

# Hegemony and Mediterraneans

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*This article explores from a realist perspective the geopolitical function that the world's three Mediterraneans play in the struggle for world power. The three Mediterraneans identified by Yves Lacoste are in fact the largest macro-regions a local power can impose its hegemony on, thus maximising their influence such a power is able to project onto the world. By following a comparative study, this article notes that while the American Mediterranean remains firmly under US control, the Asian and European Mediterraneans are turning into "discharge zones" for international tensions, namely places where the most important matches for world domination will be played out.*

### **Theoretical clarifications**

After a careful comparative study, Yves Lacoste notes that there are two regions where "the similarities" with the Mediterranean Sea "are [so] striking"<sup>1</sup> that it is possible to say that there are three Mediterranean seas in the world. They are: the "American Mediterranean", the "Asian Mediterranean", and the "European Mediterranean". Lacoste writes: "From a geopolitical point of view, we can say that a Mediterranean is a maritime grouping composed by a large number of States whose reciprocal relations are particularly rich and complex, as each and every one of them is potentially touching all the others."<sup>2</sup>

The magnitude of the three Mediterraneans (of about 4.000 km in length each), their geographical conformation (a large number of isthmuses, peninsulas, large archipelagos as well as medium- and small-sized islands), and their political configuration (dozens of States that are easily in contact with each other although do not border directly) make these areas comprehensible through the lens of lacustrine geopolitics, albeit with some reservations. This characteristic makes the three Mediterraneans (1) circumscribed systems that can "be completely absorbed by an [internal] territorial entity, which takes complete control"<sup>3</sup> and closes the system off from external

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Lacoste, *La Méditerranée*, La Découverte, Hérodote, 2001/4, No. 103, p. 20. This article uses "Mediterranean Sea" and "European Mediterranean" synonymously.

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. 20

<sup>3</sup> Orazio Maria Gnerre, *Comprendere il Mediterraneo con la geopolitica lacustre*, in "Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici", Vol. 2/2020, p. 26

influences. (2) Systems where “distant powers can permanently project their navy there”<sup>4</sup>, thus preventing unification or forcing the opening up of the regional system.

Let us deal with the first point. Because of its “enlarged lake” characteristic, namely its being a sea that can be interpreted through lacustrine geopolitics, a political entity within the regional system may unify the Mediterranean macro-region by becoming a regional hegemon. By becoming “a State that is so powerful that it dominates all the other States in the system [namely within] distinct geographical areas”<sup>5</sup> – in the case at hand, the Mediterranean. Due to the vastness of the Mediterraneans, a political entity internal to that system that enforces its hegemony on the Mediterranean finds itself in a situation of benign security (since it is not threatened by other regional powers), and multiplies its power (due to the almost exclusive control over sea routes, natural resources, economic integration it enjoys) as well as its power projection capability.

Let us deal with the second point. The direct access of the Mediterraneans to the oceans, together with Mediterraneanans’ peculiar geographical and political configuration, offer an external actor the possibility of easily and permanently projecting its naval power into the system. However, the same wide ocean that makes it easier for an external actor to project its naval power, also acts as a “stopping power”, by taking, for example, offensive capabilities away from a land army, thus making it impossible for an external actor to unify that Mediterranean within its own power structures.

Since the stopping power of water and of other major terrestrial obstacles prevent a political entity from unifying the entire world under its control (from becoming the “world hegemon”), a State’s best situation is to be the only regional hegemon in the whole world, to be the only political actor that has unified its macro-region. For this reason, after having reached regional hegemony, the hegemon “would go to considerable lengths to weaken and maybe even destroy its distant rival”<sup>6</sup> if that rival tries to unify its regional system. Indeed, the emergence of a new regional hegemon will imply a drastic re-balancing of the international power balance and thus a drastic decrease of the relative power of the previously sole regional hegemon.

With these theoretical clarifications in mind, this paper analyses the geopolitical situation of the world’s three Mediterraneans.

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<sup>4</sup> Yves Lacoste, *La Méditerranée*, op. cit., p. 20

<sup>5</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Politics*, W.W. Norton, New York, London, 2001, p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 42

## The American Mediterranean

In modern times, the United States is the sole State that has achieved full regional hegemony: a goal it “aggressively pursued” since the beginning of the “nineteenth century”<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, once achieved it, the US continuously strived, just as aggressively, to prevent extra-regional actors from doing the same with their own macro-regions.

