Kilo-class submarines and the Admiral Grigorovich-class frigate (October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020)<sup>24</sup>



Figure 7: Deployment of Russian vessels in the port of Tartus (July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020)<sup>25</sup>

- 22 Foy in the Financial Times, December 3<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/f52bdde6-20cc-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>
- 23 Svetlova, K. (September 24, 2020). "Russia Marks Five Years of Presence in Syria: Challenges vs. Achievements." The Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS), Spotlight on Russia in the Middle East. <https://www.idc.ac.il/en/research/ips/pages/russia-middleeast/russia-11-10-20.aspx>
- 24 From <http://www.hisutton.com/Russian-Navy-Base-in-Tartus-Syria.html>; accessed on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020.
- 25 From <http://www.hisutton.com/Russian-Navy-Base-in-Tartus-Syria.html>; accessed on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The photograph itself is from July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020.

It appears that the reinforcement of its foothold in Syria and the port of Tartus has provided Russia with stability to continue and proceed the geographic exploitation in deploying over other regions of the Middle East, relatively distant from the Russian homeland, too. Another foothold achieved by Russia during the last year is in Libya, being supportive as mentioned to the forces of the Libyan National Army (LNA) under command of General Khalifa Haftar who fights the the Government National Accord in Tripoli (GNA). The Russian activity is part of a coalition together with other foreign participants. Russia is working as well to expand its cooperation with other countries in North Africa, including Egypt and Algeria. Another arena of interest for Russia refers to east Africa's continent in Sudan, in where it was agreed recently to deploy a naval facility. These geopolitical advantages for Russia, should increase its influence in the near east region, even if the importance of these new posts would not gain the same equivalence to the "*duplicating the Russian activity in the waters off the coast of Syria*".<sup>26</sup>

The ports of call by Russian vessels in the Mediterranean mean various interests. Among others those in Cyprus and especially in Greece (September-October 2020) are interesting, as they might reflect over Russia's future potential intention to gain a foothold in the port of Alexandroupolis which is located in the northern Aegean Sea and is near the Dardanelles Strait in Turkey. De Palo (2020) describes the competition between Russia, the US and China for the concession to use this port facilities in view of its highly strategic location: at the junction of maritime traffic to and from the Black Sea, at the point where the Trans-Anatolian pipeline and the Trans-Adriatic pipelines branch cross its destinations; at the sea-land seam leading to the Balkans; and its close proximity to the passages between Asia and Europe, including the routes for immigration from Asia over Europe.<sup>27</sup>

## Sino-Russian Relations

The mentioned competition over a potential concession in the Port of Alexandroupolis is definitely not the only one between these two superpowers. Other topics as well as maritime disagreements are parts of a larger scale. A major one considers the control of the Arctic Northern Sea and the ownership of the natural resources under the melting ice cap in that huge and rich region. Another issue would be the

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26 Krasik, T. (2018) "Implications and Policy Recommendations" in: Krasik, T. & Blank, S. (eds.) Russia in the Middle East. The Jamestown Foundation, Wa DC. PP. 414–440

27 De Palo, Francesco (28.10.2020) "The three-way derby between China, Russia and the USA for the Greek port of Alexandropolis." In: Formiche.net. <https://formiche.net/2020/10/gas-geopolitica-alexandroupolis>

increasingly close relationship between Russia and India, were manifested at the joint Russian Indian naval exercise in the Malacca Strait in early September 2020. An event which carried a message directed primarily to China (see Figure 8). The Russo-Indo relations include a purchase of Russian arms as well—not limited to naval arm, and joint development of weaponry. The supply of arms to India began already during the Soviet era.



Figure 8: The commanders of the joint 'Indra' naval maneuver (September 2020) on the deck of the command ship<sup>28</sup>

Russian vessels began their journey from their homeport of Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean. With a probable connection, China has complained to Russia that its possession of Vladivostok (since 1860) is unlawful since it was taken from China after its defeat by Britain and France and transferred to Russia.<sup>29</sup> The Russian-Indian exercise preceded meetings on the defense ministers level to achieve coordination between the two navies, their professional levels of delegations from the two navies. The exercise was preceded by another naval maneuver in which the Russian navy took part, together with the navies of China and Pakistan<sup>26</sup>. It appears that the joint naval activity with India, which was widely reported mainly in India, illuminates a certain amount of tension in the relations between Russia and China. Among all other matters, there are foci of disagreement also in the Northern Arctic Ocean. The over-all Sino-Russian relations might have changed compared to a year ago, as lights casted the attitude towards a deeper sense of a strategic mutual partnership. A clear expression of this change can be found in the announcement by President Putin (Tass, October 22<sup>nd</sup>) which quotes "*there is no (further) need for a military alliance with China*" unless the US attacks them simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

28 From a clip on YouTube, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUrpdTJjuk>

29 From a clip on YouTube, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iy4b6fmzags>

30 From Tass News Agency. <https://tass.com/defense/1218485>, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

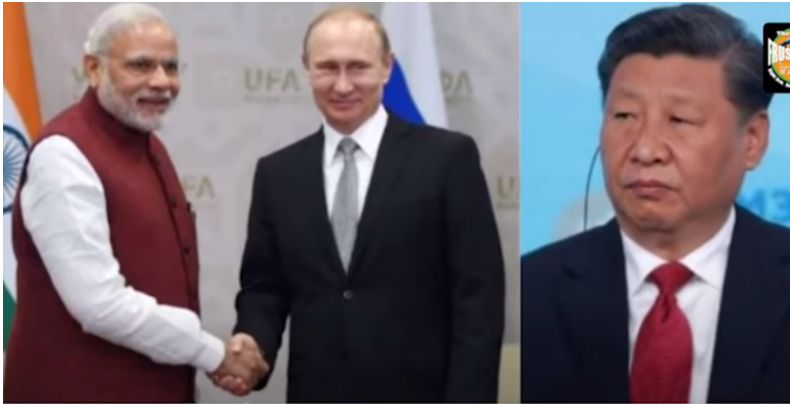


Figure 9: Russian President Putin and Indian Prime Minister Modi and opposite them Chinese President Xi<sup>26</sup>

Putin did not ignore the need to continue the primary forms of cooperation and the need to consist of joint maneuvers on land and at sea, as well as the exchange of technologies for military development. In the former December 2019, the Russian navy took part in a three-day naval maneuver in Iran which included the Russian navy, the Chinese navy and the host navy, that involved also the naval forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. This year, there has been no report of such a three-way exercise and it is unclear whether this is related to the tightening relations between Russia and India or due to the affection of the expected growth of Chinese investment in Iran, which means a decrease in the influence of Russia over the rest two other players Russia and Iran.

## Conclusion

Despite the outbreak of the Corona pandemic in 2020, the Russian navy consistently attempted to fulfill its missions according to plan. The relationship with the Chinese navy is a part of the wider relations between the two countries. They could be expressed by the statements of President Putin who diminished the need for forming a military alliance between the two countries. On the other hand, there has been measures which indicate the tightening relationship with the Indian navy. However, Russia's aim to expand and strengthen its global and maritime positions as a key player in the various diplomatic and economic arenas remains still, with an emphasis on the Northern Arctic Ocean. Russia continues to advance its projects over the north region by launching ice breakers, deepening its maritime control over the region, deploying various types of military forces to the region, planning and coordinating its legal position in the region. Russia decisively appears in the

Mediterranean, too. These entire activities continue to have domestic implications in Russia and on Putin's administration.

In the Middle East, the main activity referred to Russia's growing presence on the Syrian coast, both: in its maritime facility in Tartus port, and on the northern coast: west to the air base and headquarters in Hmeimim, and in the northern border point with Turkey. Russia has expressed its intention to develop the commercial ports, with emphasis on Tartus.

The Russian activity is also evident in Libya, as part of its intervention in the local civil war. The presence there was expanded along this year from the Libya's eastern border with Egypt - westward toward the capital of Tripoli.

Russia has deepened its naval relationship with Egypt as was realized by the joint two navies exercise held in the Black Sea at late November 2020, first of its kind in that region. The unique passage of the Egyptian naval vessels through the Turkish straits Served as a political sign over the Turkish Erdogan's government, manifesting Egypt and most likely Russia's mutual coordination. Some other operational issues between the two focuses on shore, energetic & infrastructure facilities supported by Russia.



