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Threats, Instability and Disruption in Europe's South

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Threats, Instability and Disruption in Europe's South

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This paper is an expansion of shorter remarks given at a conference held in Berlin by the George Marshall Center for Security Studies, on 30 June 2022.

Summary

- Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2016 turned out to have much broader objectives. The development of air and naval bases provided Moscow with platforms for operations in the Mediterranean and in Sub-Saharan Africa. The delivery of S-400 missile systems to Turkey added another major strategic gain.
- The European Union is faced by broad challenges on its South, with a sharp decline in rule of law, political instability, and a surge in authoritarianism. Wider phenomena such as climate change, demographic trends, and criminal activities of human trafficking networks add to the challenges. ISIL is still a threat too.
- Turkey's choice of disruptive policies has perplexed EU and NATO leaders in the recent past. Tensions with the EU have risen due to challenges to maritime boundaries and sovereignty of Cyprus and Greece.
- Although largely a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the European Union's major foreign policy initiatives in 2022 have marked a watershed moment and constitute a useful precedent for the Union's policies with third countries.
- In the near future, the EU will have to invent a new format, distinct from accession, for its relationship with the countries of 'Wider Europe' and to use its now diversified 'foreign policy toolbox' in a coherent and effective fashion.

Introduction

The threats, instabilities and disruptive actions on Western Europe's southern flank take multiple forms, from actual or intended military action to political influencing, from tensions in the energy market to food scarcity, from political instability to human trafficking, from demographic trends to climate change. Directly or indirectly, they all affect the future of Western Europe; in the final analysis, both individually and collectively, they constitute a major reason for the European Union (as well as Western Europe and NATO) to organize itself accordingly.

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After decades of limited visibility, the EU has taken major foreign policy initiatives in 2022, making this year a watershed moment in the European Union's foreign policy. But the EU is also challenged by hostile policies and competing "brands", which in turn raises questions about how Europe should exert power. This article documents the perceived risks, the actions taken so far, the competing narratives, and the challenges ahead.

Europe's "threat perception"

Threat perception on the part both of citizens and their leadership may differ from actual threats, and perceptions differ from one country to another, even within highly-organized institutions such as the European Union or NATO. The threat perceptions described in this article are based on recent developments and on this author's own experience over seventeen years as an EU Ambassador in the region (Morocco, Syria, Tunisia and Libya, Turkey). In terms of perceived threats, six problem areas have been identified since 2015.

Russia's increased footprint in Europe's south

The [Russian deployment](#) in Syria since September 2015 has proven to be a **major game changer** for European and Western powers. It was initially conceived as a rescue operation for a client regime on the verge of military defeat. However, based on a formal agreement signed in August 2015, it resulted in significant improvements in the infrastructure available to Russian forces stationed in Syria, with new facilities like the Hmeimim air base near Latakia and expanded ones like the pre-existing naval station in Tartus. Additionally, Russian military operations in Syria were also used as a testing ground for equipment and tactics.

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Beyond its relevance to the Syrian war, Russia's deployment marked **the country's return to the Middle East** as part of a strategy to fill the void left by a declining US presence. Overall, the [actions taken by Russia in and around the Mediterranean](#) are that country's instruments of choice for competing with the EU and NATO on their southern flank, by making its presence felt in major ways.

For example, the Hmeimim air base hosts S-400 missile systems which have within range an entire EU country (Cyprus), the Akrotiri base of the Royal Air Force (Cyprus), and a US-Turkish air base at Incirlik (Turkey). Furthermore, the Russian ministry of defence announced in February 2022 that it had deployed [MiG-31K fighter jets](#) at Hmeimim, armed with Kinzhal missiles: this brought a large part of southeastern Europe, including six EU members, within their announced 2,000-kilometer range. In addition, the Hmeimim air base is used to support military operations further afield in Libya and Sub-Saharan Africa.

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It is also highly significant that Russia controls the [Al Jufra air base](#) in the centre of Libya, which it uses as a stopover for its operations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Were Russia to use the base for [more strategic purposes](#)--deploying long-range ballistic missiles, for example--it would be "a game changer for Europe, NATO, and many Western nations".

