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From “Mare Nostrum”¹ to International Maritime Cooperation: How History Can Offer Constructive Answers to Future Prospects in the Mediterranean



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¹ Editor's Note (Ed.N.) Mare Nostrum is the Roman expression for the Mediterranean Sea.

ABSTRACT

Since antiquity, the Mediterranean region witnessed the rise and fall of all kinds of political and economic systems. It has always been the laboratory of human societies, a melting pot of different religions, philosophies and ethnic groups. Mediterranean countries saw astonishing cultural and aesthetic achievements, but also experienced destruction and acts of barbarism. The Mediterranean gave birth to one of the most powerful political concepts, the idea of the occidental and oriental hemisphere. With the beginning of global capitalism and transatlantic trade, the Mediterranean lost much of its strategic importance and economic momentum. But stagnation is never an option. Today, with the rise of China as the new global player, the Mediterranean and its regional powers gain new options, too. Participation is the key, and mutual understanding a possible beginning. Only international cooperation, global trade and cultural exchange will help to stabilize the vulnerable equilibrium in the Mediterranean. So, what lessons can be learned from history to better understand and explore today's political and economic potential of the Mediterranean? Some historical figurations persist or have a surprising coming-back, indicating some striking parallels between the Mediterranean of history and the present day.

Keywords: Atlantic Ocean, eastern hemisphere, hegemony, Mediterranean Sea, new world order

*J'ai sur ma table une potiche
Chinoise, et du goût le plus fin,
Qu'avec l'extase d'un fétiche
Plus d'un contemplerait sa fin.*²

– Théodore Hannon, *Chinoiserie* (cit. Décaudin, ed., 1992, 335) –

*Die alte Ordnung ist tot, die neue noch nicht gefunden.*³

– Thomas Mayer, *Machtkampf in Europa* (2020, 2) –

The Mediterranean as a Cultural and Political Catalysator

Since prehistoric times, the Mediterranean gave birth to a magnitude of societies, cultures and religions, to different political ideas and economic systems. From the Minoan culture to Hellenism,

from Carthage to Rome and from the Venetian Republic to the Osman Empire: the Mediterranean has always been (and still is) an arena for the rise and fall of various power systems, and a playground of antagonistic strategic ambitions. Geographically, the Mediterranean Sea has been an ideal platform for trade and free exchange of goods. Since antiquity, moreover, connectivity and communication were the prerequisites of cultural, if not political dominance. In one of his dialogues, Plato describes how Greek colonists set along the Mediterranean Sea «like frogs around a pond» (Plato, 1991), engaged in a never-ending circle of communication. The Athenians, always pragmatic in politics, encouraged democracy at home, but advocated tyranny in their Sicilian colonies (Finley et al., 1986).

2 On my table stands a piece of Chinese pottery / Of the finest taste / And in fetishistic ecstasy / More than one contemplates his end. (author's translation)

3 The old order is dead; a new one not found, yet. (author's translation).

In antiquity, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Persians, Greeks and Romans (only to mention the most prominent civilizations) all settled, lived, explored, dreamed, made war, prospered and died along the Mediterranean shores (Braudel, 1990; Braudel et al., 1986; Abulafia, 2011). Regional battles for exchange and competition led historically to different alliances and new forms of power balances. The Greeks destroyed the Persian fleet at the famous sea battle of Salamis⁴ (480 B.C.). But the Mediterranean is not only defined by water. It is part of Eurasia, and therefore also defined by its continental relations to the Middle and Far East.⁵ For the states of ancient Greece, the continental East was as natural a political option as the maritime West. Athenian aristocrat Dionysius became tyrant of Syracuse in Sicily, whereas his compatriot Alcibiades negotiated for military support in Persia to overrun his hometown (4th century B.C.). He was later murdered at the Persian court.