Ever since declaring its independence and breaking away from Great Britain, the US has pursued a policy of expansion along a vertical line in order to impose its hegemony on the American continent, and along a horizontal line in order to conquer the oceans. The latter expansion was also facilitated by the geopolitical empty spaces on the east and the legacy taken from Great Britain on the west. Indeed, the Monroe Doctrine, rather than being a true isolationist and anti-imperialist doctrine, enunciated “the fundamental principle that the American continent would be under the control of the most powerful State of the area”<sup>8</sup>, which means “that the United States had decided to replace Europeans in the colonial exploitation of the American continent, by using the means that would be regarded as the most profitable and suitable to them”<sup>9</sup>.

The ride to the Pacific, the victory over Mexico, the absorption of Canadian war-industrial capabilities, the expulsion of the European powers from the American Mediterranean, and a series of surgical military and economic attacks in Central and South America have made the US a State of continental dimensions whose supremacy in the American continent is not threatened by any power. In addition to the “geopolitical unity for North America”, the US has favoured “an excessive fragmentation for Central and South America”<sup>10</sup>, which it sees as its “backyard”. In regard to the latter two areas, when pursuing its national interests the US never hesitated to reach them by means of coercive measures, which only apparently contradict North American rhetorical support for freedom and democracy around the world.<sup>11</sup>

This apparent contradiction can be explained by underlying US economic nature. Following Northerners’ victory over the more agricultural, traditionalist and aristocratic Confederate South, the US national economy has been characterized by a commercial

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<sup>7</sup> Ivi, p. 170

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Cassese, *Diritto Internazionale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2013, p. 39

<sup>9</sup> John Kleeves, *Un Paese pericoloso. Le radici storiche di uno Stato criminale: gli USA*, Barbarossa, 1999

<sup>10</sup> Tiberio Graziani, *Il risveglio dell’America indiolatina*, eurasia-rivista.org, 2007

<sup>11</sup> For example, the US stress on freedom of trade has been functional to the promotion of its own expansive trade, while the stress on the right of self-determination of peoples has been functional to the fragmentation of continental empires. The same applies to the ongoing insistence on universal human rights.

expansionism that needs to be satisfied in order to avoid the implosion of the economic system. Similarly, the rhetorical statements in regard to US isolationism have historically been combined with the Puritan idea concerning US moral superiority *vis-a-vis* Europe and the rest of the world. Such ideas – the US, for example, as being the “city upon the hill” or the “house of freedom” – have been exploited to justify US horizontal and vertical expansionism to ensure the opening of global markets.

As for the domination of the seas, in addition to the economic system, US geopolitical characteristics need to be examined. Bi-continentalism and bi-oceanism connected by the Panama Canal are two fundamental characteristics of US geopolitics, which make North America a sort of continent-island. For these reasons, North American geopolitical characteristics make it easy for the US to extend and project its navy anywhere in the world; the US is therefore particularly prone to a thalassocratic type of regional and world domination. US geopolitical and economic characteristics were well understood from the outset by Alfred Mahan, the father of US naval doctrine, whose “fundamental idea remains valid”<sup>12</sup>. Admiral Mahan, at the end of nineteenth century – a period when the US was already promoting its vertical expansion onto the American continent – argued for a thalassocratic type of horizontal expansion, aimed at gaining domination on world oceans.

According to Mahan, the US is the necessary heir of the British maritime empire – (Great Britain having become too small) an inheritance that makes the US the “true contemporary island”, the “major island” thanks to its “insular character” on a continental scale<sup>13</sup>: characteristics achieved through US control of North America (American Mediterranean included), US fractioning policies of Central and South America (US backyard) and the Panama Canal. American continental insularity, as well as American linked bi-continentalism and bi-oceanism, ensures the US has the capability to easily and simultaneously projects its power onto the Atlantic, the Pacific and South America.

The only apparently inconstant US expansion over the oceans actually enjoys a certain degree of constancy and is not caused by thinking and rethinking on the part of the ruling class. In the history of US expansionism, “isolationism and interventionism are not two radically opposed and irreconcilable tendencies. Rather, they are two complementary phases – one might say of

<sup>12</sup> Nikolaus Scholik, *Power-Projection VS. Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD)*, in “Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security”, Routledge, 2016, p. 179

<sup>13</sup> These ideas are outlined by Mahan in *The influence of sea power upon history, 1660-1783*, Boston, 1894; *The interest of America in sea power, a present and future*, Boston, 1987; *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies*, Boston, 1990, p. 8

systole and diastole – of a single movement directed towards the same goal: the control of the other hemisphere”<sup>14</sup>. The same is true for the apparently contradictory nature of an expansionism headed now towards Europe and Asia, “like a giant that rolls in his bed now on one side, now on the other one in order to seize peoples and continents”<sup>15</sup>.