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For its part, the [Tartus naval station](#) is being expanded under an agreement signed in January 2018 granting Russian ships the right to visit Syrian territorial waters and ports for a period of 49 years. The naval base was used in early February to resupply a Russian naval flotilla heading to Sevastopol and is now being used to service a second flotilla which was barred from traversing the Turkish Straits after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

As a result, in addition to rescuing an allied regime, **Russia has enlarged its footprint** and acquired **additional strategic advantages** on Western Europe's southern and south-eastern flank.

In addition, in July 2019, Russia made a major move with the **sale and delivery of S-400 missile systems to Turkey**, an extraordinary deal allowing Moscow to implant missile defence assets (including personnel) in a NATO country. Importantly, from a Russian strategic standpoint, this gave Moscow two strategic advantages on its southern flank. First, it eliminated the potential deployment in Turkey of NATO-origin systems (US Patriot missiles or French-Italian Eurosam missiles), which would have been a logical choice for a NATO member country committed to the bloc's Ballistic Missile Defence, as approved in the organization's successive [summits](#). Second, it eliminated the prospect of Turkey deploying up to 120 US-made F-35 stealth aircraft as part of NATO's air defence architecture (100 for its air force plus another 20 to be deployed on the future light aircraft carrier Anadolu). These two developments resulted in a [substantial strategic advantage for Russia](#) along circa 900 kilometres of its southern border with NATO territories.

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Russia also implements a consistent energy policy in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Egypt, Lebanon, Northern Iraq, Libya) aimed at establishing a permanent presence for Russian state companies involved in oil and gas exploration and production.

Furthermore, the Russian operation in Syria has been accompanied by an **Iranian military deployment**, reflecting Tehran's aim of a permanent Iranian presence on Mediterranean shores, which triggered Israeli retaliation in Syrian air space.

Spillover from Russia's invasion of Ukraine into the Mediterranean region

The invasion of Ukraine has had multiple impacts. Trade has been affected, in particular the delivery of cereals and fertilizers from both Russia and Ukraine to countries including Egypt and Tunisia as well as further afield. Finance is also an area of concern, with substantial flows of capital and real estate investments being made by Russian entities or individuals in both Cyprus and Turkey. Commercial naval movements to and from the Mediterranean have also been affected by military deployments off the Russian and Ukrainian coasts. Air traffic to and from Russian airports, too, has been affected by the war and the ensuing sanctions.

More generally, as with every sanctions regime, moves to evade sanctions are closely monitored but, given that dissimulation is technically easy, problematic grey areas remain. Thus, while [suspicious traffic](#) such as the Russian bulk cargo vessel "Zhibek Zholy", which was thought to be carrying looted Ukrainian grain from Berdiansk (in

occupied Ukraine) to Karasu (Turkey), may be apprehended, subsequent investigations are likely to prove inconclusive.

Sharp decline in the rule of law and/or a sharp rise in political instability

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One of the broader risks incurred by the European Union is a sharp decline in rule of law, often accompanied by political instability (as in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria). The surge in authoritarian regimes in the region poses a specific challenge. In addition, long-standing intra-regional tensions persist, such as those between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and between Israel and Palestine. As the region's primary trade, tourism and investment partner, the EU is inevitably affected, in particular through the increased risks for its businesses and finance companies in case of economic downturns, currency devaluations, or the growing lack of level playing fields.

With Russia and China's increased presence in the region, a new battle of narratives has begun in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The underlying human and environmental factors

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Europe's south is largely affected by wider phenomena such as climate change, demographic trends, and educational challenges. Combined with failed political structures, armed conflicts, and widespread corruption, these factors have resulted in a feeling of hopelessness among large segments of the population, in a number of sub-Saharan countries in particular. In turn, the related activities of human trafficking networks pose problem for the EU. Criminal activities of this sort, which are a function of multiple causes, are currently ongoing in Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey, despite controls and police cooperation activities having been reinforced considerably.

The residual threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)

ISIL's activities in Syria and Iraq cannot be dismissed, given both that the terrorist group remains active and that a substantial number of its operatives are still detained in the region, according to a [recent US estimate](#). This has implications for the US military presence in Syria, which has resulted in litigation between the US and Turkey: the latter considers the Syrian Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) militia to be an integral element of the Turkish Kurdish insurgent PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), while the former works with the YPG against ISIL. Ankara's announced [additional military operation](#) in north-eastern Syria, which has been condemned by the EU, the US and Russia, would add to tensions in the region.

