Russia, lasting power in the Mediterranean

Nearly two years after the start of operations in Syria – which were initially decided (September 30, 2015) to provide aerial coverage to Damascus military operations, against opposition groups - Moscow has gradually strengthened its positions in Syrian ports and airfields, passing (not so veiled) from having a support engagement to the establishment of a permanent presence. The Institute for the Study of War outlined the Russian military presence in the Mediterranean, drawing an overall picture of resources, displacement and use of new equipment. Thus, on July 5, 2017, 15 Russian warships were located in the Tartus port (on the Syrian coasts) as part of a permanent Mediterranean MTF, following an agreement signed in January 2017 with President Bashar al Assad, which provides for a 49 years lease. On May 31 and June 23, Russian naval ships launched two series of Kalibr cruise missiles against Syrian soil on Islamic State sites, demonstrating the ability to run a combined assault on an area with ongoing fighting by using land and sea observation posts. ISW points out that the Syrian conflict offers Russia the chance to test its own arsenal (including supersonic anti-ship missiles P-800 Onyx) and to sharpen its use on different scenarios, while developing capabilities for coordinated attacks. Russian military authorities argued that they have also conducted several operational and logistic exercises near the Libyan and Egyptian coasts. In this context, the MTF continues to receive the most advanced warships equipped with medium and long range cruise missiles for ground and sea attacks.

Russian military presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Source: Institute for the Study of War (ISW)

Currently, the level of conflict in the Syrian scenario remains high and the Russian military presence in support of Damascus is therefore aiming to become a constant in a scenario far from possible policy solutions. In such a context, however, the meetings of the dialogue format opened at the end
of January in Kazakhstan, known as the Astana Process (promoted by Russia, Turkey and Iran) continue in order to achieve an enduring ceasefire.

On July 4th, for the fifth time the delegations of Russia, Turkey, Iran (as guarantor countries of the ceasefire), the Damascus government and the Syrian opposition army representatives, met with the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria (Staffan de Mistura) and observers from Jordan and the United States. The meeting followed the results reached at the previous meeting of May 4, when an agreement for the creation of de-escalation areas on Syrian territory was signed, although still lacking detailed discipline and definition of responsibilities. The four de-escalation areas are: Idlib (north); an area north of Homs; much of the area east of Ghouta and Southeast of Syria. In the final statement of the Astana July meeting, Russia, Turkey and Iran have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening the ceasefire and helping to create a climate of trust between the parties involved in the conflict. This last point would seem to be the key point for a successful de-escalation initiative.

Although in general agreeing on the principle of the establishment of such areas, the Syrian opposition has declared its disagreement with the proposal for and armed control led by Iranian forces, as Iran fights alongside government troops. Turkey also required more time to better define a land separation between the Damascus and the opposition forces.

The joint monitoring group overseeing the definition and management of de-escalation areas plans a meeting in Iran in August, while the next meeting of the Astana Process is established by the end of August.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were called by Russia to intervene directly in the Syrian conflict as observers of ceasefire in de-escalation areas. This possibility - which was proposed on June 22 by Vladimir Shamanov, former commander of the Russian air force and chairman of the Defense Committee at the Duma - should have been resumed at Astana talks but did not find the parties ready to join. According to some sources, Russia could alternatively involve all members of the CSTO as monitors (Eurasia Daily Monitor, July 10).

Proposed de-escalation zones. Source: Gulf News

Analysis, assessments and forecasts

Considering that Russia will stay in Syria for the medium to long term, even in the case of a stabilization of the Syrian scenario, its presence will be a fundamental variable for the definition of the regional and Mediterranean equilibrium in the broadest sense. Counting on a credible military capacity as well as on military partners throughout the North-Africa region, Russia seeks to consolidate itself as a needle of scale not only in defining the Syrian and Middle East security
framework, but also as an indispensable reference for transit in trade and strategic channels such as, for example, Suez and the Strait of Hormuz.

Hence, the need to carefully consider the delicate co-presence of the United States in the same regional scenario, given the possibility of re-generating (even beyond the ongoing conflict) constant tensions and possible reciprocal provocations such as those occurring frequently with NATO along the western border of Russia.

In addition, Russia's promotion of Syria’s negotiating solution (which Kazakhstan has agreed to host and coordinate in logistics terms) puts Moscow ahead of the UN Geneva-based peace initiative (which the Astana Process aims to support and facilitate), creating a parallel opportunity for a diplomatic dialogue.

Events:

- **Pakistan and India in the SCO.** The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Astana Summit (8-9 June) marked the first membership enlargement to Pakistan and India. SCO is the organization for security and cooperation, which has been ruling Russia's and China's interest in the Eurasian space for the last 16 years. With the entry of new members, SCO (including also Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) has become the largest regional organization in the world.

- **The EU is preparing a new strategy for Central Asia.** According to what was announced at the Foreign Ministers summit in Luxembourg (June 19th), 10 years after the first Central Asia Strategy, the European Union is studying a new political-economic-social agenda for the region, which should be issued by the end of 2019. The areas of intervention reported in the Council’s conclusions are: human rights (including gender issues), good governance, the rule of law and the independence of the media. Particular attention will also be given to Afghanistan (to contribute to regional stabilization) and to energy (for an extension of the Southern Gas Corridor, which joins Azerbaijan and Europe).