The late nineteenth century Pacific was seen by Mahan as an area that was geopolitically empty and contested by European imperialisms (which had just been expelled from the American Mediterranean) and the rising Nipponese one. In that area there were empty “outpost positions where it [is] increasingly evident that influences might be established dangerous to the United States. [...] Such influences must be forestalled [...] by a definitive policy”<sup>16</sup>. The US gained control and still controls the Midway, Hawaii, Wake Island, Samoa and other Pacific islands and archipelagos which, together with Alaska, constitute the “cornerstone of US control”<sup>17</sup> over the Pacific. Thanks to the strategic control it enjoys over this area, the US can simultaneously project its power in Asia while blocking an external actor’s influence in America. Early twentieth century Nipponese imperialism, which strove to create a more or less rhetorical sphere of Asian co-prosperity – and thus implied the expulsion of European and American powers from Asia – was destroyed by US expansionism. This expansionism’s aim was “to crush Japan before it achieved regional hegemony”<sup>18</sup> in the Asian Mediterranean. Following the Japanese defeat, the US has firmly settled in the Asian Mediterranean.

The same is true for the Atlantic, where the US inherited Great Britain naval bases, contributed to the collapse of the continental European empires in WWI, broke through Berlin in WWII, and marched to Eastern Europe in the Cold War victory, reaching Russian borders.

In light of this, the anti-hegemonic function of the US Navy<sup>19</sup> becomes clear, as it is also clear that US superpower status is superior to that of a purely regional or bi-oceanic power. Indeed, not only the US is the hegemon in the American Mediterranean, but its power is also “intimately linked with the American capability to be an offshore balancer, that is, to play an anti-hegemonic function” in the European and Asian Mediterraneans “through the projection of its

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<sup>14</sup> Claudio Mutti, *L’America non si isolerà*, eurasia-rivista.org, 2016

<sup>15</sup> Carlo Terracciano, *L’isola del mondo alla conquista del pianeta*, Preface by Claudio Mutti, Introduction by Giacomo Gabellini, Anteo, Cavriago, 2012, p. 58

<sup>16</sup> Alfred Tayler Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies*, op. cit., p. 8

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Terracciano, *L’isola del mondo alla conquista del pianeta*, op. cit., p. 49

<sup>18</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, op. cit., p. 260

<sup>19</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Case for Offshore Balancing A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy*, Foreign Affairs, July/August, 2016



naval power”<sup>20</sup>. By means of its navy, the US prevents other States from becoming the hegemon of their own macro-region: if that happens, US relative power *vis-a-vis* other States will drastically diminish. Historically, the major challenger, especially if it were of a continental type, has been “isolated internationally [and] encircled [by] and international coalition”<sup>21</sup> led by the US, which eventually defeated it.

As Jordis Von Lohausen notes, “for a maritime power, the sea is a living space, not a frontier”<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, the US believes that it is for reasons of national security its access to the world oceans must be “unfettered”<sup>23</sup> for US trade and navy, which requires as a *conditio sine qua non* the prevention of the birth of a hegemonic challenger, which would unify its Mediterranean and expel the US navy. Safely in its continental insularity<sup>24</sup>, the US projects its influence onto all world regions and prevents the political unification of other regional macro-systems.

### The Asian Mediterranean

After the Nipponese and the more timid Soviet attempts to enforce their own hegemony in Asia, the Asian Mediterranean witnesses a new potential regional hegemon: China. China has so far “never released a definitive maritime security strategy – a fact that might have contributed to uncertainty over the direction of its maritime strategy”<sup>25</sup> in the eyes of other countries. If one were to take literally the officials’ statements or the official foreign policy strategies that have been released, one would think that China has no hegemonic ambitions, even though it does acknowledge that it has “vital maritime interests that [need] to be secured”<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, the insistence with which Beijing refers to Taiwan, which is a sort of Sicily in the Asian region, as a

<sup>20</sup> AA. VV., *Manuale di relazioni internazionali*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, p. 115

<sup>21</sup> George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics*, MacMillan, 1987, p. 33

<sup>22</sup> Jordis von Lohausen, *Les empires et la puissance. La géopolitique aujourd’hui*, Le Labyrinthe, Arbajon, 1996, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> This is also confirmed by the US most recent naval strategy: *Advantage at Sea. Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, media.defence.gov, 2020. I provide an analysis of it Marco Ghisetti, “*Advantage at Sea*: la nuova strategia navale statunitense”, eurasia-sito.com, 2020, <https://www.eurasia-rivista.com/advantage-at-sea-la-nuova-strategia-navale-statunitense/>

<sup>24</sup> One might think that recent collaborations established between some South American and Asian States are a sign of the decline of the US superpower in Hispanic America. However, it should be borne in mind that throughout the twentieth century there always have been South American States that collaborated with extra-regional powers, which were sometimes open rival of the US. Nevertheless, this never succeeded in seriously disturbing US supremacy in the American continent.

