

Roundtable Takeaways

The Great Power Rivalry in North Africa: How it Transforms the Region, What Changes for Europe?

School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli, Viale Pola 12, Aula 12

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Moderating:

- Prof. Virginie Collombier, Scientific Coordinator at the Mediterranean Platform, Luiss School of Government
- Nedra Cherif, Researcher at the Mediterranean Platform, Luiss School of Government

Speakers:

- Riccardo Fabiani, North Africa Director, International Crisis Group
- Arslan Chikhaoui, Executive Chairman, North-South Ventures
- Dalia Ghanem, Senior Analyst, European Union Institute for Security Studies

Special thanks to the Associate Junior Researchers of the Mediterranean Platform, Luiss Guido Carli:

Giovanni Maria Barlotta ; Mikhail Giovannelli ; Meraf Villani

Introduction

Over the past years, North Africa has become the theatre of intensified rivalries between external actors eager to expand their economic and military influence, secure energy supplies and open pathways towards the African continent. China, Russia, Turkey and Gulf states, in particular, have geared up their involvement in the region, reinforcing their penetration of strategic sectors and markets, and cultivating ties with local elites.

What are the key geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics driving this new power rivalry in North Africa? To what extent are they likely to transform the region, both at the inter-state and intra-state levels? What can be the impact of these changes on Europe, at a time when both the EU and individual European states appear increasingly dependent on North African states to guarantee alternative energy supplies and to retain a chance to weight in the US-China global competition?

This second Monthly Mediterranean Platform will focus on ongoing geopolitical dynamics in North Africa and explore the ways in which they are transforming the region. The conversation with leading regional analysts will also look into the likely reverberations of these transformations in Europe.

1. A Geopolitical Shift in the Region

Riccardo Fabiani

- A geopolitical shift in North Africa started to happen in 2011 during the Arab Spring, and a main contributor was the intervention in Libya.
- The West was selectively and partially withdrawing from the region, but this doesn't mean that was becoming less important.
 - o The West's had a different kind of commitment toward security in the region.
- Military expansion:
 - o The region saw the rise of an increasing number of actors from Turkey, Russia, Iraq, France, and the Gulf, establishing a physical presence in the region.
- Political and economic expansion:
 - o China has been striking a series of agreements with countries in the region.
 - o Russia is the supplier of military equipment in the region and expanding economically.
 - o Turkey is also increasing trade and investment in North Africa and its presence is deepening.
- US and Europe are not the only international players calling the shots in the region although they still play a hegemonic role through financial bodies like the IMF or WB.
- There are many debates in the region on the following issues:
 - o Social contract
 - o Economic model
 - o Independence
 - o Sovereignty
- The debates have shifted from Western preferences as countries are looking toward other options.
 - o There is a bottom-up process for a demand for diversification.
- The old security, political, and economic models don't apply any more and there is a need for something different.

2. Changes in Europe

Dalia Ghanem

Chinese and Russian Influence in the Maghreb

- China and Russia don't have the same kind of influence in the region.
 - o Russia uses more hard power and an example of this is the Wagner group in Libya and other sub-Saharan African countries like Mali
 - o China favors a comprehensive soft power based on economic relationships
- China would like to see less Western influence in the MENA region but it is unlikely to see it taking over and becoming a hegemonic power
- The economic footprint of both China and India is big and they face competition with the EU in the Maghreb countries.
- Maghrebi population still want to emulate the culture linkage of Europe.
 - o Students from the Maghreb study in France, Italy, and Spain, not so much India and China.

The War in Ukraine and the Maghreb

Algeria:

- The war in Ukraine helped Algeria reemerge on the international and regional arena.
 - o It has been visited by several EU officials such as Mario Draghi, Emanuel Macron, Charles Michel, and others.
 - o Algeria recently organized the Mediterranean Games and the League of Arab States.
 - o During the war, Algeria also increased its gas supply to the EU and specifically Italy.
 - Supply is at a record 100 bcm and meets 12% of the needs of EU.
 - o Increased revenue of gas and oil gave the regime a second breath and a sense of legitimacy.
 - o The leadership is buying social peace by raising and extending employment and retirement pensions.
- Algeria has a very well-calibrated position of equilibrium, non-alliance, and non-interference.
 - o Algeria abstained from voting against Russia at the UN each time to prevent from antagonizing Putin in the war.
 - o Tebboune was absent from the US Africa Leaders Summit in Washington to avoid being drawn into Washington's criticism of Russia.
 - o Algeria doesn't want to upset Moscow or Beijing on one hand nor Brussels on the other.
- Russia is an old ally of Algeria and a main arms supplier to the country.
- It remains a question until when Algeria can maintain this fragile equilibrium without antagonizing the EU.