Turkey's choice of disruptive policies

Ankara's positioning in the Mediterranean and Middle East region has evolved over the past eight years or so, perplexing the leaders of both the EU and NATO, since Turkey has applied to join the former and is a member of the latter, a status which would normally imply a cooperative (as opposed to adversarial) posture. Nonetheless, [Turkey's actions in the region](#) have often gone against the interests of both the European Union and NATO. The most significant of these actions relate to Turkey's challenging of existing maritime borders and, in a number of cases, the sovereignty of EU member states (Cyprus, Greece). In addition, Turkey's gas exploration activities are based on a unilateral definition of boundaries and sovereignty which has allowed its government to sign an

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maritime agreement with Libya, to protest the signing of cooperation arrangements such as the [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#) (Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and Palestine with the US, the EU and the World Bank Group acting as observers), and to start exploration activities in waters internationally recognized as Cypriot or Greek. It should be noted that the political value of Turkey's disputing of gas exploration rights is higher than its economic values, since Turkey's dependency on imported gas will be reduced (in proportion with the size of the deposits) when its discoveries in the Black Sea reach the production stage.

The six threats outlined above pose **lasting challenges to Europe's foreign policy**. Some are by essence medium-term, while others are likely to remain in place into the long-term. However, none can be ignored or dismissed by the European Union and NATO.

European Union actions thus far

As a single political entity, the European Union has long privileged declaratory diplomacy. As a consequence, "EU declarations" often represented the only action Europe takes. Syria provides the best example of this: since the civil war began in March 2011, the European Union has not been deeply involved in diplomatic efforts and has even been deliberately excluded from forums such as the "Astana Process", which involves Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

In the meantime, significant military action has been undertaken by some European states in Syria (France and the UK, in conjunction with US operations, and supported by the air forces of other EU countries), as well as in the Central Mediterranean, through EU actions such as [Operation Irini](#) and security organizations like [Frontex](#), or NATO ([Operation Sea Guardian](#)).

However, **the first half of 2022 turned out to be a watershed moment for EU foreign policy**.

First, the European Council adopted the **EU Strategic Compass** in March 2022 after last-minute changes to take into account the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The "[Strategic Compass](#) for security and defence", a policy framework, constitutes a major leap forward in terms of a statement of principles. Seeking to protect EU citizens, EU values and EU interests, and to contribute to international peace and stability, it is the first document of its kind; it has no precedent in the European Union. However, divergences subsist between member states on some issues, including the bloc's relationship with NATO, perceptions of China, or the prioritizing of economic interests over security requirements.

Second, if 2022 turned out to be a landmark year for EU foreign policy, it is also because the Russian invasion of Ukraine added considerable **impetus to EU foreign policy debates and decisions**. As a result, the EU took a number of unprecedented steps relating to [trade and financial sanctions](#), flight restrictions, [restrictions on trading in oil and gas](#), a nascent gas procurement mechanism, weapons procurement through the [European Peace Facility](#), and the bloc's enlargement policy. Some of these decisions were taken despite the initial opposition of some member states (e.g., Hungary delayed an oil embargo on Russia for weeks and watered down the consensus on its implementation). The depth of these decisions (as well as the speed at which they were taken) has created a powerful new reality; the [conclusions of the June 23-24 European Council](#) clearly illustrate this trend.

A striking feature of the European Union's policies in 2022 has been the trend towards exerting power in new ways, especially through combination of diplomatic action, trade and financial sanctions, financial support, and weapons deliveries.

Third, in parallel, **NATO** has also taken major steps both in the policy field, with the [Strategic Concept](#) adopted on June 30, 2022, and in operational term, e.g. a [massively expanded reassurance operation](#) on Europe's [Eastern flank](#), from Estonia to Romania, even though differences still exist among NATO members with regard to their respective operational involvement. The [Declaration of the Madrid Summit](#) constitutes a major new development for Europe and has reassured European members about the US commitment to the security of Europe. In addition, the political will to ensure smooth cooperation between EU institutions and NATO has been reaffirmed.

A striking feature of the European Union's policies overall in 2022 has been the **trend towards exerting power in new ways**, especially through combinations of diplomatic action, trade and financial sanctions, financial support, and weapons deliveries. Although this new "toolbox" is currently being used to react to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it sets a **remarkable precedent** in terms of foreign policy formulation and implementation.