<sup>25</sup> Xu Hui and Cao Xianyu, *A Perspective on China’s Maritime Security Strategy*, in “Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security”, op. cit., p. 339

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Latham, *Mahan, Corbett, and China’s Maritime Grand Strategy*, thediplomat.com, 24 august 2020

“rebel province” that shall “return to its motherland” by 2049, or to the Asian Mediterranean as the “South China Sea” 90% of which is embraced by a nine-dash line that delimitates “Chinese territorial waters” over which Beijing enjoys “exclusive historical rights”, betrays what are in fact Beijing’s attempts to “legitimise China’s geopolitical ambitions up to 2.000 km from its southernmost coastline. All this to the extent that the Beijing government believes that these waters are Chinese territorial waters. Obviously, geographical names play a geopolitical function”<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to this, it must be noted that Chinese military academies and universities have absorbed the insights of the Anglo-American geopolitical tradition on the importance of maritime power for world domination, Alfred Mahan included. An increasing number of analyses and works published by these institutions argues that the US’s as well as some influential international institutions’ insistence on concepts such as freedom of navigation and trade “have [not] much to do with the welfare of others.”<sup>28</sup> Rather, it is more about “ensuring America’s hegemonic position and preventing the emergence of a new challenger in the global commons”<sup>29</sup>. Although these publications do not have the Party’s official approval, they are nevertheless useful in unveiling the general mindset and geopolitical orientations that are on the rise in the People’s Republic.

What is certain is that the Chinese approach to the sea has, even at official levels, changed radically in recently years and precisely as a result of the Chinese opening to global markets and trade in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, long ago Friedrich Hegel pointed out in his *Philosophy of History* that for the Chinese the sea was no more than the place where the land finishes, and the task given by Mao Zedong to the Chinese navy was simply to protect the mainland from an amphibious invasion. However, starting from Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms and opening-up policies, China has felt an ever-increasing need to review its approach to the sea – at least in order to protect its energy and raw material supplies. The Chinese need to govern and control maritime routes has eventually been officially recognised at a strategic level by Xi Jinping, as it is demonstrated by the increasing official use of the expressions reported on the previous page<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, this change is also proved by the fact that the Belt and Road Initiative is made not only of a land route but also a maritime one.

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<sup>27</sup> Yves Lacoste, *La Méditerranée*, op. cit., p. 18

<sup>28</sup> Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Views of the U.S.-led Maritime Order*, in “Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security”, op. cit., p. 356

<sup>29</sup> Ivi

<sup>30</sup> See John H. Mauer’s lecture on Alfred Mahan given at US Naval War College in 2020, where he insisted on the importance of Mahan’s naval doctrine as well as on the fact that “today Mahan is very popular in

After all, Beijing's recognition of its own economic and political growth should result in an encouragement to pursue regional hegemony, no more and no less than what the United States did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A mandatory step towards this goal would be the complete expulsion of US influence from the Asian Mediterranean. But while the Chinese referring to the Asian Mediterranean as their territorial waters unveils Beijing's intention to enforce a Monroe Doctrine to that area, from an external actor's point of view a Chinese Monroe Doctrine or a Monroe Doctrine with Chinese characteristics would not be that different from the Nipponese project to create an Asian sphere of co-prosperity. That is, a project against which the US fought a war.

When China opened to international trade, capitals and commerce, Beijing managed not only to maintain its sovereignty and avoid a Soviet-style implosion, but also gained a leading role on the world stage and strengthened its military apparatus. This fact has pushed the US to start playing the offshore balancer card by creating an oceanic alliance with local actors that are afraid to fall within China's orbit<sup>31</sup>. China is in such a position that if the US were to give up its offshore balancer role, for example, by losing Taiwan or renouncing its other military commitments in the Asian Mediterranean, the regional States that are trying to counter-balance the Chinese rise or are playing the servant to two masters game with China and the US would be left with no choice other than jumping on the Chinese bandwagon, hoping to gain some benefits from voluntary subservience. As a result, China would turn the Asian Mediterranean into its internal lake and become a regional hegemon; US superpower would be impaired. Very importantly, a hegemon China would not limit itself to Asia, but rather would proceed even more rapidly with the Belt and Road Initiative towards the European Mediterraneans and threaten US supremacy even in South America.