The defeat of the Persians against the Greek military forces encouraged some generations later Alexander the Macedon to challenge again the Persian kingdom and Darius II. With astonishing success; the Persian armies were destroyed, Darius II killed, and Alexander's troops entered Babylon in triumph through the imperial Lions' Gate. For the first time in history, occident and orient were united under one ruler. Alexander's famous mass wedding in Susa (324 B.C.) was one of the rare occasions, where East and West melt-

ed together. Short after Alexander's death, his empire imploded. Alexander's successors were his former generals (the famous *Diadochi*⁶), who founded their own dynasties, but never achieved Alexander's visionary East-Western unity.⁷ The precarious balance between the *Diadochi* led to various wars and weakened consequently all parties involved. Cleopatra, who surrendered to the Romans, was the last Ptolemean ruler. Her capital Alexandria, once founded by Alexander and still keeping his grave, became Roman.⁸

In the years that followed the decline of Hellenism, the influence and military power of the Roman Republic grew continuously. Rome was a newcomer, heiress of mythical Troy and usurp of the old Etruscan kingdom. The Roman republic was reckless in war, disciplined and highly organized, and became within two centuries the rising power in the Western part of the Mediterranean. In its ambition towards total control and superiority, Rome dominated already the Tyrrhenian and the Adriatic Sea. But only after the destruction of Carthage (146 B.C.) and the fall of Corinth the same year, Rome became for nearly 600 years the unchallenged hegemon and military power dominating both, the occidental and oriental parts of Southern Europe and West Asia. The Mediterranean Sea became the «mare nostrum», our sea, reaching from the pillars of Hercules⁹ (strait of Gibraltar) to the Aegean Sea.

Rome's political and military hegemony did not lead to cultural or religious homogenization.

4 Ed. N. The battle of Salamis has been seen as the turning point in the course of Graeco-Persian wars.

5 On the map (not in political reality!), the strait of Otranto between today's Italy and Albania is as close to Syria as to Spain.

6 Ed.N. It means successors.

7 The Ptolemean dynasty reigned over Egypt, the Seleucids over Babylonia and the Middle East, and Cassander over Macedonia and Greece.

8 Today, Alexander's grave lies still somewhere hidden under the pulsating modern city of Alexandria. In the course of history, the grave became a mythical idea, something like the Holy Grail or the treasure of the Nibelungen.

9 Ed.N. Pillars of Hercules are the two promontories at the eastern end of the Strait of Gibraltar. The northern pillar is the Rock of Gibraltar; the southern pillar is Jebel Musa in Morocco.

Its long-lasting and expanded system was based on military dominance, strict fiscal rules and the unconditional acceptance of its political authority. But religion in its various forms and expressions, different practices of arts, craftsmanship and culture were free; tolerance was considered as a virtue. Assimilation to Roman culture was neither desired nor demanded.

Rome, for the first time in history, gives us the *idea of a truly pluricultural global society*, where the differences between occident and orient can be transformed into a maybe even higher form of civilization.

Roman citizenship remained a privilege to the old aristocratic or nouveau riche families. The Roman elites themselves practiced a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Greek was the preferred language of the well-educated upper-class. Rhetoric skills, philosophical ideas and aesthetics were also deeply influenced by Greek culture. Leisure activities were inspired by Etruscan rites, luxury goods like silk and perfume were imported from the Far East (Fox, 2006). Rome, for the first time in history, gives us the idea of a truly pluricultural global society, where the differences between occident and orient can be transformed into a maybe even higher form of civilization. After all, dialectics, too, were invented in the Mediterranean!

The religious pluriverse of the Roman empire included deities from Egypt and the Middle East. Dionysus was revered in Rome, but also Isis¹⁰ and Mithras¹¹, esoteric religious cults that

originated from the South-East of the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, the Roman concept of «mare nostrum» included the coexistence of many cultures and political regimes, united by one idea, the «pax romana».

