



**NATO Foundation**  
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*Energy security and sustainability in the Mediterranean*  
*A Civil-Military Interaction Perspective*

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The Mediterranean is a liminal, strategically critical area between diverse realities for the European Union, NATO, and other external players. For Europe, which has relevant vulnerabilities in energy supply, it has become a hub for energy access after the international situation developments and the need for the energy transition, where energy security and sustainability are two interconnected issues.

Energy security is one of the key aspects of security involving national and supranational levels, with civilian and military stakeholders having diverse visions, priorities, and goals. Climate change implies environmental, economic, social, and cultural constraints in an interrelated scenario that must consider every aspect of the present and future developments, as concerns critical materials, water, food, urbanization, migrations, trade, and development. Our shared scope is to guarantee a steady energy supply from diversified sources and exporters, a resilient whole system, and a coherent response in case of disruptions.

Internal competition for financial funding and public investments in the sources within the energy mix, internal competition among the European nations, and external competition with antagonist players, such as Russia and China, generate biases and problematic issues. China is already competing in the area with direct investments and fewer restraints than Europe, expanding with a need for relative stability. China considers the Mediterranean the door to Europe, within an economic Sunzu-like strategy, rather than a Russian-Clausewitzian vision.

The present situation adds to an already articulated scenario characterized by the 'energy trilemma': energy security, sustainability, and economic competitiveness. Sustainability generates processes beyond climate change and involves substantial economic and political choices and social consequences. Specifically, it is a conundrum in the Mediterranean that can be solved only by rethinking the relationships between North and South. Solving energy problems also involves the region's stability; any solution should be comprehensive.

The EU and NATO are prominent stakeholders in energy security for their respective roles. The single nations, in their decision-making autonomy, and the private players, in principle, should coordinate with the overall scopes of the two entities, contributing to their knowledge and planning. Nevertheless, some aspects of the national goals do not always align with a general view, and sometimes, the most important private companies follow their agenda, practically driving the national choices.

The Mediterranean energy scenario is rapidly evolving. The discrepancies between the northern and southern economies in the region have a substantial impact. However, there is a potential for further investments and a more harmonized development if coherent and timely choices are made to overcome infrastructural weaknesses, regulatory obstacles, social inequities, political incompatibilities, and cultural biases. An effective integration is necessary to avoid even worse crises than those we witness today.

Without a secure Mediterranean, especially regarding energy, there is no security for Europe, and more broadly for the West, due to the “Expanded Mediterranean” concept even connecting the Pacific and Asia.

The Mediterranean risks becoming a further space of imbalance, where past mistakes and the gaps left by the EU, the USA, and NATO risk building the ‘perfect storm’ already manifesting itself on the horizon.

The economic, political, and cultural differences between the European, African, and Middle Eastern Mediterranean, as well as tensions over the oil and gas reservoirs of the eastern basin, combine with developing events. Several intrinsic weaknesses and internal competition within the EU (that in the past and today have weakened Europe’s more compact position), and the ambivalence in US policy vis-à-vis Europe and the whole area create uncertainty.

A shift from controlling energy sources (fossil fuels) to securing logistic lines for energy dispatching and critical materials is happening. This shift also determines an evolution in the military role, particularly in Civil-Military Interactions and Civil-Military Relations.

Italy and Turkey compete in the Mediterranean to become the leading gas hub for European energy logistics. Nevertheless, instability plays a fundamental role in future scenarios, with little possibility of increased and profitable cooperation that would benefit Europe unless adequate measures are implemented.

The intrinsic instability of the MENA region demands sea dominance and the capacity to influence the area. The growing presence of China, mainly through commercial exchanges and infrastructural projects, and Russian military operations and bases, require even more attention and complex actions on the diplomatic and economic levels.

The presence of non-state players and the cultural perceptions towards Europe are relevant sustainability questions that should be considered. Economically, in northern African countries, energy security should contemplate the mere accessibility to energy by the population also due to lack of infrastructure. Consequently, developing European programmes that include mutual infrastructural growth, energy availability, and access is necessary based on long-term planning and a broader vision, considering water resources preservation and agricultural development.

Such programmes cannot be limited only to bilateral, single nations’ interventions. Considering how private energy companies have a weight in dictating national energy choices, they could not be interested in being directly involved in complex planning that includes other sectors. For its intrinsic configuration, the private energy sector has a different perception of energy security; the European national governments have a different concept of energy security than the governments of northern African

countries. The complex socio-economic system related to energy security and sustainability generates and is affected by differences, tensions, environmental conditions, demography, migrations, resource availability, extreme climatic conditions, or other critical events.

The cyber dimension and the hybrid threats have blurred the distinctions between civilian and military because they are not confined to kinetic conflict and involve several aspects: economy, information, infrastructure management and protection, communications, and social cohesion. However, common ground in planning should be sought to start profitable programs as securely as possible. Any initiative involving the Mediterranean that does not consider a comprehensive sustainability approach does not tackle the 'energy trilemma' and does not address the relationship between water, energy, and food is a prodrome for future conflicts.

The EU has the instruments to develop a specific plan for the southern Mediterranean and the MENA region more effectively than it has done until now. A mechanism such as the Energy Community, tailored explicitly for the Mediterranean countries, is likely necessary. Focusing more on the potential of investments in technological research and development could have a higher value for Europe rather than merely chasing the differentiation of the suppliers to cover its energy needs.

The Mediterranean is essential for American forces to control the Middle East and the Indian Ocean, and Europe is where the necessary bases are located to operate in the area. Moreover, in the 'Expanded Mediterranean' vision, there is an inevitable relationship to the Asian scenario. The USA is now confronting a double potential engagement: China in Taiwan and Russia in Eastern Europe. Their present strategy prioritizes the Pacific and China, which are considered a major direct threat to their security.

There is then a risk of misjudgement when considering a marginal liminal space. An error leading to the irrelevance of the constraints' perception and determining dichotomies instead of dialogue, neglecting the dynamics happening in this area -and among the stakeholders- can develop into undesired, ungoverned, and disruptive phenomena.

The military is a stakeholder with specific needs for continuity in the supply to avoid disruptions in the operations. The transition is a necessity considered by the armed forces, while climate change is impacting the military facilities and the operations themselves. Oil and gas make the Western armed forces dependent on suppliers in unstable geographic areas. While that is less a problem for the US, at least until the shale reserves are abundant, for the European armed forces, the dependency is greater and asks for aimed and complex operations for the protection of the supply chain and the critical energy infrastructures, in the physical and cyber domains, and involving the national and international resilience against conventional and hybrid threats.

However, a military answer to energy security cannot be confined to a mere defensive response to threats. It should be pre-emptively articulated by involving the stakeholders in the energy sector: the governments and the private sector. That requires more articulated and coordinated exchanges within the civil-military interaction concept and, likely, new professional figures in the domain of energy security and the military design capable of analysing and understanding the complexity of the field, not only from a technically specialized point of view.

In conclusion, the Mediterranean's energy security has two possibilities for evolution: cooperation or competition, with, in between, a range of shades. The civilian and military goals are now partially overlapping and, at the same time, distinct. There is a potential to elaborate more prevention and management strategies without militarizing energy through a stricter interaction among civilian and military stakeholders. Investments and synergies -internal or external to Europe and the West- are usually more recommendable, and we must weigh costs and benefits. A focus on the Mediterranean could prevent future crises and conflicts.