A hegemon China would have the same interests as the US, but different geopolitical characteristics. It would be a semi-insular power but not a bi-oceanic one, because on its western flank lays not the ocean but a land mass. Nevertheless, such a land mass provides a certain degree of security and safety, as well as a dividing line *vis-a-vis* extra-regional powers (Himalayas, Taklamakan, etc.). In addition to this, Asian and African land masses work as a stopping force as they prevent China from extending unconstrained up to the other side of the continent. The Belt

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China" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaQ17rvCSA0&t=3190s> Also Robert Kaplan claims that "Tellingly... the Chinese avidly read [Mahan]; the Chinese are the Mahanians now". Robert D. Kaplan, *America's Elegant Decline*, The Atlantic, volume 300, no. 4 (November 2007).

<sup>31</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Case for Offshore Balancing. A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy*, op. cit.

and Road Initiative, which is China's major geo-economic project, surely serves the purpose to circumnavigate such a problem, and helps China reach the European Mediterranean and aims to unify the Eurasian continent under its economic and industrial leadership. For all these reasons taken together, even though China cannot become a regional hegemon also in the European Mediterranean (because of the stopping force of the water and in some cases of land), Beijing has an interest in diminishing US influence in the European Mediterranean as well.

It is interesting to note that the Belt and Road Initiative is made of a terrestrial as well as a maritime part, a clear sign of the People's Republic non-bi-oceanism and semi-insularism. Such a characteristic is perhaps the reason as to why, notwithstanding its ever-increasing projection onto the oceans, China is still using telluric expressions even when it refers to seas and oceans. This is perhaps a sign that China is still tied to a telluric worldview, and therefore its world strategy may not turn into a thalassocratic world strategy as it has been for UK and US<sup>32</sup>.

### **The European Mediterranean**

A substantially different situation characterises the European Mediterranean, where there is an overwhelming US presence, the lack of a major challenger, and a greater instability. The entire northern coast of this Mediterranean, from Portugal to Turkey, including a large part of the Balkans and of the Black Sea, is an area controlled by NATO. Thus, it is a *de facto* US protectorate. This US supremacy is accompanied by a "nonchalant use of geography"<sup>33</sup> that disowns Europe as being the westernmost part of the Euro-Siberian plain terrain or as an integral part of the Mediterranean macro-region. Rather, the usual geographical expressions used to denote this area interpret the European peninsula as an integral part of the "Atlantic" or, *mutatis mutandis*, "Western world".

This nonchalant use can be understood by realising that the concepts of "Atlantic" and "Western" are not understood in an essentialist or geographic way, but organically. This use is a way that is functional to US domination over the European States. Naming is never a neutral act; just as this is true for Beijing's use of the expressions "South China Sea" instead of the more impartial "Asian Mediterranean", so also referring to the European peninsula as "Atlantic

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<sup>32</sup> However, it should be borne in mind that China has fully integrated itself into the liberal International institutions. Hence, in the future it may feel the need to promote, even aggressively, its own commercial expansionism, in much the same way as Great Britain and the United States have done.

<sup>33</sup> Claudio Mutti, *Mare nostrum o mare alienum?*, in "Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici", Vol. 2/2020, p. 12

and Western Europe” has a geopolitical function. Curiously this interpretative superstructure is accepted and used not only by Americans, but by European countries as well. Indeed, “after sixty [now eighty] years of subordination to the Atlantic westerners, European ruling classes perceive themselves, and therefore the countries they govern, as an integral part of the West – without any respect for objective (geographical) reality, their history or identity”<sup>34</sup>.

This subordination becomes even clearer when we note that European countries do not outline a broad strategy for their sea, but actually promote and endorse US action, which is aimed at fragmenting the Mediterranean despite the fact that there is not a regional challenger that is trying to impose its hegemony. The continuous European use of concepts that, from a Gramscian perspective, are functional to a master’s domination is not at all a secondary factor when it comes to understanding European Mediterranean’s geopolitical situation. Indeed, as Yves Lacoste notes, an in-depth knowledge of one’s cultural and geographical representations is one of the main factors that one has in order to find its function in the world, and therefore the perimeter within which one can cultivate one’s ambitions and vocations<sup>35</sup>.

