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POLICY BRIEF

FAR FROM DISENGAGEMENT: THE U.S. AND THE MEDITERRANEAN TODAY

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The return of President Donald Trump to the White House at the start of 2025 was expected to signal an American retreat from international engagement, especially in regions of traditional security interest, such as southern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. To the surprise of many observers around the Mediterranean, and perhaps to the dismay of some in the Trump administration's ideological orbit, this has not happened. If anything, the second half of 2025 has seen a high degree of American activism and an increased presence of the United States in some areas. But the context, drivers, and style of these engagements are notably different from those of previous administrations. The recently released US National Security Strategy document underscores some of these shifts, notably the primacy of objectives in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, continued demands for crisis management and some new opportunities suggest that U.S. activism in and around the Mediterranean will endure, even if it is rarely described in 'Mediterranean' terms.*

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* <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

Over Two Centuries of Engagement

From commerce protection in the early years of the nineteenth century, to military operations in two world wars, from trade with the Ottoman empire to Cold-War competition and post-Cold War crisis management, the U.S. presence has been a constant in Mediterranean affairs. The U.S.'s earliest diplomatic ties were in the western Mediterranean, with Morocco (1786) and Portugal (1791). The 'Turkey trade' helped to build fortunes in the U.S., especially in the years when the U.S. was the world's leading exporter of oil and refined products, before the rise of oil exports from the Persian Gulf and North Africa.

The people-to-people dimension has also been an enduring aspect of U.S. ties to the Mediterranean world, with large-scale immigration to the U.S. from Portugal, Italy, Greece, and elsewhere. Today, American tourists and digital nomads are attracted to cities from Lisbon to Marrakesh, to Athens and Istanbul.

In geopolitical terms, several enduring factors have shaped this two-century engagement with the Mediterranean, though their relative significance has evolved over time. From Washington's viewpoint, the Mediterranean matters as part of: 1) the European scene and the transatlantic relationship; 2) as a gateway to areas of strategic concern further afield; and 3) as a focal point for crisis management and diplomatic initiatives in a context of multiple flashpoints.

The European and Transatlantic Dimension

To a great extent, the U.S. interest in the Mediterranean has been driven by the region's connection to European security and transatlantic relations. This was obviously the case during the Second World War and the Cold War years. In U.S. planning, the defense of NATO's southern members might not have been seen as vital to the defense of Western Europe as a whole, but it was still a concern, and an enduring one. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the rise of security demands in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. naval presence in the Mediterranean became more variable and crisis-driven. Over the last decade, the deployment of an aircraft carrier battle group has been episodic rather than permanent.

Nevertheless, U.S. naval and air forces deployed around the region remain a dominant military factor in the Mediterranean theater. These forces are also a key element in air and missile defense, a growing concern for north and south around the Mediterranean. Most of NATO's missile defense capability is in the Mediterranean, mainly (but not entirely) in the form of the Aegis air defense system. Bases at Rota in Spain and Souda Bay in Greece support this presence.

The U.S. military presence has been durable, but planning concerns have evolved over time. Counter-terrorism, crisis management (including interventions in Libya and the Western Balkans), and missile defense have overshadowed conventional defense and nuclear deterrence. To some extent, the war in Ukraine has recast these concerns, and analysts keep a watchful eye on the Russian presence in Syria and Libya, and Moscow's defense ties with Algeria and Egypt. The Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean is relatively insignificant compared to the Cold War, and has been further constrained by declining access to port and repair facilities in Cyprus and elsewhere. Russia's current inability to move naval forces between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea is another constraint. The security dimension still looms large in U.S. thinking about the Mediterranean, but this has

relatively little to do with Russia.

There is also an implicit political dimension to transatlantic stakes in the Mediterranean. Three examples are worth noting. First, the Obama administration was active in pressing Germany and other European Union partners to treat hard-pressed Mediterranean members Greece, Portugal, and Spain more generously during the euro-area financial crisis. This reflected the prevailing U.S. view that preservation of the 'European project' was more important than fiscal rectitude. Second, until the current Trump administration, U.S. policymakers were concerned about the consequences of uncontrolled migration for political outcomes in Europe. The worry here was about whether the migration issue would boost hard-right parties, many with distinctly anti-EU and anti-NATO views¹. The Trump administration is clearly more comfortable with Europe's right-wing movements and their tough approach to borders and migration, and is much less concerned about the potential foreign policy consequences.

Türkiye offers a third example. Both Washington and Ankara like to describe their relationship as 'strategic', and central to a range of regional concerns, from the Balkans to the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and Eurasia. But it has never been an easy bilateral relationship, not least because it remains narrowly based on security and defense cooperation, against a backdrop of historic Turkish sovereignty concerns. Politically, Washington has had to balance relations with Athens and Ankara, which has given U.S. policymakers a strong stake in Aegean détente. The state of Turkish political and media freedoms, President Erdogan's rhetoric toward Israel, and Türkiye's energy ties to Russia have further complicated the bilateral relationship². Meanwhile, Greek-American ties have become much closer over the last two decades, across multiple administrations on both sides. The anti-Americanism in Greek public opinion has all but evaporated, and commercial and security ties have expanded considerably (the same is true for Cyprus). Offshore energy development is a prominent element in these bilateral initiatives³.