Figure 10: The Russian–Egyptian joint manoeuvres at the black sea, the 'Friendship Bridge-III, November 2020

Russia continues to put efforts in order to strengthen its regional status in the Middle East, maintaining simultaneously numerous of relationships, especially as some players tend rival relations between themselves (e.g., Israel & Iran+ proxies;

Greece + Cyprus & Turkey, Armenia & Azerbaijan etc.). This role allows Russia to increase its influence as of a mediator regionally and Globally.

In the Persian Gulf, a joint Russia-Iranian maneuver hasn't taken place yet, albeit the previous one held there in late December 2019 together with China, ending with a wish statement of the Iranian commander to hold further joint exercises between the three participated navies. The nature of the Russian presence in the Persian Gulf during the past year decreased due to the Corona pandemic as well as from other reasons.

Alongside the development of naval weaponry, Russia is continuing to develop capabilities, focusing on asymmetric as hybrid threats to be projected. However economically civilian national investments, commitments and infrastructure may suffer a shortage, for example in the Syrian ports, also due to the corona pandemic. A solution might be realized by a participation of private Russian companies or investors.

## Recommendations

Israel should exploit Russia's unique strength to tend varied relationships with different parties -some in a rival situation. Especially in viewing of Russia's naval longitudinal presence in the arena.

The US trend towards leaving the near east region will apparently continue, despite the replacement of the Trump government. Russia's regional superpower status as a result, and especially as seen in the maritime domain which President Putin emphasizes, increases its presence and influence over the region. The continuity noticeable by Russia's buildup of its footholds in the region, also to the Red Sea. Thus, Israel's interest should create dialogue and coordination with Russia as a leading player and a mediator in the region, should be considered even more vitally.

Potential aspects of dialogue between the State of Israel and Russia as with other players in the region can include joint research activity in the areas of maritime infrastructure, blue energy, desalinization, sea transport, the impact of climate change, i.e., finding solutions to the threat of rising sea levels, development of food from the sea, migration etc.

Another dimension may include a research over the impact of the exploitation of the Northern Sea Route and the possible growing sea traffic through it, as well as its implications on the current traditional traffic through existing shipping lanes in the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

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## Russia in the Pacific: A Historical Perspective and the Current Situation

*Tzevy Mirkin*

### Geographical Conditions

The Russian Pacific Fleet, which is considered to be one of Russia's "strategic fleets"<sup>1</sup>, is responsible for activity in the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. Its two main bases are at Vladivostok, where the fleet headquarters and its main forces are stationed, and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, a port on the Kamchatka Peninsula which is the base for the nuclear submarines of the Pacific Fleet.

In addition to the fact that this fleet is the most remotely deployed of Russia's naval forces, it also suffers from geographic isolation from Russia's most important regions (as well as Russia's industrial centers and shipyards) and a lack of infrastructure in its theater of operations.

First and foremost, the Russian Far East is Russia's most outlying area (the flight from Moscow to Vladivostok takes more than 8 hours and the trip by railway is about 6 to 7 days). Furthermore, land transportation between the Far East and the rest of the country is based primarily on the Trans-Siberian railway, which has only a limited capacity. With respect to the Far East itself, a large part of it is not connected to the other parts of the country or to the industrial centers by a land route, such that there is no overland route connecting the Kamchatka Peninsula even to neighboring regions and therefore all transportation is by air or by sea.

There are also problems for vessels to leave the naval bases in the region for the open sea – between Vladivostok and the bases in its vicinity. Between the Pacific Ocean and those bases are Japanese islands and north of them the Kuril Islands. Even if the latter are under Russian control, the straits between some of them are frozen in winter, thus further limiting the naval forces' ability to maneuver there. This is essentially the reason that the nuclear submarine base is located in Kamchatka, since despite the major problems in supplying the base, its location allows the submarines direct access to the open sea.

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1 A phrase coined during the Soviet era. This is a fleet that has strategic weapons, i.e. submarines (primarily nuclear), that are armed with ballistic missiles. Russia's other (and primary) strategic fleet is the Northern Fleet.





Figure 1: Map of east Asia and the naval bases that was mentioned

### The appearance of Russian naval forces in the Far East

The Siberian Fleet was official established in 1799 according to the decision of the Russian Emperor Pavel the First. In 1849, it was stationed in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, which was established about one hundred years previously by Russian sailors who were mapping the country's eastern border. In 1871, the Fleet's main base was moved to Vladivostok as part of the efforts to develop Southern Siberia. In 1898, after the lease of Port Arthur from China (now the Lüshunkou District), the main headquarters of the maritime forces in the Pacific Ocean was moved there, and from that point onward these forces were composed of two main parts:

1. The First Fleet of the Pacific Ocean which stationed at Port Arthur; and
2. The Siberian Naval Squadron whose base was at Vladivostok.

The Russian naval forces in this theater were relatively weak. This is the result of insufficient investment in the forces in the Far East due to the theater's neglected position within Russia's threat perception and due to reasons that can be called "objective": the absence of any shipyards in the Far East (and the almost total lack of any real industry) and the fact that its ships are built in the Baltic Sea and must sail from there to the Pacific. Moreover, the low capacity of the land infrastructure, which connects between Russia's central regions and the Far East, has limited the ability to supply the forces in the Russian Far East.

The isolation of the theater from the main regions of Russia and its primary forces was a central factor in the Russo-Japanese war that broke out in 1904. When it became clear at the beginning of the war that Russia's naval forces in the Far East were unable to deal with the Japanese navy, a decision was made to reinforce them by dispatching a fleet from the Baltic Navy. The voyage of the fleet took about 8 months and during that time, Port Arthur fell and the reinforcements, on arriving in the theater of battle, found themselves cut off from the bases and sources of supply. The total defeat of the Russian navy in the Battle of Tsushima and the defeat of the Russian army by Japan led to the loss of some of Russia's strongholds in the Far East. Together with the decision to concentrate effort and resources on building up forces in the West to meet the growing threat from Germany, this essentially led to a major slowdown in the development of the Far East and the buildup of forces there.

## **The Soviet era**

The Far East was the last region of Russia taken over by the Bolshevik regime – the Civil war continued there until 1921. Almost immediately on its completion and with the stabilization of the new government, the buildup of military power began in the region. This included the reestablishment of naval strength. The Far East Naval Forces were established in 1922 and continued to exist (with short interruptions) until 1935, when they became the Pacific Fleet. The significance of this change was that it "upgraded" the status of the naval forces in the region, which was now formally equivalent to a regional command. Apparently, the reason for this was the change in the form of the threat in this region. Until the beginning of the 1930s, China was perceived as the main threat (to the point of open and large-scale conflict in 1929) and the main attention of the Soviet leadership was concentrated on China's land forces. At the beginning of the 1930s, Japan began to occupy this position following its invasion of Manchuria and the entrenchment of its forces there. Although the main friction with Japan was on land and since the naval forces did not participate in the two conflicts between the USSR and Japan (in 1938 and 1939), the Soviet

leadership could not ignore the presence of the growing Japanese navy and the importance of the naval route linking Japan and its forces in Manchuria.

The signing of the Mutual Neutrality Agreement between the USSR and Japan on April 13th 1941 significantly reduced the level of tension in the Far East theater. Thus, in the autumn of 1941, as the German army approached Moscow, the Soviet could bring significant forces from the Far East in order to defend the capital. In the war between Russia and Japan, which began in mid-August 1945 and lasted only a few weeks, the function of the naval forces was quite limited: the fighting occurred mainly on land and the navy was primarily involved in a number of tactical amphibious landings of forces in China and Korea. In the final days of the war, it participated in the operation to take over the Kuril Islands.

The changes that occurred worldwide and in particular in the Far East following Second World War led to a change in the Soviet leadership's attitude toward the region. Prior to that, the threat in the Far East was perceived as secondary, although important. The start of the Cold War and the emergence of the US as Russia's main rival gave the Far East unique importance, particularly in light of the US Navy's control of the Pacific Ocean and the presence of the American army in Japan.<sup>2</sup> The experience accumulated by the Americans in the Second World War in carrying out amphibious landings and the landing of its forces in Korea in 1950 created a new threat in the eyes of the Soviets, namely an American intention to land forces on the Soviet coast, and the Far East was viewed by the Soviets as an ideal arena for American goals to be achieved.

