

US-NATO Seek to Exclude Russia from the Mediterranean. In Libya, Russia is on the Side of Haftar

RAND's Hope that NATO Opposes Russia in the Mediterranean Is Divorced from Reality

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Russia is conducting "military intimidation" in the Mediterranean according to RAND in a newly published [article titled](#) "Russia Is Eyeing the Mediterranean. The U.S. and NATO Must Be Prepared." The authors claim that "As part of its great power exertions Russia seeks more access and freedom of movement in the Mediterranean region, and is bolstering its military footprint to achieve this objective." The authors also urge the U.S. and NATO to meet "this rising challenge" by developing "a more robust southern strategy with a reinforced air and naval presence."

RAND is considered the U.S. Air Force's think tank as it was established by **General H. H. "Hap" Arnold**, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and by aeronautical engineer **Theodore von Kármán**. The bulk of its funding in its early formation was from the Air Force. Therefore, when reading RAND reports it must be noted that articles are written through the eyes of US unilateralism and unipolarity.

The authors argue that "By upgrading its military posture in the region, Russia seems to believe it can be more successful in projecting power and minimizing the influence of the United States and NATO." However, this would imply that NATO has a unified policy in the Mediterranean when in actual fact the Alliance has never been so divided over its so-called southern flank. The article claims that Russia is in direct conflict with NATO and their interests in the Mediterranean, but ignores that the Alliance is deeply divided in Libya, Syria and the Aegean.

It is especially in Libya where NATO's division is observed, with Turkey supporting the Muslim Brotherhood Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, and Greece and France backing Libya's House of Representatives based in Tobruk. RAND's position on Libya is clearly in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood government by claiming it is "United Nations-backed" but omits the GNA's mandate from the UN to rule was for a two-year period that expired in December 2017. The authors then describe Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar as a "warlord" despite being appointed as commander of the Libyan National Army by the Libyan House of Representatives, the only institution that has been elected by the Libyan people. By falsely claiming that the Muslim Brotherhood government is UN-backed and describing Haftar as a warlord demonstrates the very division in NATO as RAND also completely omits that the GNA is attempting to steal maritime space from NATO-

member Greece.

Russia is on the side of Haftar, and it is here that RAND is willing to gloss over the fact that the Turkish-backed militias fighting for the GNA are overwhelmingly jihadist and include former ISIS fighters. It is also for this reason that RAND ignores that Haftar was appointed by the only elected body in Libya and has the support of NATO members Greece and France. Therefore, RAND is not dealing with the realities occurring in the Mediterranean and rather expects all NATO members to fall into line and ignore their own strategic and security interests in the Mediterranean for the sake of opposing greater Russian influence in the region.

This expectation led RAND to write that “A greater U.S. and NATO presence might also reassure allies in the Mediterranean, which could help by buttressing their own southern-facing postures.” Greece and France do not need to be “reassured” that Russia is not a threat in the Mediterranean, but rather that Turkey’s plan to steal Greek maritime space is thwarted and the jihadists it arms and trains to fight in Libya do not enter Europe. It appears that RAND is trying to unite NATO under the guise of opposing Russia in the Mediterranean, something that is not a major concern for the Mediterranean NATO members, with the exception of Turkey. A unified front in opposing Russia in the Mediterranean is only in the interests of the US and Turkey and not the entire Alliance. Therefore, RAND is effectively admitting that NATO is just a tool used to strengthen Washington’s influence and demands with no interest of other members’ security concerns.

As RAND is one of the most influential think tanks in the US today, sidelining NATO’s deep divisions on the idea that the alliance will unite to oppose Russian influence in the Mediterranean shows how it is divorced from the realities on the ground and demonstrates why Washington is having little influence over events in Syria and Libya, and has a disinterest in de-escalating Turkey’s aggression against Greece in the Aegean. It is for this reason that French President Emmanuel Macron correctly and continually asserts that NATO is experiencing a “brain death” and is open to the idea of Europe restoring relations with Russia.

The disillusionment of RAND is summed up in its conclusion: “Western priorities could change. The United States and NATO might give more thought to a strategy that could better deter potential Kremlin risk-taking in the Mediterranean.”

This is an unlikely scenario since Greece and France are not only on the same side as Russia in Libya, but Greece has fully restored relations with what RAND calls the “Assad regime” in Syria, while France is slowly beginning to thaw its relations with Damascus. Although RAND wants a re-energized and united NATO to oppose Russia in the Mediterranean, its dismissal of the realities and power games in the region will only lead to more misguided foreign policy decisions in Washington that not only weakens their position in region, but helps strengthen Moscow’s as it finds mutual cooperation with Mediterranean countries like France, Greece, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Cyprus and others to oppose Turkish ambitions.

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