What are the prospects for this transatlantic dimension of America's Mediterranean policy? The Trump administration has taken a relatively reassuring approach to its NATO commitments. But the message has been much tougher on defense burden-sharing. Washington is now firm that European allies must spend more and do more in their own defense. The Trump Administration's National Security Strategy guidance, released in early December 2025, makes this clear. This message is hardly new. Successive U.S. administrations have made this point in less brutal fashion. It is possible to imagine a future in which the U.S. military presence facing east on the European continent is greatly reduced, but the multi-purpose air and naval presence in the Mediterranean is kept steady. At the same time, Europe's aspirations for strategic autonomy are most readily achievable in the Mediterranean, where lower-intensity missions are the norm, and where European allies can already project significant military power. From a transatlantic perspective, the Mediterranean will be a key test for the future of burden-sharing.

1. Not all hard-right parties espouse these views. Italy's Meloni government manages to reconcile a right-wing approach to domestic and border issues while remaining resolutely Atlanticist.

2. Türkiye's purchase of S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Russia has been a significant irritant. Never made operational, negotiations continue on how to resolve the issue, short of simply sending the system back to Russia, which Ankara will not do. In the meantime, Türkiye remains subject to Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) restrictions imposed by Congress.

3. Eleni Varvitsioti, "Greece Signs Offshore Gas Deal in Shift Toward US," Financial Times, November 7, 2025, p. 2.

Ante-Room to Critical Regions

U.S. engagement around the Mediterranean has been increasingly driven by and devoted to concerns beyond the sea itself. Through two Gulf wars, and more recent clashes with Iran, the Eastern Mediterranean has served as a critical space linking the European theater with the Red Sea, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. This is partly about straightforward logistics, key sea lines of communication, and overflight, but it is also about the political and security relationships that facilitate American diplomacy and power projection.

The Suez Canal has been one important route—when it can be traversed safely—but is not the only one. Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey has been essential to multiple U.S. operations across the Levant and the Gulf. Ankara has often been reluctant to allow the use of the base for offensive air operations in Iraq, but has adopted a more permissive stance in relation to strikes against ISIS in Syria and elsewhere. The continued U.S. involvement in operations against the Houthis in Yemen, and to protect shipping in the Red Sea, reflects U.S. concern over the closure of a sea lane vital to the prosperity of Egypt and ports across southern Europe. So far, the multinational operations in the Red Sea have had mixed results. Attacks on shipping have been reduced, but few shipowners are willing to risk direct transits from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean.

Looking south from Europe, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has been focused on surveillance, security assistance, and training to counter instability, terrorism, and Russian mercenary activity across the Sahel. In this, there has been close cooperation with France, but like Paris, Washington has drawn down its presence and commitments in the wake of unfavorable regime changes across the region. The Trump administration has therefore not been inclined to increase U.S. commitments in an area now seen as of lower strategic priority (the U.S. has also reduced its diplomatic and foreign-assistance footprint in Africa as a whole).

North Africa is an exception, at least in terms of political and security engagement, including counter-terrorism cooperation and commercial partnerships. For an administration that many expected to be inward-looking, even isolationist, Washington in the first year of Trump's second presidency has been surprisingly active in pursuing diplomatic 'deals'. Many of these initiatives have been around the Mediterranean, from the October 2025 Sharm El Sheikh summit, and plans for stabilization and reconstruction in Gaza, to the opening with Syria's new leadership.

The Trump administration continues to voice strong support for Israel, although the Trump-Netanyahu relationship is clearly strained. The Abraham Accords struck during the previous Trump administration gained an important Mediterranean dimension with the inclusion of Morocco. The Biden administration upheld U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the western Sahara, and this continues to be a key element in Washington's relations with Rabat. Despite U.S. discomfort over Algeria's defense ties to Russia, Washington has developed closer cooperation with Algiers on counter-terrorism. The Atlantic approaches to the Mediterranean, including the Atlantic islands off northwest Africa, have emerged as waypoints for transatlantic trafficking operations, which, like those in the Caribbean, are now firmly in the sights of the Trump administration.

The war in Ukraine has also underscored the links between the geopolitics of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. There are many points of connection, from the ability of Russian naval assets to transit the Bosphorus (now prohibited by Türkiye, with the exception of vessels normally home-ported in the Black Sea), to Ukraine's ability to export grain to

markets around the Mediterranean and beyond. Key Mediterranean partners, including Greece and Türkiye, are actors in both settings. More broadly, Washington has a stake in seeing a net reduction in Russia's ability to maintain a simultaneous presence in the Sahel, Libya, and Syria, while engaged in a very costly war in Ukraine.

U.S. officials and strategists are also firmly focused on the global competition with China—one of the few points of agreement between Republicans and Democrats in today's Washington. Chinese port investments in and around the Mediterranean, including a controlling stake in the port of Piraeus, have been of particular concern to U.S. policymakers. China has also invested in ports in Malta, Italy, Spain, and Algeria, and has a much larger portfolio of holdings in nearby manufacturing facilities, including at Tanger Med. The question of whether these investments are ultimately 'strategic', or simply commercial ventures driven by the evolution of the shipping and manufacturing sectors—or perhaps both—is hotly debated. But, without question, the Mediterranean dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative and related activities has become a significant driver of U.S. thinking about the region.