Therefore, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a program was initiated to transform the navy in the Pacific Ocean into a strategic fleet. In 1961, the navy received its first nuclear-powered submarine and the following decade saw a buildup of the fleet's forces. The Pacific Fleet began the newly-built missile-carrying surface vessels, and in 1978 it received the Minsk aircraft carrier, one of the USSR's first two aircraft carriers. The second aircraft carrier, the Kiev, was deployed in the North Sea.

The new ships were provided to the Pacific Fleet mainly from the Northern Fleet. The local building of ships was problematic due to the limited capabilities of the shipyards in the Far East. New ships, including both submarines and surface vessels, travelled to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Northern Sea Route. After that difficult journey, the ships required repairs and sometimes did not manage to cover the whole route in one sailing season. In such cases, there was a need to supply them

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2 Захаров, С.Е. (Zakharov, S.) *Краснознамённый Тихоокеанский флот (The Red Banner Pacific Fleet)*, (Moscow, 1973), p. 252.

during their stay near the Bering Strait, and due to the lack of land transportation infrastructure the supplies were delivered by air.<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the new threat from China was added to those which the Soviet forces in the Far East—and in particular the naval forces—were meant to deal with. The decline in relations with Communist China, which began in the previous decade, got the point where the two countries found themselves on the brink of war.<sup>4</sup> New missions led to an expansion of the Pacific Fleet, primarily with respect to its land units which are part of the coastal defenses.<sup>5</sup>

Another component was added to the Pacific Fleet's activity in the early 1970s. Even prior to that, Soviet ships appeared in the Indian Ocean, but in 1971 a framework was specifically created for that purpose – the 8<sup>th</sup> Operational Squadron. It was under the command of the Pacific Fleet and its responsibility was the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf.

### Following the breakup of the Soviet Union

Like the other parts of the Soviet armed forces, the Pacific Fleet was adversely affected by the economic crisis during the final years of the Soviet Union, a situation that reached its peak a short time after its breakup. Many ships, including the Minsk aircraft carrier and missile cruisers, which constituted the Fleet's main fighting capability, went out of service and were sold. During the 1990s, this theater was low on the Russian leadership's order of priorities, to the point that the fleet did not manage to maintain its strategic potential, and the active forces that remained in the theater consisted of only one strategic submarine.<sup>6</sup> This was at a time when strategic nuclear forces were essentially the only component of the armed forces that the leadership was making a real effort to preserve.

The efforts to rehabilitate the armed forces, which was initiated by Putin towards the end of the first decade of his regime, was felt less by the Pacific Fleet than other fleets.

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3 Амелько, Н.Н. (Amelko, N.) *В интересах флота и государства (In the Interests of the Navy and the State)*, (Moscow, 2003), p. 78.

4 In 1969, there were indeed a series of armed clashes on the border between the two countries. the forces of the Pacific Fleet were not involved.

5 Манойлин, В.И. (Manoylin, V.) *Базирование Военно-Морского Флота СССР (Deployment of the Navy of the USSR)*, (Petersburg, 2004), p. 171.

6 Иванов, В. (Ivanov, V.) "Тихоокеанский флот вооружится подводными стратегическими крейсерами" ("The Pacific Fleet Will Be Equipped By Strategic Submarines"), *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 2020, Mar. 23.

Currently, the forces of the Pacific Fleet include the following: one missile cruiser (out of a total of three Slava-model cruisers that were built back in the 1980s and which are currently the navy's flagships); one destroyer (another one being renovated); four frigates (with another under construction and which will be delivered in 2025); two corvettes (and another four, according to official estimates, which are in the late stages of construction or are being test run) which are primarily used for activity in "green water"; about 14 small missile boats that are intended only for green water; four strategic nuclear submarines; four nuclear attack submarines; six non-nuclear-propulsion submarines; and a number of landing vessels and auxiliary ships of various kinds. Periodically, there are reports in the media about various plans to strengthen the Pacific Fleet, including the rehabilitation of its strategic component<sup>7</sup>; however, in the meantime the only program that appears to be feasible in the near future is the reinforcement of the underwater component of the fleet with a number of Kilo submarines.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, a comparison of the level of investment in the Northern Fleet relative to that in the Pacific Fleet shows that the forces in the Arctic have a much higher priority among the leadership.<sup>9</sup> A similar situation exists with respect to the "visibility" of the fleets in the media – reports on the activity of the Northern Fleet appear much more frequently than that of the Pacific Fleet.

Moreover, there are signs that the activity of the Northern Fleet is being expanded at the expense of the Pacific Fleet. Thus, in September 2020, the Northern Fleet held an amphibious exercise in the Bering Sea. A group of the Fleet's ships sailed from the North Sea to the Pacific Ocean by way of the Bering Strait and landed a force on a beach on the Chukotka Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Bering Strait served, until recently, as the boundary between the theaters of the two fleets. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the amphibious forces of the Northern Fleet are stationed permanently in the western part of its arena of activity rather near the Bering Strait.

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7 Ibid.

8 Завершены государственные испытания подлодки "Петропавловск-Камчатский" ("The Tests of the Submarine "Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky" Are Completed", *Kommersant*, 2019, Oct. 11.

9 For further details about the buildup in the North see: Mirkin, T. "Russia's "Arctic Strategy" As a Result of the Inter-Systemic Power Struggles", at: *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel*, 2019/20, (Haifa, 2020).

10 Северный флот провёл учение по высадке десанта недалеко от Аляски ("The Northern Fleet Conducted Landing Exercise Not Far from Alaska") *Interfax*, 2020, Sep. 21. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/727906>

This trend is not unique to the Russian navy. Russia's efforts to build up its forces during the past decade have been concentrated in the Northwest of the country, where in fact the military threat appears to be only imagined. This is often at the expense of the forces in the eastern part of the country, namely those opposite China, and some independent military commentators in Russia have been claiming for a while that it is in fact China that is the primary threat to Russia.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

The reasons for the situation of the Pacific Fleet are apparently to be found both in the political domain and the domestic-military domain. With respect to the former, the forces in the Far East (to which the Pacific Fleet belongs) have been neglected due to the efforts to avoid any problem in the relations with China, which is viewed by many in the Russian leadership as a partner against the "hostile West". This perception is in line with the views of a not insignificant number of senior officers in the Russian army who continue to view the West as Russia's main rival and consider the end of the Cold War and the withdrawal of forces from Central Europe as having been a surrender to the West.

In the domestic-military domain, the situation is apparently influenced by the balance of power in the navy's leadership. Most of the senior officers in the navy during the last two decades arrived at the navy's headquarters after holding senior positions in the Northern Fleet. Thus, the setting of priorities and the division of resources are to a great extent determined by their interests as a group within the naval command. This is even manifested in the gap created in the fleet's status: while the Northern Fleet has been granted an independent status equal to that of the army's regional commands, the Pacific Fleet has remained part of the eastern regional command, whose commanders originate from the land forces.

At the moment, there does not appear much chance of a change in the situation, and therefore it may be that Russia will remain without any major naval power in the Pacific theater. It appears that major parts of the Pacific will remain under the control of the US navy and in those areas near to Eastern Asia, including the eastern areas of Russia itself, Russia will be able to do no more than watch the competition between China on the one hand and the US and its allies on the other for control of the sea.

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11 Храмчихин, А. (Khranchikhin, A.) "Почему необходимо обезопасить восточные границы России" ("Why Is Necessary To Secure Russia's Eastern Border") *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 2018, Sep. 02; Гольц, А. (Goltz, A.) "Военно-дипломатические маневры" ("Military-Diplomatic Exercise"), *Ezhednevny Zhurnal*, 2019, Sep. 24.

## Strategy and Culture in the South China Sea Conflict

### *Benni Ben Ari*

This article describes the geostrategic and geopolitical situation in the South China Sea, the setting for a decades-long conflict over sovereignty between China and the other countries in the region. The article also surveys a number of strategies and actions taken by China, some of which are based on Chinese culture and history and which give China an advantage in the current conflict.