The European oligarchies’ subordination to the US’s interests marked its climax when they destroyed Gaddafi’s Libya, a country that was trying to carry out a project of pan-African and pan-American emancipation that was addressed also to the European countries that participate in its destruction<sup>36</sup>. The very same subordination can also be seen in their relations with Russia, a country that not only is structurally no longer capable of imposing its hegemony in Europe, but on the contrary has, since the collapse of the USSR, sought “for [a] rapprochement with the EU in order to counterbalance the US”<sup>37</sup>.

Hence, European geopolitics’ main problem is an interpretative one; it is the way European countries interpret their place and their geopolitical function in the world. The alternative to this fractioning policy is therefore to “denounce and oppose the aggressive and bellicose neo-imperial

<sup>34</sup> Tiberio Graziani, *Geopolitica e migrazioni*, in “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici”, Vol. 4/2006, p. 8

<sup>35</sup> Yves Lacoste, *Crisi della geografia, geografia della crisi*, Angeli, Milano, 1980

<sup>36</sup> One could disagree by arguing that the interests of Europe and European States is actually to fractionate the Arab-Mediterranean world, as the actions of England and France against the Ottoman Empire would show. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, England was a fully thalassocratic power, France a semi-thalassocratic one, and they also fractionated European telluric powers such as the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These latter two powers, contrary to the former two, were pursuing a policy of Euro-Ottoman integration (Berlin-Baghdad railway, etc.). Today, England and France are too small to play a leading role in world politics. While England has flattened itself to the US, thus confirming its thalassocratic existence, France’s position is still an ambiguous and ambivalent one. Nevertheless, a United Europe, in the sense – borrowing Jean Thiriart’s expression – of a 400 million people empire, would be a telluric power, and thus rediscover an interest in Euro-Mediterranean integration, just as it was true for the continental European empires.

<sup>37</sup> Igor Gretskiy, *Russia’s perspective on EU-Russia interdependence*, in “Post-Crimea Shift in Eu-Russia Relations: from Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities”, Kristi Raik&András Ràcz, 2019, p. 66

fundamentalism which aims to sever all ties between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Namely, the imperialism that tries to subordinate Europe to the Atlantic space and subject the Arab-Islamic world [as well as the Slavic-Orthodox one] to an increasing political, economic, and military pressure”<sup>38</sup>. Any historically existed *pax mediterranea* has come into existence through the exclusive sovereignty of one single power (Republican and Imperial Rome) or an equilibrium between more centres of power (Ottoman, French, Spanish, Austro-Hungarian Empires, Republic of Venice, etc.). On the other hand, external powers such as the British (1815) and the American (1945), have exploited the Mediterranean “exclusively within the expansionist praxis of these two powers’ imperialist policies”<sup>39</sup>.

For European countries, rethinking Europe and the European Mediterranean as part of autonomous poles that must be governed by internal actors is not only the first mandatory step to identify external actors’ power politics in the European Mediterranean. It is also, using Gramsci’s words, the first mandatory step that would trigger the “scission spirit” that would set Europe and the European Mediterranean system on a path of emancipation, and would revive their long lost sovereignty.

In any case, after the destruction of Libya, the southern shores of the Mediterranean have turned into a place where Mediterranean States fight each other, further promoting US fractioning policy. The situation on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean is different: also these areas are troubled, but there the US fractioning policy has recently clashed with an equal yet opposite tendency. This tendency is the integration tendency, which is the result of a synergic cooperation that has recently been established by Russia, China, and Iran.

al-Assad’s Syrian resistance to yet another fractioning attempt symbolically marks the turning point in the geopolitics of the Mediterranean in regard to the fractionalisation that had begun with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the disappearance of Soviet power in the Middle East and in the Mediterranean “was not perceived [...] as a positive factor [not even by] those countries that on paper were supposed to be its rival. [In fact the] Russian retreat [...] left the field open to US hegemony”<sup>40</sup>. By stepping into Syria together with Iran, Russia not only saved a State from destruction, but also asserted its global dimension, and imposed “a strong (and almost

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<sup>38</sup>Danilo Zolo, *La questione mediterranea*, in *L’alternativa mediterranea* (a cura di Franco Cassano e Danilo Zolo), Feltrinelli, Milano, 2007, pp. 20-1

<sup>39</sup>Tiberio Graziani, *Pax Mediterranea*, eurasia-sito.org, 2005

<sup>40</sup>Pietro Figuera, *Il grande ritorno della Russia in medio oriente*, in “I Quaderni di Domus Europa”, 1/2019, p. 100

uncontested) Russian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean” as well as Moscow’s inclusion “in the great powers’ game in the Middle East”<sup>41</sup>.