Universalism is a truly Mediterranean idea, embracing all kinds of differences and self-contradictions under one supreme idea (Morin & Ceruti, 2018). An ancient concept, universalism can be easily adapted to today's global trade. Isn't the idea of free exchange of goods, and the mobility of people and ideas just another expression of universalism? It must be clear, though, that there is no leading power anymore in the Mediterranean. All players have to treat each other as equal partners, not as rivals or antagonists. In a postcolonial world, only universal partnership is an acceptable concept for all parties involved. Yet, Western political concepts still tend to be biased by Eurocentric ideas.

Alliances, Conflicts and New Constellations

The Mediterranean region has never fallen victim to a power vacuum; it has rather been characterized by a fragile equilibrium of rivals, partners, friends and adversaries. In this power game, the weakness of one player always leads to the rise of its antagonist or – often enough – to the rise of a third party.

Rome held its position as supreme ruler over the Mediterranean for more than six centuries. In the 5th century A.D., while the Western parts of the former Roman empire were devastated and overrun by the barbarian hordes from the North East, Constantinople – the Second Rome – out-

¹⁰ Ed.N. Isis is the most important of all goddesses of ancient Egypt.

¹¹ Ed.N. Mithras or Mehr is a divinity, responsible for covenant, light, and oath in the Zoroastrian religion. In addition to being the divinity of contracts, Mithras is also a judicial figure, an all-seeing protector of truth, and the guardian of cattle, the harvest, and of the waters.

lasted the crisis. But the political and religious divide between the Western and Eastern hemisphere irrevocably weakened the unity of the empire.

The ambiguous situation between Rome and Constantinople, their weakened positions, offered on the other hand unexpected opportunities for other religions, popular movements and military powers. The irresistible rise of a new, vital and powerful religion, Islam, changed from the 7th century onwards the political map of the Middle East and the Southern part of the Mediterranean. Arab troops overran only within decades Northern Africa and the South of Spain. Finally, in 1453, Mehmed II and his armies conquered, after an epic siege, Constantinople. It was one of the most decisive and historically relevant victories in the Mediterranean. Istanbul became the new epicenter of the Ottoman empire and the Muslim world. Mehmed II challenged Western Europe with his armies and fleets as well as with his inventiveness and discipline.



Bombardment of Algiers (August 1816), painted by Martinus Schouman. (Wikipedia)

Until now, even after more than 500 years, the cultural and religious divide between the oriental and the occidental hemisphere persists; it is

the consequence of many antagonistic conflicts since the fall of the Roman empire and the implosion of its centralized power. *Ever since, the Mediterranean is a politically fragmented region.*

In retrospect, only a handful of geopolitical developments were decisive for the deep historical change of the Mediterranean after the fall of Western Rome (Abulafia, 2011; Braudel, 1986). (1) The schism between the roman-catholic and the orthodox church divided the Mediterranean, once for all, in two different maritime and continental hemispheres. But it left both sides, East and West, weakened and destabilized. The early centuries of Christianity marked a dramatic downfall in literature, high culture and aesthetics. Christianity, the religion of suffering and guilt, was a dubious spiritual progress, compared to the worldly and hedonistic body culture of antiquity. But what is called the dark Middle Age turned out to be, seen from a different perspective, the beginning of the golden age of Islamic culture. (2) The rise of Islam in Arabia and its victorious spread led to a power shift along the North-African coastline, in the South of Spain, on the Balkan peninsula, in the Levante¹², along the Black Sea and in the Middle East. (3) The crusades from the 11th to 13th century A.D., with all their religious fanaticism, their greed and cruelties, were the reaction of occidental alliances to defeat the new spiritual movement and its strong military forces. The outcome of these bloodsheds in the Levante (today's Lebanon, Syria and Israel) was paradoxical. The weakened European dynasties, exclusively concerned with internal struggles, witnessed (4) from the late 13th century onwards the rise of the

¹² Ed.N. It is a western term which derives from the root of levare, meaning "rising" (rising of the Sun). The region is known as city of Sham (Bilād-Ūs(el)-Sām) in Ottoman Period and it is also equivalent to the term al-Mashriq in Arabic, meaning "the eastern place, where the Sun rises".