### Past and Present

In April of 2020, at the height of the Corona pandemic, China published a list of names of 80 islands and shoals in the South China Sea. These were the historic Chinese names of the islands that are at the core of the prolonged conflict over sovereignty in the South China Sea and over the islands located in it. In a non-conventional move, 25 of the names were given to islands that include 10 sand-dune ridges (in Chinese: Sha), two small shoals and 13 shoals and reefs in the area controlled by Vietnam. Another 55 names were given to underwater mountains and ridges that are exposed only at low tide. According to international law, as it appears in the Convention of the Sea, (UNCLOS, 1982), China has no sovereign rights to these islands.

The determination of the restored names (the last time this occurred, in 1983, 287 names were determined for 287 geographic land formations) took place one day after China announced the establishment of two new administrative districts in the South China Sea, which will be under the 'Sansha' district. The two new districts are 'Xisha' and 'Nansha', which are the Chinese names for the 'Paracel' and 'Spratly' islands. This constitutes the creation of another fait accompli in the "strengthening" of China's claim of sovereignty. At the same time, China sent a research ship into waters over which Vietnam and Malaysia claim sovereignty, which constituted an open provocation.

At the same time, there was an incident in which a Vietnamese fishing boat was rammed and sunk by a ship of the Chinese coast guard. Chinese vessels also penetrated into Malaysian waters a number of times. US naval vessels patrol the region (since 2010) as part of the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS). The American presence was reinforced when President Obama declared the Pivot to Asia policy and since then the US has held naval and aerial exercises in the region. During 2020, there has been aerial activity involving helicopters and F35B aircraft, as well as B1 bombers, which are carrying out presence patrols in the region in order to demonstrate the US air force's ability to operate there. There are also patrols by

EP-3E and RC-135U planes (naval patrol planes and advanced intelligence planes). At the same time, the US is again issuing diplomatic protests against China activity, and the tension between the countries is rising. In contrast, the government of Malaysia announced that the Chinese research ship in its economic waters is operating according to law, and the President of the Philippines has announced his support of China, contradicting declarations by his foreign minister.

The US took a harder line starting on July 13th, 2020. Until that date, it took a neutral stance and only issued protests with regard to the conflict. The US also issued unambiguous diplomatic condemnations, including public recognition of the verdict by the Court in The Hague, handed down in July 2016. The US Secretary of State has declared that China does not have any legal basis for its activities in the region, such that the world will not allow it to relate to the South China Sea as China's "maritime empire". In addition, there is increased US military activity both in the air and the sea, which did not take place at all during the period 2012–15 and which is intended to demonstrate its capabilities and presence according to international law. This further intensified the tension in the region (although it should be mentioned that the US is not signed on the 1982 Convention of the Sea- UNCLOS).



Figure 1: the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier, the USS Boxer amphibious assault ship and auxiliary ships in a naval exercise in the South China Sea, October 6, 2019<sup>1</sup>

The US has no claims of sovereignty in the region, such that all of its activity is meant to show support for its allies and essentially is a show of opposition to China's aggressive actions, as part of its efforts to maintain the existing world order. It can

1 Richard Javad (22 November 2019), US, China sea tensions hit new boiling point, AsiaTime <https://asiatimes.com/2019/11/us-china-sea-tensions-hit-new-boiling-point>



be assumed that this activity is a result of the failure to resolve the problems and disagreements between China and the US through diplomatic means and of the increased tension between the countries as part of the trade war between them. Despite the presence patrols and the diplomatic protests, it appears that the US was too late in understanding the significance of Chinese activity, including the impressive buildup of power of the Chinese navy in recent years. Already at the end of 2019, the Chinese navy, according to the report of the US Congress Research Service, had 335 warships as compared to the 285 ships of the US navy.<sup>2</sup> According to a study by the US Naval War College, China will have 430 ships and 100 submarines in 2035, which is apparently double the number that the US will have. (On September 30, 2020, it was reported that a new program is being considered to enlarge the US navy, such that it will have 581 ships, in response to the growing threat from the Chinese navy).<sup>3</sup> The apparently incorrect assessment (which is partly due to the weakness and lack of preparedness of US Intelligence with respect to the intentions of the Chinese Communist Party and the lack of intelligence and understanding regarding the decision-making process of the Chinese regime)<sup>4</sup> that the artificial islands and weaponry deployed on them is not a serious or significant factor led to the long period of complacency. Thus, the Chinese essentially control the South China Sea at this point in time, and it is their intention to declare, apparently in the not too distant future, the region to be an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) (similar to the declaration made by China in the East China Sea in 2013).

The expansion of activity by US forces: The US navy, marines, army and air force all intend to challenge China's behavior. These activities can be classified into six groups, with some overlap between them: declarative actions (primarily freedom of navigation in the sea and the air); demonstration of presence (demonstration of force by means of ships, submarines and planes in patrol activity); intelligence activity for the gathering of information (by spy and patrol planes, submarines and oceanographic research); military exercises and training (by land, sea and air forces including cooperation with individual countries or exercises involving a number of

- 2 Steven Lee Myers(26 June 2020), China's Military Provokes Its Neighbors, but the Message Is for the United States, New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/international-home/china-military-india-taiwan.html>
- 3 Paul Mcleary (30 September 2020), DoD Ponders 581-Ship Fleet, As Navy Shipyard Problems Persist, Breaking Defense. <https://breakingdefense.com/2020/09/dod-ponders-581-ship-fleet-as-navy-shipyard-problems-persis>
- 4 Adam Schiff (30 September 2020), The U.S. Intelligence Community Is Not Prepared for the China Threat, foreign affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-09-30/us-intelligence-community-not-prepared-china-threat>

countries, some which are in the context of defense alliances); development and testing of operational and fighting tactics (in possible confrontations with China and relating to the South China Sea as a potential theater of battle); and deterrent activities (by amphibious task groups, battle groups of aircraft carriers, presence of nuclear attack submarines armed with ballistic missiles and flights of strategic bombers).

The Chinese naming of the islands and shoals is taking place at a time when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is, together with China, involved in the formulation of a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. This process began as a demand in 1995 following the takeover by China of a shoal within the waters of the Philippines. China agreed in 1999 to begin discussions, which essentially only started in 2002, and at that time a document was published entitled the Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> The goal of this document was to ratify the understanding among all of the countries in the region with respect to maritime, practical and environmental matters in the South China Sea and their resolution, with the intention of establishing friendly relations and cooperation in the resolution of conflicts. The document was based on the joint declaration in 1992 by the ASEAN countries which is in turn based on a 1976 document entitled 'Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia'.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, the sides agreed that discussions should be completed and the code published in 2021. During the many years of discussion, the principles of the code and its clauses were not common knowledge and not within the public domain. The delays and deferral are the result of the Chinese negotiating policy not to produce an agreement, since China is liable to find itself in an inferior position, from the viewpoint of both the agreement itself and international law. It can be assumed that the completion and ratification of the document will be deferred due to the Corona pandemic.

Simultaneous with the aggressive activity of China and its position with respect to its rights to sovereignty, and despite difficult domestic problems as a result of the Corona pandemic, China has provided assistance and support to the ASEAN countries, some of which have been involved in protracted conflicts with China in the South China Sea. These activities included the provision of 100 million masks and

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5 DECLARATION ON THE CONDUCT OF PARTIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, Association of South Asian Nations (ASEAN). [https://asean.org/?static\\_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2](https://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2)

6 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia Indonesia, Association of South Asian Nations (ASEAN), (24 February 1976). <https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976>

19 million biohazard suits, as well as an assistance grant in the amount of \$5 billion offered by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is an international investment bank in which China has a leading role and which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This phenomenon of separating aggressive diplomatic and military activity from economic activity and foreign policy is part of the history of foreign relations in Asia as far back as the imperial China.