The military protection that Russia, together with Iran (the State that in 1979 broke the “anaconda ring” in the *rimland*), is able to offer to these regions has pushed China to increase the infrastructural investments of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, more and more Mediterranean countries are becoming sensitive to the Eurasian weaving calls. In short, Russia, China, and Iran have formed a triangular collaboration capable of challenging US supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the great Asian chessboard. This collaboration is basically what the influential Zbigniew Brzezinski advised to avoid when he wrote that “the most dangerous scenario would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an ‘anti-hegemonic’ coalition united not by ideology but by complementary grievances”<sup>42</sup>. And this collaboration is successfully leading to a progressive expulsion of US influence from the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as to an attempt to connect through infrastructures the European Mediterranean with the Asian Mediterranean.

Recent US-Israeli Abraham Accords initiative can be read in the terms of “countering China’s hegemonic plans for Eurasiafrica, namely the Belt and Road Initiative”, through which China plans to “gain complete control of the maritime outposts that connect the South China Sea with the Mediterranean Sea”<sup>43</sup>. If we look at the Abraham Accords alongside the Three Seas initiative in Eastern Europe (which aims at separating Russia from the rest of the European continent), we can see that these two initiatives create an arch of crisis that isolates Europe from the Eurasian weaving projects. Clearly, the US could not keep the European mainland separated from Eurasian integration projects without the supremacy in the European Mediterranean it enjoys. Therefore, a drastic reduction of US power in the Mediterranean Sea is part of China’s long-term strategy<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup>Ivi, p. 106

<sup>42</sup>Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1998.

<sup>43</sup>Emanuel Pietrobon, *Gli Accordi di Abramo oltre l’Iran: l’altro obiettivo è la Via della seta*, insideover.com, 18 ottobre 2020

<sup>44</sup>As Yves Lacoste notes, the Black Sea and Caucasus can be regarded as “an appendix of the Mediterranean”. The same is true for some regions of the Middle East. Yves Lacoste, op. cit., p. 11

## Integration and fractionation between the two Eurasian Mediterraneans

The triangular cooperation established by China, Russia, and Iran has set in motion a tendency of integration that reverses the tendency of fractioning pursued by the US in the area between the Asian and the European Mediterraneans. It is worth examining these two tendencies better.

The two divergent tendencies of integration and fractionation can be explained in terms of a *realpolitik* aimed, respectively, at characterising oneself as a regional hegemon *vis-a-vis* preventing other actors from become a regional hegemon. Given current world conditions, only States that enjoy a continental dimension can play a leading role on the world stage: United States, China, Russia, Brazil, India, etc. Medium- and small-sized States can only play a secondary role and therefore they gravitate more or less completely within a larger State's orbit of influence – perhaps hoping to play Harlequin between two masters in order to obtain better subjugation conditions. Alternatively, they can integrate in order to increase their power.

It is with this premise that François Thual explains the apparent paradox of contemporaneity: while modernity witnessed the unification of medieval political microstructures, contemporaneity witnesses a multiplication of “geopolitical impotencies”. Or, to state it differently, contemporaneity has been witnessing the fragmentation (along more or less artificial ethno-cultural lines) of the empires and of medium-large States into small States, which are States that are sovereign only on a nominal basis. The “fragmentation of the planet” as the “supreme stage of globalisation”<sup>45</sup>, Thual writes, can be explained in terms of the fact that “the parcelling out of the planet is the result of genetic manipulations [...] the expression of a voluntarism [...] with real States and States that could be labelled as ‘faded’, and are generally ‘dominated States’”<sup>46</sup>.

Thual's findings have been developed by Tiberio Graziani, who argues that the policy of splitting up the planet is mostly carried out by the United States. According to Graziani, throughout the twentieth century the US prevented the formation of large spaces outside North America, and promoted the liquidation of the European empires. Once the Cold War was over, the US initiated “a process of destabilisation [...] of the Eurasian space [...] synergic with the one

<sup>45</sup>François Thual, *Il mondo fatto a pezzi*, Insegna del Veltro, Parma, 2008, p. 113

<sup>46</sup>Ivi, p. 109



initiated by the US in the Caucasian area [as well as] in the Hispanic-American ‘crescent region’<sup>47</sup>. This was so because at the end of the Cold War the US was the relatively most powerful State; moreover, it was a thalassocratic power that intended to change the *status quo* further in its own favour<sup>48</sup>. Moreover, it was also interested in preventing the emergence of a new challenger by promoting the fractionation of the world. It is in response to this fractioning drive that another, equal, and opposite drive of continental integration has come into being. This integration tendency is pursued mainly by two continental States, Russia and China, which have an interest in preventing a further fragmentation of the planet that would favour Washington. Even more, they are proceeding to integrate regional spaces within their area of influence in order to become regional hegemonic powers.