The Russian (and Turkish) brand of governance

The consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the EU's policy in Eastern Europe are largely beyond the scope of this article. However, the invasion has also impacted on the EU's standing in the world, where it now finds itself confronted by a "**Russian brand of governance**" which constitutes both a danger and a competing model for the European Union.

This "brand" is entirely different from European values and principles, if not openly hostile to them. It is based on absolute and autocratic power, the oppression or harassment of political opponents, the absence of checks and balances (judiciary, media, civil society), the extensive use of conspiracy theories, the re-writing of history, disinformation activities, and direct challenges to foreign nations and ethnic groups.

This model is in place in "client countries" such as Belarus or Syria, but it is also attractive to some leaders around the Mediterranean (Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt) and in Sub-Saharan Africa (Central African Republic and Mali are the most obvious examples). The system of governance in place in various countries further afield (India, China, Brazil) also bears a strong resemblance to the Russian model. In this sense, the war in Ukraine has been called a "[war of models](#)".

When the UN General Assembly took action after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a [majority sided with the European Union](#) in each of the three successive votes. However, many countries remained on the fence--a clear indication that [Western values and principles](#) are not major determining factors in as many countries around the world as many observers in Europe would like to imagine.

In its south-eastern neighbourhood, the EU is also confronted with an **autocratic evolution in Turkey**. Having embarked in December 2014 on a journey toward EU membership and having implemented EU-based reforms for a decade or so, the Turkish leadership subsequently altered its political course and veered toward a full-fledged autocracy in which the judiciary, media and civil society have ceased to serve as counterweights to the executive branch and parliament's powers have been substantially curtailed. In the process, Turkey's relationship with Western powers has deteriorated to the point that "foreign enemies" are now a regular ingredient of the political narrative. In the foreign policy field, Ankara has chosen to openly challenge the European Union, as

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witnessed in recent years and weeks.

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Over and beyond the legal arguments it has employed in its disputes with Cyprus and Greece, Ankara's actions have increasingly been based on unilateral decisions and the absence of direct dialogue. Several actions stand out: a) the "slow annexation" process of the self-proclaimed "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" is proceeding through political changes toward a like-minded president and government and concrete actions such as permanent connections with Turkey's electricity and water networks; b) a paramilitary assault on the land border with Greece in February 2020 organized by the Interior Ministry; c) objections to maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean; d) recurrent public challenges of the status of several Greek islands. As a result, Turkey is not currently considered to be part of the core group of EU interlocutors (as seen in the recent European Council conclusions, where the country is only mentioned in a negative way in relation to the threats it has made in the Eastern Mediterranean). This regrettable estrangement may have long-term consequences in the [foreign policy field](#).

Although a NATO member, Turkey has recently opted for a balancing policy between its membership of the Alliance and its relationship with Russia. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not altered this balancing policy: on the contrary, NATO was confronted by a new challenge when Turkey placed [conditions on NATO enlargement](#) to Finland and Sweden, even though this enlargement was viewed by other members as a major response to Russian aggression. The compromise [trilateral memorandum](#) agreed upon on June 28, 2022 before the Madrid Summit (which included satisfying Ankara's requests concerning Kurdish organizations in Sweden) was subsequently [challenged](#) by Turkey's President and Foreign Minister on June 30. This unpredictability has created additional difficulties for the European Union, too, since it challenges the rule-of-law mechanisms of two EU member states and has delayed the reinforcement of the European pillar of the Transatlantic Alliance.

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The challenges of exercising power

By dint of its structure, the European Union as it stood in the early 2000s was ill-equipped to deal with a world in which hostile narratives and open aggression have replaced peace-oriented policies.

Intellectually and ideologically, the European Union (and Western Europe, for that matter) was born out of the ashes of World War II, then built and equipped to **deal with a post-conflict political environment**. The sequence of decisions which led to the existing post-World War II political, economic and security architecture is telling: the Marshall Plan (1947), NATO (1949), the Schuman Declaration and European Coal and Steel Community Treaty (Paris, 1950), the European Economic Community and EURATOM Treaties (Rome, 1957), the Franco-German Treaty (1963), then all the subsequent EU treaties. Historically, a united Europe has been based on extensive economic integration and partial political integration in order to bring security to its citizens and avoid any repetition of earlier intra-European conflicts and to nurture good neighbourly relations within and beyond the Union. These momentous achievements—indeed, these very principles—are now being openly challenged.