At the annual conference of ASEAN in June 2020, the countries raised the concern that China intends to continue its aggressive activities. For the first time, they presented a united diplomatic front against Chinese activity and its demands for almost complete sovereignty in the South China Sea. The Prime Minister of Vietnam warned that the continuation of the conflict threatens regional peace in the areas of policy and economics and added that the uncertainty is a threat to peace and stability.<sup>7</sup> The decision published by Vietnam (the current president of the organization) stated: *"We are reaffirming that the 1982 UNCLOS is the basis for defining maritime rights, sovereign rights, jurisdictional authority and the issue of legality of maritime territories."* In September 2020, the foreign ministers of ASEAN published a statement calling for the cessation of all illegal activities in the South China Sea, including the construction of the artificial islands and the deployment of weapons on them and the disruption of fishing, and called for a resolution of all problems according to the 1982 Convention of the Sea, again without any mention of China.

However, and despite the new US stance, its open and explicit support of the international court from 2016 and the intensification of its activity in the region, the ASEAN states have not changed their policy in practice and they did not go any further than simply making declarations.

### **There are also islands under the sovereignty of Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines...**

Recall that the Chinese activities, which included the construction of seven artificial islands (nicknamed the Great Wall of Sand) in the Spratly island group starting in 2013 and their conversion into military strongholds, including airstrips, harbors and weapon and detection systems, were not halted by the decision of the International Court in The Hague, handed down in July 2016. Chinese diplomatic activity has

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7 Bickerton, J. (11.09.2020), South China Sea: Beijing joins new negotiations in bid to prevent all-out war, Express. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1333650/south-china-sea-news-Beijing-world-war-3-ASEAN-Vietnam-Philippines-conflict>

continued using the Chinese "salami-slice strategy" After creating facts on the ground, separate negotiations are held with each country and the outcome in most cases involves the provision of economic and military support to the complaining countries, which are using various means in order to resolve the situation; however, in practice, there is no change. The ASEAN countries have not managed over the years to come to a full consensus, which is the required method of decision making according to the ASEAN constitution. This is because Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, which have close economic, political and military ties with China, have objected any decision that is not favorable to China.

Notwithstanding the impression that it is only China which is establishing facts on the ground, the other countries that are parties to the conflict have also taken control of a number of islands over the years. On some of these islands. there has been activity to transform them into "military outposts", as well as creating tourist and diving resorts there, with the goal of demonstrating presence and sovereignty. Vietnam and Malaysia are the main countries involved in these activities.

While most of the islands in the Paracel group have been under Chinese control since the mid-1950s and full control was achieved in 1974 following a military confrontation with South Vietnam, the situation in the Spratly Islands is more complicated. Apart from the problem of identifying the natural dryland formations, the shoals, the rocks and the sand dunes, most of which are above water only during low tide, the involved countries have taken various steps to establish their presence in the islands. This has been accomplished by the construction of facilities for the temporary or permanent housing of small military forces, the construction of observation towers and lighthouses that remain above water even during high tide and by means of patrols carried out by the navies and coast guards, and in particular by means of intensive fishing activity. In view of the claims of sovereignty by a number of countries, the legal situation is unclear. It is unclear which country has sovereignty and whether these shoals and reefs fit the definition of a "habitable island" as specified in the Convention of the Sea, which would make it possible to demarcate sovereign waters.

Since 1988, Vietnam has taken control of 21 dryland formations, including shoals, rocks and sand dunes, on which it has established 34 structures. It has created platforms of between 100 and 250 square meters on some of them, made of wood or metal and built on piles. Vietnam considers some of them to be part of the Spratly islands within its Exclusive Economic Zone, according the definition in the 1982 Convention of the Sea.



Figure 2: Vietnamese "outposts" on shoals in the Spratly Islands<sup>8</sup>

The Philippines controls nine of the Spratly Islands and maintains a presence on them. Of those, eight are above the surface even at high tide. Since 1978, it has stationed small military units (of four soldiers) on five of the islands and shoals. On a different island, called the ' Second Thomas Shoal' (only exposed during low tide), they have placed an old landing craft onto the shoal which serves as an outpost for the soldiers that guard the island and maintain a presence.



Figure 3: A military outpost and observation tower on the Flat Island under Philippine sovereignty and the "grounded" landing craft on the Second Thomas Shoal

Since 1970, Malaysia has been demonstrating its sovereignty on five islands and has built facilities on them which are manned by naval commandos. It built a runway on the Swallow Reef island and has turned it into a tourist and diving resort.

Brunei is claiming sovereignty on only one coral atoll in its economic waters and in a 2009 agreement with Malaysia, which is also claiming sovereignty over this oil-rich area, it obtained control over 'Louisa Reef', which includes two areas of oil exploration.

8 Spratly Islands — a zone of possible military conflict in South-East Asia, (2 August 2013), Survincity. <https://survincity.com/2013/08/spratly-islands-a-zone-of-possible-military>; Lighthouses of the Spratly Islands. <https://www.ibiblio.org/lighthouse/spr.htm>



Figure 4: The Malaysian island of Swallow Reef<sup>9</sup>

OCCUPANTS\* ● China ● Malaysia ● Philippines ● Taiwan ● Vietnam ○ Reported reclamation/construction

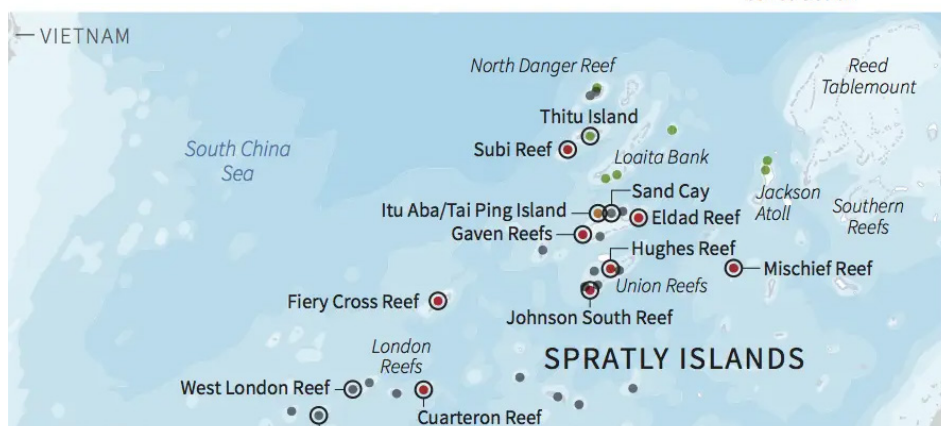


Figure 5: Islands and shoals in the Spratly Islands and under the sovereignty of five countries<sup>10</sup>

The country that is most determined in responding to the Chinese activity in the region is Vietnam, which has been a communist country for many decades and is closely aligned ideologically and politically (ostensibly, at least) with China. Nonetheless, it has taken a leading role in responding to Chinese aggression. Vietnam

9 Adrian David (4 March 2019), How Malaysia's five naval stations at Spratlys were built, New Straits Time. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/03/465854/how-malaysias-five-naval-stations-spratlys-were-built>

10 Greg Torode and Manuel Mogato, (29 May 2015), One thing people don't realize about the disputed islands on the South China Sea, Reuters. <https://www.businessinsider.com/r-civilians-emerge-as-pawns-in-south-china-sea-legal-chess-game-2015-5>

differentiates between responding to the Chinese activity and its overall political, economic and even military relations with China. This differentiation has an effect on the character of the responses, which primarily take the form of diplomatic protests. Nonetheless, Vietnam has recently adopted a more aggressive stance, particularly in the encounter between its fishermen and Chinese coast guard vessels; however, in all of the incidents it is in an inferior position.

### China's policy and behavior in a crisis

During the decades of the conflict in the South China Sea, China has adopted various strategies, according to the circumstances and the geopolitical situation, and its foreign policy and military activity are determined accordingly. In some of the cases, China has acted aggressively and with determination while in others it has adopted less of a hard line that it could have. But there is no doubt that all of its actions are connected to China's growing power, whether in the economic arena, the international arena or the military arena. Its policies are intended to challenge the status of the US in general and in particular to achieve full control in the South China Sea.

One of the main elements in China's behavior in the South China Sea conflict has been to maintain an impressive military presence. This has been manifested in "policing" operations by the coast guard and the navy against the countries in the region and the presence of tens of thousands of fishing boats, as well as the construction of the artificial islands and their militarization and in particular the naval exercises that have included advanced naval vessels of every type, including nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers.