Indeed, the slow and patient Sino-Russian weaving projects, which have recently been joined by Iran, are bearing fruits: entire Middle Eastern and Central Asian regions have been stabilised and it is becoming increasingly difficult for the US to project what is regarded as being its disruptive influence.<sup>49</sup> An interest in such stabilisation and expulsion is also shared by many Middle Eastern and Central Asian States, which want to be sure that “no Islamist or color revolutions threaten their rule. Whereas they view with great suspicious any Western attempts to open up their societies, [they] welcome Russian and Chinese support”<sup>50</sup>. All this has “greatly irritated those European and overseas lobbies that hoped [...] for the unification of the planet under Washington’s aegis”<sup>51</sup>. However, such unification is fundamentally different from Eurasian integration projects, as it involves a “federal break-up”<sup>52</sup> of large- and medium-sized States. This break-up is indeed necessary if the US wants to remain the global Leviathan.<sup>53</sup> In other words, borrowing Thual’s terminology again, Washingtonian unification is a “globalisation of economies” that is accompanied by “centrifugal tendencies” aimed at multiplying “geopolitical impotencies”. In short, as Davide Ragnolini comments, it is the “epigonal form of the *divide et impera* strategy pursued by the main actor of contemporary globalisation”<sup>54</sup>: the United States.

<sup>47</sup>Tiberio Graziani, *Il tempo dei continenti*, eurasia-rivista.org, 2008

<sup>48</sup>Nuno P. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics*, Cambridge, 2014

<sup>49</sup>Paul J. Bolt, Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, Oxford, 2018

<sup>50</sup>Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 2019.

<sup>51</sup>Tiberio Graziani, *Il tempo dei continenti e la destabilizzazione del pianeta*, eurasia-rivista.com, 2008

<sup>52</sup>Andrew Korybko, *E pluribus unum. Ex uno plures*, in “Eurasia. Rivista di studi geopolitici”, Vol. 2/2016, pp. 31-57

<sup>53</sup>John G. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan. The Origins, Crisis, and Transformations of the American World Order*, Princeton, 2011

<sup>54</sup>Davide Ragnolini, *Nota del traduttore all’articolo Andrew Korybko, E pluribus unum. Ex uno plures*, op. cit., p. 31. As noted in footnote 29, China has integrated itself very well into liberal international structures, albeit exploiting them for its own national benefit. Therefore, following a hypothetical decline of US power, China may not resist the

It is therefore noteworthy that the US strategy, immediately after the disappearance of Soviet Russia's counter-balancing function, was to fraction both the European and Asian Mediterraneans as well as the area between the two macro-regions. As Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, this strategy would have made the US "the first, only and last truly superpower"<sup>55</sup>.

So, while the American Mediterranean remains under complete US control, and it offers the US a power multiplier, the Asian and European Mediterraneans are becoming "discharge zones"<sup>56</sup> for international tensions due to the friction caused by the two contrasting tendencies of fractionation and integration. It is clear that the US's ability to prevent the unification of these large spaces strongly depends on its ability to play the offshore balancer with its navy. US power policies require, therefore, the US remains firmly anchored in the two Eurasian Mediterranean area.

For the US, China is currently the main challenger as it is the only integrationist State capable of achieving regional hegemony. If the People's Republic succeeds in conquering the Asian Mediterranean, it will proceed faster with its integration projects towards European Mediterranean. Under these conditions, for the US it will become even more difficult and costly to act as an offshore balancer in the many world's stages, and there will be the possibility that the US sees its hegemony threatened even in the American Mediterranean. Should that happen, we will witness the eventual defeat of the (Anglo-American) thalassocracy in the struggle for world domination.

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temptation to promote a strategy of globalisation of economies in the same way the US and Great Britain did. In any case, as noted in this article, at least for now, China seems to remain bound to a telluric representation of the world.

<sup>55</sup>Zbigniew Brzezinski, op. cit.

<sup>56</sup>"Discharge zone" is an expression taken from Karl Haushofer's geopolitics



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