- **A new Russian base in southern Kyrgyzstan?** During the 5-day visit by President Almazbek Atambaev in Moscow (June 19-24), the Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan has been widely discussed. Currently, Russia holds the Kant air base (near Bishkek) but, in view of its possible upgrading, Atambaev has proposed to President Putin the opening of a new military structure in the south of the country where security forces are facing the threats coming from Afghanistan. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia shares with Central Asia the same security problems. While there are still no official pronouncements about Atambaev's request, Moscow has already expressed its commitment to further strengthening its military presence in Tajikistan, where it has been holding a armored division for 20 years. Until June 2014, in Kyrgyzstan there were also US military forces, based in Manas (30km from Bishkek), which has been used as a transit center and logistics support for operations in Afghanistan. In addition to discussing security issues, Putin and Atambae have signed numerous agreements on migration (hundreds of thousands of Kirghiz are working in Russia), public health and finance.

- **New railway corridors between the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe.** On June 19, a meeting between the heads of railways of Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, Ukraine and Poland - as part of the South-West Transport Corridor launched in 2016 within the Trans Caspian International Route project - was held in Baku. The parties have concluded a new protocol to develop co-operation opportunities along the south-west route (i.e., via Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and then, crossing the Black Sea, again from Ukraine to Poland), with the aim of increasing and optimizing the transit and transport capacities of the existing railway.
The parties have decided that the South East Co-coordinating Council will be based in Baku, while the work group on the project will be located in Iran. Besides the railway infrastructure program which is developing in the Eurasian space in connection with the Chinese *One Belt One Road* system, also the South Caucasus launches its own initiative geared towards the West, with Poland and Ukraine eligible to become new European hub of future interconnections.

- **Still high tension along the western border of Russia.** On June 21, during a visit to Kaliningrad, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that due to the intensification of NATO's military activity on Russia's western borders and the exercises conducted in the Baltic Sea region, Moscow will increase its military presence along its western side, with 20 new units that will be deployed by the end of 2017, in addition the exercises already planned with Belarus. Russian television and several news agencies spread the news of a NATO F-16 escorting the plane on which Shoigu was traveling to Kaliningrad. The NATO-Russia Council held on July 13 discussed about how to reduce tension in the presence of both Russian and the Alliance aircrafts in the Baltic skies. While Russia declares to regulate military flights in accordance with international discipline, NATO denounces dozens of airspace constraints in member countries airspace, as well as refusing Russian pilots to respond to air traffic controller requests for identification.

- **The "Prague Dialogue" between Russia and Georgia.** On July 7, in Prague a meeting between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigori Karasin and the special envoy of Georgia's Prime Minister Zurab Abashidze was held in the framework of the so-called "Prague Dialogue", the only diplomatic channel between Moscow and Tbilisi after the August 2008 conflict. The (failed) goal of the meeting was to establish a commercial transit corridor between Russia and the occupied/separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are considered by Moscow very important in order to create an alternative trade route in South Caucasus in the event of a worsening of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Russia maintains a continued military pressure on Georgia, lastly with military maneuvers in Abkhazia (since June 30, lasting for two weeks) and with the movement of soldiers close to the administrative border with South Ossetia (reported on July 4).

- **High tension in Nagorno Karabakh.** The Armenian separatist enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh is still cause of tension between Eravan and Baku. On July 11, Co-Presidents of the Minsk Group (Ambassadors Igor Popov-Russian Federation, Stephane Visconti-France Richard Hoagland-United States) met with Azerbaijani Foreign Ministers Elmar Mammadyarov and Armenian, Edward Nalbandian, to discuss how to proceed to a new approach for a conflict resolution, agreeing for a forthcoming meeting at the margins of the United Nations General Assembly scheduled for September in New York. The small region, which is part of Azerbaijan's territory, is inhabited almost entirely by an Armenian population. In the 1980s, with the weakening of the Soviet system, Nagorno Karabakh attempted annexation to Armenia and declared its independence in 1991. Between 1988 and 1994, there was a conflict broke out between the local army and Azerbaijan's armed forces, intending to resume control over that region. Since 1994, the year of the ceasefire declaration, the OSCE has pledged to try a negotiating solution through of the Minsk Group, formed by Russia, the United States and France. The initiative has, however, proved to be a failure. At present, Nagorno Karabakh enjoys substantial autonomy over the Baku authorities, and despite the repeated ceasefires declared over the years, clashes continue, although low, with sporadic victims and intensification of war activities recovered since 2014. An eventual aggravation of the security framework could jeopardize a fundamental area for the transit of hydrocarbons from Azerbaijan to Europe, where the interests of different regional and extra-regional actors are concentrated.
• **Kazakhstan: deprivation of citizenship to those convicted of crimes against national security.** On July 11, Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbaev, signed a controversial legislative measure (passed between May and June by both branches of the parliament), which gives the authorities the power to deprive of citizenship those who are sentenced for crimes related to terrorism and threat to the security of the state. Specifically, the considered crimes concern: the organization and membership of terrorist groups, the threat to interests of vital importance to the state, and the plot against the life of the president.

• **Meeting of the CSTO in Minsk: cyber crime and new supplies.** On July 17, a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the CSTO took place in Minsk. The members discussed, in particular, about the contrast to cyber crimes and favorable economic conditions for the sale of military equipment to partner countries. The Council also agreed to intensify the work of the Afghanistan Working Group and approved a Foreign Security and Security Policy Consultation Plan to be implemented from mid 2017 to the first semester of 2018. Founded in 2002, CSTO is a security organization consisting of six former Soviet republics (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) as successor of the Collective Security Treaty signed in Tashkent in 1992. The Organization provides for intervention in favor of a member attacked by another country (in accordance with the right to collective self-defense of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter) and fosters military cooperation, countering terrorism and foreign policy.

• **Meeting of the EU-Uzbekistan Council.** On July 17, the first Summit between the European Union and Uzbekistan since 2015 has been held, as a sign of the new foreign policy openings introduced by the political course of President Shavkat Mirziyaev. Mirziyaev succeeded Islam Karimov, who died on September 2, 2016 after having ruled the country since independence.