Figure 6: Exercises of the Chinese navy in the South China Sea, September 2020<sup>11</sup>

11 Aw Cheng Wei (18 September 2020), China can safely drop nine-dash line in South China Sea and win friends in Asean: China expert, The Straits Time (Photo AFP). <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/china-could-safely-drop-nine-dash-line-in-south-china-sea-and-win-friends-in-asean-china>

The goals of the Chinese Communist Party are to maintain social stability with the goal of preserving its status and regime. This is also the purpose of its foreign policy in recent years, which is working to rehabilitate and improve China's global status and restore Chinese position in the world as at historic imperil China. China's behavior in the South China Sea conflict is part of its strategy to wipe out the "Century of Humiliation"<sup>12</sup>. In addition to the region's strategic importance as a primary sea route for the transport of goods and energy, in addition to its role as the line of defense for southern and western China (AD/A2), the region has major economic importance for China, primarily with respect to fishing and deposits of oil, gas and minerals.<sup>13</sup>

The statements of China in various forums, and primarily its assertive behavior on the basis of the declaration of Chinese indisputable sovereignty over most of the territory in the South China Sea, are illustrated by the words of the Chinese Foreign Minister already in 2010 at an ASEAN meeting: "China is a large nation and all the rest are small nations and that is a fact." In view of this statement and Chinese behavior, it appears that China is adopting the position of the "neighborhood bully". But its foreign policy is essentially based on, among other things, a strategy that was adopted hundreds of years before the start of the South China Sea conflict and has been updated and honed over the years. At the core of the Chinese strategy is the definition of National Core Interests which include issues on which China will not make any concessions or compromises. The first and foremost issue is the stability of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system. The second is the protection of its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and the unity of the Chinese people. The third is social and economic development. As necessary, China will use force, as a last resort, in order to protect these interests.

### **The strategy of "hardening the hard, softening the soft"**

The strategic approach is built on two policy elements simultaneously: the first is the uncompromising and rigid approach to issues that are a Chinese National Core Interest and the second is a flexible and more tolerant approach that includes cooperation and a negotiating process on issues that are of secondary importance.

12 The century of humiliation, also known as the hundred years of national humiliation, is the term used in China to describe the period of intervention and subjugation of the Chinese Empire and the Republic of China by Western powers, Russia and Japan in between 1839 and 1949

13 For further discussion of the Chinese interests in the region, see Benny Ben Ari (2018) "Asian culture and developments in the South China Sea," Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2017/18, Shaul Chorev and Ehud Gonen (eds.), pp. 56–72, Haifa University.  
[https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN\\_Report\\_2017\\_18.pdf](https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN_Report_2017_18.pdf)



This double strategy is known as "hardening the hard, softening the soft" (HHSS). China has been using this strategy for many years in the conflict with Taiwan: on the one hand, it has adopted a longstanding and rigid policy against Taiwan's independence, primarily in the political sphere and based on a military threat, and on the other hand it has encouraged economic and cultural activity between Taiwan and China. China is behaving in a similar manner in the conflict with the Philippines, Malaysia and primarily Vietnam over sovereignty. China's policy is to invite these countries, which are also claiming sovereignty, to cooperate and to be part of an effort to resolve the conflict through negotiations; however, in practice, it blocks any attempt at resolution that is not aligned with its interests. At the same time, China hints that it will not hesitate to use force in order to maintain its sovereignty, and it is sending clear messages that any attempt at opposition will lead to a dead end while cooperation will lead to benefit for the involved countries. Here again, the Chinese policy is following examples from ancient doctrines of warfare and adopts these policies for offensive activities.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has strengthened China's position in the international arena and has achieved greater "self-confidence" in its foreign policy, which has become less passive and more aggressive. Thus, the element of "forging ahead actively", which is in line with Xi's vision, has been added to China's foreign policy. This is a new kind of foreign policy, an Asian doctrine of security and a diplomatic policy of a superpower with Chinese characteristics. The South China Sea conflict (like that in the East China Sea) is defined as a National Core Interest and as a consequence the activities of island-building were intensified, and of course the ruling of the International Court in the Hague was rejected out of hand. At the same time, China has intensified its activities to promote economic cooperation and first and foremost the BRI and the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Similarly, emphasis has been put on China's relations with the ASEAN countries, primarily with the intention of reaching understandings and agreements on issues on which there are differences of opinion with regard to sovereignty and the operation of ships in the South China Sea. On these issues, China is insistent that foreign players are not involved. An example related to China's naval buildup of power on the basis of the HHSS strategy is the secret agreement signed between China and Cambodia, which is a member of ASEAN, and the establishment of a port and a naval base at Ream next to the port of Sihanoukville in Siam Bay, not far from the large new airport being built by a Chinese company.<sup>14</sup>

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14 (2 October 2020) CHANGES UNDERWAY AT CAMBODIA'S REAM NAVAL BASE, CSIS.  
<https://amti.csis.org/changes-underway-at-cambodias-ream-naval-base>

## "Wolf warrior" diplomacy

In March 2020, the economic, political and social elite of China met in Beijing for the main annual political conferences – the National People's Congress (NPC) and The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). One of the outcomes of the discussions was the adoption of a new foreign policy in response to criticism from other countries, and primarily the US, against Chinese policy on various issues, primarily international ones, but not only (the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Hong Kong crisis, the Corona crisis and the Muslim minority crisis in Xinjiang). The strategy was given the name "Wolf Warrior", a diplomatic and political attack that was intended as a response to "evil" accusations and slander and to protect China's national prestige. The expression of this concept by Chinese ambassadors and the Chinese Foreign Ministry in the US, Australia, Germany, Canada, France, Britain and elsewhere, where it was received with surprise, was a complete turnaround from the "calm" diplomatic language that had been used in Chinese diplomacy for many years. The content and style of the statements by some of the Chinese diplomats led essentially to a rise in tension, primarily with the US. It appears that this policy has caused more harm than good for China's international status and therefore it can be assumed that its main goal was to support the nationalist approach for domestic policy purposes, as part of the effort to preserve the image of the Chinese Communist Party.



Figure 7: The "Wolf Warrior" policy<sup>15</sup>

15 Cartoon by Rebel Pepper (1 June 2020), China's Wolf Warrior Diplomats: Is Life Imitating Art?, Radio Free Asia. <https://www.rfa.org/english/cartoons/china-wolf-warrior-cartoon-06012020163820.html>

## The Defensive Realist Theory

The behavior of China in the South China Sea (claims of sovereignty, construction of the artificial islands and the activities against the countries in the region) and the buildup of the Chinese navy in terms of both size and capabilities appear to indicate that China is adopting a policy of "offensive realism".<sup>16</sup> This theory states that a country develops political and military power and then seeks regional hegemony. But it may in fact be that the opposite theory better explains China's behavior and the strategy it is adopting. According to "defensive realism", a country that is building up its military power will make threats farther and farther away from its borders, with the main goal of its political and military activity being security rather than power or hegemony. The history of the Chinese navy since its founding in 1949 points to a focus on activity at greater and greater distances from China's coasts. This began with a focus on defending against Taiwan and later against Russia. In 1995 (the year of a crisis in the Taiwan straits and other global crises), there arose a need for protection against the US. At that point, the navy was given the necessary budgets and it developed itself into a large and modern force; at the same time, the "maritime militia" grew in size and improved its capabilities. Since 2005, the navy has expanded westward and it has participated in operations against piracy in the Gulf of Aden and in the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in 2012 and Yemen 2015. The navy's main activity is in support of its claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea, to impede the maritime activity of other countries in the region and to disrupt and provoke fishing activity and oil exploration and drilling. The threats and the provocations and of course the construction of the artificial islands constitute a strategy by which China is trying to create sovereign facts and to set the terms of any future negotiations in its favor.

## The Grey Zone strategy

The Grey Zone strategy involves the activities of one country trying to harm another, but which fall short of acts of war. The US Special Operations Command published a white paper in which it defined a grey zone as one in which there can be: "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality."<sup>17</sup>

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16 In the field of international relations, the term denotes a doctrine according to which the nature of countries is selfish and self-interested and every country emphasizes the development of military power. According to the realistic school, a country's actions are motivated by a desire to achieve political or military power rather than by ethical principles or idealism.