Ottoman empire to the new ruler of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. As the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation (5) was in steady decline, and papal Rome lost much of its worldly influence, the state republics of Genova and Venice stepped into the Western power vacuum.

If land and sea can become one, why not East and West? It is worth mentioning, that the Belt and Road Initiative follows the same historical idea, combining maritime and continental lines of communication and infrastructure.

It is worth mentioning, that both republics, Venice and Genova, built their strengths on *transnational sea trade*. They were eminent maritime powers. Their territorial claims were rather modest, trade and finance their true strongholds and sources of wealth. Military power was only the necessary means to protect their trade routes. Genova ruled over the Tyrrhenian Sea, Venice over the Adriatic Sea, and the islands of Crete and Rhodes. Until today, Venice is one of the most magnificent and impressive cities in Europe; a living witness of the possibility to overcome geographic barriers and cultural prejudices.

If land and sea can become one,¹³ why not East and West? It is worth mentioning, that the *Belt and Road Initiative follows the same histor-*

*ical idea, combining maritime and continental lines of communication and infrastructure.*¹⁴

But back to history! Even during the Middle Ages, the noble idea of a tolerant, multireligious and multiethnic society was not completely utopian. The Swabian¹⁵ emperor Frederic II, king of Sicily (1194-1250), encouraged Muslim scholars, craftsmen and soldiers to settle within the realm of his kingdom. He understood and maybe even spoke Arabic, loved to hunt with falcons and preferred a Muslim guard for personal protection (Kantorowicz, 1994). After his death, the Muslim population in Sicily and Puglia was murdered. Obviously, it takes more than the will and the vision of one progressive ruler to establish a truly tolerant society, and to overcome, once for all, religious, ethnic and cultural prejudices.

The conquest of Constantinople, today's Istanbul, by Mehmed II (1453) opened a new and decisive chapter in the Mediterranean history. Once again, Western dominance was restricted to the Adriatic Sea. Dubrovnik (Ragusa), once a Venetian colony, was now ruled by the Ottomans. Venetian fleets were not only challenged by Ottoman armadas, but also by pirates from Algeria and Morocco. The romanticized barbery corsairs, courageous sailors and cruel fighters, stepped into the tradition of pirates and privateers. As in ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea became the arena of epic sea battles and sieges: Otranto (1480), Lepanto (1571) and Aboukir (better known as battle of the Nile,¹⁵ 1798); Mal-

¹³ Until the end of the Venetian republic, the citizens celebrated every year the highly symbolic spiritual unification with the sea (*spozalizio del mare*). The doge threw from his galore (*bucentoro*) his ring into the lagoon (Abulafia, 2011). Carl Schmitt (1981, 10) writes (author's translation): What is our element? Are we children of the land or of the sea? This question cannot be answered by a simple either-or.

¹⁴ Just as an illustration: The Chinese Silk Road Fund holds a minority of shares of the Autostrade per l'Italia, which runs motorways in Italy and Southern Europe. Autostrade recently rebuilt the St. George's bridge in Genova. A highly profitable financial engagement – and a catalyst for Italy's suffering economy.

¹⁵ The sea battle of Nile at Aboukir became famous not only for the British victory, but maybe more for the golden artefacts that were found close to the sea in 1902. They are now exposed at the Bohde museum in Berlin and the Calouste Gulbenkian museum in Lisbon.

ta (1565) and Algiers (1816) were heavily bombarded from the seaside. The *dramatis personae* changed, but the lines of conflicts were quite similar: military dominance over strategic positions, conquest of ports and, most importantly from an economic viewpoint, the organization of safe and profitable trade routes. Berber privateers and barbary corsairs from the Rif mountains, Ottoman admirals, Genovese adventurers and Venetian businessmen; crusaders, prophets, soldiers, slaves, noblemen and plebeians – they all followed their individual careers and faced their destinies in the Mediterranean arena.