Crises and Flashpoints

To a great extent, the U.S. approach to the Mediterranean continues to be driven by flashpoints and crisis management. There are many examples across the region. In the Eastern Mediterranean, brinkmanship between Greece and Türkiye, and the related issue of the Cyprus dispute, is a perennial concern. At key points, most notably in the Imia/Kardak crisis of 1996, which nearly brought Greece and Türkiye to war, U.S. diplomacy played a critical role in avoiding an Aegean military conflict. Multiple crises in the Levant continue to compel the attention of U.S. policymakers, alongside durable demands for constructive U.S. involvement to help defuse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a diplomatic prize that has eluded multiple U.S. administrations, but which has acquired new urgency in the context of the Gaza war. Washington may not frame this as a 'Mediterranean' challenge, but the consequences for the Mediterranean world would be profound.

Together with flashpoints in the Indo-Pacific, the Mediterranean and its hinterlands constitute a reservoir of current and potential crises, and potential demands on U.S. power and influence. From unfinished business in the Balkans to instability in the Sahel, from conflict in the Red Sea to spillovers from the civil war in Sudan, the confrontation with Iran, or new waves of terrorism emanating from the south (or the north), any U.S. administration will find it hard to avoid Mediterranean challenges.

Mediterranean Opportunities

The Mediterranean region as a whole also offers major opportunities beyond the lure of peacemaking and the demands of crisis management. This is not necessarily about a Mediterranean strategy per se. Despite centuries of engagement, the U.S. has never really embraced a Mediterranean vocabulary in the way it has been common in Europe, and especially southern Europe. The U.S. approach to the region remains firmly divided, intellectually and bureaucratically. The U.S. has many experts on European, Middle Eastern and North African affairs. However, they rarely cast their expertise in Mediterranean terms or, indeed, interact with specialists on adjacent regions. The State Department has separate bureaus to deal with European and Eurasian affairs on the one hand, and the Middle East and North Africa on the other. Similar differences of perspective and mandate affect the military establishment, notably across the EUCOM, CENTCOM, and AFRICOM areas of

responsibility. The National Security Council or the State Department's Policy Planning Staff may occasionally explore strategies in a trans-regional frame—that is part of their job—but it is not the norm.

One consequence of this siloed policy outlook is that it has always been difficult for partners north and south of the Mediterranean to interest their U.S. counterparts in Mediterranean initiatives. This was true for the Barcelona Process for cooperation between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries, as well as for the Union for the Mediterranean. The U.S. has supported NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, but of course, the vast bulk of Washington's security cooperation with southern Mediterranean partners has been bilateral. As the EU launches its new Pact for the Mediterranean, there is unlikely to be very much transatlantic discussion or cooperation. The U.S. is fully vested in the outlook for Mediterranean stability and partnership, but is unlikely to frame its bilateral or regional policies as part of a Mediterranean strategy.

Beyond vocabulary, however, there is one area in which Washington is likely to promote trans-regional initiatives of special relevance to the Mediterranean: connectivity. There are already several important examples of this with U.S. backing. These include the Three Seas Initiative linking the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the Adriatic/Mediterranean; the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, linking Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt; and the '3+1' cooperation format linking Cyprus, Greece, and Israel, together with the U.S.⁴. Both the Biden and the Trump administrations have emphasized energy connectivity around the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye has not featured in these initiatives, a consequence of the still-uncertain relationship between Washington and Ankara, and persistent tensions in the Aegean. But conditions on these fronts could change, and Türkiye's substantial energy infrastructure and commercial potential would be important assets for future connectivity projects. These projects go well beyond pipelines and electric power, to include digital ties, road, rail, and ports, and the legal and regulatory 'software' to facilitate connectivity.

The emphasis on connectivity will have a natural Mediterranean focus, but it is also likely to have much wider reach, to include prospective north-south links along the coastline of Atlantic Africa, connections from the Adriatic to Ukraine, ties to Central Asia, and beyond. Above all, the proposed India-Middle East-Europe (IMEC) initiative, launched in 2023 with U.S. support, holds great potential for economic and geopolitical integration across multiple regions, with the Mediterranean at the core.

In sum, the Mediterranean will continue to offer many tests, some optional, many unavoidable, for a U.S. international policy in flux. The notion of U.S. disengagement from this large and diverse region is likely to prove a myth. But the mix of interests and policy priorities will continue to shift. Future U.S. strategy toward, or more accurately around, the region may be driven less by European security concerns and more by commercial interests and broader strategic stakes, above all, in relation to China and the potential for new connections through the Mediterranean and well beyond.

4. The U.S. Congress continues to play an important role in this sphere, notably through the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019. Among other provisions, the Act allowed for the arms embargo on Cyprus to be lifted, continuing security assistance to Greece and Cyprus, and measures to encourage diversification away from Russian energy sources and toward new investment in energy infrastructure.

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