17 Philip Kapusta (9 September 2015), White Paper -The Gray Zone, UNITED STATES SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND. <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USSOCOM-GrayZones.pdf>

The aggressive actions to demonstrate presence and primarily the construction of the artificial islands are part of China's efforts since 2015 not to involve military forces in these activities but rather to use "little blue men."<sup>18</sup> Since the activities are "against" civilian targets, namely fishermen and oil exploration and drilling ships, and also include the construction of the artificial islands, this was originally a maritime civil engineering endeavor.

There were five Chinese civilian maritime authorities operating in the South China Sea up until 2013, for the purpose of both showing presence and dealing with events in the conflict: The Maritime Police; Maritime Surveillance; the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command; the Maritime Anti-Smuggling Bureau; and the Maritime Safety Administration. As the situation developed and activity increased in the area of the Spratly Islands and as a result of the complex relationships between the various organizations and the fact that they report to five different government ministries, the five bodies were united into the Chinese coast guard. Although it is primarily a civilian body, but many of its vessels are armed and it essentially "reports" to the navy. It has a larger number of vessels than any parallel body in the South China Sea and it is as large as the Japanese coast guard. If the plans for enlarging the coast guard are implemented, then in the next decade its total tonnage will be larger than that of the US and Japanese coast guards combined.

The Chinese coast guard is an almost regular participant in any event that involves the vessels, research ships, oil drilling ships and fishing boats of countries that are party to the conflict. Essentially, China has three navies in the South China Sea as part of the Grey Zone Strategy and they are put into play as needed according to the "Cabbage Strategy"<sup>19</sup>: The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the consolidated coast guard and the "maritime militia" which is a fleet of hundreds of thousands of fishing boats, some of which are armed and which are operated by fishermen who have been drafted into the navy. By means of these three navies, China is able to cover the entire range of required maritime activities.

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18 Franz-Stefan Gady (5 November 2015), 'Little Blue Men:' Doing China's Dirty Work in the South China Sea, The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/little-blue-men-doing-chinas-dirty-work-in-the-south-china-sea/>

19 It is a tactic to overwhelm and seize control of an island by surrounding and wrapping the island in successive layers of Chinese naval ships, China Coast Guard ships and fishing boats and cut-off the island from outside support

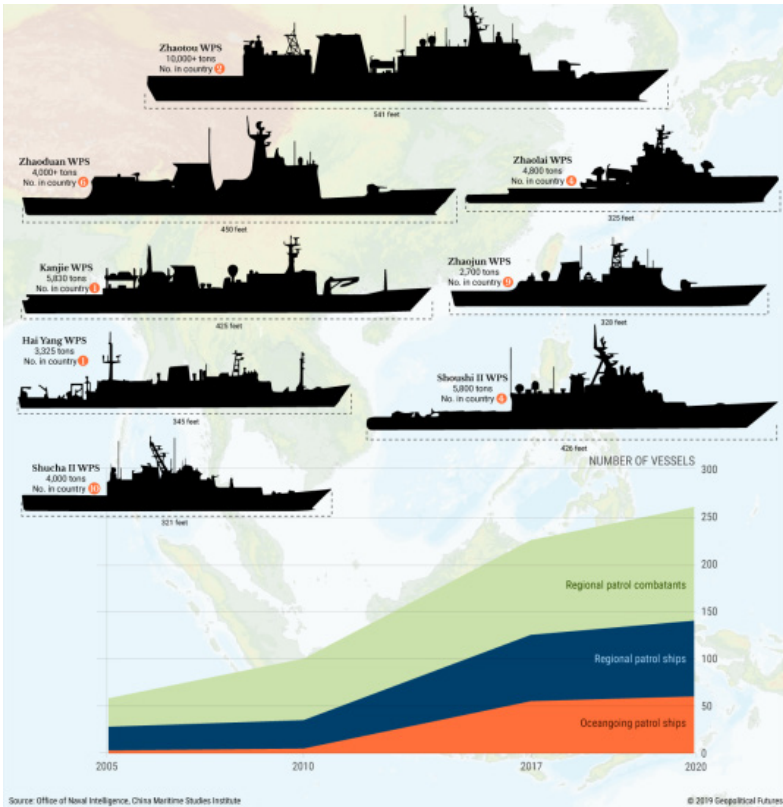


Figure 8: The growth in the number of ships in the Chinese coast guard<sup>20</sup>

The "maritime militia" has existed in China since 1949 when the country did not have any significant naval forces. The militia is meant to protect the shores of China and was part of the Community Party’s doctrine of the "People’s Army", according to which all of the people’s resources are utilized for the benefit of the State. This unique organization was trained by the navy and came to be called the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Its actual size is unknown, but it is estimated to be approximately more than 600,000 ships and boats<sup>21</sup>. The militia is under the direct command and control of the navy and has become a significant player in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

20 Phillip Orchard (), Will the US Coast Guard Enter the South China Sea ‘Grey Zone?’. <http://gonzaloraffoinfonews.blogspot.com/2019/04/will-us-coast-guard-enter-south-china.html>

21 Kraska, J., 2020, There is no universal definition for naval auxiliaries, but such ships are subject to the same treatment as warships during armed conflict, The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/chinas-maritime-militia-vessels-may-be-military-objectives-during-armed-conflict>



Figure 9: The navy, the coast guard and the maritime militia in the South China Sea<sup>22</sup>

It is important to mention that the "maritime militia" constitutes a significant operational challenge to the American and other navies operating in the region, since this is ostensibly a civilian body that includes only fishing vessels.

The Grey Zone strategy is implemented by China in the contested areas by "little blue men", a nickname taken from the Russian activity in the Crimean Peninsula and which refers to military forces camouflaged as civilians (The Little Green Men). In contrast to a conventional military confrontation, the confrontational strategy in the Grey Zone does not seek to achieve all of the objectives in one battle, but rather in asymmetric warfare, by acts that appear ambiguous and unclear and in stages that dictate the progress towards achieving an advantage. In the US view as of September 2018, China essentially controlled the South China Sea in all of the possible scenarios, apart from all-out war with the US.<sup>23</sup>

22 (18 April 2016), PLA navy stages combat drills in South China Sea, ejinsight. <https://www.ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1285724/20160418-pla-navy-stages-combat-drills-in-south-china-sea>; Asian Military Review. <https://asianmilitaryreview.com/wp-content/uploads/1-Haijing-3901.jpg>; Tyler Durden, (29 April 2019), "Warning Shot Across The Bow:" US Warns China On Aggressive Acts By Maritime Militia, Zero Hedge. <https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2019-04-29/warning-shot-across-bow-us-warns-china-aggressive-acts-maritime-militia>

23 Beech, H. (20 September 2020), China's Sea Control Is a Done Deal, 'Short of War With the U.S., The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/world/asia/south-china-sea-navy.html>

On the basis of the recognition of China’s military capabilities, the US has adopted a strategy for the Grey Zone that is comprised of tactics in which it has an advantage and which provide a solution in potential conflicts as China’s military power grows, while avoiding any direct confrontation with China’s Grey Zone strategy.

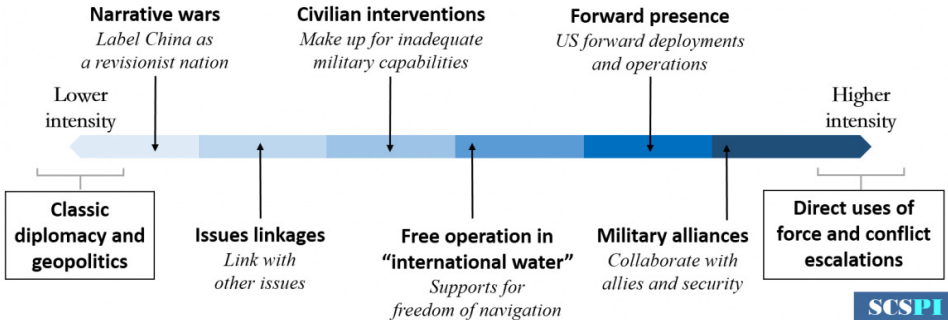


Figure 10: A spectrum of US Maritime Gray Zone Strategies against China<sup>24</sup>

### Conclusion

In Asia and in particular Southeast Asia, there have long been maritime territorial disagreements without any visible resolution. This situation will apparently continue, due to reasons that include, among others, past events in which countries were humiliated by foreign superpowers during the colonial period, in addition to subsequent confrontations between the countries of Asia, which have usually ended in stalemate rather than a decisive victory for one side or the other. This is also expected to be the case in the South China Sea. This conflict, in which China has been claiming sovereignty on the basis of a 1947 map, has lasted for more than 70 years and only in 2020 did the US adopt a clear and aggressive stand based on the claim that China’s demands are not legal.