Alexander The Great, golden coin found in Aboukir (Bohde Museum, Berlin)

Atlantic Hegemony, High and Low Tide

The Mediterranean Sea is not an isolated pond. It was – and still is, today! – exposed to global change. The decline of Mediterranean culture and its shrinking global influence are intrinsically linked to the growing importance of the Atlantic Ocean as the new prospering field of trade and exploration.

The discovery and, soon after, colonialization of the Americas in the late 15th century marked not only a new historical age in the West, but also the decline of the Mediterranean as the epicenter of European history. The prof-

its from the import of gold and silver, agricultural products and cotton from the Americas exceeded by far the profits of Mediterranean trade. The export of slaves over the Atlantic sea routes proved to be even more profitable than the import of silk and spices from the Far East (Pétré-Grenouilleau, 2004). The Mediterranean lost its supreme position as the main arena of European history; hegemony shifted westwards. In the late 15th and 16th centuries, the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain – the first explorers and exploiters of the riches of the Americas – outshined any other Mediterranean power. But it was a short period of triumph. Already in the 17th and 18th century, the British Empire gained economic and military strength. Its power relied on two strong pillars, the colonial exploitation of India by the East Indian Company, and the tight transatlantic relations. The predominance of the transatlantic trade – mainly cotton, slaves and sugar – marked the beginning of globalization. The rising Atlantic powers, the British Empire and, after their independence, the United States of America – rather than the European continental empires – were the driving forces of economic change and technological progress.

Thanks to its dominance over the strategically important strait of Gibraltar and the strength of its navy, Britain gained decisive advantages in the Mediterranean Sea. On several occasions, Britain destroyed Spanish and French ambitions of maritime dominance and eventually proclaimed its global influence. Since the middle of 19th century, Britain controlled both, the Western and Eastern parts of the Mediterranean Sea. Even the Suez Canal (1869), initially a French-Egyptian project, became in the end a British business affair. The British government under Benjamin Disraeli bought in 1875 the shares of the bankrupt Egyptian khedive Ismail (Abulafia, 2011).

Yet, global power relations are not centered in the Eurasian region anymore. New markets, economic potentials, sources of wealth and worldly powers emerged in the Atlantic West. The United States of America, with their huge homogenous home market, became the economically leading nation in the late 19th century. It took the U.S. no more than 100 years after independence to become not only a global player, but also a genuine hegemonial «super-power» with strong strategic interests on every single continent following World War II.

America's strategic and military interests reach deep into the Mediterranean. The harbor of Taranto in Puglia, a former colony of ancient «Magna Graecia»¹⁶, became one of the important bases of the U.S. Marine Corps. Atlantic predominance, represented by the U.S., developed into a political and military reality in the whole Mediterranean Sea. In 2020, the American fleet bombarded targets in Syria.

China's Rise and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

But what about China during all these years and centuries of dramatic change in the Mediterranean? Already in the early 14th century, the imperial fleet under its admiral Zheng He sailed along the East African coast. Chinese ships, technically the most advanced of their time, might have passed the African coast and reached Europe, but the Ming dynasty stopped the costly naval expedition (Vogelsang, 2013). China's policy became self-centered; focused on continental, not maritime developments. It took another 600 years before China reinvented itself as a maritime power.



A replica of a treasure ship that Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) sailed in. (Song Qiao / China Daily)

Today, China runs the biggest shipping companies worldwide, owns a hypermodern aircraft carrier and is, unsurprisingly, also a major economic player on the Mediterranean scene. In a global study on Chinese economic and strategic capacities, U.S. think-tank German Marshall Fund (GMF) concludes (Lesser et al., 2018):

China is already a leading stakeholder in Mediterranean affairs, and is set to become a more visible actor in political and security terms in the years ahead. (...) China has made substantial investments in Mediterranean port facilities and has a significant stake in the security of Mediterranean lines of communication, including the Suez Canal. Looking further ahead, even modest progress on the ambitious belt and road project will bring China into closer contact with the Mediterranean security scene over the next decade.