Moving away from the "Never Again" motto, and from the priority given to dialogue and conciliation over confrontation, is a new situation for EU leaders. It means acknowledging that the world has changed, acknowledging that the EU brand of liberal

democracy and economy has now been openly challenged by the Russian brand. It also means that the “**appeasement policies**” applied by several European leaders in recent years (for example with Moscow and Ankara) have reached their limits.

Moreover, the EU now finds itself confronted by “friends of Russia” within its own ranks: the government of Hungary, political parties including the extreme-right and extreme-left in France, and various political personalities in both Germany and France.

In a way, **the EU has now reached a point of inflexion in its foreign policy**. Its old tradition was to limit itself to declaratory diplomacy and to offer humanitarian or relief assistance in lieu of a real foreign policy. Much more is now expected of the European Union, and a wide-ranging debate has started within the European Council in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This debate will last for months, if not years, making it difficult to predict a specific result. **Disunity or divergences within the EU (and NATO) could well become a new norm**. Organizing the EU to act against active disinformation and interference is a new challenge, so maintaining a high degree of policy consistency is a serious issue for the European Union. The EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, shone a light on this challenge when he repeatedly coined the phrase: “[Europe must learn to speak the language of power](#)”.

As this political debate begins, it is useful to briefly list improvements that have been made in four directions.

A first step, largely a result of Russia's hostile moves, will be to implement more consistent principles (i.e., the Strategic Compass) and to integrate the traditional tools (statements, trade policy, sanctions, financial support) more closely with military actions (European Peace Facility or bilateral actions). This process is largely underway but needs to be carefully monitored.

A second step will consist of **fine-tuning the EU's foreign policy governance** in particular spheres such as its decision-making procedures and the debate on unanimity vs. qualified majority voting, the bloc's relationship with NATO, and the visibility of the EU's own institutional architecture.

A third step should be to reinforce the EU's diplomatic action in the wider world with a view both to building coalitions to push back the competing narratives and/or hostile moves of foreign powers, and to illustrating the political, human, and economic benefits of the EU's model of society. This will involve learning how to address the globalized generations and their demands. It will also take a collective effort on the part of the EU institutions (European Council, Commission, Parliament, EEAS) and member states, at the local level, too. Finally, the European External Action Service will need to be actively employed as a means for exerting influence, and not just as an administrative tool for EU diplomacy.

A fourth move should be to better structure the relationship between the EU and its closest neighbours. Traditionally, the European Union has exerted influence in its near-abroad through its **enlargement policy**, with the most recent example being the decision taken by the European Council in June to grant candidate status to both Moldova and Ukraine. However, as might be imagined, this decision created understandable frustration in the [Western Balkans](#).

However, this increase in the number of candidates for accession and the areas in which the EU engages in dialogue and cooperation with its neighbours has put the concept of a

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new mechanism for the countries of a **“Wider Europe”** back onto the table. Several proposals have recently been put forward by the [French President](#), the [President of the European Council](#), and former prime ministers of Italy ([Enrico Letta](#)) and Finland ([Alexander Stubb](#)). Others have pointed to the existing structure of the Council of Europe. The European Council of June 2022 initiated the discussion, which will be pursued in the near future. One of the clarifications needed is whether a new mechanism will be intended to act as a **“waiting room for accession”** or whether it will constitute an **“outer ring of partners”** with various degrees of integration with a core EU. The issues of the institutionalization (or not) of such a mechanism, and its deliverables (what and when?), will be important elements in the discussion.

Conclusion

As has happened so often in the past, intense foreign threats have led to crucial progress being made, with the European Union taking major steps forward in 2022. Indeed, European politicians have often noted that some of these decisions would have been unthinkable just months prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

These momentous decisions must now be implemented, steadily and cohesively. Most importantly of all, finding a meaningful vehicle for dialogue with the European Union's closest neighbours will constitute a litmus test for how the European Union exercises its influence and power. In this new era, statements of principle and promises will no longer suffice, as many third countries expect visible, concrete deliverables from the EU.