It appears that the balance of power is tilting in favor of China whose aggressive efforts to realize its demand for sovereignty in the South China Sea show no sign of flagging. This is in spite of the fact that it has recently adopted more moderate and positive responses; nonetheless, it still defines this issue as a National Core Interest that is not open to negotiation or compromise. Even the global Corona pandemic, which began in China, and its deleterious effect on China’s economic situation, has not changed its geopolitical policy. The timing of the latest announcement—of the names for the shoals and reefs in the South China Sea—simultaneous with other aggressive

24 Yong, C. 2019, US Maritime Gray Zone Operations against China <http://www.scspi.org/en/dtfx/1571134316>

moves, is apparently not a coincidence, but rather is related to the behavior of the regime in China, i.e. the Communist Party, at the beginning of the Corona pandemic, namely the initial concealing of information and the serious harm to the economy. Although these are not sufficient reasons for a threat to the Party from the public, the announcement appears to be an attempt to use the "weapon of nationalism and honor" in order to improve the image of the regime among China's citizens. In addition, the US has accused China of exploiting the global Corona pandemic in order to continue its illegal activities in support of its claim for sovereignty. Indeed, while the world is preoccupied with the Corona pandemic, China is taking aggressive action primarily in locations where it is claiming sovereignty – not just in the South China Sea but also with respect to Taiwan, India (on the Himalayan border) and in Hong Kong. There is no doubt that China's growing naval power in recent years constitutes an important factor in the management and realization of its aggressive policy in the South China Sea.

The struggle in the South China Sea is also part of the American opposition to China as a rising superpower in the international arena. The American strategy is to contain<sup>25</sup> China and for its part is continuing to maintain a military presence in the region, both in the air and the sea. It has maintained a presence there basically since 1940 and there are those who doubt that its activity was intensified in order to enhance American messages regarding its status in the area. It is worth mentioning that the presence patrols are an essential activity of the US navy in order to maintain the law of the sea, but they are not meant to eliminate the operational potential of the islands nor do they have the power to do so. The goal of the patrols (which are carried out also in other areas of the world) is to maintain global freedom of maritime navigation. However, Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea is being maintained and is not being challenged by the Chinese navy or by anyone else. China will only be harming itself and its maritime presence if it interferes with freedom of navigation, and even the militarization of the artificial islands is not really meant to achieve that. Therefore, the frequent patrols and grandiose exercises by the US at a time when tension with China is growing will indeed emphasize that freedom of navigation must be maintained, although these activities are liable to bring about an unnecessary military confrontation by accident.

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25 Containment is a geopolitical strategic foreign policy pursued by the United States. It is loosely related to the term cordon sanitaire which was later used to describe the geopolitical containment of the Soviet Union in the 1940s. The strategy of "containment" is best known as a Cold War foreign policy of the United States and its allies to prevent the spread of communism after the end of World War II.



From a geostrategic perspective, and primarily a military one, it appears that the US has "fallen asleep at its post" and did not correctly assess China's intentions, including both the development of its navy and its sophisticated weaponry and the construction of the artificial islands, which are today a *'fait accompli'*. This is perhaps a general intelligence failure with regard to China. And although in theory the islands and the infrastructure built on them appear to be "stationary targets" that can easily be destroyed, in the case of a rise in tension and even prior to a descent into military confrontation, the islands constitute a genuine problem of A2/AD and they allow China to control the region under various scenarios.

China is implementing the HHSS strategy in the South China Sea primarily in view of the lesson it learned from the Taiwan crisis. But it is also learning from the management of international crises in the distant past of the imperial dynasties – to win the support of rivals in a time of crisis. The increase in US activity in the region, which is viewed in China as a direct threat, also forces China to adopt a clearer regional policy, which supports the restoration of China's senior regional status and at the same time protects its claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea. All this is to be viewed against the background of the changing strategic balance in the region. There is no doubt that the result of this strategy also contributes to maintaining and improving the image of the government, i.e. the Communist Party, in the eyes of the public in China.

Although China is presenting a story that there is harmony and regional understanding as reflected in the slow and prolonged process to reach agreement on a mutual Code of Conduct, it appears that the chances of developments that will lead to a military encounter are growing, depending on Chinese actions and the response of the countries directly involved in the conflict. Although the Code of Conduct is meant to produce clear rules for maritime security and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and will enable the South China Sea countries and China to build mutual trust, to manage crises and unexpected incidents, to enhance cooperation and to maintain regional stability, the matter is still under discussion. There is plenty of doubt as to whether the discussions will be finished in 2021, as planned.

The rivalry between China and the US in the South China Sea has undoubtedly reached a higher level, particularly after the recent and dramatic change in policy regarding the conflict. Only four years after the ruling in The Hague, it was declared on June 13<sup>th</sup> 2020 by US Secretary of State Pompeo and then confirmed by US Secretary of Defense Esper that China is openly violating the law with respect to the nations of the region. The creation of a coalition of the states in the region that is liable to generate a confrontation and even a state of war is not a reasonable

option, and in response to the demonstration of strength by the US, China is holding military and naval exercises and is showcasing its ballistic aircraft-carrier killer missiles.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, it can be assumed that a violent clash between the Chinese maritime militia, with the backing of the coast guard or the navy, and Vietnam or the Philippines for one reason or another will probably include American involvement and this is not a question of if but rather when.

Neither does the call to create a broad coalition of the countries in the region that are involved in the conflict with China get much support, except from Australia and Japan who are willing to participate in presence patrols, but without entering the territorial waters of the islands. The rest of the states in the region, and primarily the South China Sea countries, are "uncertain" about the move since it may damage essential relations with China. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in diplomatic protests, including by countries that are not a party to the conflict, such as Australia, Indonesia and the US. China itself has also registered protests. Most of the protests from the various states are based on definitions in maritime law according to the Convention of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982). More aggressive involvement by the US is not certain to be a permanent strategy over time.

China views the current situation (in October 2020) as stable and its control over the islands as a fact and it will continue its activities in the region according to the method of "divide and conquer" and other traditional diplomatic policies. Similarly, it will continue to blame the US for undermining stability for its own geopolitical purposes. Although there have already been calls from the academia in China to abandon the "nine-dash line"<sup>27</sup> and to reinforce China's "soft power", it can be assumed that this will be opposed by the security establishment and primarily the Chinese army.

From Israel's perspective, the conflict in the South China Sea is not a factor that immediately affects its policymaking since it can be assumed that the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea will not be harmed and neither will be shipping in the Indian Ocean, on its way to the Red Sea. If the situation between China and the US deteriorates on a global geopolitical level and Israel is forced to take a stand and

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26 H in Sutton, (3 September 2020), Chinese Navy May Be First to Get Ballistic Missiles, Forbs. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/09/03/chinese-navy-cruisers-may-be-first-to-get-ballistic-missiles/#45a9ed4c372a>

27 For further discussion of maritime boundaries in the South China Sea, see Benny Ben Ari (2018) "Asian culture and developments in the South China Sea," Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2017/18, Shaul Chorev and Ehud Gonen (eds.), pp. 56-72, Haifa University. [https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN\\_Report\\_2017\\_18.pdf](https://hms.haifa.ac.il/images/reports/EN_Report_2017_18.pdf)

perhaps reduce its economic and other ties with China, even then it is not expected that maritime traffic to and from Israel in the Indo-Pacific region will be adversely affected. The situation could change if the US enters into a conflict with China that leads to the use of force, with or without their allies. In that case, it is possible that the traffic of commercial ships in the South China Sea will be interrupted for a short or perhaps long period. However, such an eventuality is highly unlikely.