¹⁶ Ed.N. Magna Graecia or Great Hellenic Lands is a geographical designation used to describe the south of Italy and the island of Sicily at the time when the ancient Hellenes colonized. It is emphasized that these lands were part of the Hellenistic cultural site, with reference to the Hellenic colonies in the area.

With the rise of China began a new era in global trade, technology and geostrategy. As the U.S. influence, after almost 80 years of semi-feudal hegemony, is dramatically in decline, China steps in. The Mediterranean Sea is only one scene of this geopolitical power shift from West to East. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strengthens the maritime and continental routes for trade, exchange and communications. The Mediterranean Sea as a broad bridge between Europe, Africa and Asia offers promising perspectives for China, being involved on all three continents.

The Long Way to a Multipolar Mediterranean Order

A brief look on a contemporary map conveys the enormous political diversity of the Mediterranean. It connects Europe with Africa and Asia. Ever since, it is a melting pot of ideas and goods. People always travelled on the sea routes and along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea – whether they were soldiers, traders, scholars or, in the last decade, refugees. From Turkey to Morocco, from Trieste to Port Said, from Ceuta to Iskenderun, the Mediterranean embraces East and West, North and South. Different countries, languages, religions and traditions overlap along the Mediterranean coast and build a unique and remarkably colorful human universe.

During the Cold War, the Mediterranean became once more the arena of rivaling antagonists. Bloody and long-lasting postcolonial wars, the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950s, revolutions in Egypt and Libya, the civil war in Lebanon which also affected Syria, not to mention the unsolved conflict between Israel and the Arabic world – all these frictions and often undeclared wars since 1945 prove until today the

fragility and instability of the political system in the South Eastern part of the Mediterranean. Lebanon's tragic decline also reveals the vulnerability of this region. Equilibrium is totally lost.

Nevertheless, economic growth through infrastructural projects and the intensification of global trade look like a promising concept for the Mediterranean. Paradoxically, the E.U. neglected for many years this option. During the European financial crisis, it was China's COSCO shipping company – and not a European consortium – that invested huge sums in the Greek port of Piraeus, now the biggest container port in the Mediterranean (Piraeus Port Authority, 2019).

The growing influence of China in the Mediterranean is only one of the geostrategic effects of globalization and, generally speaking, the rising global relevance of East Asia. The Mediterranean is also affected by this historical power shift. As always, East and West struggle to find a new equilibrium. Europe could have played the role of an arbiter – the third party –, profiting from both sides. This role would require true political, economic and military independence, a quality that Western European states and institutions have lost in the course of the 20th century. But Behemoth and Leviathan¹⁷ are not the only mythical metaphors in geopolitics. Undeniably, the Dragon has also stepped into the arena.

Today, mass migration from the Global South and the Middle East to Europe is one of the biggest unsolved problems of the Mediterranean. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of migration played a major role in shaping European politics and media. Migration to Europe is, under the given political circumstances, an endless humanitarian tragedy. The only realistic option would be the economic stabilization of the Global South and the Middle

17 Ed.N. Behemoth and Leviathan are two mythical beings in the bible, representing the land and sea.

East. Europe has ignored economic options for several decades, whereas China has identified new opportunities for business and geopolitical influence. The Belt and Road Initiative, with its heavy infrastructure investments in Africa and the Middle East, has already made a difference. China's economic and strategic interests in the Mediterranean are strong and evident. Europe, in its historic skepticism, avoids giving an adequate answer – a very costly attitude.

A possible Renaissance of the Mediterranean?

Today, the Mediterranean has long lost its supreme historical and economic importance. Southern Europe is not an economic or cultural hub anymore, but simply the favorite destination of sun-seeking tourists from all over the world. If you are looking for fun in the sun, the Mediterranean coast in Southern Europe might be the favorite choice. Drunken teenagers and adipose pensioners dominate the scene. The heroic times of intellectual, aesthetical and geographical exploration are long over.