Morocco:

- Morocco abandoned its neutrality and voted at the UN against Russia.
- Morocco is trying to warm the relationship with the EU to try and counterbalance the position and influence of Algeria.
 - o Morocco is worried about the growing role of Algeria in supplying to the EU.
- Morocco has close ties with Moscow is still the third largest trade partner for Russia in Africa.
- Whether or not its position against Russia will impact trade has yet to be seen.

Tunisia:

- No country has felt the impact of the war more than Tunisia.
 - o There is political division and a difficult economic situation, with increased inflation, unemployment, and trade deficit.
 - o Tunisia is also facing a serious water crisis due to the poor infrastructure.
 - 85% of water that comes to houses disappears due to poor infrastructure.
 - o Formerly the most visited country in Africa, Tunisia's tourism sector is also struggling.

What is the Maghrebi street saying about the war in Ukraine?

- They don't really care about the war, and they don't have much sympathy toward the Ukrainians.
- The publications since the war began show resentment toward the West.
 - o What about George Bush and what he did in Iraq?
 - o Why should we care about a North-North conflict?
- The rhetoric of Russia battling a Nazi Government in Ukraine is a popular view in the Maghrebi street.
- There is a battle of narratives, and the EU should think about how to win the hearts of North Africans
- Russia and China are very good at narratives and spreading fake news.
- They are standing with the strong man who is facing the West.

3. Revenge of the Global South

Arslan Chikhaoui

Mediterr-Africa

- 15 years ago, there was a discussion at Davos about the scenarios in the Mediterranean region. We came out with a concept of Mediterr-Africa.
- The North African countries are looking more toward Africa than Europe, and Algeria is a key player.
 1. First, there is an increase in economic potential in the emerging markets of sub-Saharan Africa
 2. Second, the South Mediterranean countries are looking to North Africa as a bridge between the European Mediterranean countries and the South shore of the Mediterranean.
 3. Third, everything that is happening is a second phase of decolonization.

Algerian ties with Russia and China

- Russia from the Algerian perspective is a strong ally both before and after the independence.
 - o It is a member of the UN Security Council.
 - o Russia supported Algeria during the first phase of decolonization.
 - It is more than just a supplier of military equipment.
 - o It is the same for China.
 - o Algeria will not avoid the strong ties with either China or Russia

- Algeria has three advantages in diplomacy:
 1. Energy: gas supplier for Europe, India, Turkey, and other countries.
 2. Rare minerals: Algeria is a reservoir which has 20% of rare minerals in the world and is developing the mining sector.
 3. Agricultural: Algeria could be a key player in the agricultural sector
- The new elites governing Algeria for the next years are 50-70 years old.

Multi-alignment of Algeria

- Multi-alignment is the case of Algeria, not non-alignment.
 - o There is no alignment with either the blocs of the US or Russia, there is a balance where Algeria is looking out for its own interests.
 - o Algeria is trying to position itself between all these players instead of taking a position with one camp against the other.
 - o The president recently had a meeting with the press, and he stated this.
- Europe is also a key partner to Algeria.
 - o When the Ukraine is raised
 - Algeria responds with the US in Iraq, and when the Wagner Group is mentioned, they respond by mentioning Black Water.
- Maybe Algeria can be a facilitator for peace in Ukraine?
 - o The recent Turkish initiative didn't result in anything.
 - o China has yet to propose an initiative.
 - o Perhaps Algeria can at least facilitate a dialogue.
- Algeria suffered from conditionalities with the West in the past and China is playing very good in this area.
- China used science diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic to reinforce their role and presence in North Africa and especially Algeria.
- I'm not quite sure that the US is not so interested in the region.
 - o US and USAFRICOM high level officials have visited Algeria and more visits are foreseen in the near future from the DOD.
 - o Maybe not so much economically but in terms of security and defense, there is interest.
 - o These ties have been consolidated in the past two years.