Today's European self-confidence suffered from the extreme bloody conflicts of the 20th century. Humanitarianism, the central idea of Renaissance's thinking, is nowadays reduced to an ethical dilemma posed by mass migration. It turns out to be poisonous for the political climate of Western societies and Europe has become the prisoner of its own colonial past. But political paralysis leads directly to societal decline. The dramatic economic breakdown in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic makes the situation even worse. So, what about the future prospects of the Mediterranean?

Thinking about the singularity of the Mediterranean, there is one prominent feature that reappears again and again over the course of history. The Mediterranean was always *open to new cultural influences and economic developments*. In other words, it is a highly perceptive culture. Mobility and the openness towards change are its main characteristics. The ability to absorb and transform new influences is maybe the main reason for the survival of the Mediterranean culture until today.

Without any doubt, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also some strong Mediterranean features. Furthermore, the natural gas basins in the Eastern Mediterranean, claimed – so far – by Egypt, Israel, Turkey and Cyprus, offer new economic potentials for the whole region.

It does not come as a total surprise that since the beginning of the 21st century China, too, stepped into the Mediterranean arena. Chinese companies invested heavily in Mediterranean maritime infrastructure. The Greek port of Piraeus is controlled by the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO. China invests, among others, in infrastructural projects in Italy, Greece, Turkey and Albania (Hermann, 2020). China is also engaged in several railway projects on the Balkans. Without any doubt, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has also some strong Mediterranean features. Furthermore, the natural gas basins in the Eastern Mediterranean, claimed – so far – by Egypt, Israel, Turkey

and Cyprus, offer new economic potentials for the whole region (ISPI, 2018). China's politics of infrastructural engagement and security might have come at the right moment.

Yet, the growing possibility of an open trade war between China and the U.S. change the geopolitical prospects of the Mediterranean, too. Financial Times political analyst James Kynge writes (Kynge, 2020, 9):

A bipolar change is starting to take shape (...). Around one pole are those countries that welcome Chinese technology and the multi-billion investments of its corporations. Around the other is the US-led west that is closing its door, in varying degrees, to a lengthening list of what are regarded as sensitive Chinese technologies and investments.

Whose side are you on? The falcons of foreign policy in Europe and the U.S. demand a clear decision, favoring transatlantic relations (Lesser et al., 2018). But this would only prolong Europe's weak position under the umbrella of the United States. The long, ambiguous history of the Mediterranean teaches a different moral. In a multipolar world, Europe would be much better advised to build up a *third option*, and to be open, like the sea, to all parties involved.¹⁸

In a recent conversation with English journalist Charles Powell, Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union, describes China as "partner, rival and competitor" (Borrell, 2020) and stresses the complexity of the Sino-European relations. Handling complexity

could be a start: Independence and cooperation seem to be a wiser and more peaceful concept than the struggle for dominance and superiority.

Summary

The antagonism of occidental and oriental cultures, East and West, is deeply rooted in Mediterranean history. Hegemony, sought by many Mediterranean powers over the course of history, always was an exception. On the other hand, times of flourishing culture and prosperity in the Mediterranean were marked by mutual exchange, cooperation and tolerance. Today, in times of a globalized economy, the Mediterranean becomes again the arena, where East and West meet. China's investments in Mediterranean infrastructure, both maritime and continental, prove the geostrategic and economic relevance of the Mediterranean. Europe therefore must rediscover its own political potential; independence is the key. In its long history the Mediterranean experienced all imaginable power constellations. There is always the possibility to overcome prejudices and biased ideologies. The antagonism of East and West may even turn out to be the last historical chimera.¹⁹ 🐉

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¹⁸ China is already the second most important trading partner for the EU. Attention needs to be paid to EU-Chinese trade relations (European Parliament, 2020).

¹⁹ Ed.N. Chimera is a creature known in the Iliad for its eternal fire.

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